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THE BATH HOUSE

by Ariadna Efron

In my first camp, the one in the Komi Autonomous Republic where I remained for not very long, there were several people who had been imprisoned “for religion,” among them a little nun, Aunt Pasha. Her pre-prison biography was as follows: a peasant girl from a large family, she once happened to visit a women’s monastery. After the smoke-blackened hut she had grown up in, the monastery’s splendor so captivated her that all she wanted was to live there. What she heard, though, was, “We don’t take poor girls, because, you see, we need contributions in order for the monastery to flourish.” They took her in, but only to do chores, the dirty work, without permission to study and no right to take vows.

Pasha was industrious, very modest, quiet, and affable, and there was no job she wouldn’t do. She soon began to reap the rewards of her labors: she was allowed to study sewing (they never did teach her to read or write), she was given hand-me-down monastery garb, and eventually she was assigned her own linen-closet of a cell. Aunt Pasha was happy. Over time she saved up her kopecks, and at long last (O dream come true!) she got herself her own samovar. In the evenings she and two or three other nuns would sit in her cell drinking tea: “Today we’re having tea at Mother Anna’s, tomorrow at Mother Manetha’s, and tomorrow at Pasha’s.”

Life went on, quiet and happy, until suddenly—the revolution! The Red Army arrived. The commissar assembled the nuns and explained to them that they were now free citizens. “Collect your junk and get outta here. You’ve got six months. Anyone left here after six months has only herself to blame, women!”

Those nuns who were smarter and more adept left, while the rest remained, hoping against hope. Aunt Pasha also stayed behind.

Six months later the same soldiers returned and said, “Well, women, we warned you. Now you have only yourselves to blame. Leave everything here, take no belongings, only what you’ve got on your back, and go.”

“And so, Alechka,” Aunt Pasha continued her story, “I started to dress, and I’m crying and dressing, dressing and crying, and then crying some more: how can I leave my samovar? I’m dressing and dressing (putting on as much as I can to leave them as little as possible), crying and crying, until I cry myself out, and then I tie the samovar so that it hangs under my skirts, and set off, walking very slowly. Standing at the gates is a soldier who bids all the sisters farewell with a kick on the rump. I walk past him, modest as a mouse, and he wallops me so hard I go flying. Would you believe it, Alechka,

to this day there's still a dent in the samovar from his boot!"

It happened that several women imprisoned in our camp "for religion" were being let out. We were saying good-bye. Aunt Pasha crossed them all, one by one, saying, "Now you girls be sure to write and let us know if the churches on the outside are still standin'. And light a candle for us there."

Write? How? Letters were censored. A plan was devised: instead of "church" they would write "bathhouse." Off they went. Time passed, and after a while a letter arrived. Aunt Pasha came to me.

"Read it for me, Alenka, read it for me, sweetie!"

I read the letter:

"Dear Praskovya Grigorievna,

Our deepest respects to you and to Sister Alla-Honey, etc., etc. We made our way to the city of (we'll say, Serpukhov), and no sooner do we walk out of the station than what do we see? A bathhouse! We went straight to that bathhouse and bathed real hard for you all! At that bathhouse we talked to a woman who sold washtubs. We asked her lots of questions, and she said, 'You should go out to the cemetery, sisters.' We went. We get to the cemetery and what do we see? Another bathhouse! The most beautiful bathhouse you ever saw! We bathed real hard again for you all, and we lit a washtub for each of you. The bathhouse attendant there turned out to be very kind, and he bathed for you, too."

Now to the story about our real bathhouse back in camp.

Our bath day was set for just before Trinity Sunday. Aunt Pasha was overjoyed, because we would all be clean for the holy day. Off we went, carrying our little bundles. The bathhouse attendant was a modest, quiet man, also one of those who had been arrested "for religion," which is why they made him bathhouse attendant, figuring that he wouldn't ogle all the naked women.

He met us at the entrance, naked as a jay, except for his apron.

"Happy holy day upon us, ladies! It's very nice in the bathhouse today. I cleaned it all up and economized on some of the men's water so that each of you could have four washtubs instead of three. Splash away, ladies!"

Never will I forget the scene that followed. (At the time I veritably doubled over with laughter, it was so comical!) The bathhouse attendant goes over to Aunt Pasha, sits down on the bench next to her, and the two of them start up a quiet conversation.

"Ah, Praskovya Grigorievna, remember how on Trinity Sunday people would get all dressed up and go to church with birch branches?" She hasn't

a stitch of clothing on, just a scarf on her head and he's wearing nothing but his apron, and the two of them are sitting there chatting about "the Divine," pure and innocent as children, or angels. ✚

"The Bath House" is reprinted here with permission of translator-editor Diane Nemece Ignashev from her compilation of Gulag prose and memoirs by Ariadna Efron (Marina Tsvetaeva's daughter) and her friend Ada Federolf, *Unforced Labors* (Moscow: Vozvrashchenie, 2006). *Unforced Labors* is the first English-language translation of Efron's prose. Look inside the book at <http://www.amazon.com/> or order directly from Russian Press Service, 911 Foster Evanston, IL 60201 1 (847) 491-9851.