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I Realized I Just Cannot Give Up

Ihar Alinevich

22 March 2016

There are no Belarusian prisons In Belarus, only the Soviet ones.

Ihar Alinevich is among the winners of the National Award for Defending Human Rights named after **Viktar Ivashkevich**, a former political prisoner and the author of “I Am Off To Magadan,” in which he describes what happens in modern Belarusian prisons and camps.

Ihar Alinevich has spent more than five years behind the bars. He was released last year, and he had not asked for pardon. After he was released, he went abroad to present his book, Radio Racyja reports.

Receiving the award in Warsaw, the political prisoner recalled the importance of international solidarity at the time, when he was behind bars.

“Solidarity is something that you can really feel. People from different countries did a great job, held a number of rallies, interviews, information events, fundraising for us during the five years I spent in prison camps.”

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Now I am travelling around the towns. It's very unusual and touching that people really care about the situation in Belarus, that they were helping us and our families when we were going through arrests and sentences. I was particularly touched by the fact that the former prisoners from the Polish Solidarity and from the Czech Republic had also made great contribution, they donated things, raised money and food. Now they are in power, they are people with well-known names and high positions. As soon as it comes to prison, they react quite differently, they immediately know what to do, and show real compassion, as if it happened to them, to their close relatives," – Ihar Alinevich said.

– There is always more violation of human rights in prison than outside it in any country, that's for sure. But as for the situation in Belarus, with a dictatorial regime, prisons actually look exactly as described in your book.

– The fact that you cannot even just talk about human rights violations in Belarusian prisons. Because in Belarus prison is not even Belarusian, it's a Soviet one.

It is a huge violation of human rights as such. When in 1991 the Soviet Union collapsed, many things have changed, but not prisons. All the experience that they have been accumulating since Stalin's epoch, from the late Soviet era, it evolves gradually.

It continued in the 1990-ies, passed into the 2000-ies, continued in 2015, and it is not getting better. It is being embellished, glamourized, but it is getting only worse inside fundamentally. These things are not called like they are.

This method greatly reminds how the Stasi acted in the GDR. They tried to get rid of their opponents or influenced the society in an unobvious way. But at the same time a comprehensive set of measures was being developed with the help of a scientific research, which demonstrated to be even more effective than overt crackdown.

It seems hard to say that someone is oppressing you, but in reality the result is more serious than oppression. People

become insular, people lose their moral values, people get marginalized. All that is presented under a beautiful veneer of laws, regulations, and this is done allegedly "for the sake of discipline, for upbringing." This hypocrisy is even more outrageous than repressions as such.

– You have a complicated, hard experience. How can a person leave the Soviet-type prison and remain oneself?

– To start with, I cannot say that I have made that alone, that it was only my achievement. It was very important for me to save face in the eyes of my family, my friends, my associates.

Books of GULAG prisoners and prisoners of other Soviet prisons and prison camps were of great importance for me in the period of my detention. And I understood that as people had survived a real hell, more difficult than today's one, I do not have a right to make a step back, to sidestep or agree to a compromise.

These people have died, but their spirit helped me and other prisoners, no matter political or not political ones. Someone said: "The time is illuminated by the light of people who had passed away long ago." It was like that in my situation, and I am extremely grateful to these people for that.