

Introduction

Olga Taratuta, the *babushka* (grandma) of Russian anarchism, was born in what is now southern Ukraine in 1876, graduated from a teachers' college, and taught school in Yelizavetgrad. Her first arrest took place in 1895, but the case was dropped. By 1898 she had become a full-time revolutionary, at first in the social democratic movement, and then in a series of anarchist-communist organizations, starting in 1903. In the same year she gave birth to a son, Leonid, known as Lenya.

In the fall of 1905, while living in Odessa, she joined the Chernoznamtsy (Black Banner) movement; in particular, its *bezmotivny* (literally "motiveless") fraction which practiced indiscriminate terror against the bourgeoisie. She helped with preparations for the bomb attack on the Café Libman in Odessa on December 17, 1905, but did not take part in the attack itself. Arrested a few days later, she was held in the Odessa Prison



along with her two-year old son. On November 1, 1906, she was sentenced by a military court to 17 years of hard labour (*katorga*), while three of her comrades were sentenced to death.

In the article below she describes the traumatic events around the execution of her comrades. Written 10 years after the event, it was not published until 1924.

The Kiev Lukyanovskaya Convict Prison

by Olga Taratuta

November 15, 1916

Finally I was alone in my own tiny cell. Roll call was finished. My "archangels"⁽¹⁾ had retreated to the far end of the corridor to relieve their boredom with gossiping. Finally some relief time. I love this time. The door will not open again till 6 a.m.; in the meantime not even a mosquito can get in. I long for this soothing peace. I'm alone with myself. . . .

I always look forward to this time as a blessing, but today . . . today I feel like I'm losing my mind in expectation of this time. I spent the day in torment. From early morning I felt myself in the grip of physical pain that seemed to be both long-standing and of recent origin.

The experience ten years ago seized

¹ Taratuta refers to the guards as "archangels."

me with such intensity, with such force, that I was glad to leave my cell today when they summoned me to work. There, in the hubbub of people and machines, I cravenly hoped to save myself from the baleful memories gripping my brain and soul. In vain! The whole day I was assailed by these memories. With each passing hour I wished more and more not to struggle with these overpowering emotions but to surrender to them completely; not to run from them, but to meet them head-on.

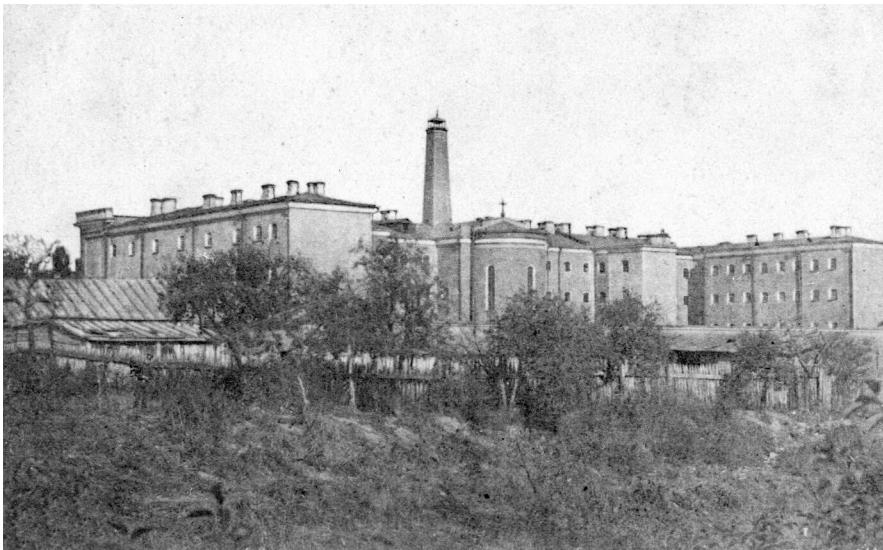
The more vividly I recalled the events of that fateful day, the more I longed to immerse myself in the stream of those events, to be overwhelmed by them. But now I had to deal with people, "archangels," and machines. They tore me away from the images of the dearly departed, from everything connected with them. In the morning I was still trying to save myself by immersing

myself in this hell. But after two hours I was already gnashing my teeth from wanting to escape from everything into my own quiet cell, where I could devote myself whole-heartedly to my dear, dead comrades.

And so passed an excruciatingly long day. Finally my yearned-for quiet time arrived. I was alone, and ready to receive my beloved, inspiring visitors. I welcomed them all. Hour after hour I relived with them the last day of their lives up to the moment when they were taken away, the moment when they uttered their last goodbyes to me. And even beyond, on the execution block at the moment the hangman's hand came down.

* * * * *

It is already two weeks from the day of sentencing. I have been let out into the courtyard of the prison at daybreak.



The Kiev Lukyanovskaya Convict Prison

From the courtyard of the women's building it is possible to see the windows of the third storey of the men's prison. By agreement with Boris and Osip, they were to hang a towel from the bars of their window as a sign that the inmates of the cell were still alive. When I called to them, they would look down and greet me. Sometimes we would exchange a few thoughts that, although of little significance to the administration, were important to us. I would return to my cell for a few hours of peace.

And so it was on the morning of November 15, 1906. I knocked impatiently on the door. The guard was late and the door remained shut. I was getting agitated. Sherochka² approached and gave me a hug.

"Don't be upset, Olya, as long as I am with you, they are alive," she said quietly, tenderly.

Turning around, I looked at her with amazement, almost with annoyance. What is she talking about? What sort of nonsense? It's true that she was sentenced to death along with Boris and Osip. But neither I nor any of the prisoners or even the administration ever doubted that her sentence would be commuted, just as the sentences of all the women condemned to death in

² Beilya Shereshevskaya is referred to in this article by the affectionate diminutives Sherochka, Sherunka, Shunka, and Shera.

the Odessa prison had been commuted up till now.

Everyone believed this, except for Sherochka herself. In her soul she was convinced that the sentence would be carried out. But she had been silent until this morning. To my angry objections and proofs of the absurdity of her conviction, she responded with a gentle caress, quietly smiling, and repeated:

"There's nothing to be done, Olya, just don't be upset, don't get angry, dear mommy."³

Finally the door opened. I ran out into the courtyard. The towel was hanging out, and Boris and Osip were standing at the window, waiting for me. They said "Hi!" I yelled "How are you?" They nodded their heads. Boris joked: "Would you like us to pray for you?" The matron pulled me away; I left the courtyard. Sherochka was already preparing breakfast for Lenya, everybody's darling. (Five months ago they brought my son here, the plan being that he would be turned over to relatives on the outside when my sentence was finalized by the court.) Once our two-year-old pet had woken up, we spent a lot of time fussing over him.

Some friends came to see me and pulled me out of the cell to a "secret

³ Within the movement Olga Taratuta was a maternal figure.

meeting." The secret consisted of making arrangements to celebrate Sherochka's birthday, which was happening this month. The preference was to time the celebration to coincide with the abrogation of the death sentence. Sherochka was going to turn 22. The comrades wanted to order flowers. They decided everything would depend on the fate of the other two: there could be no thought of a celebration if Boris and Osip were executed.

We could hardly wait for visiting hour. We were especially impatient because our family members would be the first to learn about the confirmation of sentences, which they would be able to communicate to us. But visiting hour came and went, and Sherochka was not called out, although she was expecting a visit from her sister. Afterwards we went outside for our walk. We were all hoping that Boris would have something to tell us. After five or ten minutes, they called Sherochka to the main office. Everyone walking got excited and rushed to her. She waved us off impatiently:

"Don't make a fuss, comrades, don't get excited, they're calling me to meet my sister. I'll be back with news within the hour."

I didn't doubt for a moment that she was just being summoned for a visitor. We waited.

Through the wall from the men's block an express delivery came flying. It was for me: a bundle of lilies with a letter attached. This meant that Boris had been to visitation and already returned with news and flowers. Comrades straggle around the courtyard: some with letters; others exchange remarks through the wall with comrades of the men's block. I sat by the entranceway of our block and began reading. I read for a long time. The letter was very long and written in a fine hand. It had been composed last night and this morning, before visitation. I don't know how long it took to read the letter, because I was totally absorbed in its content. During the previous two weeks, I had

often received letters from Boris, and each time they impressed me as coming from a person possessed of strong and splendid courage.

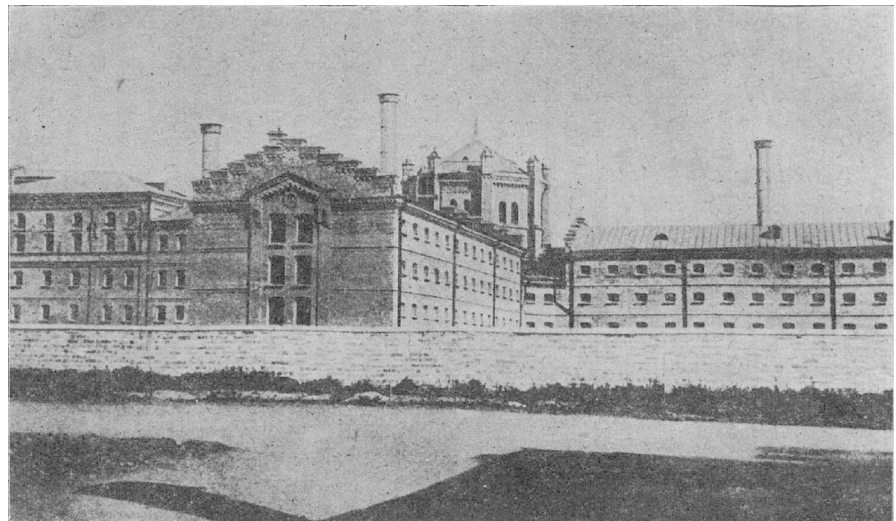
I had known Boris for many years and had taken part with him in two terrorist acts. We had organized study circles among the workers in Odessa. We had been incarcerated in the same prisons. We were released in accordance with the amnesty of 1905 as part of the same case.⁴ And now we were again imprisoned as part of the same case. I had seen him when he was young, healthy, and energetic; and when he was ill with eleven wounds. I had seen him in successes and in failures, of which there were more than a few in our collaborative work. In all the twists and turns of life, he remained a staunch anarchist-revolutionary, an active fighter for the truth and justice of the anarchist ideal. He was dearly loved and respected by all who shared his views. He was even respected and marvelled at by his opponents.

“It’s as if he was spun from the rays of the sun,” said one old social-democrat-Bolshevik, who spoke with him several times in 1905 in Yekaterinoslav. That was Boris as we knew him for many years, and yet he became an especially wonderful person for us from the day of his sentence, when it became clear that physically he would cease to exist. I say physically, for it was only in a physical sense that he felt himself at the Rubicon of what is called life. Spiritually he felt that he would live for ages—invigorated and immortal—through the everlasting idea which he embodied, for which he had struggled and died.

I was involuntarily distracted from the events of that day when the image of Boris appeared vividly in my mind, and I had an almost a physical sense of his presence.

I don’t know how long I spent reading Boris’s letter. I only remember that

⁴ Certain categories of political prisoners were released on October 21, 1905, under an amnesty.



The Odessa Prison

as soon as I had finished, I was seized with worry about Sherunka’s long absence. I asked the senior matron to send someone to the main office to find out if her sentence was confirmed. The matron returned without learning anything, and said only that visitation was ongoing and that Boris and Osip were present as well.

Another half hour went by. We had already been directed back to our cells. Sherochka had not returned. Anxiety was growing. I convinced the senior matron to go in person to get some news. We awaited her return with considerable stress. She’s coming . . . she’s moving slowly. I go to meet her. I see that her face has red splotches. I understood. . . . “Confirmed?” I ask. She nods her head affirmatively. “All three?” Her lips are contorted, she can’t say anything. She nods her head. . . .

I turn towards the comrades, I want to tell them. I listen as Yasinskaya (the senior matron) makes an effort to speak. I listen eagerly.

“Shereshevskaya asked that . . .”

“What?”

Yasinskaya babbles something, then collapses at the entrance, sobbing. The comrades stand around in a circle, quietly. Yasinskaya pulls herself together and finishes:

“Shereshevskaya asked that you not make a fuss and go to your cells.”

A tactical ploy. We understood.

“And why has Shereshevskaya not returned?” The sentence was confirmed, but that still didn’t mean that she wouldn’t return. After confirmation of a sentence there are still two weeks before the execution can be carried out, and furthermore, executions were not carried out in the daytime.

“She is delayed with her sister. She will soon return; in the meantime, just go to your cells.”

Nobody moved. I announced that we would wait there for Shera. I stood there and a few comrades stood beside me.

I remembered that Boris and Osip had already returned from visitation. I ran to the laundry room, from where Boris’s window could be seen. All the windows were already illuminated. But Boris’s window was dark. The towel was hanging from the bars. At the top of my lungs I call Boris and Osip. Comrades stand silently at all the windows of the men’s block. There is also silence from the dark window. The towel is hanging there. Yasinskaya begs me to leave. I call again and again. Someone figured out how to remove the towel. I understood. . . . Finally. . . .

Completely confused, I go somewhere

with the comrades. Suddenly I remember the meeting! They promised to meet with me before the execution at no matter what time, day or night. I run to Yasinskaya. I send her to the main office, while I myself rushed into my cell to get the cyanide. I knew that Boris and Osip always had some with them. [Subsequently it was explained that only Boris had poison. They took Osip from his walk without his cap, in which was sewn the poison. That's why Boris also didn't use poison.] In the drawer of the nightstand we still had three grains of cyanide. I stuck the poison in my pocket and waited. Yasinskaya returns with the categorical refusal:

"The warden says under no circumstances. Permission is granted only to a child related to them."

Only now did I remember that Lenya wasn't with me. Where is he? I ran along the cells. Found him. He was sitting on a cot in Vera Gorbits's cell and pouring eau de cologne on himself from a flask. Vera, in a state of agitation, was running around the cell. I carry Lenya to Yasinskaya, I babble some kind of nonsense to him, and place the poison in the pocket of his jacket. They take him away, but bring him back five minutes later. I ask him some foolish questions, and receive foolish answers. The poison is still in his pocket.

I ask Yasinskaya why they returned so soon. It turns out that Lenya was not allowed access to the condemned prisoners. The matron stood with the child in the courtyard, opposite their window, and through an open vent was able to speak with them from a considerable distance.

The knowledge that the poison had not been passed to them gnawed away at my mind. I call Yasinskaya, and persuade her to deliver the poison. She's frightened, she's very reluctant, but, after an excruciatingly long discussion, she agrees to do it. But she returns with the poison—there's no possibility of getting through to them.

Beilya Shereshesvkaya (1884–1906) was a native of Białystok, where she attended a high school for women before being expelled for revolutionary activity. An anarchist from 1903, she belonged to the Białystok group "Borba" [The Struggle] and conducted workers' study groups. At the end of 1903 she moved to Odessa and joined the group "The Irreconcilables." Arrested in April, 1904, she was released in September for lack of evidence. As "The Irreconcilables" had been liquidated, she joined an Odessa group of anarcho-communists, becoming the girlfriend of one its leaders, Moisei (Boris) Metz. She spoke at workers' circles, worked in an underground printshop, and maintained contacts with groups in other cities, frequently travelling to Białystok and Warsaw. Arrested on January 13, 1905, in Odessa, she took part in a prisoner revolt in July and was transferred, along with Metz, to a prison in Oryol. Freed under an amnesty in October, she returned to Białystok and joined the Chernoznametsi (Black Banner) movement and, in particular, its *bezmotivny* fraction which practiced indiscriminate terror against the bourgeoisie. She took part in preparing the bomb attack on the Bristol Hotel in Warsaw that took place on November 24, 1905. She then participated in the bombing of the Café Libman in Odessa on December 17, 1905. Arrested on December 22 along with Metz and Josif Brunshteyn, she offered armed resistance and suffered a severe stomach wound. During her trial, she refused to give evidence or offer any kind of defense and was sentenced to death on November 1, 1906.

Moisei (Boris) Metz (1885–1906) was born in Chernigov and became a cabinet-maker in Odessa, where he was one of the founders of the group "Union of the Irreconcilables." Arrested on April 12, 1904 when the Irreconcilables were liquidated, he joined the anarcho-communists while in prison before being released for lack of evidence. Together with Olga Taratuta, he took part in two assassination attempts. Early in 1905 he became romantically involved with Beilya Shereshesvkaya. Arrested in Odessa at the end of February, 1905, he took part in a prisoner revolt in July and, as punishment, was transferred to the Oryol convict prison. In late October, 1905, he was freed under an amnesty. He then settled in Białystok, becoming an advocate of *bezmotivny* anti-bourgeois terror. Returning to Odessa in December, 1905, he threw one of the bombs during the attack on the Café Libman. Resisting arrest on December 22, 1905, he was seriously wounded. At his trial he refused to give evidence or mount a defense but did deliver a prepared speech which was later published in the anarchist press. Condemned to death, from prison he wrote a letter to comrades encouraging them to continue to struggle for the anarchist ideal.

Josif Brunshteyn a.k.a. Osip Belenkiy (1888–1906) belonged to the Odessa workers' group of anarcho-communists and was one of their militants. At the end of 1905 he joined *bezmotivny* group to which Shereshesvkaya and Metz belonged and took part in the attack on the Café Libman. While resisting arrest on December 22, 1905, he received eleven wounds. At his trial he refused to give evidence or defend his actions and was sentenced to death.

I knock on the door, demand a meeting. Categorical refusal. In desperation I toss the poison on the table. Finis.

Time passes. Lenya demands attention, but I can't give him any. I want him to lie down.

Suddenly the door bangs open. Deputy Warden Zolotarev, Yasinskaya, and a couple of others are there. "Get ready for the meeting!" I fly around the cell like a loose cannon. My every movement is being observed, so there is no way I can reach for the poison, which has ended up under the lamp. They hurry me. I can't delay any longer, I have to go without the poison.

I went to the farewell meeting in a state of mental anguish which my

friends had never seen me in before. It was at that moment that I understood that it is much, much easier to be crucified than to accompany others to the crucifixion. The consciousness of death in the name of an idea is so clear, simple, and joyous.

A year ago, when I was living in a conspiratorial apartment, our Jewish landlady treated us to some brandy in connection with some kind of Jewish holiday. Someone asked what we should drink to. Another person proposed that we drink to the goal that none of us should die in our own beds. Everyone willingly clinked glasses and drank up.

A year went by. One of our band of friends perished while offering armed

resistance. An indefatigable, implacable fighter against private property and the state, the anarchist Gelinker,⁵ after offering stubborn resistance to the police, shot himself with the last bullet in his revolver.

Another member of our group, the famous anarchist Notka—a splendid comrade, organizer, and propagandist, my “partner” (co-conspirator) in the Warsaw affair, the terror of the Białystok authorities—perished during a pogrom. In 1906 he had organized self-defense in poor, working class neighbourhoods. A whole district of poor peasants and workers was defended by the anarchists, but some of them were killed there, including Notka, who was savagely tortured to death by the police.⁶

And now I was going to accompany my closest, most beloved comrades to the executioner’s block. I was tormented with the realization that **this cup would not pass from them**. What a great difference from the mood a year ago when we talked about not dying in one’s own bed. But such a contradiction was inevitable, it seems to me, for revolutionaries who are liable to find themselves in the situation of being buried rather than being the gravediggers. However, I don’t know if it was like this for everyone. Possibly I was weaker than the others. I only know how it was for me. I was devastated, tormented by the impending defilement of my friends by the hangman. If I still wasn’t crying, it was only because I was unable to do so.

It was in such a state that I crossed the

⁵ Gelinker (‘Lefty’) was the pseudonym of the charismatic terrorist Aron Yelin (1888–1906). On May 9, 1906, a meeting of Białystok anarchists in the Jewish cemetery was attacked by police and Cossacks. Yelin gave up his life to allow his comrades to escape.

⁶ Notka was the pseudonym of Benjamin Bachrach (1884–1906). According to an alternative version of Notka’s end, he died in early June, 1906, while resisting arrest along with another comrade. A bomb explosion killed Notka, his comrade, and two policemen.

threshold to the condemned . . .

And there I stopped short. I felt desperately that I couldn’t cope with what confronted me, there on the threshold of the condemned. How can I convey the situation? Let me at least say that they met me on the threshold quietly, joyously, and smiling brightly; that their faces shone with a very special, spiritual quality that came from within each of them. Their voices sounded and their eyes lit up in a new way.



Beilya Shereshevskaya

Faith—passionate faith in the deathless greatness of the idea of anarchism—sounded in their speech.

“We’re not dying, Olya. We’re alive and we will live with you, and with the fighters for anarchism, in your terrible struggle, in your victories and defeats, in prisons, in *katorga*, and in your deaths. We will always be with you until the day we celebrate the triumph and victory of our great idea of anarchism,” said Boris.

“We will go on living, Olya. We are immortal, just like the immortal struggle for the great ideals of anarchism, for which they are crucifying us,” said Sherockka.

Again I broke down. I said something that at least partly expressed my feelings. I was oppressed with the sense of not having fulfilled my duty. I restrained any impulse to speak with bit-

terness. I can say only that everything experienced by me on that day, up until the meeting—up until the moment when I crossed the threshold to them—appeared to be strange, superfluous, and hazy. Everything I had experienced up until then was in crude dissonance with the greatness I found in their presence.

I uttered a groan, but the sound was not heard behind the door . . .

I left them a different person, renewed. Ten years have passed since then. Many have left our ranks. An enormous number were executed. Many, like myself, have spent the decade being dumped in various Russian *katorga* prisons. I have endured a lot and much of what I took away from the cell of my beloved condemned comrades has faded and become effaced in the throes of implacable struggle. I’ve acquired new outlooks, but what remains with me to this day from the memory of my dead comrades is their unshakeable faith in the triumph of the idea of anarchism and their passionate, unquenchable thirst to fight for it.

Again I’ve been distracted. I will continue.

The carriage for the condemned approached. The visit ended. We said goodbye. Shera whispered:

“There’s a letter in the nightstand.”

We warmly embraced for the last time.

In my cell was Vera Khalfin. Lenya couldn’t sleep, he was fretting. It was already 11 p.m. I tried to rock Lenya to sleep. He insisted on a song. I sing. . . . Before my eyes I could see my lively, affectionate, cheerful comrades. In my mind’s eye, I want to follow them to the place of execution, to the very moment when they are under the control of the hangman—but I cannot. Neither my soul nor my brain can process this. I keep seeing for a moment the gallows, the ropes, and the terrible sight of bodies swaying in the air. But before this vision can reach the

conscious level, it quickly fades and is replaced by others: the cell, and my visitation with them—lively, warm, quietly joyful. Lenya frets, he wants a song. I sing. . . . He goes to sleep. . . .

I rush to the nightstand and find the letter. It was written the night before. For some reason Sherochka expected they would be executed then. In her letter she said goodbye to myself and Lenya. The letter was divided into two sections: the first half was devoted to Lenya (whom she warmly loved) and precepts for him. The second part was devoted to me

It is with inexpressible pain that I recall that Sherochka's letter, the letter of Osip (delivered to me by the Chief Warden of the prison the following morning), and also the letter of the rabbi (received on the third day after the execution), have all been lost. Osip's letter, just like Sherochka's, is exceptionally valuable and not just for me alone. I remember the overwhelming impression produced by Sherochka's letter on all the imprisoned comrades. It was passed from hand to hand. Most striking in the letter was

her passionate hymn to life at the moment of her death. Joyful, triumphant life pulsed from each line, from each word. Reading the letter, I forgot for a moment that her pulse had already stopped beating

I imagined that I was together with her in freedom. We were going to test a dynamite-bomb. It was November, early morning, a strong wind was blowing. We walked along a beach, searching for a safe place for the test, a place from which we could easily disappear after the explosion. The sea was in a thundering rage. Waves, one after another, crashed against the rocky shore. Sherochka was completely spell-bound by the tempestuous sea. With uncommon agility, she climbed up on a rock. The wind was ruffling her dress, her hair was dishevelled, and her arms were extended towards the sea. "Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho," she cried joyfully at the top of her lungs, "ho-ho-ho-ho-ho." The waves, striking about the rock, splashed her with a cascade of foam. She embraced the sea with open arms. "Here, little wave: More... More... More..."

The bomb turned out to be successfully made—it exploded well. We ran back, wrapped in our shawls. A frightened policeman was running to meet us. Sherochka screamed:

"Run, brother, run fast. The sea has gone mad, it's spitting bombs."

The policeman stopped, stared uncomprehendingly, then ran forward again. Sherunka, full of life, laughed uproariously.

That's how I remembered Sherunka when I read her letter, written as she awaited execution. Dying in the name of an idea was perceived by her as a thing of beauty and creativity. With a profound belief in the future of anarchism, she sacrificed her own life and regretted only that she didn't have many lives that she could lay triumphantly on the altar of impending freedom.

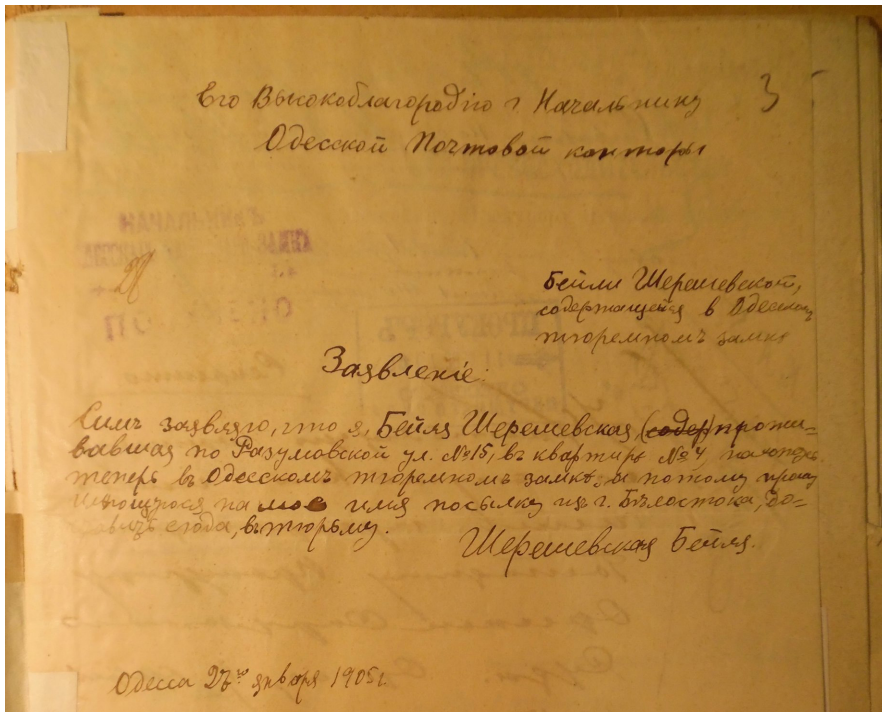
"More, little wave, still more. . . ."

In the morning I was summoned to the office. They gave me Sherunka's dress, and Boris's cap and watch (on the inside of the lid was scratched "Goodbye, Olya, live and create.") A letter by Osip, which he managed to write after my departure, was signed by all three.

Our handsome, brave Osip. A dedicated, selfless comrade, always ready to engage with enemies in bloody battle, in life he was shy, gentle, and modest, like a girl. We called him "Whitey," or "Silent" Osip. In his letter, saying goodbye, he thanked us for the life he had spent with us, for all the good things that our circle had given to him, and even for the death which he embraced with pride.

November 16, 1916

My manuscript broke off at this point. I had written almost till morning. Volchek began to tap more and more often. The night orderly officer came by and I heard her whispering with the guard. The latter, evidently, reported that I had still not gone to



Beilya Shereshevskaya was arrested in Odessa on January 13, 1905. On January 26 she sent this notice to the Odessa postmaster requesting that her mail be forwarded to the Odessa Prison.

bed. The notion of a search struck me like a knife in the heart. I had to either hide the manuscript quickly or tear it up so the swine wouldn't get their hands on it. I tried to tear up the manuscript but couldn't bring myself to do it. I experienced a stabbing internal pain. I held on to the manuscript until morning. Then I was called to work. I took it with me. Finally I was alone again after roll call. With difficulty I read what I had written. I was so worn out after the previous day's "celebration with friends" that I was staggering as if I was drunk. My eyesight was blurred, my hands were shaking, and I was weak and helpless. I had a severe "hangover." But I had a sudden desire to finish what I had started. I wanted to say a few words about what I knew about the last minutes of my friends' lives.

Two or three days after the executions, I received a letter from the rabbi who was present at the place of execution. He began his letter by explaining how he happened to be there with the condemned prisoners. At 11 pm they came for him, not saying where they were taking him. His whole family was in a panic. The police chief (it seems that's who it was), began to reassure them, saying that they were just going to borrow him for a short time for some kind of ceremony. The rabbi, frightened and agitated, followed them. They took him to Aleksandrovsky Park; from there, on foot, they went to a courtyard belonging to the civic administration. A carriage with the condemned prisoners was standing there. The hangmen explained to the rabbi that they had brought him there to hear the parting words of state criminals subject to execution.

His heart was wrung as he approached the carriage. The door opened and three policemen emerged. The rabbi was ordered to get in the carriage. Horror-stricken, he entered. The door closed. The astonished prisoners asked him what he wanted, and he explained. Boris, speaking for all three, replied that they didn't need a spiritual counsellor [dukhovik] and, therefore,

he was free to leave immediately, but if he was agreeable, they could chat for a bit. The rabbi agreed. A quarter of an hour was available for conversation.

As I mentioned earlier, the letters of Shunka, Osip, and the rabbi have been lost. Despite my best intentions, I have scarcely succeeded in re-establishing the content of the rabbi's letter, which described exceptionally well the mood of these giants of the struggle about to die for their beliefs.

I will try to reproduce from memory what the rabbi wrote: [Many comrades, incarcerated at the time in the Odessa prison, read the letters of Belenkiy, Shereshevskaya, and the rabbi. I will be very grateful if they can fill in the gaps for me.]

All three spoke to me, but mainly the woman. It's difficult to recall what each of them said individually, but each of them had the same frame of mind: calm, lucid, and in good spirits. They said that their beliefs, strong and deep, were based not on religion but on the doctrines of anarchism. Its essence is fraternity, equality, and freedom, not for some particular nationality, but for all nations, for the whole world, and for every individual.

I didn't argue with them. I listened and was astonished. During the brief quarter of an hour conversation I had with them, I momentarily forgot that I was speaking with doomed people, that the hands of the hangman were extended over them and would descend upon them in a matter of minutes, even seconds. It seemed to me that I was talking with people who were preparing for a long, but pleasant journey, a journey upon which they pinned great hopes and expectations. That's what it was like.

"Please tell our friends and comrades," they said, "that we died untroubled and firm in our belief that our deaths will give birth to life. To a vast multitude of young lives! They raise the banner of anarchism which is falling from our hands and continue our struggle. When they fall in the struggle, they will be replaced by others

until the great victory is attained. That day is coming. There's no doubt about that and, in dying, we will live on in the hearts of all who struggle for the truly great anarchist revolution."

Listening to them, I was completely spell-bound. I forgot about the reality of the situation. Suddenly there was a command like a thunderclap: "Get out."

I jumped up and they removed me from the carriage.

In the adjacent courtyard preparations for the executions were taking place. I began to tremble. I asked for permission to remain where I was, in the first courtyard. They gave me permission, and so I was spared from the terrible spectacle of violent death.

First out of the carriage they took the woman. Calmly and resolutely she made her way to the courtyard where the execution was carried out. What happened there I do not know, but after a few minutes the police officer Panaciuk⁷ came running out. Clutching his head, he screamed:

"No, I can't. You know she's still talking and saying goodbye to the soldiers."⁸

The second one they took was Boris Metz. He approached me, gave me a hug and a kiss, and, smiling, said warmly:

"Zay Gezunt" [Good-bye].

I was shaken by the serenity of his face and the calmness of his voice.

I could scarcely stay on my feet.

They came to take the third one. He alone did not go willingly. He scrunched

⁷ The pristav Panaciuk was killed with a bomb on May 7, 1907, in Odessa by the peasant Chirkov, a member of the South-Russian Regional Committee of the Socialist Revolutionary Party. (Note added by the editors of *Katorga and Exile*.)

⁸ According to the survivors of Shereshevskaya's group, her death agony lasted 25 minutes. See <https://www.katesharp-leylibrary.net/7m0dqr>.

up in the corner of the carriage and didn't want to come out. Him they took by force. . . ."

I read the memoir I had unexpectedly poured forth. When I wrote it, I was not setting myself any goals. But memories came flooding back to me with clarity and forcefulness, and involuntarily spilled out onto the paper.

Today, after recovering from my "hangover," I was seized with the desire to save what I had written, since it had value as an historical document.

More than ever I sensed the unsatisfactory nature of what I had written.

How inadequate is my writing for perpetuating your memory, my inspiring friends!

* * * * *

In 1903 Shereshvskaya-Vaysbaum was expelled from the 7th class of the Białystok gymnasium for engaging in underground anarchist activity in working class study circles. She was 19 at the time.

Moisei (Boris) Metz, a 22-year-old cabinetmaker, joined a group of anarcho-communists in 1903.

In early 1904 Shereshvskaya and Metz were arrested in Odessa in a connection with a case involving anarcho-communists. After several months they were released and again set to work.

Then began the year 1905, packed with events. After January 9⁽⁹⁾ our work became especially lively and intensive. Workers' circles proliferated. The demand for literature, for leaflets, was enormous. We had to write them, print them, and distribute them. We had to organize new workers' circles

⁹ Bloody Sunday, date of the massacre of peaceful demonstrators in St. Petersburg.

while continuing to carry on work with the old ones. We had to maintain links with workers in other cities. We were up to our necks in work, but our resources, as always, were few.

Shereshvskaya, Metz, and a number of others were working themselves to death. At the end of February, 1905, Shereshvskaya and Metz were arrested again in Odessa for anarcho-communist activities. In July of that year, as a consequence of a revolt of political prisoners, Shereshvskaya and Metz were among the 200 prisoners sent to prisons in central Russia. Metz and Shereshvskaya found themselves in Oryol Prison. They were overtaken there by revolutionary events and were released in accordance with the manifesto of October 17, 1905.

Around October 22–23, Shereshvskaya and Metz were released. By that time the revolution had already been destroyed by the tsar's hangmen. Pogroms were raging and beatings of the intelligentsia were in full swing. Throughout Russia tens of thousands of workers were cast aside, deprived of work, and condemned with their families to starvation. A large number of the most advanced workers were locked up in Russian prisons. The atmosphere was oppressive and terrifying.

When Metz and Shereshvskaya arrived in Białystok, a pogrom was expected on a day-to-day basis. The population was panicking. The Białystok anarchists, visiting Warsaw, were apprised of the vicious humiliations inflicted on the defeated workers by the bourgeoisie and the government. Among other things, the Białystok anarchists were shown an item in a Warsaw newspaper about preparations for some kind of celebration by the bourgeoisie, a banquet in the up-scale Bristol café-restaurant. The anarchist workers hatched a plan to remind the bourgeoisie that their celebration of victory over the bones and blood of

tortured workers was premature, that the system of vile tyranny and violence of the well-off would be answered by systematic terror.

Three anarchist workers—Metz, Notka, and Lialka⁽¹⁰⁾—decided that the first large-scale anti-bourgeois action would coincide with the celebration at the Café Bristol. Shereshvskaya also participated in this action. In early November the café-restaurant was blown up along with its feasting "victors." The action was successful; the participants were able to disappear with the help of Warsaw comrades.

In early December, 1905, Metz, Shereshvskaya, and Osip Belenkiy, acting according to according to the same motives, took part in an analogous terrorist act, bombing the Café Libman in Odessa. Five days after the bombing, the participants were arrested. As a matter of principle, they refused to either give evidence during interrogation or to use the services of defenders in court.

In view of the refusal to give evidence, the investigatory authorities, in drawing up the indictment, were guided by the external aspects of those arrested: the wounded were ascribed as active participants in the action, while the non-wounded were labelled as shielding criminals. The sentences were decided in advance; the court was simply a formality. Since Shereshvskaya, Metz, and Brunshteyn (Osip) were wounded, they were found guilty of direct participation and sentenced to the death penalty. The military-district court pronounced the sentences on November 1, 1905.

The executions were carried out on the evening of November 15.

¹⁰ Lialka was the pseudonym of Yakov Tysherman (1889–after 1917), who became a participant of *bezmotivny* terror in 1905. In and out of prison and exile for several years, he became an informer for the police in 1913.

Afterword

On December 15, 1906, Olga escaped from the Odessa Prison with help from the friendly guard Yasinskaya, leaving behind her beloved Lenya. After carrying on underground work in Kiev and Moscow, she fled abroad in the spring of 1907 to Geneva where her comrades were planning new exploits, including blowing up a wall of the Lukyanovskaya Prison.

Returning to Russia in early 1908, she was soon arrested and received a new sentence of 21 years of *katorga*. This time there was no escape and she was finally freed by the revolution on March 1, 1917.

Upon release, Olga didn't immediately throw herself into revolutionary work, but concentrated on looking after her son. By 1920 she was active simultaneously in both the Nabat Confederation of Anarchists of Ukraine and the Makhnovist movement. At the end of 1920, she was imprisoned for the first time by the Bolsheviks, and was one of the seven anarchists released for a day to attend Kropotkin's funeral in Moscow.

In April, 1921, while still in Moscow's Butyrki Prison, she became a member of the Society of Former Political Prisoners (later the All-Union Society of Former Political Prisoners and Exiles – VOPIS). A few weeks later she was severely beaten before being transferred to the prison in Oryol. Later she com-

mented that a year-and-a-half in Soviet prisons shortened her life more than 10 years in a tsarist prison. After serving a term of exile in Northern Russia, she returned to Kiev in 1924 and soon announced her withdrawal from VOPIS because of its domination by its communist fraction. But her article about the execution of her comrades in 1906 was published in a VOPIS journal in the same year.

In 1924–1929 she took part in underground anarchist activities, notably establishing a secure link with anarchists abroad through a safe house on the Polish border. In the 1930s she was subjected to more arrests and was finally shot on February 8, 1938.

Sources

O. Taratuta, *The Kiev Lukyanovskaya Penitentiary* was originally published in **Katorga and Exile: Stories of the Revolutionary Movement in Russia** (Kiev, 1924), pp. 30–41. The portrait of Shereshevskaya is from this book.

The article was reprinted in the Russian-American journal *Volna*: № 57 (September, 1924), pp. 33-40.

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