

Alexei Navalny is seen on a screen via a video link from the FKU IK-3 penal colony above the Arctic Circle during a hearing of his complaint on restrictions placed on which books and reading material he can access in prison, at the Supreme Court in Moscow on January 11, 2024. (Vera Savina via Getty Images)

Exclusive: Navalny's Letters from the Gulag

From his punishing cell, the Russian political prisoner wrote to the former Soviet dissident Natan Sharansky. Here is their historic correspondence.

By The Free Press

February 19, 2024



Natan Sharansky, one of the great heroes of the twentieth century, corresponded with Alexei Navalny, one of the great heroes of the twenty-first. Navalny, through his lawyers, managed to get a Russian copy of Sharansky's famous memoir *[Fear No Evil](#)*. He read it in the gulag where he was killed on February 16, 2024. We know this because he sent Sharansky two letters: one in March and one in April of 2023.

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Today we are honored to publish these historic letters in their original, handwritten Russian and in English. (We are grateful to Anna Lyubarskaja and Rebekah Koffler for their help with translation.)

There are so many things that are striking about this correspondence: their erudition; their Biblical references (“Everything according to Ecclesiastes: what was, will be,” writes Navalny); their moral clarity (“In prison I discovered that in addition to the law of universal gravitation of particles there is also a law of universal gravitation of souls,” Sharansky writes. “By remaining a free person in prison, you, Aleksei, influence the souls of millions of people worldwide.”)

But most striking of all is their humor. Sharansky calls the punishment cell his “alma mater.” Navalny jokes that there is no better place to spend Holy Week than in the punishment cell (known as SHIZO). And so on.

Sharansky ends his second letter with this line: “Judging by all of your time in SHIZO, you will soon beat all of my records. I hope you don’t succeed in this.” As he told me over the phone last week, after he learned Navalny was killed: “We dissidents use black humor. But this joke is even more black than I thought.”

One last thing to note: We don’t typically use footnotes in *Free Press* stories. We made an exception here to deepen readers’ understanding of the letters and some of their references.

—BW



This is the first letter written by Alexei Navalny to Natan Sharansky. The prison paper was ordered on March 30, 2023. The letter is dated April 3, 2023. The translation follows immediately after the image.

От кого:
Навальный Алексей Анатольевич, 1976
г.р.

Кому:
Борисова Юлия Навальная



Не сканируйте QR-код!

Уважаемый Натан.

Вас беспокоит Алексей Навалянин. Привет Вам из Владимирской области, хотя я и не уверен, что Вы сохраните о ней теплые воспоминания.

Я сейчас в ИК-6 Мелехово, но из Владимирской тюрьмы пишу, но там уже мне начеру доять. Так же, вероятно, ожидая в том же здании, где были и Вы. Только теперь там будет на первом этаже здесь сидит Навал Шереметев. Извините пожалуйста за вторжение и письмо незнакомому человеку, но такое кажется позволитель в отчаянных «автор-читател».

Я пишу как читатель. Читая Ваше Не убоясь зла¹ в PKT так же, что я сейчас пишу из SHIZO (128 суток всего дурей). В месте где Вы пишете мне ради серии 15-суточных SHIZO, а потом как нарушитель отравлен из 6 месяцев в PKT, я слышал от того, насколько не изменилась ни суть системы, ни методы ее реализации.

Я хочу поблагодарить за эту книгу, она мне очень помогла и помогла. Да я пишу в SHIZO, но когда пишу о Ваших 400 днях в тюрьме, не поминимая норму не поминимая поминимая, то это мои поминимая норма, которую пишу за свои уверенность. Я смотрю на это открыто, потому что писала Вы Авиталь - в ней все слова демократии. Потому что на суд где мне доверяют, но сомнение тысяч отравленных мне замочка. Ведь в них дни, мифы.

И я понимаю, что я не первый, но очень хотела стать последним или, хотя бы, одним из последних, кто бы читал это письмо.

Ваша книга дает надежду, потому что показывает

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Навальный Алексей Анатольевич, 1976
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двух систем СССР и современной России, их идеология, методы, их императив как всегда строг, их предельность, зарплатность и так же не индивидуальны прох. Как и вот, что мы и делаем.

Короче - судья, верные выборы, тогда это государство, что мы и делаем, не дамо на новый шаг.

В предельности и израно 1991. Вы пишете, что Россия была в тюрьме, сохранила "буржуазную" и потому не надо ИТБ изобрести вакцину от него.

Вы, они избранны. Но вынуждены в соответствии ситуации не они, а мы, потому что слышали, что выборы и старость не а ради любых целей можно так изменить выборы, тогда, там судья, поминимая, здесь процесс, трижды.

Из таких людей и веры в авторитарную модернизацию и словников, вакцина.

Тем не менее, "буржуазная" дамо не убий. Не репутация и сотни, как кто-то "а дактили и сотни тысяч не дамо выдумать за свободу и против войны, месяцев не утраты. Сотни из них в тюрьмах, но я уверен, что они не слышали и не судья.

И многие из них терпят силу и формирование в том месте в Ваших тюрьмах и Ваших миссиях.

Я пишу один из них.

Спасибо Вам.

Вот, выписал себе из книги: Лемана хабаа Буржуазиям.

Ваш, Алексей
03.04.23

Dearest Natan,

Aleksei Navalny here. Hello from Vladimirskaya Oblast, although I am not sure if you have retained warm memories of it.

I am now in penal colony IK-6 "Melekhovo," but from the Vladimirskaya prison they are writing to me that a cell is being prepared for me there. So I will likely find myself in the same facility that you were in. Only now there will probably be a plaque saying "Natan Sharansky was held here." Please forgive the intrusion and a letter from a stranger, but I believe it's permissible in author-reader relations.

I am writing as a reader. I have just read your book, "Fear No Evil," while I was held in the PKT.¹ And now I am writing from SHIZO² —it will be 128 days in total. I was laughing when I was reading the passage where you wrote, "I was penalized with a series of 15 days at SHIZO, and then, as an offender who broke prison rules, they sent me to the PKT for 6 months." I was amused by the fact that neither the essence of the system nor the pattern of its acts has changed.

I want to thank you for this book as it has helped me a lot and continues to help. Yes, I am at SHIZO now, but when reading about your 400 days spent in the "punishment cell" on decreased food rations, one understands that there are people who pay much higher prices for their convictions. I look at the postcards sent to you by Avital³, all the words have been blacked out. Then I go to court where they try to convince me that burning the letters that were sent to me is legal. After all, there was a "code" embedded in them.

I understand that I am not the first, but I really want to become the last, or at least one of the last, of those who are forced to endure this.

Your book gives hope because the similarity between the two systems—the Soviet Union and Putin’s Russia—their ideological resemblance, the hypocrisy that serves as the very basis of their essence, and the continuity from the former to the latter—all this guarantees an equally inevitable collapse. Like the one we witnessed. ⁴

The most important thing is to arrive at the correct conclusions, so that this state of lies and hypocrisy does not enter a new cycle. In the preface of the 1991 edition you write that dissidents in prisons have kept the “virus of freedom” and it is important to prevent the KGB from inventing a vaccine against it. Alas, they have invented it. But in the current situation, it is not them who are to blame, but us, who naively thought that there was no going back to the old ways. And for the sake of good, it’s okay to rig elections a little bit here, or influence the courts a little bit there, and stifle the press a bit over here.

These little things, and the belief that it is possible to modernize authoritarianism, are the ingredients of this vaccine.

Nonetheless, the “virus of freedom” is far from being eradicated. It is no longer tens or hundreds as before, but tens and hundreds of thousands who are not scared to speak out for freedom and against the war ⁵, despite the threats. Hundreds of them are in prisons, but I am confident that they will not be broken and they will not give up.

And many of them draw strength and inspiration from your story and your legacy.

I am definitely one of them.

My thanks to you.

Here, I copied it for myself from the book: ***L’Shana Haba’ah B’Yerushalayim.*** ⁶

Yours,

Aleksei



When I was writing my book “Fear No Evil” right after my release in February 1986, almost all of my friends and comrades-in-arms were either incarcerated in gulags or in a battle. So I envisioned this book not only as a memoir, but also a sort of textbook or manual for how to behave in a confrontation with the KGB. But by the time it was published in Russian, the USSR was already collapsing. Therefore, over the years, the book was interpreted more and more as a historical novel about the dark middle ages. And now—“the idiot’s dream has come true!”

First Volodya Kara-Murza² and now you have written to me about how this book “works” in a Russian prison today. My misfortune has brought about this silver lining.

And now—as an admirer:

Aleksei, you are not just a dissident—you are a dissident “with a style”! My horror over your poisoning changed to amazement and exhilaration when you started your own independent investigation.

I was very angered by the question of a certain European correspondent the day after your return to Russia. “Why did he return? We all knew that he would be arrested in the airport—does he not understand such simple things?” My answer was pretty rude: “You’re the one who doesn’t understand something. If you think that his goal is survival—then you are right. But his true concern is the fate of his people—and he is telling them: ‘I am not afraid and you should not be afraid either.’”

I wish to you—no matter how hard it may be physically—to maintain your inner freedom.

In prison I discovered that in addition to the law of universal gravitation of particles there is also a law of universal gravitation of souls. By remaining a free person in prison, you, Aleksei, influence the souls of millions of people worldwide.

Aleksei, it is truly sad that the past can return so quickly and so easily. Volodya Bukovsky once insisted, after the fall of the USSR, that communism must be put on trial. But there were few who supported this idea—after all, the free world won “without a bullet being fired”—why return to the past?

I hope now, after all these shots have been fired, it is clear why that was necessary then, and why it will be necessary tomorrow.

X X X

By the way, I write to you the day before Passover—the celebration of the liberation of the Jews from Egyptian slavery 3,500 years ago. That is the start of our freedom and our history as a people. On this evening, Jews from around the world sit at the holiday table and read the words: “Today we are slaves—tomorrow, free people. Today we are here—next year, in Jerusalem.”

On this day I am sitting at the celebratory meal wearing a kippah, which was made 40 years ago, out of my footcloth, by my cellmate—a Ukrainian inmate in the Chistopol prison. That’s how twisted everything in this world is! I wish to you, Aleksei, and to all of Russia, an Exodus as soon as possible.

Hugs,

Natan Sharansky



This is the second letter Alexei Navalny wrote to Natan Sharansky. The prison paper was ordered on April 7, 2023. The letter is dated April 11, 2023.

От кого:
Навальний Алексей Анатольевич, 1976
г.р.

Кому:
Борисовна Юлия Навальная



Не испорть QR-код!

11.04.

Дорогой Натан!

Это просто короткая записка, чтобы сказать Вам огромное спасибо за Ваш ответ.

Так расстроился, что пришлось прятать от сокамерников выступившие слезы.

И Вы это делаете второй раз! Последняя страница "Не убоясь" там где "извини, что я немного задержался" - невозможно не заплакать, конечно.

В Вашей Alma-mater все по прежнему тут традиции. В пятницу вечером выпустили меня из ШИЗО, сегодня - в понедельник - снова 15 суток.

Все по экклезиасту: что было, то и будет.

Но я продолжаю верить, что мы исправим его и Россию и в России будет то, чего не было. И не будет того, что было.

Ну и в конце концов, где еще проводила Страстную Неделю, как не в ШИЗО!

Еще раз огромное спасибо.

Обильно,

А.

Dear Natan,

This is just a short little note to say a huge thank you for your response.

I was so touched that I had to hide my tears from my cellmates. And this is the second time you do it to me! In the last page of "Fear No Evil," where you write "forgive my being a little late," it is of course impossible not to start crying⁸.

In your alma mater everything is as it was. Traditions are honored. On Friday evening, they let me out of the SHIZO, today on Monday—I got another 15 days. Everything according to "Ecclesiastes": what was, will be.

But I continue to believe that we will correct it and one day in Russia there will be what was not. And will not be what was.

And after all, where else to spend Holy Week, if not in SHIZO!

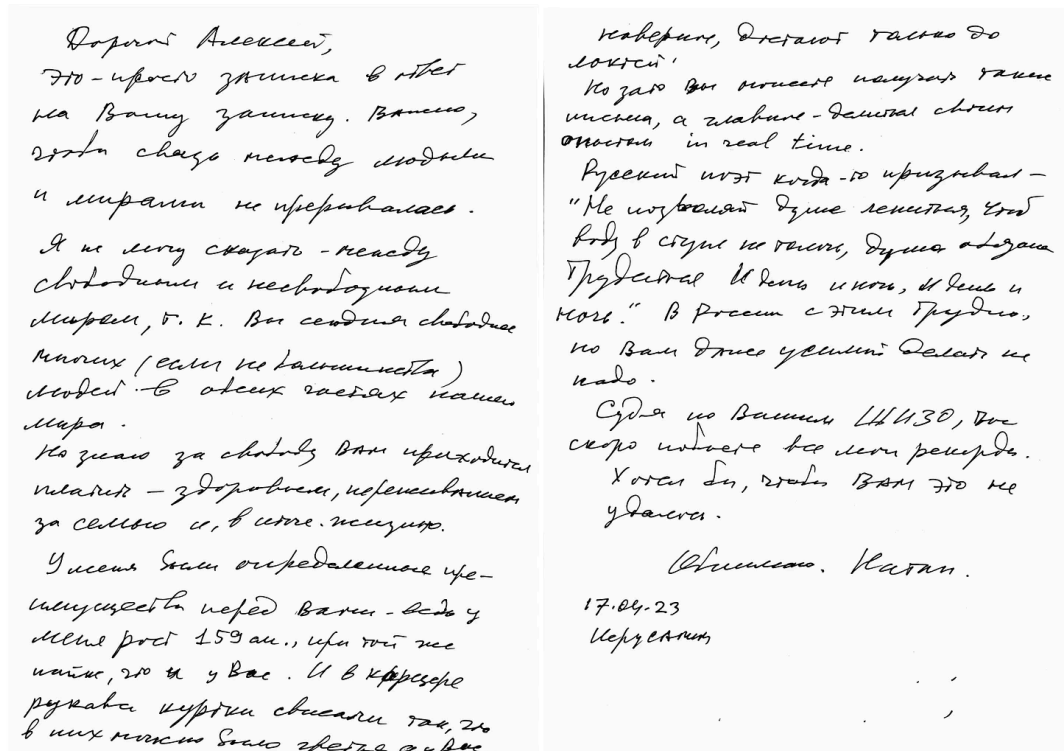
A huge thank you again.

Hugs,

A.



Letter from Natan Sharansky to Alexei Navalny. The letter was written in Jerusalem on April 17, 2023.



Dear Aleksei,

This is just a note in response to your note. It is important for the connection between people and worlds not to be interrupted. I cannot say —between the free world and the unfree world, as you are today more free than many (if not most) people in both parts of our world.

But I know that for your freedom you are having to pay—with health, worries for your family, and eventually with your life.

I had certain advantages over you—after all I am 159 cm tall ², and I had the same food rations as you. In the punishment cell, the sleeves of my jacket drooped so low that I could keep myself warm in them, while for you they probably only reach to your elbows.

But at least you are able to receive these letters, and most importantly share your experiences in real time.

A Russian poet once urged—“Do not let your soul be lazy, to not pound water in mortar, the soul is forced to labor, both day and night ¹⁰, both day and night.” In Russia, people struggle with this, but you do it effortlessly.

Judging by all of your time in SHIZO, you will soon beat all of my records. I hope you don't succeed in this.

Hugs,

Natan



1

The PKT is solitary confinement. Prisoners in PKT are kept within their cells at all times. [Read more about the PKT here.](#)

2

SHIZO is the most extreme punishment for Russian prisoners. In SHIZO, also referred to as the punishment cell, prisoners are held in solitary confinement, access to hot water is restricted, and prisoners are granted 35 minutes a day for writing letters. A single book is allowed. There are no phone calls or visits. [Read more about SHIZO here.](#)

3

Natan Sharansky's wife, who spent nine years leading an international campaign advocating for his release.

4

Meaning the end of the Soviet Union.

5

Russia's war against Ukraine.

6

Meaning: Next year in Jerusalem. This is the phrase that Jews say every year at the Passover seder. It was a phrase famously invoked by Sharansky

when, in 1978, he was sentenced by the Soviet court to 13 years in prison. “To the court I have nothing to say. To my wife and the Jewish people I say: Next year in Jerusalem.”

7

The Russian dissident Vladimir Kara-Murza. He was convicted of “treason” for denouncing Russia’s war against Ukraine and is currently being held in a Siberian penal colony. His sentence is 25 years.

8

Here Navalny is referring to the moment in Sharansky’s memoir where Sharansky finally reunites with his wife, Avital, after nine years of imprisonment and says to her, “Forgive my being a little late.”

9

Sharansky is five feet, two inches tall.

10

Sharansky is quoting the first verse of Nikolai Zabolotsky’s poem “Ne pozvolai dushe lenitsa” (Не позволяй душе лениться).



Wednesday, April 17, 2024



Comments 679
