

READINGS

[Profile]

TO THE PENAL COLONY

By Masha Gessen, from *Words Will Break Cement: The Passion of Pussy Riot*, out now from Riverhead Books. Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, Maria Alyokhina, and Yekaterina Samutsevich, members of the Russian punk-rock band and art-activist group Pussy Riot, were arrested in March 2012 and sentenced to two years in prison for “hooliganism motivated by religious hatred,” after staging a performance at Moscow’s Cathedral of Christ the Savior. They may receive amnesty under legislation passed in December by the lower house of Russia’s parliament. Gessen’s previous books include *The Man Without a Face: The Unlikely Rise of Vladimir Putin*.

Gera wanted to pee. Again. In the eleven hours we had spent in the car the day before, she’d alternated every five minutes between asking if we were there yet and demanding to be allowed to pee. She did not sleep, even though we arrived at one in the morning. Now, barely eight hours later, we were back in my car, on our way to the penal colony, and Gera wanted to pee.

“Gera, you cannot pee every five minutes!” said Petya to his four-year-old daughter. “You cannot appraise a work of art from the point of view of effectiveness.” Now he was speaking into a lapel mic that belonged to the German television crew following us in another car. Before we left the hotel in Zubova Polyana where we had spent the

night, I’d had to pull the car away from the back porch so the Germans could film the lanky Petya running to the car with huge, plaid, Chinese-made rectangular bags we were taking to the colony for Nadya, Petya’s wife and Gera’s mother. “This is the sixth time I’ve been filmed loading bags into a car for Nadya.” He laughed as he got into the passenger seat. He seemed to enjoy the publicity connected with his wife’s imprisonment, and only now, months after I first met him, was I starting to appreciate how hard, tedious, and unceasing was the work he did on her behalf.

While one of the Germans was miking Petya up, another tried to interview Gera, but she went suddenly tight-lipped and petulant. When the reporter walked away, I tried, in a fit of competitiveness, to ask Gera some questions, too. We had, after all, become familiar to each other after spending a day in the car together.

“When was the last time you saw your mom?”

“I don’t remember anymore.” She shrugged.

“Why is your mom in jail?”

“I don’t even know.” She shrugged.

“Who put her there?”

She shrugged again. “Putin.”

Then her father and grandfather were finally in the car, and we started driving.

“If you keep peeing in the cold, you will freeze your bottom and won’t be able to have any children,” said Andrei, the grandfather.

“I don’t need any children,” Gera shot back.

“I don’t either,” said Andrei. “But you see, they just happen to you.”

Andrei was not the kind of man you would want talking to your daughter. At fifty-six, he was well-worn, but you could tell he used to be movie-star handsome. He was impatient. He was

occasionally inappropriate, as when he started berating Petya in front of Gera. He was immature. When a tired Gera threw a tantrum, demanding that she be taken to her mother, to her grandmother, and back to the hotel—immediately, and all at the same time—he threw a tantrum, too, demanding that Petya give him his cup of coffee, then giving it back, then taking it again. The rest of the time he talked and played with Gera, to her evident delight, but when I heard him teaching her to say the word *entropiya* (“entropy”), I found myself stifling the impulse to explain to him that children are not circus acts. I assumed such remonstrations had been attempted many times before by other women, to no evident effect.

“Mama does not want to see you,” Gera told Andrei now, kicking her foot against the floor. She had taken to calling her grandmother, Petya’s mother, “Mama.” It drove Andrei crazy, and he made no effort hide it.

“I don’t want to see her either,” he declared.

“You scared of her?” asked Gera.

“Well, she is a woman,” Andrei responded, with what I thought was uncharacteristic candor.

We spent the night at a hotel on the third floor of the House of Homekeeping—a peculiar name given, back in Soviet times, to buildings that contained businesses ranging from hair salons to shoe-repair shops. In 2013, the House of Homekeeping in Zubova Polyana, Mordovia—population just over 10,000—had a half-dozen clean hotel rooms with simple pine furniture, a pool hall, a café, and a reception desk for the hotel that also sold a mind-boggling assortment of hair dyes in the narrow color range from pink to copper, and two kinds of flags: a flag of the Russian Federation for the equivalent of ten dollars and one of Mordovia for about twelve. The café in the House of Homekeeping was named 13, after the number featured on Mordovian license plates—as distinct from the numbers associated with each of the other eighty-two regions that make up the Russian Federation. As in the Western tradition, thirteen is an unlucky number in Russia, “the devil’s dozen,” and it seemed an appropriate designation for the region with not only Russia’s but the world’s highest concentration of prison inmates among its residents.

We had about twenty-five miles to go to get to Nadya’s penal colony, Correctional Colony Number 14, or IK-14. Petya pointed out local landmarks. Here was a rusting metal board with the words RESTRICTED TERRITORY, NO PASSING WITHOUT STOPPING, but there was no checkpoint at which to stop; it had apparently been eliminated some years ago, when another high-

profile female inmate was serving time here and someone in charge decided the checkpoint looked bad on film. A men’s maximum-security colony straddled both sides of the road; a covered bridge concealed by tin sheeting allowed inmates to be taken across the road out of sight of drivers. Another men’s colony, a women’s one, then a bland stretch of road with an identical flat forest on either side, then, finally, the village of Partsa, which consisted of IK-14, a small general store, and a smattering of houses where IK-14 employees lived.

The penal colony was hidden behind a tall gray fence, with only a couple of structures reaching above it: a sizable church—Orthodox churches were erected in all the colonies here in the 1990s—and one of the colony’s standard gray concrete buildings with a wall-size poster of a young girl on it. Petya told me the caption, obscured by the fence, said YOUR FAMILY IS WAITING FOR YOU. We entered a two-room structure for visitors. It had been built recently, most likely because Nadya was expected to draw media attention here, and it even included a carpeted playroom with a crib, a set of toddler-appropriate Legos, and a rocking donkey. Gera and Andrei took off their shoes and started making a Lego prison from which a rubber duck was going to help her friend the princess escape by means of a fire truck with a telescoping ladder.

Petya planted himself and the bags in the larger room. One of its walls was entirely taken up with bulletin boards. A small one labeled THE SOCIAL MOBILITY SYSTEM featured charts and flyers geared to show that “malicious repeat offenders” would come to no good in prison, while “positively characterized convicts have hope for the future.” A large board labeled INFORMATION was entirely covered with sample applications and other documents: an application to be granted a visit with an inmate; an application to have a package delivered to an inmate; excerpts from laws relevant to the business of visiting inmates; and descriptions of attempted violations colony authorities had successfully intercepted (visitors trying to smuggle cell phones to inmates had paid a high price, forfeiting not only the phones but visitation rights).

A lonely LCD display hung on the back wall. It showed a video of a corpulent middle-aged woman in a federal prison-authority uniform, reading out rules and regulations and excerpts from the Penal Correctional Code. It was a twenty-minute recording on a loop, and by the time our wait was over, we had absorbed the rules in all their monotonous detail. Petya took off his parka, revealing one of his apparently endless supply of checked Ralph Lauren shirts,



"Buddhist Retreat near Pietermaritzburg, Kwazulu Natal," a photograph by Santu Mofokeng, whose work was on view in November as part of the German Pavilion at the Venice Biennale.

and sat down at a desk facing the window, with his back to the woman on the screen, to start making a complete list of the contents of the large plaid bags.

*Assorted fruit
Bedding*

Inmates are allowed only plain white bedding; last time, a pillowcase was turned away because it exhibited piping, which is apparently not allowed, even when it is also white. The opposite rule applies to underwear: it must be plain black. Petya dropped an empty Uniqlo thermal-underwear package to the floor.

*Books:
My Testimony, by Anatoly Marchenko*

Marchenko was a Soviet dissident who spent years writing this exhaustive accounting of the lives of political inmates in Soviet camps; he died behind bars in 1986, following a hunger strike to demand the release of political prisoners. Nadya had asked for this book specifically; Petya had been unable to find a copy for sale, so we brought the one from my personal library.

Two human rights activists who had been helping Petya had added another eight books by and about dissidents. A Russian translation of a book by the philosopher Slavoj Žižek rounded out the list of ten books—the maximum number allowed at one time. Nadya had been corresponding with Žižek, and she had said she liked the idea of carrying on a conversation with the man and his books at the same time. Months later, only the Žižek volume had made it past the prison censors.

The uniformed woman on-screen was reading out a list of items prohibited from being passed to prisoners. Markers, colored pencils, copying paper—all potential tools of escape. Early that morning, when Petya printed out a map of the surroundings, a House of Homemaking staffer had quipped, "Is this an escape plan?" Meanwhile, in the adjacent playroom, Gera grew bored with playing out the rubber-ducky prison-escape scenario and started throwing a large red gym ball at the Lego prison. She was barely bigger than the ball, so throwing it proved both difficult and ineffectual, but she kept at it with furious determination.

[Sting]

THE GET SET

From an October 10, 2013, complaint against ten Jewish men, including two rabbis, in New York and New Jersey, accused of running an organization that kidnaps and tortures husbands who refuse to grant their wives divorce. "UCE-2" is an undercover FBI agent.

According to Jewish law, in order to effect a divorce, a husband must provide his wife with a document known as a *get*. The wife has the right to sue for divorce in a rabbinical court, known as a *beth din*, which may order the husband to issue the *get*. A woman whose husband will not consent to a divorce is known as an *agunah*.

Essentially the Defendants' organization operated as follows. The family of an *agunah* made payment to the Defendants, after which the Defendants convened a *beth din*, which issued a contempt order, known as a *seruv*, against the husband. If the husband failed to respond, the *beth din* issued a ruling, known as a *psak din*, authorizing the use of coercion and/or violence to obtain the *get*. The Defendants then arranged to kidnap the recalcitrant husband and assault him until he gave the *get*.

Defendant Mendel Epstein talked about forcing compliance through the use of "tough guys" who utilize electric cattle prods, karate, and handcuffs, and place plastic bags over the heads of the husbands, at one point telling UCE-2:

EPSTEIN: I guarantee you that if you're in the van, you'd give a *get* to your wife. You probably love your wife, but you'd give a *get* when they finish with you. Hopefully, there won't even be a mark on him.

UCE-2: You can leave a mark. [chuckle]

EPSTEIN: We prefer not to leave a mark. Because basically the reaction of the police is, if the guy does not have a mark on him, uh, there's some Jewish crazy affair here, they don't get involved.

Law enforcement seized the following items that the kidnap team had brought with them to use during the kidnapping and forced *get*: masks, rope, surgical blades, a screwdriver, plastic bags, and items used to ceremonially record the *get*, e.g., a board with string attached, feather quills, and ink bottles.

Petya continued making the list:

Yellow plastic basin
Blue plastic basin
Green plastic ladle

All of this was intended for washing clothes, though there was also hope that Nadya might be allowed to use the multicolored plastic equipment to wash her long hair. Petya was entering the colony in possession of a precious document: a letter from the federal prison authority stating that the Penal Correctional Code placed no limitations on the frequency of hair washing. In theory, this might be interpreted to mean Nadya and the other thirty-nine women in her barracks could be allowed to wash their hair in between their weekly bathhouse visits. The theory would eventually prove wrong. The on-screen officer continued her litany of banned objects: maps, compasses, books on topography or dog training.

In all, the preliminaries lasted nearly three hours—with the making up of the lists and the visitor applications and the waiting for a young woman officer to come and get the documents and then waiting for her to come and get the visitors, it was nearly one in the afternoon by the time Petya, Andrei, and Gera entered the facility. They were shown out at four. Counting the short wait inside, they were cheated out of one and a half of the four hours allotted once every two months.

They spent the two and a half hours of the visit in the guest cafeteria, the facility's pride and joy, featured on the Mordovia prison authority's YouTube channel. Gera sat in her mother's lap the entire time. The four of them played a board game called *To Catch the Koschei* (Koschei the Deathless being an evil character in a number of Russian folktales); the grown-ups kept getting distracted, giving Gera the opportunity to cheat. She, meanwhile, let no one get away with the slightest deviation from the rules. In a phone conversation a couple of weeks later, Nadya would, with a mixture of pride and regret, cite this behavior as evidence that Gera was far better grounded at the age of four than Nadya herself would ever be: "I think she will be an excellent leader of middle-class protest." All along, a junior visiting-room inspector sat in the corner of the cafeteria looking absent. She did not even stop Petya and Nadya from hugging, which made this visit, overall, a lot better than the one two months earlier, when they had not even been allowed to hold hands.

While Petya, Gera, and Andrei waited inside, I drove around taking pictures of penal-colony landmarks. The Zubovo-Polyanski District, of which the town of Zubova Polyana was

the administrative center, was in essence a company town formed around the prison authority. A penal colony was the economic and architectural center of each village, with small, impermanent-looking wooden residential houses clinging to the colonies' concrete buildings and tall churches. I found one ongoing construction project: an apartment building for prison-authority staff across the street from the district prison authority itself. The tall fence around the construction site and watchtowers in its every corner suggested that the building was being put up by inmates.

Near the district penal authority sat the district administration, housed in a neoclassical building that used to be a secondary school. The building's once-proud, columned and porticoed façade was peeling, but someone had lovingly retouched the red kerchiefs on the pockmarked sculptures of two Young Pioneers on either side of the porch. It was a striking sight in a region that, for many Russians, was once synonymous with political prisoners; Marchenko and several of the other Soviet-era dissidents whose books we had brought for Nadya had served their prison sentences here.

But the region's ideology seemed less neo-Soviet than, simply, penal. Another colony featured over its entrance a large banner that said *THOSE WHO WANT TO WORK FIND THE RESOURCES, THOSE WHO DO NOT WANT TO WORK FIND EXCUSES*. When I stopped to take a picture of this banner in all its Nazi glory, I saw a policeman spot me and drive away. In a few minutes I was detained and taken to the Zubova Polyana precinct, just down the street from the House of Homemaking, to make an explanatory statement about the purpose of my work here. I had just left the police station when Petya called to say they were done.

That was that: eleven hours in the car, a brief night in the House of Homemaking, two and a half hours with Nadya—and here we were again, strapped in for the 300-mile drive back to Moscow. Gera, who had been stoic throughout the previous day's long trip and today's tedious waiting, was now acting up, shouting, demanding that she be taken back to the hotel, to her mother, and to her grandmother. Andrei was shouting, too, calling Gera a spoiled brat. Petya was trying to tell me about the visit but constantly getting distracted by calls coming in on one of his two cell phones, then absently scrolling through Twitter posts, apparently forgetting that he had been in the middle of telling a story. He did not feel like finishing it because there was not much to tell. Nadya's life now consisted of fighting for a working sewing machine in the colony factory, where her job was putting pockets on the trousers of police uniforms, and of trying to find tiny islands of common ground with the women who

surrounded her. When you lose your freedom, you lose the opportunity to choose the company you keep. The only person in the colony who had even walked the same streets as Nadya and read some of the same newspapers was the other high-profile prisoner: an ultranationalist sentenced to eighteen years for the murders of a human rights lawyer and a journalist.

Occasionally, Nadya and Petya succeeded in fashioning her surroundings into tellable stories, like the one about an inmate who everyone said had eaten her lover; or the one about an inmate who had waited four years for her lover to get out of prison, then two weeks later came home to find him in bed with another woman and stabbed them both to death; or the one about an inmate who gets regular visits from her dead husband's parents, who think that when she killed him he got what he deserved. But just now Petya did not feel like telling stories. Everyone in the car was tired, no one had gotten what he or she wanted out of this trip, and no one but me had freely chosen to be stuck in the car for hours in the company of the other three. While we were driving back to Moscow, Petya got an email from Nadya's friend and fellow Pussy Riot prisoner Maria Alyokhina; it seemed she was upset with him for talking about her solitary confinement in a different penal colony as though it were some sort of blessing—just because she did not have to interact with other inmates.

We got into Moscow at three in the morning on a dirty-snow early-March Friday. The following Monday would mark one year since the Pussy Riot women were arrested; that meant Nadya and Maria had exactly one more year left. The same day, Gera turned five.

[Propaganda]

NOW YOU SISI

From a video of senior Egyptian army officers at a meeting held by General Abdul-Fattah el-Sisi, leaked last October by the Islamist website Rasd News Network; the meeting is thought to have occurred around the time of the December 2012 constitutional referendum, seven months before the coup that deposed President Mohamed Morsi. Omar is an officer identified only by his first name. El-Sisi, then minister of defense, was appointed first deputy prime minister last August. Translated from the Arabic by Ahmed Ould Meiloud.

OMAR: You know the armed forces in any country are the main pillar of national security.