

THE BIRDS

Few creatures can endure the harsh climate of Siberia's far north, where the winter temperature often drops as low as -74° F. By then, the birds have long since flown south to their winter feeding grounds in the Philippines and Japan. Only the hardy ravens and magpies remain behind. And the ever-present sparrows . . .

During the coldest times, the sparrow would cling to the sides of the barracks with their tiny claws, pressing their little bodies against the walls. There they stayed for hours. If I was very quiet, I could get close enough to see that their little eyes were closed as they rested. It was so pleasant for them. How fragile they seemed, how incongruous with the severity of our surroundings.

One day I took them some bread crumbs. Carefully I shook the crumbs out of my pockets onto the snowy ground. Before long, I was surrounded by a whole flock of sparrows and the crumbs disappeared in moments. The little birds eyed me expectantly, waiting for more. I showed them my empty hands: "I have nothing else. Tomorrow I'll try to bring you more."

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After a while, the sparrows recognized me. Every time I went outside, they'd leave their precarious shelters and gather around me, waiting for their bread. There were more than I could count.

Gazing at the tiny birds, joy filled my heart as I remembered the words of the Lord Jesus Christ: "Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? And one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered.

**Fear ye not therefore, ye are of more value
than many sparrows." (Matthew 10:29-31)**

Dear little birds, if you haven't been forgotten by God, then neither have I! And so it was during my years in bonds that I saw most clearly God's protection and His faithfulness to me and to His Word. What a privilege it is to belong to Him!



THE MOST DANGEROUS OF ALL

Anvar and I were the only prisoners in the “raven,” a black police van used to transport prisoners. He sat alone in a compartment meant to hold fifteen prisoners while I was handcuffed and locked behind the metal door of a tiny cell reserved for the most dangerous criminals. Two soldiers armed with machine guns guarded us. A heavy metal grille separated them from us.

The harsh Siberian climate had left its mark on the narrow asphalt road. The lurching, swaying raven slowed to a crawl as the driver tried to maneuver around massive potholes. Though it was mid-May, snow still covered much of the ground in this vast territory known as Yakutia, thousands of miles northeast of Moscow. Our destination: Bolshaya Markha, a strict regime labor camp in a remote region in the far north of Siberia.

Anvar shook his head in amazement. “Georgi, why do they treat you like this?” he shouted over the thunderous roar of the engine. A heavy accent thickened his Russian.

I'd met Anvar two weeks earlier in the prison at Irkutsk where we shared a cell. Then we spent ten days at a camp near the city of Yakutsk. Anvar was a stocky man of medium height. The gray stubble on his huge, shaved head seemed premature for a man in his mid-forties. A sharp eagle-like nose protruded over a coal-black mustache. Muslim by background, Anvar was fascinated that I was imprisoned for preaching the Gospel. We had spent many hours discussing the Bible and Jesus Christ.

Anvar openly admitted that he had killed the district attorney in the city of Baku, for which he was sentenced to fifteen years. He quickly earned a reputation among camp authorities for being a dangerous criminal. He had already stabbed one prisoner with a knife and struck another on the head with an iron bar. Anvar was usually handcuffed during transport and was surprised at being denied that "privilege." He turned to me again.

"Ha! It looks as though you are even more dangerous than I!" He shouted something else, but the words were lost under the engine's clamor. The isolation of my tiny cage made it useless for me to reply. Through the window in the door of my cell, I could see Anvar talking with the two soldiers. He kept pointing in my direction. The soldiers were very young. I knew they made no decisions about where or how to move me. Those orders came from the KGB. And to the KGB, I really was more dangerous than Anvar.

One prison camp director had told me, "You'd be better off if you were a thief or a murderer rather than a Christian!"

What will the next camp be like?, I wondered as I thought about the past week.

I had just spent ten days at camp Mokhsogollokh, near Yakutsk. Although the camp was as secure as a fortress, guards often fired random warning shots at night to discourage dreams of escape.

About a mile from the camp was a factory, which manufactured panels, flooring, and other components for the pre-fabricated buildings of the North. Like the camp, the factory was surrounded by massive wood fences topped with rolls of barbed wire. Armed



ONE OF THE SOVIET PRISON CAMPS IN WHICH GEORGI VINS WAS IMPRISONED

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soldiers from the Ministry of the Interior, MVD, patrolled the area with specially trained German shepherd guard dogs.

About 2000 prisoners and 500 civilians worked in two shifts at the factory, which operated day and night. Each prisoner worked at least a ten-hour shift. Twice a day, morning and evening, the soldiers led out columns of 1000 prisoners, marching slowly the mile from the living zone of the camp to the factory.

When I got my assignment at the factory, the supervisor was glad to see me. He was a civilian, about twenty-five years old, with no technical training to qualify him as supervisor of the electrical division. He already knew I was an electrical engineer. “You can help us draw up blueprints for the factory and develop technical documentation. How we worked without blueprints and instructions—I have no idea!”

Prisoners have no choice about where they work or what they do. During my first sentence in the northern Ural Mountains (1966-1969), I had worked in the forest in a lumber camp. In the snowy winters, the temperature often dropped to -79 degrees F. The column of prisoners sank into the snow as we stomped a path to our work place. In the summer, the forest was a kingdom of mosquitoes and midges. There was no way to protect ourselves from the hordes of insects—not in the forest, not in the barracks. Our faces, necks, and arms were swollen from their merciless bites. In the spring and fall, our clothes and boots were always soaked, and our bodies were covered with painful boils from general weakness and colds brought on by the



GEORGI—1963, SHORTLY AFTER
BEING RELEASED FROM HIS FIRST
ARREST AT 34 YEARS OLD

miserable conditions and frequent downpours. Day after day we worked under the open sky, guarded by armed soldiers.

But Mokhsogollokh was much different. I was assigned to a bright, spacious room with a desk, drawing table, and a cabinet. How I rejoiced to have a few hours alone in this room! In the barracks the shouts, curses, quarrels, and fights of the other prisoners were a constant distraction, but at work I could set aside my blueprints for a while and pray in solitude.

I was also able to move freely about the plant to become familiar with the electrical equipment and the workers. Besides asking technical questions, I looked for other believers. Each time a man asked why I'd been arrested, I had another opportunity to share my faith in Jesus Christ.

A few days after I arrived at Mokhsogollokh, a KGB official summoned me to his office. He was thin, almost fragile in appearance, with a squeaky voice. His narrow eyes glittered with hostility.

"We know," he said testily, "that you want to build a secret printing press here at the camp to print religious brochures! We will not allow this! We'll rot you! We'll put you in the punishment block. You'll get solitary confinement!"

I was surprised. "I don't understand. What kind of print shop? What brochures?"

"Cut the act!" the officer barked, slamming the desk with his bony fist. "We know you're dangerous. Hundreds of eyes will scrutinize your every move no matter where you are in the camp, the barracks, or the factory. Don't you dare pray or talk to anyone about God!"

He struggled to sound ominous and produce a deep bass voice. The result was comical.

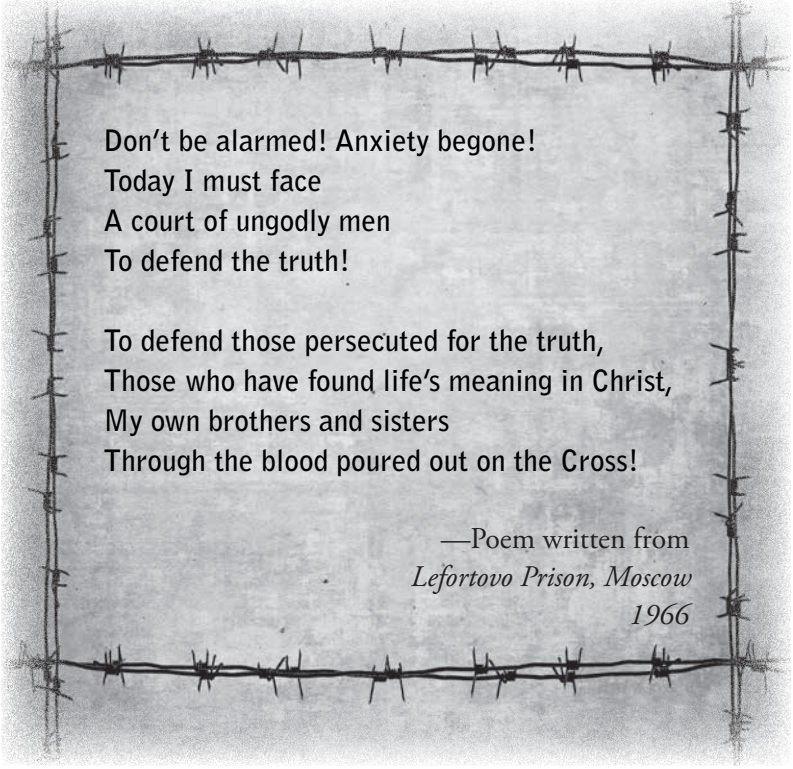
"We know you're dangerous. Hundreds of eyes will scrutinize your every move. Don't you dare pray or talk to anyone about God!"

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“It never occurred to me to set up a print shop here,” I answered quietly. “Besides, it’s impossible. But I do have the right to pray. I am a believer and will continue praying to God. I’ll pray for the whole camp, and I’ll pray for you, that the Lord would grant you repentance and the salvation of your soul.”

“Don’t you ever pray for my soul!” the officer shrieked. “You’ll regret this conversation! Now get out of here!”

That’s how I found myself in handcuffs and on my way to another camp. But I knew that my banishment from Mokhsogollokh was actually a victory for Christ. The KGB fears open prayers and open testimony about Jesus Christ more than the vilest crimes! As we rumbled along in the raven, I knew my future was secure in the Lord’s trustworthy hands.



Don't be alarmed! Anxiety begone!
Today I must face
A court of ungodly men
To defend the truth!

To defend those persecuted for the truth,
Those who have found life's meaning in Christ,
My own brothers and sisters
Through the blood poured out on the Cross!

—Poem written from
Lefortovo Prison, Moscow
1966