

Two Letters from Ushuaia Penitentiary

Simón Radowitzky

1921-1924

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Simón Radowitzky (1889-1956) was born in the Ukraine where he was shot and wounded at the age of 14 by Cossacks breaking up a strike meeting. In 1905 he served on the soviet established in Yekaterinoslav and was later arrested and served 16 months in jail there before moving westwards and emigrating to Argentina in 1908. On 14 November 1909 he assassinated Colonel Falcón, the Buenos Aires chief of police who had been responsible for eight deaths and injury to forty people at the May Day demonstration in the city. He was sentenced to twenty years in the cells, being too young to receive the death penalty. He served his time in the Ushuaia penitentiary in Tierra del Fuego. In 1930 he was released under an amnesty on condition that he quit Argentina. [Following that, he fought in the Spanish Revolution and later lived in Mexico.]*

First Letter

To the FORA (Argentinean Regional Worker's Federation)

Greetings, fellow workers:

Hopeless but resigned, ailing and weakened, but courageously, I waited quietly throughout my lengthy, silent incarceration between these four walls, without sight of the light of day, unable to talk with another human being. I quietly and steadfastly awaited my death.

Other inmates, unable to withstand the cruel persecution, have hanged themselves; others have perished of anaemia, TB; remember, comrades, that anyone sentenced to "life imprisonment" is denied reading matter and correspondence; I could neither smoke nor drink a cup of bitter tea and was on half-rations. I had a few books in my cell, and once they got wind of that they took them away and installed a light by the door and the window; I had never been able to read the books for lack of lighting. But, not content with keeping me on half rations and strictly incommunicado, they devised and searched for excuses and so, every two or three days, four or five warders led by Sampedro would take me to a cell and force me to strip entirely for examination. Many a time, since I had a fever, I refused to strip: whereupon I was met with threats of force. And, back in my cell, what didn't they do! They ransacked and destroyed everything; they removed whatever they pleased; they took away a letter sent me by my father and when I no longer had anything to be taken away Sampedro removed the gourd I used for drinking mate. These searches were really a queer sight: it was as if every warder took great relish in finding something to take away; they even took away my bottle of medicine and when the time came for me to take the dose I would knock on the door and the warder would let me have it, before taking it away again. I asked for the return of the bottle but was told to speak to their superiors.

On the anniversary of my escape attempt [in 1918 he had made it as far as Chilean territory before he was handed back], there was a band playing beneath my window from 8.00 am. to 11.00 am. and again that afternoon, from 1.00 pm. to 6.00 pm. They amused themselves by reminding me of my failure. All thirty of them, complete with musical conductor, thought that they were bothering me and wounding me but I merely laughed at the perversity of my tormentors.

For want of food and want of medical treatment (at that time Dr Izaza was banned from entering the prison after he had taken exception to misuse of the cells) and for lack of air, I fell ill. I asked to see the nurse and in order to fetch him I had to shout through the window, since the warders would not inform the guard and apologised by saying that they had forgotten.

My tormentors, when they locked the door after carrying out their searches, would say, loud enough for me to be able to hear: "This guy refuses to die. He's sick, doesn't eat and is losing weight, and still he won't hang himself."

One day, since I don't eat meat or stew, I asked them for a plate of soup from the infirmary and the warder told me, "You're more likely to get a rope than soup." Oddly enough, one day a number of officers off a ship asked to see me and when the door was opened ... they shuddered to see the condition that I was in. One officer thoughtlessly asked me if I was on bread and water and the warder replied that I was refusing to eat. I told them that for over a year I had been asking for no food other than a dish of soup and that I was ... psychologically ... breaking up. Whereupon Miguel Rocha, who was acting mayor at the time, ordered them to give me the damned soup and a few potatoes: but within a few days they took it off me again. But that is nothing: when the training ship arrived, the physician on board paid me a few visits; I asked for one of them and after a lot of fuss they brought me to a doctor, with an escort of four guards, lest I should say anything to him about the condition I was in.

When I told him that I had been locked up for the past two years and had never been outside the cell, I was unable to add anything else because the chief warder stuck his nose in and the doctor backed off. So I asked to be examined: They closed in on me and under the warders' inquisitorial gaze the doctor carried out his humanitarian task, establishing that I was suffering from chronic throat inflammation and weak lungs. He wrote me a prescription for a good bottle, but once his ship sailed they refused to give me the medicine or to treat me and the sickness continued.

In cell No 4 on No 5 wing, where I am held, comrade Avelino Alarcón was also being held in the same conditions. He was placed on bread and water for a fortnight just for being a close friend of mine and an anarchist. Palacios had him locked in the cells after that. Within a short time, he fell ill. One day he sent a letter to the mayor's office requesting medical attention and he was told to approach the governor.

At the same time, Miguel Rocha ordered that he should get neither paper nor pencil and that no inmate should be allowed to send out a letter without his knowing about it, even should the addressee be the governor or a relative. Alarcón got worse with every passing day. Many a time I called the nurse and asked him to see to it that he got some medicine so that he could carry on until a doctor could come to the prison from Buenos Aires. His answer was that he would have a word with Palacios and so the weeks and months passed. One day I got hold of a little olive oil, sugar, tea and condensed milk: I asked the warder if he would be so kind to pass them to Alarcón, but he refused and when the next search came I ventured to ask Sampedro and the chief warder González: I asked them and begged before these two hyenas, but, let me tell you, it is easier to move a stone than these animals' hearts: I told them that the sugar was mine, that Alarcón was eating and they replied: "He'll eat when he's hungry." A few days later, after I pestered the warders, I managed to get a few provisions through to him. Alarcón wept because he understood what sacrifices I had to make in order to help him out. I was forever asking the warders how Alarcón was (sometimes, at night, I was able to exchange a few words with him during momentary lapses by the warders, but we were reported and the administration ordered that anyone caught talking should be placed on bread and water for a fortnight): some of them would tell me the truth, others lied. One day, at mealtime, when they opened the door to Alarcón's cell, I remained at silence: After they had doled out the food, I called the warder and asked him to tell me truthfully how Alarcón was. He told me he was very serious. I asked warder

X on his word of honour to alert the nurse: within a few moments the nurse showed up and told the warder: "It's serious, but I must consult with G. N. Palacios and M. Rocha." When he told them that Alarcón needed isolating, Rocha and Palacios asked him if he was sure that Alarcón was going "to die" and when answered that he was they ordered that he be moved to isolation. At 6.00 pm. that evening I heard the warders talk about his being moved: I pounded on the door and the warders opened up: I almost fought my way to Alarcón's cell: they refused to open the door. I told them, "Well, instead of removing one corpse you can remove two." In the end, they did open up ... When he saw me he made a superhuman effort to get up. He was a skeleton, brothers ... He told me, "My death is near; I go to my death calmly, in the knowledge that I have fought for our idea, for the good of the workers and have always stood by my friends and been fair in my dealings." The warders present could not disguise their tears at the sight of two victims of the current society embracing each other. Lest someone might see us and sack them, the warders would only let me remain for a minute. A few days after that, on 15 September, Alarcón died in isolation.

Comrades, you can image for yourselves what condition I was in after having watched a comrade, a brother, dying before me, unable to help him or alleviate his suffering. Shortly after that, they did convict No 452 (Carlos Barrera) to death the same way. He had an argument with several warders: they beat him up and dumped him in the cell with orders that he be put on bread and water until he reached the point of collapse and they kept him like that until he was no longer able to stand to receive his bread and water: then they brought him a mattress and put him on half rations of food, leaving him locked up. Within a few months, as a result of being locked down and of the injuries he had received in the fight with the warders, he fell ill. He requested medical attention and was told: "Behave. You're just playing the patient to get out of lock-up." The pain that he was in forced him to complain and one day, I not knowing the identity of the complainant, I asked the warder, only to be told: "It's No 452 going crazy to get out of lock-down." I explained that 452 was too much of a man to feign sickness and should at least be seen by the nurse, but was told that chief warder González told him that he could cure himself. And so, gradually, he lost his mind: he would sing and wail. One night I called out to him and told him: "Comrade, if you can, do me a favour and stop wailing at night, because I too am sick in bed." And he replied: "Sorry, brother, but I can't. They've poisoned me." And he carried on wailing. Because of all this wailing day and night, the chief warder, González, approached the administration and told them that there was a prisoner going crazy and the nurse, Palacios and Rocha ordered (so I was told by the warder): "Leave him on bread and water. We're going to drive him out of his mind." And so it was until one day the warder told the guard: "No 452 seems to be sick." The chief warder arrived to establish the truth of this for himself and after a while the nurse arrived. After seeing Barrera, the latter went to the administration and faced the same question as he had when Avelino Alarcón had been on the point of death: was he sure that death was imminent. They brought in a stretcher, took him away to the infirmary and the very next day he died ... calling for water.

Comrades: I am too overcome to go on writing: I remember what I have witnessed in my ten years in this prison, upwards of six of which I have served in the cells, with twenty to thirty days at a time on bread and water, in lock-down and with a window blocked by a metal grille with gaps that would barely admit a match, listening to the screams all around me of "Stop hitting me, please. Some water" and, in winter time, prisoners in rags in the cells, unable to endure the cold and begging to be finished off with a bullet as a more humane option.

Shortly after the death of convict 452 (Carlos Barrera), No 122 hanged himself. His name I do not know: he too was locked down. Some weeks after that, they killed No 629 with their thirty days on the cells on bread and water. A TB victim (Lastra, No 450) also died. One day, during a search, a warder told me: "Take care not to tear the sheet!" I asked him why he said it and he replied, with a smile on his lips, that when they called to give No 632 a cup of coffee, they had found him hanged with a strip of bed sheet. "So take care you don't tear the sheets!"

I was bed-ridden, sick: unable to get up: I cursed him and, had I had the strength, I would have thrown the chamber pot at his head. I cursed him and told him to go and ...

Because I was getting weaker and was wasting away in lock-down, they relished coming every morning to rub things in. All of a sudden, one day along comes a warder who asks me if I knew No 35, Luis Burgatto: My reply was that I was not required to explain myself to him. So he told me: "It appears that he is playing the nutcase." On hearing which a shudder ran over me. For several nights previously I had heard somebody talking to himself. What hadn't they done to him! 30 days on bread and water just for talking: 30 days for smuggling contraband bread to someone in the punishment cells: long periods of lock-down, half rations, screams of "Stop beating me!" echoing from the cells, the wails of the sick – it had all been too much for him and he had lost his mind. One time he was shouting that he wanted to speak to the mayor and they moved him into a different cell because his window was facing the guard post and moved him into a different one facing my own. Most days he was left without food because he was screaming: "Two years I've been in lock-down: Man, man, I am innocent ... They've poisoned me ... Mayor!"

By order of the chief warder, González, one day he was not only left without food but was also left without water and he boarded up his door. Convict 35 flew into a rage and began to bang the slats of his bed against the door. I summoned the guard and asked him to give him my ration of bread and food to calm him down, he being mentally ill. His answer was that he was not ill, but was faking it. The warders arrived to poke fun at him and, come nightfall, Sampetro arrived with his cohorts to remove him to the cells. Whereupon, at the sight of so many warders, he refused to leave his cell and shouted: "Kill me, kill me ..." Sampetro said: "I swear to God, if you don't come quietly we'll drag you there". On hearing this, the wretch grabbed one of the bed slats and shouted: "First one to step inside gets a cracked skull: help, help!"

Comrades: a human being was murdered opposite my cell... and there was nothing I could do: I could stand it no more and I pounded on the door, called the warders and explained to them that if they would feed him, he would calm down: that he was sick and that of course, if they were to leave him four or five days a week without food the way they had him, anybody would lose his temper. Their response was that it was none of my concern and they locked my door. Since he was refusing to go down to the cells and his tormentors were afraid that he might crack their skulls, they did the following:

In the prison there was a warder by the name of Miguel Bolano: he was respected by the inmates: they sent for him (I heard all of this myself) and Sampetro told him: "See if you can get him to another cell so that we can remove the boards and then we'll let him have a mattress and some food." Warder Bolano went up to the door and said this: "Listen, Bugatto, how is it going, pal? You were left without food today but come with me and we'll put you in a different cell because this door here is broken", but the sick person refused, arguing that they would kill him and he mumbled something unintelligible. But the warder persisted: "Look, you know me, I'm not the sort to mislead you: we're going to switch your cell and then later I personally will bring you a mattress and some grub: you have my personal word on that."

Convict 35 believed him and moved into the other cell ... which was the punishment cell, but before he could understand what was going on, they had slammed the door behind him. Warder Bolano returned to Bugatto's cell to bring his mattress and some blankets, but Sampedro shouted to him to go to the guardroom, that there was no one there. Thereby cravenly deceiving both warder and inmate. They held Bugatto for two days on water alone and five nights with no blankets before putting him on bread and water until he could not walk any longer. The warders' plan was for him to be done to death like Alarcón and No 452, but this time the doctor arrived at the prison and a comrade told him that there was an inmate in No 5 wing who was seriously ill. The doctor visited him, wrote up some prescriptions and ordered that he be given a cot and mattress: but the warders tried to carry on as usual. A week later the doctor called back to see him because he was continually shouting during the night: "Man, madre mia ... Come. Where are you?" The day after the doctor re-examined him, his tormentors returned to his cell, left him bread and water and removed the mattress and bedclothes. Since he was bed-ridden and not strong enough to walk, they manhandled him and took away the mattress and blankets, dragging him over to the urinal and he was forced to manage everything from the floor. To ensure that no inmate reported this to the doctor, the administration ordered that a chief warder should sit in on consultations, confident that no one would dare to say a thing about what had gone on in No 5 wing. But when the doctor arrived at the hospital, a passing prisoner warned him that Convict 35 was dying up in No 5 wing. Again the doctor ordered him to be fed, given a mattress and some clothing but his tormentors were keen to have their way and placed him on half rations and gave him a blanket and, as soon as there was any hint of a visit to the prison by a commission, they issued him with a mattress.

Comrades: bear in mind that what I am telling you in this letter is only a part of what I have seen and heard over the two years I have been locked down in No 5 wing. And the beatings doled out in the cells under my own cell! You should hear them crying from the blows and the hunger! To tell the truth, when I was in good health, my food and half rations were withheld: there were nights when hunger refused to let me sleep. And to think that under my cell there were others who didn't even have a drop of water, nor a mattress ... dumped on the floor on winter nights ... the wailing and the screams! It really was enough to drive one crazy and my tormentors, when they removed Bugatto, put a lunatic in the cell, Convict 406, who had been driven out of his mind because of lock-down, punishment cells and beatings and he spent his days and nights reiterating: "The truth of my truths are pure truths and truths that I speak are genuinely true." As I could not carry on like that, in that I could not sleep because of the "truths" that he was chanting in a very loud voice, I asked to be moved to another cell. They replied: "It's fun and stops you getting bored, but if you like we'll let the administration know." Know what they did? Seeing that I was going downhill, that I was not eating and sleeping very little, every night at midnight and at 4.00 am. they would throw open my cell door and wake me up to ask: "How goes it?" I asked them to leave me be at night at least and they replied that they had orders from above to drop in on me twice nightly, for "fear" of my hanging myself ... And for more than half a year now I have had the lunatic opposite my cell chanting "The truth of my truths..." etc.

But not the same lunatic. There was a different one at first, but a strange one: he would rant and rave and wake up screaming for help and calling out to me: "Simón, please, undo the rope dragging me down to hell and binding my heart..." He would cry and scream. The warders - idiots! - would drop by at night to have some fun with him: there was another guy who used to rant about killing his wife and kids. Back in Córdoba a police official had seduced his daughter and

she wound up in a brothel. When he found out about it, he killed the official and was given a 25 year prison sentence. He lost his mind after arriving here. Initially and as usual they said that he was feigning madness but he has been out of his mind for the past three years and they have done nothing for him! It really defies belief that he has not died of the ill-treatment he has received. But he will never regain his sanity now. His name I do not know, but his number is 273.

From 30 November 1918 until 7 January 1921, my world was inside these four walls, denied the light of day and on half rations, making four times that I have been confined to the cells. The first was from March 1912 until October 1913, the second from February 1914 until that December, the third from October 1915 and 25 May 1916. Every time that I have been locked down, they started off by putting me on bread and water for 20 or 30 days: later, when I was working, I suffered a lot from prison panic attacks.

At meal time on 3 January I was visited in my cell by court inspector Dr Victor Barón Peña. He asked me my name. I told him what it is. Although I already knew who he was, just to be on the safe side, I asked him:

- Are you the court inspector?
- Yes.

I wanted to say something but he told me to carry on eating and he would send for me the following day. As indeed he did.

On the afternoon of the following day I was called to the administration office and I have to admit that I barely had the strength to walk there and stay upright. The court inspector had to supply me with a chair to sit on before I could make a statement. I talked; I talked a lot; I told him all that I had seen and heard since the day I arrived at the prison; all the lock-downs, the punishment cells, the persecution visited upon the inmates. He paid me great attention: he told me that everything was going to be different, that he was a man on a humanitarian mission to see justice done. I showed him how prisoners were well treated during many visits only for the prison to revert to the old ways the day after the visitors had boarded for the trip to the capital.

He assured me that this time that would not be the case and that they would have to abide by his instructions: that the inmates would be treated humanely. After which all of the inmates filed past him. Some of them collapsed on their way to the administration block: whereupon the inspector went to their cells where the fellow had to fight back tears when he heard that, just for asking chief warder González for treatment, (he being ill) and for having told him that from the window, an inmate had had to spend 37 days on bread and water (at the time of writing he is dying: yesterday a comrade and I carried him to the isolation cell): and the unprecedented suffering undergone by others who had been driven mad by hunger and beatings: others who had been without a short for upwards of two years and others (a lunatic who cursed him) who were put on bread and water just for talking through the window and who, after complaining to Sampedro, were dumped in the punishment cells. The inspector really deserves to be admired: comrades, he is a credit to the courts. Up until 1.00 am. he went from wing to wing and cell to cell. He suspended Palacios and Rocha: he dismissed six of the guards and on 7 January lifted the lock-down on all of us in No 5 wing. Unfortunately for me and other inmates, the gates opened a little after that: but at least I will have the satisfaction of going to my death knowing that I have seen a human being and the light of day.

And that was not all that was done by this inspector, who was a man and a man of honour. On the day he spoke with me, as I was leaving I told him that if he wanted proof of the beatings doled out in the punishment cells, he could find the clubs in the wing where I was locked down,

as well as a truncheon weighted with sand: I told him where they were stashed: he went there, found them and found something else ...

The administration, which is to say Palacios and Rocha told him that the garrottes belonged to the inmates (when he discovered the garrottes he reported to watch commander José Muzzo and when the inspector asked him why the garrottes were there Muzzo had nothing to say and was left speechless) and that we had fire-arms, knives, machetes, etc.

The next day, the inspector ordered all of the staff to report at 3.00 am. They thought this was some new order or some trick. At 3.00 am. the inspector showed up and instructed them to search the cells. From 3.00 am. to 9.00 am. a search was mounted in the inspector's presence and the only things found were cigarette lighters ... with chains attached. The inspector laughed and asked if cigarette lighters were regarded in these parts as fire-arms and knives ... A few slivers of tin that the inmates used for cutting up meat. Then they realised that the inspector had not come there to hear their band and attend a banquet and the warders and a few of the prisoners started to stir up trouble on the wings by urging the inmates not to report for work: but all of the inmates realised what was afoot and they reported the warders to the inspector for stirring up trouble and getting the prisoners to riot: all to no avail: the inmates were united and performed very well in their statements.

A few days later a commission made up of four parliamentarians arrived on board the cruiser 'San Martin'. First they visited No 5 wing. On reaching my cell they asked me why I was so harassed in the prison. I talked for over two hours: I held nothing back: how we are treated here, the punishments, the lock-downs, etc. I could not say any more because I had a sore throat and lost my voice. They visited the other cells and were aghast at the sight of the other inmates. "Really" - they said - "the notoriety of this place is well deserved." When they visited the isolation cells, where nearly all of the sick are victims of No 5 wing, they took to their heels, unable to look at the dying or the TB victims spitting blood.

Comrades: workers: on behalf of all of us in the penitentiary, my comrades in misfortune, I send you greetings and thank you for your campaign against the crimes of this sinister prison.

Simón Radowitzky

Ushuaia Penitentiary, January 1921

P. S. Now the running of the prison is according to regulations, but ... yesterday they posted new regulations which seem to suggest that we are going back to the old ways. We shall see.

In order to install the grille I mentioned in the letter, they do this:

They remove the window pane and since the grille is the same size, they install it and the inmates has to put up with an icy wind blowing through the 400 perforations so tiny as hardly to admit a match. Which was how the inspector found my friend and fellow inmate Enrique Arnold (No 165). According to the doctor, another month there and he would have died. The inmate in question was ill and he was being persecuted as an intellectual because he refused to become a paid hack for Major Grandón and G. N. Palacios. He deserves to be admired for what he has endured for the sake of the workers' welfare.

Simón

Second Letter

As you might understand, there was no way that I could tell you in my earlier telegram what work I was doing and under which conditions. But circumstances require that I tell the truth. I would not have wanted to tell you any of this: I still have enough courage and gumption left to endure harassment from my jailers: but since you will soon learn that I am back in the punishment cells I want to tell you what happened.

On the first day when the new administration took over at the prison I was sent to the punishment cells on bread and water. Nobody knew why: they held me for a time and took me away, leaving me incommunicado. So far I am still in the dark as to why they did either. Some days after that governor Palacios and the whole team called and took away all my books, writing paper and ink: in short, they left my cell without a shred of paper and that very afternoon the order came through that I was to be locked down, again on bread and water. Within a few days I was summoned to the guard room and they read me an order stating: 'By order of the governor, punishment has been lifted ...'

I went off to work at the quarry: I worked a few days, which is to say, until they locked me down again. They had me on bread and water for another while and then rescinded the punishment and sent me back to work, hard labour.

They sat aside for me all the donkey work, anything that might humiliate me. I am isolated and completely incommunicado, with orders issued that my speaking is not to be tolerated. Since I am now bound for the rigours of the punishment cells on bread and water, they want to finish me off through hard labour and the punishment cells.

I am not writing this letter by way of a complaint or protest: no, that is not my intention: I wish only to let you know my persecution is due to several persons hereabouts who belong to the 'Patriotic League'. One of these is a certain Bazan who, from what I have heard, was a brigade commander with the League in Córdoba. For it appears that he and another of them rant and rave about me.

But since I regard myself as better than them and told them one day that neither they nor anybody else will strip me of my human rights and my dignity as an anarchist, they have not known what harm to do me ever since. On the advice of several comrades I go to work, forced labour, just to deny them the pleasures on having me on a bread and water diet. But I can do nothing to escape the bans placed on me by my tormentors: I have courage and they are not going to get the better of me.

Maybe when this reaches you I shall be in the cells: for unless they change my work I will refuse to go on working and these wretches can do whatever they please. Because it is one thing to put pen to paper and quite another to put up with all this rigour and my patience is wearing thin, especially with the way that they order me about at work and the instructions under which the warders are operating. They have even gone to the stupid lengths of entering it in the records that I am doing hard labour under redoubled surveillance...

June 1924

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* [Other sources give 1891 as his date of birth, possibly 'modified' to save him from execution in 1909.] From: Una Vida Por un Ideal: Simón Radowitzky by Agustin Souchy (Mexico 1956).
Translated by: Paul Sharkey.

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