

Meeting

Maximum security penal colony UT No.189/33 was located in the Ural taiga, two hundred kilometres from Perm on the railway from Nizhniy Tagil to Perm. The camp had a territory of approximately five hundred by five hundred metres, surrounded by the woods, with an alarmed razor wired fence.

An officer on duty occupied a booth over the camp. In colonies like this there were usually not so many prisoners, about seventy or eighty. At the same time, in No.6, which was a penal colony, located just a few hundred metres away from No.189/33, there were about three thousand prisoners.

From the camp outside Leningrad Vladimir Spivak was transferred to Perm, but not to "Perm-33" as he was supposed to under sentence – to No.6. The local administration must have thought he was transferred to another camp under article 209 (parasitism). His documents under article 190-1 had not been delivered to the special unit. No one knew that Spivak, a scum and evil, a notorious dissident as well, loved "Hamlet" and was crazy about the underworld language of Francois Villon, the main bandit and last poet of French Middle Ages.

It happens sometimes. He wouldn't shout about it.

The whole group of people under arrest, where Vladimir belonged to, was sent for an isolation period. Officially prisoners adapt there to the camp conditions. He knew that from the last camp where he had spent two months.

For twelve to seventeen days that the newcomers stay in isolation, the staff are meant to shave their hair, wash them, give them work clothes, test and introduce them to the colony. But this only happens on paper and without prisoners' participation.

In the police van Vovka realized something was wrong when one of the security guards said they had bad luck and that was the end of the game. "What do you mean – bad luck?" Vovka thought. But he couldn't ask security guards questions. He didn't have to wait long. As soon as he jumped out of the police van, he was showered with a hail of blows. He started running, followed by kicks and blows, until he got to a room for an isolation period. He could feel how scared everyone was, including himself. Two prisoners were taken somewhere upstairs. Four people were standing at the wall, with their arms and legs apart. An officer was hitting them with a baton trying to make them spread their legs. He asked, "Are there any reds?" Two of them said, "Yes," and were taken to a room, then somewhere upstairs. The other two stayed, Vovka and another man who he didn't remember. Where did he come from? He looked like a Kirghiz, small and skinny. The tension was growing.

Another question was asked, "Are there any offended?" The other prisoner also went to the room and then upstairs. Spivak was left alone and understood that was the end of him. Someone said, "Looks like you are without an occupation." He didn't know what it meant so he kept silent. He was hit again and taken to another room. He was feeling like a scared animal when he had to run between the two rows of officers, hit by batons and kicked hard. When he was kicked on his leg he fell but could feel the blows continue. He heard someone's furious voice, "Get up, scum bag!" Struggling to get up, he ran to the end of the corridor. He could hear someone's cry of despair from the room he was being pushed in. When he

was about to run into the room he noticed someone's body in blood lying near the door. Inside all of the newcomers were squatting on the floor of the room, which was three by three metres, with scuffed brick walls. The officers would take each of them by the scuff of the neck and lead him to the table covered with a red cloth. On the tablecloth there were paper forms which the prisoners needed to sign. Vovka saw the officers beat up one of the prisoners in the corner of the room. They were not just beating him up, they were stamping on him, because he refused to sign the form. After a long procedure of "agreement" the poor bloke was carried out. Now it was Spivak's turn.

Vovka was thinking of signing it unwittingly but he knew that would be the end of his dissident career. When he was led to the table he took the three pieces of paper and crumpled them up proudly and threw them on the floor. Spivak followed the papers in the nick of time. The blows on his head were so strong he thought they had a hammer. Vovka lost consciousness.

He woke up in a concrete crypt with a small light bulb on the ceiling behind a railing and water on the floor. Having seen him move, the officers of the isolation room picked him up and started beating him up again methodically. Their calm worsened the situation. It was not an outrage of feelings, it was their everyday work, like painting a wall with a lunch break.

Vovka was feeling the "personality amputation" his father had told him about. It felt like being dragged face down on the rubble and losing his own features. He could notice it after being on his own for a long time. He couldn't go for a walk or wash, there was just a small window in the cell, they fed him every other day, the light bulb was so dull he couldn't see anything. He didn't get any warm clothes. In the corner of the cell there was a stinking piss-hole, which smelt unbearable.

The first forty eight hours Vovka could differ day from night. In the day time he would walk back and forth and at night he tried to sleep. But the monotony, cold and hunger took their course, added by bad headaches after beating up. His muscles shrunk and didn't stretch after bad injuries. He had lumps the size of eggs on his back and shoulders. Without moving his body the lumps collected liquid in them. They were growing and hurting. He knew he had to move his arms and legs intensively to rid of the liquid and lessen the lumps. As a result, it hurt less and he didn't feel so cold. Now he could take a nap for fifteen to twenty minutes. Then he would jump up of the pain and start running for forty minutes and wave his arms. It did hurt! After that he would doze off on the floor pushing his back against the wall for a quarter of an hour... The feeling of reality was gradually disappearing. His body stiffened. Spivak was slowly turning into an inanimate object, his body was hurting and all he felt was a dull, sharp, dragging pain.

Vladimir had been kept in the cement crypt first for five days, then another week. Then longer... He would fall into oblivion, jump up, run, lose himself... Sometimes he found it difficult to realize whose body was lying just in front of his eyes on the cement floor. He couldn't control his body. His thoughts didn't obey him – they came and went away. When he was beaten up, he felt better. If he felt a sharp pain from an officer's boot he was happy – firstly, the pain would not remain, it would go gradually, secondly, the pain witnessed him being still alive. It meant nothing less than the papers still not signed.

The blood stains on the grey knobbly walls, which he had been watching for many days, were gradually fusing into one whole thing. Like in a cartoon about a magic artist, he could see some faces, objects in them. In his imagination they could talk to each other, bragging their hats or long beards, picking giant buckets full of grapes

from the floor... That one, with rich hair and a long nose like Cyrano de Bergerac's, picked him up, put him across his shoulder and carried him somewhere... Spivak quietly whispered to him, "Leave it..." But the man just waved his sword, laughed and... stayed where he was. "No, that's my school friend Serega in a musketeer's robe and a hat... How did I not recognize him? He's got the same nose... No, not really... But he looks like him. And in the corner there someone is lying flattened... in the robe... the robe is waving in the breeze... and his profile... identical to Yurka Lisochkin! Aramis!" Spivak remembered himself and his friends taking part in a concert for their parents when they were in Year 193...

"Why are you here?" Spivak uttered instinctively... There was no answer. He said loudly, "Why are you here?" He paused and answered to himself, "So, Porthos is still not with them."

Vovka was looking and chatting to them for a long time. He was talking to them as Athos, then as Vovka Spivak. He asked them about their school mates and Alyonka Livanova who had played the role of the queen, and the revolution in Cuba. He thought they answered him. He even argued with them...

"Anyway, where is Porthos?" Spivak thought again. He sniffed the wall and felt it with his fingers. He tried to look at it at different angles... Nothing! He nearly got disappointed in his hopeless search when he noticed a new face right in front of him, with long hair, without a hat or a cloak and a small frame. Not anything like a musketeer. However, there was something peculiar and even familiar in his face. Vladimir tried to ask him questions... There was no answer. The wall seemed to have frowned and kept silence. Then it suddenly began to fall on him... Spivak screamed... There was no shout to be heard. He had lost his voice and he didn't even realize that. He was calling for help...

"This little one... Is he Philya? Petka Philippov," it flashed in his eyes as if he had connected two electric wires. He didn't think it was not Porthos and that little one had been quiet before and had not talked with the other wall's dwellers. Vladimir suddenly felt it was a pay-off. Just in time...

When he was in 7th grade, he, Serega, Yurka and Petka Philippov - "Philya" - found their way into the staff room. They nicked form registers and were about to leave through the window when they were caught by their disabled DT teacher Vasiliych. When the teacher was trying to help Philippov, who was helplessly hanging onto a tree, he fell out of the window and died. Philippov was caught quickly, convicted and sent to Kolpino, into a juvenile prison. He didn't turn state's evidence. Six months later it was reported Petka had died. The Petka who had played a violin in his childhood, had learned to read first in class and recited "Neznaika in the Sunny Town" in front of the class.

"One for all," Petka Philippov's shadow whispered slowly and intensely. Sergey was silent and Yurka stayed where he was, but he uttered, "I didn't push Vasiliych, I did not. He fell out himself..." Spivak was lying in a dirty puddle, wet and aching, and staring at the image of Philya over the piss-hole. He could clearly see Philippov's lips moving, his eyes raising and sparkling...

He didn't know the sparkles came from the dull light bulb, they slipped down the droplets of water on the wall, which were going to fall into a big dirty puddle on the cement floor of the solitary.

Vladimir broke down. When they presented him with the paper form next time, he signed it.

In spite of getting his signature, they didn't let him into the camp. He had to spend another week in the cell full of water, wearing just his pants. After that he was moved into a dry cell, but he didn't get any clothes. Only on his

third week in prison did he get some dirty work clothes. That way the remains of human spirit were knocked out.

"What's the difference?" Spivak asked himself. Should he have signed that damned paper straight away, he wouldn't have suffered the hell of the concrete cell. On the other hand, he wouldn't have come through the hell!

Now he knew what it was. He now knew what hell was and what was a trifle.

Having ticked all the boxes of the psychological tests of the isolation period, Spivak entered the camp at last.

The criminal mode in the camp looked formalized, tough and die-hard. Even though it was an integral component of the cultural community called "the Soviet people", it differed from what that phrase really meant.

In general, the prisoners tried to create what they had lost. Some sort of a society model was taking shape there, the society they were taken out of. Of course, their society didn't invent a bike or a model of laws. It was just coping the relationships which were either respected or disrespected but acknowledged in freedom.

There were exactly six barracks in No. 6. The relationship between them was settled by the Supervisor. If it hadn't been, the barracks would have looked like separate clans and not one whole criminal machine. As a rule, the leader was the most strong-willed and respected prisoner. You could recognize such people straight away. It was the fairest prisoner who had passed true life tests. His word had authority with everyone. It was him who drew a line in the most complicated problems in the camp, whether it was with a godfather or ordinary prisoners. He even dealt with the camp administration. Especially if the staff "found" drugs or prohibited items in the parcels too often.

For instance, a week ago the morning check-up lasted too long. The newcomers, who had recently passed the isolation period, broke the fence and without com-

mand went into the barrack. After that incident, at the meeting it was decided the supervisor would punish the isolation superintendent, who had not taught the newcomers the right things to do, had not found out who was a decent person, who was red or offended, had allowed absolute idiots to go into the camp. What was he given three weeks for? Now he was being questioned. They did punish him but didn't decide who to substitute him with. So the administration could do whatever they wanted in the isolation zone. There was no fair control!

When Spivak found out about that, he understood what the guard in the police van meant. That was it. Shift changes. Going from the isolation zone into the camp didn't mean coming home. It was a loyalty test, its existence laws. As it was Spivak's first sentence, everyone was trying to check how strong he was. Troublemakers started. They would provoke him for an argument, ask him tricky questions and would want conventional answers. One prisoner politely tried to make him wash his clothes, another wanted him to make his bunk-bed, one more asked him to swap places. All this was followed by being beaten up, which was called "registration". It was assumed, however, the beating was light, without leaning on the bunk-bed. The barrack supervisor normally didn't interfere but was always watching that important thing. Because it was easy to kick someone leaning on something, even an idiot could do that. The group leader was not an enemy to himself, even though he was staff. He was meant to explain how harmful smoking and drinking were and how to avoid outrageous behaviour. In fact, he only did paper work for conditional early release, because he loved to do it for money.

This straightforward line of events was gradually turning into the geometrical progression, which was leading Vladimir to the most saint place in the camp - a medical unit. Of course, if he was dying and doing ev-

everything according to the rules, he would be looked after by the quarantine, group and isolation ward supervisors. He was only asked to do their washing and he got wound up and was rude to them. That was not right. He had to preserve an equal mind. Patience was something that Spivak lacked in his life. He was too sensitive and proud. Prison was a place for those who had no facial expression and could sew gloves every day and manage to specify their own pattern, even if it was tiny... Spivak was not like that. His face said everything. These kinds of people wouldn't survive. Other people were consistent and it saved them, as well as being resistant to the dull and monotonous way of life.

Spivak, bruised, with a broken rib and collarbone and missing upper front teeth and his neck cut, was put into the medical unit at last. You had to try really hard to get there. Sometimes a weak prisoner had to swallow some repellent stuff to be taken out from his brigade in the camp, even for a couple of days.

Vovka was lying on a white sheet without moving. But the sheet was gradually becoming reddish brown from his blood stains. It was extremely painful to move, even though he had not been beaten for five hours. He was staring at the ceiling, at the white painted metal mounts and couldn't believe it. He didn't believe the reality. "They want to hang me. On those mounts... That's it! This one wants to hang me," Spivak thought when a nurse came in. He instinctively cringed. The sharp pain stabbed his stomach, then it went in his side and calmed down.

The nurse, a macho in a robe of odd colour, was holding a wet cloth dripping with stinky yellow liquid. He took three tablets out of his pocket and put them on the bedside cabinet, then he put the cloth on Spivak's throat near his collarbone. The sticky liquid flowed all over his body.

"What's this for? It won't help the rib or the collarbone," Spivak thought when the sharp carbolic smell filled the room. When he realized he could still think straight, he got really happy.

He remembered his childhood, his first stay in a hospital after he got food poisoning from mushrooms. He was then given a little plate with sugar and a lump of butter. He didn't know he would need them for his tea and bread, so he thought that was his breakfast and forced himself to eat them. Unforgettable experience... At that very time his schoolmates were visiting a dentist and waiting for their turn...

Now he would crawl on the floor to see a dentist, as long as there was one. "Where is that one?" Vovka was terrified of the nurse. "He must be waiting somewhere here... Waiting for me to drop off... Where's he?" There was no one around. Spivak was looking around but couldn't see anyone. He was lying motionlessly on his medical bed, alone in the cell.

Vovka Spivak relaxed and tears appeared in his eyes. My god! Is it the price of justice? He had no other thoughts. For the last few months his life had changed so much and now it was breaking his nature, planting new values and motivation, strengthening fresh reflex. No, his intolerance had not disappeared. It was still feeding his behaviour. Only now this feeling was deeply hidden. Even the tears in his eyes didn't fall down his hollow cheeks but stayed where they were. Some new unknown powerful force was resisting the gravity and didn't let them go down.

A moment later the nurse came back. Now he had a man with him. The man was small, crooked, with his grey face all puckered up, he was very ill and had difficulty climbing on his bed. With a moan, he lay down clumsily on his side, his back to Spivak. Two prisoners who helped the nurse with the man, put a bottle with a

label "Stolichnaya Vodka" and two pieces of processed cheese on his bedside cabinet. "Petro Ignatyich, here's some broth for you. It's the chicken broth, no fat," the prisoner babbled. "Tomorrow we'll get you some more. Whatever you need, we'll find it. Maybe, some medicine for your stomach..."

The young supervisor was quietly standing at some distance, looking indifferently at all the fuss.

"Cheers, that's enough," the patient said, then he turned to the tall bald man with his arms and neck covered with tattoos and added, "You can go now, I'll be fine. Any problems - come and see me straight away! Don't think I am ill. I will be fine in a couple of days, I know."

The nurse gave him an injection. Everyone disappeared. The man screwed up his face, groaned and calmed down. A moment later he was snoring. Spivak was lying without moving. He didn't look around and he didn't see anyone. He didn't have any thoughts. It was the silent calmness of an alive creature being awake.

Now the medical unit supervisor came in. Everyone knew him. He was the favourite person of all people and times. His nickname was "Stalin". He crinkled his face from the smell of Vovka's cloth, then he examined his neighbour's bed, tucked the blanket and put some ampoules into the bedside cabinet. When leaving, he looked at Spivak, saw his opened eyes, stopped and said, "Watch out, you, wretch! Don't you dare! I can move you to another cell and won't give you aspirin. You've been lucky so far. If something is wrong with him, give us a shout immediately. Understand?"

Vovka sighed deeply twice, as they do in the army line before the treble plangent "Hooray!", he strained his face painfully and quietly, as if he was dying, breathed out, "Yeah..."

He was still lying on his back and didn't have a clue that the snoring man lying next to him could easily change

his life at a glance. For better or for worse. Vovka knew the fundamentals of the prison hierarchy but he couldn't even imagine the man lying next to him was the prison camp supervisor.

That was the head prisoner in the camp. Not a godfather, no! Godfathers feel at home out of prison. In prison he was the main person. He was the most respectable person, that's for sure. Everyone knew about his life in No.6 and was reciting it. Spivak didn't have time to learn anything of his life. When you are being beaten all the time, you don't have a chance to absorb any other information apart from the thoughts of escaping from a blow.

Petro Ignatyich, as other prisoners called him, got into the camp in Chusovaya seven years ago. No one knew what for. Or where from. Had he been in prison before? Had he been moved here from another camp? They didn't know anything. He didn't have the wrong tail following him. The staff didn't gossip about his past. There was enough of his own authority.

Everyone knew that while on the isolation period he had not just been beaten up, they had tried to kill him. Because according to his file he was severely negative, which meant he would not confess anything or betray anyone. He was suffering down to the limit and knew he could go to the extreme measures only as a last resort. So when he could not realize where he was and what was happening to him, and his ears, nose and mouth were bleeding heavily, his intuition suggested that that was the moment. The future leader of No. 6 felt the hidden razor with his tongue, ran to the window and jumped out. He smashed the glass and fell on the ground. All his body was cut through with the shards of glass, but he jumped up and cut the veins on his both hands. The staff of the quarantine didn't care about him but they didn't want to take responsibility for his death. So they stopped his beatings, stitched up his wounds and carried him to the

medical unit on the stretcher. It was in the medical unit that they found out he had a gastric ulcer, which would now and again burst, become infected, inflame and turn into other things incompatible with life in general and especially in the camp in Chusovaya.

But this withy shrunk man survived. He survived in any conditions. His patience and self-consistence founded in his childhood had always saved him and later made other people respect him everywhere, in No. 6, earlier in Nizhniy Tagil and before that in Rostov camp, No. 12, as well as in the juvenile camp outside Leningrad...

In an hour a morning formation was starting. But it had nothing to do with those two. They were quietly lying on their beds. One was lying crooked and sleeping. The other was staring at the ceiling and waiting for something...

The camp supervisor got up early, as he should do. It had become a habit. It didn't matter if he was ill. He gave himself an injection and now he was sitting on the edge of his bed staring at his neighbour and waiting for him to stop moaning in his sleep and to wake up. His neighbour's eyelids flinched and his eyes opened. Spivak sighed deeply and his body trembled of deep dry cough. He tried to get up but a sharp pain passed through his body from his head to his feet.

"You haven't changed at all, Vovka," his neighbour said quietly as if he was talking to himself. Spivak heard him.

"...o you know ...e?" Spivak asked having a trouble pronouncing words.

"Yes, I do. You are easy to recognize, I am telling you. You haven't changed. It happens... when you have an easy life. But you won't recognize me."

Vovka strained himself and trying to overcome a dull pain in his body raised his hands and grabbed the iron pipes connecting the beds. He turned his face towards his neighbour, "...o, I ...on't know ...ou."

"Sure. You've all forgotten me. Shall I recite Cid's monologue in French? Or something from 'Neznaika in the Sunny Town'?"

"...ilya? How's the...?" Spivak didn't recognize him but he understood it was Petka Philippov in front of him. Alive Philya... He didn't look like him though. As if a different person had learned about their school life and was now trying to pass as Philippov. But why?

Philya. Was that the frail clumsy boy with a big white collar over his shirt? Yes, it was. But his face was different. It was grey, covered in scars, one eyelid was drooping and half-covering his left eye. The nose... Petka had a long thin nose. This person had a flat nose with a curved bridge. No, it must be him! The same squint of eyes. Like Lenin's. The main thief of No. 6. The most respectable prisoner in the camp.

"Phi-i-ilya," Vovka didn't say but whispered. Then he got ready and said in French, "Comment ça va?" His mouth now opened showing empty upper gums, his thin reddish-blue lips with splits on them were now moving. First the upper lip, then the right side of the bottom lip and in the end the left part of it shaped something like a smile.

Vovka started crying - second time that day. This time tears were pouring and there was no stopping them.