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# One Woman's Account of 16 Years Behind Bars in a Russian Prison

By Tanya Lokshina

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Yekaterina Samutsevich was one of three members of the punk group Pussy Riot to spend time in a Russian penal colony after performing an anti-Putin song in Moscow's Christ the Saviour cathedral.

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In 1999, 20-year-old Tatyana Gavrilova was convicted of murder by the Russian courts. She spent the next 16 years in various institutions. On Sept. 9 this year she was released from the IK-2 women's prison in Mordovia and went straight to Moscow, taking with her a documented account of her treatment at the hands of prison authorities.

Gavrilova described her ordeal to MediaZona, the alternative online news agency established by Pussy Riot members Maria Alyokhina and Nadezhda Tolokonnikova. Her account cannot be independently verified, but her description has struck a chord with many who have endured the harshness of the Russian penal system — including Alyokhina and Tolokonnikova themselves.

This is her story.

## Murder

"On March 8, 1999 I went to meet someone I knew. I was 20 years old. This guy had committed crimes but he had served his time by then. He liked boys but what does it matter who likes what?

"Since I looked like a tomboy, he had tried it on with me many times and he was used to getting whatever he wanted by force. That night was no different.

"While we talked about this and that, his hands started to creep towards me again. Only now, after having spent so many years inside, do I understand why prisoners are so quick to reach for their weapons. He grabbed hold of a knife but I turned it against him and killed him. It all happened so fast.

"I went to my sister's place to sort it all out. Should I go to the police or what? I was told to make it look as if he was killed during a robbery. I went back to the flat and grabbed the first thing I saw, a sheepskin coat and something else, even though there were more valuable things there. My sister was going to throw it away in the morning but the plan didn't work out, and I was caught with it all.

"In court, they painted a very negative picture of me. According to them I was an alcoholic and a drug addict, despite the fact that I had played sport since I was a kid and competed at local and regional levels. But they brought a case against me and fitted me up. I was sentenced to 16 years in prison.

## Cemetery

"From the detention centre, I was sent on to prison in the city of Perm. I didn't know then that there is only one law in prison: Everyone does as they want. What a farce.

I started to try to contest my sentence. I couldn't write the appeals alone but the women in my cell helped me. But nothing came of it: the Federal Prison Service didn't send my appeals on. You can write as much as you want, they said. I had been offered work in the prison administration but had turned it down and so 'didn't deserve' the right to appeal my sentence, they said.

"From then on, my relationship with the staff started to go downhill: They gave me a good beating on several occasions and placed me in solitary confinement.

"Sometimes they forced people to confess. If you didn't take responsibility for a crime you didn't commit it would be only be the beginning of your troubles, the worst will be yet to come. Of course, I still didn't understand this fully back then, I didn't realize quite where I'd ended up.

"Once, I blurted out: 'If you don't let me appeal against my sentence, I'll complain to [Official X] about your crimes.' I didn't know then that [Official X] was in league with them. They beat me up and placed me in solitary confinement."

"A female prisoner, P, was killed soon after I arrived. She was murdered by 'observers' [inmates who enjoy privileges in return for maintaining order on behalf of the prison administration]. But the staff also played their part [by not protecting her].

"I didn't usually get involved in disputes because it's dangerous [to stick your neck out], but on this occasion I stood up for P after they set upon her in the shower. I went to [Official Y] and warned that the observers intended to kill her."

"I asked that she be kept away from the room where prisoners are intimidated, tortured and broken by other inmates and prison staff. [Official Y] couldn't care less. She was taken anyway. I knew that the prisoners would kill her, I just didn't know when."

"I woke up one morning to find that P had been strangled and her body placed in the corner of the cell.

"I understood then that I had to get out of that place so I decided to take the blame for the death of P — but only until the case reached [Official Z]. I was by no means going to carry the can the whole way. There are times when you have no choice. The main thing was to get out, to stay alive. My hopes were dashed of course. [Official Z], whose job it was to make sure the law was observed in correctional facilities, forced me to dictate my confession. He didn't give a damn about my appeals.

"I was transferred to IK-28 in the end [where Pussy riot member Alyokhina also served time]. I vividly remember how I left the prison: I was led in handcuffs down a corridor lined with prison officers. They beat me with their batons and cracked me on the head. I remember how one animal stood behind me ..." [crying]. "I couldn't stand it anymore: I turned round and spat in his mug. I didn't manage to reach the car under my own steam.

"I was sent to a special prison for lifers, especially dangerous prisoners and so forth. Everyone calls this place the 'special graveyard'. It's no place for a woman. I'm the only woman in Russia who's spent eight months in the graveyard' — but not officially, of course. On paper, I was registered as being somewhere else.

"The walls were half a meter thick. I was given my own cell but was treated the same as the other prisoners: If they came round to do an inspection they would beat up everyone, me included. The prison officers would arrive and order everyone to vacate their cells and strip to the waist. I say that I'm a woman and am not going to get undressed. 'What are you, a faggot?' one of them says to me. 'It is you who's the faggot,' I reply.

"They began to suggest, no, to insist, that I take the rap for a host of crimes. The second Chechen war was underway by then, and they started to make out that I was a Chechen sniper and had opened fire on Russians at a roadblock. I didn't accept any of this, of course. They said that I'd never be released anyway but if I agreed to be the fall guy I would be granted parole. I might have been young but I had enough sense to refuse.

"My defiance earned me a spell in a punishment cell where they sometimes forgot about me. No food arrived and the radiators didn't work. Cold, gloom and loneliness were my only companions. My nerves were shot and I became afraid of my own shadow.

## 'Special conditions'

"As a result, they got nothing out of me. They sent me to a psychiatric clinic attached to the Federal Prison Service, where I spent the next six years. Corporal punishment wasn't practiced there but they pumped you full of drugs instead. They even injected illegal drugs, such as sulfozinum. [Sulfozinum was used to treat schizophrenia in the U.S.S.R. but was found to cause severe muscle pain: Doctors later stopped using it although there are rumors it is used to punish psychiatric patients.]

"You lose yourself in there. Under the influence of these drugs, of the torture that they inflicted upon us, you soon forget even how to hold a spoon. You have no past and no future.

"I was then placed under special measures because I still tried to defend myself, contact journalists and the like. I am the only woman to have suffered special measures, although, strictly, that shouldn't have been allowed.

"Since 2003, they can only be imposed on men, not women. They locked me up in a punishment block, in a tiny cell that measured two strides from wall to wall. Only after half a year in this cell was I allowed to go for walks outside, and even then I was in handcuffs and only allowed out with the men. The injections continued.

"On paper, of course, there were no special measures. But look, if some special commission decided to go out there, I could tell them precisely where [the prison] is and what is in it. That means that I was there. Right?

"A year after they began, the special measures ended. In 2007 I was sent to a normal hospital, where they established that I was healthy.

## Transfer after Transfer

"I was transferred from institution to institution, from prison to prison, they didn't know where to put me. As far as the documents were concerned, I could be registered in several places at the same time. Meanwhile, I kept writing appeals to prosecutors and the prison administration. I continued to pursue my inquiries [in the belief that] she who controls information controls the situation.

"I requested that they send me to a prison in Kirov province, I [believed that I] had that right. Instead, they packed me off to Mordovia, nobody cared a jot. Wherever I went, I ran into trouble. Once, I ended up in Ulyanovsk and had to fight off two people who were trying to force themselves upon me. It was self defense

"In the summer of 2007, they placed me in the IK-2 prison in Mordovia. Before the van had even reached its destination, they had told me that they had heard all about me. I was immediately initiated into the rules of the place; the wardens took my bag away because I was supposedly resisting an inspection, removed my documents and started to shred them and scatter the pieces.

"They shouted threats and insults. In short, it quickly dawned on me where I'd ended up. On the very first day, I was threatened with solitary confinement because I had refused to sign

a form saying that 'Gavrilova has been given three bed-sheets'. How could I sign it when they only gave me two?

"[Official A] called me ... and struck me a few times on the temple with his baton. I couldn't just do nothing, so I started to defend myself ... He cried out and the officers came running ... He said, quietly, that I would never leave this prison. Then the effing and blinding began.

"I was taken to a medical examination where they established that Gavrilova 'may be held in solitary confinement'. They tried to take my crucifix off me but shouted 'they're coming to kill me today ... I'm not taking my crucifix off'. [Official B] was called and he too demanded that I take it off but I told them all the same thing.

"My crucifix stayed on.

"As I was being led back to my cell, [Official B] cuffed me hard in the back of the head. I whipped round, side-swiped my leg into his stomach.

"The guards called for back-up and by the time riot police arrived in body Armour and helmets I'd been handcuffed to a radiator. [Official B] and others started to hit me in the breasts and stomach and two of the riot police joined in.

"After that I couldn't sleep, what with all the terrible pains. Breathing was difficult, too. Two months later, they gave in and sent me to the hospital. Prisoners aren't usually let out if they have visible wounds but suddenly there was an emergency — Vladimir Lukin, Russia's Human Rights Commissioner, had sent them a message saying that he had read and noted one of my complaints about being denied medical aid.

"The hospital staff were shocked when I was brought in looking like a corpse, my head shaking, but I kept on scribbling complaints and [sending them to everyone and anyone].

"IK-2 had to get rid of me, so they wrote an announcement under my name saying that I'd been hospitalized in a psychiatric ward. That's where you end up if you appeal. If you want to find plaintiffs in a prison, take a look at the psychiatric ward.

"The appeals regarding assault and battery that I had written in 2007 only came to light in 2009. [Two investigators] turned up at the prison. I gave evidence and told them what had happened to me. I pointed the finger at [Official A and Official B], and said that they had beaten me.

"The investigator took down my testimony but it was all smoothed over in the end. A case was never launched, on the grounds that 'Gavrilova was not in command of her faculties at the time of giving evidence'.

## Freedom

"I have been told many times by ... various prisons that I would never be released. They did everything they could to keep me inside but I got out in the end. I understood that only information could help me to survive. I explained that my life was in danger but had I died, it would have been a matter of indifference to them.

"I was attacked constantly. The prison administration sent prisoners to [come and get me]: One assaulted me with a razor blade.

"I'm ready to help any investigators willing to sort out this abuse. This was my life, after all, I gave years of my life to the prison system.

"Protecting the rights of inmates, I believe, is in the interest of all Russian citizens because they will get out in the end and live amongst you. Violence breeds violence, doesn't it?"

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