In Stalin's Prisons—Reminiscences

By K. F. Shtepa

Meanwhile the wave of purges and "processings" throughout the country was culminating in a wave of mass arrests which affected all circles of the population, but primarily the top leadership of the party, the army, the administrative and economic bureaucracy, the higher educational and scientific institutions. The mass arrests began in 1936, but only in midsummer 1937 did they reach their climax. What distinguished these arrests from similar actions in the past was precisely the fact that this time they involved the staunchest Bolsheviks, the leaders, the grandees of the party, occupying the most responsible posts within the political and economic apparatus. And the principal charge brought against them, as far as could be gathered, was "espionage in favor of one of the capitalist powers." What was the reason for this? Stalin, not long before, in a speech calling for class vigilance, had asserted that the capitalists were sending thousands of agents and spies into the Soviet Union, and that a single spy was able to cause greater harm than a whole enemy army corps. This was enough to send the Soviet authorities off on a hunt for foreign spies; and the NKVD could think of no better pretext for reprisals than a charge of espionage. And so it came to pass that millions of Soviet citizens of various social position, nationality, age, and sex—party members and non-Communists, army men and civilians, educated and uneducated—were exposed as hired or voluntary agents of foreign powers. Not one but many army corps could have been formed from these "spies" who

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under the Ezhov régime landed behind prison bars or behind the barbed wire of NKVD camps!

Every day brought news of the “disappearance” of this or that secretary of an obkom (regional committee), of the chairman of some executive committee, or even of a people’s commissar. There were no official communiqués, of course; and the public usually reached its conclusions on the basis of such indirect yet infallible signs as the removal of the portrait of this or that leader from the walls of the public institutions he had up to then adorned, or the persistent suppression of his name in the press, or else the appearance of his name with some unflattering qualification, such as, “the people’s enemy.” However, the arrests did not remain a secret and usually would become known the very next day. The arrests, as a rule, took place during the night.

The arrests went on without interruption, their number steadily growing; but there would be special flare-ups in connection with the great political trials staged during that period: the trial of Marshal Tukhachevsky and other participants of the “military conspiracy” in the spring of 1936; the trial of the “Trotsky-Zinoviev bloc” in the early autumn of 1937; the trial of the “Rightist bloc” in the spring of 1938, etc. Each of these trials gave the signal, as it were, for a new wave of arrests that rolled from one end of the vast country to the other, hitting every layer of society without exception.

Hardly anyone took the charges brought against the victims of these trials seriously; nor were the trials themselves regarded as anything but a means of reprisal and intimidation. But what for most people remained an enigma was the behavior of the defendants. Why did they plead guilty to all the crimes imputed to them? Why didn’t they make the slightest attempt to justify themselves, or at least to mitigate their guilt? What was behind this incomprehensible acquiescence? Various attempts were made to answer these questions, all of them unconvincing. As for myself, I had no answer; like many others, I did not know,
up to my own arrest, that the explanation was quite simple. True, more than once I had been reminded of the medieval witch-trials (which were the object of my special interest), but at that time the analogy still seemed to me something of a joke. Only later did I discover that history repeats itself, albeit in a different form.

The year 1937 occupies a special place in the history of Bolshevism. Not only in my own memory has it left an indelible scar . . . A year of horror! Day by day the circle of friends who were still at large was shrinking. News of arrests of friends and acquaintances reached one with growing frequency. And every night a Soviet citizen going to bed would wonder where he would find himself in the morning. The hooting of a passing car would fill hearts with dread. The ceiling was shaky above every Soviet head. Such was the Ezhov era!

In my personal life, in 1937, events of evil omen followed one another. In the spring, several of my university colleagues were arrested, among them some close friends of mine, such as Professor Lozovik, a Jew, a former Menshevik; Perlin was another.

In the summer of that year I learned of a "family" suicide: Lubchenko, chairman of the Ukrainian Soviet of People's Commissars, had committed suicide after killing his wife, Natalia Nikolaevna Krupenik.

Both events affected me directly. Among the arrested colleagues were friends of mine, and every Soviet citizen is well aware of what it means to have friends or relatives among those arrested: it is a clear warning of one's own imminent arrest, as inevitable as a natural law.

As for Lubchenko's suicide, Soviet citizens had been duly forewarned about what to expect by the suicide, in 1934, of another Ukrainian people's commissar, Nikolai Skrypnik. It had been followed by a huge wave of mass arrests among Ukrainian "bourgeois nationalists," who were made answerable for the passive protest of an oppositionist in the ranks of Soviet bigwigs.
By some strange misunderstanding, during the purges and "processings" I had been classed among those very "bourgeois nationalists," although there had never been anything, except maybe my name, which is of German origin, to make me suspect of this particular political sin.

Thus I had every chance to be called to answer for Lubchenko's death, in the same way as many of my academic colleagues had had to pay for Skrypnik's suicide. In the present case things were complicated by the fact that I had been acquainted with Lubchenko's wife, who had been a lecturer at the university and also the chairman of the university's mestkom (trade-union local); which meant, of course, that like-minded people would be sought among faculty members.

My third trouble in that ill-fated year was the "processing" I had to undergo; to me as well as to all who knew me it seemed a direct prelude to my arrest. It brought out a characteristic feature of Soviet life: friends and acquaintances made haste to turn away from me as from a leper—some with brazen assurance, others with unconcealed shame.

The clouds above my head were darkening, and a silver lining appeared only when I learned of the arrest of the selfsame assistant who had been the main instigator of all the attacks on me, who had accused me of all mortal sins and had called for my "crucifixion." However, the silver lining proved an illusion.

Things came at last to a head on the eve of the festival of the Paris Commune, that is on the 18th of March 1938, almost at the zenith of the Ezhov era. Yet it would be more exact to place the highest point of the Ezhov regime in April and May of that year, when even members of the Politburo, such as Kossior and Chubar, were arrested, and hardly any party bigwig, administrator, or high-ranking military commander, was left at his post, not to mention thousands and millions of small fry.

And then it happened. My arrest, which for a long time I had been expecting from day to day and from night to night, became a fact.
The procedure of the arrest, the search of the premises that went with it, the transportation to the NKVD internal prison, the search and preliminary questioning at the warden's office (komendatura)—all this was routine. It must be admitted that everything was performed in a fairly civil way, or, to use the Bolshevik term, "kulturno," in a cultured manner.

When all the inevitable formalities were over and I found myself, at daybreak, in solitary confinement, I could at last give free course to my thoughts, which naturally centered upon a single question: what was awaiting me? What would be the charge against me, what should I say in defense of myself, and what punishment could I expect?

My meditations were interrupted by my transfer to an ordinary ward of the same prison, the ward where I received my first lessons in prison life, which revealed to me Soviet reality, in particular the Soviet penal system, in a very different light from what I had imagined. There began for me, as for many other Soviet citizens, the actual "school of Bolshevism."

My first ward-mates were:

Zuichenko, a metal-worker and one-time active participant of the Makhno movement, who under the Tsar had served his eight years at hard labor for belonging to the anarchists and taking part in terrorist acts, and who under the Soviets had already been twice deported to labor camps—a striking representative of the Soviet category of "have-beens" (byvshie), always the surest target of Bolshevist terror. He was charged with participation in "the preparation of an armed insurrection against the Soviet power."

Another inmate of my ward was Johann Gressel, an unemployed German workingman who had come to the Soviet Union with the sole purpose of earning his bread here, and who instead found himself behind the bars of an NKVD prison charged with fascism. But his real offense was something else: lodged with wife, baby, mother-in-law, sister-in-law, in a single tiny room with a leaky roof, he had knocked in vain at door after door
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until at last he lost his self-control and told somebody in office—not even high office—that in capitalist countries dogs were living in better conditions than workers in the land of the toilers.

Gressel was a "foreigner," and quite soon I discovered that foreigners of diverse origin and social position formed, next to the "have-beens," the basic population of a Soviet political prison.

There were other fellow-prisoners beside Zuichenko and Gressel: a bookkeeper belonging to the category of "have-beens" who in 1917 had been a member of the Ukrainian Central Rada and was charged, of course, with "Ukrainian nationalism"; another "has-been"—a Cossack colonel who for many years had managed to disguise his identity doing unskilled work in a brickyard, but finally had been discovered and jailed, allegedly for membership in the Russian Armed Forces Union, a political organization of the so-called "White" émigrés abroad; also an official of the planning department whose offense was rather vague, although he was charged with such a fearful crime as terrorism. Finally, there were two experts in forestry who belonged to the category of "specialists" and were accused of "wrecking" and "sabotage."

From these my companions in misfortune I obtained the first useful information regarding my prospects. By them I was introduced into the workings of Soviet political jurisdiction in all its phases, from the preliminary investigation to the execution of the sentence. And although some of it I had known, or rather had guessed, while still at large, much of what I learned came to me as a complete surprise.

To give me an idea of the procedure of the preliminary investigation and the methods of inquiry in political cases, I was invited to have a look at the "nationalist" bookkeeper. The poor fellow was lying face downwards because the back of his body was a mass of wounds as a result of the "questioning" procedure.
Lately some rumors had been leaking out to the public that those arrested were being subjected to beatings during interrogation by the NKVD and sometimes even to various kinds of torture. However, I had treated such rumors rather skeptically, believing them to be greatly exaggerated if not entirely fancy-born. At any rate I thought it highly unlikely that such methods of "investigation treatment" (sledstvennoe vozdeistvie) should be applied openly and on a vast scale. They seemed incompatible with the principles of democracy so solemnly proclaimed a short while before, as well as with the "Staliniist solicitude for the human being."

My ward-mates acquainted me with all the methods of the "investigation treatment," to prepare me for them psychologically. My subsequent observations and personal experiences fully confirmed what they told me.

There exists a complete system of treatment, worked out in detail and applied by the examining officials of the NKVD with due regard to the psychological peculiarities of the person under investigation.

The procedure usually starts with "persuasion," the examiner urging the prisoner to make a voluntary confession and promising him a full pardon in case of compliance. The methods of persuasion are often marked by real subtlety, keen psychological insight, and the recognition of the peculiar Bolshevist philosophy of life which bears the stamp of a genuine religious-mythical faith with all the emotions implicit in it. Sometimes the stage of "persuasion" and "admonition" takes a long time. With intellectuals this method quite often achieves the desired result, wherefore it is applied to them with particular intensity.

"Persuasion" is followed by various threats and preliminary intimidation.Stubborn recalcitrants are threatened with dire consequences—with execution, with reprisals against members of their family and close friends, etc. Such threats supported by undeniable evidence are also effective, especially the threat of reprisals against the family; most prisoners react with an
intense, sometimes morbid, anxiety about the safety of their kin—and the examiners know how to exploit it.

When the means of persuasion and intimidation are exhausted, the investigators resort to methods of direct action. Such a method is the so-called “conveyor,” with the prisoner subjected to questioning for many days and nights almost without interruption; either in a “standing posture” (vystoika)—forced to remain standing for days, until his legs are swollen, or in a “sitting posture” (vysadka)—made to sit all the time in an uncomfortable position, for instance, on the edge of a chair. Another method is the deprivation of sleep, when the victim is prevented from sleeping sometimes for weeks, until he is driven out of his wits, losing all will and self-control. And as a last resort there is ruthless beating.

Beating is the method of “investigation treatment” most widely used by the NKVD. Quite often it is applied at the very beginning of the inquiry along with the subtler methods described above, or even without them.

Of all the people I met during my two years’ detention in NKVD prisons, only a very few escaped beating. Theirs were exceptional cases; as a rule, all prisoners, to a greater or lesser extent, were subjected to it in the course of the inquiry.

The beatings were performed by the examiners themselves, and the usual tool was the leg of a chair with sharp ends. The NKVD obviously wished to avoid telltale evidence, such as would have been left by rubber clubs and similar weapons.

The beatings were carried out in a systematic way, as a planned method of investigation, and were by no means an expression of sadistic perversion. Thus I observed that while one of the victims, Professor Lange, had most of the lower part of his body beaten black and blue, the seat had been left intact, so as to enable him to sit down to write his deposition after the “treatment” had achieved the expected result.

The degree of the beating varied according to the victim’s stubbornness, from slight blows to maiming of the body. I met
people with ears torn off (among others, the former deputy people's commissar for education, Levshin), with broken ribs, broken arms and legs, injured kidneys and lungs, etc. In not a few cases the beatings caused death (for instance, in the case of the former deputy people's commissar for home affairs, Bronevoi).

Often the beatings were combined with more ingenious methods of treatment. Most in favor were the so-called "games" of "football" and "aeroplane." In the "football" game the victim would be knocked from one corner of the room to the other. In the "aeroplane" game, the prisoner was placed on a chair on top of several tables piled one upon another; then the chair would be pulled out from under him so that he tumbled headlong to the floor; and this would be repeated until the victim lost consciousness or was severely maimed.

There were methods of still greater refinement of cruelty, such as breaking of joints, pricking the face with a needle in a way calculated to hit a network of nerves, crushing fingers in a door, etc. These expedients were not applied on a large scale, but were by no means exceptional; I met several people who had been subjected to them.

It should be noted here that the most cruel treatment was reserved for arrested officials of the NKVD itself, for party members and commanders of the Red Army, since from such people it was most difficult to extort a confession of crimes they in most cases had never committed.

These peculiar methods of investigation were the first thing I learned about from my ward-mates; and this information was fully confirmed by all I observed and experienced later. But I came to know a great deal more: first of all, that the crimes charged to a prisoner under investigation, of which a confession was sought by every available means, had nothing to do with his real offense, if offense there was.

In other words, an inquiry by the NKVD represents, from beginning to end, an effort to obtain from the prisoner, by any
means including torture, a confession of never-committed crimes—for some fictional ends, and by no means to establish the actual facts.

The charges usually followed a stereotyped outline and were based on so-called "objective data." In the Bolshevik jargon, this term covered, on the one hand, biographical data: the social position of the defendants, their former activities, their family and personal relationships, and, on the other, the secret information contained in the reports and resumés of secret agents regarding the defendants' political attitudes as revealed by them in private conversations or in some other way.

Thus it was made to appear, for instance, that my neighbor in the ward, the bookkeeper, former member of the Ukrainian Central Rada, had belonged to a "bourgeois-nationalist organization planning an armed uprising against the Soviet regime," despite the fact that, ever-mindful of his "original sin," he had done his best to keep out of harm's way and nothing had been farther from his mind than armed risings.

The old Cossack colonel who had lived under the guise of a common laborer, in constant fear of discovery, had hardly known of the existence abroad of an organization like the Russian Armed Forces Union; nevertheless he was expected to confess not only to membership in the Union but also to having committed "acts of diversion."

The most difficult part of it all for the defendants was the requirement that they themselves construct the plot of their alleged crimes—"the legend," "the play," were almost official expressions in the investigation routine—taking pains to make it as credible and convincing in every detail as possible. This is surely the most unbelievable part of our story: every defendant under inquiry by the NKVD and subjected to the one or the other method of the "investigation treatment," had to exert himself to "help the inquiry," that is, to provide as much evidence against himself as he possibly could.

But then, for a great many, the practice of "self-criticism"
during the purges and “processings” had served as an excellent rehearsal: already at that stage any attempt to justify oneself or to extenuate one’s guilt, especially with reference to “objective circumstances,” was considered totally inadmissible. On the contrary, the more the individual showed himself penitent, the more he incriminated himself and others, the better were his chances to be recognized a sound Bolshevik.

The elaboration of the incriminatory plot or “play,” for many of the defendants, involved real pangs of creation, and for those of little imagination and inventiveness it was an ordeal. To help them were the “ward consultants,” either volunteers or else acting on secret orders of the investigators themselves. Moved by compassion or by self-interest (to worm themselves into the good graces of the authorities), or from any other motive, these consultants helped their fellow-inmates to compose their “plays.” These compositions smoothed the inquiry procedure for the defendants, relieving them from many forms of the “investigation treatment,” and made it easier for the NKVD itself to “liquidate” their authors. I met several such “consultants” myself, well-known then in all NKVD prisons. Such were, for instance, Professor Wittenburg and Professor Sukhov.

The “plays” were sometimes strikingly realistic, with all parts well-knit together, but more often than not they were rather crude, monotonous, and full of fantastic exaggerations. My neighbor Zuichenko composed a rather credible “play”; and very likely it helped to put an end to his stormy and sorrowful life: in the small town where he had worked as a moulder in a plant, the routine activities of the OSO (an association to help the war effort) had been taking place with the usual maneuvers, campaigns, contests, etc.; and there was nothing simpler than to represent these activities as “secret preparations for the mobilization of forces for an armed uprising against the Soviet regime.” And on the strength of this plot Zuichenko himself, the director of the plant, the secretary of the regional party
committee, and a great many rank-and-file workers, peasants, and employees found their way to the NKVD, and from there to the grave or to Siberia. And it is characteristic that this time Zuichenko was locked up not for his part in the Makhno movement (for this he had already served two terms in prison) but for "participation in an armed demonstration."

It would take up too much space to cite here all the "inquiry plays" I heard about in my ward. Still, some rather peculiar ones deserve mention: so, for instance, the deposition of a Kievan worker about his intention to blow up an isle on the Dnieper opposite the city. Or, still better, the testimony of a worker employed in a Kharkov workshop producing school appliances; I do not know whether he had been subjected to some method of "treatment," but he stated at the inquiry that his workshop had been planning to blow up... the whole Soviet Union! The poor fellow possessed neither technical knowledge nor a sense of reality. Yet who knows, he may have been richly endowed with a sense of humor!

As a rule, every incriminatory plot had to contain information about so-called "recruiting." Two questions were inevitably asked by the examining official: "Who recruited you?" and "Whom did you recruit?" That is, who had drawn the imaginary political criminal into the imaginary counter-revolutionary organization engaged in espionage, in terroristic plotting, in insurrectionary activities, etc; in other words, who had incited him to commit his crimes (taken for granted but hardly ever actually committed) and whom had he incited in his turn?

This meant that every defendant had to submit the names of his fictitious accomplices, the more names the better, yet had to take care to make his statements sound as credible as possible. The "play" had to present, more or less, the appearance of truth. It would have been awkward, for instance, to represent an aged member of the clergy as an armed insurrectionist (an army man, especially a younger one, filled such a part much better); but the clergyman would do very well in the part of an instigator, ideological agitator, etc.
This was a highly delicate point. It was easier to accuse oneself than to inform on others. Different people reacted in different ways: some silenced their conscience and named as their “recruiters” and “recruits” anyone they could remember if he fitted the part assigned to him; others tried to save a remnant of their conscience by naming only people who had already undergone reprisals and thus could no longer be harmed; still others submitted the names of dead or non-existent persons and sometimes, but not always, got away with it. However it be, “recruiting” played a very big part in the mass arrests; on the strength of such denunciations innumerable Soviet citizens were arrested and subjected to the “investigation treatment” with all its consequences. The NKVD was only concerned about having some formal pretext to arrest this or that individual, and the statement of a person already under arrest provided such a pretext; that it was false and obtained under duress did not matter. The rest followed the usual pattern. The new prisoner would take pains to provide the material incriminating himself; he needed only some “treatment.”

All this I learned on my very first day in the ward. It changed somewhat the direction of my thoughts. It was obvious that I was doomed; I saw my fate now in a different light than before my arrest. “Abandon all hope, you who enter here” . . .

The stories told by my fellow-inmates made me realize that my case was taking a more serious turn than I had anticipated. Of such techniques of investigation as the chair leg I had had no idea; of “recruiting,” “objective data,” and “plays” I had had only the haziest notion. Nor had I known much more about the judicial procedure of the NKVD—a perfect counterpart of its investigation practice—with its “special councils,” its “three-man boards” (troika), its “circuit sessions of the military board,” and all the other organs of Soviet justice. They often decided cases with great speed, but rarely with fairness. The legal proceedings were simplified in the extreme. In most cases sentences were passed behind the scenes, in the absence
not only of the parties but of the defendant himself, by some mysterious "special councils" and "troikas." But even if a trial took place, for instance in the "circuit sessions of the military boards" of the Supreme Court, it consisted in nothing more than a single question put to the defendant: "Do you plead guilty to the crimes set forth in the indictment?" Whereupon, regardless of the reply, the verdict was brought in, nearly always one of "guilty." In some cases a supplementary inquiry would be ordered, yet never would anyone be acquitted in court; a defendant could be released by the investigation organs of the NKVD but would never be declared "not guilty" by a court, whatever the result of the preliminary inquiry. Such an acquittal would have meant an encroachment on the authority of the NKVD—something utterly impossible within the Soviet system. The NKVD is as infallible as the ruling party personified by its leader.

The first time I was on my way to face the examining magistrate I was reflecting over what kind of plot I would have to invent, how to make it accord with my "objective data," what to do about the "recruiting." It is interesting to note that the thought did not occur to me to assert my innocence or to try to justify myself. Every Soviet citizen has it hammered into his head that the attempt to exonerate oneself is tantamount to doubting the infallibility of the NKVD and can only make things worse. The NKVD is assumed to know what it is doing; if it has someone arrested it must have political reasons for this and no one is allowed to question these reasons, even when his own life is at stake. One can try to placate a wrathful god, but does one contend with him? The practice of self-criticism also taught people never to try to exculpate themselves . . .

My "objective data" suggested a charge of "ideological wrecking" and "counter-revolutionary agitation"; to this my "methodical" errors about which I had heard so much during the "processing" might be adjusted. Yet it turned out that things were more serious than that.
My first examiner, Shapiro, chief of the most dreaded section of the NKVD, the Third (in charge of cases of espionage, terrorism, and such) began with the usual question—whether I pleaded guilty to the charge of counter-revolutionary activities. I tried to answer evasively, to the effect that should errors in presentation or formulation, or random remarks in private conversations be regarded as counter-revolutionary activities, then of course I must be considered a counter-revolutionary. To this the examiner reacted with unprintable abuse, whereupon the “investigation treatment” began.

Of the usual methods of “treatment” I was subjected to only two, the “conveyor” and the deprivation of sleep. Persuasion and intimidation are hardly worth mentioning. I was subjected to questioning, almost without interruption, from the day of my arrest on March 18 up to May 10, that is, for nearly fifty days, with no more than two or three hours of sleep daily, in a half-sitting position, between interrogations. But there were days and nights when I was not allowed as much as one hour’s sleep, which reduced me to a state of such nervous tension that I wonder whether even beatings would have had any effect on me after this, inasmuch as I was losing all sensitivity, all perception of the external world.

During that period I had to do with thirty examiners one after another. As I learned later from fellow-prisoners, about half of them had also been arrested at one time or another, and thus had been made to share the sad fate of their former victims.

This too was a feature of the Ezhov regime: that officials of the NKVD itself were exposed to “elimination” and “liquidation” like anybody else, and in such numbers that in some posts three, four, and more incumbents were removed and replaced in rapid succession. Thus, for instance, the holders of even such an office as that of the Ukrainian people’s commissar for home affairs—Balitsky, Leplevsky, Uspensky—were liquidated one after another.
Every new examiner would take up my “case” from the beginning, showing no interest in the preceding phase; and every new one would be more exacting than his predecessor. My case grew like a snowball and was taking an ever more ominous turn. I did not get away with my “ideological sabotage” and “anti-Soviet agitation”; it was not nearly enough. I was charged with taking part in “preparations for an armed insurrection against the Soviet regime” and in the “plotting of terroristic acts against the leaders of the party,” in particular Kossior.

The “objective basis” for this charge was the fact that for twenty-three years I had been on the staff of various academic institutions headed by the well-known Ukrainian politician and historian M. Grushevsky, with whom I was slightly acquainted. For some reason known only to the NKVD it had become necessary to represent all Grushevsky’s scientific and organizational activities in the Ukraine under the Soviet regime as a means of secret political subversion directed against that regime. In consequence, whoever was in any way connected with these activities became for that very reason a participant in a political organization actively hostile to the Soviet rule.

In that “play” concocted by the NKVD I too was assigned a part which I was intended to act out at the inquiry and maybe at the show trial that may have been contemplated at that time.

Naturally I resisted, all the more so because I was required, like many others in similar cases, to testify not only against myself but also against those who had “recruited me” or had been “recruited by me.” Grushevsky had died several years before my arrest and thus could no longer be harmed, but there remained his widow, daughter, brother, sister-in-law. There were still others at large who like myself had worked in his Institute and therefore were candidates for membership in a counter-revolutionary organization.

By the way: to be accused of membership in such an organization, it was by no means necessary to have worked or served together with a suspect; simple acquaintance, a game of cards
or a drink together, provided a sufficient “objective basis” for the charge.

My resistance was finally broken, not so much by the “conveyor,” the deprivation of sleep, the threat of beating (which I had every reason to take seriously), as by my confrontation with Grushevsky’s daughter and with my university colleague, Professor Mirza-Avakiants.

E. M. Grushevskaya, at the confrontation with me, stated that I had collaborated with her and her late father in counter-revolutionary activities aimed at the overthrow of the Soviet regime, in particular in preparations for an armed insurrection. There and then the examiner showed me the deposition by the late M. S. Grushevsky, in his own handwriting, in which he admitted that all his academic institutions were no more than a camouflage for a political organization actively hostile to the Soviet regime. What could I do? Mirza-Avakiants for her part testified that the above-mentioned Natalia Krupenik, wife of the people’s commissar Lubchenko, had told her herself that I had long been a member of an underground nationalist organization headed by both Grushevsky and Lubchenko. I understood perfectly what had prompted these depositions; yet they made me realize that further resistance was futile, since the investigation authorities already had enough material at their disposal to have me “liquidated.” Accordingly I pleaded guilty to taking part in the preparations for an anti-Soviet armed uprising in the Ukraine. I was beginning to understand Zinoviev, Bukharin, and the other leaders of the opposition who, seemingly with such ease, had admitted in court all the crimes charged against them. And the analogy with the medieval witch-trials no longer seemed to me a joke.

As for the problem of “recruiting,” I was able to cope with it somehow: naming either dead people, such as Lubchenko, Grushevsky, Skrypnik, which was made easy for me by the very nature of the case, or else by naming people who had already suffered reprisals, my testimony could no longer harm
them since they had already "got what was coming to them." Whenever I had to name people still alive and at large, such as Krymsky, A. Grushevsky, Timchenko, I gave only such information as had already appeared in the press about them or had been made public during the purges and "processings."

All went swimmingly. Towards the end of the "conveyor" I was even allowed to sleep a few hours every day; and one circumstance even suggested a considerable alleviation of the whole case: the examining official himself proposed that I drop from testimony the item of "terrorism." This I did willingly, since terrorism was considered more serious than "armed insurrection." I had resisted long and stubbornly before I included it in my deposition, and I finally did so in a state of extreme apathy and depression induced by lack of sleep.

At first I supposed that the charge of "terrorism" had been dropped in my case because it was not supported by the "objective data." It turned out, however, that all the other "terrorists," who were quite numerous and who in their depositions had named Kossior, secretary of the Central Committee of the Ukrainian Communist Party, as their target, also had the charge of "terrorism" against them withdrawn. From this the correct conclusion was drawn in the wards that Kossior himself must have been arrested. This was confirmed by the new batch of arrested persons brought in to our prison—our sole link with the world outside and our only source of political information.

My joy over the withdrawal of the charges of terrorism proved premature, for in its stead they pinned on me "espionage."

The overwhelming majority of those arrested in 1937 and 1938 were charged with just this—espionage. Suddenly there was a flood of spies—German, Japanese, Polish, Rumanian, etc. I had thought it rather odd that my incriminatory plot should contain "armed insurrection" and "terrorism" but no espionage. "Objective data" must have been missing, so I thought. But such data were soon found—of the highest quality and in the required quantity.
For several successive years I had been the director of the Byzantine division of the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences. Inasmuch as the term “Byzantine” somehow sounded reactionary, it was replaced by the designation “Near Eastern” and its scope was enlarged to include the histories of Turkey, Iran, and some other Eastern countries. This circumstance “objectively” linked me with the “Eastern powers,” of which the most dangerous to the Soviet Union was of course Japan. And although the latter did not belong to the Near East, this was a nicety that did not interest the NKVD examiners whose knowledge of geography was rather sketchy.

Secondly: as part of the program of public activities of scientific personnel and their so-called patronage over the Red Army, I had to deliver lectures on the history of military art in antiquity and the Middle Ages to the highest-ranking commanders of the Red Army, the Soviet authorities being concerned about raising the level of their general education. This “objectively” linked me with the Red Army, since it provided me with an opportunity to collect espionage information.

What was required beyond this were ways and means of communication with representatives and agents of the respective powers. These too were soon discovered. First there was the fact that in 1937 I had attended a festive banquet in honor of the well-known Czech orientalist Professor G., arranged in Kiev by the Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries. I even had a few minutes’ talk with the distinguished foreigner—which was entirely sufficient for him to “recruit” me for service in some foreign intelligence agency. Talking of the aforesaid society: its chairman himself, Velichko, was arrested before my own arrest, and later I met his successor Smirnov in one of the wards.

Then there was the fact that the chairman of the commission in charge of the patronage of scientists over the Red Army which had the task of organizing the lecturing activities, Professor Mailis, a good friend of mine, had made a trip that same
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year to the Far East to lecture to the Red Army units stationed there, obviously with the purpose of spying and establishing contacts with Japanese agents. That this was so was proved by his arrest, for "the NKVD never arrests anyone for nothing." I reported on my work to Mailis, and he transmitted the information to those for whom it was destined. Thus he testified in his deposition under the influence of the appropriate treatment.

It was the above-mentioned ward consultant Professor Sukhov who assisted both me and Mailis in the composition of the incriminatory plot. Endowed with a vivid imagination, he made use of an "objective feature" of his own biography—a chance meeting with the Japanese consul at Odessa—to work out a complicated and entertaining "play" in which parts were assigned to myself, to Mailis, and of course to many others, among them the well-known Ukrainian orientalist Krymsky and even the president of the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences, Bogomolets.

The NKVD, among its other activities, was engaged in collecting compromising and incriminating material about high-ranking officials—"just in case," storing it away, as it were, to be used at the proper time. The procedure was simple: from people like Professor Sukhov, testimony was obtained against anyone and the material was incorporated into the proper file. For a time the compromised official would be still awarded decorations and given promotion to high office, but when the right moment came . . . Professor Krymsky, for instance, received a medal in 1940 on the occasion of his jubilee celebrated with great pomp; but in 1941, early in the war, he found himself under arrest. There was a time for everything!

And so, I was exposed as a spy in favor of Japan. The espionage information I would pass on to Mailis who transmitted it to the Japanese intelligence, using Sukhov as an intermediary. It all fitted together rather well. We still had to invent the contents of the information collected by me. What could I learn about the Red Army in the course of my lectures that would have interested Japan? All I could think of was the observation
that the top commanders of the Red Army, including the divisional commander, "were unable to tell Napoleon III from Napoleon I and Caesar from Alexander the Great." This was entered under the heading: "Information about the moral-political condition of the Red Army commanders."

Could I resist? Could I deny these charges and repudiate the part assigned to me in Sukhov's play and approved by the NKVD examining official? At the risk of having my ribs broken, my kidneys damaged, etc. I might have resisted. But what was the use? After all, there were two witnesses against me, Sukhov and Mailis, and no more was needed to convict me. For the sake of truth? I lacked the spiritual strength to submit to torture for the sake of truth alone . . . This is my sin and my crime! And those who never passed through the purgatory of the NKVD and never endured all its methods of "investigation treatment" are entitled to throw stones at me with a clear conscience . . .

*To be continued*