



FIVE MONTHS IN THE SECRET OVADAN DEPE PRISON

(as remembered by Geldy Kyarizov and chronicled by Vitaly Ponomarev)

Introduction

Geldy Kyarizov (who turned 65 on January 18, 2016) is a living legend of post-Soviet Turkmenistan. He has played a key role in the revival of the Akhal-Teke horse breed, which has become a national symbol: Yanardag, an Akhal-Teke stallion born at Kyarizov's private stud ranch, is featured in the center of Turkmenistan's coat of arms. In the 1990s, Kyarizov founded and headed the International Association of Akhal-Teke Breeding (Turkmenistan President Saparmurad Niyazov became the president of the Association in 1998) and directed the Turkmen Atlary state agency for breeding the Akhal-Teke horses between 1997 and 2002.

In 2001, the Turkmen authorities suspected Kyarizov of political disloyalty and secret contacts with the opposition. On January 30, 2002, he was arrested by the Ministry of National Security on trumped up charges of economic offenses. On April 4 of that year, the Ashgabat City Court found him guilty of "negligence" and "abuse of power" and sentenced to six years in prison. In August 2006, Kyarizov was transferred to Ovadan Depe, a secret prison isolated from the outside world. In January 2007, a month after President Niyazov's death, Kyarizov was returned to an ordinary prison colony and then amnestied and released in October 2007. Between 2007 and 2010, the Kyarizov family's property, including more than 100 Akhal-Teke horses, was confiscated and his house demolished, but the Turkmen authorities refused to provide any compensation. International human rights organizations repeatedly expressed concern for the health of Geldy Kyarizov, who was subjected to continuous pressure by security services. For more than a decade, none of Kyarizov's family members were allowed to travel abroad, and the family was only able to leave the country in 2015 thanks to an active international campaign.



The following text is based on interviews with Geldy Kyarizov and his wife Yulia Serebryannik (pictured above), which were recorded by Vitaly Ponomarev, head of the Central Asia Program of Human Rights Center Memorial (Russia), in 2015 in Moscow.

Geldy Kyarizov is one of the few former Ovadan Depe prisoners who managed to travel outside of Turkmenistan. His first-hand account of the appalling detention conditions in that prison is extremely important. Since 2003, when the first group of prisoners was convoyed to Ovadan Depe,

secret government instructions, rather than the law, have determined the fate of most Ovadan Depe inmates. Dozens of political prisoners, including Turkmenistan's high-profile public figures and former government officials, have died there. According to reports, some inmates have had their prison terms extended on trumped-up charges, perhaps in an attempt to avoid disclosure of Ovadan Depe's dark secrets. Only strong international pressure can prevent new victims of Ovadan Depe.

The problems faced by Geldy Kyarizov and his family did not end after they left Turkmenistan in 2015. While in Russia, they have been continuously followed, subjected to a violent assault (see <http://provetheyarealive.org/geldy-kyarizov-and-family-threatened-by-unidentified-turkmen/>), and regularly receive threats from unknown individuals, apparently acting on behalf of the Turkmen government, who insist that Kyarizov and his family members stop giving interviews and speaking at international conferences about their own experience, illegal persecution and political repression, and the state of Turkmenistan's prison system. In addition to that, in an attempt to silence Kyarizov's family, their relatives and friends living in Turkmenistan are consistently subjected to pressure.

This material has been prepared as part of the international Prove They Are Alive! campaign (see details at <http://provetheyarealive.org>).

Escorted to Ovadan Depe

Between 2003 and 2006, Kyarizov was held in low-security penal colony LB-K/12 located in the town of Seydi, Lebap velayat (province), in eastern Turkmenistan, along with thousands of other Turkmen prisoners.¹

A small group of inmates there were serving terms for contact with members of the political opposition or indirect involvement in the November 25, 2002 events in Ashgabat. After a while, all of them were placed in a high-security isolated block within the colony and then eventually, one by one, falsely accused of disobeying the colony's administration and transferred to high-security facilities (mainly the secret Ovadan Depe prison).

In 2005, the same fate befell a group of Muslims from Akhal velayat whom the authorities considered to be Wahhabis. They were brought to LB-K/12 in the spring of 2005, and then transferred to Ovadan Depe in late autumn. Other inmates nicknamed this group *The Twelve Apostles*.

On August 25, 2006, it was Kyarizov's turn. While the colony administration did not have any formal complaints against him, one day he was unexpectedly moved to Ovadan Depe. Kyarizov had no idea where he was being taken and why. The way the transfer was organized indicated that the decision had been initiated at a top level in Ashgabat. Considering certain practices characteristic of Saparmurat Niyazov's final years, the orders may have come directly from him.

¹According to Kyarizov, this penal colony established in Soviet times has grown considerably since Turkmenistan's independence. The number of inmates increased from about 800 to 2,700 or 4,000, dropping to 1,300 or 1,600 temporarily after annual amnesties.

Geldy Kyarizov recalls:

“At about four or five p.m., duty officer (DPNK)² Makhtumkuli comes to me and says, ‘Geldy-aga, get ready fast, pack your towel and medicines...’ But where was I going? Why? I had no idea. Outside the Operating Unit [internal investigations unit], I saw one of the officers, Rashid, who said comfortingly, ‘It may be for the better. Come in, they are making a new uniform for you.’ I entered the sewing shop – my new uniform was ready, with the tag attached, indicating my name and the charges against me. I thought, ‘They are taking me somewhere. Perhaps to ask Niyazov for forgiveness...’ If only I had known where they were taking me, my heart would have stopped then and there.”³

Two cars, one of them owned by Akhmet, chief of the colony’s Operating Unit, were used for urgent transportation of the ‘special prisoner.’ Kyarizov was placed in the back seat next to the Spetsnaz soldier handcuffed to him. In the car with them were Colonel Oraz Khalniyazov, chief of the colony, Akhmet, and Chary, head of the unit. A group of policemen followed them in the other car all the way to Abdushukur prison in Turkmenabat, the administrative center of Lebap velayat. Kyarizov was brought to Abdushukur prison at about 7 p.m. and after a checkup was placed overnight in solitary confinement in a ground-floor cell formerly used to hold death row prisoners.

At about 5 a.m. the next morning, the same two cars drove him and his escort to Ashgabat. They stopped under a bridge next to a racecourse in an area fenced off by *Interbudmontazh*, a Ukrainian construction company. Someone placed a sack on Kyarizov’s head and pushed him into a parked van. Musa Isayev, Deputy Head of the Department of Corrections (DoC) at the Interior Ministry, was observing the scene.

“Musa was wearing a stylish hat, curled hair, and a white scarf – you’d never tell he worked at the DoC,” Kyarizov recalls. “Once the van began climbing a bridge, I realized that they were taking me to Ovadan Depe. Okay, I thought, at least I will die in my home region ... When we arrived, the first gate opened, then the second one, and then the third one was lifted ... I could half-see through the sack ... They told me to get out of the van outside the special security unit and led me through the building with the sack still on my head. We passed one door, then two more... There was a solid concrete wall on the left and a row of cells on the right ... They stopped me outside a cell, facing the wall, hands apart, and removed the sack. Musa said, ‘There is no one to help you here, count only on Allah.’ – ‘I always count on Allah,’ I said. At Musa’s command, the cell door was opened. I looked in and saw two prisoners, both of them skinny, bald and wrinkled, their ears sticking out, standing there like monkeys in a zoo, only their eyes blinking. I felt uneasy looking at them. One of them reported, ‘This is cell No. 4, I am No. 2 on duty.’ I turned to Musa, ‘May I ask a question? I have been in a low-security facility and committed no violations while there.’ He said, ‘This is a maximum security facility.’ Another man standing nearby repeated these words; he had a mustache and somewhat slanting eyes. I do not know his name. I assume he was the Ovadan Depe prison chief.”⁴

² DPNK - duty officer, assistant to the prison chief.

³ Interview with Geldy Kyarizov, Moscow, October 8, 2015.

⁴ Ibid.

It should be noted that by Turkmen law, transferring an inmate from a “low security” to “maximum security” or “prison” regime is only possible by a court order following “grave violations of the established rules of the penitentiary.” But in Kyarizov’s case, there was no court order, nor any warnings of violations from the colony administration; therefore, Kyarizov’s transfer to Ovadan Depe can be described as unlawful. Before being locked in his prison cell, Kyarizov had unsuccessfully tried to explain this to the representatives of the prison administration and the Department of Corrections.

“And finally, Musa Isayev said, “Remember, you no longer have a name or surname. You are No. 3. Better not even try calling yourself or anyone else by name.”⁵

Before President Saparmurat Niyazov’s death in December 2006, not a single Ovadan Depe inmate had been released or transferred to an ordinary penal facility.

Life in Ovadan Depe

The prison wing where Kyarizov was held consisted of two sections separated by a door, four cells in each. The cells had seven welded iron bunk beds secured to the concrete floor. In addition to Kyarizov, there were two other inmates in his cell, former senior officials from Dashoguz: ex-khyakim of the velayat (regional governor) Kakamurad Annaklychev, removed from office in January 2006, and Dadebay, ex-director of an animal fat processing factory.

Earlier, there had been another inmate in cell – Geday Akhmedov, former khyakim of Lebap velayat, Honored Elder and Hero of Turkmenistan, arrested in February 2006 and sentenced to 17 years for economic crimes. According to human rights defenders, the 66-year-old Akhmedov died in early July 2006. His body was brought to his relatives in Lebap velayat in the trunk of a car and secretly buried.⁶ Soon afterwards Kyarizov was brought to fill his place in the cell. According to his cellmates, Akhmedov, who had diabetes, did not receive the medicines he needed. About a month or two before his death, he could no longer move around on his own and was unable to use the toilet; the cellmates helped clean him when he soiled himself. After his death, his body was left in the cell for two days to decompose in the scorching summer heat.

The cell was a poorly lit concrete box 7 by 3.5 meters with a high, four meter ceiling, a washbasin and a toilet. The outer wall had two glassless windows with iron bar fittings, additionally covered with metal blinds, their slats turned upwards. During colder months, inmates covered the windows with plastic wrap. There was a heating pipe running along the wall. In the winter of 2006/2007, heating was cut off twice, each time for about 12 hours – the temperature in the cell dropped so low that it was impossible to sleep.

From the hallway side, each cell had a thick metal door with a peephole and a small window for food delivery. Behind it was a second lattice door with a window. The doors and windows were always locked shut and sealed – the outer door had two locks. In the hallway, high up on the wall to the right of the cell door, there was a notice saying that the door could be opened only in the presence of three services: the Interior Ministry, National Security Ministry and Prosecutor’s

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Geday Akhmedov dies in prison // Chronicles of Turkmenistan, 04.07.2006 (<http://archive.chrono-tm.org/?id=150>).

Office. The rule was strictly observed, and the two soldiers who brought food on a trolley were always accompanied by the officer on duty and one representative each from the National Security Ministry and Prosecutor's Office.

"We had to get up at 6 a.m.," Kyarizov recalls. "The peephole in the door opened, and we lined up so we could all be seen through the peephole, hands behind our backs, and one of us would report, 'This is cell No. 4, three persons, I am number so-and-so on duty.' Breakfast was brought at about 8 a.m., dinner at 6 p.m., and lights were out at 9 p.m."

According to Kyarizov, *"The soldiers' attitude towards us was terrible – they did not treat us as human beings. We were 'enemies of the people' for them... The soldiers hid their own names; in our section, they were all from other velayats."*⁷

The inmates were totally cut off from the outside world. Contrary to the existing norms of penal law, no letters, parcels or visits from family were allowed.

Likewise, they were officially barred from any communication with guards or with inmates in other cells; however, many had learned to circumvent the rules. According to Kyarizov, sometimes it was possible to communicate with neighboring cells through the window or exchange a couple of phrases while running by on bath day.

No television, radio, or even official press was available. From time to time, prisoners were given old magazines and books, most of them from 1930s to 1950s with stamps of rural libraries in Tedjen, Murgap and Lebap districts – the libraries had been disbanded after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Once Kyarizov got hold of a magazine with photos from a horse race he organized in 1988. He showed it to a guard, who was shocked to see it. But after 6 p.m., the light in the cell was poor, making it impossible to read.

Unlike other prisoners in Turkmenistan, those held in Ovadan Depe enjoyed one 'privilege' – they were released from the obligation to study the Rukhnama, the 'new holy book' written by President Niyazov.

The prison conditions were extremely harsh.

"For breakfast, they would bring us soup made of crushed wheat grains (yarma), sometimes with a piece of potato or a small onion in it. Occasionally (once a week), meat skin, fish bones or eyes were floating in the soup. There was no fat at all in the soup, so cleaning the bowl was very easy. Soldiers who cooked the food for us would have already eaten every piece of meat or fish ... In addition to this, prisoners were given slightly sweetened tea in a plastic liter mug and a slice of bread, half a centimeter thick. Lunch consisted of the same soup made of crushed wheat and porridge from the same crushed wheat. Occasionally, we were given fish soup. When wheat was delivered to the prison, it was first poured on the asphalt and then gathered with brooms; thus, there were often small stones or dirt in the porridge and soup. Once I mentioned this, and the response was, 'Just eat what you are given.' They would cut the bread very thin in 2 to 2.5 cm slices. The bread was brought in at night and stored in a refrigerator; it froze inside overnight, the

⁷ Interview with Geldy Kyarizov, Moscow, October 8, 2015.

crumb turning black and moldy. Dinner was the same as breakfast. At lunchtime and in the evening, they gave us camelthorn infusion instead of tea.”⁸

It was the same menu day after day. After his release, Kyarizov told his wife that he often got sick from bad food and had to give some of his food to cellmates or pour it into the toilet (prisoners were not allowed to refuse food). After five months in Ovadan Depe, Kyarizov lost about half of his weight (more than 40 kilos).⁹

Prisoners were given reusable plastic bowls and spoons, which had to be washed and returned to the guards after each meal. Tap water used for drinking and sanitary needs was only available for 30 minutes in the morning and afternoon; most of the time, the water was cloudy from mud or rusty. Every morning, inmates filled plastic flasks and a trash bin with tap water. One of the cellmates gave Kyarizov a flask; according to Kyarizov, “If you had one more flask than the other guy, you were a rich man.”

When prison guards opened the door, they would frown in disgust from the foul odor in the cell.

“We were simply rotting alive in there, judging by how the guards hated the smell,” Kyarizov recalls. “But we were used to it and did not even notice...”¹⁰

Once a week, unless there were problems with the water supply, prisoners were allowed to take a shower. They were led to the shower room, making sure that they could not communicate with or even see people in other cells.

“The three of us would be led out; we carried our mattresses, blankets and pillows and left them to dry in the sun; then we were made to run along the fence towards the smoking area on the corner ... There’s a concrete path next to the block, and we were running along, hands behind our backs, not allowed to look around. But it felt like a holiday for us anyway – being in the open, without bars and blinds. Otherwise, I swear, we were never allowed outside for exercise, as we should have been! We were given 15 to 20 minutes in the shower to wash and shave. Then we were made to run all the way back. The water was always cold. But as winter approached, ‘obizhenniki’ – prison downcasts¹¹ -- welded a gas stove out of old pipes; the stove blew up a couple of times, but still it allowed you occasionally to wash yourself with warm water.”¹²

On bath day, prisoners were given razors with Rapier blades to shave their heads and other body parts. Once a week, the guards would bring a quarter of a bar of lye soap, which had to be divided among the cellmates by cutting it with a thread. These pieces of soap were to be used for washing and for laundering one’s clothes. Prisoners were not allowed to keep the leftover slivers.

“About a month and a half after I was transferred to Ovadan Depe, we were issued small bags sewn out of greenish military fabric with small toothbrushes and tiny tubes of toothpaste in them. The toothpaste was past expiration date, but even that was better than none. It was to last us for a

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Interview with Yulia Serebryannik, Moscow, April 18, 2015.

¹⁰ Interview with Geldy Kyarizov, Moscow, October 8, 2015.

¹¹ Prisoners who have been sexually abused.

¹² Interview with Geldy Kyarizov, Moscow, October 8, 2015.

year, they said. They would issue it in the morning so we could brush our teeth, and then take it away after breakfast along with the eating utensils.”¹³

Once a year, each prisoner was entitled to a new black cotton robe. Kyarizov was issued his new robe while in the Seydi colony before being transported to Ovadan Depe. No underwear was ever issued, and no change of underwear was available. A prisoner’s only underwear consisted of the trunks and undershirt he was wearing when admitted. When these would wear out, “we were given a needle and thread to patch them up.”

“My undershirt was white, yet they gave me a black thread to patch it up,” Kyarizov says. “I was afraid that I might die wearing this undershirt, and if my body is given to the family, they would be shocked. Later, at the first opportunity, I ripped out the black thread and re-patched the shirt using a white thread.”¹⁴

Kyarizov was brought to Ovadan Depe with no socks. When it got colder, a cellmate who had an extra pair gave them to Kyarizov.

“Footwear was also issued once a year. When I came to Ovadan, I was wearing flip-flops. They got worn out, because we paced the cell all the time – there was nothing else to do there. But no one brought me another pair. During lunchtime, some downcasts took my flip-flops, mended them, and brought them back during the evening meal.” Kyarizov’s cellmate, whose footwear fell completely apart, was issued heavy old shoes with a nail sticking out of the sole. “He had to bend the nail hitting it with the other shoe.”¹⁵

There was virtually no medical care. Occasionally, a doctor would come by and ask the inmates about their health through the bars – he was not allowed to enter the cell.

“Occasionally, you could get a pill of analgin or trimol.¹⁶ Like it was a big favor! As winter approached, they gave me something for cold – I have weak lungs ... Once, the doctor gave me a nitroglycerin tablet for high blood pressure. There were no medicines available for diabetics. They were saying, ‘We also have other prisons [to supply], there is nothing available yet, we have no funds,’ etc.

Sometime in December – I do not remember exactly when, perhaps in preparation for the annual amnesty – there was some sort of health check-up: you were led to the duty officer’s room, they took your blood pressure and pulse ... Then they visited cells and gave us shots of something, using the same syringe on everyone, and some pills – they said those were vitamins, but we were afraid to take them.”¹⁷

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Analgesics and antipyretics.

¹⁷ Interview with Geldy Kyarizov, Moscow, October 8, 2015.

According to Kyarizov, *“There were insects in the cells, the same as outside. We did not mind mosquitos. As to beetles and spiders – they were our friends, providing some distraction from the monotony of prison life.”*¹⁸

Little information was available about inmates in other cells.

*“Those in Cell No. 2 were khyakims (heads of regional administrations): Ashirberdy Cherkezov¹⁹ and others. Cell No. 3 next to ours was empty. In the autumn, the Hadjiev brothers—Sapar and Aman²⁰--were brought there; their sister Ogulsapar had been married to a late friend of mine. Sometimes I talked to Aman, but Sapar avoided any contact. None of us knew at the time that their sister had died in prison in September.”*²¹

Three civil society activists, including RFE/RL Turkmen Service correspondent Ogulsapar Muradova and Sapardurdy Hajiyev, were arrested in June 2006 for helping foreign journalists film documentaries about Turkmenistan. The case provoked a wide international response. The initial charges of espionage and an anti-government plot were soon changed. On August 25, 2006, the journalists were convicted on trumped-up charges of possessing ammunition and sentenced to 6 and 7 years in prison, respectively. In the spring of 2006, Ogulsapar organized an interview with Yulia Serebryannik, her sisters and children with French journalists from *Galaxie Presse* who had come to Ashgabat to shoot a documentary about Turkmenistan.²² Kyarizov knew from his wife about the meeting with the French journalists, and when he heard about Ogulsapar’s sentence, he feared that his own family might also be at risk of reprisals. According to Yulia Serebryannik, her husband’s unexpected transfer to Ovadan Depe almost immediately after the sentencing of three civil society activists may have been linked to those interviews.

Kyarizov recalls that they used a system of signals to communicate with the neighbors – a system that his cellmates had learned while detained in another block of Ovadan Depe.

*“First, we peeped through cracks in the blinds to see if anyone was nearby. Then we knocked on the wall in a certain way... scratching a stone meant ‘come up to the window.’ Then we looked around again. Each of us coughed, and we would begin talking quietly. If you heard steps, you had to sneeze and stop the conversation...”*²³

The wing where Kyarizov’s cellmates had been detained earlier also held former heads of government departments – Ilyas Charyev,²⁴ an official from the geological exploration authority,

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ashirberdy Cherkezov, former mayor of Ashgabat and Turkmenbashi, was sentenced in 2003 to 10 years in prison and released in June 2013.

²⁰ Amandurdi Hajiyev was sentenced to 15 years in prison in October 2002 and released a few years ago.

²¹ Interview with Geldy Kyarizov, Moscow, October 8, 2015.

²² The documentary ‘Turkménistan: la folie Niazov’ with excerpts from interviews with Kyarizov’s family members was aired in the autumn of 2006. While the interviewee faces were blurred out, they were fairly easy to identify for someone who knew them.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ilyas Charyev, head of Turkmenneftegaz, was accused of corruption and embezzlement and sentenced to 25 years in prison in 2005.

and some others, including former officials of the National Security Ministry and high-level prosecutors.

“They told me about Kuvandyk, the head of the Investigation Department at the Prosecutor’s Office. While still in office, he would enter their cell chewing gum, notebook in hand, put his foot on a bunk bed and say, ‘Well, any complaints? You will stay here until the end.’ Boy, were my cellmates laughing when Kuvandyk himself and others from the Prosecutor’s Office were sentenced... In January, just before my transfer back to the colony, I was walking to the shower past their wing and could hear inhuman cries, like they were losing their minds in there... [Guards] shaved Murat Atagarryev’s²⁵ head in the hallway using a dull razor, while he was yelling in pain; on another occasion, he was dragged into the hallway and severely beaten – perhaps on someone’s orders.”²⁶

Family

When Kyarizov was transferred to Ovadan Depe on August 25, 2006, nobody informed his family. His wife, Yulia Serebryannik, brought a parcel for her husband to the colony on August 22, but when she came back to LB-K/12 to visit him on September 2, the deputy head of the facility told her that Kyarizov had been transferred ‘to an appropriate institution.’

During the six months that followed, Kyarizov’s family was not aware of his whereabouts or whether he was still alive, received no news of him and appealed in vain to various authorities.

On September 18, 2006, the Deputy Head of the Department of Corrections told Yulia Serebryannik that her husband was not registered at any prison in Turkmenistan.²⁷

“In September, I started going everywhere asking why no visits were allowed and no money or parcels accepted,” Yulia recalls. “But no matter where we went, nobody told us anything. I started writing complaints and sending out telegrams. I prepared letters for the Russian, American, British and German embassies. The British then made an enquiry. As British diplomat Chris Bowden later told me, Rashid Meredov, Vice Premier and Minister of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan, had asked him why the diplomat was so concerned about Kyarizov who was ‘a criminal element.’”²⁸

Yulia Serebryannik has kept some of her voluminous correspondence with various government departments at that time, including the responses she received from the Prosecutor General’s Office, dated October 26, November 8 and 20, and December, 2006, stating that her letters asking about her husband’s fate had been forwarded to the Interior Ministry; the response from the Supreme Court of November 23, 2006, saying that she should ask the Interior Ministry about her husband’s whereabouts; receipts of registered letters addressed to the editorial board of *Adalat* legal weekly dated November 6, 2006, Supreme Court, Ministry of Justice, Presidential Institute of

²⁵ Murat Atagarryev, khyakim (governor) of Akhal province, was removed from office on charges of corruption and other crimes in September 2005.

²⁶ Interview with Geldy Kyarizov, Moscow, October 8, 2015.

²⁷ Interview with Yulia Serebryannik, Moscow, April 18, 2015; Turkmenistan: Medical concern: Geldy Kyarizov // Amnesty International, EUR 61/007/2007, 01/02/2007 (<http://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/64000/eur610072007en.pdf>).

²⁸ Interview with Yulia Serebryannik, Moscow, April 18, 2015.

Democracy and Human Rights, Prosecutor General, dated November 3, 2006, and January 3, 2007, and others.

Four of the responses signed by Yazmyradov, Head of the DoC at the Interior Ministry, dated November 3, 13, 17 and 23, 2006, stated that the convicted Kyarizov was held in 'an appropriate institution' of his department, but did not specify the prison.

The British Foreign and Commonwealth Office human rights reports of 2006 and 2007 mentioned that the Embassy was maintaining close contacts with Kyarizov's family and regularly raised the issue of his release both on a bilateral basis and in the framework of the EU and OSCE. The 2006 report referred to Kyarizov's parole eligibility and the 2007 report referred to humanitarian considerations related to Mr. Kyarizov's poor health.

The fact that the 33-year-old Yulia was so active had been unprecedented in Turkmenistan, a totalitarian society where fear of punishment at the hands of government was pervasive. In February 2006, she and other members of her family were banned from traveling abroad, and a month later she was fined for alleged 'unruly conduct' in the National Security Ministry's building. Yulia's numerous complaints and the attention of Western diplomats in 2006 and 2007 – and later in 2015 – made a positive difference for Geldy Kyarizov and were likely the reason for the small improvements in Ovadan Depe inmates' daily lives in October 2006, as described above.

According to Kyarizov, prison guards in Ovadan Depe soon began treating him a little differently from other prisoners. Kyarizov once said to his cellmates, *"See, my [family] are not just sitting there doing nothing, they appeal everywhere ... What we need is forty women, not just one, to get together and file a petition, appeal to the OSCE and the United Nations."* His cellmates, however, had a conformist outlook.

Geldy Kyarizov recalls, *"One of them said, 'When I was arrested, I said to my [family], 'You should keep quiet,'" but I said to him, 'You could also advise them to take off their pants...' He was offended."*²⁹

Around November 10, 2006, a stranger came to Yulia Serebryannik's home on a friend's recommendation; the man said that he worked in Ovadan Depe and could allegedly deliver some food and money to her husband.

*"That guy was about two meters tall. I was in shock – how come? We had been unable to pass anything over, no note, no food. I packed some meat and other food, borrowed some money from my brother. Then it turned out that Geldy got none of it. I do not know why. My brother scolded me for that. People say, the man indeed had worked at Ovadan Depe, but soon he was killed."*³⁰

On December 13, 2006, Geldy Kyarizov's family was visited by a man who introduced himself as a Ministry of National Security official but did not present any identification. He reportedly told

²⁹ Interview with Geldy Kyarizov, Moscow, October 8, 2015.

³⁰ Interview with Yulia Serebryannik, Moscow, April 18, 2015.

them that Geldy Kyarizov had been tortured to death.³¹ It may have been a futile attempt by the security services to quash Yulia's activity.

After President Niyazov's Death

Saparmurad Niyazov, the first post-Soviet president of Turkmenistan and the architect of the country's totalitarian regime, died under unclear circumstances on December 21, 2006. The administration of Ovadan Depe hid this information from prisoners. Geldy Kyarizov learned about the dictator's death more than a month later when he had a chance to talk to inmates from other facilities while in a prisoner rail car. Nevertheless, certain changes signifying new developments started occurring in Ovadan Depe almost immediately after the death of the 'leader of all Turkmen.'

"On December 21, we could hear a large helicopter circling over the prison. Then, unexpectedly, larger bread rations were issued; in addition to the usual brown bread, 'dubacks' (prison guards) would bring some churek (flat bread) and cut it up, giving out pieces to us as if it was hudaëly.³² On New Year's Eve, they even served us pilaf – no meat, just the rice. I ate it, but was very sick afterwards... And the prosecutor guys suddenly gave each of us two chocolates. It was as if they had started to fear God. The guards' attitude had changed noticeably. A week after Niyazov's death, they installed a mirror and some flooring in the shower and allowed us to keep the leftover soap slivers. This had never occurred before, and so we knew that something had happened...

On New Year's Eve, we heard the duty officer turn on music on the radio. He got drunk, came up to our cell door, opened the peephole and yelled, 'Everyone, stand up! Roll up your bedding, no one may sleep!' He was pounding on our door with his boot or baton, swearing... My heart sank... but then I thought, 'No f...ing way, you are not allowed to open the door on your own.' So I just lay down. He was yelling, 'Lie over there, where I can see you.' He was banging on the door and swearing. I took my stuff. I had seen enough of such types already. I said to him, 'Get lost, you bastard.' He was still pounding on the door and bars..."³³

On January 18, 2007, an Interior Ministry official called Kyarizov's ex-wife and said that the family could come to the DoC on Monday, January 22, 2007 and bring a parcel to be delivered to the prisoner. In Kyarizov's home, the phone line was disconnected, no reasons given, on the day of President Niyazov's death, and reconnected only after almost three months (the family's complaints about the disconnected phone remained unanswered).

Due to difficult relations with her husband's former family, Yulia Serebryannik learned that she could send a parcel to her husband only on the evening of January 21, 2007. This was the first indication that Geldy Kyarizov was still alive. On Monday morning, she came to the DoC building on Gerogly Street, near the Tourist Hotel, to find an enormous queue of prisoners' families outside the building. She was called in after a while; at first, the officials spent quite a long time trying to find Kyarizov's name in two prison registers, but then they brought in a third register – perhaps a

³¹ Turkmenistan: Medical concern: Geldy Kyarizov // Amnesty International, EUR 61/007/2007, 01/02/2007 (<http://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/64000/eur610072007en.pdf>).

³² Hudaëly is a traditional Turkmen treat served as charity or a plea for forgiveness.

³³ Interview with Geldy Kyarizov, Moscow, October 8, 2015.

special one listing the Ovadan Depe inmates – and found his name there. Then they accepted the parcel.

Soon after that, an Interior Ministry representative phoned Geldy's younger brother Kakageldy Kyarizov, telling him that Geldy had been moved to a higher-security colony in Mary velayat. This, however, was not true. Yulia Serebryannik travelled to two facilities in that velayat, a colony in Bairam-Ali and a prison hospital, before she learned that her husband had been returned to LB-K/12.³⁴

Geldy Kyarizov shared his own memories of those days:

“About ten days before, we had been told that parcels were now permitted. We got excited. I gave the phone numbers of my wife and Davlet – my son from the first marriage... It snowed on Friday, January 26. From the exercise yard some 20 to 30 meters behind the shower room, I could see the Kopetdag mountains' snow-capped peaks, and for the first time I got an idea of our location. When I came back, the cell door was not yet closed, and soon a man came in, accompanied by a duty officer and the chief of Ovadan Depe, the same mustachioed guy who met me when I first arrived. He asked, ‘Who is Kyarizov? How are you? Pack your stuff tonight and get ready to move.’ The guy turned out to be the DoC new chief. I asked, ‘Where now?’ – ‘They will explain.’ That evening I was packing my stuff. Just a couple of days before I had received a parcel with round cheese, nice packaged soap ... I shared them with my cellmates. They said: ‘May Allah bless you, Geldy. You’re the first one to leave.’ They said goodbye with tears in their eyes. When it was time to carry my stuff, I was so weak that I could not lift the bag and was dragging it along, wobbling as I walked. We came to the exit. Once again, sack on my head, hands behind my back, they pushed me into the vehicle. It was just me inside. We drove along a special road past a few checkpoints. Once behind the railway station, on the side of the tunnel leading to Khitrovka, they removed my handcuffs. There were soldiers with Alsatians all around us. I was led into a rail car. A Stolypin prison car³⁵ typically has a few large compartments and couple of small ones. I was placed in one small compartment, and a couple of downcasts brought from Krasnovodsk were placed in the other. We were passing by Yashlyk, 60 kilometers from Ashgabat, and I kept hearing the same conversation: the President of Georgia, someone else coming to the funeral ... I asked, ‘Hey, bro, what president? What funeral?’ – ‘Where are you from, brother?’ – ‘Ovadan Depe’ – ‘Oh, now I see ... Our president Turkmenbashi died on December 21.’ That's where I first heard about it. Sure, I gasped...”³⁶

It turned out that the same car was carrying Geldy Kyarizov's nephew Agageldy and the nephew of former Foreign Minister Boris Shikhmuradov, Murat, both convicted in 2001. They were being convoyed from Krasnovodsk. They had been sentenced to serve the first five years in prison, but had been kept in prison a year longer and transferred to a colony in Bairam-Ali only after Niyazov's death. Kyarizov was able to exchange a few words with them.

After Geldy Kyarizov's return to LB-K/12, all restrictions concerning family visits, parcels and communication with other inmates were cancelled.

³⁴ Interview with Yulia Serebryannik, Moscow, April 18, 2015.

³⁵ Stolypin car is a rail car equipped for transportation of prisoners.

³⁶ Interview with Geldy Kyarizov, Moscow, October 8, 2015.

On January 29, 2007, Yulia Serebryannik was able to visit her husband for the first time in five months. According to Amnesty International's press release of February 1, 2007, Geldy Kyarizov looked beyond recognition like 'a walking dead body,' 'a skeleton with skin,' and weighed 45-50 kg, having lost about half his weight. Although in 2002 he suffered two heart attacks and a stroke in pre-trial detention and had pneumonia, he was denied appropriate medical treatment in Ovadan Depe. The human rights organization expressed concern for the health of Geldy Kyarizov, who needed urgent medical treatment.³⁷ A similar description was given in an article posted on Gundogar website, saying that Kyarizov looked 'as though he had been in Buchenwald.' In addition to serious problems with his physical condition, he was 'morally depressed and on the verge of a mental disorder.'³⁸

Geldy Kyarizov was the first prisoner transferred from Ovadan Depe to an ordinary prison colony after Niyazov's death. His cellmates were convoyed to a colony in Bairam-Ali a week later. Dadebay, former director of the animal fat factory sentenced to 18 years in prison, was released in late 2007 after compensating the state the damage incriminated against him. However, Kakamurad Annaklychev, former khyakim of Dashoguz velayat, sentenced to 25 years, is still in prison, according to unconfirmed reports.³⁹

On October 7, 2007, Geldy Kyarizov was released 56 days before the end of his term as part of the annual amnesty campaign in accordance with the presidential decree on amnesty of persons sentenced to imprisonment, in honor of the Gadyr Gijesi holiday on September 29, 2007.

Before Kyarizov's release, deputy chief of LB-K/12 Shakir had tried to persuade him to make a statement of repentance on television, but Kyarizov refused.

"I answered, 'I incriminated myself once before, but you will never make me do it again. If you release me, good, if not, you will be held accountable. The decree has been published and my name is in it...' When I came out of the colony and walked away about 200 meters and thought that no one could see me, I turned round, gave them a finger, and said, 'I f...ed your mother'... It was my impulsiveness that got the better of me. It turns out, some people saw it and later told my wife... At first, I enjoyed the sense of freedom. Once in Ashgabat, however, I realized that surveillance, squealing, prohibitions, and arbitrariness of security services – none of these had ended for me. It was as if all of Turkmenistan had become one big prison."⁴⁰

The certificate of release issued to Kyarizov by the administration of LB-K/12 did not mention that he had been held illegally in Ovadan Depe.

³⁷ Turkmenistan: Medical concern: Geldy Kyarizov // Amnesty International, EUR 61/007/2007, 01/02/2007 (<http://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/64000/eur610072007en.pdf>).

³⁸ Boris Shikhmuradov, Shall We Stop Killing Each Other? // Gundogar, 01.02.2007 (<http://gundogar.org/?0221043815000000000000011000000>).

³⁹ In February 2007, Ilyas Charyev, mentioned above, was transferred to Bairam-Ali and continues to serve his sentence. Civil society activist Sapardurdy Hajiyev was transferred to the colony of BC-K/6 in Akdash, Balkan velayat, in 2007, and released in February 2013. Around 2012, Seydali (?) Rakhimov, one of the '12 apostles' held in Ovadan Depe, was also released.

⁴⁰ Interview with Geldy Kyarizov, Moscow, October 8, 2015.



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