

DIARIES OF DISSIDENTS

Daily Routines in a
Belarusian Prison

DIARIES OF DISSIDENTS

- Daily Routines in
a Belarusian Prison

Texts by Andrei Baranau, Ilya Bohdan,
Zmitser Dashkevich, Andrej Dynko, Kasia
Halitskaya, Anton Kalinouski, Ales Kalita,
Volha Kuzmich, Siarzhuk Latsinski, Anatol
Liabedzka, Uladzimir Mikalaeu, Siamion
Pechanko, Valery Schukin, Franak Viachorka
and Katsiaryna Vinakurava

The Jarl Hjalmarson Foundation

Grants from Sida have assisted in the printing of this book.

© 2010 Jarl Hjalmarson Foundation

The texts in this book express the opinions of the authors.

Printed by Brommatryck & Brolins, 2010

www.hjalmarsonfoundation.se

First translation into English: Kacia Halitskaya

Editors: Evelina Lorentzon and Elisabeth Precht

Cover design: Henrik Sundbom

ISBN 978-91-977569-9-0

АКРЭСЬЦІНСКІЯ БУДНІ

Дзёньнікі палітвязьняў

Укладальнікі:

Антон Каліноўскі
Сяржук Лацінскі

Рэдактар:

Алеся Скапінцава

Карэкцыя:

Кацярына Чыж
Алеся Скапінцава

Вёрстка і дызайн вокладкі:

Насьця Машчава

- **This book includes** diaries written by political prisoners, sentenced to administrative detention most of them in a prison which has become a symbol of contemporary Belarus – the Detention Center (since September 2007 – the Center of Isolation of Law-breakers) located at Akrestsina street no. 36, in Minsk.

The photo on the previous page shows one edition of the Belarusian manuscript. The original manuscript in Belarusian has been edited a number of times during 2009 and 2010. Texts have been enhanced and adjusted. The diaries (as they can be read in this book) have first been translated into English by a Belarusian translator. Subsequently the texts have been prepared for publication by Swedish editors. The end product has been approved by the Belarusian editors.

CONTENTS

We Fear no More <i>Preface by Vytautas Landsbergis</i>	8	A Political Prisoner's Diary <i>by Katsiaryna Vinakurava</i>	114
Before You Read this Book...	10	Daily Routines at Akrestsina <i>by Anton Kalinouski</i>	122
The Diaries:		University of Akrestsina <i>by Uladzimir Mikalaeu</i>	130
Akrestsina Diary <i>by Anatol Liabedzka</i>	12	15 Days or in Crib no. 22 <i>by Ales Kalita</i>	140
Ideological Prevention at Akrestsina <i>by Volha Kuzmich</i>	30	Pegasus Imprisoned <i>by Siamion Pechanko</i>	150
Three Days, Three Nights and a Half, and Ten Days Around the Clock <i>by Andrei Baranau</i>	40	Therapy of Sacrifice – that's what the Protests this Spring were About <i>by Andrej Dynko</i>	158
The Diary of a Political Prisoner <i>by Valery Schukin</i>	50	Facts:	
Challenges of Akrestsina <i>by Ilya Bohdan</i>	62	Administrative Detention	168
The Prison Diary <i>by Kasia Halitskaya</i>	72	Belarusian Media	169
Seven "Cutlets" <i>by Franak Viachorka</i>	88	The 2006 Election Protests	170
A Prison Diary: the Story of Three Days <i>by Zmitser Dashkevich</i>	98	The 2006 Inauguration of President Lukashenka	171
Ten Days in the Prison of Zhodzina <i>by Siarzhuk Latsinski</i>	106	National Symbols of Belarus	172
		The Entrepreneur Protests of January 2008	173
		The Day of Freedom, 2008	174

“WE FEAR NO MORE”

Such was the feeling of the Lithuanian people when they poured into streets, squares and stadiums to join the thousands of brothers and sisters to sing about and pray for their homeland and liberty. What followed was the simple request of a nation to have their homeland and liberty back. The long spring of 1988 – in the hearts of so many of those 1.5 million who dared to sign the petition requesting the Soviet army to leave and who held each other’s hands in a chain formed by the three self-liberating Baltic nations from Vilnius to Tallinn – allowed Lithuania to blossom. The first free elections were held in February 1990, putting a true, free, democratic Parliament into power.

This was the beginning of much greater challenges on the way to have our stolen statehood restored and recognized. But nothing could be achieved without the spirit of regained human and national dignity. “We don’t fear!” – it was such an exciting experience after long decades of Soviet oppression, persecution, and open red terror.

At that time, Belarus was not yet ready to follow the “Baltic way”. The momentum passed away, not seized, and the new dictatorship came into power. Sometimes it looked like the

very existence of the Belarusian state was questioned. Thus, Belarus lost precious time to aim for a rightful place in a family of free European nations. Though, the time lost was not in vain. The new Belarus was and is growing in the conscious of young people. They are fearless, resolute and refuse the local non-democracy. They change life in their homeland without any armed revolt, simply by the consolidated peaceful means of a mature civic society. All this appears to be on its way now. This is the right way and its off-springs will not be stopped.

The ones who wrote this book of testimonies are not cautious observers, but living participants. “Belarus is alive, and we fear no more”, “I am a citizen!” – that is the message.

“Read and give to your neighbor” was the usual remark put on illegal leaflets and booklets under the old totalitarianism. Let this book serve well all the people under the current Belarusian regime. Unifying all those who believe that their country can be a European democracy.

“We can!” - that’s the spirit. God bless young discoverers of the right paths. Lithuania proved twenty years ago that building up a parliamentary democracy based on respect for human rights, helps to achieve and strengthen the national independence most effectively.

Vytautas Landsbergis
Head of state of Lithuania after its independence
and today Member of European Parliament

BEFORE YOU READ THIS BOOK...

When speaking at a conference arranged by the Jarl Hjalmarson Foundation for Belarusian political youth, Marika Ehrenkrona, Swedish journalist with a masters degree in psychology, came across these diaries written by prisoners in the Akrestsina detention centre and other prisons in Belarus. Marika Ehrenkrona brought the diaries to the attention of the Jarl Hjalmarson Foundation and the Foundation got permission to publish the texts in English and Swedish.

Working with the manuscript a few alterations have been made, in addition to purely linguistics. Most of the names mentioned in the diaries have been replaced with randomly chosen letters to protect the individuals. The names of official politicians have been kept, as well as the authors as they have chosen to tell their stories to the World.

In addition, the manuscript has been shortened to make the texts more accessible. Finally, some fact sheets have been added at the end of the book, to give the non-Belarusian

reader a better understanding of the reality in Belarus. When these do not provide enough information, footnotes have been included. However, these changes have not been done to change the texts into something they are not. The diaries remain the genuine words of the prisoners at Akrestsina and other Belarusian prisons.

Working with this manuscript has been a privilege. When reading you can feel the smell of Akrestsina, sense the monotonous repression of a dictatorship and share the triumph of someone who has managed to sneak in a chocolate bar to her imprisoned friend. We have wanted to preserve this feeling as far as possible.

Thank you to the Belarusian editors who have worked hard in bringing these texts together and translating them into English. Most of all, The Jarl Hjalmarson Foundation would like to thank all the authors for sharing their diaries with a wider audience.

*The Swedish editors and
the Jarl Hjalmarson Foundation*

AKRESTSINA DIARY

by Anatol Liabedzka

Anatol Liabedzka, the chairman of the United Civil Party, was arrested in connection to the entrepreneurs' protests in January 2008. He was sentenced to 15 days of administrative detention and served his time in the Akrestsina Detention Centre.

January 10, Thursday

Here I am again in the Detention Centre at the Akrestsina Street. The same smell, which I nearly had forgotten, the outlines of dirty-beige walls, which has almost been erased from my memory, the first floor of the four-storied building. Cell no. 12.

The size of the cell is 4.6 x 2.7 meters. The floorboards are squeaky and the floor seems unstable. The walls are covered with a thick layer of plaster. Mouse-coloured doors, which can only be opened half way. In most cases, it's not the door which opens up, but a small window in it - the size of 20 x 20 cm, located 50 cm above the floor. It meets various functions – it can be the means of communication as you can talk to the guards through it, and the so-called “way of life” which means that food arrives through the small window three times a day in aluminium bowls.

Moreover, the above-mentioned “Akrestsina square” has an educational function. Each opening of the window is accompanied by a bow – the applicant must bend down to the point where the guard's body is divided into two and proceeds into legs. Such construction makes you never forget who is who in this world limited by grating.

There is also a peep-hole in the wooden door, to see what happens on the cell “stage”. The “stage”, which is actually the scene for 80 percent of the action, is a wooden boarding occupying two third of cell no. 12. The wooden construction

towers 40 cm above the floor and is covered with sheets of chipboard on a frame made of metal.

The “stage” performs different functions during the day. In the first place, it is “the miraculous bed”, which has healing characteristics. No injustice and privileges can be found here – each prisoner is provided with a space for sleeping – 50-60 cm wide.

Three times a day, the bed turns into a kitchen table. For this transformation, you need only to put aside “the linen” (jackets, sweaters, gloves, caps) and put a newspaper, preferably “Soviet Byelorussia” or “Republic”, as a table-cloth.

January 11, Friday

The day was spent in the hands of justice. The status of an administrative prisoner does not provide you with a right to have breakfast at Akrestsina: prisoners are not on the budget until the court trial is over and the circumstances are made clear. Thus we only washed our mouths with tap water.

The prisoners were transported in groups. There were 16 prisoners and 16 guards in our bus. We went into the bus with a feeling that we would soon be back at the Detention Centre, and we were right. On the way back there was the same quantity of people, but with the consolidated decision of judges – 15 days of detention to all the participants of the “Entrepreneur Rally”.

The law-enforcement agencies and the administration of the courts did their best to ensure that some of the trials were held in presence of no one apart from the judge and the accused. No lawyers or journalists, no relatives or friends. Two policemen brought me to a rather big hall. A lady in black emerged from the side door – she was the judge. Noises and screams came from the corridor. Familiar and non-familiar people ran into the hall as a policeman opened the doors. The judge murmured something but no one listened to her.

Prior to this six riot policemen had entered the hall through another door. Then the trial started in due course. I suggested that the judge should read the resolution and the verdicts – 15 days of detention - on the spot, as it was obviously prepared beforehand, in order to save time. It was easy to predict. All the 16 detained were in the same room, and after the first few trials it became clear that no one would get less than 15 days of detention.

I and seven other political prisoners first found ourselves in cell No. 4. We hardly had time to settle our sleeping places, when V. and I were convoyed to other cells, at the upper floor. Mine was No. 12. Two people moved on the wooden boarding – a guy of about twenty and a man who looked no less than fifty at the first sight. P. and S. In 20 minutes the door bolt rattled and there were four of us. Our new cellmate was D., one of the individuals on the “List of 23”.¹ Everything seemed brighter.

January 12, Saturday

The country slowly came back to life after the holiday. I heard street noises through the window – the city was waking up. The government worked, the law-enforcement agencies worked. As if to confirm this, a whole brigade of investigators arrived to Akrestsina 36, headed by the Head of the investigation Department of the City Administration of Internal Affairs of Minsk City Executive Office Lieutenant-Colonel M. Only yesterday, the court printers poured out resolutions on detention for the participants of the “Entrepreneurs’ Rally”, and the investigators had already pushed up their sleeves and gotten down to some serious work. The public prosecution reacted as quickly as a cobra, defending the nervous system of “The Governor” from any felonious attempts conducted by individual entrepreneurs. If only they reacted so quickly to the statement that Lukashenka fabricated the results of the presidential electoral campaign ...

January 13, Sunday

I spent part of the weekend writing complaints to Siarhei Karpovich, the Head of the Centre of Isolation of Law-Breakers. Nothing personal, just substantial issues.

Recommendation: you can ask the guard to give you a clean sheet of paper and write a complaint to the Head of the Centre of Isolation of Law-Breakers demanding the right for everyday walks for no less than an hour.

We decided to file more than just one complaint, so we composed an appeal to allow us to use such achievement of scientific and technical progress as telephone. It's not a whim. The rules, namely, claim 44, state that there should be a pay-phone in the building so that the detained could use their right to have telephone conversations.

Recommendation: *you have a right for telephone conversations, you can demand it.*

January 14, Monday

The morning of today is like a carbon copy of yesterday. Cleaning the cell. Breakfast. Handing our complaints to the guard on duty. Compensating the sleep stolen by the cold in the night. I heard the sound of the policemen's boots click-clicking along the corridor. This promised a new lining to the grey ordinary Monday. A severe voice ordered us to leave the cell. Six guards stood in the corridor. Some of them wore white rubber gloves.

They lined the five of us along the wall. Personal search started. The procedure of examination took 10-15 minutes. The people in uniform fulfilled their obligations in earnest, but with no enthusiasm. Some of us were searched with metal detectors. This was obviously done to increase the level of seriousness of the search procedure. One of the detained took off his shoes, and the lieutenant's nose curved with disgust because of the smell. However, he went through this gas attack vigorously.

January 15, clean Tuesday

A day of pleasant expectations. I was expecting a first wash in the redecorated shower of Akrestsina. After five days of detention you get the feeling that a horse riding competition is being held on your body. I approached the sink more and more often, washing my hands as thoroughly as a surgeon would do.

We went downstairs. When I was passing by the call centre of the Centre of Isolation of Law-Breakers, I noticed N. carrying packages to the detained. We managed to glance quickly at each other. The contrast between N. and the battered inhabitants of Akrestsina was as sharp as that between a supermodel and members of the Politburo.

Only in the shower at Akrestsina, one can realize all the wonders of a washing procedure. The head enters a flexible waterfall, hundreds of little springs of water flow down the body. The fingers happily rub the shampoo into the roots of greasy hair, magically turning it into a silky English lawn. You physically feel the invisible but palpable shell of smells and voiding disappear and fade away. You realize how wonderful the smell of a home towel is when you are here, at Akrestsina. God, how many things we fail to notice in our daily lives...

Recommendation: *it is useful to have rubber slippers. They are convenient in the cell; they are irreplaceable in the shower. Until someone passes you a pair of those, bring a few state newspapers to the shower, to line on the floor. This will make the process of changing more comfortable.*

January 16, Wednesday

After the morning inspection there was breakfast. The feeding system, as well as the actual food at Akrestsina, is the topic for a separate discussion. In fact, it is a process of absorbing a mass which contains a certain amount of proteins and carbs. Food is handed out three times a day, and that's progress. In the mid-90's, prisoners were fed only every other day. Nevertheless, the quality of food was as low then as it is now.

First you are "invited to the table" at 8 a.m. State yellow newspapers like "Narodnaya Gazeta" (People's Newspaper) and "The Republic" perform the function of a dinner table. The bedroom turns into a kitchen in just a few minutes. The ration is spartan – some porridge, a mug of something which is supposed to be tea, a piece of wheat bread and a quarter of a loaf of rye bread. When they serve tea in aluminium mugs it is best to wear gloves when you drink it. It's impossible to hold an aluminium mug with boiling water in it.

Dinner time is approximately at 4 p.m. The main difference between breakfast and the first course of dinner is the colour

and ingredients swimming in the water. The second course is porridge with a cutlet of unclear origin. That's all. No tea is served for dinner.

Supper comes three hours after dinner and consists of, not surprisingly, the same porridge. Moreover, they put it on the dirty plates which are left in the cells following dinner.

Recommendation: *after dinner put the dirty plates into the window in the door and demand that they provide you with clean plates before supper.*

There are plenty of diets and recipes in magazines how to lose weight. Celebrities, artists, and politicians throw away huge amounts of money in order to stay fit. Ladies dream about the ideal parameters 90-60-90. I would like to suggest my own Akrestsina diet. Twice ten. This means two detentions for ten days each. The effect is guaranteed. Fat disappears immediately. Moreover, it will cost you only 42 000 Belarusian roubles per visit. Delivery to the special establishment is included. In addition to that, it's not very difficult to get to Akrestsina. Just go to Kastychnitskaya Square and shout "Long Live Belarus!" once. Yes, this exact slogan. If you just swear badly, the police is not likely to notice.

January 17, Thursday

We endured another painfully cold night. After 11 a.m. everyone is usually directed to see the doctor, and that's sort of unavoidable. It happens every day. Political prisoners go to

see a lady in white, most probably just to get the diagnosis “healthy”. It seems that the medicines which the prison doctor has in store are limited to absorbent carbon and Citramone (a painkiller), which are used to cure the symptoms of all illnesses.

January 18, Friday

The most discussed topic is how to cope with the cold at night at Akrestsina. The dress code is that of a cabbage. You try to wrap yourself in all the clothes you have, just like cabbage leaves. A person feels more or less normal upon implementation of the formula “Three to one”. That means three sweaters and three pairs of trousers on one person. Any other variant does not allow you to sleep. They just give you some patchy fragments and elements of a dream.

Recommendation: *the most effective means of keeping the warmth is underwear intended for mountain skiers.*

Preparations for the night includes not only clothes, but also making the cell cold-proof. More precisely winterization of the small rectangular window which is located right under the ceiling. The window shows a small piece of trellised sky. It's only the colour of the sky that changes depending on the weather outside. The horrible night cold creeps into the cell through the gaps in that very window. All means are acceptable in the struggle to “repair” it, but the most effective one is “plaster” made of bread. The quality of bread allows using it

like that. In the morning, though, we have another problem – the hardened mass is like glue. Opening the window requires some physical strength. It's impossible to leave the window closed because of tobacco smoke. The administration of the Centre of Isolation of Law-breakers meticulously places prisoners who smoke together with the ones who cannot bear tobacco smoke. Thus, it is absolutely necessary to air the cell.

January 19, Saturday

At the morning check-up I disagreed with the Senior Lieutenant in regards to the functions of a guard on duty. When I demanded that he should register in the prison records journal a complaint about the low temperature he replied, "I am not cold, thus, you should be okay, too." So I had to remind him that it is his obligations to register complaints, not to measure the temperature in the cell by his nose.

In addition to the above discussion D. and I refused to eat from dirty dishes. That is indeed a scandal. Our self-respect suffered from that.

At 3 p.m. we were all woken up by the alarm. We grabbed our things and moved to another "apartment". Cell no. 9 was smaller than the previous one. There were three inhabitants, two of which were our people. Thus, six of us in all. It was a bit crowded, but fun. It took ten minutes to get settled in and to unpack.

We conducted a house-warming party at the festive table. We

ate sausages from the supplies of one of our cellmates – they were delicious. After dinner we placed the dirty dishes by the window and refused to accept any food. Supper was served in freshly washed dishes. It is true, that the way to real success lies in small achievements.

January 20, Sunday

I woke up long before sunrise. L. was sleeping to the left of me, moving his nostrils, snoring. S. was trying to “over-snore” him. Who are they, the people from the substructure of society? According to my observations, they can be divided into two groups – shoplifters and brawlers. S. was serving two detentions in a row – five and seven days. First he tried to steal a bottle of vodka from a shop, second – he was caught with a stolen bottle of wine. Young P. forgot to show two pieces of cheese at the cash-desk. V. conducted a binge drinking party at his house; J. was here for the same reason.

Long-term communication with the shoplifters convinced me that the authorities are satisfied with having a so-called “substructure of society”, with thousands of people sinking down to it. It is easy to manipulate such people. “A rouse and a crackling” – this is their life formula. There are no cameras of the Belarusian Television here, at the bottom. They don’t ever sink that deep. These people do not confess to “honest” state newspapers either.

January 21, Monday

With heavy clouds in the sky the morning looked gloomy through the bars of our window. We got the usual responses to the usual questions and complaints: shower? writing paper? “And please let us out from 2 till 4 pm so that we can participate in the protests of the entrepreneurs”. The Major did not get it at first, he started explaining that it was not allowed to leave the prison ... and then he started grinning like a Cheshire Cat.

We hardly managed to establish “ventilation tube communication” with the inhabitants of the neighboring cell, when there was an order to get out. Another shakedown. The inspector was waiting for us in the corridor, wearing huge pink gloves. He looked more like a proctor than a guard. One by one the staff of the Centre of Isolation of Law-breakers entered our cell. Someone searched the wastebasket, someone rummaged through the packages. The cell looked like a battle field after the shakedown.

Today I talked to the Head of the Detention Centre for nearly an hour. S. at first stated that the conversation should concern only our written claims, but we couldn't keep our conversation within these borders. I told him about the campaign “Humanization of Akrestsina”, started by the political prisoners.

We had been waiting since morning for any news from the Kastychnitskaya Square. The zoom of traffic in the yard got more intense closer to the evening: vans, cars, minibuses. Af-

ter supper we tried to communicate with other cells. Someone unexpectedly replied from the neighbouring cell No.8. It seemed that new political prisoners arrived to the cell of shoplifters and brawlers. We heard a voice from a tube. He informed us about the break-up of the “Entrepreneur Rally”.

January 22, Tuesday

I didn't feel like sleeping. I could not hear any rattling of dishes in the corridor - that meant that it was about 5 am. The window could not keep out the colourless, weightless cold, although it had been carefully plastered with the bread mass. It was obvious when you looked at peculiar positions of cellmates – knees to the chin, hands either in gloves or folded and stuck between the knees. All the clothes were now used as blankets.

January 23, Wednesday

Today I voluntarily took responsibility as prisoner-on-duty in the cell. There are not so many obligations to fulfil – just to sweep the floor and to work with a mop. The guard in charge of the corridor usually hands out the cleaning equipment at 7 o'clock.

The guard on duty had a horrible habit of knocking at the cell door shouting “Wakey!!!” at 6 a.m. However, no one ever reacted to that, not even the rats of Akrestsina. The inhabitants of the Centre of Isolation of Law-breakers never get up before seven.

The choice of things to do was limited. After intensive morning exercises I started reading. The choice of books was also limited – it was sort of a complex menu in a restaurant. I had Lev Tolstoy's trilogy "Road to Cavalry" for the first course, tasteless "Breakfast with Polonius"; and a situation close to ours in the "Rebirth" by Lev Tolstoy for the second. My dessert was "Golden Calf" by Ilf and Petrov. It's impossible to get enough of this book.

Today we were asked to give back the dirty dishes after dinner. They were washed and returned to us in 15 minutes, clean and warm. Constant dripping wears away a stone. Today it's clean dishes, tomorrow it might be telephone conversations, then – walks. Go forward! Let's make Akrestsina human-friendly!

January 24, Thursday

The sky turned blue and sent some sunshine through our cell window. Time slowed down.

It would be unfair not to say a few words about the staff of Akrestsina. An average employee of the Centre of Isolation of Law-breakers is a rather decent person. They are definitely better than riot policemen. A person in uniform here at Akrestsina does his job. Probably, he or she does not like everything about it, but it makes his living. Another observation – the younger the people are and the lower their positions are, the more stupidity and diligence they show.

January 25, Friday

That's it. The last cold night of our stay at Akrestsina is slowly coming to an end on the other side of the window. Happy release, the free people of an imprisoned country! The morning was spent in preparations – we left everything to those who stayed – toilet paper, a week's stock of water and juices, read and re-read books ...

22 political prisoners are leaving Akrestsina today. More than 30 will see us leaving, leaning against the metal grating. There have been no mass detentions of such scope since the presidential electoral campaign. However, we were not allowed to leave quietly. Another shakedown, the third one in 15 days. What can we take out of here? An aluminium mug as a prison souvenir!

So?! What do we have in store after 15 days with regard to feelings and emotions? Akrestsina makes your feelings and sensations ten times stronger. Akrestsina is a test. A test of everything: maturity, level of optimism, will. The time in Akrestsina is an opportunity to see things from a different angle: the whole structure, the coalition and the people that surround you.

A politician ought to periodically take this Akrestsina test for self-identification, in order to define his system of values.

Yes, there are a lots of things you can do during these days. Good and useful things. For the people, for the party, for the coalition, for the family, for yourself.

To tell the truth, I have no regrets. I am not disappointed. If it doesn't kill you, it only makes you stronger.

12.30. I am coming out of the prison doors, my head up high. My lungs filled with fresh air. I am feeling a little dizzy. I am a citizen, a human being. And that's great!

Endnotes

1 The List of 23 refers to the people being sentenced to administrative detention after the protests of the entrepreneurs on January 11, 2008.

IDEOLOGICAL PREVENTION AT AKRESTSINA

by Volha Kuzmich

The coordinator of the project “students.by” Volha Kuzmich was arrested on the first night of the tent camp at the Kastychnitskaya Square in Minsk.

On March 21, 2006 she was sentenced to 10 days of administrative arrest by the Partyzanski district court, in accordance with the Article 167.1 of the Code of Administrative Offences of the Republic of Belarus – “breaking the order of organization and conducting of mass events”.

The guards on duty liked to visit our cell to meet young confident, beautiful girls with a good sense of humour and a high intellect. Thus, it didn't come as a surprise when the heavy metal door went open. However, it was not one of the policemen, but a young guy in civil clothes, who stormed into the cell.

“Are there any students here? Get three of them out of the cell” he said and asked who of us that were students, making us all confused. The absolute majority of us were students. I joined the “lucky” three.

“Get dressed immediately and follow me!” he ordered.

I had a lot of presumptions about whom we were going to meet. The first guess was that we were taken to the KGB for a conversation. This was indeed why I agreed to go in the first place – I did not want to worry the other girls, and I also had a secret wish to see who would win a debate – we or them. I also thought they might transfer us to another cell for the last day, as they had done with two of our girls before the visit of the representatives of the OSCE to the prison to show that the cells were not overcrowded.

So I put on my jacket for the first time in ten days, pulled on my boots and went out in the corridor. The guys were standing there – our guys, unshaved and battered, but ours. We were escorted to the street in a line. The daylight blinded us, our legs turned weak and I hardly managed to walk in the warm boots without tied laces – it was spring outside. They

led us to another building at Akrestsina where we spent some time before we were “sorted out” for the cells. Once more, we stood in a line, not realizing what was happening, our faces against the wall. Some of the policemen said we would be meeting journalists. Then we were led outside. I had a strange feeling that the policemen had no idea what to do with us. The policemen treated the girls with cigarettes, the girls in turn, shared the cigarettes with the guys. We used this time to exchange news – who heard what through the window? Who read which newspapers? Was the tent camp still there? What happened on the Day of Freedom?

A few minutes later we were led to the old building of Akrestsina, to the fifth floor. There we proceeded to a hall with desks, a table in front of them, and flowers at the window sills. The wall was decorated with a large Soviet Byelorussian coat-of-arms - with spikelet and a red-and-green flag.

“That’s psychological pressure!” I couldn’t control myself when the policemen went out into the hall leaving us alone by this wall. I sat at the first desk.

The guy who picked us up at the cell entered the room. He made sure all present were students. Naturally, it turned out that not everyone was a student. They seemed to have certain problems with documentation. I cannot understand how they deal with the real criminals with such a huge amount of bureaucratic mistakes. A man who was sitting at the desk was asked what the reason for his arrest was and if he had really been at the square. The man replied that he hadn’t – though,

his wife had been, and he was trying to bring her some hot tea at night. He didn't even manage to get to the square, but was arrested on his way there. Having asked a few more questions, the man (he refused to introduce himself point-blank), said sarcastically:

“Beware, you’re gonna get yourself another article by speaking too much” and left.

We started talking – who represented which university? Who inhabited which cell? We looked for people we knew. Sometime later an entire delegation entered the room: a man with a tie, another high-ranked policeman, two men in civilian clothes, one representative of the administration of the detention centre. They sat down at the table.

The man wearing the tie started to talk. He introduced himself as the Head of the Department of Prevention of the Ministry of Internal Affairs – Mr D. He also introduced his deputy – the high-ranked policeman – Mr M. The two others were introduced as “lecturers”.

Mr D. clarified the purpose of the meeting: to hear our pretensions, to find out our plans for the future, to know if we considered ourselves guilty and whether our opinions had changed after ten days in a cell.

I was the first to raise my hand and asked about the names of the professors. Mr D. told us their names and added that they worked in the Academy of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and

that one of them was a psychologist. Suddenly he stopped short. “They are not from the KGB. Don’t even think so!” We laughed: “We didn’t, it was you who started the topic.”

Mr D. started explaining:

“We want to have a sincere conversation. We are also parents, who have children with their own ideas – let’s just talk...”

“True, you are parents, you have children our age, that’s why the question which I am about to ask should worry you in the first place. Please explain, why I, a young girl, cannot walk around the park with my beloved? Aren’t you afraid that your children will go for a walk and someone will drag them into a bus together with people covered in blood? Aren’t you afraid that your children will face a court trial where the protocol is faulty and the witnesses are people that they have never seen before? And then the judge will give your child 10 days of detention and no one will let your child call home. Is this normal? Aren’t you afraid for your children?”

The psychologist reacted to my questions by calling me an organizer or something, claiming that “it was obvious from the first sight”.

The conversation was intense – it got dark outside very quickly. Let me share some extracts from the “preventive conversation”.

The policeman:

“Tell me sincerely, from your heart – what is your attitude to

these actions? You are against the current state system deep in your soul, aren't you?"

"Well, maybe I love Vasia deep in my soul – that's my private business."

"How will our arrests affect our studies? Will anyone be expelled from University?"

Mr D.:

"We have just met with the Ministry of Education. No one is going to get expelled! Perhaps those who miss classes or get bad marks, but no one for political reasons!"

A policeman:

"Just look at how the citizens of the Baltic States live! They envy us! We live superbly in comparison with the Soviet times! Just look what's happening in Latvia..."

"What about Lithuania?"

"Have you ever been there?"

"Sure!" I turn to the other arrested. "Dear friends, I suggest that after this 'vacation' we go to Vilnius together – we'll relax and observe how "difficult and complicated" life is there."

“None of the present were arrested at the square during the action, but nearby. Which law did I break by walking in the park with my beloved?”

The lecturer from the Academy of the Ministry of Internal Affairs:

“Normal people have normal feelings of fear. Some people even called the police on March 19 asking whether they could go outside. Why did you go there? You should have stayed at home.”

A policeman: “You had enough time to think about your convictions. Have you realized your mistakes?”

An arrested guy: “I used to study; I read books and never got involved in any politics. However, after the 10 days of arrest my political views became clear.”

A policeman: “Don’t listen to the fairytales that people tell you in the cells, about arrests and bodily blows. Those are all just fairytales; it’s their orientation - to tell you fairytales.”

“Each of us have our own such ‘fairy tale’...”

The organizers of the meeting did not expect the event to turn

out like this. I got the impression that we chaired the meeting, not them. In the end, I even gave a short conclusive speech like “let us be friends as all intelligent people will sooner or later walk together in one shaft”, and thanked them for coming. Mr D. was forced to add up to my words.

Yes, I was proud that our arguments remained unbeaten, that we were so united and replied without giving way to provocations. I was a little disappointed that all these adults with higher education, sitting in front of us, could utter totally illogical things that did not correspond with history and refuse to answer our questions. We expected them to be stronger and were disappointed by how weak they were. It was they who were afraid and tried to justify themselves.

When we rose up to leave, one of the “lecturers” asked:

“Tell me the truth – deep down in your soul, do you feel like a loser because you have been placed here?”

One of the guys in the last row nodded:

“Yes.”

At that moment I responded:

“I am a successful girl and I will achieve everything I want in this life!”

The lecturer did not expect such an answer from me, and turned to the guy who claimed himself a “loser”:

“That’s what your problem is all about.”

I am proud of the people who were there, sitting at the desks, defending their convictions. Nothing’s going to change them. Even the people who got there by accident (which was a huge number of them), who just passed by the Kastychnitskaya Square. Now they have defined their attitude towards the circumstances in the country and are ready to defend themselves and their choice.

How can our parents, who stood near the Akrestsina building, believe in a “stable and flourishing” country, when their children are sent to prison and the state television calls them drug addicts and shows fabricated reports?

Nothing’s going to stop the people who spent time at the prisons Akrestsina and Zhodzina. They left confident, calm and convinced. They were met by confident and free people, individuals who believe in the Day of Freedom and experienced the nights in the tent camp at the Kastychnitskaya Square. People who appreciate human solidarity: they gave their coats to those who stood at the square, brought them food; students and lecturers, schoolchildren and old ladies stood together and sang the anthem “God Almighty” in the night outside of Akrestsina, ...I am proud that we are making history. I am proud that we are conscious, confident and strong. We are going to win – I know that.

THREE DAYS, THREE NIGHTS AND A HALF, AND TEN DAYS AROUND THE CLOCK

by Andrei Baranau

Andrei Baranau from the Belarusian Popular Front was arrested when Belarusian police forces stormed the tent camp on Kastychnitskaya Square. He was sentenced to ten days of administrative detention for “breaking the order of organization and conducting of mass events” and served his time at Akrestsina Detention Centre in 2006.

The luckiest time in my life was March 20-24 2006. I had taken time off from work to be able to spend my days and nights at the Square.

Mop-up operation

Later on, we would call the elimination of the tent camp the “mask show”. We even changed the lyrics of the famous song “Free dances” into “The Black Masks”.

When everyone was told to stand in a so-called “protective circle”, I did not react immediately. I was too sleepy. Then I realized something unusual was happening from the tone of the speaker’s voice. I heard the rattling of heavy vehicles. When I climbed out the tent the police vans were already there and riot policemen were about to form a chain.

We were asked to sit on the ground. This was obviously a reasonable suggestion. When a person is sitting on the ground, the main objective of the riot police is likely to pull them away not beating them.

I was pulled out of the circle and thrown into a police van. People were standing, sometimes even lying, inside. We soon realized that the only way to avoid being crushed was if everyone stood up. People around me had scratches on their faces. We tried to comfort each other. People called their parents and friends. We sang in quiet voices, something like “The Aerostat”. We did our best to stay calm. Someone recalled that the prisoners of German concentration camps suf-

fered and endured a lot more. This helped. People suddenly started thinking about their jobs and studies.

It is widely known that challenges in life either make a person stronger or break him. When I was standing by the Akrestsina prison, my face to the wall, I was thinking “the most important thing for the moment is to survive until I can visit the toilet. The second thing is to keep my head straight. If I manage to do the first and the second - great job, I survived the arrest.”

An unknown officer of the special police unit of Minsk walked along the row of people, saying: “So, now you know that the riot police of Minsk is not just a gang of fags”. That’s exactly what we called them from that moment on.

I heard one of the policemen saying to his colleague: “What are you laughing at? Maybe it will be us standing with our faces to the wall in some years.” The other one recited a poetic line in Belarusian: “The business of a soldier, in any war at any time, is shooting!”

When they drove us to the court, we saw a huge crowd near Akrestsina. Kazulin¹ came over to the bus, pressing his palm against the window. Thank you everyone for your support which helped us to keep our dignity during the administrative detention.

Court trial

It became clear in court that once the fight was over, the important thing was to get the shortest sentence possible. One of my mates invented a cool excuse: he said that he came to the square to listen to Belarusian music played on a good sound system. Moreover, he said he had a sick heart. Seven days.

Another friend, a lawyer, started arguing with the judge trying to prove that the Article 167.1 could not be applied to his situation. 13 days. All the rest got ten.

In other courts everybody was sentenced to 15 days. The Belarusian political court is like a lottery in such cases. Fines were sentenced only in exceptional cases – and only to women with children.

A friend of my cellmate came to the Square drunk twenty minutes before the mop-up operation started. He looked for a friend in the tent camp. The tenants thought he was snooping and did not let him in. When the DJ asked everyone to sit down, he obeyed. He shouted a couple of times “The police is with the people”. Got arrested.

The policemen told a tale: A man was arrested in the centre of Minsk at 3 o'clock at night with a tent and a fishing-rod. “Where are you going?” – “Fishing.” – “Then why is there a flag on your fishing-rod?” – “The fish bite better this way”.

After the court trial they drove us back to Akrestsina through the Kastrychnitskaya Square. We saw an empty place, people

who were held back by the riot police, flowers. And suddenly I thought: what a great chaos we made.

Behind the bars

Before getting behind bars we all agreed that we were going to do our best to have fun in prison. And so we did.

We organized a real mini-state in the cell (or “crib”, as we called it). Twice a day we elected the “goomba”. I supervised the elections procedure as a Chairman of the Central Election Committee. First we nominated the candidates, and then held debates, and finally it came to voting. The new “goomba” took the oath of the “crib”: “Taking the position of the goomba of crib No. 39 I oblige to care for the well-being of the crib, defend the rights of its tenants and the principles of democracy. Long live the crib!”

The political life in the crib was seething during the elections. Most active was the “smoking” opposition, which from one time to another amounted to 25-40 per cent of the population. The smokers fought for the right to smoke whenever and wherever they wanted. The non-smoking majority did not allow them to do that.

The crib had its own anthem, the folk song “Our house’s got something to celebrate today”. We sang it at inaugurations and every time there was a package with food, etc, arriving to our cell.

On the first day of our prison sentence, two of our cellmates decided to go on a hunger strike to protest against the initial ban on packages from outside. They had breakfast and started their hunger strike. They wrote a corresponding declaration. The hunger strike had lasted for twenty minutes when the door was opened and a package arrived. Everyone threw themselves at it, apart from the strikers. Another package arrived in half an hour. The strikers looked at it as hungry wolves, but endured. After the third package arrived, they decided to hide the declaration and postpone the hunger strike until further notice.

My mother sent me the book of Janka Kupala's poems, so I read them aloud in the evenings instead of lullabies. However, it was difficult to fall asleep after such poems. First, the plots were thriller-like (Bandarouna being shot, Masheka being cut with a knife); secondly, the detailed erotic descriptions kept us awake.

We really missed girls. Once in the morning we heard someone jangling the "Long Live Belarus" rhythm on the radiator. We responded the same. The thought came to us "What if they were girls?" A brainstorm began: how could we make them understand there were men in here? We decided to rattle 13 times, as the letter "M" (men) is the thirteenth in the alphabet. But there was silence in response.

Physical exercise was the easiest and cheapest way to stay in a good mood. Thirty push-ups on the cell floor make life in the cell rich of sensations. We cut out the portraits of the state

figures out of “Soviet Byelorussia” and glued them onto the toilet walls. We called it “The Gut-Bucket Tribunal”. We also organized a prison radio. The broadcasting was conducted through the ventilation. Here are some “advertisements”.

“And now let’s hear the weather forecast. Tomorrow it will be minus one person in the cell No. 39, and minus seven persons in the cell No. 40”.

“The first Belarusian cosmonaut ARL³ went to the ancestors during inauguration today”.

“Dear passengers. Please do not come close to the end of the platform. There’s high voltage on the metro railways. Long Live Belarus!”

To cut a long story short, you probably understand that administrative detention is a highly non-effective measure for political prisoners.

Freedom!

When we were let go and left the cell, I remembered a tale:

“What is stinking?”

“That’s fresh air, Sir!”

There was almost no snow on the ground; people caught the few snowflakes in their hands. We were wonderfully welcomed – champagne, sweets, flowers, exclamations “Long

Live Belarus!” I was actually walking on air the entire first day after our release. I switched on my phone – three support calls within an hour. We agreed to meet our friend who got 13 days of detention. We kept our promise.

After the release we talked to our friends who had also been in prison. It turned out that we had exchanged radiator rattling with them, and they, as well as we, also thought that the people at the other end of the line were girls. Revolutionaries, learn the Morse Code!

Epilogue

If someone asked me what the three and a half days at the Square and ten days of arrest at Akrestsina gave me, I would answer: optimism. It was not the tea and coffee that became the fuel for the people at the Square, but optimism and faith. The people who stood there definitely believed change is possible. That is why they managed to bring this change closer. There are still a lot of things to be done, but we’ve already passed our Rubicon.

The Square changed my view of how people should be governed. I saw the power of self-organizing by my own eyes. When the people are united by enthusiasm and high purpose, there’s no need for governing. Everyone finds something to do which he is best suited for.

At the Square, Belarusians needed to be determined, strong and believe in victory without any compromise. We needed

freedom instilled in our backbones. Naturally, resistance was no longer the business of just a bunch of intellectuals. The leaders at the Square were common people with uncommon vigour, who could say at a certain moment: “I will do that”.

On the night of the release, humming the “Elsa’s Ocean song”, I wrote in my prison diary:

“To keep. To keep the core of freedom inside of me. To keep the feeling that I can overcome any difficulties. To keep the air of freedom that I inhaled on that night next to Akrestsina. I will not surrender without a fight”.

Endnotes

1 Aliaksandr Kazulin – the candidate for President at presidential elections 2006.

2 Article 167.1 of the Code of Administrative Offences “Breaking the order of organization or conducting of gatherings, meetings, street rallies, demonstrations and pickets”.

3 Aliaksandr Ryhoravich Lukashenka.

THE DIARY OF A POLITICAL PRISONER

by Valery Schukin

Valery Shchukin, a journalist and a human rights activist, was arrested on January 16, 2001. The reason for his arrest was his attempt to, without accreditation, attend a press conference held by the then Minister of Internal Affairs Uladzimir Navumau. The guards did not let him in, but Valery Shchukin stormed into the conference hall. The guards pushed him into a glass window and injured him seriously. At his trial, which took place on March 20, 2001, Valery Shchukin was accused of hooliganism according to Article 339 and sentenced to three months of detention. He served his term in the detention centre at Valadarski Street in Minsk.

Wednesday, June 13, Day 2

Yesterday's demand that the guards should address me politely had a positive result – today the guard who hands out sugar stopped calling me “hey, you”. Surprisingly enough, the tea tasted like real tea. Naturally, a beverage prepared in a container intended for hundreds of litres cannot be the same as one made in a small tea-pot. Nevertheless, the tea they gave me was tea, not the lightly coloured water that they usually give to prisoners at the Akrestsina Detention Centre in Minsk.

I suppose I will soon have the opportunity to compare, as after 92 days of imprisonment, I will face ten more days of imprisonment there for the so-called “political hooliganism” on May 18 of this year – the day of the All-Belarusian Congress.

The window in the cell is broken and half of the glass is missing. I slept with all my clothes on. I put on all the shirts I could find. I did not bring a warm sweater since it was still summer outside. I asked the guard on duty to fix the window but he said I would soon be transferred to another cell. In spite of this, not only was I left in the same cell, three more prisoners were added during the day.

They took my fingerprints once again and made a fluorography – an X-ray of my lungs. They already had my fingerprints from the pre-trial detention centre. I was imprisoned there in October 1999, for upholding the freedom to protest and demonstrate.

When the young guards saw a grey old man with a beard, they asked me:

“What have you done to get here, old man?”

“Hooliganism. – I replied.”

“So what was it – did you take a swing at your old wife?”

“No, the minister... “

The reaction of my vis-à-vis is best described by the word “flabbergasted”.

First walk. They gave me an hour. It seemed like much shorter. It was difficult to tell exactly how long it was since we are not allowed to have watches. Could anyone from the Belarusian Committee for the Execution of Punishments possibly explain the reason for that? Why are prisoners deprived of the opportunity to know the time? It is agony for a modern human being as we are all used to living from minute to minute.

Red clouds of smoke has started to fill the cell after the arrival of the new neighbours – two of them are smokers. We soon realized, though, that it was not just tobacco smoke – something was indeed burning. It turned out to be the mattress. Probably, our previous cellmates put a cigarette stub in the rolled mattress as a farewell joke.

Our attempts to choke out the fire with our bare hands and

water were not successful: the cotton in the mattress continued to smoulder. We had to tear the mattress apart, place the cotton all over the cell floor and pour water on the smouldering pieces. The smoke fretted our eyes and dispersed all over the corridor. It was an emergency situation. As a result, all the officials of the detention centre, including the Head, visited our cell No. 217 that evening.

The visit of the Head of the pre-trial detention centre, Colonel Saevich turned out to be most effective. New glass was put into our window and we even got a mirror. They gave me a mattress and a blanket instead of the parody mattress and blanket I had had before. The guy whose mattress burned down also received a new one. The guy, who was transferred from cell No. 22 to our cell with no blanket, received one as well.

There were women in the neighbouring cell No. 218. We heard female voices from behind the wall, and they invigorated our all-male company a little. We decided to act like gentlemen and turned on our TV as loud as possible. We hoped they could hear it – it might raise their spirits a bit, as there was no radio in any of the cells.

Thursday June 14, Day 3

It seems like the Detention Centre is overcrowded. There are not enough plates so today they served the food for two people on one. There are so many prisoners that they cannot take us all for a walk at the same time and have to do it

twice a day. Some prisoners go for a walk before lunch, all the rest after lunch.

Today they suggested that we, cell No. 217, would be taken for a walk during lunch time. However, we, to the guards' annoyance, decided to be guided by an army principle: "You can postpone a war, but never a lunch". There were no sanctions after that – they just took us for a walk after lunch.

The yard intended for walks is just a concrete pit and the Sanitary Inspection has not inspected it for years. Nevertheless, it is an opportunity to stretch your legs.

I am wearing a t-shirt from Charter-97¹ here in prison. I would advise other civic and commercial bodies to think more of such opportunities for advertising – I could have worn any other t-shirt, like "Belarusian Helsinki Committee" or "Narodnaya Volya" etc.

I used my time to educate my cellmates in politics, using television as some kind of a prop. For example, the TV states that there are 26 candidates for the position of President. All of them have equal rights. However, the rights of one of them are 'more equal' than the others'. For two days, the regime TV-channel BT has been describing how the current President, the head of the regime, "modestly", as any other mortal human being, filed an application to the Central Elections Commission. None of the other candidates were mentioned, let alone shown on TV.

I realized that my cellmates had no trust in the President, but not in anyone else either. They said things like “they will forget their promises as soon as they grab the power”.

I cannot speak for everyone but I can state for sure that Mikhail Chyhir², who served eight months of imprisonment in Lukashenka’s prison, did not forget his promises to make the conditions in prisons better.

At last, they brought us some salt, by the end of the third day. We asked for salt every day, no less than twice a day. They also brought us “Vecherniy Minsk” (The Evening Minsk). The Detention Centre does not provide any other newspapers.

A series of opposition media promised to pass me their printed material to prison before I got here. Well, we’ll see if their words were not just empty promises.

Friday, June 15, Day 4

I am sticking to my promise to keep a diary in prison and to send my notes regularly to the editor. So I sent another load of material this morning. Letters are looked through by the prison censor, so the prisoners get them torn-open. Thus, “the members of the Politburo” have an opportunity to know how things are going at the local level, and what the people who are imprisoned think about the official authorities even before the texts appear on the pages of the independent newspapers.

Today was the last day for potential candidates for President to

register their initiative groups with the Central Elections Commission. The prisoners had no idea who had filed the documents for registration – it was a complete mystery. “Vecherniy Minsk” did not publish the list of potential candidates. BT only discussed one of the 26 Baku commissioners. I found out that the Central Elections Commission had registered Zianon Pazniak’s³ initiative group only from the ONT⁴.

The current regime is most likely to prepare the “Lukashenka vs. Pazniak”, scenario for the second round of the elections hoping that the voters will choose the rival of the Belarusian Popular Front candidate.

Nevertheless, I am convinced that, should Lukashenka get a second round in 2001, the voters would vote for the devil rather than for their odious leader.

Jury Azaronak⁵ would not be able to save his idol. I use “the Secret Springs” as a study material in my “lessons” on political education, in particular, his attempts to make people believe that former deputies were somehow connected to terrorism etc. The reports by this “talented” director actually work against the current regime. And in the end, Jury Azaronak failed to find any video shots or pictures in the KGB archives confirming the alleged “corruption of the deputies of the Supreme Council of the Republic of Belarus of 13th convention”. No Valery Schukin with a bombshell, no Anatol Liabedzka with a bag of explosives and no Siarhej Kaliakin with a machine gun belt.

Saturday, June 16, Day 5

One of my cellmates served his term to the end and was released. Now, there are three prisoners in cell no 217— one of the smokers has left so it will be less grey smoke and easier to breathe.

I am still curious about the list of candidates for President of the Republic of Belarus. No information. I hoped that Jury Kazijatka⁶ would announce the whole list, but in vain – Jury remained silent.

Sunday, June 17, Day 6

Today's the Day of Medical Workers. I greet my wife and close friends who by profession are connected with this holiday, but only in my thoughts, as a Belarusian prisoner is not allowed to use the telephone.

Who can explain this? How many generations of Soviet prisoners went through the physical and moral agonies as a result of being deliberately deprived from cigarettes and severely punished for smoking? They say that changed when General Jury Churbanau, Brezhnev's son-in-law, was imprisoned. Nowadays, it is allowed to smoke and this has not affected the quality of the penitentiary system.

Maybe, it would help if some "General" from the circle of close friends of the Head of the State would be imprisoned? As I recall, Lukashenka promised not only to allow privileged prisoners to use cell phones, but even to buy them with

the tax money. However, as always, he did not keep his word.

Forget mobile phones. Everyone would be happy to be able to use an ordinary payphone – and to speak as long as you have money to use it. It is just as easy to apply censorship to telephone conversations as it is to letters. So why are prisoners allowed to write letters with no limitations while telephone communication is forbidden? Where's the logic in that? Where's the sense? For me personally, an electoral campaign is a very important event in life. Isn't the professional holiday of my wife an important event in life as well?

On this very day, they did not even give us wheat bread, let alone granted us telephone conversations. I wonder whether it was a mistake or the ordinary prison routine or could the food on Sundays be worse than on weekdays?

In the evening I watched the program of Aliaksandr Zimouski "Resonance"⁷. I hoped he would announce the potential candidates. In vain. The pre-electoral campaign in our country is conducted in a really special Belarusian way.

Endnotes

1 Charter-97 is a Belarusian civic initiative, aimed at human rights defense activity and at unification of all the opposition political forces

2 Mikhail Chyhir was a Prime-Minister of Belarus since 1994 till 1996. He retired just before the referendum, initiated by Aliaksandr Lukashenka. He left for Moscow and later returned in order to participate in the presidential elections, but was arrested in the spring of 1999. Chyhir spent eight months in a prison and was finally released under a non-leave obligation. Mikhail Chyhir participated in parliamentary and presidential elections after his criminal case had been submitted for a follow-up revision. In summer 2002 the case against Mikhail Chyhir was renewed. He was sentenced to three years of imprisonment with conditional release after one year.

3 Zianon Pazniak - Belarusian politician and civil leader, one of the founders of the Belarusian Popular Front “Revival”, the Chairman of the Conservative-Christian Party – BPF, writer, poet, doctor of linguistic studies. In the year 1988 he discovered Kurapaty – a place of mass executions of Belarusian individuals and made this case public.

4 Public National Television

5 Belarusian journalist, director and civil activist, author of notorious movies about the opposition. His series of

short movies “Secret Springs of Politics” tried to discredit the opposition leaders.

6 The former general manager of the ONT TV-Channel (The Public National Television), now works as a director of the STV (The Capital Television). Has a reputation of a pro-authoritative propagandist.

7 A program of Aliaksandr Zimouski with many “revelatory” reports about the opposition in Belarus.

CHALLENGES OF AKRESTSINA

by Ilya Bohdan

Vice-Chairman of the BPF Youth Ilya Bohdan was arrested on March 25, 2008 in Minsk, at the crossroads of the streets Kazlova and Independence Avenue, for participation in a demonstration celebrating the Day of Freedom. As many other participants of the action, he was brutally beaten by riot police.

On March 26 the Court of the Savetski district of Minsk considered him guilty, breaking the order of organization and conducting of mass events. He was sentenced to 15 days of detention.

Advice from a friend

After yet another arrest and detention at Akrestsina, my good friend and ally V. told me: “Make sure to keep a diary if you are sent there”. He showed me an issue of the newspaper “Nasha Niva” (Our Field) with his prison diary printed in it. V.’s words kept replaying in my head when I first got arrested; they kept me restless in another, more complicated, situation, when I was at Akrestsina. Unfortunately, I could not keep a diary then. Now I cannot find an answer why.

Times goes by, the world changes, we change as well. Our memory only retains certain moments, filtered by time. They are like bright pieces of a photograph. They are reflections of our inner world. Sometimes I think that some memories will stay with me forever.

Just before the celebration of the 90th anniversary of declaration of the Belarusian People’s Republic, a famous human rights activist and writer Ales Bialiatski joked in his address: “Do you know where a real Belarusian should be on March 25?” He received no reply so he smiled and continued: “At Akrestsina!” A few days later more than a hundred people were arrested during the demonstration in the centre of Minsk. Including me.

Court trial

Before actual hearings started we all sat together in a big hall,

familiar faces, close together. We just sat there and waited. The first decision is the one you are the most eager to hear as after that you can calm down and prepare for the rest. When a person comes back from the trial, holding a copy of the court resolution, no one asks what he has been sentenced to; everyone just looks into his eyes...

Through a gap in the door I could see many people who had gathered in the corridor. There were journalists, politicians, relatives and friends. I even saw my girlfriend for a second.

When they transferred me out of the hall to the trial, a package with food appeared in my hands. Later friends would try to pass on warm clothes and a sleeping bag. The first thing I grabbed anxiously was a set of four sandwiches wrapped together in a plastic film. I ate three of them while we walked upstairs to the third floor and approached the judge's cabinet.

After the trial which took five minutes the judge read aloud the resolution: "Considered guilty and to be punished with an administrative detention for the term of 15 days".

A Policeman as a Human

After the trial I was driven to the Savetski District Department of Internal Affairs together with other arrestees. A policeman had our files. He was supposed to prepare all the documents to transfer us to another establishment.

Our relatives and friends knew that we had not yet been at

the Centre of Isolation of Law-Breakers so they tried to pass us the necessary things. The guards in court had not allowed them to do so. Thanks to the policeman mentioned above they accomplished their task. “If you want to receive your things sit quietly and refrain from asking questions!” he told us as soon as we were driven to the department.

The most unpleasant thing was that we had to stay in the so-called “fish tanks” – five-six people in a room 2 x 3 meters. The smell was the hardest to bear – it felt as if the room kept the memory of all its temporary inhabitants. I guess the reason for this horrible smell was the absence of ventilation and light, combined with other factors. In our case such “factor” was a man, or, more precisely, a guy of about 25, filled with alcohol up to his bones, who curled up in the corner whimpering from time to time. Then he started throwing up on the floor where he lay and where we stood, shifting from foot to foot, doing our best to find and breathe in some fresh air. We knocked at the door covered with plates of zinc, calling the policeman on duty, crying that a man is sick and can die any moment, that we also would climb the walls in five minutes if nothing changed, but had to calm down and keep silent after we heard the reply. After some time we did not distinguish any smells at all.

It turned out it made no sense to appeal to legal norms, laws, to mention human rights. In the vertical authoritative system, adopted by Belarus from the Soviet Union, everything is de-

cided by a person who occupies a certain position. All the appeals smash against the wall which is called “I am the boss here; it’s up to me to decide what will happen to you”.

On the way to Akrestsina or Happy moments

They drove us through the night city; we were tired, heavy-headed, but a little bit happy. I felt a rush of happiness when I saw a crowd of people hurrying somewhere, when I saw Niamiha Street, so familiar, more attractive than ever with its lights...

I felt a rush of happiness because I could open a package with food and start eating a piece of sausage. I could drink the most delicious juice in the world. I could secretly take out my mobile, dial my mother’s number and hear her voice. I was sort of happy while the bus moved, everyone was. The bus stopped at the crossroads – another minute was won...

All the guys tried to have fun on the way to prison. Joked all the time, treated one another, and the guards, with food. K. even made friends with one of the guards. Gave him a sticker “The City is Ours” as a gift, to which the policeman responded: “ha, our department just confiscated a couple of boxes of such stickers”. And I thought, Z. got detained for these stickers accused of petty hooliganism ...

Cell No 20

You are supposed to go through a series of procedures before you finally get to the cell: personal search, recording of prop-

erty, which is confiscated for the time you are imprisoned, medical examination, which is more of a formal character. A lot of things here are more of a formal character. I fully realized this several days later, when the stock of cigarettes was big enough for three to four days, but we had ran out of matches. I regretted not having hidden a small lighter somewhere.

“Akrestsina sanatorium” or three meals daily

As many of my friends, I sometimes joke that Akrestsina is a sanatorium. All you have to do is read, make plans for life; you can even go to the shower, however, not more than once a week due to budgetary restrictions. Moreover, there are three meals daily.

Yes, it's true – the law-breakers are fed three times a day here. I heard that it used to be just twice, but it was allowed to receive food from outside without any limitations. Now it's not.

I heard a lot about the famous Akrestsina tea long before my first arrest. Let me say frankly – they did not put salt in it, as some of the guys thought. There was no salt, as well as nothing which would remind of tea, in the mug. You are lucky if you can find a couple of tea-grains in this warm coloured water. Not hot, warm. They brought tea in the morning or in the evening, the mug was always so hot it was impossible to hold it, but the water was warm, because the mug was made of aluminium.

We had our own know-how in regards to tea-drinking. Apart from juices and water our allies sometimes passed us “Ice Tea” – a soft drink. We realized that if we add it to the local tea, the latter would taste a little bit like peach or lemon. Our spirits rose after this invention.

The only thing I missed was sugar: the stock of chocolate bars, sweets etc. which we had when we had just “moved” here, was soon finished. We substituted chocolate with hematogen¹, which I found in nearly each package I received from the outside. Such packages were passed to me regularly thanks to my relatives and my girlfriend.

The bread they gave us here was not very tasty, that is why, probably, there was always too much of it left. First we just put it into a package, and then someone came up with an idea to dry it and make crisps. We put the pieces of bread into the radiator, so that no space was left, and the next day we had a whole lot of crisps. We even joked that we would optimize the process until the release day and would set up production of local crisps. We did not think about the dirt and germs which had been gathering in that radiator for many days ...

Cellmates

Two men met us in the cell: K. and G.

BPF?

Yep, we said.

You kept us waiting for so long!

The prisoners know nothing about what is happening outside, but they do know everything what concerns the life here. Thus, these men knew that new political prisoners had arrived during the past few days.

K. is 25 years old, of which he spent eight in prison. He has only one lung and has had a lot of diseases for his young age. Gramps V. is about 50. We called him “Gramps” because of his long beard, not because of his age. He did not look 50 at all. Both of them came here for breaking the regime, more precisely, the regime of administrative surveillance. When a person is released pre-term, he is supposed to be under the so-called administrative surveillance for a year or two. This surveillance mostly means close attention of a district police officer: the newly released should be at home from 8 p.m. until 8 a.m., should not consume alcohol (or he might be sent to the occupational therapy detox center), should not commit any hooliganism. These limitations are pretty difficult for most of them, for some - even impossible. The first violation of these rules is usually punished with a warning, the third one – fine or detention.

We made friends with them from the start, and lived together peacefully until the terms of detention were over – first theirs, then ours. They told us about colonies and juvenile prisons, as well as the prison “conceptual” philosophy. We told them about the opposition, BPF and the European Union.

K. taught us how to make a tube and a shuttlecock out of newspapers. You put a note into a shuttlecock, and then shoot it through a tube out of the cell window. We managed to throw notes to our friends twice. In the first one we asked to pass us matches, in the second one we called everyone to come to the court trial against K. At this point K. even offered to host the training “How to survive in prison”. We laughed, but some of his ideas and knowledge would have been very helpful for our activists.

Time went by. We received greetings from our girlfriends and D. from his wife and daughter. We slept close to each other, shared the last cigarettes, I even think we had one and the same dream. We counted days. First, you “climb up the hill” – this was the most difficult. “Hill” was day number seven – half way through the term. Then it got easier.

After the first several days of emotions and discoveries life got quiet and little happened. Everyone tried to kill time in any possible way. All of us dreamed to be on the other side of the fence, to be free people who can open the doors themselves. Here is only one door, which cannot be opened when you want to ...

This is how we spent almost two weeks within the same walls.

Then followed the tears of families, my mother’s eyes look-

ing at me as if she could not get enough of me, the warmth of my girlfriend's lips, many arms stretching out to shake hands ... The day of release blurred in my memory, such a wide range of emotions that it was impossible to focus. Moreover, I inhaled fresh air which made me even dizzier ...

Endnotes

1 Hematogen is a fudge candy bar made partly from cow blood. It is sometimes used as a medical product to treat anemia.

THE PRISON DIARY

by Kasia Halitskaya

The activist of the youth organization “Young Front”, not registered in Belarus, Katsiaryna Halitskaya was arrested at the celebration of the Belarusian Day of Freedom in 2008. She was sentenced to ten days of administrative detention.

March 25, late at night

The brightest memory. I'm afraid this moment will replay in my head for a long time: the prison corridor, Z. is standing by the wall – hands on the wall, feet apart, head down... The guards are escorting me passed him; my jeans are wet up to the knees, water squishing in my boots... He turns around, pale as death, spotting the bruise on the left side of his face– and whispers very-very quietly: “Good luck, Kasia...” Good luck to you too, Z.

March 26

IT'S 10 DAYS, NOT 15!

Moreover, how cool that A. is not here in prison! And K.! It's much easier this way. Gonna dance.

March 27

The pigeons sat at our window-sill and screamed (I mean, cooed) in the morning. I even woke up because of that. And thought, how am I supposed to live Skype-less for such a long time.

I looked around, estimating the conditions: the space for walking back and forth in the cell was approximately 1 x 2 meters, two steps and a half and back ... On the bright side, L. managed to pass me a couple of books during my court trial!!! What a genius!!! Moreover, we managed to bring bis-

cuits and three chocolate bars to the cell, V. put one more chocolate in my pocket while we were standing in the corridor waiting for the guards to distribute us to different cells (thanks, V.). Thus, the food supplies are as follows: loads of biscuits and four chocolate bars, for just the two of us. This will keep us alive. The only thing I regret is that I am not as four-sighted as Z. – he brought some serious food with him to the action, I only thought about hygienic “equipment”.

Now it's time for jumping gymnastics – warmest regards to the coach!

About the shabby-looking man.

A very shabby-looking man in a dull sweater washed the floor. Once when I left the cell to hand over a garbage bin, he dropped the duster saying “Oh my God, what beautiful girls they keep here...”

Well, my dear man, they keep even more beautiful ones here.

A package arrived for me. I love you, V.!

The books are gathering. I will be a well-educated woman when I get out of here.



1.



2.





4.



5.





7.



8.







Captions

1. Ilya Bohdan
2. Siamion Pechanko
3. Drawing from one of the cells at Akrestsina, artist unknown
4. Kasia Halitskaya
5. Volha Kuzmich
6. Kasia Halitskaya
7. Anatol Liabedzka
8. Ales Chyhir
9. Siarzhuk Latsinski
10. Ales Chyhir

March 28

Today it was such a cold night that we hardly slept at all. However, I took a nap during the “wakey time” until breakfast (that is, from 6 till 8 am), and dreamed about summer and flowers. Moreover, we are going to the shower today, hooray-hooray-hooray!!!

Another package arrived for me. K, I love you! I’ve got a towel! Clean underwear! House slippers! A notebook with zebras! And... BOOKS!!!

March 29

I wake up really very early. The guard will take away the mop and other “equipment” in a few minutes, so I’ll probably try to sleep a little bit more. Why can’t I sleep like V.?

Once again I dreamed about summer, flowers, and bushes with black currants... This must be because of the cold.

I went to see the prison doctor; she put her hand onto her heart, saying, “Oh, no, little girl, how come I see you here again?” Well, Lady Doc, such is the backside of life, I can’t say I wanted to be here in the first place ...

Another package arrived; I gave half of the juice packs to our drunkard lady, saying, drink these to the health of V.

March 30

It got warmer!!! I guess it's spring outside. And we are here...

Today I really feel like crying, but I won't – I'm not very good at that.

K. will be released today, so she is already nervous, walking round the cell as a squirrel in a wheel. The last day is always the hardest one, even if it's just a five-day term.

H. is telling about her life. She has lived with three men, two of them were named Vova, and the third one was named Kolya. Two Vovas died because they were named Vova, and Kolya is still alive, because he's Kolya. Such a faith in the power of a name. She's a cool lady anyway!

March 31

I opened the small window and put a bottle with mineral water on the window-sill. The Sun shines through it so now we have a rainbow in the cell.

I took off her socks (one of them is grey, the other is brown and I have a strong suspicion they both were once white, and they have holes in them... just everywhere...) and said: "Wow, I've got such claws on my feet I can easily climb the trees!" No comment. I gave her a pair of my socks.

April 1

Hey-ho, I went to wash the floor in the corridors on our floor and saw F. He was being taken to the doctor. I told H. a lot about the Young Front and some outstanding individuals. When she heard about one of them, she immediately turned around to see the guy. I bet she flirted, being such a fierce lady :)

V.'s all-winning performance.

When a person takes a Snickers bar... wraps it in Scotch tape... takes a two-litre juice carton package... pours the juice into a can... accurately slices the bottom of the package... puts the Snickers inside... glues the slice... pours the juice back... and then passes all this to her cruelly repressed sister in prison – then this person is not just a genius. This person is V.!!!

April 3

I slept wonderfully as I tied my head with a towel so that the horrible lamp did not glow right into my eyes. Yes, I am a genius.

I was sitting there waiting for the guard to escort me to the shower, when the door was opened and ... the policeman pushed P into the cell. I couldn't say anything apart from "Oh, my God, P. ..."

Ten days for the action dedicated to the so-called “Day of Uniting”, near the Russian Embassy... Why it’s always the same people who get into prison?

We’ve got four more neighbours – really horrible women. Each time they say something P. looks painfully into my eyes ... Poor baby, how’s she gonna make it here on her own in such a company?

April 4, the day of release

H. is out of here. She said goodbye like this: “Farewell, sunshine! I’ll tell Kolya I’ve shared the cell with a political prisoner, he will turn green of envy!”

...I don’t know what to do; I’ve had enough of this...

I think I’ll go and look through the window...

Good luck, P., sunshine! I will bring you more books and I will come to meet you! Show them all!!!

Well, that’s sort of... a happy end.

SEVEN “CUTLETS”

by Franak Viachorka

Franak Viachorka, at that time one of the leaders of the youth branch of the BPF party was arrested on July 27, 2007, near the Square of Independence in Minsk. The police found ten greeting cards among his belongings and issued a protocol of administrative offence in accordance with Article 23.34 of the Code of Administrative Offences of the Republic of Belarus – “breaking the order of organization and conducting of mass events”. He was sentenced to seven days of administrative detention.

Independence Day

I was walking from the centre of Minsk to the Independence Square when I realized I was followed. Approaching the Square, a policeman asked me to show my documents, as well as the contents of my pockets and bag. He brought me in, allegedly to identify my person.

In the District Department of Internal Affairs they found in my bag ten postcards dedicated to the celebration of the Day of Independence on July 27. The postcards were very abstract, only black silhouettes of dancing young people in front of a red background and no political slogans whatsoever. I got seven days of detention for those postcards.

Never trust, never fear, never ask

First I was kept at the police department, alone, in a cell, cold and narrow. I was afraid as I didn't know what to expect. I thought I would die or go insane if I spent more time in there.

However, I was most afraid in the police van – a big police vehicle that transports criminals and political prisoners to the prisons all over Minsk. It arrived approximately at 1 am. Inside, I saw metal boxes, 50 x 50 cm, without any windows or light. You can see nothing, you just have to concentrate on what you hear. You hear the gates squeaking – first, second, third ... I guessed it was Valadarka – the most famous prison of Minsk. The guards dragged the criminals out of the van; I heard screams, sounds of beating ... We proceeded to the next prison.

I heard one of my “colleagues” ask for permission to go to the toilet. The policeman laughed, then dragged him out of the van and punched him. The prisoner screamed. The police can beat you any time they like in the police van – to them you are just another criminal. They know they will never be punished for that.

No one beat me. It was useless to say anything or to ask for anything. They shout, so it’s better to keep silent. That is the only way. In the Police Department prisoners are supposed to ask for permission to go to the toilet. I didn’t do that – I was hoping I would endure, and tried to stay calm.

Language

When the police van arrived I said something in Belarusian. This drove the policeman mad. He started shouting in Russian “what the f***k d’you think you’re doing, speaking that language to me?”

Lukashenka does not speak Belarusian and people on the street speak Russian. Still, language is of national value. Today the Belarusian language is the language of the elite and the intelligentsia, and I suppose that was the reason why the policeman got angry. He thought I was teasing him.

Meeting Akrestsina

My father has been here more than twenty times. I am used to see Akrestsina from the outside – I came here with my Mom.

Third floor, windows like in an ordinary building. However, once inside, you realize that three fourth of them are walled up. All you see is a small piece of the sky, the windows face the inner yard, so you cannot even hear your friends come outside the prison to support you. All you hear is exercises of the internal troops and the police.

I spent the first three nights with the so-called “kitchen fighters” – this is what those who beat their wives are called here. There was also another prisoner, S., in his late twenties, who had spent four years in prison. He boasted that this was the 13th trip to prison for him during one year. He sort of liked me because he had studied at the same lyceum as I, in the early 90’s. He was expelled during his second year. Now he is a notorious criminal. S. was an “alpha dog” at Valadarka – a kind of boss among all the prisoners. In addition to this, we had mice as cellmates. When a newspaper was left in the cell for the night, it was completely nibbled through by the morning. We waited for the court trial together.

Court Trial

The court is like a comedy show. The judge obviously was engaged in a political court proceeding for the first time so she didn’t know what to ask. She looked like professor Umbridge from “Harry Potter”, a lady of character. Instead of “All rise, the court is now in session” she said “Good afternoon”. The audience laughed.

One of the witnesses was a policeman.

“I, the driver of the police car, saw this young man...”

“What was he wearing?”

“I don’t remember, I just saw him passing someone some papers...”

“Which papers?”

“I don’t remember...”

“Well, thank you, the situation is clear”, said the judge. Then she turned to me: “You say you did not hand out propaganda, but the policeman saw you!” The audience laughed, including the journalists, making the judge angry.

After a 15 minutes break the judge read out the sentence. “Taking into consideration the personality of the accused” and “with an aim of prevention and correction” the court confirmed my guilt and sentenced me to seven days of administrative detention.

My cellmate-criminal also got detention, but the “kitchen fighters” only had to pay fines, so they could get back to beating their wives. Anyway, I was told that I would be imprisoned even before the court trial started.

When I was led out of the cell to go to the court, the criminal said in a rough voice, in Russian: “Listen, if you’re detained, ask them to put you in my cell, we’re gonna have fun, ha-haha”. A nice invitation, but I decided not to accept it, as it could end badly.

“They’re not gonna defeat us!”

This was my first prison sentence.

When they threw me into the cell, I recalled everything I had read about the Stalin times. It was very much alike. Even the prison newspaper was the same – “Trudovoj put” (Way of Work). Prisoners and the prison administration have read it for 80 years. The criminals write articles on the topic “I killed five people but now I have returned to God” etc. They do so because they believe it could help them to be released earlier. A dim lamp was also described in the literature. It was covered with some piece of black fabric so you could see nothing when you enter the cell.

When my eyes got used to the dark, I started reading signs on the walls. All the walls were decorated with all sorts of messages – names, surnames, threats of revenge. Someone appealed to God, someone anticipated close victory. Such small things sure lift one’s spirits. I wrote “They’re not gonna defeat us! Franak Viachorka. Long Live Belarus!” and the time of my prison term “July 27-August 03, 2007”.

Neighbours

There were approximately six prisoners in my cell at different times – someone left, someone came. Among them there were three political prisoners. There were also several alcoholics.

When a new cellmate arrived, he was immediately asked a

series of questions, like: “What for?” “I had a drink and beat a policeman”. “What about you?” “I am a political one”. “Aaaa, oh, a political prisoner!” And the conversation usually stopped. They had voted for Lukashenka, and now they said he was bad and cursed him. The only thing which comforted me was that those who came through prison or had any encounters with the police would never again support Lukashenka.

Smell of Akrestsina

Everything in the cell was old and broken, including the hole that prisoners were supposed to use as a toilet in front of everyone. The water had too much chlorine in it. A wooden stage occupied half of the cell – that was the place for sleeping. All the prisoners slept together. My parents passed me a sleeping bag as it was cold in the cell and we had nothing to cover up. Those prisoners, whose relatives had passed them nothing, marched across the cell, frozen, their eyes red, and smoked “Astra”. The smell of these cigarettes mixed with the smell of the “toilet”, and the prisoners’ sweat. Such was the smell of Akrestsina. I remembered it from my childhood, when my father returned from prison. Now, I smelled like that myself.

At the court trial, Dad advised me not to sleep near the toilet and to wash my hands very often, as I could have problems with my skin otherwise. Many different people sleep on that wooden plank, including tramps, so they

could bring different diseases or parasites with them. He also said I should ask for a shower. People don't know they have such a right, and the policemen take advantage of that. In the end the prisoners do not take a shower for a long time.

Stockholm and “cutlets”

Watches are not allowed, so we measured time by different sounds. When the plane Stockholm-Minsk flew over the prison, it meant that it was 4 o'clock, dinner was coming. Experienced prisoners passed this knowledge to newcomers. Everyone was hungry and waited for the Stockholm plane to fly over Akrestsina. It made such a noise that it was impossible to speak.

They served the same soup every day: water, a little fat, a little cabbage. Same cutlets: a substance looking like powdered grass, a little meat, carrots. Prisoners called days “cutlets”. They never asked, how many days of imprisonment you had got, they asked, how many cutlets you had got.

The “library”

I read a lot: Aliakhnovich, Kundera – my friends passed me the books during the court trial. The policemen asked if they were political books. I denied that. They double-checked if there was something against Lukashenka in those books. Prisoners and policemen called our cell “the library”.

It was allowed to pass newspapers like “Soviet Byelorussia”, “Komsomolskaya Pravda” (Comsomol truth) – sometimes we tried to read them. A short article stating that “the Belarusian opposition tried to organize an illegal street action with participation of drunk and greedy for money youngsters, blah blah blah” made us think that more people had been arrested so we would soon have new cellmates. When a guard on duty brought a list in which we were supposed to sign for the next day’s food, we looked for familiar names. When I left the prison, 17 people were still there.

J. was released at the same time as me. He was also arrested on July 27, got 15 days of detention, but his lawyer filed a complaint and the court admitted the sentence was biased. For the first time ever since the Belarusian regime settled, thus, he was released prematurely - after seven days of detention. After that, everyone wrote complaints. I don’t know what it was – a struggle for power between two clans, or our arrests were just convulsions of a dying regime?

Games are not allowed at Akrestsina, however, the wooden planks on which prisoners sleep are covered with drawings – chess-board, “crotch-pheasant”, “hinchyk” and other games. We sculptured figures and dices from bread. There always was too much bread left – each prisoner was given a whole loaf of rye bread per day. We painted the dots on the dices with toothpaste.

We didn't play chess as every other day there was a shake-down – all the prisoners were ordered out of the cells in to the corridor, and the cells were searched, and all the illegal things, like chess figures or dices made of bread, were confiscated. They even checked the toilet hole to see whether we had hidden something there. So in the end no one wanted to make new chess figures every other day.

Life School

Two hundred years ago people were tortured, their arms were cut off, but they still shouted “Free Belarus!” People like Kastus Kalinouski. Later, during the time of the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD), someone was killed every day.

So why cannot we endure prison, or transportation in a small box?

We have to do that. It's a great school for life. Some time spent in Akrestsina gives a very strong motivation to fight against the regime, I would even say, an extremely strong motivation.

A PRISON DIARY: THE STORY OF THREE DAYS

by Zmitser Dashkevich

From 2006 until 2008, 19 activists of the democratic movement were punished for activities on behalf of an unregistered organization, in accordance with Article 193.1 of the Criminal Code of the Republic of Belarus. While the majority of them were fined, some were imprisoned.

The leader of the youth association “Young Front” Zmitser Dashkevich served the longest term. On November 1, 2006 he was sentenced to a year and a half in prison. He served his time at a Prison in Shklou. He was released in January 2008 by a special resolution of the Supreme Court of the Republic of Belarus.

Republic of Belarus. Minsk. Valadarski Street, 2. Two thousand five hundred people live at this address, in a building located in the centre of the city, near the Catholic Church of Symon and Alena, the House of Government, the Four-star hotel “Minsk” and the drama theatre named after Maksim Gorki. There would have been nothing bad about this story, had it not been a prison.

Prison. This word has something mysteriously dangerous in it, for those whose freedom have never been restricted. Even if some of us happened to visit a place like Akrestsina, we cannot imagine what is hidden behind the ancient walls of the Pishchalauski Palace.

No, it is not scary at all here. People have lived here for years, in these tubercular, stale-to-death cells, which are tenderly called “cribs”, or “houses” in the mother tongue, as if to make each new visitor of the central prison understand – this is your new home, your house, your crib. The most peculiar thing is that life here also follows laws. Its own laws, however, the prisoners’ laws, or the laws of the underworld

Any kind of communities is likely to form its own laws to turn its activity into normal. This process is inevitable and positive in itself. A community creates laws in order to regulate or limit the activity of its representatives.

This is exactly what happens in a community of people deprived of freedom – prisoners. They form laws in the context of contradiction of their system of values and another

system – the police one, or “pig system”, as they call it here. The main point of the contradiction is to liberalize the latter and make it more acceptable. For instance, the individuals with prison ethics demanded that the prison administration should increase the allowed quantity of packages, or allowing usage of electricity, or television. They also form the so-called “cash common funds” to help those newcomers who have brought nothing with them upon arrival to prison, etc.

Well, as for the laws of the first system, the police one, they are familiar to most of us. Thus, we can understand their characteristics. As for the prison laws, not everyone is lucky enough to get acquainted with them in his lifetime.

Adaptation

For me, it started on a Friday in the pre-trial detention centre number 1 in Belarus. Those who get here on the last day of the working week, or on the weekend, are kept in the so-called “sumps” until Monday. “Sumps” are specialized cells with wooden boarding instead of the floor; and the toilet, which is called a “slip hole” here, also performs the function of a sink. It is difficult to understand this if you never came across this system. Nevertheless, it is quite easy – a flat latrine is located in the corner of the cell, no walls or fences, and there is a tap with cold water above it. A very economic construction – two in one. So they proved they could do anything if there was such a wish.

So, the sump number one, nine, eight (this is the way the

numbers are spelled out here), which became my home for three days, had a floor space of about 12 square meters. However, the administration managed to stuff 25 people into it. A prisoner who had been dwelling in the sump for eight months even said he had never seen more than 18 people in it before. There are no limits of the endurance of human beings' under such conditions.

The prison laws and the corresponding hierarchy, in which everyone longs for a better place, come into force already in the sump, as in all cell like premises when imprisoned.

A position in a system.

Everyone tries to find it from the very first day. Listening to the prisoners who had come through the circle of this hell "prison-prisoner transport-cage" several times. Learning the rules of behaviour on the spot. Everyone considers himself a moral ideal. However, as we already know, there is a special morality here.

A person of steady character adapts quite quickly to the prison system and starts following its laws. However, a person of weak character and will turns into an outcast that will be bullied and laughed at. There is also another category of prisoners. These are people who, due to their high moral standards, cannot accept the laws of the "criminal world" and inevitable conflict with it. It is difficult to find such people here, but possible. Typically a huge physical and moral pressure is carried out towards these people. In the end they

accept the rules of the game, or turn into the same outcasts, mocked less but hated more.

When I came across this other legal system, I did not contemplate my rank in it. I never wanted to get into the “powerful” group, and I also knew it would be difficult to dominate me. I tried to stand aside these prison laws, but immediately found myself in contradiction to these rules.

Resistance

The questions arose in the very beginning, in the sump. There was an old man, who was a little bit otherworldly, so, when he entered the cell, he was careless enough to sit on the floor, as there was no other free place to sit on. All the others started harassing him, saying things like “you, old man are a bugger, so you should sit near the slip-hole, never touch anyone else, eat separately” etc. Naturally, it is hard to bear things like that, so I started without any hesitation defending the old man. At first, nobody understood me. Then they took offence and started bullying me. During these days I heard a lot from the adepts of criminal morality – that I was a jerk, that I was a sectary, that I would be put into a harem together with this old man if I didn’t stop acting like that.

The most peculiar thing is that these new found fighters against the inhuman “pig” system just sit there saying:

“Cops are bastards (a policeman punched one of them when they took us to a doctor for a blood test) – they beat people,

bullied them and humiliated the little human dignity that was left.”

A few minutes later they start doing exactly the same thing – humiliating the old man, who was too tired to get up and walk around the cell.

“Guys, I said, you criticize the policemen for inhumanity and illegality, but in which way are you different from them? Where do you find strength to humiliate others when you are humiliated every day?”

The prisoners fell silent and did not touch the old man anymore.

Life conclusion

The conflict was over. However, I still think: God, how is the human heart structured, that when it comes under influence of the forces of evil, it has neither strength nor desire to stop evil, but pass evil over to others, multiplying it many times?

It is not the problem of a certain place where I happened to be at the time. The point is that all human characteristics, good and bad features, become more visible under extreme conditions. Though, we encounter the same situation in different formats every day. Think about it and you will realize that we often are dragged into this kind of closed circle, by which evil goes from one person to another.

Apostle Paul knew this inclination of the human heart and warned us: “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Romans, 12:21). These words may seem simple, as we often hear them spoken in our families, at school, and see them printed in philosophical books. But how hard it is to respond with good to somebody’s evil in the everyday life! It is possible to find strength to do so only if a well of God’s love and kindness lives in our hearts: “Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love”. (1 John 4:7-8)

If some of us want to comprehend God, these words should be the guide in our fight against evil – whether it is the “pig” system, or the prison system, or any other. Only love can overcome the pro-Soviet ideology and atheism, despotism and illegality. Only love for one’s neighbors can stop this evil, which prevails in our worn-out land.

TEN DAYS IN THE PRISON OF ZHODZINA

by Siarzhuk Latsinski

The member of the Belarusian Popular Front Siarzhuk Latsinski was arrested on the last day of the tent camp in 2006. The detention centre at the Akrestsina Street was overcrowded then, so some of the detained, Siarzhuk included, were transported to the pre-trial detention center in the city of Zhodzina. He was sentenced to ten days of administrative detention.

I arrived to the Square together with my friends from Babrujsk. There were 20 of us altogether, perhaps even more. In all the countries around the world, people go to a square after the elections to celebrate this event together, regardless of the results. However, in Belarus, it was obvious that the Presidential election results would be fabricated again, even before the results were announced. So, caring citizens came out to the Square to protest against the elections results. Therefore, for my friends and myself it was not a big dilemma whether “to go or not to go”.

The hardest thing, when we left our city, was probably to avoid being arrested preventively. Many from Babrujsk were arrested and put into prison several days before the elections.

Naturally, we believed that we would be able to defend our interests at the Square. Otherwise, we would never have gone. We were among the first to start establishing the tent camp. The tents were placed on the second day after the elections. As soon as we started taking them out, people in civilian clothes removed and broke them. After that, the head of the tent camp suggested we should form the so-called “protective circle”, which would be impossible to penetrate. We put up five tents at first, but the quantity increased every hour.

Funnily enough, life at the Square reminded of a tourist camp, with the same distribution of obligations and rules. The “life organization” was excellent. We had our own cook, our own DJ, people responsible for the “protective circle”, security.

Naturally, fear was present, especially on the first night and on the night of the arrest. It was fear of the unknown – what would happen to us next?

Every single night we expected to be arrested. That is why the last night at the Square did not differ much from the previous ones. At about 3.30 am the electricity at the entire Square went out. The journalists, who were standing near the chain of people, were forced away by the policemen. Following this, several police vans arrived. Riot police surrounded our tent camp. Everyone in the camp sat down in two rows on the ground, interlocked by their arms. The policemen stood there in a circle for ten minutes or so and then, after receiving an order, started brutally pulling people out of the chain.

They drove us to Akrestsina. First, they did not take us to the building itself. They just lined us up against the wall surrounding the Detention Centre. We stood there for several hours, frozen and our faces to the wall. The policemen did not let us move or speak. Next, they started bringing us in to the building one by one to execute protocols. One and the same policeman witnessed against several dozens of people at once. Then they put us in cells, where I spent three hours or so. As a lot of opposition activists had been taken to Akrestsina Detention Centre before and during the elections, there were not enough free cells. Thus, they decided to transport half of the people to the prison of Zhodzina.

They threw us into different cells upon arrival at Zhodzina. I shared the cell with ten people. The court trial took place only

three days later. At the trial we were quickly led into a room. The judge read out the protocol and announced the sentence. I got ten days. Some people got seven, 12 or 15 days.

The conditions in this prison were rather good in comparison to the Babrujsk prison. I had been in prison before, in my native town, for hoisting the national white-red-white flag at a concert. In Babrujsk, unlike here in the prison of Zhodzina, there was a wooden boarding called “the stage” instead of the plank beds. “The stage” was meant for five people to sleep on; however, usually there were ten people. We had an opportunity to listen to the radio in Zhodzina, which was not the case in Babrujsk. Also, there was a sink and a toilet in the cell in the Zhodzina prison. Cells in Babrujsk only had buckets which stank horribly, and twice a day prisoners were led to the toilet. In Zhodzina, we were taken to the shower twice within ten days and for a walk every day.

In Babrujsk, I shared the cell with domestic hooligans, alcoholics and petty criminals. In Zhodzina, I was accompanied by students, entrepreneurs and an assistant professor of the University. The relations between us were warm and friendly. An interesting fact was that there were four people from Babrujsk in my cell together with me, whom I hadn’t known before. At that moment they worked and studied in Minsk. Thus, we had many topics to discuss.

Time went by quicker than during my prison times in Babrujsk. As I’ve mentioned before, there was a radio and we received newspapers and books from outside. There was also

an opportunity to do morning exercises, like push-ups, as there was enough space in the cell. We also played logical games, and chess made of bread.

The prison food was quite acceptable and the meals were more or less varied. My brightest memory is the taste of Zhodzina bread – it was really very tasty. The whole cell agreed on always refusing supper – it consisted of one “bigos”¹ We constantly received packages – mostly containing sausage, fat, biscuits, fruit and cigarettes. The packages also included, apart from food, hygienic supplies and linen.

It was only scary in prison on the first day. A prison is not a natural place for a normal person. Thus, the first day was spent adapting to the new conditions. However, later the fear disappeared. First of all, my allies were together with me and secondly, our sentences were not that long. Lastly, none of us felt guilty.

At the beginning I did not count days, but when one of my cellmates was released it made me happier since I realized that I would also get out soon. The last day was really hard. All the inhabitants of our cell had made friends and it was difficult to say goodbye – sometimes we even ironically repeated the famous slogan from the Square “We Stay Here!” After the all-clear we had to wait five more hours before release (two more people from our cell were to be released on the same night as me). Naturally, we had no watches, so time crept extremely slowly.

The first call of freedom was the opened door of the cell. They lined us up in the corridor, handed us our personal belongings and asked us to sign in the journal.

After that we walked around in the prison labyrinths for seven more minutes. Then we were led out of the building, but not out from the prison grounds. For the first time in ten days I saw the sky not through bars: I was overwhelmed by the feeling of euphoria. Our next destination was the check-point. I saw a TV-set behind the guard on duty. It showed a huge crowd of people. At first I thought it was a report about the current events in France. Nevertheless, I asked the guard: "Have all these people come here to meet us?" He said nothing, but smiled in a friendly way. It was indeed the camera for external observation.

As soon as I walked out of the check-point, I saw a lot of happy people waiting for us. I saw my friends who had come from Babrujsk to drive me home. I saw my friends from Babrujsk, who had inhabited other cells. Also, my cellmate from Minsk was released on the same night and decided to visit me in Babrujsk immediately upon release.

The events of the Square 2006 became one of the brightest moments in my life. I found a lot of new friends whom I still meet and communicate with. I am sure that all what we did together was not in vain.

Endnotes

1. A dish prepared from sour cabbage. Ideally, it is supposed to be cooked with meat and spice; however, in the Belarusian army and prisons this dish exists in a simplified variant and has bad reputation.

A POLITICAL PRISONER'S DIARY

by Katsiaryna Vinakurava

The Russian citizen Katsiaryna Vinakurava from the Russian youth movement "Oborona" (Defence) was arrested on July 22, 2006 near the Russian Embassy in Minsk. Together with friends she protested against the CIS' (Commonwealth of Independent States) summit in Moscow, as well as against the Russian authorities' support of Lukashenka's policy. Katsiaryna Vinakurava got ten days of administrative detention, which she served in the detention center at Akrestsina Street.

It's the end of July and all of my friends have kind of disappeared. Someone left for Europe, someone went on tour around our widespread homeland, and someone preferred to go on a business trip to the USA instead of a summer vacation. As for me, I am spending summer in a Belarusian prison. Ten days of administrative detention. Today someone has passed me a notebook. Thus, I have started to keep a diary, as any other decent prisoner, in order to pass it on to my contemporaries and descendents

Day 1

As soon as the sentence was announced, they transported me to the Central District Department of Internal Affairs of the city of Minsk. A "fish tank", a room of 2 x 2 meters, with no windows or doors, but with a video camera; smell of chloride. I froze in 15 minutes. Two women, who knew from the start who I was (I don't know how) tortured me with "fishing" questions. An elderly lady, lying on a bench, asked for headache medication. Finally, night transportation arrived and the doors of the detention center at Akrestsina Street went wide open. A freezing cold shivering night (there are no beds, no mattresses in the cell – just a wooden board to sleep on).

In the morning I was visited by the Russian Consul, all ironed and well-cared. I asked for cigarettes, a notebook and a blanket, saying I was ready to pay for all these things as soon as I was free. The man said it would be very kind of me

and left quickly, stating he could do nothing but to pass on some packages.

Day 3

Mr Consul, where is my blanket? The morning started with thinking about the articles which could incriminate the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Belarus. I tried to recall the procedure of filing a claim to the court for “crime against humanity”. On the whole, I felt like Princess Tarakanova¹. I had an idea to go on hunger strike so that they would give me a mirror, because I was bored and hungry. However, they gave me a mirror even without a hunger strike. An unpleasant thing: the guards found the notes from my friends during the shake-down.

They brought me a blanket! Not from the Consul, as expected. The Consul is a clear example of what the system of diplomatic dynasties leads to. Moreover, someone passed me some sausage together with the blanket, so I am warm and full, and I think I’d better put off the murder of the Russian Minister for Foreign Affairs until worse times.

Day 5

As I was warned by my friends in Belarus and in Moscow, who had served administrative detentions in this hospitable country before, I am starting to die. From eating too much. I asked the guard on duty to let me pass food to other prisoners, as I had no idea what I was going to do with such quantity of

food. Strangely enough, I adapted to the situation and totally regained my spirits. I even did not worry about my own destiny and well-being - I worried about the people outside who thought about me. Another thing that worried me was that, in spite of all the rules of image-making, I would appear at the platform of the Belarusian Railway Station in Moscow not as a sad prisoner with a worn-out face, but as a well-cared for and cheerful girl.

Day 6

It wasn't me who first said that every prisoner acquired his own rich inner world as soon as he got to prison. Apart from that, I found a wonderful company. My prison angel was N. – an Armenian girl, who had been waiting for deportation for two months. She became my source of joy on the first day. She sacrificed half of her blanket to me and it was no less than saving my mindless life. I am serious. A guard named G. recalled last year's Chernobyl commemoration and the "Youth of Yabloko"² from Moscow, almost all imprisoned, as well as the two Russian citizens who served their terms here after the elimination of the tent camp during the Presidential elections. I suggested I would give them his best regards as soon as I was back in Moscow, but he refused. So, my dear friends, the guard G. will give his regards to nobody.

Day 7

Please, no more food! I am turning into a lazy overeaten ani-

mal. It would be better if they passed me some fresh newspapers. I am tired of doing nothing. I am keeping a substantial, but one-way correspondence. I spent almost the whole day sleeping. My happiness would have been complete if I had gotten an hour of Internet for each kilo of sausage.

Day 8

A pigeon flew over to our window today. Or maybe it was a crow. They say, it's a sign that news is coming. True, we got a new guard on duty. Instead of G., who refused to give his best regards to the Russian opposition, there was a cupboard-like man called M. My Moscow depression vanished. I behaved like a decent prisoner: I fed everyone, entertained them and agitated for the opposition.

PS More food arrived. This is a real catastrophe.

Day 9

Our cell was probably the most intellectual at the whole Akrestsina. We spent our days reading (when we were not eating), drawing, sculpturing figures from bread. We made a whole zoo, but the guards threw it away regularly. Thus, it became a matter of honour to restore the collection. I made a head of Yulia Tymoshenko³ and placed it above the door as a guardian. Then I made the Goddess of victory – Nike, with wings, a lion and a lioness (the lion reminded me of a poodle, and the lioness reminded me of a dog), and the signs “Long Live Belarus!”, “Glory Russia!”, “Hasta la Victoria

siempre”. In the end I decided I would only take with me to Moscow, the ring made by N. so that I would have something that remind me of her.

Day 10

I decided to pack in advance. The things that occupied our limited space (the cell was approximately five steps long and most of the time there were three people in the cell). My next goal to achieve will be, I guess, to learn how to travel light. Thus, I threw away the clothes I had on during this prison time, left considerable food supplies to my cellmates, and took only some cigarettes, a notebook and some personal belongings with me. I am listening to the footsteps coming up the corridor. Seconds turn into hours. This is it, the long-expected rattle of the door lock.

I am free.

It was a rapid deportation. Minsk railway station, a train, the morning Moscow express , unexpectedly my allies from “Oborona” hugged me at the platform. We drank Champagne laughed, cried.

Several months later I tried to convince another “gang” of activists not to go to Belarus. Because it’s not just “serve your punishment and be released”. The face of a prison, even an administrative one, as well as the face of politics, or a war – is not feminine at all.

In fact, the whole system is aimed at suppressing a person. Whoever you are outside the prison doors, you find yourself face-to-face with the system, with not even a chance to win. All you can do is to survive.

What depressed me the most was my absolute dependability on all the external circumstances and inability to influence anything. I also remember the sheer joy when I found hand balm in one of the packages. It smelled like freedom.

Another problem is a psychological one – elimination of the feeling of fear and the instinct of self-preservation. You feel the fear every single minute in prison. The ability to feel fear further on, in normal life, greatly decreases. I still have problems with the feeling of self-preservation.

Yes, I sometimes have nightmares about all of this, too.

But – we did it, we survived. We are going to celebrate tonight! For your and our freedom!

Endnotes

1 Princess Tarakanova pretended to be the daughter of the Russian Empress Elisabeth Petrovna. She was arrested and died of tuberculosis in 1775).

2 Youth organization of the Russian political party Russian United Democratic party Yabloko

3 One of the leaders of the Orange Revolution in Ukraine

DAILY ROUTINES AT AKRESTSINA

by Anton Kalinouski

Anton Kalinouski, an activist of the BPF Youth and a student of Minsk State Linguistic University, was arrested on January 16, 2008 in the building of the Court of the Central District of Minsk, where he came to support a friend accused of participating in the action of protest of individual entrepreneurs. The police accused him of swearing in public. He was sentenced to ten days of detention in accordance with Article 17.1 of the Administrative Code – “petty hooliganism”.

January 16. The background story and Day 1.

It started at 8 am when I got a phone call from K. She told me that her friend J. had been arrested as she took part in the protest of individual entrepreneurs. I called our friends and told them that the girl had been arrested and headed for the court house.

The trial was closed to all outsiders. We waited for the sentence to be announced when the policemen of the Central District Department of Internal Affairs approached us and demanded we show our passports. Almost everyone had documents with them. The policemen looked at my passport. One of them took it and left. After that another led me outside. We were put in the car and taken away.

It didn't take us long to realize that we were going to the Central District Department of Internal Affairs. They led us to one of the rooms and kept us there for three hours. Meanwhile, a policeman looked through video materials taken at the action of entrepreneurs on January 10th, trying to find us there, but in vain.

As soon as the three hours - prescribed by law - were over, we were taken to different rooms. In an hour I was presented a protocol, according to which I swore badly in the presence of the police. I refused to sign the protocol, and they started to try to persuade me to do so, promising there would only be a fine in this case. Still, I did not sign it. You can fool anyone except yourself.

I was returned to the car where some of my friends waited. We were driven to Akrestsina, searched and put in cell no. 2 until morning.

January 17. Day 2

My impressions of the first night at Akrestsina were rather brutal: the gash bucket, the wooden “stage”, and that’s all. There was nothing more in the cell. They woke us up early and sent us to the court straight away, without any tea or coffee. When we came to the Court there were people already there. I would like to thank everyone who came to support us in court in spite of the risk to find themselves in exactly the same situation as us.

They brought us to trials one by one. The sentences varied from ten to 15 days of detention, mostly 15. The trial was standard – lying witnesses, unsubstantial claims, and rude policemen. I was lucky to get only ten days. I asked for an opportunity to have something to eat as I had been without food and drinks since the previous day. First they refused, but after the trial allowed that some sandwiches and a bottle of mineral water be handed over to me.

At about 8 pm all of us were driven to the Central District Department of Internal Affairs again, and then – back to Akrestsina, where we were divided into different cells. I found myself in the cell no. 20, together with eleven others. We went to sleep straightaway. Akrestsina daily routine started.

January 18. Day 3

The first day at Akrestsina. Wake up, inspection, breakfast, which I refused as it was impossible to eat: porridge swimming in water, tea, which reminded of ordinary boiled water with salt and sugar. However, I decided to have dinner: I ate a cutlet which was in reality made of bread, a little soup, and the famous Akrestsina bread. We drank lots of juice, mineral water, Coca-Cola. Played “mafia” and “crocodile”, then I started reading a book.

Tried to take a nap during day-time and kept thinking: why did they put us in prison? Were they trying to intimidate us? Though, I found it more likely that they wanted to intimidate not us but the people who were planning to go to the Square on January 21st.

January 19. Day 4

The next day they woke us up at about 8 am just before the morning inspection. I dreamed about T. She was sentenced to 20 days of detention and, thanks to destiny; she was in the same place as me. In my dream we walked through Vilnius together at 1 am, trying to find the “Belarusian Human Rights House” and talking. The dream was very long and pleasant. I woke up in high spirits, before realizing that it was just a dream, a fake reality.

We sang the anthem “God Almighty” in the morning, it was wonderful.

I was supposed to take an exam in French today, but I could not get there. I studied some Polish with J. who gave me grammar exercises. It became sort of a challenge to spend the time here at Akrestsina as effectively as possible.

After dinner we were led to the shower. It was one of the best moments of the whole prison time: a wonderful opportunity to stretch the legs, to wash off all the prison dirt collected during the last few days.

January 20. Day 5

I woke up because of a sore throat. I felt feverish. There were some medicines in the cell: aspirin, pain killers, antibiotics. I took several pills, drank hot tea – it seemed delicious and it made me happy. I asked the policemen on duty for more tea, but they refused and called the doctor. My temperature was 38.6 degrees. At that moment I got really scared. My cellmates covered me with all the blankets and clothes they could find in the cell and I started thinking of calling the ambulance. I managed to fall asleep somehow. All day I was shivering and couldn't even get up to fetch myself some water. My cellmates were really very helpful. Thank you!

January 21. Day 6

I had some medicine in the evening, but it did not make me feel better in the morning. I woke up early, approximately at 3 am. Could not go back to sleep because of the sore throat. At 6, the cleaning up of the cell started, then – breakfast,

and – inspection. Medicines, two portions of the so-called tea, sleep again. When I woke up my cellmates told me there were rumours that part of the political prisoners went on hunger strike in solidarity with those who would go to the Kas-trychnitskaya Square today.

January 22. Day 7

I felt very good. Only the back hurt a little, but it was nothing compared to my previous illness. I had no breakfast, not even tea. Just went to sleep and slept until dinner.

I woke up because someone sang Belarusian songs in the cell – the songs by Viktor Shalkevich, Kasia Kamotskaya, “Krambambulia”. The guards came and prohibited that – they said we were only allowed to sing the official anthem.

January 24. Day 9

Our friends passed us newspapers – “Belarusians and the Market”, “Kamsamolka”, “Our Word”. I don’t know why but we received neither “Nasha Niva” nor “Narodnaya Volya”. There must be a corresponding order.

January 25. Day 10

The second last day, I am very excited.

My cellmates are being released one by one. They should have been released in the afternoon but it actually started in

the morning. The first to get out of here became U., S., Z., C., P., K. All of them are wonderful people who really helped me out in the difficult times. I am especially grateful to U for the poems which he wrote literally every hour.

One spot was free so we got another neighbor – V. who was arrested near Akrestsina when he came to pass a package with food. The system has developed to a higher level – some are imprisoned for the actual action, some for coming to the court to support them, others for passing things to both. Article 17.1 36 apply to all of them.

January 26. Day 11

The last hours are the most difficult to bear. It seems like they are not hours, but days.

M. released. I grew more and more excited as he was supposed to be released two hours before me. M. is a very cool person. We said goodbye, and agreed to meet outside. Several hours passed. The doors went open, a policeman entered saying: “Kalinouski, get your things and get out”. Formal procedures took another ten minutes. And I was free!

UNIVERSITY OF AKRESTSINA

by Uladzimir Mikalaeu

Uladzimir Mikalaeu, a student and activist of the Conservative Christian Party of the Belarusian Popular Front was arrested at the protests for the Presidential inauguration in 2006. On April 10 the judge of the Central district of Minsk considered him guilty in violation of Part 1 of Article 167.1 of the Code of Administrative Offences of the Republic of Belarus – “breaking the order of organization and conducting of mass events” and sentenced him to administrative detention for 15 days.

April 8

I thought I heard someone calling out “Long Live Belarus!” approximately at 4 am. I decided it was something I dreamed of. In the morning I found out that it was not just me who had heard that – at that time those who had been arrested in the tent camp were being released.

In the morning we looked through the window (it was necessary to stand on the radiator to do that) and saw the internal troops military unit, their flagpole, from our “penthouse” on the 4th floor. We joked that the red-green flag would any minute be substituted for the white-red-white one and that the officers of Akrestsina would come to apologize to us. The flag was indeed lowered down a bit, probably because of the mourning due to inauguration.

April 9

Someone had passed E. a book called “American Detective” – so I read about Miss Marple in Belarusian, although it was rather dark in the cell even during daytime and cold if the window was open. The lamp with a capacity of 40 watt was dimly glowing day and night.

They fed us every day. I heard that they used to feed the prisoners every other day – one day was called “flyable”, the next one – “non-flyable”. There was also a joke about the 3-times meal – Monday, Wednesday, Friday...

The spoons are quite okay, mostly aluminum, but there used

to be spoons with cut-down handles, so that the prisoners would not make hand-made knives of them. In cell No. 1 there was an aluminum mug with “Long Live Belarus” engraved on it.

April 10

Slept well for the first time, woke up almost last because of the rattling sound – the food arrived. The guards ordered us to proceed to the exit with all our things – the court trial should take place that day. I was lucky to get a “luxury” car for one person. I prepared for 15 days of detention.

In the Central district department of internal affairs, which felt like homeland for the time, we waited in a cell with bad ventilation and light. It reminded me a lot about a Finnish sauna. However, there was a video camera. We listened to a tale about how Lukashenka treated the deputies with the Shklou bathtub gin after the football games in the early 90’s
...

Then we were transported to the court. I was impressed by how many of my friends that came to the police department to support me.

In the Central district court I decided to claim a lawyer. The lawyer turned out to be a very young girl from the Minsk Collegium of Lawyers. Her prime aim seemed to be to show that she wasn’t there at all. We had waited for her for about an hour, I spent most of the time standing in a corner smiling

to myself, while the riot policemen nervously walked back and forth, angry because of the wasted time.

The witnesses, two privates of the riot police of the City of Minsk Executive Office, gave evidence, in which they did not only contradict each other - they contradicted the protocols of detention and exemption. The judge B. also paid attention to the discrepancies: he asked several times, whether Mr S. heard his colleagues announce the meeting non-sanctioned, but the latter stubbornly answered: "No, I did not. I stood 20 cm away from the accused!"

I abstained from a final speech, thinking that I would not get a sentence taking into consideration all the discrepancies in the witnesses' testimonies. I asked the lawyer to agree on three days, which I had already served before the court trial. She did not ask me a single question, I had to clarify the situation to her myself, while we were sitting in the court's corridor. However, in the court resolution I read the same rubbish about "numerous warnings", which was in the protocol I had refused to sign earlier ... 15 days!

When I approached the stairs the flashes of cameras and the applause increased. The guard, who was obviously astonished by such reaction of the audience, asked with a smile: "Is it the longer sentence the better?" I replied that Bush will give more money for a long sentence.

While I was waiting in a car I talked to people through the window. K. wanted to go to the cell with me. I was slightly

disappointed that no one shouted “Give him more!” apart from H. I asked M. to stop smiling. Everyone around me smiled when they should have been crying – two weeks in prison in store for me! However, it was really nice to see my friends and talk to them – a wave of positive energy. Thanks, everyone.

April 11

Breakfast: rice porridge with instant broth Galina Blanka (thank you, K.!)- the porridge got very tasty, as well as the tea, when you add a pack of actual tea into the latter.

Another Kazulin supporter came to our cell. There are seven of us here now. The new cellmate used to have close contacts with the Russian National Unity¹, to my opinion, he is not very experienced in politics, unlike our first “guest” – H. a former Young Front activist who is very well-oriented in politics and knows Belarusian language and history.

I was in high spirits for the entire day – new interesting cellmates, bright memories about the yesterday’s meeting with friends in court. I will get out of here on the 22nd, which is actually my birthday, and my girlfriend will have been waiting for me with a bottle of beer since 7.20 pm.

April 14

The slip-hole got clogged.

All of us felt sleepy and apathetic – maybe they added Bromine to our food? However, it was probably due to the weather and conditions. I started reading “The Unknown War” by Sahanovich. It was raining outside. The day before yesterday we got newspapers, and we still looked through them. We liked the newspaper with Belarusian crosswords the most, called “Kryzhavanka” (Crossword). We also played the game “Political Charades”.

Also, the Russian National Unity member-supporter of Kazulin had a feeling that he was supposed to be released on that day. We laughed at him telling him he was mistaken, but he got over-excited. Later in the day it turned out he had indeed been mistaken.

April 16

I woke up early. I had hardly slept at all. We laid the festive table, ate the Easter cake, prayed (those who knew how to), read the Bible and “The Grand Duchy”. I beat everyone at cueballs.

Someone passed me a package: Easter-cake, apples, sprouts, chicken, parsley, cucumbers, biscuits and cinnamon with sugar.

April 17

I started dreaming of girls.

We ate a little (the odds and ends of the festive dinner). I was going to continue reading the “Unknown War”. I thought about how I would try to make everything ok at the University – how I could work out the labs and attend missed classes.

We saw off our comrades E. and U., out into the world. There were three of us left. It got dark and gloomy.

April 18

I slept like a baby, as we had a theological argument with H. (oh, those Protestants) which lasted for almost the entire evening.

We had breakfast, sang “Drabnitsa”, and played volleyball with toilet paper until we made the guard on duty angry as the toilet paper ball sometimes hit the door with a bang. The law school students came over to the prison on an excursion. The excursion, wrongly, did not include our cell – there was hardly any free space on the plank bed, it was all covered with exotic food – the students from provinces would definitely have liked that.

I ate Easter-cake with lemon with sugar. Did nothing in spite of having a textbook on the strength of materials with me. Got lazy. J. made me learn English, saying we would go on picket to the Embassy. Why don’t they add more inhabitants to our cell?

It would be nice to take a shower now ...

I stopped eating rubber meatballs long ago, thanks to the food packages passed from outside. My Grandmother used to tell me I would be taught to eat porridges in the army. I was taught to do that in prison. I hope that everything is ok at home and that the repressions against me will not be passed on, at least not to my parents. Gonna go to sleep.

April 22

We divided our belongings. When my girlfriend comes I will give everything to her, because she lives in a hostel. It seems to me that fewer and fewer girls are waiting for me for every hour that passes. H. is in the opposite situation – a girl whom he hadn't seen for two years passed him a package. I expect at least ten people to come and meet me, not including relatives, and I am waiting for their greetings "Give him more!" and "Another round, please!"

Nine hours left. Let me sum up – being in the Center of Isolation of Law-Breakers is not fun at all. It can be different from time to time. The rather comfortable conditions can turn into unbearable ones at any moment.

We never found the video camera (I would give a lot for the tape recording of our imprisonment). The audio bugs were well hidden. You can think of many things if you are locked in a limited space and have unlimited time.

There was no psychological pressure on me in prison. I was used to sitting in a small room in front of the monitor anyway.

As for the plank bed and bad food – it's just a matter of habit. The contemporary system of administrative detention is not aimed at destroying the personality, but forces everyone who comes through it to draw his or her own conclusions.

Endnotes

1 Russian National Unity – the ultra-right nationalistic organization in Russia; its regional sub-division is active in Belarus.

15 DAYS OR IN CRIB NO. 22

by Ales Kalita

On July 5th, 2007 the court of the Central District of Minsk sentenced one of the leaders of the youth organization of the BPF Party "BPF Youth" Ales Kalita to 15 days of detention, and his ally P. to ten days of detention. The youth activists were arrested on July 3rd and accused of "petty hooliganism" (Article 17.1 of the Administrative Code of the Republic of Belarus).

Ales Kalita and P. were at the office of the BPF Party when they heard a friend calling for help outside. They looked out and saw unfamiliar men dragging her into a car. Ales and P. ran out to help her and got arrested as well. The police witness stated in court that he had been ordered to arrest all young people coming out of the BPF office, as they might be carrying CD:s and agitation literature.

I didn't start my diary until the 8th day of detention, but the wish to write had been there earlier: a considerable amount of thoughts demanded to be put on paper, due to the lack of physical activity. Ordinary things, like white printing paper, or a pen with a logo of the company where your girlfriend works, gain special meaning here at Akrestsina. They give confidence that your girlfriend and allies are waiting for you outside the prison.

So, okay, let's proceed.

Day 1

The arrest was sort of senseless. Had I been more careful, I would not have ended up here. When the police brought me and P. to the Central District Department of Internal Affairs, we knew nothing about our future destiny although we supposed it could be detention. Fortunately, our friends knew what they were doing and brought some water and food. Thus, P. and I were not hungry, and, thanks to V. who brought a sleeping bag, we managed to keep warm during the first night.

They drove us to Akrestsina at night, approximately at 10 pm. As usual, they collected all our personal belongings and threw us into a wet cell on the ground floor. After several requests they gave P. a lighter to light a cigarette, so he smoked four cigarettes in a row, joking that the lethal dose for a man is two packs.

Day 2

They drove us back to the Central District Department of Internal Affairs. We were separated from the large group of administrative law-breakers and put into the local solitary confinement cell, stating that they would drive us to court but not until after 2 pm. To be honest, this news upset us a little, as our friends, allies and journalists had been waiting for us in the court ...

After 2 pm they led us out of the cells to the so-called “dog department” of the vehicle. Two special guards escorted us in a silver coloured car. Near the building of the Central District Court we saw our friends waiting for us. The vehicle parked under the scorching sun and soon it became evident that it was made from metal and painted dark green. The feeling was as if you were being fried alive as a sprout in a can, and that did not add any optimism. When the temperature went above +40C, it became impossible to breathe so we asked the driver – the detain escort officer - to move to the shadow. However, the driver (who was sitting at the front seat with the doors open) refused, saying: “I am sitting in this very vehicle as well”.

The so-called “court trial”, which was actually something more of a public opinion jury, was pretty much the same as any other trial of the kind, which, unfortunately, are painfully familiar to the Belarusian democratic society. The court sentence: 15 days of detention.

When I was escorted back to the vehicle, I managed to tell my friends to bring me warm clothes and Karatkevich's books to prison.

Day 3

At about 10 am P. and I were led out to the corridor and put into different cells on the first floor. We did not see each other again at Akrestsina.

Crib No. 11. seems to be the biggest cell at Akrestsina. There were nine of us in the cell at 7 pm. However, the population of the cell increased by three more people closer to midnight: V. who had stolen something at work and received five days of detention; K. who had got drunk and knocked down the trash can on the street; and E. who had organized a binge drinking party at his house, brought the girls and as a result was handed in to the police by his mother. His sentence was five days of detention.

Today I received the first package from outside – warm clothes and the book “Elephants of Hannibal” by Uladzimir Arlou.

Day 4

In the afternoon V., K., E. and I. were transferred from cell No. 11 to cell No. 22 on the second floor, where I spent the remaining eleven days.

Crib No. 22 was much smaller than No. 11, about eleven square meters. 80 percent of the crib was occupied by a stage intended for six persons (although the Law stipulates that there should be no less than four square meters per person in a cell), the remaining 20 percent was occupied by the toilet and a narrow (30 cm) aisle dividing the stage from the wall.

Day 5

Political talk started. V. walked around the cell looking for “bugs” and video cameras. He stated that he found a niche in the wall where it used to be a bug and assured us that he felt some strange vibrations and saw infrared rays.

Lying on the stage we looked at the drawings on the yellow plaster. I could make out a man riding a donkey, E. – a lady who slipped on a banana skin.

We fell asleep at 11 pm, but soon woke up because of V.’s horrible cries and convulsions – he had an epileptic attack. We started knocking at the door to inform the guard on duty. In 10 minutes the attack was over. The ambulance arrived only after half an hour. The doctor gave V. an injection and suggested he should go to the hospital, but he refused. We were warned that he would not regain total consciousness for a while. That was true – he started introducing himself, then he tried to go somewhere, realizing that the door was locked and began asking questions like “why the wallpaper is yellow, not blue? Why the doctor said it was a detention centre? This really is my friend’s place, isn’t it?”

During the night V. started talking aloud with someone called Vladimir Vladimirovich, complaining that his eyes hurt because of the red light. Then he cried out “that’s it, I’m giving him to you!” and with his fists started punching B., who was asleep. Thank God we reacted rapidly and seized him. We called the guard on duty, but he was afraid to take out the insane guy.

We kept an eye on V. ourselves during the following hour. From time to time he screamed “What?!” as if in response to the orders of some forces, coming from the peep-hole of our cell, known only to him. The whole Akrestsina was awake. Approximately at 5 am the ambulance came, but we stayed restless for a long time thinking how a person literally went insane in front of our very eyes.

Day 8

They added another prisoner to our cell – S., a tidy man who had kicked up a rumpus at home and got seven days of detention. He spent half a day trying to persuade the policeman on duty to let him call home. Unsuccessfully. So we wrote a claim to the Head of the United Detention Center to the Chief Administration of Internal Affairs of Minsk City Executive Office, as, according to the Procedural Code, a prisoner can be allowed to call home at his own expense upon the decision of the Head of the Detention Centre.

We passed the claim to the Head of the Detention Centre. After that, S. was several times taken for a meeting with an un-

known person, who interrogated him asking why he wanted to call home and why he filed such an official claim. In the end, they never allowed my cellmate to call home, and never showed any written resolution by the Head of the Detention Centre.

Day 10

The morning was dedicated to a shakedown. A shakedown is a procedure which is usually conducted twice a week. Everyone is led out of the cell, then two guards search the clothes of the prisoners and check them with metal detectors. At the same time three guards dig into the personal belongings in the cell and check all the gaps and cracks with a flash-light.

During the shakedown one of the guards asked me why I needed that much paper. “To write complaints” was my response. He was surprised and wished me luck.

Day 11

After breakfast I was woken up by a pigeon’s coo. The bird sat on the window sill of our cell. I stood on the radiator, and the bird looked at me with intense interest. At the grounds of the military unit a soldier of the internal troops was trying to turn a heavy vehicle “Ural”. In a couple of minutes a senior policeman approached him. The following conversation took place:

Policeman: “Tell me, you f***ng soldier, what the f***k do

you think you're doing?"

Soldier: "I am turning around a car."

Policeman: "Why the f***k? It stood here and hurt nobody."

Soldier: "That was the order of the warrant officer."

Policeman: "And who the hell d'you think you're talking to? A captain! So put the f***ng car where it used to be!"

Soldier: "Yes, Sir!"

Day 14

At 4 pm we received another cellmate – F., a man of about 35 who looked like a homeless person. He got ten days for petty hooliganism. On Saturday, July 14th, he found two dead bodies in the basement of the grocery store near the nightclub Sadko (not far from Kamarouski food market). He informed the janitor about that. The next day F. found out that the police had been looking for him. He himself called the Savetski District Department of Internal Affairs. The policemen came and took him to the department. After a three hours interrogation with questions such as: "Tell us who the murderer was", the policemen issued a charge and a report stating that he was drunk (there was no medical evidence of that), swore and tried to provoke the policemen to fight. F. declared: "I will never again inform the police even if I see someone being murdered! Hell no!"

Day 15

I am counting the minutes until I am out of here, until the moment I am free.

At 10 am I was transferred to the cell on the ground floor. This made me think that they were either going to give me 15 more days, or drive me to another district of the city and leave me there, or release me a couple of hours earlier. They released me a little bit early.

A lot of friends came to meet me outside the prison. Thanks everyone!

PEGASUS IMPRISONED

by Siamion Pechanko

The correspondent of the newspaper “Nasha Niva” Siamion Pechanko was arrested on March 25, 2008 at Independence Avenue where he was reporting live from the Day of Freedom celebration.

In court, the police claimed that the he had been holding a white-red-white flag and shouted “Long Live Belarus!” and “Shame on you!”. The judge disregarded the testimonies from other journalists and from Pechanko’s editor that he had been acting as a working journalist, and sentenced him to 15 days of detention according to Article 23.34 of the Administrative Code – “breaking the order of organization and conducting of mass events”.

The advice never to refuse a prison cell or a beggar's bowl is most relevant in contemporary Belarus. Anyone can find himself behind bars, be it a famous artist or a journalist.

I'll be there is they don't arrest me

Sometimes, although, thank God not very often, an instant feeling of bad fate comes over me: something bad is about to happen. Very soon something will cause me lots of trouble. This feeling is combined with an irresistible fear that the upcoming trouble cannot be avoided – the only thing to do is wait and be prepared.

I managed to find some spare time to cut the dead branches in my father's garden the weekend before the Day of Freedom. The apple trees took a rest last year so this year we expected a great harvest. Something was urging me; I felt I would have no opportunity to finish this work later.

The schedule of that week was full. On March 25, I planned to meet up with my friends after work. On Wednesday I was going to watch a football game with one of them. On Saturday my fellow students were organizing a party dedicated to the 5th anniversary since our graduation. I gave a promise to the organizer of the event by phone: "I will definitely be there if they don't arrest me".

The "unfree" theatre

In the evening on March 25, a riot policeman (a "cosmo-

naut”, as we call them) caught me and dragged me to the bus. It was not funny at all. To my cries “I am from the press!” he only murmured something like “They will figure it out later”. The bus was gradually filled. “We were just going to the theatre!” – screamed two ladies (as I found out later, they were from Grodna). “Don’t you like this theatre?” smiled one of the detained.

In the Department of Internal Affairs of the Maskouski district of Minsk everyone was recorded in due course. The policemen collected personal documents (my journalist certificate was again ignored) and started figuring out where all the detained worked. The Major who approached me with this question held a list in his hands. I saw that in front of our surnames in the list there were numbers 23.34.¹ At that moment they hadn’t even taken written explanations from us, neither had they executed protocols of detention. It was senseless to ask questions – the system works flawlessly: the first policeman arrests you, the second drives you to the police department, the third records your documents, the fourth write down explanations from you, the fifth issues a protocol, the sixth makes an inventory of your personal belongings, the seventh gives evidence in court. In the end, it is impossible to find out who is really responsible.

“Got a nickname?” – asked a policeman with a sneer. “I’m a human being, not a dog, I have got a name and a surname” answered the detained. The sneer disappeared. There were very few of those who did not have higher education among the detained. There were two couples, two brothers, a priest,

and Polish students from Krakow.

S., the policeman who issued a protocol against me, gave a response to my explanation: “I would never agree with such a protocol, either”. After that he uttered angrily that it was time to quit such a stupid job and go to work at an industrial tractor plant.

No commerce or politics

After a cold night in the prison cell we got to court. On the way to the court we laughed about the conference of Lukashenka and the judges.²

“So now we’ll see whether there is any commerce or politics in our courts”.

We settled in the court hall. The so-called “witnesses” sat behind our backs. The Lieutenant Colonel explained the procedure of the court trial and said a few words about the new building of the court of the Maskouski district. At the end of his speech he promised that those who would be sentenced to detention at the end of the trial would be fed with the restaurant food. Then they started calling people one by one to the judges. The first results astonished us and gave a slight hope – fines. Then it came to the entrepreneur and the chairman of the city organization of the United Civic Party V. He got 15 days of detention.

My turn. The judge listened to my explanations, then – to

P.'s testimony. She was interested in, at which distance from the street action I was fulfilling my obligations as a journalist. She asked P. the same question. I responded that the law allowed journalists to be among the participants of an event, including non-sanctioned events.

The judge invited witnesses from the police's side. From the very first second I saw the policeman who was telling about yesterday's arrest so confidently, I had a strong suspicion that I saw him for the first time in my life. I asked him a few questions and this suspicion grew stronger: he did not remember whether I had a journalist's badge (maybe he confused it with a flicker?), he couldn't say which bus he had dragged me to ("it was hard to remember the number in such a fuss – was it the first or the third one ...). It was the second in fact.

The other witness at least showed no satisfaction by this farce. He did not accuse me straight to the face, saying something like "there were a lot of shouts; I cannot say exactly what he shouted".

In an hour and a half the judge declared the decision in the absence of the witnesses: 15 days of detention. The judge predictably saw no reasons not to believe the policemen.

Neighbours, neighbours

To me, Akrestsina was like watching the movie after you've read the book: everything was familiar by the tales of people who had been there before.

Soon we were joined by the “common” law-breakers. J., a native of Georgia, got 15 days for making a scandal on board of the Minsk-Tbilisi flight – the Boeing returned to the airport. We saved him from a liver sickness – called ambulance, asked the doctor for the medicines. J., as it turned out, was very adventurous by nature, he spent half his life in prisons. Before he got to prison for the first time he was a professional gymnast, a member of the Soviet national junior team. For many years he trained together with the famous gymnast Vital Shcherba. “We lived together, and then visited one another” he recalled with a smile. He could read “Nasha Niva” quite easily, as he spent eight years in an Ukrainian prison, so the language was not difficult to him anymore. He also knew about the Belarusian People’s Republic from V., with whom he shared a cell for some time.

Pegasus

I looked at the signs left in the cell, among which there was “Long Live Belarus!”, “Jeans for Freedom!”, “Young Front”, when I suddenly noticed a sign “Pegasus”. A thought slipped through my mind: what is this inspiring horse doing here, in prison, what does he want someone to write, what is he doing in a country where judges have no idea about the newspaper in which gurus of national literature had their debuts; in a country where policemen “defend” the monuments from floral tribute, beating people?

Bykau’s memories Pavich’s novels and “The Joke” by Kun-

dera, which I have read during the nights here, convinced me that Pegasus can inspire everywhere, and that it is not only a group of people that can be put behind bars, but even a whole country or a half of a continent, if there is such a wish. However, as we learn from history, it never brings anything good.

Life is working out for the best

Several hours before release I felt that the guards started feeling nervous. The people who came to the prison to meet us outside were slowly gathering. Almost ten big guys were added to our cell. They declared their respect to the opposition for upgrading the cells. They said, see you on April 26.³

My legs and my tongue disobeyed me for a few seconds when I inhaled the air of freedom. “Take your flowers, prisoner,” my colleagues greeted me. After a short telephone conversation with my parents and a meeting with T. I slowly started getting back to life.

A lot of things happened in the world during the two weeks that I spent in prison: lost the elections, the chestnut trees started blossoming, decade tickets for four kinds of city transportation started to be sold in Minsk, and the beer “Sia-bar” was now sold in plastic containers. Nothing remains unchanged. Life is working out for the best.

Endnotes

1 Article 23.34 of the Administrative Code of the Republic of Belarus – “breaking the order of organization and conducting of mass events”

2 Aliaksandr Lukashenka made a speech at the conference with the judges on March 25, 2008, claiming that “Belarusian judges managed to avoid politics and commerce in their work and base solely on the principles of Law and justice”

3 The date when the traditional action of the opposition, dedicated to the memory of victims of the Chernobyl tragedy, is held.

THERAPY OF SACRIFICE – THAT’S WHAT THE PROTESTS THIS SPRING WERE ABOUT

by Andrej Dynko

The editor of the newspaper “Nasha Niva” (Our Field) Andrej Dynko was arrested when he was stepping off a bus during the events in the spring of 2006. He came to the square to bring food to those who lived in the tent camp. At the court trial, the witnesses stated that he “walked along the square for a long time and swore”. Andrej Dynko was sentenced to ten days of administrative detention, which he served in the detention centre at Akrestsina Street in Minsk.

I am writing this on Monday, at 11 pm. If everything is okay, these notes will get to the editor's office just in time before another issue is finished and signed. The lights are out, but the prison is awake. It's as noisy as the jungle at night. I can hear talking and laughter in the cells. Prison really reminds me of a scout camp, the same sounds. In the daytime, prisoners play chess (made of bread"), mafia, the sea battle or solve puzzles and crosswords. After the "all-clear", it's time for word games. The prison keeps recalling all kinds and types of riot policemen and convoys, mocking the dictator and his escort, radio commentators and sergeants, who have gathered here at Akrestsina from the entire capital to guard us. "Quiet, shut the hell up!" – they scream, but the noise does not go down. A lamp is shining in a trellised window above the entrance door – it helps me to keep writing.

The guard informed the guys from the neighbouring cell an hour ago that at that moment 300 arrestees were being transported to Akrestsina. It seems like he made this story up, we are not likely to believe it.

This was probably a joke after a week of conveyer-like arrests. The last big admission was reported on Saturday. First, there was a rumour among the prisoners, that a crowd of 15,000 people was approaching Akrestsina, two hours later this rumour was confirmed by the Minister Navumau¹ in the Belarusian Radio News.

The two prison buildings are completely overcrowded with prisoners. Conscious citizens get used to prison. There's no

depression. From the new prisoners we know about the scope of protests on the Day of Freedom. The prison greets with loud applause the shouts “Shame on you!” and “Long Live Belarus!” coming from behind the Akrestsina gates. The guys are discussing how to inform their colleagues at work about the idea of a solidarity action – the citizens eat twice a day, like prisoners in Belarusian prisons, until the last prisoner is released.

Prison unites. There are many of us, and we can see how our optimistic mood grabs the convoys. They, especially the newcomers, look at us closely, talk to us. Some of them show the “V” sign – our victory - to us in the window, as a goodbye.

“You seem not to be having a great time here, guys”, - says one in the convoy, - “but the girls have porn magazines and syringes in their cells”². And we burst out laughing together.

My dear Homeland

We are listening to the news on the radio. We find out about the social crisis in France, when 1.200 people have taken to the streets. We note that the guarantor of stability of the social-economic policy has been silent for a week by now. The victory of “the orange” in the Ukraine becomes evident as the Belarusian radio for the whole Monday depicts the chaos in some of the voting districts. The guys feel we played a part in that victory. The Ukrainian people realized in due time, what the friends of Symonenko³ and Vitrenko⁴ did in order to keep the power. We hear nine times a day how the Belarusian

Ministry of Foreign Affairs strongly reproaches interference of the USA and the European Union into internal matter of the Republic of Belarus, and we know – there are demands to free us. The guys have spoiled an elegant victory of the regime. That is why Lukashenka is keeping silent.

Before March, I thought that the “Republic of Lies” would survive its creator. In the Detention Centre I started believing, that all this horror could be over much sooner. I underestimated the force of the moral engine driving the protesters and the scope of the social base of the protests. Unlike in 1996 and 2001, the people who came out to the square knew exactly what they were up to.

The Contingent

Akrestsina cells live a very intensive spiritual life. Preachers speak about the challenges God sent to Joseph, dissidents with 20 years of experience speak about what happened long ago. The youngest know nothing about the events of the year 1996. ZUBR activists⁵ – our special force, which I haven’t fully appreciated until now– share their knowledge and experience. No fear, no gloom, only a feeling of fulfilling one’s obligations. “Who, if not us?” – says a manager from Grodna, who loaded the back of his Ford with ham, cheese and tangerines and left for Minsk on March 21 at 6 am He managed to get to the square and got arrested on the spot.

I was arrested in the morning of March 21, after the first night at the Square. I wasn’t the only one in the specialized bus –

the riot police packed it with the people who heard about the tent camp at Kastychnitskaya Square from the NTV13 TV Channel, or the Internet. Solidarity was the instant reaction. One of the guys carried a fish-rod and a tent, all the others – just food. Someone brought eight rolls and a thermos of tea, someone – 40 chocolate bars. I recognized a guy from my neighbourhood, whom I knew by appearance, but had never said a word to. In 1996, the people got fined for fighting with the riot police. In 2006 – girls got imprisoned for bringing a thermos of tea.

Closed space

I am sitting on a long wooden bench (I also sleep on it). My cellmates squeeze up to one another's back on the plank beds – they pull the jackets from their feet up to their hips and tuck the sleeves. The cold is creeping inside through the trellised fire-alarm hole, which is situated between the cell and the corridor, through the window frame, covered with a net, with enforced non-clear glass. Such glass was used in construction of “posh” doors in the multi-storied blocks of flats in the late years of the existence of the Soviet Union. Akrestsina is silent, at last. Wet socks are hanging on the radiator. “Kent” cigarette stubs are sticking out of the ash-tray, made of bread – the only available material. The lamp is reflected in the brown wooden floor, a convoy is coughing in the corridor, I can see the contour of the “feedbox” at the door, studded with tin. This “feedbox” is used to pass food to the cell twice a day. If you don't have a fear of being locked-up, this place

is sort of calm and quiet. You are provided with the necessary minimum to survive and nothing depends on you.

Overmanned structures

The Soviet Union prepared for a war with an external enemy and invested money into rocket construction. Lukashenka's regime invests all the money into fighting with internal enemy, thus, such structures as Special Rapid Reaction Unit, "Almaz", PRET, and special branches of the President's Security Service, KGB, multiplied and grew. They are supervised by the Security Council and Viktor Lukashenka, who is the boss of the entire apparatus. Internal forces have grown several times in comparison to the Soviet times. It seems that each of these structures were in action at the Square.

The methods of arrest differed. I heard from a student, how the "Almaz" men collected their arrestees in the Janka Kupala Square, beat them and delivered to Akrestsina, stacking them on the bus floor. I don't know if that was an exaggeration. I know that the telephones of the "ZUBR" activists and some regional leaders were monitored. They were arrested as extremely dangerous criminals, in the trains or at the apartments, rented in Minsk for a day or two.

The repressive system is well-organized. "Ideological vertical" substitute the party structure. It coordinates the task to indoctrinate and control people's behaviour. The vertical is closely connected to the Special Services Apparatus (ideologists often perform the function of heads of departments).

Together they organize and fabricate the so-called “elections procedures”. Meanwhile, a state controlled mass media cheers. Protests are broken, or preferably prevented, by the force of structures: courts, executive offices etc., simply verifying the decisions taken “above”.

Therapy of Sacrifice

The Sun is rising outside. Cell no. 13 is about to wake up. It's time for me to finish, since it is almost impossible to write side by side with the talking, smoking and physiological life of seven cellmates. The country took yet another step to normality. The authorities tried to invoke an atmosphere of terror and to cut down the protests of March 2006 by the means of mass arrests. It is no longer important whether you break the law or not. You can be expelled, fired, beaten, arrested or put in prison if you conduct any activity, which the authorities consider equal to an opposition activity.

The regime wanted to obstruct the tent camp, to establish a blockade. The essence of this regime was revealed vividly when people who were heading for the toilets and girls who were bringing thermoses with tea were arrested. Another example was the hidden police vans behind big billboards which read “For a prosperous Belarus!”. A TV screen – that's the most valuable thing for this regime. The authorities preventively isolated everyone who they thought were potential organizers of protests, and then arrested all the people who encouraged the protests. But an unexpected thing happened

– for every new prisoner three more people appeared at the Square. And people hid food under their clothes. Photographers documented the happy face of a boy who undressed and took off a line of sausages tied across his torso.

The tent camp made many people conduct heroic deeds - big or small. These heroic deeds will stay with them for years, lighting up their hearts.

Therapy of sacrifice – that was what the protests of spring 2006 were. The authorities realized that they had lost the game. They clumsily demolished the tent camp. When this did not help the authorities conducted a really primitive provocation on the Day of Freedom. That's how I see those days, most of which I spent in prison. Correct me, if I am mistaken.

Aliaksandr Milinkevich stated that Belarus would wake up after March 19 as a totally different country – a brave and free one. I wasn't sure that wasn't just a propagandistic statement. I don't know what is happening outside the prison. I don't know who is still free. I am spending these ten days among people, who came through the therapy of sacrifice, and these are bright days among the bright people. Probably, Milinkevich was right.

Endnotes

1 Uladzimir Navumau, the former Belarusian Minister of Internal Affairs.

2 The report shown on state TV-channels stated that the participants of the action of protest at the Kastrychnitskaya Square had drugs and porn magazines with them. This statement became a subject of numerous jokes.

3 Petro Symonenko, Ukrainian politician, the Chairman of the Communist Party of the Ukraine.

4 Natalya Vitrenko, the leader of the Progressive Socialist Party of the Ukraine.

5 The Belarusian resistance movement “ZUBR”, created in 2000, existed until 2006.

Administrative Detention

Administrative detention in Belarus is a strange bird in western European judicial systems. In Belarus, an administrative detention means mostly 5–15 days in a prison. For political activists, an administrative detention is a recurring phenomenon, but it does not apply solely to political prisoners. “Minor” crimes such as stealing, blasphemy or domestic violence frequently generate administrative detention.

According to Belarusian authorities, there are no political prisoners, only opposition activists who just can’t stop themselves from swearing, beating policemen or uproar civil unrest.

When arrested by a Belarusian police officer, you often spend the first night in prison. After that you are taken for a short session in court and get your sentence. Then, you are returned right away to the prison, or detention centre, to serve your sentence.

References:

International Federation for Human Rights and Viasna: Condition of detention in the Republic of Belarus, June 2008 - N°500/2, available on http://spring96.org/files/book/conditions_of_detention_2008_en.pdf

Belarusian Media

The Belarusian Media is dominated by newspapers and TV-channels supporting the current regime. The TV-station ONT, one of the most popular state TV-channels often describes the opposition as criminals, thugs and drug addicts.

There are a few opposition newspapers such as independent newspaper *Nasha Niva* but they are not widespread. There are also several information sites on the Internet. A foreigner who wants to follow Belarusian news finds useful information on Charter 97. However, independent journalists are often harassed by the authorities. After the celebration of the Day of Freedom in 2008, Reporters without Borders and the International Committee to Protect Journalists protested against arrests, beating and detentions of journalists during the demonstrations in Minsk.

There have been several attempts to broaden the Belarusian media spectra, for instance through the *Belsat*, a satellite channel broadcasting from Poland. However, these attempts have so far had a limited distribution.

References:

BBC News: Belarus Country Profile – Media, available on http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/country_profiles/1102180.stm#media

The 2006 Election Protests

On March 19 2006, Belarus faced yet another presidential election. This time, Aliaksandr Lukashenka was put up against Aliaksandr Millinkevich, the candidate for the joint opposition. When the votes were counted, both the OSCE observers and the political opposition had noted the election fraud.

Prior to the election, KGB chairman Stsiapan Sukharenka had tried to scare people from protesting in the streets. People who failed to comply would be considered terrorist, risking imprisonment for 8 years or even capital punishment. Despite Sukharenka's warning, several tens of thousands of people gathered at the Kastychnitskaya Square in Minsk to protest.

Inspired by the orange revolution in Ukraine, young people started a tent camp, prepared to continue protesting until the protests yielded results. It didn't take long before the police started arresting people. The campers weren't the only ones to be put in jail. So were individuals that carried warm clothes and food to the Square, or who just came by to show their support.

When the tent camp was finally eliminated on March 23-24, approximately 600 people had been sentenced to administrative detention, more than ever before in Belarus.

References:

OSCE/ODIHR Final report on the 19 March 2006 presidential election in Belarus.

The 2006 Inauguration of President Lukashenka

Minsk was almost completely destroyed in World War II. After the war, the city was rebuilt in Stalin monumental style. Though, many of the old street names have been kept, such as the Lenin Street and the Victory Square. Referring to the revolution in November, 1917 (October according to the Julian calendar), the Kastrychnitskaya - October Square - is no exception. Today, the Square has become a place of meeting for many of the protests against the Belarusian regime.

The inauguration ceremony of the president of the Republic of Belarus Aliaksandr Lukashenka was scheduled to April 8, 2006. The day before thousands of people protested the fabrication of the election results and called for a new election. Armed with banners like "We want new elections", "Fraud not President", "For a Free Belarus" and the white-red-white flags, people gathered at the Kastrychnitskaya Square in Minsk.

Riot policemen in uniform and in civil clothes forced people out of the Square towards the Janka Kupala Street. They wrested the flags from activists and threw them in garbage bins. When it was all over, five participants of the action had been arrested and were later on sentenced to 10 and 15 days of administrative detention.

National Symbols of Belarus

Belarus gained independence in the aftermath of the fall of the Soviet Union in December 1991. As many of the other former Soviet republics, the new state tried to distance itself from Soviet Russia by adopting several national symbols, including the red and white flag, connected to the Belarusian National Republic, the first independent Belarusian state at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Many of the Belarusian symbols of that time emphasised Belarus' European origins as part of Poland and Lithuania. For example, the Belarusian coat of arms in 1991-1995, Pahonia, was an old symbol used by the Grand Duchy of Lithuania.

In 1994, Aliaksandr Lukashenka won Belarus's first presidential election. Since then, he is holding Belarus in an iron grip. When Lukashenka entered office, he reintroduced the flag and national symbols of the former Soviet Republic.

Today, the red and white flag has become a symbol for Belarusian independence and for the Belarusian opposition. Waiving the red and white flag could result in administrative detention.

The Entrepreneur Protests of January 2008

January 10, 2008, almost three thousand entrepreneurs and activists met at Kastychnitskaya Square in Minsk to protest a Presidential decree that forbade small enterprise from hiring others than close relatives. At first, the entrepreneurs tried to negotiate with the presidential administration. When that proved futile, people decided to remain at the square, causing a major traffic jam. 27 people were arrested on January 10. In spite of this, the participants agreed on another protest, on January 21.

It is common practice in Belarus to arrest preemptively. The authorities believe that by arresting leaders and activists, they can prevent protest actions before they have occurred. In between the two entrepreneur actions, on January 10 and January 21, 2008, the Belarusian police detained more than 40 people. They were arrested when they came to support their friends at court or when they handed clothes and foods to the detainees.

In addition to the shorter sentences, several young activists were sentenced to 1-2 years of restricted freedom of movement, a mild form of house arrests that allow them to go to school but not travel abroad. Two activists, Andrej Kim and Siarhej Parsiukevich were sentenced to 1.5 and 2.5 years in prison respectively.

Day of Freedom, 2008

The anniversary of the Day of Freedom on March 25, 2008 was planned to be celebrated in Minsk by a street rally starting from Jakub Kolas Square and ending at the Opera Theatre, where the participants would pay a floral tribute at the monuments to the Belarusian national heroes Jakub Kolas, Janka Kupala, Adam Mickiewicz and Maxim Bahdanovich. The Minsk Authorities, however, decided to move the protest to a more remote location and put policemen on guard at the Jakub Kolas Square a few hours before the event.

At the sight of the police, the participants soon divided into two groups. The majority moved on to the approved location, while a smaller group decided to try to reach the monuments.

When the police saw the participants, they immediately intervened. They forced the activists to the ground, beat them, tore their flags apart and arrested them. All together, more than hundred people were arrested and 27 of them were sentenced to administrative detention.

FURTHER JHS-PUBLICATIONS

Publications by the Jarl Hjalmarson Foundation:

An anthology about the Balkans

The Jarl Hjalmarson Foundation is most active in the West Balkans. There are many success stories, as country after country edges closer to an EU-membership. Some problems however do persist and cannot be ignored.

In this anthology politicians and authors provide readers with glimpses of times passed and as well as their views on what the future might hold in store. They herein reflect on the road that lies ahead. The road that hopefully will carry the Balkan countries into a better future. (2011)

Living and working as a dissident in Belarus

A study in political oppression during dictatorship, by Marika Ehrenkrona, journalist with a master degree in psychology.

Marika Ehrenkrona has interviewed numerous dissidents in Belarus: about their everyday life, political ambitions and their struggles vis-à-vis the state authorities' repression. Ms Ehrenkrona's accounts are testimony to political life in an authoritarian regime. How the political opposition perseveres, day by day, and in the long run. The book also details the authorities' strategies, ruling by fear and deceit. (2011)

To celebrate 20 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall the Jarl Hjalmarson Foundation published the anthology **"Triumph of Democracy"**.

Introducing the book Foreign Minister Carl Bildt wrote: "Today, there is no more barbed wire, no fences and no passport checks. ... We have achieved what only a few believed possible and what millions dreamt of. We, who had the privilege of making concrete and resolute contributions to European reunification, have learned the importance of never giving up on the vision of a better future." (2009)

ISBN 978-91-977569-8-3

"Principles for a Free Society" is a study book about the fundamental principles and values essential for a free, democratic and open society. It is written for the Jarl Hjalmarson Foundation by Dr. Nigel Ashford. (2003 and 2009)

ISBN 978-91-977569-0-7

This book has been translated into numerous languages; Turkish, Russian, Spanish, etc.

"Communism in the Baltic States" by Andres Küng (author, debater and entrepreneur) was first published in 1999. Though, it is still one of the best documentation of the crimes against human rights in the Baltic states committed by the Soviet communists. (1999)

ISBN 978-91-977569-4-5

*Books can be downloaded at www.hjalmarsonfoundation.se
or ordered from info@hjalmarsonstiftelsen.se.*

THE JARL HJALMARSON FOUNDATION

The Jarl Hjalmarson Foundation was founded in 1994 with the objective of promoting cooperation and European development according to the principles of freedom, democracy and market economy. The methods used are knowledge transfer and education aimed at political parties and organizations.

The work of the Foundation concerns mainly politically active individuals. Special emphasis is put on youths and women, while they are the political future of their respective countries. The principal sponsor of the Foundation is the Swedish international development cooperation agency (Sida), and the funds are part of the party affiliated democracy aid earmarked for “assisting the development of well-functioning party systems in developing countries and countries in Central and Eastern Europe in order to promote representative democracy”.

The education is carried out within the following domains:

- Structuring of organizations
- Communication, campaign work and public relations
- Education in ideology
- Counseling concerning hands-on aspects of politics

The Jarl Hjalmarson Foundation is an organization affiliated with the Swedish Moderate Party.



The Jarl Hjalmarson
Foundation
Box 2080
SE 103 12 Stockholm
Sweden

Tel: +46-8-676 80 00
www.hjalmarsonfoundation.se

DIARY DISSIDENT

How I got America's
Most Powerful People