

FOREWORD

I was born and grew up in Minsk, in the very center of the city. A month before my birth, in the building where I grew up, the Central Cinema opened, which confirms that the building belongs to the very center of the city. At the end of the yard there is a Mauritian style building of the former Choral synagogue of Minsk. Now, it's the Russian Drama Theater named after Maxim Gorky. Building Number 13 is still standing at the same place where it stood, but from the time of my appearance, it changed its address several times for political reasons. At first, it was on Stalin Avenue, then Lenin Avenue, then Francysk Skaryna Avenue, named for the founder of the Belarusian printing press, and now it is on Independent Avenue. Meanwhile, the maternity clinic where I appeared on this earth is still on Volodarsky Street.

Right across from the maternity clinic is the oldest prison in Minsk, the “Volodarka,” nick-named after the name of the

street. In the old days, the prison was called the Pishchalov Castle, named for the merchant Rudolf Pishchallo, who commissioned it. The prisoners of the castle were the insurgents of 1831 and 1863, the writers Vincent Dunin-Martsinkevich and Yakub Kolas; the Polish head of state Joseph Pilsudski; and the creator and inspirer of the Cheka-KGB, Felix Dzerzhinsky, the Dracula of Belarus.

Today, School No. 42, the famous “Impermeable Guards,” is also at the same address, on Komsomolskaya Street, just a block from my house. This entire block is occupied by the building of the KGB and Interior Ministry (MVD). The building is notable for the fact that on its façade in the Soviet era were hung enormous portraits of the members of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, and behind this façade, hidden thoroughly from outside eyes, was the gloomiest Belarusian prison – the “Amerikanka.” For 10 years, I walked to school past the columned entrance to the KGB, and on graduation night, my graduation took place in the Dzerzhinsky Club, which is located in this same apartment, right across from the school. We partied until morning and greeted the dawn at the airport.

A few blocks from my house is October Square, which used to be called “Central Square.” In the Soviet era, parades used to be held there along with mass festivities. A block from my house in the other direction is Independence Square, previously called “Lenin Square.” The Government Building is on this square, one of the few that remained undamaged by the war; a monument to Constructivism. In the center of this government ensemble is the largest pre-war construction in Belarus, a stone Lenin statue on a podium.

I grew up in this district, I know it well, but several years ago I was forced to get to know it anew, to become acquainted with its life hidden from outside eyes.

In 2010, the presidential “election” took place in Belarus, in which I took part as a candidate. The main events related to this “election” in fact took place in the center of Minsk, on the squares and in the prisons of my district. This is what my book is about.