Anonymous letters of exiled (or imprisoned) Russian anarchists, published outside Russia. All texts from The guillotine at work unless otherwise noted. Texts were sometimes edited by Maksimov to improve the English translations. It’s tempting to think abbreviations are simple, that O. = Odessa. But I don’t think they are. For example, in the letter beginning “I was lying down on my bunk and listening to the sad song of the wind”, by ‘L.’ = Naumov, according to Maksimov18, file no. 7223.

A few of the letters are not anonymous. A few may not be in Amsterdam (eg the ‘Applebaum and comrades’ letter printed in Man!)

Questions regarding the letters: 
A, who are they by and where were they written?
B, can other people/ places they mention be identified?
C, what was left out when they were translated or printed?

I assume: letters were laid out in the bulletins in the order they came in (which may not be the order they were written.)

A partial view of the Fleshin/ Flèchine archive can be seen at: http://senyafleshinpapers.wordpress.com/. This should help in identifying the originals from which these published texts were translated.]
April 15, 1923.

Dear Comrade:

Your kind letter came a few days ago. We are really glad to hear from you. Many thanks for money order for $5.00 which you enclosed in letter.

We are having spring weather here now. Gee, I wish I were out and back East once again. I get the “World” every day and the fact that Coney Island opens up soon makes a fellow think about summer time. Will close hoping to hear from you soon again. I am, with best wishes and comradely greetings, as ever,

X. Y.

[Behind the bars 1 New York January 1924 p.12 (reprinting the Bulletin of the Joint Committee for the Defense of Revolutionists Imprisoned in Russia, October 1923).]

April 22, 1923.

Dear Comrade:

It was indeed a pleasant surprise to hear from you and I assure you that the gift was gratefully appreciated.

Such thoughtfulness on the part of comrades who are not in the shadow of imprisonment does much to lighten the burden of those who are less fortunate. It revives our hope and seems as a sort of raft to keep us afloat on the turbid waters of adversity.

Wishing you success and thanking you for your kind assistance, I am,

Sincerely yours,

Y. X.

[Behind the bars 1 New York January 1924 p.12 (reprinting the Bulletin of the Joint Committee for the Defense of Revolutionists Imprisoned in Russia, October 1923).]

Dear Friend:

No doubt you will understand why we didn't write you all this time in regard to that which you requested of us and what we really did want to write you about. The reason is simple: Every written word leaving and coming in to Russia is being read and censored, especially that which comes from our comrades, and the Bolshevik censors are not to be fooled. The fact is that many a time we knew that there were letters for us and that they were being held by the authorities. Besides, for corresponding with anyone outside of
Russia, and especially for letting anyone know what our arrested comrades are undergoing, the punishment is severe. It is true, we might have written on the chance that it may or may not reach you, but as our uppermost desire is to leave Russia, we hate to put further obstacles and complications in the way, unless it be of any value. Lately, four of our comrades succeeded in getting away, and the rest of us are awaiting chance to do likewise. Each one of us has different plans, as the situation for our comrades has not changed at all either for those who have already been jailed, or for the rest of us. Those who are out of jail many a time wish they were imprisoned, as the situation is such that their suffering is unbearable. Work cannot be secure[d] by an Anarchist, and those who do work must be very docile, because if they make any objection or complaint they are immediately discharged. It happens very often, when a comrade tries to leave for another town, he is caught on the way and brought back, or sent to a different place altogether.

And yet there seems to be some kind of an awakening and activity, but it is very doubtful if anything will be accomplished, because each one of the comrades is constantly being followed by a pair of eyes. Often one or the other is being called to appear before the "Supreme Authority," just to be asked a question or two, to talk things over, and in some manner or other be offered an "easy job" and be secured economically, etc. "Why go hungry such fine fellows that you are?"

The worker in the factories shuns Anarchists, because he is always being spied upon at all times, and should he only stop to say a word or two to an Anarchist, he may lose his job, and then ... It's not so easy to secure work elsewhere – the Trade Union will see to that. Of course, it's done under different pretexts, but what can the worker do?

It often happened before, and there are several cases now, that Anarchists turn Bolsheviks, but these are for the most part adventurists, as it proves in the end. Some of them defend their action with pretty phrases, but no one believes them, even the Bolsheviks don’t. They are being spied upon to ascertain whether or not they keep up their old connections. Their work is mostly among such departments that are employed to spy upon the Anarchists. Some of them submit, others refuse and are being penalised and persecuted for it. And generally they are given jobs, which pay very little, where there is no graft, and consequently go hungry.

Many of those who have turned Bolsheviks have told the following: They were being urged by the authorities to leave the Bolshevik party, join again those forces where they formerly belonged, and thus be able to give true accounts to the government of the doings of that particular organisation. Many of them have, of course, refused to do it, and have no doubt paid a heavy penalty for that ... Others, as it happens in every country and in every movement, have followed out this procedure, and are still doing their evil work ... It is for such that our comrades must look out.

No doubt you are familiar with the policy of the Bolsheviks in regard to the Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries. They makes a practice of calling a conference of all the degenerates who have long been thrown out of their parties (I forgot to say that beforehand there is wide-spread arrest, and only the weaklings who undersign that the Bolshevik is the only revolutionary party are let out), and these
degenerates declare their parties to be out of existence, and make public statements in the papers published by Bolshevik funds. We, too, could have expected this, and it did come in the person of Chaim Gaitsman, Ladanski, Michailov. Liza Tinovitzkaia and her husband Tchekeress and others who have already prepared a declaration and a call for such a conference, and undoubtedly the Soviet papers will soon proclaim this. For instance, during the early part of August there were general arrests in several towns, and this surely is in connection with this declaration and with the forthcoming conference, as a precaution against disturbances which may be caused by comrades influencing others, etc., and also as a means to take advantage of the weaklings that may possibly yield and join the Bolsheviks, at least as far as making some statements in the press. However, they will have a hard time with the Anarchists. It's only a pity that everything is being done under such heavily bolted doors. Your work, then, is not to be silent ...

As regards the arrested ones. There are about 300 Anarchists in the jails of Russia, Ukraine and Siberia. But it is hard to obtain correct statistics, because the situation of the arrested ones now is quite different from that of the "old" days, when each prisoner knew his term, his place and was given books to read, and was allowed to receive mail. Now it's different. One day you're pardoned, and before you come to yourself, you're arrested again. The best treatment is given at the Moscow jails, to the city where all the foreign delegates and visitors arrive. But very few are kept in the jails of the large cities; for the most part the arrested Anarchists are sent to Archangelsk, Petromsk [Pertominsk], Cholmogiria [Kholmogory] (Cholmogiria is 120 versts from Archangelsk), in Tobolsk Gubernia, thousands of versts from a railroad; all over Siberia; in places where there are few inhabitants, where there are no books and no newspapers, where no foreign representative ever comes. Their condition is by far worse than of those who are in large cities, where food, clothing, etc., can be gotten to them from time to time. Until recently we were able to send someone with a supply of food and clothing to places nearer here, like Archangelsk, Petromsk and Cholmogiria. The expenses of this, of course, were terrific. But now those who go on such missions are being arrested, and as punishment are being sent away to regions still further. Yet this happened to many, and it's a question if we'll ever see them again.

The spirit of the arrested ones is very depressing. The hunger strike, which was the only recourse of prisoners, and which did yield results in a period of five or six days, but in these days, when comrades wanted to be transferred from the cellar of the Moscow Tcheka to the Butirka, because no one who hasn't actually been confined in that cellar can even have the least inkling of what horror it is, it took 19 days of starving to get the transfer. And as this method of securing anything at all is becoming less and less effective, the Bolsheviks saying "let them hunger until they die," our comrades come to such a desperation that suicide seems to be the only way out, as Baron and other[s] tried it by means of setting fire to their cell. But the guard interfered and saved them.

At one time the regime in Cholmogiria was possible due to a rather decent warden, who allowed the politicals to congregate, gave them a kitchen for use, etc. But with the oncoming of winter, a new warden arrived. It was just at the time when the prisoners had to change for their winter cells, and the new
warden declared that they'd have to be put in separate cells, and that the privilege of kitchen will be taken away. When they protested and refused to go, they were promised to get all the privileges they demanded, but in the end the comrades rioted, because the warden did not live up to his promise, and this was answered with shooting on the part of the authorities, almost resulting in the death of Kabas Tarasuk, an emigrant from Philadelphia, and others. After that a Commission was summoned from Archangelsk and some of the demands were granted. But even up to this day, for looking out of the window the guard answers with shooting, as in the "good" old days.

This is only one of the phases of the general situation. It is impossible to relate in detail about all the persecution that the prisoners undergo; about the young women whose hair was torn off their scalps; of the young people with toothless mouths because of "tzinga"; of comrades who have been released, but in such a condition that they haven't the strength to exist, etc.

But to give you the names of the arrested ones, as you ask, is entirely impossible for me. And why know the names? Does a single name signify anything? The facts speak for themselves. In the central localities there are always comrades in prison. In Moscow, the city of numerous prisons, there are usually between 160 and 170 comrades imprisoned during a period of a "clean-up," in other words when the authorities release some, imprison others, and shoot down still others. During a more or less regular period there are not many comrades in the jails of Moscow. However, those so-called "regular" periods don't last long, for both in Moscow and Petrograd wholesale general arrests are a matter of frequent occurrence. This applies to Ural, Briansk, Kursk, Razan [Kazan? Ryazan?], Vladimir, Charkov, Odessa, Minsk, Kamnetz-Podolsk, Tiflis, Siberia, etc.

To keep up intercourse between all these places under these conditions is a very hard matter, and often an impossibility, so that I can't really say what is happening in these distant parts at present. In Odessa, Yerbitski, an old comrade, a peasant from a village near Elizavetograd, was shot some short time ago. Another comrade from the same district, Mitropan Kulka, is at present imprisoned in Odessa. For a period of nine months we didn't know his whereabout or anything about him, and only now, through some chance information, we discovered that capital punishment awaits him.

So you see, comrades, the situation is desperate, and your help is needed very much. All the money you've sent us up to the date was distributed among the comrades.

Also we need you to be the voice that shall spread the truth about the true situation here.

Constantinople, Aug. 26, 1923.

[Behind the bars 1 New York January 1924 p.5-6.]
I am sure that my first letter has already been received, and therefore you know that the money previously reached its destination. At present I am in receipt of the $50 which were sent by telegraph.

Five thousand roubles were given to Mollie, and the rest, 20,000, were sent to the comrades in the North.

To be more explicit, we bought the most necessary provisions, such as butter, sugar and other things and sent them to the comrades.

You can hardly imagine what joy and pleasure that brought them. They are a group of 30 comrades concentrated, in spite of hardships in one place and together they try to make their life bearable.

Our comrade M.S. is also with them. Their needs are great, comrades, and we must help them at least every month with the same amounts we used to.

We thank you heartily for the contributions which are surely used for the best and most necessary purpose.

With comradely greetings,

P.S.

[Behind the bars 1 New York January 1924 p.14 (reprinting the Bulletin of the Joint Committee for the Defense of Revolutionists Imprisoned in Russia, October 1923. Guillotine at work p.532)]

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August 22, 1923.

Dear Comrades:

Because of my absence from K. I was unable to answer your letter sooner. The money was received and distributed among the comrades who are in such great need. Until now the money was received very regularly, but for the last few months nothing has come and the need is very great indeed. The amount you send is small compared with the great demands.

Life is terrible here, especially for those who are in the distant prisons. Most of our comrades are concentrated in the Northern provinces, where communication of any kind is impossible. Yes, our poor comrades! It is very painful! They have no one. You are the only ones who can help them.

[I have no cheerful news, dear comrades. Our comrades are persecuted everywhere. The government is despotic and cruel. No protests of any form are tolerated. Therefore the lives of our comrades are intolerable, as they are unable to do anything whatsoever.

Will not say any more now. The time will bring more news. I must remind you about them for the winter.

Do not forget our comrades and remember their hardships.]

Do not forget our comrades during the winter; remember their hardships. With comradely greetings,

P.D.
April 9, 1923
Dear Comrades:

Your two letters and parcel received. We thank you heartily and be assured that the things sent will be used only for prisoners or for those who are being released conditionally. They can be arrested and imprisoned at any time.

In general, the imprisonment, arrests and persecution have been stopped a little, although not everywhere. This is due mostly to the protests raised by our comrades abroad; also because our activities were stopped.

[You know, however, that this silence will not last, as our comrades will always work for our ideal, and we may again expect the same persecutions.

Our comrades in O. are silent. We have not heard from them for a long time.]

We have not heard from our comrades in O. for a long time. Some of them are under arrest. Censorship, as you know, is very strict; therefore we cannot communicate. I am sending you an address through which you can communicate with them and help them directly. We are also sending money to all those parts of Russia that we can reach.

S

[Behind the bars 1 New York January 1924 p.14-15 (reprinting the Bulletin of the Joint Committee for the Defense of Revolutionists Imprisoned in Russia, October 1923. Guillotine at work p.533. Text in Behind the Bars is longer (added in square brackets). MS of Guillotine at work (7134 in Maksimov 18) has this extra text. Signature ‘S’ is from Guillotine at work. In Behind the bars it follows the next letter, (“Dear Comrade: Your letter was received. Thanks.”) not reprinted in Guillotine]
Everyone is rejoicing over the work that you are doing. With thanks and hearty regards from all the comrades.

S.

[Behind the bars 1 New York January 1924 p.15 (reprinting the Bulletin of the Joint Committee for the Defense of Revolutionists Imprisoned in Russia, October 1923). Not reprinted in Guillotine at work (MS of Guillotine at work (7135 in Maksimov 18) has this letter.)]

April 3, 1923
Dear Comrades:
[I believe that my letter acknowledging the first $25 was received by you. Now I am glad to acknowledge the second sum of $25. Ten dollars of the latter was given to S., as you requested, and you probably have received an answer from them. The $15 will be given to comrade M.S. as per your request. As he is not in the city at present, the money will be forwarded as soon as possible.]
I must tell you, dear comrades, that our needs are great, greater than ever before. Our comrades are in need of money, clothes and provisions, especially. You are aware of the fact that our comrades are dispersed all over Russia, in the most awful places, and in incredible conditions. Most of them are in the distant, desolate provinces, where it is almost impossible to reach them with help.
No matter how far and poor we are, comrades, we must help with all our might, at least enough to enable them to live. We used to receive help from Berlin comrades, but we have not had anything from them for quite a while. The last few dollars have been spent on things for our comrades in the distant provinces.
We ask you again and again not to forget our comrades.
With comradely greetings,

P.P.

[Behind the bars 1 New York January 1924 p.15 (reprinting the Bulletin of the Joint Committee for the Defense of Revolutionists Imprisoned in Russia, October 1923. Guillotine at work p.534. Text in Behind the Bars is longer (added in square brackets). MS of Guillotine at work (7136-7 in Maksimov 18) has this extra text.)]

1924?
[From a letter of an old anarchist sent out to organizations and individual comrades]
After long and distressing experiences with the now socialist prisons and camps, I again obtained freedom. Although in the real sense it is not freedom at all, but the same prison expanded to the confines of an entire city. One is always under strict surveillance, and we ceaselessly feel the hideous tentacles of the socialist G. P. U.

You can see from this that any activity of a social and political nature is utterly impossible. I and my comrades are forced to be the silent onlookers of a life of violence and arbitrary rule exercised over the people who are [enmeshed in cobwebs and are] violently struggling for their existence. workers are placed in the position of Egyptian slaves. Peasants are despoiled by taxes and by prices lowered to the very minimum on agricultural products, and raised to the utmost on products of the manufacturing industries owned as a monopoly by the central power of the ruling Communist Party.

Workers are exploited in the most predatory and shameless manner; they are despoiled of their pitiful wage by all sorts of levies for the benefit of the state power whose adventures are always covered up with alleges high sounding purposes, such as extending aid to various nations, loans of various kinds etc; along with this predatory evil there is also the existence of a huge army of unemployed which comes as a result of the inability or unwillingness to raise industries to a higher level.

Poverty, hunger, destitution are rampant, and all this is set off by the unbridled luxury indulged in by the ruling; caste and the “bigshots” of the speculative and commercial world. The air is permeated with the stifling after-effects of a six-year-long reaction and terror. Fearing the Che-Ka and executions, men are ready to carry out every mad and senseless whim of the power-drunken Kremlin tyrants. Moral disintegration and corruption have permeated livers of the population. Professors, doctors, priests, middle class men, workers and peasants yield to the self-seeking interests in whose name they are ready to sacrifice all self-respect, beginning with betrayals of their personal convictions and ending with espionage, provocations and betrayal. This demoralization is becoming more and more marked from day to day and the state power pushes the nation further and further along the road of ignorance and inhumanity.

The cultural level does not rise, but keeps on falling. The growing generation is corrupted by the Komsomol where personality and individuality are eroded by [the special preparation and the school of] a distorted Marxism. Crude materialism and the lack of ethical notions displace the honest, noble impulses of the growing generation. The new state leavened with the old spirit of the Russian absolutist state, builds a “new” man, the new young Communist or what is even worse. a hooligan. Such is our folk life in actuality.

Every manifestation of social life is ruthlessly suppressed. Prisons and other places of confinement are overcrowded; executions and tortures have already become a part and parcel of the Socialist government even to a greater extent than during the rule of the most ferocious Tzars. The ranks of revolutionaries are broken up morally and ideologically. The old revolutionaries have become invalids in the realm of creative thought. The strongest among them have perished and those isolated individuals, who have survived, have secluded themselves, becoming inactive and waiting for a change of weather. Youngsters
have not grown up yet. The old swords have been dulled in the battles, and new ones have not yet been forged. The search for new truths in academic fields is nothing but a psychological reaction, losing oneself and wandering in the darkness.

Life is clear, only one has to approach it in a simple manner, without piling up of superstructures and systems. ...

([Bulletin of Russian Anarchists, No. 2, June, 1924, Berlin]. Guillotine at work, p.536-8. additions from TS of Guillotine (Maksimov 18, June 6, file nos. 7141-3]

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1924

During the last period there has been a noticeable revival of work, but unremitting arrests hindered this work greatly. We succeeded in organizing a group of comrades, but the arrests on the First of May destroyed our efforts.

Perhaps, you know already that we have a stable currency; that prices of industrial products are very high, due to the inability of the State to organize industries properly and also to the wide-spread speculations in the administrative spheres. And you may also know that prices of agricultural products are kept at an artificially low level so that the peasants are worn out by the heavy taxes and unable to buy the manufactured products.

But you do not know, perhaps, that the workers and peasants who are disillusioned with the Russian revolution, are still looking forward, although they do not see any way out. They wait for us, for our words. Everywhere there is a muffled protest against the existing order of things; at times this protest breaks forth in the form of partial strikes and emphatic demands, which are often met. But the Government has at its disposal a monstrously strong weapon – retrenchment. The army of unemployed is growing from day to day.

The stores are stocked with commodities; the bourgeoisie and responsible communists are having a good time, but workers and peasants are bending their backs ever lower.

You know already what happened to our comrades in the prisons, of the beatings administered to them. We were shipped out to the concentration camps of Pertominsk, Kholmogorsk and Archangelsk under the most unsanitary conditions. We were starved, beaten up, administered artificial feeding during hunger strikes and brought to such a state that some comrades committed suicide by setting themselves on fire.

Then all the political prisoners were concentrated in Solovietzki, in the White Sea. The food there is not so bad, but it is never varied and conducive to the development of scurvy. In the winter (from October to May) no mail is received, navigation being closed for all that period. Letters get through very seldom. Our comrades, the Anarchists (there are more than thirty of them) occupy a separate cottage; half of the
lake and a plot of land for gardening is fenced off for their use. There is no surveillance within the
 confines of this little colony. No visitors are allowed during the winter.
There is also a prison for political prisoners in Yaroslavl. The concentration camp in Suzdal was broken
 up and the inmates were transferred to other prisons.
Exiled prisoners do not get any subsidies from the State, and at the same time they are blacklisted from
 work. The situation is so bad in this respect that comrades very often demand to be sent to prison. In
 addition to the difficulty of obtaining work there is the most brazen sort of police surveillance under
 which the slightest movements of every exile are subject to control.
Arrests still continue. Three weeks before the first of May, more than 1,500 people were arrested, most of
 them university students. Prisons are overcrowded.
The situation of the workers is also terrible. They are forced to work overtime and to overstrain
 themselves at work.
There is a great deal of unrest among workers.
There was a strike at a clothing factory in Peter (Leningrad). It was neither big nor a long strike, but it
 was a good one: unanimous and well-sustained; no one refused to take part in it, not even Communists.
We have now very few active workers in our movement. Many of our people have been exiled while
 others live in constant fear of arrests. But we are not dispirited. The work goes on and little by little it is
 gaining strength. Individual fighters emerge spontaneously from the mass of people and build up their
 organizations all by themselves.


Excerpts from a letter by an anarchist in Solovetsky
… And now, comrades, we turn to you in a matter which concerns all of us alike: Russians, as well as the
 comrades abroad, and all those whom this letter may reach.
The past winter was very hard on us, and we have much suffered in health. Our only hope was was that
 we should build up during the summer. But it proved worse than the winter. The administration is
 pursuing a policy of suppression, and no help is coming from the outside. We have reached a condition of
 physical exhaustion and we are now facing slow death from starvation. Those who formerly enjoyed
 good health are now very weak; those that were sick can hardly keep on their feet. So whatever you can
 send us in the way of provisions should be rushed to us at once, without delay. Send us food packages or
 – better yet – money, for with money we can buy everything we need…

[Bulletin of the Joint Committee for the Defense of Revolutionists Imprisoned in Russia, October-
 November 1924. Followed by appeal (written by the Joint Committee?) for food and money giving
addresses of Ivan Charin (for anarchists imprisoned in Savvatievsy skit) and A. Baron (for anarchists imprisoned on Savvatievo Island).

1925

Dear Comrades: We have decided to cut down our correspondence: all letters are opened and we do not want to get people in trouble. ... There is much unemployment in our circle and some of our friends have fallen sick again, and very seriously. (Meaning renewed arrests. Transl.) The news I can write you is rather sad. Lela Pissarevskaia has been transferred from Kokand to Skobelev, in spite of protests. She had served as a nurse there, but now - who knows? ... New arrivals in Turkestan are Iosif Bromberg and Rhaya Shulman, students from Petrograd. Both are penniless and sick. Need medical treatment which is not to be had here.

In Kirghizia there have arrived: Alexander Petrovsky, a student from the capital; Constantin Govar and his wife and Semyon Pastukhov, from Orenburg. Anton Balunkevich and Meyer Raisky, from White Russia, and Alexander Bogdanov (a Left) have been sent to Tchikment. In the City of Turkestan now are Nikolas Gontcharov, a student of the Petrograd politechnical institute, and Sergei Bisov, who had attended the pedagogic institute in the same city. In Orsk there are Ivan Tcheprunov and Aida, sent away in connection with the case of the All-Russian Anarchist Federation (the Karelin Group). Schmidt and another comrade from Petrograd, don't know his name, are in Urda. Benjamin Rakov and Alexandra Kvartchevskaia, Petrograd students, and Alexander Drugal, a sailor, are exiled to Uralsk. In Urda are also Alexei Maslov with his wife Xenia, syndicalists. To some of them we have sent financial aid, since we could spare a little. In all we forwarded to them over 260 roubles, which includes part of the money we received from you. Up to March there were 12 Anarchists in Ust-Sysolsk, as you were informed at the time. Now the number has considerably increased by arrivals from Petrograd .... Some have been sent to Narym. Lenya Lebedev is in Kolpashev, 65 versts from Parabel. Dmitry Alimov was arrested and sent to Briansk. The State Prosecutor, Tchernogorov, remarked on the occasion that our comrade will be prosecuted as a common criminal, in order “to discredit Anarchism in the eyes of the workers”. We think that D. A. failed to receive the money you sent him. The Petrograd comrades sent to Solovki have been changed to Yaroslavl. Some of the others are now in Upper-Uralsk, among them Maria Weger. Misha Axelrod, arrested in Kharkov, was taken to Akatui in company with a comrade from Poltava. Enough for this time. Will write again at the next opportunity.

Your L. (Turkestan).

[Bulletin of the Joint Committee for the Defense of Revolutionists Imprisoned in Russia, November-December 1925.]
Dear Friends, I hasten to inform you that Vanya Kabas is now in prison in Moscow, after having been dragged about from place to place ... Over two hundred share the same fate. Kharkhardin, Khudolei, Alexei Solonovitch and others of that group (Karelin Group, Moscow) are in the same position as Vanya now, probably because they occasionally gave aid to their “poor relatives”. (Supplying the politicals with money and food. Translated.)

Twice we received from Chicago the papers “Noviy Mir” and “Russky Golos”. Wonder who sent them. May be you. But I can tell you, whoever did, the very fact is pleasant and encouraging. People are thinking of us ... Do not complain that I write so little. It is true, my illness (imprisonment. Translated) has had a bad effect on me: I have lost my energy; am indifferent, even morose. I hope, my dear ones, you will understand and not condemn ... Must add that some of our exiles in Turkestan are being transferred to Siberia. Terrible situation. This being constantly thrown about from place to place is unbearable. Our life is bitter. One often thinks of talking a quietus ...

N. (Central Russia).

[Bulletin of the Joint Committee for the Defense of Revolutionists Imprisoned in Russia, November-December 1925. This is an extract from a letter from Anton Shliakhovoy, from Tula, 02/07/1925 Flechine48 file nos. 463-4 Translation by Malcolm follows:]

Tula, 2.7.25

Dear Mark!

I just got home from roaming around the woods for more than a week with my kids and found your letter, dear friend. Thanks, brother: it’s terrible that of all the comrades living in the USSR and abroad, you alone keep in touch with us. Never mind the others, but it sure would be been nice to talk to you once in a while.

Concerning Rubinchik [1] – not a word from him in more than three months. From Baron no answer to my letter which was sent three months ago. The person I exchange letters with most often is Vanya Kabas [2]. In the recent past the poor man was “totally absorbed in searching for an apartment, or, at least, a different place to live”, and now he is in prison in Moscow. It’s not surprising that Moscow is so inhospitable: the concentration of “inhabitants” is so great that “apartments” can not be provided for all. I have learned, for example, from very reliable sources, that many people “of the same or closely related profession as Vanya” have found themselves in an identical situation – roughly 200 people.

Well, dear friend, how can I cheer you up, what news can I share?!...
Yes, I forgot: Kharkhardin [3], Solonovich [4] and others, who were previously helping their poor relatives, have, thanks to the failure of their enterprises, found themselves in the same position as Vanya....

On two occasions we have received communist newspapers from America (Chicago): “Novy Mir” and “Russkiy Golos” [5]. I have no idea who sent them. Perhaps you can find out who has done us this favour. We know we have relatives in America, but we don’t know which ones are concerned about us. I can only say that their gesture is most welcome.

Dear friend, you are justified to reproach me for being unreasonably cautious, resulting in prolonged silences. I myself constantly curse the state of mind from which I continue to suffer. Yes, I became quite withdrawn, unsociable, even anti-social; and this happened to me after my “illness”, of which you are well aware. It’s all too clear to me that it will take some major event (good or bad) to shake me out of my pathological apathy, peevishness, paranoia, etc. ... I hope, dear friend, that you will understand and not judge me too harshly... News about the USSR is known to you from our newspapers. I can only add that many of the “settlers” among our comrades are being “resettled” from Turkestan to Siberia; they are quite distressed... This is the way life goes on here, friend: constantly being moved around, deprivations, etc., etc., etc. ... It’s a hard life!! And yet one doesn’t necessarily agree with Gogol: “It’s dull in this world, gentlemen!” [6] I only hope that this letter reaches you.

With the warmest affection, Anton

Notes

1 Yefim Borisovich Rubinchik-Meier (1892–1938), anarcho-syndicalist.
2 Ivan Vasilevich Kabas’ (1893–?) was deported on the Buford (“alias Dimstrius (or Dimitrius) Arrested without a warrant because present at the house of friend Tony Chinelli during the latter’s arrest. From Grodno, Russia. Came to U.S. in 1913. Worked in Youngstown in steelworks and fireproofing company. In Akron, worked at tire factory. Opposed to czar in Russia, not to U.S. government.”: Buford bios). He was on the executive of the Nabat Confederation. “Workman. Arrested in Kharkov in November 1920 and, after several hunger strikes and transfers from prison to prison, he was assigned administratively to the Kholmogory concentration camp for two years. In the wake of the beatings inflicted upon the anarchists there in November 1922 he was removed to the Pertominsk camp. Freed after serving out his term, he was rearrested after a short time and banished to Briansk where he was arrested again and dispatched to Arkhangelsk. In 1926 he was arrested yet again for having corresponded with friends abroad and locked up in Petropavlovsk.”: 1927fre.
3 Ivan Vasilevich Kharkhardin (1899–no earlier than 1939).
4 Alexei Aleksandrovich Solonovich (1887–1937).
5 These newspapers were actually published in New York.
6 The last sentence in Gogol’s “The Story of How Ivan Ivanovich Quarreled with Ivan Nikiforovich”.
My dear ones: You may “congratulate” me on being ordered to the farthest North. I thought I needed a southern climate, but our friends the enemy decided otherwise. Well, I guess they know better. Arrived here July 28. Am ordered “not to go far”, to report (to the local authorities) regularly, and so forth. Permission of the G.P.U. is required to accept work, and such permission is generally refused. How are we to exist? ... Orders must be strictly obeyed, else something even worse is in store. I cannot tell you how sick I am of it all.

Many arrests here of late. Prisons are filled and not enough room for the new comers ... Fortunately my own health is still so so. Morally I am also well. I am preparing to remain here a long time, but then there is no telling. Just now I am hunting for lodgings. Very hard to find a place. The cost of living is very high. We are particularly worried about the approaching cold weather. Neither I nor the others have any warm things. At present it is summer and the sun is bright, but you know how capricious this climate is.

Well, sufficient unto the day ...

Your Z. (Archangelsk Province).

[Bulletin of the Joint Committee for the Defense of Revolutionists Imprisoned in Russia, November-December 1925.]

... We live here together, the 4 of us. A little commune, with treasury, table, and work in common. About our material condition we have already written you - hope letter reached. The 38.80 roubles you sent have just arrived and will come in most handy. Most fraternal thanks to you and the donors. As you know, if you received our previous mail, we are allowed by the Government 6 roubles 25 kopecks per month (less than $3.25 Transl.) There is no chance of earning anything: first, because there are only two or three local institutions in our village, while several hundred persons are looking for work; secondly, we are not accepted on principle. ... The lowest minimum one needs here to exist is 10-12 roubles a month per person, not counting any expenses for necessary clothing. Therefore, but for your help, - well, you know where we should be. ...

S.- K.- (North of Siberia).

[Bulletin of the Joint Committee for the Defense of Revolutionists Imprisoned in Russia, November-December 1925.]
Dear Comrades, during the summer mail arrives here per boat every week. But the telegraph has been out of order 3 months and now it is entirely suspended. May be that is the reason we failed to get the money you sent lately. We still hope it may reach us. From E. we have not heard for some time, and A. also is silent. Perhaps something has happened to them. ... From America we received just one post-card last winter, and 4 papers during the spring; nothing else.

During the past winter we worked here in a little tinker-shop that we ourselves had opened. After 2 months “they” kicked us out, to speak plainly. In the spring we planted vegetables; we were rather successful, so that we hope to have enough for our own needs this winter ... The mosquito and fly pest here is fearful, and to it must be added the “other” pest, that bites no less. ... But we are persevering and living in hopes of better days.

M. (Narym Distract.).

[Bulletin of the Joint Committee for the Defense of Revolutionists Imprisoned in Russia, November-December 1925.]

1926

Dear Comrades, you know already that I was tried in the Moscow court and sentenced to 5 years’ prison. My term expires in March, 1926. The official charge against me read: “For demanding the election of a genuine Soviet Government”. My sentence carried with it “strict isolation”. I served in the Pertominsk Camp, then in the Solovetsky, and I have gone through everything that happened in those prisons… There is now in Russia a working class as well as a peasant class – they exist physically and spiritually, which was not the case four years ago… Even in prison one feels this difference, and once these classes now exist, we can also exist… My time expires in March of this year – but will I regain liberty? Exile now almost always follows after prison, and prison after exile – it has become a general rule. My friend N. after having served his sentence, was recently called out by G.P.U.

“Within three days you must come with a letter of repentance, or you will bring your things with you”, he was told. He came with his things, and he was ordered into exile for 3 years… I am very anxious to get out, for my father died not long ago, and my old mother and two young girls are penniless and need my help. I myself also feel badly in need of a little rest; I am weakened physically, exhausted. The years of 1916 and 1917, up to the Revolution, I spent in prison; in the autumn of 1918 and spring of 1919 again in prison, in the beginning of 1920 once more arrested, and since 1921 again in prison. One is hungry for a little life, for a bit of freedom…

X.
Good Friends thanks for your letter. Could not reply before on account of sickness – a kind of fever resulting from inhaling the fumes of acid used in our brass factory. We have been having disgusting weather and strong winds; our shop lacks ventilation and the acid fumes till the place and poison your whole system… B. is in the same fix as I… We received the $50. you sent and distributed it as already explained to you in B’s letter. (The writer is the distributor of funds sent by us for his district. Editor.) We have also sent a package of food, amounting to $10., to L., who is now in the hospital… For the rest, we have “gone into ourselves”. When we get papers or magazines from some good friend, we read. We read, we work, we shake (with the fever). And still we hope… We have just received word from D. that she was given “minus 6 and the boundary provinces” (That is to say, exile with prohibition of living in the 6 largest cities and in the boundary provinces. Editor.) Your S.

Friends, we hasten to inform you about the fearful ordeal to which our poor M. (Moisey Zuckerman [Tsukerman]) is being subjected. You know what he has gone through in the Solovki and during his previous imprisonment. When he finished his term, he was ordered to Siberia for 3 years. He was sent by étape and he has been three months on his way. You can well understand what that means. He reached Omsk in terrible condition, so that he had to be put in the hospital. Two weeks before his release from Upper-Uralsk an operation was performed upon him, but it was not successful and now he is facing another operation. Meanwhile he is being forced to continue on his way. He is almost despairing of reaching Narym, his final point of destination… It is necessary to wire some money to him there.

Tanya P. [Polozova] is still in prison in Upper-Uralsk. Katya got 3 years to Ust-Sissoisk. From Rubintchik and Aron Baron we have not heard for a long time, and we are getting anxious about them… Dora Stepnaia and Tamara Weger, with their little babies, have at last reached the Kirghiz Republic – K.
My Dear Comrades: I have already three times acknowledged the receipt of the $10. you sent me, but it seems you have failed to receive my previous letters. I regret it very much… My little baby girl can already stand on a chair. She raises her little hand and shouts, “Tovarishtchi, unite! Papa is soon coming home!” So. But I am afraid that she may have to wait a long time yet, for two years are still before me… My health is somewhat poor – still I hope for that wonderful thing “freedom”, “liberty”. Where is it? Only Allah knows… and may be one is doomed to die in prison.

X., “Polit-Isolator”.

[Bulletin of the Joint Committee for the Defense of Revolutionists Imprisoned in Russia, April 1926]

THE LETTER FROM AN EXILE
Dear Friends: - We are glad to be able to send you the news just received. K. and S., about whom we worried so much, not having heard from them for such a long time, have at last given a sign of life. Both are in poor physical health. We had to scold them for having sent to others the $20 they received from you. We know how badly they and the friends with them need it themselves. Most of them have no support whatever. It is particularly terrible there on account of the children, as you know. And the population of exiles is growing because of the new political arrivals. Among the latter is a student girl who came three weeks ago, with several others, most of them very ill. One suffers with his lungs, another from heart trouble….One of our friends was sent away to a worse place recently, because he refused the offer made by the Assistant Chief of the G.P.U. to become a spy on his comrades. This method is often practiced. Especially the young prisoners are so approached by the G.P.U. Refusal means worse conditions and exile further on. Things are beginning to look very ominous. Politicals from the extreme South are sent to the coldest North. You can imagine what suffering it involves, particularly in view of the fact that no warm clothing is supplied and often no time is given to prepare for the long journey. M. is soon expected here – after having been in the Solovietzki, Uralsk and … L., N., and several others are already in … Polit-Isolator. R. is in Siberia, and other are to follow there, according to our information. We fear to think of who is to come next…

[The Bulletin of the Relief Fund of the International Workingmen’s Association for Anarchists and Anarcho-Syndicalists Imprisoned or Exiled in Russia”. No, 1, December 1926. Paris-Berlin. Guillotine at Work p.550-1. (Heading in Bulletin is ‘From our correspondence’.)]
… Many thanks for the money you sent. I received … roubles. I could not acknowledge it before. I did not feel well enough even to take a pen into my hand. Twenty roubles of the amount you sent was forwarded according to your instructions… You know how glad they all were… A package was sent to the polit-isolator in… where a large number of our people are now in prison. They needed the things very badly…

[The Bulletin of the Relief Fund of the International Workingmen’s Association for Anarchists and Anarcho-Syndicalists Imprisoned or Exiled in Russia, December 1926]

I can tell you that I am glad to be in this place, because it gives me the opportunity to be of some use…. The last $35 was duly received and distributed according to greatest need, both in packages and in cash. I am with … and we succeed in keeping in touch with the necessary places… The weather has been very bad, but your aid helps a great deal. Else some would die of hunger and cold…

[The Bulletin of the Relief Fund of the International Workingmen’s Association for Anarchists and Anarcho-Syndicalists Imprisoned or Exiled in Russia, December 1926]

Your letter has made us very happy. We only wish mail would come more often. There is nothing very good we can write to you, except that B. has been slightly improving. For a while we feared that he was about to die. But fortunately he has passed the crisis and we hope that he may get well… Now everything depends on the help we can get. He needs special medical treatment. The physician holds out strong hope for his entire recovery, provided he follows the regime prescribed. But that means diet, rest and similar things not easily achieved. He should be sent to a warm climate, the doctor says. But that requires big means. Fortunately our good comrades in America have been quick to send help, and you also, which we all appreciate very much. The money would make it possible for B. to go South, but the great question is will he be permitted to? …

[The Bulletin of the Relief Fund of the International Workingmen’s Association for Anarchists and Anarcho-Syndicalists Imprisoned or Exiled in Russia, December 1926]
(From an exile in the Far North of Siberia, where mail reaches only twice a year. The letter was written in September [1926] and arrived only now.)

Dear Friends: The last boat is about to leave – there will be no other this year. So I am taking this opportunity: may be the fates will be favorable and my missive reach you. It is this same boat that had brought us the 20 roubles you had sent and the package with food for my little one. Soon the Polar night will be here; there will be daylight only for 4 hours, and – we have no oil for our lamp. True, we shall then sleep more, but too much is dangerous because it helps to produce that fearful disease tsinga (scurvy). The peasants here claim to have a safe cure for it: to run about barefoot in the Spring over the nast (tree stumps of local growth) until you cut your feet all up; in this way, they say, you’ll let the “bad blood” out and be cured. But this prescription seems to be getting out of style even here, may be because the tsinga may kill you before you’ll live to see the Spring… The baby is jumping about and interfering with my writing… She thanks you for the baby food you sent. The weather is bad, fearful winds blowing, and soon the white flies (snow) are due here. The measly summer is gone – mighty poor summers here – and the peasants are cheated of their hopes, and so am I. There was not enough to lay by for the winter… We live on hopes here, mostly. In the Spring we had hoped to get a lot of white and red fish. That failed, and then we hoped to get herring, in the fall. I rowed to the other side of the river – stayed three weeks there – waited for the herring to come up from the sea. Didn’t come up – may be smelt danger or saw me, I don’t know. Then we travelled to … hoping to get fish there. The rains started, then terrific winds that filled your eyes with sand – and we turned back, hungry and wet – and that is how we live here. But we hope…

For the present we have enough herring, some bread also, though not enough; of vegetables, meats and fats there is no sign, unless some cargo is brought up. And it is hard to live without books. Paper and envelopes are very, very scarce, and stamps is almost impossible to get…. But we live and – hope. Now it is pouring, Grey sky. Damp, incredibly. Yet life is curious and interesting. One must turn his head about and look. It would be possible to live even here, were one free to leave the place… We greet you all.

[Bulletin of the Relief Fund of the International Working Men’s Association for Anarchists and Anarcho-Syndicalists Imprisoned or Exiled in Russia (Paris-Berlin), no.2 March 1927, p.5-6.]

1927

… The comrades sent away from Leningrad are in great need. We appreciate all you are doing for us, but we call your attention to those who need aid even more than we do… More fortunate are those who can
secure some kind of work, but there is great unemployment among the exiles. The question of lodgings is also very acute. It is difficult to secure a room – the harder even for those with families. Often the politicals are ordered out of a house they happen to live in, in order to give it to some members of the party. And then – look about for another place, which is always a problem most difficult of solution… The money you sent… was received and will be distributed among the most urgent cases.

[Bulletin of the Relief Fund of the International Working Men’s Association for Anarchists and Anarcho-Syndicalists Imprisoned or Exiled in Russia (Paris-Berlin), no.2 March 1927, p.6]

Friends: The aid you sent was already received in October, and you must have wondered at my failure to acknowledge it. Well, you know yourself how uncertain our existence here is. I was again arrested. – I think this is enough of explanation… Since I am out and in exile here, I could not get in touch with you, because of the loss of all my addresses, destroyed by myself, as a precaution. Only thanks to the receipt of the last postal card from you am I enabled to write to you again… S. and T. were ordered into further exile for 3 years. Order came direct from Moscow. S., I. and G. are still in… As they have reported no change of late, I assume they are in the old status quo. Several cases, of which I write you separately, are in need of quick aid. I hope you will be able to assist at once. – Comrade X., who is very far north, within the Polar Circle, is in need of reading matter, as are also a number of others. Send only “legal” literature, of course. Such as “Workers’ Weekly”, “Rote Fahne”, and similar stuff. They get the post there only 7 months in the year… Greetings to all Those who do not forget us.

Later: We have just learned that our comrade Kuznetsov was sent to Archangel, after having been liberated from prison. But when he arrived in Archangel, he was ordered to a place called Kuya. Surely you never heard of it – it is somewhere way up North, a bit of a village containing less than fifty huts. Besides Kuznetsov there is only one other exile there, some Tsarist gendarme. Existence there is equal to living in a tomb….

[Bulletin of the Relief Fund of the International Working Men’s Association for Anarchists and Anarcho-Syndicalists Imprisoned or Exiled in Russia (Paris-Berlin), no.2 March 1927, p.6]

To the "Golos Truzhenika," Chicago, Ill., from comrade A. I. Baturo [Aleksandr Ivanovich Batura], exiled to Slobodsk, Viatka province.
To the editor of the "Golos Truzhenika":
I beg you to print in your paper the few lines I am sending you now.
I lived in the town Gomel, White Russia. In 1924, as you know, I was deported from America as an "undesirable element" for the bourgeoisie. But in the Soviet country also life is very hard for me since I openly declared that it is only Commissars and not workers that live well here. That is why I was not allowed to live in any of the larger cities, not even in the capitals of any of the provinces.

There are eight exiles here; there are Social-Revolutionists and Mensheviks. They were given three years. As for myself, I don't know for how long I was sentenced. It is Moscow that decided about it, but Moscow is not very much in a hurry about such business. I wrote to Moscow to allow me to go abroad, but there has been no answer yet.

The main thing is that I have no work and it is so hard to get anything. I have been actually starving here, moreover, I am sick. I am therefore asking you, my dear comrades, to help me out as much as you can, for otherwise the Soviet government will surely put an end to my life. It is a worse mockery than in America. Our Communists shout that workers are exploited abroad, but one need only look around to see what kind of exploitation is going on here.

Here is an example. Women work at the docks, unloading salt. For six hours work a day they get fifty cents. Isn't this exploitation of the worse sort? I beg of you to publish in your paper this letter with my appeal for help. Perhaps, some of the comrades will respond.

With comradely greetings,

A. I. BATURO.

(The Archive of the "Golos Truzhenika," the organ of the Russian Section of the I.W.W.. 1919-1927, Chicago, Ill.)

[Guillotine at work p.569, in material dated 1927 there. (All Batura letters in Flechine archive date from 1929-31).]

[A letter from Victor Sergeyev, a comrade exiled to Tiumen, Siberia]

May 17, 1927

Dear Senia,

[In order to avoid too long an interval between the previous letter and this one, I decided to write without awaiting any answer to my last letter. I am writing not because I have news that have to be told, but in order to make our correspondence more punctual, at least keep it up twice a week.

There were no new developments here during the last period. Our colony has not changed, and altogether few changes have taken place in our midst. News come in very rarely, and in a rather niggardly fashion. Soon, comrade Victorova, [Nikolai Viktorov?] and a few others from other districts and factions will be through serving their time. So, they will have something new to say. I hope to find out in this manner something new about Sudaletz.]
Zilber is already in Tver and has found work, but he hasn’t yet written me about it, although he promised a lot in this respect.

They say that disturbances took place in some of the prisons especially in Cheliabinsk. A group of Zionists and Georgian Social-Democrats were moved from Cheliabinsk to Tobolsk. There are also letters from some comrades who were sentenced to Vierkhnie [Verkhne]-Uralsk, but for some unknown reason they had their correspondence rights taken away from them for a month. Altogether, there is something beneath this perturbation.

The poet who was mentioned in the last letters was said to have already arrived from Tobolsk. We were told that he came with the steamer, but no one answering this description was found there. But the person who saw him maintains definitely that he was brought over with the steamer. But think only of this “freedom of press, speech, etc”, when the only crime this man committed was being a bit loose with his tongue, more so that the government permits. Yes, damn it, sometimes the saying: “the prison entrance gates are wide, but the exits are narrow” is more than fitting in our cases. Upon the slightest provocation one finds himself at once in prison; the reverse simply does not happen.

Here is, for instance, an example. A certain man by the name of Studenetzky, a Socialist-Revolutionist, ended his term in Tobolsk prison February 10, and he is still in the “peresilnoy” prison (prisons used as distribution centers for prisoners and exiles) of the city of Perm. His letters show that the steamer leaves for his destined place of exile in June. So figure out how much additional time this man is serving for no reason at all. This happens here quite often.

Today three exiles came to us asking whether we have free rooms or work for them. They are Ukrainians and are not only politically underdeveloped but are just illiterate peasants. Perhaps they were well-to-do at home but they could hardly be classed as dangerous in the party sense. They might have said something at one of the meetings and were arrested. They say that they were arrested for no reason at all, were kept in prison nine months and now have been sentenced to three years of exile.

You can imagine the difference between this situation and the one described in last year’s “Pravda”. A British Bolshevik came out with a speech somewhere in the mines, calling upon the army not to shoot at workers. This landed him in prison for three years. “Three years of prison! Bloodsuckers! Hangmen!”...shouts out the paper, but here, right under our noses, a sentence of four and ten years is nothing to speak of. But, what is worse, this is being presented as 100 percent Socialism.

When this is done in countries where the bourgeoisie rules, it is considered quite normal and natural. But when men allegedly fighting for “Socialism”, fill up prisons in the name of the ideal, I cannot understand what “socialism” means nor and for what kind of “people’s welfare” this is done.

Tragically, only that part of the population which has personally experienced this regime is aware of what is taking place. Well, anyway, let us hope that this will not last forever. Public opinion is beginning to stir already and only a spark is lacking for an explosion on a grand scale.
In my own personal life no changes have taken place. I am unemployed, as I was before, and I am oppressed by the realization that time goes by without my making much use of it. I would like to use this time to prepare for the revolution that is to come. But there are no books here that I would like to read.

Kolia transmitted my request for reading matter to Moscow, but all I got was Kropotkin’s “Ethics”. With some effort, plenty of fiction can be obtained here, but of the more serious kinds there is nothing here outside the works of Lenin and Marx. One can get, of course Stalin’s “Leninism”.

You seem to be interested in those who have already served their time. I told you who is in Tobolsk prison, but I did not write you who was there of those that “recanted”; whether they are still here or whether they have been released already – that I do not know.

Vania and Arkhangeltzi are not writing. Kolia writes that he is overworked and cannot write now. I would like to ask you to describe briefly the Anarchist movement abroad, that is if you have the time and opportunity. I will be very grateful if you do. And meanwhile accept my warm greetings.

Regards to all.

VICTOR SERGEYEV.

(The Archives of the “Aid Fund”, Chicago, Ill.)

[printed in The Guillotine at work, p.569-71. The original of this letter is in Flechine 70, file nos 117-20.
Heading and first paragraphs from TS of Guillotine: Maksimov 18, June 6, file nos. 7174-7.
It might be possible to work out who The poet, Vania, Arkhangeltzi and Kolia are. Sergeyev mentions Nikolai Viktorov in his letters – but he may not be the only Kolya.]

Dear Friends: I am glad of the chance to reply to your last letter. But I feel very sad…It seems that the conditions of our existence frequently incline one to a fatal pessimism, regardless of one's temperament.

Take, for instance, the case of young Spilka, in Chekment (Central Asia). He was only 20 years old, but he decided to put an end to the comedy of life. He drank a glass of poison. Then, not sure of its deadly effect, he hanged himself. Can you realize the psychic condition of that boy, with such determination to die? The day before his suicide he had himself photographed with the glass of poison in his hand and the rope around his neck. This shows what… (Several lines of the microscopic writing undecipherable – Ed.).

Our other friend, Boris Lipsker, was also quite young and of a joyful, sunny disposition, and therefore his recent suicide surprised and shocked us… Some may ascribe these and similar instances of increasing suicide among the exiles to inherent inclination. But that would mean to ignore entirely our fearful conditions of existence. They not only determine our model of life, but even more so our death…Excuse bad writing. Greetings. Your comrade…
Friends, our comrade Y., who lives in the extreme north, just wrote me a letter that may interest you. I quote in part:

“In the Spring I was transferred to a little hamlet that contains only 60 huts. It is about 200 versts from the nearest village and more than 1,000 miles from any railroad station. The poverty here is incredible. You can’t buy anything. With my woman companion I go every day to the woods to search for any berries left from last year, such as vakcinion [vakcinio] and oksikoko (red whortleberry and mosberry). That is our food. Unfortunately, there will soon be none even of that, and then we'll have to wait for the new crop of berries and mushrooms. In the novels of Jack London I have read of the gold-seekers in the Canadian primitive forests who some time lost their way and have to subsist on berries, mushrooms and similar things. But I can tell you that it sounds much better in the novel than it is in real life. This is just as an instance of the way we live here…”

The exiled in T. are almost all without employment. Sometimes they are refused work on the ground that they “are not members of the union”. But the union does not accept exiles as members. Again we are told, “We don’t employ you, enemies of our government”. Our comrades in S. are almost starving. In general, the conditions of our people in the upper north are most deplorable. In the region of Beresov, Surgut, Obdorsk (Siberia) we are almost never given a chance to work and earn something. And you know yourselves that the government allowance we receive is not even half-adequate, nor regular. The authorities pay railroad expenses of persons imported to fill certain vacancies, while the exiles could do the same work and even better, without the extra expense.

Y.Z.


Thanks for the money you sent. We are very much moved by your thoughtfulness. At the place which I recently left…there is great need. M. is not earning anything, L. has very little, and R. is expecting a child. We have shared with them what you sent. K. is earning 30 roubles a month, which is no great amount, but still he keeps on sending packages of food and clothing to our people in the …prison. N. is in Turkhan [Turakhan] with her husband and child. Conditions there are extremely bad. Great poverty, no
earnings at all, climate severe and mail only twice or three times a year. In January we received a letter that was sent us the previous August … Recently some of us were lucky enough to get jobs cutting wood and collecting nuts. We’d appreciate books and magazines.


________________________________________________________________________________________

1928

From our Ural correspondent, a most trustworthy and intelligent comrade.

Dear friends:

As you see from post stamp we are at this moment in the city of U. It means that our term expired duly 23/4. But this does not at all mean that we are free. Our new fate is not yet known and we must wait here indefinitely until the new sentence comes from Moscow.

Your last letter of April 6th received. During the entire month of April post communication with the village D. was broken off.

Not long ago we received two french books from you: "Les Gamins de Paris" and "Le Bois du Templier pendu". Just several minutes before our departure we received 20 rubles from you. Hearty thanks! I hope you got my post cards in which I acknowledged the receipts of your letters, money and books.
As you may well know, it takes weeks and often even months until the exile receives a new destination after he finishes his sentence. Perhaps you are aware of the fact that A. Baron finally got his new sentence of Three (3) years exile in Tashkent where he is now with Fanya.
If any of you should happen to be in Liege to the 3rd Congress of the International Workingmen's Association, we ask you (in the name of our comrades here) to express our thanks for the brotherly solidarity and help.

We send our greetings to the comrades at the Congress and I believe it is not necessary to tell you how deeply impressed we are whenever we get a letter, book or money from you.

You must remember - and please tell this to all our comrades that each similar sign of solidarity, is deeply stamped in our heart and memory.

Surely you must have heard about the Khiva tragedy, that took place the 17th of February; when a young Zionist BRONSTEIN (a nephew of Trotsky) was KILLED IN THE LOCAL PRISON BY THE WARDEN WITHOUT WARNING, AND ALL THE REMAINING PRISONERS WERE SAVAGELY BEATEN (TWO OF THEM WERE GIVEN A WHIPPING). The details are not fully known as yet.
Many of our comrades finished their sentences this year, but new sentences are imposed when the old is out so that there seems to be no end to our suffering.

I shall certainly write you when we get our new verdict.

Yours fraternally

S.

[typescript in Berkman 129, file no. 104. From 1928: Liege Congress 27–29 May 1928]

Comrade A… writes

I have just discovered that in the Verkhne-Uralsk prison the regime has taken a much harsher turn, as indeed it has in other prisons too. Pretty much across the board, disputes with the Administration are inevitably breaking out, with the latter making ridiculous or injurious demands, such as that prisoners stand up for the head count, etc. They may demand but others do not comply. In Sverdlovsk prison, the political prisoners have been on hunger strike or upwards of a week now. Recently, the administration at that prison starting moving the political prisoners into the cells of the ordinary prisoners. The politics insist upon being returned to the political cells and backed up their demands with a strike. Broadly speaking, we are in the throes of the implementation of certain “reforms” in the treatment we receive. In Tobolsk, for instance, it is the prison governor himself who is in the process of registering the exiles passing through his establishment. On this occasion, he subjected the prisoners, individually and one at a time, to an out-and-out grilling, including questions of a completely intimate nature. All of the exiles fallen momentarily into his clutches wait impatiently for their time to leave.

Let me tell you something of our life here. The most worrying thing for us is the expense of foodstuffs, with the costs climbing daily. Given the paucity of our resources and our chronically unemployed circumstances, this is, as far as we are concerned, a matter of the first importance. It starts with bread. Last autumn, wheat was selling at 50 kopeks a pud; today, oatmeal fetches 1 rouble 80 kopeks per pud, and as for wheat, there is not a single pud of it to be had on the market hereabouts. White bread is only available during the mornings, and even then not every day. “Queues” outside the Central Workers’ Cooperative seeking bread have turned into a permanent feature and so dense that a cannon-ball could not disperse them. And yet bread is issued only on the presentation of booklets from the CWC. A while ago, very white bread was fetching 10 kopeks per pound; these days, a disgusting, inedible rye loaf costs from 10 to 12 kopeks. And of course, the price of bread is not the only soaring price. The prices of every basic necessity are escalating.

As for work, let us say no more about that subject. All our efforts, all our questing, all the steps we take have yet to produce any results. Here are a few examples. Recently, the Labour Exchange was looking for ten calculator employees for the Bureau of Statistics. The pay being wretched, scarcely any interest was raised. We got wind of the matter and let ourselves be lulled by sweet dreams of earning 27 roubles a
month … but alas! … We were asked what we could do, our responses were listened to and … we were turned down. “Specialist knowledge we do not need”, we were told by the delegated administrator himself, “which is why we are not willing to take a gamble … You might very well busy yourself with some counter-revolutionary endeavour … And here we have no [Party] “cell” to keep you under surveillance.” Which was at any rate direct and candid. Which is not always the case. For example, one student exile was giving a few private lessons hereabouts, which was causing the GPU sleepless nights. So one of his female pupils was summoned, given a little “background explanation” and, as a result, she let the student go. After which her girlfriend did likewise. As you can see, the “eye” is ever vigilant! In Tobolsk, the procedure was a lot less clever: exiles were purely and simply banned from giving lessons.

Being “politically suspect” means arming the powers that be with the most powerful weapon. For instance: recently, there were two would-be tenants competing over a room that was to let: one is a former member of the Young Communists, the other – a Communist ex-convict. Once upon a time the pair had been fast friends, ready to profess their love for each other. Then along came the housing issue and … the appropriate GPU office had to be brought in. Its conclusion was emphatic: “The erstwhile Young Communist is known to none and, broadly speaking, is a suspect individual, whereas the ex-convict has served some time in the Party and, being one of our own, might be used on surveillance on the exiles…” And so the room was made available to the ex-convict.

The mentality among the local population is anything but light-hearted. This year, for instance, 25,000 people crammed themselves on to the square on the occasion of the 1st of May. A wretched sight! People were largely there because of threats of “staff cuts” and lay-offs. But most were there for the spectacle and the music. There was nothing inspiring in the speeches made, nor any enthusiasm in the masses. The speakers stood out primarily for their insults. “Hooligans, good-for-nothings, nitwits, bureaucrats, counter-revolutionaries”, etc., etc., that was all one heard and nothing that was sensible, intelligent or uplifting … Besides no one bothered to listen to these “speakers”. Its “heart stuck to its ribs”, as somebody put it, the crowd just waited for the speechifying to finish. The speakers themselves were well aware of the degree of interest with which they were heard out. But what can we expect of them? They are required to talk just as the rest are required to listen.

On the eve of May 1st the authorities organised a torch-lit procession. This “march” depressed us even more than even the following day’s demonstration. In fact, it degenerated into hooligan activity. One maid told us: “We were informed at the Union that anyone missing from the demonstration will find his voting rights suspended for six months and will in addition have his name stricken from the Union lists for some period or another …” The explanation for these things is straightforward: it is the only way of whipping up the “mass enthusiasm” on display at the movies on every pretext. There is but one “truth”, that proclaimed by the government. So there is no need for anyone to ponder.

A further illustration.

The Easter vigil. An “evening of struggle against the religious poison” was organised by a soviet institute. On a tiny stage, a few variety acts performed to begin with. Then came some music. Then the
public began dancing the fox-trot. But soon, they had had they fill of that and people began to drift away. Now, the Administration has to be able to claim a “success” and it was announced to the crowd that the cloakroom was being closed until 3 o’clock a.m. So leaving was no longer an option. So they started wandering the corridors and kicking over the traces, etc… The organisers laid on some games. At first it was games of cat and mouse but this soon turned into hiding away in the girls skirts … To be sure, this would be a matter of little significance, if it was not all referred to as “sport” and “physical exercise” and if there was not this attempt being made to create “sound revolutionary militants” by these means. For, alas!, all too often we see the sort of revolutionary consciousness spawned by football and fox-trots. At one point, for instance, the secretary of the “cell” was shown the door along with a member of the regional Executive Committee and muttering started that under the boss and the tsar, life was better … And this after ten years of revolution! … Is that not sad?

Today, the town is bedecked with red flags. Militia personnel are touring every home and giving orders: “on threat of a fine, get that flag up on the occasion of … the first agricultural loan.”

[Service de la Presse publié par le Secretariat de l’AIT no.8 (1928). Text in Berkman 129, image no 99. Translated from the French.]

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THE BEASTS

There is a small town, known as Minusinsk, in Southern Siberia, on the river Yenissei. To this place the G.P.U. has of late been sending political who are in bad health. In the colony of exiles there is the Anarchist Ritovsky who had tried to commit suicide while in the Upper Uralsk Polit-Isolator by cutting his veins. Ill treatment in prison had driven him to desperation, and when he was finally brought to Minusinsk he was in such weakened condition that he could hardly stand on his feet. The Bolshevik authorities of the “health resort” refused Ritovsky permission to remain in the city and he was therefore taken to a nearby village, a wild and deserted place where there is neither hospital nor any medical aid. Ritovsky asked that his wife, who had accompanied him to Minusinsk, though she was pregnant at the time, be permitted to remain to take care of him. The G.P.U. not only ignored the request, but even ordered Ritovsky’s wife exiled to the Tulunski District, hundreds of miles away, and that notwithstanding the woman’s condition and the fact that it was in the midst of a most severe winter. Another woman political, Khana Nudelman, who is almost blind and imperatively in need of medical treatment, was treated in almost the same way. Under armed guard she was taken to an isolated hamlet eighty miles from Minusinsk. The Chief of the local G.P.U., whose name is Ivanov and who is a Moscow appointee, boasts that in political matters he knows no “distinction of sex”.

The sick political know that they are faced with the fate of Beridze, a Georgian exile, who had been brought to Minusinsk suffering from internal injuries and sever hemorrhages as a result of an accident. He required immediate surgical attention, but the woman Communist in charge of the hospital declared
that she “so hated the enemies of the Soviet Government that she would not permit them in her institution”. Beridze was refused admission to the clinic and was placed in a cold, unheated corridor where he died within six days.

Not much more cheeful is the life of those exiles who are permitted, but the grace of the authorities, to remain in the city without being sent away to even more distant and forsaken places. Employment is out of the question, and they have to support themselves on the pittance allowed them, which amounts to six roubles and twenty-five kopeks per month (about three dollars). Even that is paid very irregularly and incompletely. Moreover, of late the exiles have been compelled to pay for medical attention.

But there is a group of politicals in Minusinsk which fares much better: it is the “ariostocracy” of exiles consisting of prominent Bolsheviks, of the Opposition, among whom are Sarkiss, Smilga and others. They live under incomparably more favourable conditions, receive thirty roubles monthly and are a class by themselves. Needless to say, they are friendly to the administration and keep aloof from the other politicals.

The Minusinsk colony has grown considerably in recent months. Among the exiles there are at present the Anarchists Mikhail Panfilov, Samuel Ruvinsky, Nikolas Belayaev, Otto Ritovsky, Aida Bassevich, and Nikolas Mukha. To them have now been added the Menshevik Pyatigorsky, brought from the Upper Uralsk Polit-Isolator; the Georgian Socialists Ossip Yemanidze and Elizabeth Balkvadze; the Social-Revolutionist Beresnev and the Zionisht-Socialists Iosif Novikov and Khana Nudelman. (Ibid).

[The Bulletin of the Relief Fund of the International Working Men’s Association for Anarchists and Anarcho-Syndicalists Imprisoned or Exiled in Russia”, December, 1928. Originally titled ‘From far away’. The Guillotine at work p. 578-80]

Dear Friends: I am glad of the chance to send you this, in the hope that it may reach you... In the Sverdlovsk prison the politicals are already in the second week of a hunger strike. It was declared in protest against the administration's new practice of placing the politicals in cells of the non-political, ordinary prisoners. Our people demand to be transferred to the political wing of the prison. Lately more repressive measures are being applied to the politicals under the guise of “reforms”. In the Uralsk Polit-Isolator the regime is getting all the time more severe. At every transfer there is always trouble with the authorities. At the “counting”, for instance, some of the officials indulge in abuse and brutal arbitrariness toward the politicals. ... In Tobolsk the “registration” is carried on by the warden himself who subjects the politicals to “examinations” and “hearings” that are inquisitorial in character and insultingly un-bearable. It has come so far that we live in constant dread of his very approach. ...

[The Bulletin of the Relief Fund of the International Working Men’s Association for Anarchists and Anarcho-Syndicalists Imprisoned or Exiled in Russia”, December, 1928. The Guillotine at work p. 583]
Dear Comrades… We feel that we must draw your attention to the very sad case of V. Postnikov and his family. During the past 3 years he was kept at Archangel and now he has been exiled to Yenisseisk (Central Siberia). Postnikov is a peasant and the sole support of the family which consists of his old mother, three small children between the ages of 4 and 8, and two young brothers 13 and 19 years old, the latter a consumptive. When Postnikov was only the first year in exile in Archangel they wrote to him from home that were entirely without means, could not pay the taxes, and that the old shanty was falling to pieces. Of course, Postnikov was powerless to help them. And now, after three years he is exiled again, and the people at home are on the verge of starvation. Even if they should sell everything the possess and every stitch of clothing on them, they could not pay a third part of the debts they have made... A desperate situation, and in Yenisseisk there is no chance for the exile to earn anything...


(Below are excerpts from several letters received by us from N., a comrade of long standing and activity in the movement. In 1912, when still a youth, N. left Russia to work as a sailor. He visited almost every maritime country in South America, as well as Portugal and other South European lands. A Revolutionary Syndicalist, he presently became the object of persecution by the authorities of Argentine, Brazil, Portugal. etc., from which countries he was deported, at various times. After fifteen years of that life, Comrade N. Finally decided to return to Russia, visit his parents, and find permanent work and rest. His letters from the “paradise of workers” breathe disappointments, despondency and despair).

June, 1928. ... No work yet. It seems impossible to get a job, and I have finally decided to go to Moscow. Will have to travel by foot….. Russia is large and maybe I shall be able to pick up some odd work on the road… There were meetings here of the unemployed and at one of them I also spoke. As a result I have already been “called on the carpet” five times. The G.P.U. always comes at night, when I am in bed… I fear all this will end badly, but I cannot dwell on this matter in letters – I am in a “proletarian” land...

July 1928. Four months here already, but I cannot find work. It is a “peculiar” situation: they will not permit me to work as long as I am not a member of the union; but they will not accept me as a member until I have a job and have stayed on it at least 72 days. That is the rule. How to solve this dilemma? … Unemployment is very great in this city. In a population of 40,000, 10,000 are unemployed. The first to receive work are those unemployed who are getting some aid from the government while they are idle,
but we who are “not members” get neither aid nor work. I have explained to them that I have been a member of a labor syndicate since 1914, but the authorities would not listen to it. Why? Because the syndicate to which I belong “is not a member of the Profintern”! (The Red Labor Union International). If I were an immigrant things might be better for me. But as I am a native Russian I enjoy full freedom to – starve. This is no mere phrase. It is quite literal... I have already sold what decent clothes I had. Walking about almost in rags now. I have to come think that I would be better off in prison in Portugal than in this “liberty”. My family is in a similar position. My father used to be a “melamed” (Jewish religious teacher), so of course he is now without work and is being supported by his brother. The latter, who is a man with a family earns only 48 roubles monthly (about 24 dollars), from which amount are deducted the payments into the union, the Party, for the aerial fleet, and other similar things...

August 1928. I returned from Kharkov today. How did I happen to be there? Well, I had been “visited” almost every day, and finally I was arrested and taken to Kharkov. There I was kept 20 days in jail and I was ordered to return home. Now I am compelled to every day at the offices of the G.P.U. They are still “investigating” the matter of my talk to the unemployed, and it looks as if things may turn out ill for me...

[The Bulletin of the Relief Fund of the International Working Men’s Association for Anarchists and Anarcho-Syndicalists Imprisoned or Exiled in Russia”, May, 1929. The Guillotine at work p. 583-4]
IN BOLSHEVIK PRISONS

(Related by a political who had spent considerable time in various Soviet prisons and who succeeded in coming abroad).

The two Moscow prisons in charge of the G.P.U. – the Lubianka and the Butirsky – are over crowded with politcials. They are compelled to sleep in fearfully congested quarters, the mattresses and bedding being veritable nests of vermin. The food is bad; the bread half-baked, mixed with indigestible ingredients. Occasionally there is a soup or stew consisting of frozen potatoes and decayed vegetables, with now and then some meat offal. New political arrivals are placed together with ordinary criminals, and it requires several weeks of energetic protest before they are transferred to the political wing of the prison.

There are numerous workers and peasants among the politcials, as well as scores of Communists of the Opposition, foreign and Russian. The most prominent of them are kept in strict isolation, while the others – those of the rank and file – are permitted certain work, such as cleaning up the cells, assisting in the kitchen, distributing the rations, and so forth. It is interesting to mention that the attitude of the prisoners to the new political element – the Communist Opposition – in no way differs from their treatment of other new arrivals. They are neither shunned nor discriminated against. And, as a matter of fact, the Communist prisoners are generally even more bitter and antagonistic to the authorities than the other politcials.

Twice every month prisoners are transferred from Moscow to the Solovietzki Islands and to Kem, in the far North. Their number is usually so great that there are never enough railroad cars on hand to hold them all. Then one witnesses a sight that has become common: with the butts of their guns the G.P.U. agents force the prisoners into the cars. The Kem concentration camp now has over 18,000 prisoners, while 27,000 are in the Solovietzki. Conditions in the Solovietzki are so fearful that it has been popularly christened the “red Sakhalin”, after the dreaded Sakhalin colony of Tzarist times.

Members of various political parties and movements are represented among the politcials: there are Socialists, Communists, Anarchists. A large percentage consists of workingmen condemned for participation in strikes and peasants involved in agrarian troubles. There are men convicted in the Shakhtin (Don Basin) trial, with a goodly sprinkling of Trotsky followers and foreign Communists. Recently the Solovietzki population has been increased by a new batch of politcials, among them the poet and author Alexander Yoroslavsky [Yaroslavsky]. Without trial he was condemned to three years soon after his return from abroad, where he had spent the last two years working as a common laborer. His wife, who had lost both legs in a railway accident, is following him to Kem, in order to be somewhere near her husband.

Among the political one notices particularly a numerous group of Chinese students. They are former pupils of the Moscow Oriental University, whose rector was Radek. They had believed his assurances
that the Soviet Government would never betray the cause of Communism in China. During the critical
days of the Chinese Revolution these students organized a street demonstration in Moscow: they
protested against the Kremlin intrigues in China and demanded that the revolution be aided. Mounted
Chekists broke up the demonstration, and the Chinese students were arrested. They have been in prison
ever since, deserted by everyone and no one apparently caring what becomes of them. The most
interesting point is that among these Chinese students is also the son of Chan-Kai-Chek, the young
Communist who about a year ago denounced his father as a traitor to the revolution and publicly
proclaimed Soviet Russia as his chosen fatherland. He was arrested as an opponent of the Comintern
policies in China.

Another group consists of 13 German Communists who had come to Russia to “help the first labor
republic to build Socialism”. They landed in Butirsky. Several of them were accused of “espionage in
favor of the international bourgeoisie” while others continue in prison without any known charges having
been made.

Foreign Communists must generally spend many months in prison before they succeed in getting in touch
with some diplomatic representative of their country who would enable them to leave Russia. A member
of those who finally secured their release and returned home relate that the agents of the G.P.U. practiced
the following trick upon them: The foreign prisoner is called to the office, where he is introduced to the
person allegedly representing the embassy of his country. He is given the opportunity to fill out a
questionnaire and the “representative” assures him that he may talk confidentially and entrust to him
messages to his relatives and friends. After the interview the prisoner is told that he will be released in a
few days. Months pass without results. When the foreign Communist finally gains his liberty – this time
actually by aid of his country’s embassy – he learns that he had entrusted the confidential message not to
a representative of his country but to an agent of the G.P.U. As a result of such infamy the foreign
Communists have of late refused to be “interviewed” by alleged “diplomats”. [typo: lines switched in
Guillotine]

Among the group of the Shakhtin prisoners the most tragic case is that of one of the chief witnesses
named Bashkin. Long imprisonment and the nerve-wrecking trial have unbalanced his mind. His
comrades in the case tell of the continuous nightly “pumping” that Bashkin and others underwent at the
hands of the G.P.U. in its attempts to force confessions out of them. Few, even the strongest men could
mentally survive the agonizing night hearings, and particularly the experience of having the death mask
placed over their heads, preparatory to being taken out to be shot. These were the Bolshevik third degree
methods: leading men out at night to execution, going through all the harrowing formalities and then, at
the last moment, returning them to their cells – only to have the performance repeated a few days later.
The death mask is the latest achievement of the G.P.U., now frequently practiced in its dungeons. It is not
necessary any more to blindfold the victim before his being shot, and – it is less disconcerting to shoot at
a mask than at the head of a living human…..
Polya Kurganskaya

We have just learned that on August 26 there died in Krasnaya Polyana our dear comrade Polya Kurganskaya, leaving two small children behind.

The deceased was a very active and staunch Anarchist who throughout her life had given her best energies to the services of our cause. In proletarian circles she was widely known and beloved for her extreme devotion and tireless efforts.

She did splendid work in the labor movement during the Revolution. In 1920 she was arrested by the Bolsheviks, as were also a large number of other comrades at the time. For the past nine years, her life was a continuous Golgotha; she was driven from prison to exile and back to prison again. She passed through the Solovki, served in the Upper Uralsk polit-isolator, was imprisoned in the most desolate parts of Siberia, and finally exiled in the Tula Province, where she died of heart failure.

The most remarkable trait of Polya Kurganskaya was her entire selfishlessness and unchanging loyalty to her cause and her comrades. Though for years dragging on a miserable existence amid the worst surroundings, compelled to witness the suffering of her two small children, never sufficiently clad or fed, she yet retained her idealism and revolutionary integrity. All the wiles and threats of her Bolshevik jailers could not break down her wonderful spirit. She continually busied herself to make the lot of her fellow-sufferers more bearable, even at the cost of her personal safety. Her courage and humanity were the inspiration of all who came in contact with her. Of her it may be truly said that she was a veritable incarnation of the spirit of the early Russian revolutionists who had consecrated their all in the service of human liberation.

S. F.

We publish below the last letter of our dead comrade, and we take this occasion to call the attention of our readers to the two small children left by Polya Kurganskaya in her Tula exile. Immediately upon learning of our comrade's death, the Relief Fund forwarded aid to her children, but more assistance is urgently needed. We hope that our friends will not delay in responding.

THE LAST LETTER OF POLYA KURGANSKAYA
(Dated August 18, 1929)
Dear S. [Senya]
It is already six weeks since I’ve heard from you and I am growing anxious about your silence. I hope nothing untoward has happened. Are you all well? Write soon, I beg you. I have received the 20 roubles you sent, but I must tell you that it is very hard for me to accept this aid, knowing how many others need it. By autumn I hope to be able to earn something with my sewing, if they will only let me work.

The children are feeling better, though my youngest, Natasha, is still coughing badly. My own health is not the best. I had to pawn my coat and shoes, but luckily the weather is warm now, so I can get along without those things. It is a hard life, but the worst of it is to see the little kiddies suffer. The rent eats everything up: 14 roubles a month for a dingy little room, but even at that it is considered cheap according to local conditions.

I had a letter from K---. He does not feel very well and has no work. If at all possible, send him some help: there are several others with him in the place.

My faith is strong that sooner or later these persecutions, will come to an end and then we shall take our place in the family of our European comrades. With our activity we shall then repay for the fraternal assistance which we have been receiving all these years of the “Socialist” heaven, By this faith and hope I live.

I embrace you all, my dear ones.

Your POLYA

(Ibid).

[The Bulletin of the Relief Fund of the International Working Men’s Association for Anarchists and Anarcho-Syndicalists Imprisoned or Exiled in Russia, November-December 1929. The Guillotine at work, p.589-91. See also French text in Flechine 89 (544-9) which has more text than that printed in the English Bulletin. In particular, ‘K.’ is ‘Nicolas’ie Nikolai. The original letters is in Flechine62, file nos. 83-7]
bien que séparée les uns des autres par des centaines et memes des milliers de kilometres nous vivons tous dans la meme conditions... N'attendez donc de nous autres rien de bon. Rien de nouveau, surtout!

Tout, absolument tout marche comme suparavant, sux temps de mos grand'peres et arriere-grand'peres.

Eh bien! Voici donc mes lamentations a moi:

Je suis un simple mortel. Avant las pricon et l'exil, je maniais l'outil a l'usine. Je lisais un peu, je poétisais aussi, et j'avais "des idees". C'est ce dernier defaut qui m'a perdu. Car, d'apres nos lois actuelles, avoir des idees est... prejudiciable a l'Etat. Et voila depuis 5 ans, je suis traine a travers des prisons et les lieux d'exil. J'si goiuté de tout en peu. Et puisque je n'ai pas "encore" renonce a mes idees, je continue de "voyager". Présentement, on m'expédie dans un petit trou qui porte un nom bizarre et qui se trouve quelque part tout pres de l'Océan arctique. C'est le dernier village habité du nord. J'ai essayé de protecter, sans resultat d'ailleurs. Je dois partir vers ce beau pays sans meme avoir des habits chauds. Or, le froid y atteint jusqu'a 60[degrees] et plus. La perspective n'est pas gaie, commes vous voyes. Depuis ces 5 ans, ma santé est ébranlée a un tel point que, l'homme sain et robuste que j'étais, je suis devenu maintenant un vieillard, faible et malade. Recement je me suis adressé a un medecin. Son diagnostic but bref et net: "C'est du rhumatisme aigu". Je me demande alors comment, diable, mon rhumatisme aigu" se fera-t-il aux 60[degrees] aigus"? Cedependent, je ne desespere pas. S'il le faut pour le bien de la Révolution, il faut savoir supporter tout...

"Quant au travail, il nous et [est?] absolument impossible d'en trouver dans ces parages. Certains vivant de la chasse, mais pour chasser il faut avoir un fusil. Meme s'il existe un travail quelconque, il n'est pas pour nous autres: on le confiera a n'importe qui, a des criminels, a des anciens bourgeois, a des hommes sans foi ni loi, mais pas a nous.

"Le pays ici ne compte pas comme lieu d'exil politique. Nous ne sommes la quem quelques hommes. Quant a toutes sortes de criminels, d'hommes perdu, de malheureaux et de miserables, ces parages en regorgent. On en voit partout, par groupes... Cela ne nous etonne plus. Question d'habitude!... Toutefois, un homme venu du dehors, en serait épouvanté. Vraiment, il faut etre des derniers sadistes privés de tout sentiment humain pour pouvoir pousser des hommes jusqu'a un tel etat!"

[English Translation by PS]

You are always on at me to speak of myself and in some detail. Which is no easy thing to do. A summary of our situation would of necessity prove nothing more than an endless litany of lamentations and would be a very sad affair .. What is the good of complaining? Is there anybody around to show an interest in our fate, after so many years of physical and moral suffering, suffering shrouded in silence in that “civilised” world of yours? What would come of it if it were to become known among you that thousands of exiles of every class and every stratum in society were suffering a slow agony somewhere on the far-off steppes of Siberia just because the purposes of a certain “fatherland” require it? Over there in your lands in the West is there anyone left who might be surprised by this? I have no doubt but that in all the
letters reaching you from this country of ours, you are forever reading about the same things: hunger, deprivation, disease, suffering, tortures, and so on. Which is, actually, only to be expected. For although we may be separated from one another by hundreds or indeed thousands of kilometres, we all have to contend with the same conditions … So expect no good news from us. And, above all, nothing new! Everything, absolutely everything proceeds as it did before, back in the days of our grandfathers and great-grandfathers!

Well, here comes my very own lamentation.

I am a mere mortal. Before I was imprisoned and banished, I brandished a tool in a factory. I read a little, dabbled a bit in poetry and had “notions”. It was this last shortcoming that was my undoing. For, under our present laws, having “notions” is … an offence against the State. And so, for the past 5 years, I have been trailed through the prisons and banishment places. I have sampled pretty much everything. And, since I have not “yet” abjured my notions, my “travels” continue. I have often been shipped off to some little backwater bearing some bizarre name, somewhere near the Arctic Ocean. The last inhabited northerly village. I have done my best to protest, but to no avail. Off to these splendid places I must go, with or without warm clothing. Now the cold thereabouts reaches -60° and below. As you can see, the outlook is not bright. Over these past 5 years my health has been broken so much that, from the healthy and sturdy figure that I once was, I have now been turned into an old man, weak and ailing. I visited a doctor recently. His diagnosis was brief and to the point: “Acute rheumatism.” So I wonder how the hell my “acute” rheumatism is going to fare at -60°. But I have not lost hope. If this is what it takes for the revolution to prosper, one has to learn how to endure it all …

As for work, we have absolutely no way of finding any hereabouts. A few people survive by hunting, but one cannot go hunting without a rifle. Even if there was any work to be come by, it is not for the likes of us: it is handed out to all comers, criminals included, to former bourgeois, to men of no conscience or no law, but not to us.

The countryside thereabouts is not counted as a place of banishment. There are only a few of us here, amid all sorts of criminals, lost souls, unfortunates and wretches, the place is teeming with them. They are to be seen everywhere .. in gangs .. Not that this comes as any surprise to us, this being run-of-the-mill … But someone newly arrived from the outside world would be aghast at it. One really would have to be the last word in sadism and bereft of any human sentiment to be able to push men to such extremes …

Thanks for the money. It comes to me as a double relief, for, on receipt of your assistance, I somewhat forget my status as a “man without rights” and my loneliness here in this forsaken place. At present, I am on my own here, with no other exiles around. The inhabitants of my village are out and out savages. With an extremely low level of education. Conversation with them on any topic is out of the question. On every side there is dense, virgin forest … I venture there sometimes, albeit not without some trepidation, searching for wild strawberries. This is merely a pastime for me for there are no other fruits to be had!
My health is so-so. Last year I never expected that I would see my time in exile through. Now I reckon I may even survive it, since I have only spat up blood once in a long time, adding to my confidence … When it comes right down to it, everything depends on the decisions made by “the centre”. It would be hard for me to say whether I am merely due a “change of scenery” or might be allowed to return to central Russia, with the exception of certain towns … Our fate lies in the hands of the “Almighties”!

[French version from duplicated Relief Fund bulletin, with Polya Kurganskaya as the lead article. See Flechine 89, file nos. 547-8. English version http://www.katesharpleylibrary.net/rr4zx6]

... Yesterday they transferred some of our comrades to other regions, along the rivers Petchora and Izhma. Among them is also Kumanov, who has recently completed his term in the Solovki. I am afraid they are facing great suffering: they have a long and hard road to travel. Their journey lies through Archangel, by way of the rivers Vitchehorga and Northern Dvina; then across the White Sea and over the Boryantsev Sea to the Petchora River. They’ll have to travel for weeks, through primitive and difficult roads.

Life here is a pretty dark existence, a continuous adaptation to a thousand petty irritations and humiliations… The bread ration is 300 grammes, which is entirely inadequate. Neither bread or flour is to be bought here, at any price. Butter and eggs so high that they are out of our reach. Sugar is also very scarce and is rationed. Our food consists almost entirely of potatoes, cereals and milk. We have to devise all kinds of combinations in order to secure a bit of variety in what we eat. It is especially hard on the comrades with small children.

We are all sending you our hearty thanks for the books and magazines. The photo of our dear old Comrade Faure has made us happy. What a fine face he has! What has become of the Encyclopedia promised us? We have not received it yet. (Reference to the Anarchist Encyclopedia, published by Sebastien Faure, copies of which have since been forwarded to this correspondent, but returned to us by the Postal authorities of Russia – Ed.) Our greetings to you all.

[The Bulletin of the Relief Fund of the International Working Men’s Association for Anarchists and Anarchist-Syndicalists Imprisoned or Exiled in Russia”, November-December 1929]
Dear Friends, I have been wondering why you failed to receive several letters I had sent you in August. Your last letter I received, but the package of literature you sent me has never reached me. Of course, one understands, and the thoughts that one thinks are apt to sadden the most cheerful … Lately, especially, the censors have become more active, and the “loss” of letters is an added factor in isolating the political even more than before. I could say more about this, but what’s the use of waving the red rag? Certain species are maddened by it… Our time is rich in events – various important problems are facing us. We, exiles in a far-away spot, would fain be struggling in the stream, but instead were are doomed to be passive observers. Not for us the joy of active participation in the creative work… We get only the echoes – much is kept from us, and the little that reaches us is masked and disfigured through the prism of the press… The old slogan “Light from the East” seems to have failed. Our hope lies in the workers of the West. But of this I cannot write to you – even thoughts are not free here – but what would we not give to be able to talk things over with our friends! We greet you all.

[The Bulletin of the Relief Fund of the International Working Men’s Association for Anarchists and Anarcho-Syndicalists Imprisoned or Exiled in Russia”, November-December 1929]

… Our material situation is very bad. We are without work and there is little hope of securing any. During the recent elections to the local Soviet the authorities published a list of the “disfranchised”; that is, of those who are deprived of the right to vote. Of course, the political exiles head the list. That is nothing new, and formerly we paid no attention to it, for we knew how to make our “voice” heard without any special sanction. But now things are different, because being disfranchised also means being thrown out of the union; in other words, deprivation of a chance to secure employment. Formerly the G.P.U. said to us “Get work if you can – we don’t object.” It was, of course, difficult to find something to do, particularly in the far-away and deserted villages to which our people are usually exiled. Still, there was, with a few exceptions, no definite prohibition against work. But now being on the list of the disfranchised also means deprivation of the right to work. That is a very serious matter for us; it practically means being doomed to starvation. Already those of us who had been fortunate to earn a little by securing some job, have been dismissed and have thus lost their last source of support…

[The Bulletin of the Relief Fund of the International Working Men’s Association for Anarchists and Anarcho-Syndicalists Imprisoned or Exiled in Russia”, November-December 1929]
I want to thank you for the money you sent me. It is a double help, because the thought of friends makes one forget the distance and the loneliness. I am all alone in this hamlet – there are no other exiles here. The natives are quite uncivilised and on a very low level of evolution. There is literally no one to talk to. All around primitive woods, dark and forbidding. Not without fear do I go into the forest to gather some eatable berries. It is not for mere pleasure, but out of necessity. Fruit does not drown here.

My health is so-so. Last year I did not believe I could survive my exile term; but now I hope I may … During the past weeks I have had only one hemorrhage from my lungs, and this comparatively improved condition make me very hopeful. Now everything depends on “the center.” Will they order a “change of climate,” I wonder. There is no telling what is expecting [awaiting] me at the expiration of this exile: permission to settle in some designated place or new exile… Our fate is in the hands of the “almighty!”

[The Bulletin of the Relief Fund of the International Working Men’s Association for Anarchists and Anarcho-Syndicalists Imprisoned or Exiled in Russia”, November-December 1929]
It is hard, very hard, to exist here. We are buried from the rest of the world. Even mail from relatives seldom reaches us. They are far away … It is six years since I saw my parents. My comrades cannot write to me, you understand the reason. Lack of touch with the living makes life the harder. Papers reach us sometimes, two or three months later, even in the summer. What the winter is you can imagine. We seem to be forgotten …

[The Bulletin of the Relief Fund of the International Workingmen’s Association for Anarchists and Anarcho-Syndicalists Imprisoned or Exiled in Russia. November-December 1930.]

We are subjected to constant changes, particularly in the matter of food supply, and always the change is for the worse. It is difficult to understand why the new economic “norms” are called “class provisioning”. Recently the following rations have been established: workers and Soviet employees receive 300 grammes of bread per day, and once a month 1 1/8 kilogr. of fish, 400 gr. cereals and 250 gr. sugar. Once in 3 months they also receive 500 gr. of soap. The unemployed workers receive 200 gr. bread per day and 300 gr. cereals per month, and nothing more of anything else. We are forced, of course, to resort to the methods of the first years of the Revolution; that is, to barter things with the peasants. They demand clothing, underwear, tools, but where are we to get such things? Can we part with our last suit of clothes in this climate? Our comrade K. recently traded his only overcoat for some food. He was actually starving, and he could not stand it any more. Now he is in the greatest danger of freezing to death, for the frosts here are indescribable. If you lie down without the warmest covering, you are lost. The natives are used to this climate, and besides they are provided with suitable furs, but we have nothing. To fall ill means death, for there is no medical aid whatever.

[The Bulletin of the Relief Fund of the International Workingmen’s Association for Anarchists and Anarcho-Syndicalists Imprisoned or Exiled in Russia. November-December 1930.]

Those of our friends who have completed their time in the “polit-isolators” and are sent to exile are mostly in broken-down condition. It often happens that the local medical commission, if there is any, prescribes “surgical treatment”, which simply means a major operation. Thus my chum S. has been ordered to undergo two operations, one on his bowels, the other on his ears. But these things are expensive, and our people penniless. They have to think first of all of their daily bread. And some are exiled to such distant points that even securing a piece of bread, not to speak of medical aid, keeps them
going all the time. The fate of our old comrade K. is particularly sad. He has been sent to the “devil’s corner”, as we say here. A letter from him takes about 5 months to reach us. For several months he failed to get the usual allowance, which is 6 roubles and 25 kopeck (about three dollars). With absolutely no opportunity to earn anything by work, he found himself literally doomed to starvation. In his last letter he writes: “I am getting weaker every day. To walk even a few steps tires me so that I flop on the ground. It is not that I am sick, it is simply systematic under-nourishment, I don’t know what is going to happen. May be the allowance will come with the next boat, but will my strength hold out till then. …”

[The Bulletin of the Relief Fund of the International Workingmen’s Association for Anarchists and Anarcho-Syndicalists Imprisoned or Exiled in Russia. November-December 1930.]

… For a long time I have not had either fish, meat or fruit. But even what is to be bought is not for me. Products are sold only to the natives and the Soviet employees and in a very limited quantity at that. I being a political cannot procure anything I need. For the past two months have been suffering from tsinga (scurvy), which is our fearful scourge here, resulting from a lack of fats and vegetables. The local medical authorities have been trying to get me to the next city for treatment, and at last the needed permission from the higher authorities arrived. But that permission was indirectly a refusal. They “permitted” me to travel to the city, but at my own expense! Receiving 6 and a quarter roubles per month to live on, such “permission” is the veriest irony, for I haven’t a penny to my name … My friend M. is luckier than I, fortunately. Being nearer to the large city, he has at last succeeded in securing some temporary job. He works 9 hours a day, and very hard, receiving 70 roubles per month, 25% of which is withheld for the support of various Soviet under-takings, such as the air fleet, etc. Life is very dear in this place and 70 roubles do not go far. Still my friend, as he writes me, is infinitely better off than in his previous “home”. He says that he feels now in the seventh heaven as compared with his years in Savvatyeva (Solovky)… It will interest you to learn that our friend M. has been transferred to a new place of exile. He is on his etape now, but his final destination is not known. He came here from Solovsky a very sick man, but it was wonderful to see his moral strength and courageous spirit.

[The Bulletin of the Relief Fund of the International Workingmen’s Association for Anarchists and Anarcho-Syndicalists Imprisoned or Exiled in Russia. November-December 1930.]

It was a great joy for us to receive your letters and money, you realise that for us here it is not only a financial but also a vital moral help. We are now living through a most difficult time. The G.P.U. is continually designing new methods to make our existence unbearable. Now they systematically persecute
us by demanding that we petition the “center” for mercy by recanting and renouncing our ideas and signing statements (prepared by them) of loyalty to the powers that be. Some have done so, unable any longer to support the misery and torture. But there are others, whose spirit remains strong in spite of everything, and who refuse to be false to themselves or betray their ideals … I regret I cannot write you better news, but what is the use of hiding our situation from you? Most of us here you would hardly recognise; we are the mere shadows of the men you had known, almost all invalids. If you happened to see me now you would not know me. It is only with a stout stick that I can walk at all. My feet have been partly paralysed since 1927, and now my right hand is also very bad. That is why you will find it hard to read my handwriting, The worst of it is, I need my right hand particularly, as I am a carpenter, and how could I work without it? …

[The Bulletin of the Relief Fund of the International Workingmen’s Association for Anarchists and Anarcho-Syndicalists Imprisoned or Exiled in Russia. November-December 1930.]

I am out of the Solovky at last and I hasten to send you a few lines. First of all I want to thank you for the steady help we have been receiving from you, to thank you in the name of all our people in that frozen hell. Every time we received money from you, I wrote an acknowledgment. But all my letters were returned to me. … Many comrades still remain on the Solovetsky Island, including A. How they fare you know yourself, and A. is particularly in bad health, but he keeps encouraging others by his cheerful spirit. I have received what is called minus Six, which means that six of the larger cities are forbidden me to live in. You know how hard it is to find work in the smaller towns, but I have been lucky to get a job. It is only temporary, working as a longshoreman and carrying heavy weights. Yet I am happy to get even that. My great worry is my family consisting of my wife and three children. My wife is working, but earning very little. She gets 40 roubles a month, from which 15 must be paid for rent, not counting fuel for heating. Then there are the “dues” that are held out of her wages for Government purposes. Very little remains, and I myself earn just hardly enough for my own keep. I send you the greetings from all our people up on the Island.

[The Bulletin of the Relief Fund of the International Workingmen’s Association for Anarchists and Anarcho-Syndicalists Imprisoned or Exiled in Russia. November-December 1930.]
… I have just arrived by etape to my place of exile in Narim. We were a whole month on the way. A woman and not very strong, I fell ill on the road. The military convoy left me and together with another sick political I was taken in charge by the authorities of the little village we were passing. Every seven or eight versts we were turned over to new authorities, and in every village we were told that no horses could be gotten to continue our journey. The animals were indeed pitiful to look at, their ribs almost sticking out of their sides, half-dead from their hard field work and badly nourished. In every village the drivers feared that the poor horses could not last till the next place of change. These were the “collective” farms, and everywhere hunger and want. On the route we received only potatoes, because the peasants could sell us neither bread nor milk. They had none themselves. Now I am here in the Narim, and the remembrance of the sights I witnessed on the road, terrible and heart-rending, makes me forget my own fate … We regret to inform you that conditions in the polit-isolator of Verchne [Verkhne] Uralsk is growing worse all the time. Recently the politicals there were punished by cold water being turned on them, and it was still severe winter there … Our friend M. writes that he can be congratulated: he has completed his 10th year in Soviet prisons! …

[The Bulletin of the Relief Fund of the International Workingmen’s Association for Anarchists and Anarcho-Syndicalists Imprisoned or Exiled in Russia. November-December 1930.]

CONDITIONS IN RUSSIA

(From letters of our correspondents)

“Since the past several years I have had an opportunity to get acquainted with the life of the peasantry, particularly in Siberia, The impressions I received are very depressing. The older population and some of the young generation still go regularly to church; but most of the youngsters spend their time in the clubs. The latter, however, by no means serve as educational centers. There is little of reading or study there. They are places for the boys and girls to get acquainted, play and carouse. On church holidays the entire village is drunk. That is the local mode of celebrating. When they are sober, they live in constant expectancy. Expectancy of what? You may think it incredible, yet it is the sad fact that they actually and deeply believe in the speedy coming of the Anti-Christ! Men and women almost every day come to me to ask questions about his coming, because they feel sure that the “Intelligents” as they call us, are well posted on air the situation and that they merely keep the “dark people” in ignorance about it. No argument prevails with them. “What”, they tell us, “was there ever a time before when our country our rich Siberia, lacked, bread or had no cattle? It’s the work of the Anti-Christ who is driving us into the collectives, and we are all going to die of hunger, and then the Evil One himself will come”. The coming
of the Anti-Christ is rather doubtful, but that there is no bread and no cattle is the holy truth. The kolkhosy (collective farms) are growing by means of compelling the peasants to join them and to turn over to them whatever cattle and farm utensils they still possess. It must be hard for the people abroad to visualise the situation here, but those who know the servile submissiveness of the mouzhik know also that you can “weave a rope of his hide”, as the saying is here. However, in some places one comes upon a growing spirit of rebellion, but that refers to districts more West. There have been even considerable uprisings there. But in the more Eastern parts of Siberia they have been laid low by the ruthless hand. Incredible and crushing the extent to which it has been done.

E.”

Bulletin of the Relief Fund Nov-Dec 1930

Here in Central Russia, centralisation has almost reached its highest point, and the results are fearful. The hand of the dictator is everywhere, and his eyes, a thousand of them, are on every single inhabitant. As to the politicals sent to these parts as exiles, they never become free. After they have served their prison sentences, they receive what is virtually a “yellow ticket”, from which there is no escape as long as they live.

K. has been working, but the other day they “took him off”. As a former exile he is expelled from the profsoyuz (trade union), though he had been a member of it for 12 years. And once out of the union, he has been kicked out of work as a lishenet, or one deprived of political and other rights. As if that were not enough, they are dispossessing him of his home now. He and his family will have to leave the city, for there is no place for them here. But in the next place – the “eyes” of the dictator are everywhere, and what is to become of our friend? He is marked a lishenet and that means the same as “kulak”, and his fate is settled. Even his children are made victims. His eldest daughter has recently been driven out of the university, though she was already in her last year there. Simply because her father is a lishenet. For three years in the university she was considered the daughter of a proletarian, and then suddenly, on the fourth year, she gets the stamp of “kulak”, because her father is not in the good graces of the powers on high.

Of many such cases I could write to you if paper were not so scarce. Especially characteristic is the fate of our comrade C. As you know, he is of the old guard, a revolutionist with a rich past, including prison and exile in the time of the Romanovs. Moreover, he is the son and grandson of a workingman, and he himself has worked since early childhood. In short, he is what is called here a hereditary, 100 percent proletarian. Not long ago he was arrested without known cause and exiled to the Far North. His wife and
two children remained without a kopeika [kopeck] and without their supporter. The servile profsoyuz, of which C. was a member and repeatedly elected him to its executive committee by the workers, excluded him as a “political”. Officially he thus became a lishenetz. Then vengeance had to be visited also upon his family. His daughter A. who is only 5 years old, was thrown out of the “second” school, as a child of a lishenetz!

V.”

[The Bulletin of the Relief Fund of the International Workingmen’s Association for Anarchists and Anarcho-Syndicalists Imprisoned or Exiled in Russia. November-December 1930.]

“This time, dear friends, I want to communicate to you the latest news. Some of it you have probably read in your own newspapers, but we wonder in what shape the real facts of our life reach you. One must live here in order to get an adequate picture. I should like to write to you only facts, giving names, dates and detail. But you understand that the names must be left out, for it would mean subjecting those named to new persecution. I must only write of the general situation, but first I want to warn you that you will not understand the real meaning of what I say unless you keep in mind the kind of existence we led in the days of the civil war, of military communism and the great famine.

Not long ago I had the opportunity to make a rather extensive journey through the country. I have lived all my life in Russia and I have seen many tragic sights, but there is always something new to shock one. On every railroad station I have come across entirely new signs; they are notices of the “feldyager” department! It is the good old Tsarist “corps” revived again, in a new and very striking uniform. Their mission is to personally carry and deliver “messages of special importance” to Soviet and Party officials, messages which the Government cannot entrust even to the post! And that after 12 years of the “proletarian” regime. It made me think of

how little the authorities feel safe with the people or have any confidence in them, or even in their own employees. At the same time there has been introduced a new system into the long-ago revived “Black Cabinet” of Tsarist notoriety. Incidentally, the “Cabinet” employs as specialists a great number of the men that served in the same capacity under the Romanov regime; they are censorship “spetzes”. Formerly the Bolshevik “black cabinet” made copies of “suspicious” letters before sending them on to their destination. But now thousands of letters simply disappear in the “cabinet”, including even registered mail. Woe to him who is bold enough to present his receipt for the letter at the Post and demand the missing mail! …
Some other innovations, called “reforms”, will seem to you incredible in a “Socialist” Republic. At every printing establishment there are stationed armed guards, and each employee is searched on leaving the place. Even Communists are not excepted, The printers’ union does not dare to protest against such humiliation of their members. No wonder, since our Unions have been turned into obedient mouthpieces of the Government. Worse yet, the executive committees of the unions are actually a branch of the G.P.U. (political police). By order of the latter any union member is immediately excluded from his organisation, even if the entire union membership should protest against it. But they do not protest, they dare not. Many of our comrades and other old and tried revolutionists have in that manner been excluded from their unions and thereby become lishentsy, deprived of all rights, even of employment, which is equivalent to a sentence to death by starvation. On the other hand, speculators enjoy special privileges. They need but pass one year in prison to acquire the right of joining the union. Queer situation, is it not?

The Government has declared that in prison the offender (excepting, as always, politicals) passes through a certain “propagandistic education”, and thus becomes “class conscious”. Hence his restoration to proletarian rights. You will smile when I tell you that it frequently happens now that some speculator or “kulak” tries to get into prison for a short term, as for instance for failure to pay taxes, (which is punished by just one year’s imprisonment), so that upon the expiration of his time he is considered emancipated from his former “social descent” and becomes eligible to the labor union.

It is most interesting to listen to the sentiments of the average workingman on the existing conditions. Of course he will not talk to you about such matters unless you have succeeded in gaining his confidence. But if he feels that it is not dangerous to speak and that he may be frank, you will get the essence of what may be considered public opinion. He will tell you that for the past year his earnings have actually been decreased, in spite of the paper statistics of the Labor Department. He will show you how a goodly percentage of his wages is being taken from him, against his will, for things in which he has no interest and to which he is even frequently opposed; also that he is compelled to make special contributions for Government and Party purposes. But if he gives a little aid to a friend or comrade who has been “taken off” the union, or who does not happen to be in the good graces of the authorities, he will be threatened by discharge from work, with all the dire consequences that follow such a calamity.

The private trader and the speculator will not trust you with their opinion, but they will occasionally tell you – an anecdote! These Anecdotes have of late been multiplying and nothing, could describe conditions more characteristically and pointedly, in humor or satire, than the anecdotes that are circulating, privately, of course. They are a veritable free press, of a kind. However, not entirely free. Many a man gets arrested for some story told in the train or tramway, and then he is faced with a charge of “counter-revolution”. And this, as you well know, is no light matter in our country. The worst ordinary criminal can count on his sentence being shortened by pardon or amnesty. But if you have been arrested for an incautious remark or some anecdote reflecting on conditions, then you are a political and as such deprived of the benefit of pardon or amnesty. Unless – you become a podavanets.
A podavanets is one who has appealed for mercy to the G.P.U. after having solemnly recanted his political faith and promised, in writing, never to entertain or to express any opinions except those officially approved by the Communist Party and the Government. There are many podavantsy. Some of them become such because they cannot stand prison or exile. They become traitors to themselves just to save their lives. Others again bring this sacrifice on account of their loved ones, their families and near of kin. The Bolsheviks merely use this element for their own purposes and then leave them out in the cold. They get the crumbs from the official table, but they are never permitted to partake of the real repast. Others again become podavantsy purely out of material reasons, in order to make a career. They seldom succeed, however, for the Bolsheviks know that such people cannot be trusted. They can be corrupted, however, and the authorities seem to be satisfied with that … It is pitiful to meet this element. They can hardly look you in the eye, and they dare not complain. They are mostly “have beens”, played out spiritually as well as physically. The places of these people are quickly taken in prison by scores of others, mostly young persons, politicals of the new generation, whom we, “the old guard”, do not know. Many of them call themselves Anarchists, and one wonders in what manner they have learned of our ideas. For you must consider that there is no Anarchist literature in Russia, none that the average person can get hold of. And there are but few organisations or groups of our comrades, and all underground, at that. Often this new element is merely a rebellious contingent, whom the G.P.U. simply designates as Anarchists. In prison, fortunately, some of them actually become enlightened Anarchists. But there are those of the younger set that come to prison as actual Anarchists, with a very clear and intelligent conception of our ideals. Thus at a certain prison transfer point I came upon a young man who belonged to a student organisation of Anarchists-Syndicalists. He seemed a man of an entirely new type that is growing in Russia. Not an Anarchist by temperament, but one whom actual conditions and an independent and critical mind have led to new conceptions of life and society. With two other comrades of the same type I met in the city of T., and I was particularly glad to observe that their militant spirit was not the determining factor in their Anarchist viewpoint. On the contrary, their entire argumentation showed that the social conditions of dictatorship have developed in them a clear and logical tendency to seek for other, more practical and rational ways of making and living the Revolution.

[The Bulletin of the Relief Fund of the International Workingmen’s Association for Anarchists and Anarcho-Syndicalists Imprisoned or Exiled in Russia. November-December 1930.]

…I am glad to inform you, dear comrades, that in spite of illness and physical weakness due to my long imprisonment and exile, I am still in a comparatively cheerful mood. I have gone through a good deal during the last six years, but I do not permit persecution to cause me to despair.
On the contrary, I am trying to keep mentally close to you, my far-away friends, and this helps me to bring me nearer to you. Your unchanging devotion and help serve to give me courage, and I am happy at the stronger comradeship and friendship that continues to bind us, widely separated by distance as we are. I have just had a letter from Ch. He informs me that he received a letter from you and also 20 Roubles. I was glad to hear this, because I know in what fearful conditions he has to live. Accept my thanks, dear comrades, in the name of all of us, for the help and encouragement you give us. We live in the hope, everything notwithstanding, that some day we may meet.

Your N.

[Solovky, July 1930.]

[The Bulletin of the Relief Fund of the International Working Men’s Association for Anarchists and Anarcho-Syndicalists Imprisoned or Exiled in Russia, April, 1931. Typed up from TS of Guillotine Maksimov 18, June 6, File no. 7201. ‘Solovky, July 1930’ from Typescript Flechine 88, file no.55 ]

Dear Comrades - I was lying down on my bunk and listening to the sad song of the wind which is blowing a bit hard. I fancied I could hear it bring me the voices of those outside who live in the world of liberty… I am a poor fisherman, for that is the way I have to find my sustenance here. And often I confess that life is far from pleasant or cheerful. Often, very often, I think of you and my thoughts wander to the fields of your activity. I envy you that opportunity.

I can’t help admitting that my situation is bad. It is lasting 7 years already. I am only 24 years old and I feel the urge of life and of being active. How happy I would be to share the struggle that you are making for a better world! …

Maybe a little sketch of my life will interest you. I am the son of a peasant of the Tula province. Already when I was a child my parents had to leave their native village to seek a livelihood somewhere else. They went to Moscow. We lived in miserable conditions and until I was 8 years old, the only air I breathed was that of a little kitchen. For my mother was a cook and we had to spend all day at her work. I still remember the pancakes she used to make for me, and she had to do it secretly, so that the master for whom she worked should not know about it…

A short time before the war we moved to a little village in the province of Tula. There I went to school, and I loved to study so much that soon I was nicknamed “the student”. I had a veritable passion for books, and it was that passion that made my life very different from that of the other boys. I just lived in my books.

Father was a heavy drinker and our lot was very hard. As I look back upon those years I can see what a terrible martyrdom the life of my mother was … In 1915 I finished the village school and I stood very high on the list of able pupils. I was eager to continue my studies, but it was the revolution that prevented
it. After the revolution I succeeded in entering the agricultural school which was 25 verts distant from my home.

In 1921 I joined the Communist Youth and I was full of enthusiasm and zeal for liberty and the new life the next year, together with a companion, I left the agricultural school in the hope of getting admission to the Workers’ College in Moscow. But we had no luck, we arrived too late and we were told that no more pupils were being accepted. My companion entered the navigation school for undersea craft. I was interested in the social sciences, but I could not get an opportunity to follow my studies. I was instead sent to the Second Infantry School in Moscow, which trains officers for the Red Army. … It took months of protest and resistance before I was able to return to my village again.

In 1923 I came back to Moscow and I hoped that this time I would be able to enter some college to continue the studies that I was eager for. But again I had no luck. Without influence or protection there was no chance for me. No schools were open to me. And so I was compelled to work as a clerk. … Meanwhile my ideas developed away from the Bolsheviki and I withdrew from the Communist Youth. Finally I left it entirely in 1924. I did not know any anarchists and I had never read their literature, but my ideas apparently were growing towards greater libertarianism. In March 1924, I wrote to the Communist Youth group, to explain the reasons why I resigned my membership. Two months later I was arrested. They charged me with having offended against article 72 of the Penal Code, which forbids the possession and spreading of “anti-Soviet literature”. But I had no such literature at all. They had confiscated documents in my house, which consisted of a pamphlet of the Social Democratic Labor Party and some papers I had written myself analysing my thoughts and feelings. I was not a Social Democrat; in fact I was not even their sympathiser. Nor was I an Anarchist. I was simply a student, and a searcher for truth.

They deported me for 3 years to the Ural and they placed me in the city of Tobolsk. It was there that I met for the first time in my life some Anarchists. I began to read their literature and acquaint myself with their ideas. They appealed to me, and after much study, in 1925, I declared myself a Communist Anarchist.

Then of course there began special persecution against me. The G.P.U. (the political police) started to make trouble and presently they ordered me transferred to Obdorsk. There, new conflicts began, and I was put in prison for 10 months. In the spring of next year, in 1926, they transferred me to Tobolsk, where I was put in strict confinement. The conditions were terrible and I soon fell ill.

What followed was a long chain of persecution and imprisonment. In January 1927, I was again arrested in Tobolsk and in June they condemned me to 3 years in the Solovetsky Islands, in the far North, near the frozen White Sea. …

Life in Solovky was a veritable hell. It ruined my formerly strong constitution. I contracted Typhus there, from which I was never recovered. On Feb, 23, 1930, when my time was up there, I was exiled for 3 years to Siberia. I was suffering from consumption by then, and a complication of other diseases, such as heart trouble and throat affection [infection], all of which I had contracted in the Solovky.
Half-dead I embarked on May 20, for the distant and deserted place of my exile in M… I only had 3 rubles as my entire possession. In M. I met comrade Z. and we stayed together. He was a splendid man and we became very close friends. But unfortunately he was soon transferred to Archangel and I was left alone again, without my dear friend and fellow sufferer. … M. is a very grey and primitive place. There is even no telegraph there, and mail comes only once a week. Not seldom the beasts from the jungle, hungry for food, come to forage into the village and attack the cows and other domestic animals, few as they are about…. The people live by hunting and fishing. There is almost no agriculture and life is very hard. But there are many exiles here and over 50 politicals. Most of them are dachnaks, Armenian Socialists, Georgian Social Democrats and so on. With much trouble I at last secured a little place to live in. It is a fearful hole, and yet I have to pay for it 4 rubles and a half a month. There are so many bugs that I have to wait until sunrise before I can safely lie down.…

The matter of food is a hard problem. We rarely can get a little milk and butter, meat or eggs are entirely out of the question. Even fish is difficult to procure. We live mostly on potatoes. The peasants are compelled to deliver to the Government most of their produce and so very little is left for local consumption. The people here refuse to accept money as it has no value to them. With money you can buy only rice powder but nothing else. Everything is scarce, and last month I could get potatoes even only 3 or 4 times. The peasants demand goods in exchange for their foodstuffs. Tobacco, shoes and such things they will take for products but no money.

The situation of the exile is terrible and none of them get sufficient nourishment. But the politicals are in somewhat better condition than the others, because they can at least get certain products at prices fixed by the State. But where get the money? The support the Government is supposed to send us comes very rarely and often remains unpaid altogether. We are permitted only manual labor, but there is little chance to find it. Moreover, my physical condition is such that it is almost impossible for me to work …

Your L.

[By L. = Naumov, according to Maksimov 18/7223. *The Bulletin of the Relief Fund of the International Working Men’s Association for Anarchists and Anarcho-Syndicalists Imprisoned or Exiled in Russia*, April 1931. The original of this is Flechine 66, file nos. 161-5. Date: 12 August 1930. It appears that ‘M’ is actually Kargasok. And is ‘Z’ Kirill Sadov ?]

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From a letter of the same comrade

… Your letters have made me very happy. They mean to me a great deal : like a waft of fresh air to a man in a stifling atmosphere …

My health has grown worse of late. The ravages of consumption are continuing and the conditions here, both material and otherwise, are not of a character to aid my recovery. … Your money came in the most needy time. I was entirely without means, and the bad weather was keeping me in bed. I am running a
very high temperature and I fear that I cannot last very much longer … But don’t think that I am growing pessimistic. It is merely that I am looking facts straight in the face. But I still keep up my interest in life, though it is limited to books. I read a great deal; in fact, I devour all reading matter that I can get…

I am with you till the end. Greetings to all our comrades.

Your L.

[By L. = Naumov, according to Maksimov18\7223. The Bulletin of the Relief Fund of the International Working Men’s Association for Anarchists and Anarcho-Syndicalists Imprisoned or Exiled in Russia, April 1931. ]
...Excuse me for not writing you before, though I had your address. I was in no condition to write after I left the *polit-isolator* [(solitary imprisonment of politicals)]. The truth is, even now I feel the effects of that experience....

I have been intending to write to Maximoff a long time ago, whom I knew by accident so to speak. It was late in 1921 that I returned from Murmansk, while he and his comrades were being deported to Berlin. I am sure that he will not remember me. It is a long time ago, and we had met only casually. I was then only a little over 20 years old and I had just finished my studies in the Tolmatchev Academy of Leningrad. Political economy and philosophy were the main subjects there, and of course the greatest stress was laid on Marx's *Capital*. And naturally we also had to study his dialectics. Some of the students there were soon showing a heretical inclination, leaning more toward the direction of Proudhon, Bakunin and Kropotkin. The instructors strictly discouraged all such tendencies, and even Plekhanov, the old Socialist thinker, was proscribed. The authorities frowned upon everyone who showed some inclination to independent thought, and there were many cases of friction as a result. Still, it was the happiest time of my life....

Before I went to the Academy I lived in Eastern Russia, and when I left the Academy I went to Central Ukraine. I stayed in Alexandrovsk, Militopolsk and other cities, where I had to carry on the struggle for existence. I worked in a brick-making factory, and then I studied Latin and entered a drug-store. But my health was bad, as I am naturally of weak constitution, and so I had to give up physical labor. Later, I returned to Leningrad and for no known reason I was soon ordered deported for three years. They sent me to Beresov, [in the Ural,] where I stayed from 1924 to 1927. At the expiration of my sentence I was given "minus six" and sent to the city of Perm, where I was again arrested in 1928. ... Thus began a long calvary from prison to prison. I was kept in different political dungeons, and this year they sent me from the Verkhne-Uralsk prison into exile here. It is due to my consumptive condition that they exiled me to this region. ... But it is no use speaking of my bad condition. Some of our comrades are even worse off. A. has had an operation, but it has only made his condition worse. We are very anxious about him. N. is also a very sick man, and he suffers even more than the others because he is a vegetarian. Life is very sad....

The place I am in is rather small, but fortunately there is a library, most of the books are works of Marx and Lenin, but it is noticeable that few of the population ever demand this. The natives prefer the old novels, it seems. Some of them have told me that they cannot read the new literature; as it is hard for them to understand it. Among the exiles there are a number of Trotzky followers and they try to get works of Leon in the library. There are many different views among them on the tendencies of their leader, and in general, there are among the politicals all shades of opinion and party. But otherwise, life in this place is very grey and monotonous. All of us live in the hope of a coming future that will be different and better than the present. ...
We do not permit ourselves to despair.

S.

[Guillotine at work. p. 611-12. Attributed to The Bulletin of the Relief Fund of the International Working Men’s Association for Anarchists and Anarcho-Syndicalists Imprisoned or Exiled in Russia, April, 1932

Maximoff is only mentioned in the Guillotine at work. In the Bulletin it says ‘M.’—see the typescript of Bulletin (Maksimov 18, June 6, file no. 7357. This is actually from the April 1931 Bulletin (printed in The tragic procession). Copy in Maksimov files lacks front page, hence his error? Guillotine version shows a number of editorial amendments.]

… Don’t wonder, dear comrades, that I write so seldom to you. Our life here leaves us whether [neither] time or energy for correspondence. Most of the day is spent “holding down the bread line”. It is not only for bread that we have to stand hours before we get it, if at all. For everything that you need, you must get into line, and there are always hundreds ahead of you, no matter how early you come …

You can hardly imagine how this takes the life and energy out of you, not to speak of the wasted time. Not only the days are spent that way; even parts of the night and from early dawn. And you can understand how hard this is on those who are sick. Unfortunately I am one of them. I cannot even get time enough to rest in the day time or get enough sleep at night. But if we don’t mean to starve to death, we have to keep it up…

R.

[The Bulletin of the Relief Fund of the International Workingmen’s Association for Anarchists and Anarcho-Syndicalists Imprisoned or Exiled in Russia, April 1931]

I want to thank you heartily for the money you sent. We don’t know what we would do without your help… In this far-away exile we are hardly able to keep body and soul together, and some of us are very ill; some are so weak from lack of nourishment that they can hardly walk at all. It is just as bad in regard to clothes, the climate is severe, but we have no proper underwear, no solid shoes, and I suffer fearfully from rheumatism. My companion and I hope somehow to survive until the end of our term. Maybe then we can return to Russia proper and maybe conditions will improve for us there. Of course we know how the people suffer there also for the necessities, but at least we will be nearer to those who are dear to us. Here, existence is becoming daily more unbearable…

G. is about to go now with my last pair of trousers to exchange them for potatoes. The peasants have very little left from their crop, because of the high percentage they have to turn over to the State. They refuse to sell for money and so we must give them our very last possessions. There is little that we get to eat here. No milk whatever, almost never any meat, few vegetables. So that potatoes are the main food, and if
we can’t get even that…. Well, you will understand such a calamity. So we have eaten up all our wardrobe, literally speaking. S. *(Ibid)*.

*[Guillotine at work p. 612-13. Attributed to The Bulletin of the Relief Fund of the International Working Men’s Association for Anarchists and Anarcho-Syndicalists Imprisoned or Exiled in Russia, April, 1932. See the typescript of Bulletin (Maksimov 18, June 6, file no. 7358. This is actually from the April 1931 Bulletin (printed in The tragic procession).]*

We try to follow from here what is happening in the world, especially in the world of the proletarian. Of course, it is not easy to keep informed in our exile. But some journals and old magazines reach us now and then, and you can imagine how we read them from cover to cover and try to think out what is going on in the world at large… Unfortunately, it seems to us that the European workers are not accomplishing the things one might wish. Of course it is hard to judge from here, yet our impression from what we read is that there is disorganization and strife where there should be harmony and solidarity…. But your letters bring us great cheer and hope also. We can see that news of the real events in labor ranks does not reach us… We want to thank you for the ray of sunshine that your mail always brings us… How we would like to be with you, to take part in the great struggle outside and share our views and opinions with you… There is so much to talk over, so much to ask and learn. … It is therefore that we write you little of our personal life, it is too banal a subject to talk about when there are such great and grave problems facing the world. They demand solution, and we are always eager to have you write us on these matters… From here it is hard to say much about it, as you understand. But rest assured that your letters are the main inspiration of our drab existence…

T.

*[Guillotine at work p. 613. Attributed to The Bulletin of the Relief Fund of the International Working Men’s Association for Anarchists and Anarcho-Syndicalists Imprisoned or Exiled in Russia, April, 1932. See the typescript of Bulletin (Maksimov 18, June 6, file no. 7358. This is actually from the April 1931 Bulletin (printed in The tragic procession).]*

… I hasten to inform you of the very serious illness of our comrade B. her third year of exile may prove fatal. She is suffering from consumption of the lung and throat. To aggravate the situation, she has recently fallen victim to malaria, which is the common scourge of the region of her exile. Naturally she cannot work any more. Before her illness became so serious she kept at work, and she even managed to help other exiles. Now she is herself in urgent need of aid. We have sent her some assistance, but that was
very little and it will not last our sick comrade for any length of time. We count on you, friends – it is our only hope. The physician has “advised” a change of climate, but the G.P.U. has ignored the matter. If she will not be permitted to move from this climate very soon, her doom will be sealed.

S., whose husband is in exile, is also in miserable condition. Seven weeks already she is in the hospital, in fearful circumstances. Her legs have apparently lost the power of motion. She is constantly growing weaker and the doctors say that she will remain a cripple for life unless she is given the benefit of the necessary medical attention. For that purpose she should be sent to another place, but there are no means to pay the expenses involved. Poor S. realises her terrible situation. She is only 30 years of age and she is hungry for life. She has two children, the younger one 2 years old. Their father, an exile, is also suffering from consumption. The thought of what will become of the children worries their mother to desperation.

Excuse this sad letter, but conditions here are even much worse than we can tell you. We know that you friends live at a time of a terrible crisis, we know that you also have a hard struggle, and yet we hope...

We fully understand your eagerness to know what is happening in this part of the world, and of course we also know that you cannot learn much about it from our press. One must live here in order fully to realise the spirit and character of our existence. Our newspapers can help you but a little in that. We, who live here, daily see a great difference between official figures and statistics and the actual reality. When reading our newspapers you must always bear two things in mind: first, the writers must not only write but even see things with official eyes, so that their reports have very little in common with the true situation; and secondly, the true character of our every-day life finds no expression on the pages of the official publications; there is no place for it in the general structure of the official LIE.

... The process of abolishing the Kulak (rich peasant) has caught in its net also the seredniak (the peasant of medium means, slightly above the poorest economically). The whole policy of the system is to force the peasants to enter the kolkhosi (collective farms). Much that is happening here reminds one of the system applied in the beginning of the XIX. century to deprive the peasants of their land. Of course, the historic conditions were different then, but the result is about the same... The village, on the whole, can only offer passive resistance, and our press even claims that the kulak’s resistance is active.

There are a few model kolkhosi, but the great majority of them are the worst failures, because of the inimical attitude of the peasantry. But the main question which is of prime interest to you, as to us, is whether the present conditions, based as they are on governmental coercion, can last. We can assure you that we have never before felt so convinced of the truth of our views as at the present moment... We have a great advantage over you, of course, for we can see with our eyes how a better social system cannot be built...

Our daily existence has become much worse of late. Living, keeping from starvation, is the most difficult problem... All Soviet employees and even a goodly part of the workers have been deprived of their rations. All my co-workers in the institution where I am employed have lost their rations. Our entire establishment receives only 6 rations (each ration being 300 grammes of bread), and these are divided among the lowest grade of employees whose monthly wage is not over 40 rubles (about 20 dollars). But
what even they receive is so insufficient to exist that they are compelled to buy products at the market, from speculators. You will better understand what it means, when I tell you that a pound of flour (about 40 pounds) costs 50 rubles. These exorbitant prices are partly due to the fact that this year’s harvest was very bad in our part of the country… Besides, neither sugar nor tea is to be had at all. As to industrial products, they practically don’t exist for us – we have not seen any within a year… To say it briefly, one belonging to the “not privileged” cannot exist in our city. Yet, I – an exile – am really privileged, for none of my co-workers in the institution receives any rations, while I receive one from the G.P.U., being an exile, as I have said. Yet, how hard it is for me to live! …

As concerns news, there is little that is cheerful. Recently there was a very tragic happening in our city: a woman with her two small children jumped off a bridge into the river and committed suicide. Investigation showed that she was one of the peasant women deprived of everything she had possessed – it was a case of actual starvation… Such things are no isolated cases here. These village satraps, half idiots, their heads swelled by their absolute authority, are incredibly irresponsible and visit their hatred or displeasure upon defenceless victims… The press keeps silent about such matters, particularly if they cast a shadow upon the official “lines” of activity. The fruits of absolute power and dictatorship are poverty and misery…

Sometimes I even fear to give you details of our life – they might seem incredible to you, so terrible they are … Nothing exists outside of the “party”, and it word is Draconian law. The trade Unions have no say: they merely carry out the dictates of the party. Strikes are forbidden. But men driven to desperation now and then resort to striking, as was recently the case in P. The Union officials threatened the strikers with deprivation of their union cards, which is equal to a sentence of starvation. The “leader” of the strikers was imprisoned… Nothing is left of the former real labor organizations that sought to defend the interests of the workers. Now they have become a means of silencing the dissatisfaction of labor…

You are aware, of course, that industry with us is now “continuous”; that is, the factories and mills, as everything else, work without cessation, Sunday having been abolished. The workers and employees have every 5th day free, but the work itself goes on, the “free” days being spread over the entire week. Strange to say, this change has not proven an improvement in our condition. Rather the contrary, before the new system we had at least one day in the week that we could use for rest or recreation. Everything was closed, and so willy-nilly you could rest. But now it is different. It is no exaggeration to say that most of us have no rest at all now, for our “free” days are now spent in running to the various institutions where products are issued, and standing in line …

Of course, there are exceptions. – Some of the youths who live with their parents, or the students who live in the communal institutions and receive everything ready – they can have a real rest on their “free” days. But that does not refer to one of us. To eke out a living, for which at least 200 rubles a month must be earned, we have to hold several jobs. I am employed as an economist, and my time is so occupied with work, with sessions by day and in the evenings, that to speak of a “rest” day is simply ridiculous. It is true that the “center” has issued a number of orders about securing the responsible workers a day of rest, but
the conditions of reality are stronger than orders from Moscow… and when I return late in the evening home, there is work for me there, “home work”, for my companion has a little child and there is too much for her to do. It is almost unbelievable, but for months neither of us has had enough sleep. We are both tired out and weakened, and we look like corpses. We wonder under what conditions you are living. Has the crisis in Germany and France been exaggerated by our press or are conditions really as described? We understand that there is a great lack in Europe of rice, flour and food for children. In the city of M. we had to pay from 3 to 4 rubles for a pound of flour, but here it is not to be bought at all. If only possible I wish you would send us a few pounds of rice and flour.

You will readily understand how intensely interested we are in the happenings in Spain. Unfortunately, the information we glean from our press is now only very meagre: it is obviously false… We wish we could learn the true situation there. Some 60 years ago, the failure of the Spanish revolutionists gave Engels a chance to write a malicious satire upon them, and that is the stuff the young Soviet generation is being fed today…

[The Bulletin of the Relief Fund of the International Workingmen’s Association for Anarchists and Anarcho-Syndicalists Imprisoned or Exiled in Russia, November 1931. Final 3 paragraphs from Letter of Aron Baron to Senya Fleshin, Voronezh, July 29, 1931. See Aron Baron to Senya Fleshin July 29 1931.docx]

… Our life is quite gay; if you believe the Soviet papers. Bread is cheap, 8 rubles, soap, there is none, other products are to come “soon”. One cannot help being reminded of the Shevtchenko’s “Dream”, in which the Tsar squeezes the fat ones, the fat ones squeeze the lean ones, the lean squeeze the hungry, and the hungry cry “hurrah!, hurrah for the Tsar, our Little Father, hurrah!”

Our entire existence can be characterised as general training on the road to “socialism”. Formerly the peasant’s yards were filled with such anti-socialist elements as cows, pigs and sheep, but that is not being tolerated now. The guarantee of the coming bright future is to be seen in the shelves filled with stacks of books –

“Empty belly, bleeding feet, hungry thou and wan, –

Slave on Stalin’s five year plan”,

that’s the enthusiastic motto of our days. As the poet once said, “this moan we call song…” Strange to say, in spite of all misery and hunger, popular wit still finds expression, and the songs, stories and witticisms born of the people are numerous and not rarely very clever and extremely humorous. The spirit of competition has grown to dimensions of a mob psychosis: passion[s] have been roused and every one is “in races” … But the most general means of distraction are lice – the sole thing the government does not need for export, a numerous tribe due to the condition of soaplessness …
We have received the money you sent. Unfortunately just now we cannot use it where we are … In this [space] place, there is nothing to be bought. It is no rare thing for us to go to bed hungry like a wolf that has in vain sought all night for a bite… How we live? Mostly by prayers… As the local saying goes, “we hope for the best and prepare for the worst”… We have here a new kind of institution of which you have probably not yet heard. It is the “factory-kitchen”, and there we go every day. It feeds from 3 to 6 thousand persons daily, and how! We never see any meat, but now and then there is horse meat. “Sit down to eat – the horses are ready”, the local wits jeer… To add to these pleasures there is also a great house-crisis in this growing city. Comrade V. and I have been rather lucky to secure what we have; we live in a corridor, sleep in the same bed and have to heat the place at our own expense, which costs us 25 rubles. But our neighbours are far worse off. Next door, in a room of 10 ½ cubic metres there live 7 persons! Such are the “characteristic essentials” of our life.

Morally we live in the new spirit of Spain. Our thought are there, and our hopes… We are glad to know that those “friends” who are trying to get everything into their hands in order to create a “socialistic State” that is the worst expression of capitalist absolutism – we are glad to know that they have little influence in Spain, in spite of the busheld of Moscow gold sent over to corrupt the revolution. If the organized labor elements have their purpose clearly before their eyes and march directly towards it, those “friends” will be no danger to success. … We have been greatly inspired by the thought that our comrades far away had not forgotten their imprisoned and exiled brothers, as is evidenced by the fine resolution passed by the Congress of the I.W.M.A. – we fell it is [illegible] our best and greatest prize.

The papers and magazine you sent us – how terrible it is that we are condemned to read the Paris Communist Humanité, almost none of the other papers reaching us. And that sheet is filled with lies about the revolution in Spain…. Incidentally, the insinuations published by the Humanité against our comrade F. Ghezzi, are simply outrageous. Ghezzi is at present working in Moscow: he is employed as a locksmith in the factory “Amo”. The statement that Ghezzi has gone back on his ideas is a miserable lie to discredit our good comrade.
[From a village hospital]

I take advantage of my “free” day to send you a few lines. But don’t misunderstand my saying “free” day, for I really have no days off. I am serving as a sister in this hospital, and I am the only trained nurse here. There is no one to take my place even after twelve or fourteen hours of work. It is my duty to receive the sick brought in by ambulances, to take care of the sickroom and also to visit patients outside the hospital. It often happens that I have to remain on duty 48 hours in succession. There is no overtime pay – that has been abolished. But of course, I don’t work for pay, for that is insignificant. I love my profession and because of that I am able to do the best I can for the poor unfortunates that need my aid.

There are only five persons employed in the entire hospital; the doctor, his assistants and myself. We receive about 100 patients daily who are brought by our ambulances from the entire district, for various kind of treatment, of shorter or longer duration. In the hospital itself we have a permanent population of 40 patients who are very seriously ill. 75% of them are typhoid patients.

The tragedy of the situation is that the medical aid we can give is insignificant compared to the needs of the population. Moreover what good are doctors and nurses when the material condition of the workers and peasants are such that death is a relief for them? The peasant mothers actually wish for the death of their babies and little children – they simply cannot afford to have them. Frequently mothers beg the nurses to “relieve” them of their new-born baby, and there have been cases where mothers have refused to feed their babies, preferring them to die.

The existing economic and social conditions are such to drive these peasants to desperation. Hunger and the fear of tomorrow tend to kill even mother’s love. Add to it the ruthless attitude of the authorities and the cruel methods in daily practice, and you will have an approximate idea of what our life is like here…

[The Bulletin of the Relief Fund of the International Working Men’s Association for Anarchists and Anarcho-Syndicalists Imprisoned or Exiled in Russia, April, 1932). Guillotine at work p.607-8 Title and 75% from MS of Guillotine at work, (Maksimov18, file 7349. Another MS (Maksimov18, file 7195) gives author as NN (no name?). Women with initials NN from Memorial list are all anarcho-mystics: NAZAROVA Nadezhda Nikanorovna ; NIKITINA Nina Alexandrovna ; NOTGAFT Nadezhda Nikolayevna (nee Avenarius NN)]

From a hospital

(The following excerpts are from the letters of a young comrade, 26 years of age, formerly a member of the Communist Party; for resigning his membership he was arrested, nine years ago, and ever since he has been imprisoned in various places, including the Solovietsky Islands. In prison he fell victim to a
number of diseases, and now he is in a dying condition in a Siberian hospital where he has been exiled for the second time.)

December 1931. I am still in hospital and I have no more hope of getting well. I am rotting away with diseases that have been neglected for a long time. Besides consumption of the lungs I am also suffering from tuberculosis of the nasal bones. I don’t know the complete diagnosis but they had intended to operate on me and then it was decided that I am not strong enough to survive it. I have stomach trouble and inflammation of the kidneys… Still, I have some energy left yet and I would rather get out of this place and work. But where could I secure employment? Even if I could earn enough to exist on, how would I procure medicine and medical treatment? That would be out of question. That is why I remain in the hospital, and keep to my bunk. Here at least I get some sort of attention, and that delays a bit the progress of my diseases and keeps me alive… Of course, I know I won’t be able to bear this for much longer. If you my friends could aid me a little, it would mean so much to me. A little money or package of nourishing food. I am hungry most of the time, and we get very little here.

[Naumoff]

[The Bulletin of the Relief Fund of the International Working Men’s Association for Anarchists and Anarcho-Syndicalists Imprisoned or Exiled in Russia, April, 1932. Author from TS of Guillotine, Maksimov 18, June 6 file nos 7195-6]

February, 1932.

Yesterday I received the package you sent. Dear comrades, you can imagine what joy it brought me. I am only sorry that I cannot make use of the sugar. I am not permitted to use it. But it is alright, I can trade it on the market for butter or cream. My health is unfortunately not improving. During the last month things have become worse. Of late my temperature is very high every evening and I feel feverish. At times I feel full of life and energy but there are also sad and heavy moments. No wonder, dear friends, I am still young and I want to live. It is oppressing to lie in a hospital bunk when you know that life outside demands activity, that still remains to be done the work to which I have devoted the years of my youth.

[Naumoff.]

[The Bulletin of the Relief Fund of the International Working Men’s Association for Anarchists and Anarcho-Syndicalists Imprisoned or Exiled in Russia, April, 1932. Author from TS of Guillotine, Maksimov 18, June 6 file no. 7196]

[From a letter of Comrade M., a locksmith, now in exile in the far North]
A little about our new life here. Our every moment, our every thought almost, is being watched, and there is no telling when or by whom you may be denounced. One has the need of exchanging his feelings and views with his fellow-men, but we live under such abnormal conditions, that there is no chance for any of our people to get together, to spend an hour socially, to exchange opinions or to consult on matters of vital importance in our lives. And when you walk into the street, the sights are almost unbearable. The people are hungry, miserable, oppressed. Everyone seems to be afraid of his very shadow. The newspapers with their endless misrepresentation of the actual situation and obvious lies turn your stomach. It is impossible to read them when you know the truth. On the market the prices for necessaries are exorbitant. A pound of butter, for instance, costs 15 roubles. Meat comes to about the same price.

Where should one get such money? In the so-called cooperatives you can get 600 grams of bread a day and two pounds of sugar per month, and that is all. These are NOT workers’ cooperatives, they are branches of the government distribution centers. There is neither butter nor fats, nor tobacco nor cigarettes. In short, the most necessary things for physical existence are lacking, and you are expected to live on “enthusiasm” for the “great plans”. That “enthusiasm” is based purely on oppression. You can imagine what our lives – both our physical and spiritual existence – is like. I can tell you from experience that state capitalism is the very worst enemy of the people! It kills both body and soul.

M.

I cannot write you much now because our friend Naumov is critically ill. He suffers from consumption, but the conditions are such that very little can be done for him. He needs quiet and nourishing food, and that is just the things we cannot have here. A bit of milk and some horse-meat is all that we can procure, at best… I myself have also lost a good deal of weight during the last six months. The climate here in the North and the physical deprivation are beginning to tell on both of us. I am afraid that this new term of three years exile will be the end of us.

For two months I have been without employment. The authorities have prevented my taking a position in my special line, and other work cannot be secured. There are but few Government institutions here, but now and then they need a mechanic, a position for which I am well trained. But such is life here…

P.S.
I know it is awful my comrades, to write you such sad letters, but what can we do? We cannot lie to you. We write seldom, and then we cannot help telling you the truth about the conditions under which we live…. Our room is cold, unheated. It’s winter time and you know what that means, in this climate… Today I stood nearly two hours in line to get some bread, and I was lucky at that, because some days it takes much longer…. An epidemic of black pox and typhus has broken out in our district. We had to get preventative injections – my children and I – and now our arms are all swollen and it is hard to do any work….

I cannot write more. The room is dark. Electric lights have been promised, but not before May…

B.

[The Bulletin of the Relief Fund of the International Working Men’s Association for Anarchists and Anarcho-Syndicalists Imprisoned or Exiled in Russia, April, 1932). Guillotine at work p.609]

It was a miracle that I actually received the book you sent. And how happy I was! When I opened it, it was in German, which unfortunately I can’t read. But there is a comrade here who reads that language, so I gave him the book, asked him to read it and tell me the contents. Alas, before he could finish reading it he took sick – some horse meat that had been issued to him was evidently not of good quality. At any rate, he died before he could tell me anything about the book… The poor fellow, it appears now, really died from undernourishment. His stomach had become too weak to stand a horse meat diet. And yet, we are glad even when we can hold a piece of any kind of meat, wherever it comes from… We have all been saddened by the death of our friend. He was a fine fellow, of a generous and noble nature. He had been driven from prison to exile during many years…

L.F.

[The Bulletin of the Relief Fund of the International Working Men’s Association for Anarchists and Anarcho-Syndicalists Imprisoned or Exiled in Russia, April, 1932). Guillotine at work p.609. Initialled ‘S.’ in Maksimov18, file 7351. ‘L.F.’ added by hand to MS of Guillotine at work, (Maksimov18, file 7199]
……We are not surprised that you cannot understand the relation of Marxism-Leninism to the science of photography – we confess, we also cannot see the least connection between those matters. But we have learned not to dig too deeply into the mysteries of official rules and orders and attitudes….. The “spirit” of Marxism-Leninism is now being introduced into mathematics, astronomy, architecture and other similar fields of historic materialism. How can we, dark people, pretend to understand these Marx-Lenin mysteries? Nor, we are sure, will you, friends, grasp these supernatural conceptions.

Let us therefore turn to more concrete matters. We live here a disordered, not to say disorderly, life. A great deal of time is spent running about from place to place to secure something which is substantial for the stomach and which, at the same time, is within reach of our income. As a rule, there are no fundamental products: I mean such things as meat, fats, sugar, but of candy and face powder there is no lack. It is hard to get bread or flour, but you may procure cake. But the prices of all these things are sky high. We have been refused the opportunity to get our dinner at public eating house; that, together with poor health, has served to bankrupt our private exchequer.

Regarding foodstuffs, the situation here is as follows: besides the “commercial” stores there are also cooperatives; some of the latter are “open”, the others “closed” to the average citizen. It is impossible to give a general description of the cooperatives, because there are a great variety of them, all differing in their methods, supplies etc., each social group, and even every institution within such a group, has its own cooperative with its own supplies. We are working in government institutions, yet in spite of that we belong to the group known as the “deprived ones”. A very large group, indeed, consisting of persons of the variegated professions and trades, of different political attitude and social standing. This group is deprived of many rights. Thus we are allowed to buy at “set prices” only flour, sugar, and a few similar things in the most microscopic doses. To procure anything else, such as clothing, shoes and so on, one must have a cooperative card or membership, or be a member of a trade union. But that is forbidden to us.

As a result of this, we are practically compelled to buy everything in the open market at the most incredibly exorbitant prices. Of course we possess no such financial means. Moreover, in the “open” market the products are of very bad quality and mostly second hand stuff, first bought at the cooperatives and then resold at a high price upon the market.

Under these conditions the vaunted “high wages” are the veriest irony. For even the highest nominal wage cannot purchase on the open market even the most fundamental necessaries of existence…

B.

[The Bulletin of the Relief Fund of the International Working Men’s Association for Anarchists and Anarcho-Syndicalists Imprisoned or Exiled in Russia, April, 1932. Guillotine at work p.610-11. Italic for ‘within’ from Maksimov 18, files 7352, 7200.]
ALEXANDER NAUMOV

He was 26 years old when he died. But he seems to have lived longer than 26 years.... And he went through a whole lot more than most people of his age. Yet he was not enabled to live in the very real sense... To work, struggle, create, to live the well-rounded existence of a young fighter, idealist and revolutionist - alas - that was denied him.

For he was snatched away while only a stripling, who was only groping his way; for it was in prison only, where he had met people whose way of thinking was so near to him, that he came to see his way clear.... And how intensely he regretted that he had not known all that! How strongly he wished that he had the opportunity to live the life of a man who has found himself after having wandered long in the dark. That realization came to him now that he came to feel with every fiber of his emaciated body that he would not last long, that he was sinking from day to day, that neither his indomitable will, nor his passionate desire to live, neither his youth nor his ardent blood - nothing would halt the approaching end....

Naumov died. ... A young, steadfast, devoted comrade died, one whose life was devoted to our ideas with his soul and body - he died from tuberculosis which he had contracted during his exile to the Solovky Islands. And the only thing I have to remember him by is a postal card sent from the clinic, with the address written by him, while the notification itself was already pinned [penned] by someone else: ...

"Died April 18 in Tomsk, in the clinic."

That is what one of the exiled comrades writes us about Naumov.

We here, abroad, received the same kind of postal card: the address shows his handwriting and on the reverse side - a notification of his death.... And now I have before me his letters written to his friends abroad during the last two years of his life.

There are only a few of them - but what letters! ... Every line breathes such youthful ardor, such simple and winning sincerity! In reading those letters one forgets that the author is a doomed man, that the dried-up flower to be put on the grave of the Communards - was sent by one who himself, a month later, was to sink into the grave....

"Deeply agitated" - he writes in that letter - "I viewed the snapshot of the wall of Communards which you sent me recently. Space and. ... prevent me from carrying out my ardent wish: to bow reverently before the ashes of those who sacrificed their lives for Freedom. Nothing, however, will prevent my heart from beating in unison with the hearts of the children and grandchildren of the Communards, nothing will prevent me from loving with all my heart the great Truth of the Communards and hate their executioners, and no one will be able to shake my faith in the near triumph, of this truth....

....I am inserting here two modest little flowers which grew up here upon the Russian land, upon the land swept with the blood of the Russian workers and peasants.... Place those flowers upon the blood-soaked grave of the Communards.... The day is drawing near when the blood of the Russian workers and of the French Communards will blossom forth into the gorgeous flower of freedom and Commune...."
He writes simply, unaffectedly and with reserve. Of himself, of his brief life he writes reluctantly: he had
to be asked several times before he had sent in a brief story of his life; told in a matter of fact manner,
giving only a dry record of events.

He is the son of a peasant from the province of Tula. His father was an inveterate drunkard. "In my young
days," he writes, "my parents were driven by their poverty to move to Moscow." There his mother
worked as a cook and her only son "until eight years of age breathed the heavy air of the kitchen." Then
the family went back to the village and the young Naumov entered the local school. His passion for
reading earned him the nickname "the learned one." For five years after his graduation from the local
country school the young lad was deprived of the chance to study. In 1920 he entered the "agricultural
technicum." In 1921 he joined the Communist cell of the school: "This joining was an impulsive and not
a conscious act on my part." In 1922 "he left the technicum, aiming to enter the Rabfac (college prep
schools for workers) and through the latter the university (social science faculty)." The Komsomol
awakened within me a deep interest toward social sciences, which brought about a more conscious
reaction toward life and the gradual breaking away from the Komsomol and its ideas."

"I did not have much luck with the Rabfac - I was too late for it. I drifted into the second training school
for infantry officers. ... It was with difficulty that I bore those two months of barrack life.... In 1923 I
began clerking in one of the Moscow offices. I drifted further and further away from the Komsomol.
Although ignorant of Anarchism and lacking any contacts with Anarchists, I was constantly reprimanded
for my ‘Anarchist deviations.' Whence those deviations came to me - I do not know.

"In March 1924 I withdrew my membership card from the Komsomol, having submitted a written
declaration to that effect. In May of the same year I was arrested, and charged with ‘keeping and
spreading of anti-Soviet literature’ which they found on me, and also my writings in which I attempted to
get my bearings in the chaos of ideas and impressions overwhelming me at that time.

“But I was not a Menshevik, nor did I even sympathize with the Mensheviks. Nor was I an Anarchist. I
was just a seeker, groping my way through.

"I was exiled for three years to Ural region. In the city of Tobolsk I had my first chance to meet
Anarchists and obtain Anarchist literature from them. I plunged into the study of the latter and in 1925 I
came to feel myself organically linked up with the doctrine of Anarchism-Communism. In the same year
as a result of a tiff which I had with the G.: P. U. authorities I was transferred to Oborsk. There, another
conflict took place which landed me in prison for ten months. In the spring of 1926 I was transferred to
the Tobolsk prison. Altogether this year of prison told heavily upon my mental and physical state.

"In January 1927 I was arrested in Tobolsk, and in July of the same year I was banned for three years to
the Solovky islands.

"After having served my term in Solovky I was exiled to Siberia for additional three years. I left Solovky
on February 1930, already stricken with pulmonary tuberculosis, throat ailment and many other ailments
- all of which became aggravated as a result of a typhus contracted in 1930.
"On May 20, 1930, I landed upon the shores of Karga; I was ragged, half alive and only had 3 roubles and 40 kopeks in my pocket ($1.20). And then the trials and tribulations of the Siberian exile began. The room - a veritable bed-bug breeder.... One could fall asleep only at five o'clock in the morning. It was even worse with food. During the two and a half months that I spent in Kargarsk I ate potatoes only three or four times, and as to butter, milk, meat, eggs - I forgot how they looked...."

He did little complaining, but he could not altogether hide the real situation. "The material and spiritual conditions of life," he wrote during that period, "are conducive towards the progressive development of tuberculosis. I am carried away very often in my thoughts to your active life and I feel deeply pained that I cannot take part in the struggle which needs people so badly. Every line that I receive from you, comrades, is like a breath of fresh air for one that is being stifled...."

Toward the end of May, Naumov was taken away to the hospital in Tomsk. The disease was rapidly destroying his organism. "On the whole," he confessed at that time, "I am a first-rate invalid.... But this is only bodily so - I still feel buoyant in spirit. ..." He even wanted to sign out of the hospital, being eager to obtain work, But in vain! ... The disease has done its work. On April 18 Naumov breathed his last.... That is the entire "life story!" And what is so unique about it? - the reader may ask not without justification perhaps. Who really wants that story about an anonymous youth whose fate seems to differ so little from the fate of many others like him?

And who will believe that story? Who, among the "revolutionists" abroad, among those who are vociferous about equality and freedom, who will believe that "in the first and only socialist country of the world" young and self-denying revolutionists, workers and peasants are doomed only because they refuse to let themselves be indoctrinated and because they make an attempt to think their own thoughts?

Who will believe that among the hundreds and thousands of such "heterodox" people, who now rot away in the prisons and exile places of Soviet Russia, there is not one who could be indicted - even by the Soviet court, which lacks any guarantees of fair trial - on charges of a criminal nature?

Who will believe that people who are sentenced for a number of years to hard prison labor or exile by a mere administrative "prikaze" (order) of the G. P. U. can easily save themselves all those horrible tortures just by signing a small piece of paper stating that they have retracted their convictions?

Who will believe that it is because of this firmness of conviction, the refusal to traffic with their conscience that the best fighters for freedom are doomed in "The land of Socialism?"

Who among the tourists and "workers' delegations" making their yearly pilgrimage to the Holy Mecca will believe it?

Whoever among them took the trouble of looking into the political prisons and of talking to the political prisoners, who are the only group of Soviet citizens who speak their minds freely, fearless of consequences?

Who among those "delegates," instead of regarding the visit to Russia as a "joy ride" along the officially mapped out itinerary, set himself the aim to see things for himself, to get away to the far off, forsaken
corners of Ural, Siberia, Turkestan, all those places of exile and to find out even sketchily, but from first hand, how those people live and why they were punished by the "workers' and peasants' government?" And if they wish to do so but are prevented by the all-seeing eye of the G. P. U., what keeps them from raising their voice of protest upon their return from Soviet Russia? What accounts for the almost universal "conspiracy of silence" on this matter?

[The Bulletin of the Relief Fund of the International Working Men's Association for Anarchists and Anarcho-Syndicalists Imprisoned or Exiled in Russia, No. 26, November 1932. The Guillotine at work, p.602-7. Typescript of this in in Maksimov18, file nos. 7228-33. The ‘two modest little flowers’ may be in letter Flechine 66, file nos. 133-6, written Parabel 07/03/1931
NB, rewritten from autobiographical material, see letter starting “I was lying down on my bunk and listening to the sad song of the wind” and the following one starting “Your letters have made me very happy”.]

1. Some “changes” are taking place in our exile life. Their purpose is not clear yet, but the authorities are collecting us into certain places of exile. It looks as if the powers that be have decided to concentrate the exiles according to their party affiliations. This new system apparently aims to make it easier for the G.P.U. to keep an eye on us. But there is a very obvious other result to be attained. We are being herded in small and distant villages, where there is no chance for us to secure any kind of employment and where no rations are being given us. What this means you can easily imagine...

[The Bulletin of the Relief Fund of the International Working Men's Association for Anarchists and Anarcho-Syndicalists Imprisoned or Exiled in Russia, January, 1933.]

2. I have already spent two months in this god-forsaken little town. Our life is so hard here that it is difficult even to gather up energy enough to write a letter to you. During the last 6 weeks our friend A. has been trying to get some work to do, and during all that time the two of us had to exist on 300 grammes of bread per day. We have already sold everything saleable, even some pieces of clothing that we need so badly ourselves in this fearful climate...

At last A. found work. He is a skilled locksmith, but of course he could not get a job in his trade. He had to become a clerk and he receives 175 roubles a month. Beside bread he gets no products, and even one person cannot exist on the salary he earns. Products can be bought in the town in the free market, but you would not believe what prices are charged. The center (Moscow) is not in the least interested in enabling
at least its own officials to exist. They have apparently forgotten to supply even the government employees with rations.

In worse condition yet is our friend M. His health is broken and they keep throwing him from one place of exile into another. Now he is here. In spite of his physical condition he has to accept the hardest kind of work. But even at that the local G.P.U. keeps persecuting him. Its agents see to it that he should not remain more than a few days on any job. They simply demand his discharge... We are very anxious about him. They seem determined to have friend M. die of starvation. Our only hope for him is on you, dear comrades. We ourselves will somehow get along without assistance from you – we know how difficult it is for you to keep on sending us help. But we plead with you to do something for the sick M... He cannot exist without your aid.

[NB see “A little about our new life here.” by M. Not the start of letter. Bulletin of the Relief Fund, April 1932. (archive and bulletin: locksmith, exile in far north) Guillotine at work, 608]

[The Bulletin of the Relief Fund of the International Working Men’s Association for Anarchists and Anarcho-Syndicalists Imprisoned or Exiled in Russia, January, 1933.]

3 ... I have had considerable trouble of late. When I returned here after some weeks I was informed that I have been changed to another job. In the new place we are supposed, according to law, to work maximum 6 hours a day, as the work is very hard and dangerous. But actually we are compelled to slave 8 and even 10 hours, without any intermission.

The work is very injurious to health and the conditions of nourishment and of general existence are very hard. We work at a temperature of 50-60 Celsius and we are all the time in a sweating condition. When I return home I am too tired even to eat – when there is some food on hand. It is already the second month that we have received no pay and no one cares how we are to live... It is far better to starve just without work than work as hard as we do and starve just the same. I often ask myself where are the benefits that the Revolution has given the workers. It is not only that we are hungry all the time. There are even worse things. No one who has not actually worked as a Soviet employee can fully realize what is happening here. It is the worst slavery, with spying at every step, petty persecution and climbing on the backs of others to secure the good will of the authorities and a better job. It is disgusting. It is impossible for a decent human being to breathe in this atmosphere of servility, espionage and careerism...
4. We have received your package and we cannot find words to thank you enough for your help. It is a godsend to us, for nowhere in this neighborhood is it possible to procure such things as you sent us, even if we had the price...

We have a chance here to watch the life of the peasantry and to learn their attitude and feelings. They are sick to death of all these Bolshevik experiments that are ruining the agricultural life of this part of the country – and we know that in other parts it is no different. This feeling is very evident when some peasants are gathered together and the talk concerns the rumors of war. Strange as you may think it, the peasants would welcome war. Think of it! They know well enough what a terrible thing a new war would be for them. But they hope that it would be the lesser evil as compared with their present life. Neither among the workers nor among the peasants is there any interest whatever in the success of the new experiments – and every few weeks there are new orders and new experiments, and all of them are introduced in the habitual Communist methods, – that is, by the iron hand of the G.P.U. The people are sick of it. They see no results either. The administration is just blindly carrying out orders from the center which is thousands of miles away from this part of the country. No cognizance is taken of the local situation or needs. The result is just chaos... The inefficiency of the rulers here is incredible. The cattle is neglected no less than the human material, and in the best collectives men and cattle are dying of disease and bad nourishment.

... A little incident happened here a few days ago. Insignificant, considering the far greater tragedies that are part of our daily lives. But it is somewhat characteristic of the situation and it will give you a faint notion of things here. The sister of our friend T. was to arrive here recently. On the way she caught a cold. For lack of warm clothing or medical attention she got steadily worse and died before she could reach this place. She left an 18-month old child that was brought to T. He family consists of 5 persons and they all have to live on the earnings of one man. Of course to procure milk or other food needed for a little child is out of the question. Comrade T. kept running from one institution to another to have the child placed in some home for infants, but that was refused and only dry bread was issued for the child. Now after a few weeks the child is showing signs of tuberculosis. It is dying on our hands... You can't protest here against brutality or outrage – there is no such a thing. The least protest means that you lose your ration and that spells absolute starvation, especially for exiles. The Bolshevik[s] scorn “sympathy” and “soft-heartedness.” That is fit only for bourgeois ladies of the old world, they say. A real government cannot show itself weak... Somewhere there are being built great industries, but in reality there is no sign of it here and conditions are worse every day. The further from the center the worse...
The labor unions – they have become worse than a joke among the workers. They are not labor unions: they are just here to carry out the orders of the Communist Party. They have become simply a branch of it to forward orders to the smaller towns and villages. They have no other function. They receive instructions and carry them out, that's all. Every member of the union is compelled to belong to some of the “social institutions,” the purpose of the latter is to aid morally and materially the building of a great military or naval air-fleet, to help the Army, etc., etc. In every one of these bodies the members have to contribute a certain percentage of their wages. In fact, the percentage is taken off the wages automatically. Thus about 30 and even 40 per cent of the worker's wage goes to the different “social institutions.” Considering how little value the rouble has when you go to buy anything with it, you can judge for yourself what becomes of the earnings of the workers.

[The Bulletin of the Relief Fund of the International Working Men’s Association for Anarchists and Anarcho-Syndicalists Imprisoned or Exiled in Russia, January, 1933.]
1933

I received the 5 dollars you sent me. I felt like having my fondest dreams realised. In fact, more than that. For I had dreamed only of bread – and your help has enabled me to get even some other foodstuffs… I could not write to you in reply to your letter as soon as I received it. You will smile at the reason of it, perhaps. The truth is, there was no kerosene. I work the whole day and when I return to my room there is such darkness – a blackness that you can almost touch with your hands. It is impossible to get kerosene. It has become the greatest luxury. But thanks to your money I bought some today, and my room looks as if the sun has suddenly entered it.

Our friend A. is in a very bad condition. He and his companion have been without work since March, and there is no hope of securing any job for them. You know how we exist even when we have some work. It requires very special ability to support life even when earning our pittance. But when we can earn nothing, then the problem is just like squaring the circle. And I am sorry to inform you that most of our people here are at present entirely without work…

… Our letters are filled mostly with matters of food, prices, and so on. Do not wonder at it, dear friends. Our letters are the reflex of our thoughts. Almost all our time and energy is spent in thinking of bread, food – and devising ways of securing at least the minimum needed… As you know, a little child is with us. He needs nourishing food – milk, flour, sugar. But it is just unthinkable to procure these things. Even a bit of rice costs a small fortune. Not to speak of butter or other fats… Yet it hurts to see the little one grow up weak and sickly.

I am always happy to have a letter from you. And so are all our people here, for you may be sure that your letters are read and reread, many and many a time. But it is terrible to hear of the brutality and barbarity practiced by the fascists in those countries you write about. It is tragic to think how inhumanity and ruthlessness still dominate the world – and when will the masses wake up to their real power, their solidaric might?… We bought in the Torgsin here, after we received your aid, some real sugar, which we had not seen for over a year now. We are sitting and drinking tea, with a bite of sugar, in the good Russian fashion, and we are thinking of our dear friends and comrades…

[From IWMA Russian Aid Fund typescript in Berkman 129, file no. 117-118.1933?]

My friend and I are still without work. Our speciality is “trained economists”, and now and then there is need of such men. But the moment it becomes known that we are political exiles, the doors are closed against us. We have visited every factory and institution in this city, and in vain so far. The only solution would be to go to some other place, but that is strictly forbidden us. I learn from the magazines that now and then reach us what is going on in the world. All tyrants use the same methods, more or less. And hunger is always a powerful weapon in their hands. I notice that Hitler
has studied this question. When the people have been used to starvation even a little crust thrown to them will be considered a special favour – it is no doubt in this manner that Hitler is getting himself to be regarded almost as a divine blessing by the great German Michel. [masses? people?] And when the people are dehumanised by starvation, they will blindly obey any dictates of Hitler. And when you see how the mark is losing its value, how it falls while the prices for products rise skyhigh, I feel that soon Germany will be selling certain products for gold only, or for some solid foreign valuta – such products as sugar, flour, especially wheat and so on. Because Hitler will try to show that he can produce anything and everything in his own country, and that there is more than sufficient of everything in his country. That means he will begin to export – and let the people starve to death for the very things he exports abroad. He will let the people pay, for instance, 280 marks for 16 kilograms of bread, or to buy it from the Government for gold…

When one thinks of all this, one feels deeply sorry for the unfortunate German people, for the great masses of the proletariat in Germany. For those poor masses that have been so duped by their social-democratic leaders and who now have to pay such a dear price for their mistakes…

[From IWMA Russian Aid Fund typescript in Berkman 129, file no. 118-119.1933? Note ‘valuta’ and description of the actually existing Soviet economy, disguised as critique of Hitler. Possible economists: Aksenova, Askarov, Barmash, Baron, Bazhenov, Borovoi, Dyakov, Makaryants?]

Things in this part of the country, in our wonderful (once upon a time!) Ukraina, are not very encouraging… If I tell you of my own situation, you will have an idea of how conditions are for all of us who are in the same boat here. I am one of the lucky ones, at that; for I am working, and but few of the other friends here can boast of such fortune. But though working, my earnings do not suffice even to procure even one quarter of the minimum necessary to exist… Do not forget that I am a “qualified worker”, which is the term here for a skilled artisan. As for the others – their manner of existence is hard to describe. Of course we share, but even at that…

The harvest in Ukraina this year was very good, the crops splendid. But the cemeteries are busy; they have grown to such an extent that there are not enough people left to work on the fields… We have read the wonderful things that Herriot has said and written. It’s very strange though. He seems to have seen what we cannot find here; and what we see he could not find. I wonder what circles he has convinced… Somehow people here long to live – and not only for the sake of some “great future achievements”, but just simply for the sake of the love of life… As the old Russian saying is: “The young chicken also wants to eat”. – There is N., for instance. She does not want to die. The doctors say she is suffering from cancer of the stomach. She needs treatment. But where is she to get it and where are the expenses to comes from? Are we able to help her? …
We arrived in this place together with K. Of course, not because we wanted to come here. Now we are spending all our time here trying to find some work. The outlook is not very promising... We saw S. here. You remember what a big, strong fellow he used to be? A regular giant. We hardly recognised him. He is a mere shadow of his former self. He suffers from frequent heart attacks. To make things worse, his lungs are also affected. He is working in the coal mine – you can understand how that work affects his condition. And he does not earn enough to buy nourishing food. … We know how many there are claiming your aid. But if at all possible help comrade S., even if only a little bit…
Nicolai Rogdayev

A Letter from Russia

Dear Comrades:

We feel deeply hurt ourselves by learning from your paper of the death of our good old Comrade Nicolai Rogdayev.

I, as his close friend and co-worker in the foregone days of the Russian Revolution, want to say a few words in the form of an obituary. To our great sorrow we cannot do it here, in this land where Comrade Rogdayev gave his best years of revolutionary activity. On the contrary, this very land, which is considered by many nowadays as Socialistic, kills in its prisons and exiles revolutionists like Rogdayev. The mere fact that Rogdayev died of hunger in the far Turkestan exile shows the real face of Russian Bolshevism. Rogdayev is put in prison; luckily he escaped from the jail and migrated out of revolutionists. [typo]

Being yet a student in the beginning of this century, Rogdayev joined the Russian Anarchist movement where from the very beginning he has been most active. In 1907 he was sent as a delegate to the Anarchist Congress that took place in Amsterdam. After his return back to Russia he was arrested by the Tzar's gendarmes and put in prison: luckily he escaped from the jail and migrated out of the country Many years of his emigration Rogdayev lived in Spain and was active in the Spanish Anarchist movement and only in the time of the World War he went to Paris where he stayed till the outbreak of the Russian Revolution.

In the beginning of 1918 I met him first in Saratov. He was full of energy then. As an experienced conscientious revolutionist his views were definite and uncompromising. In regard to the results of the victory of Bolshevism in Russia he was much less optimistic than many of his comrades; nevertheless, he propagated the necessity of fighting Denikin and other counter-revolutionists. Being an eloquent orator he was an excellent agitator. All his life and activity were a natural expression of a genuine revolutionist.

In 1919 he was in Samara (Central Volga) and owing to his energy and colossal mental power we had there a nice club and a good cultural centre. His lectures always attracted huge crowds of workers. At the end of 1919 the Bolshevik reactionaries closed our club and almost all of the Samaran Anarchists were jailed. At that time the Bolsheviks didn't yet dare to put their claws upon comrade Rogdayev. But he was aware of the fact that the reaction in Russia had a tendency to strengthen and that he would also be thrown into the Socialistic dungeon for not being in agreement with the Bolshevik executioners.

In 1920 I met Rogdayev again at Tashkent. Here he worked in an "Hindustan Revolutionary Committee" where he had great influence. But the Bolsheviks fearing competition disbanded the committee and Rogdayev was sent out of Tashkent.
Being deprived for a long time of communicating with anyone on this plane naturally I lost sight of Rogdayev and only in 1930 being in exile I was informed that he was being kept in the political prison of the Suzdal convent.

In the name of all comrades in Russia we energetically protest against torturing Anarchists in the Bolshevik prisons and exiles. We also urge our comrades outside of Russia to unite their protest.

We mourn the death of our dear comrade Nicolai Rogdayev, as also the death of all other revolutionists-victims of the Bolshevik regime.

Applebaum and Comrades.

Russia, 2-VII-1934.

P. S.-Dear Comrades: I beg of you to translate these lines for your paper and to forward the original or translation to other Anarchistic publications.

With Comradely regards: Applebaum.

("Man!" A Journal of the Anarchist Ideal and Movement, No. 8, August, 1934. San Francisco, Cal.)

[Guillotine at work p.617-18]
November, 1936

...Life is hitting me right and left and I feel bad about starting off without any smile, without any joy. The City M. gave me quite a joyless reception – do you know what “pale of settlement” means? If you do, well, think of a Gomel citizen who came to Moscow, let us say, in 1907-8; that will give you an idea of our situation.

The family is in a state of depression, nearing collapse, it is exhausted to the limit of human endurance, beyond which begins the purely mechanical routine – life, without thoughts, without clear perception of good and bad – “One has to live” – just that and nothing else. V. wrote me asking me to come as soon as I can – I came and three days later we parted. Now I am again all alone, I see him once in six days, bringing him in a small basket bread, butter and tobacco – no end of tobacco. And then what of the nearest future?

This year we have an unusually “foul” autumn – I cough and spit these abominable clots (tuberculosis) and, apart from ordinary blessings, I have also contracted a nervous eczema, fortunately, showing up in places...which are not noticeable. All this, of course, is trifling – only one does long just for a little bit of happiness!!!
November, 1936.

Today I went to the Post Office and, unexpectedly, I received a food remittance. I guessed immediately that the sending of it was the work of our friends. Situated as I am, this gift is always welcome to me. Thanks a lot for it. My health has improved somewhat. But A. has had bad luck. Her hand began to ache and she couldn’t sleep nights on account of it.

K.

[Guillotine at work p. 622-3. From Dielo Truda, No. 96, March-April 1937, Chicago, Ill. See Maksimov18, June6, file nos. 7413-4 – Russian typescript (initials not expanded).]

November, 1936.

Many thanks for your remittance. What a joy it was to get all that! Now I am going to tell you why I did not answer at once. Unexpectedly I obtained the chance to go to see G. I just came from there having spent fifteen days with him: he changed so that one can hardly recognize him. As to me, I did not fare very well in the city of X. I caught a cold on the way, having gone out without a winter coat (I haven’t got any) and now I am confined to bed with a high temperature. Now that fall is approaching, my little girl’s health has taken a turn to the worse (tuberculosis) but worse than that; my brother is dying and he is not only a brother to me – he is a fine, responsive comrade, but it is utterly beyond my power to help the slightest little bit…

T.

[Guillotine at work p. 623. From Dielo Truda, No. 96, March-April 1937, Chicago, Ill. See Maksimov18, June6, file nos. 7413-4 – Russian typescript (is ‘G.’ in printed version given as ‘G. Ottuda’?).]

December, 1936.

…I have no news… the situation as to obtaining work is as hopeless as ever…

B.

[Guillotine at work p. 623. From Dielo Truda, No. 96, March-April 1937, Chicago, Ill. See Maksimov18, June6, file nos. 7413-4 – Russian typescript.]
This is the worst season of the year in this part of the country. I had hoped to use my time to good advantage by continuing intensively my studies, but the great difficulty is to secure enough kerosene and potatoes… At any rate, I have been lucky in getting a room – a very, very small room, but at least I have it all to myself. Such a thing is considered here a stroke of fortune, and I am happy to have some privacy, so that I can read, think and study. It has been the worst torture to me to be compelled always to share quarters with others, particularly strangers with whom I have nothing in common and who live, mentally, in an entirely different world…

[‘Voices from exile : Extracts from our Russian correspondence’, undated. Sent out by the Relief fund of the IWMA. Berkman 129, file no. 106. French version in Berkman 129 file no. 124.]

Dear Friend, you must excuse my long silence. For a long time I was looking for a place, and that is an occupation that makes one dead tired at the end of the day, and one cannot think then of writing. …Do not misunderstand me: I love life, but if you knew what existence is like under these conditions, you would not wonder at the pessimism that you feel in my letters. I do not mean only the material conditions, for we have had time to learn to exist on next to nothing. There are things worse even than starvation… We live in an atmosphere in which you cannot claim your soul as your own – where every step and every word may involve the greatest danger… Can you wonder, then, that we often feel that the very sources of life are poisoned and that death would be preferable?

[‘Voices from exile : Extracts from our Russian correspondence’, undated. Sent out by the Relief fund of the IWMA. Berkman 129, file no. 106. French version in Berkman 129 file no. 124.]

In our circumstances a good book is the best friend, so you will understand, dear friend, why we are so hungry for reading matter. To me, in particular, reading is the only consolation left. As you know, I am suffering from heart trouble, and my lungs are also bad… My companion has also been ill for a long time now, and of late she has been even in a worse condition than I. … I am sorry that I can’t write you more
cheerful news. I wish I could – I wish I could write you a bright and happy letter, but to tell you the truth, I haven’t even energy enough to lie to you…


You ask me for news of our people here and about the conditions of our life. But surely you don’t expect that we can give you even an approximate picture of our existence and of the things going on. No doubt you are familiar with the official version of conditions in this country of “socialism”. The various delegations and tourists are shown places and things about which they can speak with enthusiasm when they return to their own countries. But the things they do not see are the true reality of our life, and of these no one may write about… Pretense is one thing, the actuality another and entirely different…


I hesitated a long time before deciding to write to you, and I write not only in my own behalf but also by request of friends here. We are facing a fearful winter and are compelled to ask you for help. It is only most extreme need that forces us to do so. There are children here – among them also my own – and we are terribly anxious about them for the approaching winter… We cannot describe to you what we went through last year during the months of zero weather, with constant lack of food. And we are afraid that our little ones could not survive another such experience… I know our friends abroad will understand, and so we shall anxiously wait to hear from you soon. Your old comrade A.
[‘Voices from exile : Extracts from our Russian correspondence’, undated. Sent out by the Relief fund of the IWMA. Berkman 129, file no. 107-8. French version in Berkman 129 file no. 124. That is addressed to ‘Mon cher N.’ = N. Lazarevich?]