

## [Prison]

The night has already begun to disappear and day was dawning. We are already at the gigantic gates of the Cześćochowa prison, where so many have spent long days and nights.

While I was still a free birdie, more than once, while passing by, I had cast my glance at the prison and its blocked windows, which never let in a ray of light, thinking that, sooner or later, I would be a tenant in one such dank dwelling, for that is, after all, how all comrades end their passage through life.

The policemen ring the prison doorbell and a guard immediately emerges, cloaked in his grey *szynel* [Pol., greatcoat]. He unlocks the lock and opens the gate wide. This is nothing new for him, as it is a regular phenomenon and, oftentimes, the prison is renewed with fresh people - almost every hour. But, nevertheless, it is already his nature to keenly scrutinise his charges. We do not inspire any great joy in him, because he has already understood that he will not be able to lick any fat little bone from us<sup>1</sup>.

They prefer it when the prisoners, who arrive, are criminal arrestees, who have committed great criminal offences - robbery, murder and other villainous acts. With these types of detainees, money is no object and they regularly receive fine coins from them for different favours which they do for them. Arrestees of this kind, who are the worst scum, are not as strictly treated as are we, the victims of the current order. Friends, professional criminals of their acquaintance, who are at large and [whom the police] have not as yet managed to arrest, are frequently let in to them. They come to visit the jailed detainees, bringing with them products, money and reports of their activities, and they talk amongst themselves in a coded language.

It is different with the political arrestees. They are under the worst conditions in the prison. The attendants carry out the orders of the management most meticulously. It is not permitted to speak with any political arrestee, because they are the disruptors of peace and order, etc.

Once we are in the corridor, which truly looks like a cage, with its little *ner tumid*<sup>2</sup> lamp flickering and swaying peacefully, the guard begins to conduct negotiations

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<sup>1</sup> [TN: Yiddish expression meaning to reap benefit from something.]

<sup>2</sup> [TN: Heb., "eternal candle"; a memorial candle which is always left burning.]

with us. Despite there being orders to have no contact with arrestees, at night, after all, the management does not see. He understands that we are Jewish prisoners - and that Jews like to give [bribes] and keep quiet. He tells us that the better we pay him, the better accommodation he will provide us with.

Being a proponent of the Jewish device, whereby “the better you grease it, the smoother you travel”, I am the first to take out two silver coins and thrust them furtively into his hand, in an unnoticed manner. The *urel*<sup>3</sup> opens up part of a thick, locked door and lets us in! There, I find several Polish friends<sup>4</sup>, who have already been sleeping in their beds for a few hours and, by now, are about to get up, while others have barely just fallen asleep - for how can one sleep in such a bed, in a hard, living tomb?

Our arrival made all of them begin waking. They raised their heads, looked deep into our eyes and, recognising us as Jews, got the urge to make sport of us - to play an amusing little game with our tormented souls. When we had only just sat down, bent over threefold<sup>5</sup> on the damp ground, resting on a hard hay-mattress, we received gifts from our comrades - gaiters, boots and other implements hit us in the head or other places. I was the only lucky one who was not hit and did not receive such an endearing welcome.

My friends were prepared to fight and take revenge upon those who were hurling different things at us, but, after all, they did not know who was doing the throwing and to where they should throw back, because we could not make out anything in the dark. They were therefore compelled to give up the fight and hurl nothing back.

The Christian inmates, however, did not stop the throwing, deriving, from it, immense pleasure.

My friend, whom I had given the moniker “The Old Arrestee”, hit on a plan. Courageously, he began banging on the iron door and protesting in a loud voice. Our neighbouring Jewish comrades, who had just fallen asleep not long before, woke up - and a huge commotion and stir ensued. The guards came and switched on the electric lights. We [then] first perceived that there were another few friends here along with us. Naturally we rejoiced with them and exchanged greetings

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<sup>3</sup> [TN: Heb., “uncircumcised one”; term once used in ref. to a particularly uncouth non-Jew.]

<sup>4</sup> [TN: As the reader may apprehend from the subsequent paragraph, by “friends” the author does not mean literally friends or comrades but fellow inmates.]

<sup>5</sup> [TN: Yiddish expression akin to “doubled over”.]

The guards heeded our protest and immediately transferred us to another cell, where we met friendlier inmates, including several Jews. We began getting to know each other and told them about our nocturnal experience, etc.

Meanwhile, the night had vanished. We were becoming acquainted with our individual neighbours and also with our new life as inmates which, at first, appeared quite farcical to us. But, gradually, we became accustomed to it until it seemed, to us, that this is how things had to be and not any other way.

The first *Shabbes* [Sabbath] in prison had a very unfavourable effect on us. At least in prison, behind the thick walls, *Shabbes* was no different than any other day.

Nevertheless, we receive a greeting from the outside. They bring us *challes*<sup>6</sup>, fish and other dishes, which remind us that, at home, today is unlike all the weekdays – and this aggravates us even more.

One notes a few tears rolling down from the eyes of some comrades. It can be read, from their faces, that a profound despondency has poured down upon them. I make myself cheery, wishing to dispel their forlorn state although, within me, secretly within my own soul, it is also gushing like a deep, rushing river.

I start singing the song “*We’re Breaking!*”:

*Our eyes filled with rage, drenched in blood;  
Our hearts pounding with vigour and courage;  
We stand by a high, bricked wall  
Holding hammers, iron rods and crowbars.  
We’re breaking, we’re breaking!*

These are tones of freedom and passion, so beautiful and harmonic and, as I sing them, it seems to me as if the echoes are reaching the outside, the free and wide world, to all the comrades and friends together with whom I have lived and suffered.

I suddenly cut short my song due to the arrival of the *klucznik* (key keeper), who has brought in a new fellow. The old inmates set upon him like locusts, greeting him in the prison jargon. They are pleased that their family has been enlarged.

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<sup>6</sup> [TN: Loafs of special sweet bread traditionally eaten in honour of the Sabbath and Jewish holidays.]

They ask him different questions - how and for what offence has he been arrested. And, presently, the “*porzqdkowy*” ([Pol.], the one who keeps order in our cell), an inmate himself, demands of him to give him [money] for beer - or, to phrase it more accurately, as it is called in their lingo, “admission fees” into the collective - whether he liked it or not. After complying with his demand, the new arrestee is considered one of “their own” comrades in the same cell.

Their conversation is of little interest to me. As this is happening, I am having a talk with my Jewish friends. One of them is crying out his bitter heart - his children are asking, “Where is daddy?” I tell him that, as young as they are, they will [have to] listen to their mother’s reply, “The gendarmerie and police came late at night, like the kidnapers in the times of [Tsar] Nicholas [I], who abducted small children from their mothers’ aprons - and that is how they took your father and my provider and locked him up in a dark prison”.

Our talk is, once more, interrupted due to the arrival of the bailiff and his aide from the detention centre, along with several guards as well. They start lining us up<sup>7</sup>, as if we were soldiers and must stand at their service.

The bailiff’s aide - a young slug, definitely a peasant’s son, but who managed to become a scrivener in the *kancelaria* [Pol., chancellery/office] thanks to all kinds of preferential treatment or bribes - yells “*шапки долой!*” [Rus., Caps off!] at all the arrestees, who do not obey his orders. He counts us several times. He thinks that he has made a mistake - he is missing one and counts once again. His other companions scrutinise the walls and look in all the little corners to see if a breakout tool is not hidden somewhere, Heaven forbid. Not having found anything, they leave the cell.

It was already our second night in prison. On the first night, we did not sleep and were very tired. Our feet were beginning to hurt and signs of debilitation were plaguing our weary bodies. We wanted to lie down and rest a little, but the question was – where and on what to lie down? And with what to cover our cold limbs, which were very much in need of a little warming up?

The established inmates had long since occupied the best spots. They were lying down comfortably, in an entire row, on the upper part of the *коўка* [Rus., bunk] and were, one by one, already dozing off. There were empty spots still left for us on the cold stone floor, with the cushioning from beneath of a mouldy, damp

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<sup>7</sup> [TN: We have inferred this from the context; the verb used in the original is אויסטראָיען, a word which we have been unable to find in any dictionary or other sources.]

hay-mattress, in which there were, deep, deep in their hiding places, many microbes and living maggots, with which Egypt was blessed<sup>8</sup>. Whether we liked it or not, we stretched out, exhausted, on the ground. What other option did we have? Some put a *palto* [Pol., overcoat] or another garment under their head. I put my arms underneath mine, which I had to remove from time to time, having strained them too much.

I finally dozed off, but was directly awoken - the tiny maggots were to blame. They were charging about with all their might, wandering around all over my bed and disturbing my unhappy slumber. I was forced to stand up and remain awake all night. Before sunrise, I caught another nap. Nature had got the best of me and lulled me to sleep in her bosom.

Another incident, once again, disturbed my leisure - the *klucznik* [warden/key keeper] opened the rusty door and ordered us to get up. The fearful immediately obeyed his command. The "heroes" - the old inmates - took little heed of his stern order and remained lying down, as if he had not meant them. The *klucznik*, seeing that he was not being obeyed, began to lose his temper and started shouting, "*What's the matter with you? Have you forgotten where you are? You think you're in a hotel?*" Unwillingly, they all came down from their bunks, apart from one Jewish comrade, R.W. "Quickly, [take] the hay-mattresses out to the yard!", the *klucznik* ordered vehemently. We immediately complied - did we have any choice?

"*Who's that lying there in the corner?*", a second *klucznik* yelled out murderously. "A sick man!", I replied to him.

Slowly, he goes over to the sick inmate and peers intently into his face and, when he perceives this is one of our brethren, the Children of Israel, he bursts into savage laughter and says to my ailing friend, "Nothing doing, little Jew! Don't strike any poses, like you little Jews like to do. Do you think you're free?"

The sick man answers nothing, because the suffering presses him too hard. The *klucznik* leaves - what does he care? He is not a bad man, which I perceive from a conversation of his with an old inmate. He tells him, "At first, when I arrived to serve for twelve roubles a month, more than once, I wanted to leave my post, because I thought that I had found a very rough job. But, one by one, those mad notions of mine disappeared. I began to realise - what does one not do for money? And thinking it over, is this then a bad livelihood? I'm like the ruler of a

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<sup>8</sup> [TN: Maggots were actually not among the Ten Plagues of Egypt; the ref. here is most likely to the plague of lice and gnats.]

small country. Don't forget that now I've worked my way up. I've risen to a higher rank, receive better wages and am respected more." The old arrestee smiled at him and replied nothing, but he thought to himself, "May an unnatural death should take you!"

Their talk was cut short by a great commotion in the criminal cell, which was caused due to the fact that they had received a new fellow there, who was not yet a credentialed thief, and did not want to give them any "admission fees". They lay him down on the ground and gave him a thrashing, teaching him how to be a man amongst men. The noise reached far, far into our cell. The *klucznik* ran off, in the middle of his chat, to stifle the "revolt".

The matter that concerns me now is what will become of my ailing friend. I have stopped thinking about my own fate and that of all the other comrades. The question of my friend bores into my mind, torturing my conscience terribly. His state is increasingly worsening and becoming more wretched. He begs for aid, but no one hears him. We are prisoners, who wish to help him, but cannot. Everything around us is bolted with many locks and under police surveillance. Each groan from the sick man makes deep wounds in my heart

Eventually, we began to protest. The more progressive inmates assisted us, and we demanded a doctor or that he be taken to hospital. After long hours of pleading, a medic arrived. He cast a glance at the patient, ordered a small bottle of medication to be fetched from the prison hospital and went away unperturbed. For many more days, the sick man lay unconscious, [until] he eventually began to come to.

Permeated with the day's events, during the night, I dreamt that my friend had died in prison, surrounded by unfamiliar, unwelcome companions, and that his last words before his death had been, "I wish to see my wife and child". Then, in my dream, I saw how they were dragging him out, pallid and dead. He was being carried by bearers, who were to blame for his death [and] who had robbed him of his young life. Upon seeing this, vengeful sentiments were aroused within me. I started yelling, protesting that they should not touch him with their filthy hands, defiling his corpse. They would do better to hand him over to us, his close friends. And thus, clamouring with screams as a madman, I awoke from my sleep.

My screaming elicited wondering from a few of the inmates. Others were already accustomed to it and paid me no heed.

Our days in captivity began to pass, day after day. Early every morning, when we - thanks to various requests and with the aid of coins – were able to go out to the prison’s open yard, which was about twenty ells<sup>9</sup> in length and the same in width, we had a hankering to come out of the cage that was torturing our souls. Sometimes, the days were very beautiful. The birds, flying by, often sang their songs and they had an indescribable effect on us. We envied these creatures and wished them to, just for a moment, give us their wings, such that we should be able to disappear from our living graves.

Before we had time to think a little while walking about in the narrow little yard, they already ordered us to go back in. Officially, the prison administration did not permit going for a stroll - even though every prisoner in every jail has the right to demand this. The reason they gave for their refusal was that, a short time before, a bloody incident had taken place. During their stroll, a group of criminal arrestees attacked the prison employees and the result was a very bloodied one - all their rage and long-hurting suffering brought them to set upon their tormentors and they killed several prison guards on the spot and seriously wounded a few others. From then on, the little bit of freedom the prisoner could still enjoy from the open nature was taken away.

There were many days when a terrible frost reigned outside, the wind whistling mercilessly with all its force. On such days, it was our desire to make a fire to crackle and blaze on the ground. There was even a large cooker in jail - the problem was that we had no coal. The prison administration receives plenty of fuel, but they themselves swallow it up and all that reaches us are a few rare bits of coal to heat our dank tomb. We inmates found a way out. Many times, surreptitiously, we put hay-mattresses in the cooker when the guard did not see us, and we also added the broom with which we swept our cells.

Gradually, life in prison began to follow a normal course. We realised that we were not the first and would not be the last. Had we had correspondence with the free world, our suffering would still have been bearable. But not knowing what was going on outside, how our nearest and dearest were doing, often embittered our lonesome, sorrowful life.

Every day, we searched, in the foods that were sent to us, whether there were not a few lines hidden somewhere - but *a nechtiger tug*<sup>10</sup>! The stringent

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<sup>9</sup> [TN: The Russian ell measured 71.2 cm and the Polish one 78.7 cm; thus, the size of the yard was roughly between 14X14 and 16X16 metres, depending upon to which ell the author is referring.]

<sup>10</sup> [TN: Yid., lit. “a yesterday’s day”; expression akin to “not on your life!”.]

supervision of the orderlies, when the food was brought in, made it impossible to slip in anything.

Eventually, we still managed, by chance, to receive a letter which said little but which meant much. It said that, on the outside, they were making efforts for us. They had sent a telegram to the Social Democratic faction in the [Russian] Duma requesting them to carry out an inquiry regarding our unlawful arrest, during the course of which nothing had been found. This calmed us down a little.

Later, we also received several greetings in the pots [of food], - then in notes, etc. One by one, these also disappeared. The prison orderlies noticed this, due to the following incident: [in the cell] next to us sat criminal offenders. Having already previously been sentenced to long terms of *каторга* [Rus., penal servitude], and having nothing to lose, they sought means to escape and, one evening, they sawed through the bars and vanished. Upon looking around, the prison guards still managed to catch one. Clanking and drumming [noises] immediately ensued, accompanied by an occasional shot. In all the cells, they immediately found out what had happened - inmates have an excellent hearing.

The situation began to become serious. We knew that searches would ensue - old inmates prophesied this. The whole police force soon arrived. They pondered [matters] and wondered how this could have happened. They set out to look for the escapees and, concurrently, conducted a search of all the cells. They ordered us to strip almost naked and searched all the small crevices. But they could find nothing and left as if they had been whipped.

Surveillance in prison began to intensify and increase. Our close friends on the outside found out what had occurred from the notices in the daily newspapers, and they were enveloped by a new fear. Who knew what was happening with us? And they ceased to send us any word of how things were with them.

One by one, we arrestees began to forget what had transpired. Some sang melancholic songs and others happier ones - and this intensely irritated one of the officials, who was just then in the prison's *kancelaria*. Like a savage tyrant, he came into our cell with guards and ordered us to be quiet, "or else...". We were compelled to quieten down, for thus demanded those under whose authority we were being sternly imprisoned.

I started conducting negotiations with one of my guards. I proposed that he bring me a newspaper early every morning. He was wary of having dealings with



me and went away. I very much wanted to know what was happening in the free world and, if I managed to get hold of a paper, this would satisfy my curiosity.

Finally, after sitting for five weeks in prison, while going out to the yard, I noticed that the inmates' cook had a Yiddish newspaper. I realised that they were obviously sending me a paper every day, but they were being confiscated. I ran up to him and, with tears in my eyes, begged him - and in so doing gave him twenty kopeks - to give me the newspaper. He gave it to me, under the condition that no one should learn of it.

Immediately, I called together my Jewish friends. I read every article out loud and explained it to them. A collective joy filled all our hearts. The Christian prisoners asked us to tell them what news were in it and we fulfilled their wish. But that was the only time when we managed to receive a newspaper.

Oftentimes, during the night, when we were very despondent, the old arrestees cheered us up a little. They performed various tricks for us, which momentarily made us forget our troubles. It seemed as if we were in a circus - we were being shown different curiosities.