A prisoner leaning on a dining table. In the back, small barred windows are the only source of light. At right, the inmates' beds.

In the 1970s, tens of thousands of Soviet citizens were sent to penal colonies, where they were forced to perform hard labor. Prison cells like this one served as transitional holding places before inmates sentenced to hard labor were transferred to the designated penal colonies where they would serve out their sentences. Among other punishable offenses, refuseniks and dissidents could be sentenced for possession of anti-Soviet literature, the Hebrew Bible, and for disseminating materials critical of the regime.

Courtesy of the Eshet/Yawetz Family.

A guard post at right and the prison's corner.

Political prisoners were kept with the general population of the penal colonies. Individuals who were sentenced for collaboration with the Nazis during the Holocaust, including members of local auxiliary police units and former camp guards, could still be found among the general population of the penal colonies as late as the 1970s. Due to widespread antisemitism among the guards and the administration of the penal colonies, former Nazi collaborators were often able to terrorize Jewish prisoners. Moreover, they received preferential treatment and were frequently used as informants against political prisoners.

Courtesy of the Eshet/Yawetz Family.

Two prisoners in a small cell.

In Soviet penal colonies, prisoners usually lived in barracks, but cells like this one were used for punishment. Prisoners could also be sentenced to isolation cells. Once there, they suffered a significant curtailment of their few freedoms: they were not allowed to write to relatives and friends or receive the meager pay they were owed for their labor, and they lost the right to receive visitors and care packages. The quality and quantity of their food rations were reduced, and they suffered from hunger, cold, and excruciating loneliness that left many traumatized. Political prisoners were frequently punished with isolation for protesting conditions and regulations, refusing to go out to work, or simply opposing the criminal inmates with whom they were imprisoned. Complaining about conditions involved additional risks. It could lead to psychiatric evaluation and institutionalization, a common practice in the Brezhnev period that was designed to silence dissidents.

Courtesy of the Eshet/Yawetz Family.

A prison behind barbed wire.

Boris Penson was sent to ZhKh-385, a penal colony located in the Zubovo-Polyansky district of the Mordovian Autonomous region. Conditions there were especially harsh. Food was scarce — barely nutritional—and communication with family members was limited to two meetings per year and only after a prisoner had served a significant part of their sentence. Spreading over tens of miles, the penal colony contained various factories and their adjacent barracks, and prisoners were routinely moved from one area to another. Penson, for example, began in an area designed to process trees into lumber before he was transferred to a textile factory.

Courtesy of the Eshet/Yawetz Family.

Prisoners getting off a train.

After leaving the transitional prison where they were initially held, prisoners sentenced to hard labor in a penal colony were transferred by train to the colony where they were to serve their sentence. Penson's trip to ZhKh-385 took two weeks because the train had to stop in various labor colonies along the way to deliver other prisoners.

Courtesy of the Eshet/Yawetz Family.

Prisoners during roll call, leaving or returning from hard labor.

Viacheslav Chornovil, a Ukrainian journalist and dissident who served his sentence with Boris Penson, recalls his reactions to the roll calls:

> Low morning sun peeks through the barrack windows, projecting onto the walls and the prisoners' sleeping faces long shadows of the fence and guard posts. A piercing call and a new day begins at the camp. We arrange ourselves in rows of five for the morning roll call ...My gaze wanders across this dull gray crowd of old men who are both spiritually dead and half-dead physically. Above their heads, my gaze falls on a long row of educational slogans and fixes on a long familiar one: "Prisoner! Treat people well and they will respond in kind!"*

Courtesy of the Eshet/Yawetz Family.

*Viacheslav Chornovil and Boris Penson, *Daily Life in a Correction Colony in Soviet Mordovia* (The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1975), 42.

Prisoners in a “recreation” area.

Vasyl Stus, a Ukrainian poet and dissident who served time with Boris Penson, described the state of mind of prisoners this way:

> Not everyone can live in this narrow gap between life and death. Some — usually politsai [members of the Ukrainian Auxiliary Police who collaborated with the Nazis] — quickly slide down the moral slope and lose their remaining human characteristics. Others, even members of the 1970s generation, repent and begin to collaborate with the KGB ...Others lose their minds, unable to bear the pain ... Recently, there have been more suicide attempts, and the authorities are taking steps to deprive prisoners of this last opportunity to free themselves from the suffering and with it their last illusion of personal freedom...*

Courtesy of the Eshet/Yawetz Family.

*Viacheslav Chornovil and Boris Penson, *Daily Life in a Correction Colony in Soviet Mordovia* (The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1975), 19.