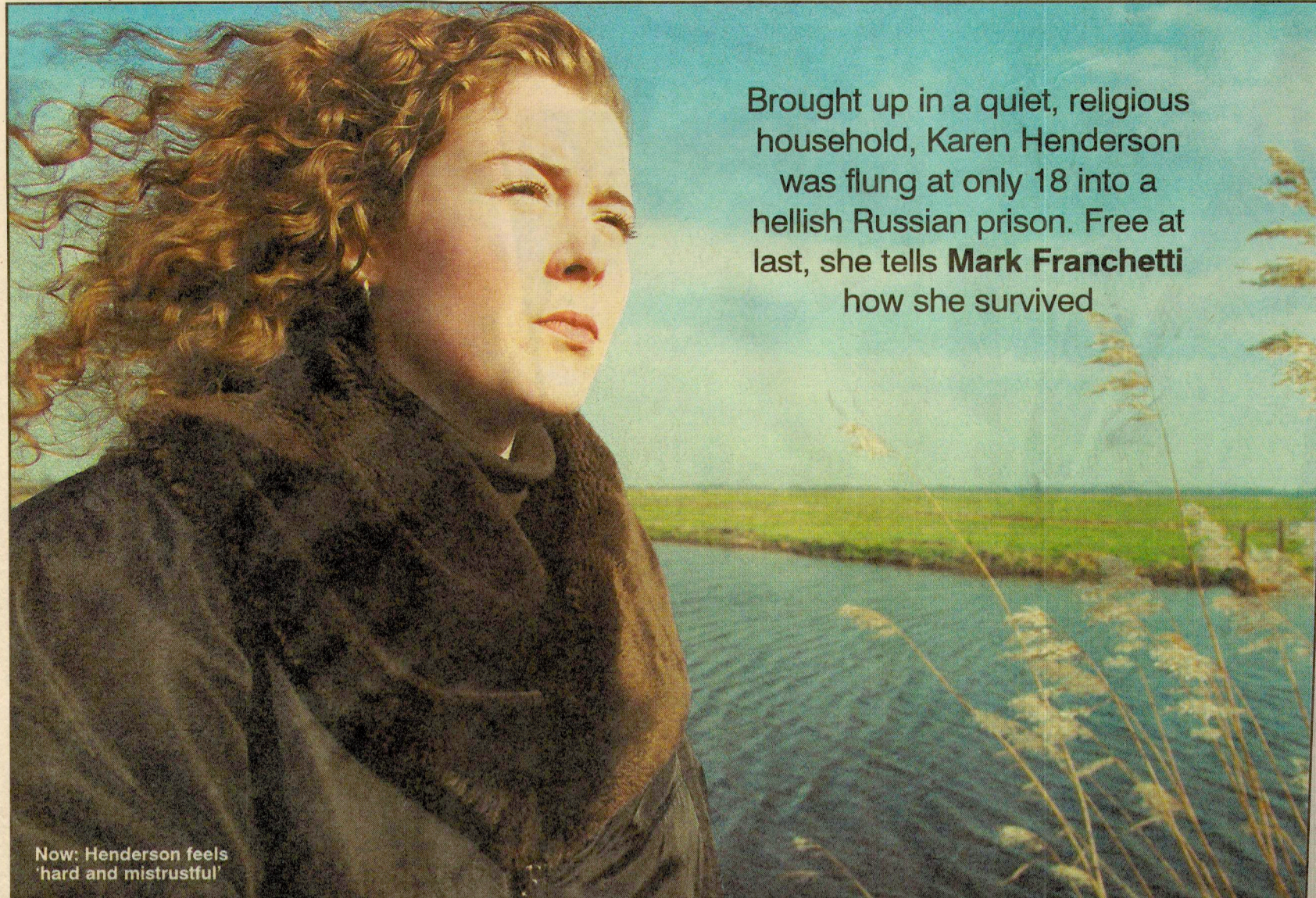


Simon Townsley



Brought up in a quiet, religious household, Karen Henderson was flung at only 18 into a hellish Russian prison. Free at last, she tells Mark Franchetti how she survived

Now: Henderson feels 'hard and mistrustful'



Then: Henderson was locked up at 18 in Moscow's worst prison

THE GIRL IN CELL 402

It was not until she was escorted down a dark and putrid corridor to cell 402 in Moscow's infamous Butyrka remand prison that Karen Henderson understood what faced her. Arrested on drugs charges at Moscow airport, the 18-year-old was about to spend nearly two years in Russia's Dickensian prison system.

As the heavy metal door of the overcrowded cell was slammed shut behind her, she stepped on the shaven head of an inmate sleeping on the damp floor. The room measured 50 square metres and had 22 beds. It held 94 women, sharing one lavatory and one wash basin, sleeping in shifts, fighting for space. Two naked light bulbs were kept on day and night.

Henderson would be let out for only 45 minutes a day to walk on the roof. She was allowed to shower once a week sharing a nozzle with four other inmates, often without hot water.

Daily prison rations consisted of a tin bowl of sickening buckwheat served three times a day through a narrow opening in the cell door, stale bread, cabbage soup and fish soup, a rancid grey liquid made up of water and entrails. Violently sick the first time she faced this, she ate only stale bread for six weeks.

"I tried to prepare myself as I was being taken there," she said last week in her first detailed interview. "I imagined that a Russian prison

would be tough but I had no idea what to expect. Nothing could have prepared me for the reality of it.

"Arriving was the most difficult part. Everything was a shock. The cell itself, the overcrowding, the rats, bedbugs and cockroaches, the smell, the filth, the violence, I was frightened and kept telling myself to keep calm, to keep my wits together, or go mad. I felt terribly lonely."

Raised in a strong Baptist community, Henderson had

never been in trouble with the law before. Her father, Hugh, is a Scottish computer programmer. Her mother, Patricia, is a Dutch nurse. Henderson was brought up in the Dutch countryside after their marriage failed, but she held a British passport.

Two years ago, she was returning from a holiday in the Caribbean when she stopped in transit in Moscow for a few hours en route to Warsaw from Havana. Russian customs officers found 10lb of cocaine in a secret compartment in her suitcase and detained her. They found a similar quantity in the luggage of Suzanne Vorstenbosch, a 23-year-old Dutch girl whom Henderson claims to have met for the first time that day.

Vorstenbosch confessed and is now serving a six-year sentence in a labour camp 500 miles southeast of Moscow. Henderson, however, insisted she did not know of the drugs. She said her suitcase had broken at Havana airport where she had bought another from the nephew of a friendly lavatory attendant. The Russians did not believe her story and sentenced her, too, to six years.

She had never heard of Butyrka prison before but in Moscow its name is synonymous with the inhumanity of Russian jails. A stint there earns immediate respect among Russian criminals. Built in 1771, it is Moscow's oldest and largest remand prison. Designed for 3,000 inmates, it house more than 6,000. Henderson was one of the last women there before it was turned into an all-male prison.

Even before her arrival, the teenager had a taste of the violence meted out to Russian prisoners. While being led out of a police cell to await transfer to Butyrka, she said, she saw a group of drunken policemen drag in an adolescent boy they had just arrested and beat him with truncheons. At one point, she said, a gun was put to his head and he was ordered to beg for his life. "I was horrified. I simply could not believe it."

On reaching Butyrka, escorted by two guards in a battered Lada, she was taken with other new inmates through a series of small dungeons along a dark corridor where they were searched. Those with lice had their heads shaved after primitive medical tests. Henderson screamed when a guard holding a bloody syringe tried to force her to undergo a blood test with the same needle he had used on five other inmates.

"Then they locked me up in a cell which measured no more than one square metre. It had no light, no window. It was pitch dark and unbearably damp. I could feel the cockroaches. At that point I had a blackout. I freaked out and was in a state of complete

shock. I kept thinking of my mother, hoping that she had been alerted."

When she was pushed into cell 402, dozens of women surrounded her, shouting, pulling her blonde curly hair, feeling her western clothes. One of the longest serving women in the cell invited Henderson to share her bunk. Three other women already shared it, sleeping in shifts.

The offer sparked off jealous fights. "The woman's lover thought I had become her new mistress."

Henderson said she regularly rejected advances, often getting into fights as a result. "At first I was being constantly challenged by several other women who were trying me out, pushing me to see how far they could go. I had to fight several times to earn some respect."

"Learning to survive was a full-time job, it took up all my energy. Other women stared at me in groups. They would whisper and laugh."

collected butts which they rolled in newspaper, adding to the suffocating stench of sweat, open wounds and disease. Yet there was a premium on cleanliness. Those women who did not use the single basin in the cell to wash themselves and their clothes were ostracised and forced to sleep by the lavatory alongside sex offenders and child murderers.

Each cell was run by a *starsha*, the longest-serving inmate, who was often close to the prison guards and had the power to have a rebellious inmate transferred. Other inmates spied on each other to ingratiate themselves with the guards. Those caught spying or stealing faced severe beatings by the other prisoners. Those who refused to share their parcels were ignored by the rest of the cell.

"That is the worst punishment, being ignored," said Henderson. "That is when you are nobody. You cannot sustain it. Eventually you go

again, afraid of how they would react to me.

"I was determined not to let them get to me. I would just sit, watch and mind my own business without getting sucked into a particular gang of women, without letting them push me around. I just got on with it, desperately trying to keep my wits together without showing too many emotions. You either cope or go down."

RELIEF was on the way. While the Dutch embassy in Moscow refused to help, she said, British diplomats lodged several complaints and she was eventually moved to a new prison. After Tony Blair raised the issue of her long detention with President Boris Yeltsin during his visit to Moscow last October, she was given a retrial at which the head of airport customs failed to testify on four occasions, one of his deputies could not remember most details of the case, and it emerged that 50g of the cocaine found in Henderson's bag had disappeared before reaching the testing laboratory.

In December the judge found her guilty a second time but, on the grounds of good behaviour, reduced her sentence to the 23 months she had already served.

After her release, Henderson returned to her mother's modest house in the small Dutch town of Zegveld, a safe 1,300 miles from Moscow. A photograph on the wall, taken only five months before her arrest, shows her looking like a child. Barely 20, she now talks and acts like a tough adult.

Suddenly lost for words in English, her face hardens and her voice drops as she breaks into fluent Russian, sometimes using prison slang.

She hopes for a fresh start. She plans to study as a Russian interpreter and wants to become a lawyer — with the distant aim of trying to raise awareness about Russian jail conditions. She also talks of taking her case to the United Nations court of human rights in Geneva.

Adapting again to a normal life has been difficult. She often sleeps in the same bed as her mother, unnerved by silence, and she is prone to sudden outbursts.

"I changed a lot. I became quite hard, maybe too hard, too mistrustful," she said.

"Shortly before my release the women in my cell told me that once outside I could never explain what it was like. They said they are the only ones to know what Butyrka is really like and they would always be a part of me. They are right."

They locked me up in a cell which measured no more than one square metre. It had no light, no window. It was pitch dark and unbearably damp. I could feel the cockroaches. At that point I had a blackout

One day an inmate threw hot tea in her face. "The cell suddenly went quiet and everyone stared at me to see how I would react. I swore at her in what little Russian I knew then and the place burst out laughing. Somehow they liked that."

Henderson slept during the day, despite the relentless noise and putrid air, and forced herself to stay awake at night, when she wrote letters, kept a diary and worked on her appeal. Two months passed before she received a mattress.

Her mother travelled to Moscow more than a dozen times, using money raised by her local church, and fought a running battle with the Russian bureaucracy to deliver food parcels.

Like other inmates, Henderson came to rely heavily on the parcels for survival, but they also had a social value. "Without visits and parcels you become a non-person in a Russian prison," she said. "I was first offered a share in a bunk bed because the other women imagined I would receive regular parcels. But the first one took a month to arrive so after a while I was told to get lost."

Inmates without cigarettes

mad. I saw it many times. Women wandering around, talking to themselves hysterically, banging their heads against the steel beds or the walls, slashing their forearms with razor blades to die or just to get some attention."

As the weeks passed, Henderson became weaker and paler, unable to walk up to the fifth floor for her weekly collective shower without returning exhausted. She developed a violent cough and was terrified of contracting TB which, like syphilis, is rampant in the prison. She now suffers from back pains.

She said the guards took away other women for beatings. "They would return semiconscious, black with bruises." But they did not beat Henderson. "I am a foreigner and they knew there would have been official complaints. They hated me for that and called me the foreign bitch, the foreign princess."

Instead they moved her to different cells 18 times. "Once they found out that I hated being moved, they did it as often as they could. It was very unsettling. Every cell had its own rules, its balances of power between inmates which I had to learn all over again. Every time I had to get settled

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