Prison Riot

We worked sixteen to seventeen hours a day, from 7:30 a.m. to 12:30 a.m. We slept four hours a day. We had a day off once every month and a half.

Conditions at the prison are organized in such a way that the inmates in charge of the work shifts and dorm units are the ones tasked by the wardens with crushing the will of inmates, terrorizing them, and turning them into speechless slaves.

Sleep deprived and exhausted by the endless pursuit of production quotas, the inmates are always on the verge of flying off the handle, screaming their heads off, and fighting. A young woman was struck in the head with scissors because she had delivered police trousers to the wrong place. Another woman tried to stab herself in the stomach with a hacksaw.

People were left behind bars alone with the understanding that they were goners, that they were broken, crucified, and doomed.

People fall asleep at their sewing machines. They sew their fingers together. They die.

If a needle pierces your fingernail and slices through your finger, your mind cannot process what is happening for the first five seconds. There is no pain, nothing. You just do not comprehend why you cannot pull your hand out of the sewing ma- chine. After five seconds, a wave of pain washes over you. Wow, look, your finger is stuck on the needle.

That is why you cannot pull your hand out. It's simple. You can sit alone nursing your finger for five minutes but not for longer. You have to keep on sewing. You're hardly the first person to sew through her finger. What bandages are you talking about? You're in prison.

Your hands are scratched and pierced by needles, there is blood all over the table, but you try to sew anyway, because you are part of an assembly line and you must carry out your part of the job on a par with the experienced seamstresses. But the damned machine keeps breaking down.

Time and again, the needle in your sewing machine breaks, but there are no spare needles. You have to sew, but there are no needles. So you find old, blunt needles on the wooden floor and you sew. They do not punch through the fabric, and the thread gets tangled and breaks off. But you are sewing, and that's the main thing.

At night you have a good dream that makes you wake up with a smile on your face: you dream that you are presented with a set of needles. You wake up, look around, and realize that no, it was only a dream, a beautiful, rose-tinted dream. In reality, you will again sew the whole day with the blunt needles you scare up in the manufacturing zone.

My imprisonment is the reverse, material side of the Matrix, hundreds of bodies put into operation, weak, pale, dumb bodies, hundreds of physical existences enveloped in the slime of the eternal return, the slime of apathy and stagnation.

Dreaming only of sleep and a sip of tea, the exhausted, harassed, and dirty convict becomes an obedient putty in the hands of the wardens, who see us solely as an unpaid workforce. In June 2013, my monthly wages came to 50 cents.

There is little crying in here: everyone understands that it won't change anything. It's more like a deep sorrow that is not expressed in crying. Laughing isn't tolerated much here. If someone does laugh, she is approached and told, "What, you having fun?" Or, "What, you got nothing better to do?" But I laugh anyway.

In September of 2013 I started the most dangerous hunger strike I'd ever done. I handed a letter to the prison officials: "I will not remain silent, watching in resignation as my fellow prisoners collapse under slave-like conditions. I demand that human rights be observed at the prison. I demand that the law be obeyed in this Mordovian camp. I declare a hunger strike and refuse to be involved in the slave labor at the prison until the administration complies with the law and treats women convicts not like cattle banished from the legal realm for the needs of the garment industry, but like human beings."

Prison is an island of legalized totalitarianism. The objective is to standardize the thoughts and actions of the people who end up on the island. If you dare to rebel in a totalitarian state, be prepared to be shot.

"It was here, in Butyrka prison, that I gave some honest words to myself, some kind of word, that I embraced something," writes gulag survivor Varlam Shalamov. "What were these words? The main thing was matching word and deed. The capacity for self-sacrifice. The sacrifice was life. How it would be taken. And how it would be used."

Resistance gave me the strength to live.

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