

Chronological Report of my Life in Russian Prisons

On Dec. 1st 1937 I was arrested at the custom house in Moscow, where I was preparing my property to get looked through for my departure from Russia. I was immediately brought to the Lubianka prison where I was shown the order of arrest dated from Charkow from Nov. 27th, on account of Paragr. 58 (political reasons). After a quarter of an hour I was brought to the big Butyrka prison into a cell for 24 men. Gradually this cell was filled up until it held 140 men, sleeping on and under wooden boards, about 2-3 men per m². While still in Moscow, 11 days after my arrest I was called out and questioned by an officer of the NKWD, to give a full confession of my alleged counter revolutionary activities on behalf of the german fascist government, but no concrete accusation was brought up against me, only the names of a number of my - russian and foreign colleagues from the Charkow-Physicotechnical Institute were mentioned as being members of a counter revolutionary organization, as Shubnikov, Landau, Ruhemann, Weissberg, Fomin, etc. I was told that if I gave a full confession, I would immediately be sent abroad. Of course I did not make a false confession and denied any activity against the USSR. On Jan. 4th 1938 I was brought up in a prisoner car by railway to Charkow and put into the prison Cholodnaja gora in Charkow in a cell which was still more overcrowded than that in Moscow, but without any sleeping accommodations so that we all had to lie on the floor. I remained there till Jan. 10th when I was brought into the central Charkow prison of the NKWD, into a cell perfectly clean and not too overcrowded. Here my fellow prisoners tried to persuade me to give a false confession, of thought out things as they had done myself since sooner or later I had to anyhow in order to save a lot of trouble. The same day I was asked to give a confession again by a questioning official, named Drescher, who threatened me to beat me and to get anything out of me. In the evening of Jan. 11th began an uninterrupted questioning of 11 days with the exception of 5 hours interruption the first day, and about 2 hours on the second day. No concrete charge was

brought up against me as in nearly all cases of people I have seen in Russian prisons and I was told to give all facts myself. The only 2 questions that were asked were: 'Who induced you to join the counter revolutionary organization and whom did you induce yourself? Three officials questioned me in turn of about 8 hours each, the first 2 days I was allowed to sit on a chair, later only on the edge of a chair and from the third day I was forced to stand nearly all day, I was always kept awake, and when I fell from lack of sleep I was brought to by means of cold water that was poured on my face. The chief official who led my questioning was named Pogrebnoi. The night of Jan. 22nd shortly after midnight Pogrebnoi showed me an order of arrest of my wife and another order to bring my children into a home for besprisornis under a false name so that I would not be able to find them ever again. I was of the opinion that they were all still in Moscow. I have learned since that they had left shortly after my arrest so all I was told was bluffing but in the state of weakness after nearly 10 days without any sleep I fell for it. In this state I fell unconscious nearly every 20 - 30 minutes but I was awakened every time and my feet were so swollen that my shoes had to be cut off. I was beaten little only occasionally and not with instruments as many other prisoners I have seen and I was told by them that the treatment I had to undergo myself was very mild indeed if compared with what they had to endure in beating. At the end I declared I said I were ready to sign any statement they wanted under the condition that my family were to be sent abroad immediately and I would be shown a letter from abroad by my wife telling me her whereabouts, after 3 months. In case I would not get such a letter I would revoke any statement I made. I signed a short statement as they asked me, that I was sent to the USSR by the German Gestapo, for espionage. Then I got to eat luxuriously and got tea and was sent to sleep to my cell where I slept for about 36 hours. Then I was asked upstairs again and there I wrote a long confession of about 20 pages in German and I was very careful to give only names of people whom I knew to be abroad, or whose evidence against me - of course forced by 3rd degree methods also -- was shown to me. I had to write about espionage, sabotage and counter revolutionary

agitation and I was absolutely free to invent anything I liked no corroboration by facts or by other evidences as to material facts being needed. I made nuclear physics the theme of my espionage, though at that time no technical applications of nuclear physics were known since fission was not yet discovered but I wrote a lot of phrases that the nuclear energy is there and that it needed only the right way to start a chain reaction in the way of popular novels on this matter. Another instrument I wrote I had spied upon was an instrument for measuring absolute velocities of airplanes by the number of magnetic lines of force which went through a coil a device contradicting the law of conservation of energy and being obviously a perpetuum mobile. I intentionally made my confession as stupid as possible in order to be able to test that it is nonsense in case of a trial and I put in a short statement in English in ciphered form that I was under third degree torture and that all I wrote is pure invention. During the last year of my being in Charkow many people I knew and I knew perfectly well as being innocent had been arrested already and it was stated that they all had given evidence to be guilty. I did not know then about the method how these statements were forced from the people but I had told my wife in case a signature would ever be forced from me I would leave out the full stop after my signature, and in case the signature were given by my free will I would always put a full stop after my name. I had opportunity to do so and left out the full stops in the written confession. My written confession was translated into Russian and was left alone and was not troubled any more til August 1938, living til March in a clean prison cell not too overcrowded in the central prison Charkow. On March the 17th I was called again and a letter from my wife dated from Copenhagen was given to me. The same day I was transferred to the Cholodnaya Gora prison in Charkow to a small cell, rather dirty and very overcrowded where I remained til August 2nd. Food was very little and we suffered rather from hunger. The rations consisted of 600 gr black bread containing more water than ordinary bread (equivalent of about 500-550 g of ordinary bread) about 15-20 gr. sugar, a mug of soup containing little nourishing value and 1-2 spoons of porridge of some kind a day, from fair estimates made by physicians I met and by myself about 900-1000 Cal per day. Food was always

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given regularly and I don't know of any cases that prisoners were not given their rations. Treatment by prison officials was hard but not sadistic, but there existed cells where conditions were much worse for people who had not given the confession or evidence wanted. I remained there until August 2nd when I was sent to Kiev in "Stolypin car" a special sort of railway car for prisoners. I remained in Kiev til October 1st 1938 where was asked to give more evidence especially against a friend of mine Prof. Leipunski, member of the party and an absolute sincere man. From prisoners in my cell I learned that he was arrested in another cell in Kiev and a man in my cell tried to persuade me to give evidence against him and told me what I should say. No special pressure was used against me and therefore I did not give any evidence against him or against Prof. Obreimov, another member of our institute, that I was asked to give. Prison conditions in Kiev were much better than in Charkov, the rooms being very clean and food a little bit better. It was hard though because it was not allowed to sleep in daytime. On October 1st 1938 I was sent back to Charkov and put into a clean cell in the central prison. Prisons were not so overcrowded more at that time, but still there were 1-2 persons/m² of room. I was not questioned til January 1939 again when I was asked to sign an application for soviet citizenship. For that case they promised me the leadership of a big institute for my research work to be built by the NKWD itself but I did not consider that offer to be sincere, having met foreigners in prison cells who had agreed to such an offer without having been released and therefore I asked I could talk about this matter only after release and after having communication with my family. This time was the only one when I got some of the things that were sent to me by my wife and from Mrs. Cohn-Vossen, a friend of mine in Moscow. I got a blanket and a few pieces of underwear. I did not get any letter nor any money that was sent to me from abroad, as I have learned since. This was rather bad because all the time there was the possibility to buy some additional food supply and smoking material for about 20 rubles a fortnight and this helped a great deal but since I had less than 100 rubles on me when I was arrested I nearly never could make use of this possibility and therefore I had lost about 18 kg in weight and became more and more feeble. I could not think

of a revocation of my confession the year before and when I was asked to give more evidence, against persons as Obreimov whom I knew to be in the USSR, I declined but I confirmed my former confession not wanting to have all the trouble over again. On the new evidence they were not pressing very hard. In February 1939 I was sent again to Kiew where I was put again in the central prison but in an underground cell without any daylight (artificial light was in all cells always during all night), which was very humid. I was asked again by a new official to give evidence against Obreimov and Leipunski and I was threatened to be beaten in case I refused and shown written evidence of both of them against me in their own handwriting. I was very weak then, I could hardly walk about and so I decided to confirm their statements on counter revolutionary activity about myself and that I knew about theirs. I put in some slight discrepancies concerning dates etc. with their evidence and my evidence was accepted. Again I was told I would be sent abroad. In May 1939 I was asked by the peoples commissar of the interior of the Ucraina himself to give evidence against Prof. Fritz Lange a good physicist and friend of mine who was working in Ucr. Physico. Techn. Institute and also against Prof. Ladau, Prof. Joffe and Prof. Kapitza all of them being prominent physicists of the USSR. He told me they knew well that all of them were active spies and members of a counter revolutionary organization and they only wanted me to confirm this. I said I knew nothing about it but I did not try to revoke my own statements given earlier. This confirms the fact I had often heard in prison cells about especially by men who once had been officials of the NKWD themselves that it is quite usual to collect evidence about counter revolutionary activity of prominent people who are not arrested at all in case their arrest should be effectuated later on. Neither Lange, nor Joffe or Kapitza ever have been arrested as far as I learned since. No paper or books were ever allowed in prison cells and therefore it was nearly impossible to do any work. Yet from the very beginning of my prison time I decided to work under all conditions and since it was the only field I could do it in I started already at the end of 1937 to think about problems of the theory of numbers. All I knew was Euclids proof about the existence of an infinite number of primes and I started

thinking on the problem whether there exist an infinite number of the type $6x + 1$ and $4x + 1$ also, while for the $6x - 1$ and $4x - 1$ I could find Euclids proof hold with a slight alteration offhand. I had no writing materials but I tried to write some numbers with matches on a piece of soap or on places of the wall where it could not be seen, but I had to extinguish it all every day before leaving the cell for the toilet. I thought about that problem more than a year and finally in Kiev in the first days of March I found that any form $x^2 + xy + y^2$ with x, y being relative prime cannot contain any other factor than primes of $6x + 1$ type or 3, and the sum of to squares of relative primes contains only primes $4x + 1$ or 2. After solving this problem I found Fermats theorem (I only learned its name after I left the prison as with all theorems I found) and quite a number of theorems in elementary theory of numbers. When I found on August 6th an elementary proof for Fermats famous problem for $n = 3$, which as have learned since is essentially the same as Euler by a descente infinie I got so excited about it because I did not know Eulers elementary proof to exist that I made application to the peoples commissar of the Ucraina to get paper and pencil - I said I want to work out an idea of mine on a method in radioactivity which might be of economic importance. When my petition was not granted I went on hunger strike (only declining food, not water). I was alone in a cell then and succeeded in getting paper and pencil after 8 days of hunger strike by which I was very much weakened since I was in a bad state when I started. I wrote a number of theorems, I had found the so-called indices of theory of numbers, a theorem of Lucas and a new proof of a theorem of Sylvester which ⁱⁿ the course of publication at the Jahresbericht upon the advice of Prof. van der Waerden whom I have told about my prison studies in theory of numbers I even could keep writing materials when Prof. Melamet (a philosophy professor from Odessa) was put into my cell and I remained there, so that a could make steady progress in theory of numbers. In August all my evidence I had given 11/2 years earlier was rewritten and I was asked together with Prof. Obreinov for a so-called "double questioning" in which he - of course it was all pure

invention - he stated before my eyes that I had induced him while still in Berlin to do espionage work for the Nazis - though at the time of his visit to Berlin the Nazis were not in power and a quite small party. I affirmed all his statements because I did not want and in the state of health I was in could not afford to go another time over all the tortures again by which I was threatened. Suddenly on September 30th 1939 I was called out and brought to the station in a closed car and was brought to Moscow. I did not know about the war til January 1940. The isolation of prisoners is extreme in Russia the only source of information being what is told by new arrested prisoners and I had not seen such people for a considerable time. In the train I saw that the official who had questioned me before travelled with me on the same train and in Moscow I was brought immediately into the central prison of the NKWD on the Lubianka. While I was still in the showerbath everybody arriving there had to go through I was already called for being questioned. I was brought into a luxuriously furnished room in which a man in the uniform of a general of the NKWD sat and beside him in civilian clothes a very intelligent looking man who presided and who asked me politely to sit down and then asked me what I felt guilty of. I asked again "Do you want to hear what confession I signed or do you want facts? Of course facts he replained. This is the first time I am asked this question within these walls I said. But since you want to have them the only thing I feel guilty of is that I stole a pair of underwear in the Charkov prison a year ago by extinguishing the prison stamp on them by Calciumchloride in the toilet. That's all. And what about your confession? He asked? That's all pure invention? Then he asked who had forced me to give a confession and by what means I was forced, I gave all the names as far as I knew them and all details. We are going to clear it all up he said shortly and I was brought back to my cell a good cell, where I was alone and I liked that better by the way since I could work. All was extremely clean and I got books, very good ones too, special food in quite sufficient quantity and a package of cigarettes every day. Though my Kiev manuscript had been taken away from me when I entered the Lubianka I got writing materials again without any effort and I went on to occupy myself with what I have learned since to be Pell's problem and other things in the theory of numbers. In this cell

I remained without being called a single time until the beginning of December 1939 being all the time alone. After all I had passed it was a treat. In the first part of December I was called up again by another official who asked me absolutely correctly about everything and I answered all questions correctly. When I asked to write or to cable to my family - I supposed them to be in England from where I had last heard from them in August 1938 or to send a cable he said I shall soon be sent out. I then asked specially not to be sent to Germany and he made a note of it. About a week later I got new clothes and was sent to Butyrka prison into one of the big cells where I had been 2 years previously, but it was not overcrowded then. All people in the room were Germans, not all of them foreigners, some had taken the soviet citizenship. Among them I was glad to meet another German professor, Prof. Fritz Neether, former Professor at the Breslau university for applied mathematics and later refugee living in Tomsk. He had been arrested as German - though being a jew - and was forced to invent a espionage story, also. But in contradiction to my case a sentence of years of imprisonment had been passed on him. Shortly after my arrival he was removed from the cell and I never heard about him since. In this cell always we all got special food in sufficient quantity and cigarettes and we had the impression that we were kept there because most of us were in a very bad state of health and they did not want to send us abroad. Most of the people were German workers, skilled workers most of them or engineers, specialist and many of them former communists. Among them was Hugo Eberlein, friend of Lenin and Liebknecht and former member of the executive control committee of the Komintern, president of the communist fraction in prussian Landtag for many years. He had been beaten severely also like nearly all of them. Some were called out and presumably sent abroad, some arrived directly from camps in Siberia and the far North. In March I was called out by myself and asked to sign a paper that I was not to tell about what I have seen in Russian prisons and that I would agree to do secret work for the USSR. abroad. This I signed because I had learned from many people that most of them were asked to sign such a paper, otherwise one would be kept indefinitely. I again asked as a condition not be sent into Germany and this was promised to me by the official who made me sign the paper. On April 17th 1940 some were gathered into another cell in the same

building and on April 30th we all were called out, a sentence was read to each of us, that we were condemned to be exiled from the USSR. by a special court of the NKWD, and we were transported in a prison car to Brest-Litowsk where we all were taken over by officials from the Gestapo. We were not set free, but taken to a Gestapo prison in Biala Podlaska a small town near the frontier line and after some days we all were transported to the citadel of Lublin. Isolation was not as strong there as in Russian prisons, the regime was more military and food and accommodation conditions much worse than the last time in Moscow. Every day we heard the songs and noises from drunken Gestapo officers below our windows while we learned that every day about a hundred Poles and Jews were executed in the prison court. We had passed the frontier on May 2nd 1940 and were transported to Berlin on May 25th. Some of us were brought into a Nazi- "Ruckwandererheim" where they were set free after a few days but some of us, among them I also was brought to the police prison on the Alexanderplatz. By the way the only prison in my experience where I have met lice. Here I met people from concentration camps who told me about German camps and a well experienced communist who advised me how to behave before the Gestapo. A week later I was brought to a small prison at the Gestapo headquarters in the Prinz-Albrechtstrasse where I was asked about my Russian experiences, why I had left Germany and gone to Russia, about some communist friends of mine in Germany before 1933. I told them I had known those people but I did not know about any illegal activity of theirs confining my information nevertheless on such people I knew to be abroad. I was asked to give an account of my Russian experiences which I did, also mentioning by precaution the paper I had been made to sign but not the fact that I had asked not to be sent to Germany. On July 16th finally I was set free. A few days later I met Prof. v. Laue from whom I learned the whereabouts of my family. As soon as he had heard that I am in Germany in a Gestapo prison he went there himself, brought me some money and did all he could to accelerate my liberation.

F.G.H.

May 19th 1945.

P.S. I have been asked several times by many people to publish something on my Russian experiences since the war between Germany and Russia began. I always declined this strictly because I do not want any propagandistic conclusions to be drawn from my experiences. I also do not want this information to be used for publication.