

The oligarch behind bars

Mikhail Khodorkovsky, 46, once Russia's richest man, speaks to us secretly from his jail cell

Wake-up call is at 6.45. I have an hour for breakfast, to exercise, clean, shave and watch the news. Most days I have porridge and coffee. It's a time which makes me pine for my kids, because I always used to have breakfast with them before going to work. I'm being held in the toughest type of jail in Russia. There are three to eight men in each cell and I have less than five square yards of space. Unless I'm being taken to court, I'm in my cell 23 hours a day. The guards allow me out for one hour to pace in an "outdoor" cell, which is covered with metal netting. I'm under constant surveillance and the light in the cell is kept on around the clock. I'm allowed to shower once a week.

An hour after wake-up call they move me to go to court. Because of the security procedures, it takes two hours to get there and two hours to get back. I'm taken in a truck, inside a metal booth — 4ft by 2ft 6in by 1ft 6in. I spend four hours in it a day.

In court I and my former deputy, Platon Lebedev, who is also on trial, are locked up in the "aquarium", a 1.5-ton bulletproof glass cage. The courtroom is full of guards cradling machine guns. I always wonder who they are intending to shoot at.

Court sessions last eight hours, four times a week, and will go on for the next year. There's a short break for lunch, when I'm allowed to eat my daytime prison ration: biscuits, tea, sugar. And instant porridge. I tried it. Best not to. I drink water.

I grew up in a family of Soviet engineers. My parents were not Communist party members and had no connections. They earned 300 roubles a month. Half went to rent; a third to food and the remaining 50 roubles had to suffice for clothes, transport, school books and so on. In those days 50 roubles could buy you a pair of trousers. That's why I went to work early. I became an engineer in 1986, at 23. By the time



of my arrest in 2003 I had built Russia's largest oil company, Yukos.

The campaign against me was organised by the Kremlin. The first case, which got me eight years, was out of greed; the current one is out of cowardice, and I'm facing up to 22 years. It's hard to say what my enemies convinced Vladimir Putin of. Maybe he really thought I was plotting some coup — which is ridiculous, as I was supporting two

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opposition parties which at best could have won 15% of votes in elections. More likely it was an excuse to raid Russia's most successful oil company.

I'm often asked why I did not flee abroad. I thought it would be admitting I was guilty and I'd be leaving Lebedev in the lurch. But I also thought I would face a proper trial. Instead there has been no fair trial. Even in Russia few people now believe my trial is fair and unbiased.

After court I am driven back to jail. Hello cell! I then have two hours to eat, read the newspapers, do my laundry, write letters. I have already spent more than 2,000 days like this. Who knows how many more await me? One of the hardest things is not being able to predict one's future. Guards use it as a psychological tool. Watches are forbidden, and you are never told why you are being led out of your

cell. One just has to relax and take things as they come.

That's how I deal with the fact that I'm searched so often. That after my hour outside the cell, it's clear the guards have gone through my papers. That I'm not allowed simple things like a laptop or a marker pen. But that's no big deal. What's far worse is that I'm allowed to see my family only twice a month for an hour, through a glass partition. It's been like that already for six

years, except for one year in a penal colony, where the rules are more relaxed. Meanwhile my children are growing, my son is getting married, my daughter is going to university, and my younger children started school. My parents are not getting any younger. No one except the country's top leadership can say if I'll ever be released. So I live as if I'll be in jail for the rest of my life.

For dinner I have bread, cheese and coffee. The prison gives porridge and once in a while fish soup. Food is especially important. It's very bad if you don't have someone on the outside to send you food parcels. You get ill without proper food and sun. I'm lucky, I have a big family, so if there's need I can help my cellmates.

The years in prison, the isolation — it's not easy, but it is bearable. I always used to read much. Now I read very much. Education and reflection are prison's pluses. I sleep well and have no nightmares. Let those who are persecuting me have a heavy conscience ■

Interview by Mark Franchetti.
Photograph: Tatyana Makeyeva

already spent more than 2000 days like this, and who knows how many more await me. One of the hardest things in jail is not being able to predict one's future, not even the most immediate future. Guards know this and use it as a psychological tool. Watches are forbidden, and you are never told why you are being led out of your cell. One just has to relax and take things as they come.

That's how I deal with the fact that I'm searched so often. That after my daily hour outside the cell, it's clear that the guards have gone through my papers. That I'm not allowed simple things like a laptop, or even a marker pen and colour pencils. Or that the list of food products relatives are allowed to send us consists of only 20 items. But that's no big deal. What's far worse is the fact that I'm allowed to see my family only twice a month for an hour, through a thick glass partition. It's been like that already for six years - except for one year in a penal colony, where the rules are more relaxed. Meanwhile my children are growing, my son is getting married, my daughter is about to go to university, and my younger children started school, which I fear they will also finish without me. My parents are not getting any younger. No one except the country's top leadership can say if and when I'll ever be released. So I live as if I'll be in jail for the rest of my life.

For dinner I have bread, cheese and coffee. The prison gives porridge and once in a while even fish soup. Food is especially important in jail. It's very bad if you don't have someone on the outside to send you food parcels, and you only eat prison rations. You get ill quickly without proper food and sun. I'm lucky, I have a big family and no problems, so if there's need I can even help my cellmates.

The years in prison, the near total isolation - it's not easy but it is bearable. I always used to read much. Now I read very much. Education and reflection are prison's well known pluses. I sleep well and have no nightmares. Let those who are persecuting me have a heavy conscience.