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## Serial Killer's Victim Tells of Her Escape

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By Svetlana Osadchuk, Carl Schreck / The Moscow Times

On a gray, snowy February morning, a woman walking in Bittsevsky Park heard a faint cry coming from a concrete well rising about 40 centimeters above the ground.

There was no one else around.

She saw the iron manhole cover atop the well slowly rise, and she scurried away in fright.

Maria Viricheva was trying in vain to shove aside the 40-kilogram cover when, through a small crack she managed to create, she saw the woman flee. Exhausted from hours of crawling through filth after being thrown in a sewage pipe and left for dead, Viricheva thought her last hope had disappeared.

"My head hurt terribly, but I wanted to live," Viricheva told the Moscow City Court in videotaped testimony last week.

Viricheva is one of three people known to have survived attacks by serial killer Alexander Pichushkin, who was convicted Wednesday of murdering 48 people. One survivor has no recollection of the attack because of the head injury Pichushkin inflicted, while the third was a homeless boy.

Pichushkin, 33, typically used vodka to lure his victims into the sprawling Bittsevsky Park in southwest Moscow and tossed them into a sewage drain to die after getting them drunk. Some of his victims he bludgeoned to death with a hammer.

Attempts to reach Viricheva, 24, for an interview were unsuccessful, and she only agreed to give videotaped testimony in the five-week trial. She did not want to see Pichushkin again.

Originally from Tatarstan, Viricheva came to Moscow in 2001 to find work. After her arrival, she met Sergei Pastukhov, who became her boyfriend and set her up with a job selling stationary near the Kakhovskaya metro station. She was 19 and three months pregnant with Pastukhov's child when she met Pichushkin while at work. After an argument that day, she feared her boyfriend was about to



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Polikarpov

break up with her. Her boyfriend was an acquaintance of Pichushkin's, and Pichushkin told the court that he had seen Viricheva near the metro station several times.

On the night of Feb. 23, 2002, Pichushkin said, he was "hunting" for a victim near the metro station and saw Viricheva looking distraught.

"I understood immediately that she was upset and offered her some company," Pichushkin told the court, speaking through a microphone in the glassed-in defendant's cage.

While he plied most of his male victims with alcohol, Pichushkin took a different tack with women.

"Women always need to have a financial interest," he told the court.

To lure Viricheva, Pichushkin told her that he had several boxes of brand-new contraband cameras stashed deep inside the park. He told her not to waste her time grieving, that she would be better off making some money. If she would help him move the merchandise, she could keep half of it for herself, both Pichushkin and Viricheva told the court.

It was dark when they arrived at the concrete well where Pichushkin said he had left the cameras, and Viricheva was pressing him to hurry up. She had to wake up early the next morning to go to work.

Pichushkin lifted the manhole cover off the well and told Viricheva to come closer. When she approached, he quickly grabbed her and shoved her inside. As she tried to keep her grasp on the rim of the cylinder, Pichushkin grabbed her by the hair and began smashing her head against the well's concrete walls. She had no choice but to let herself fall.

"I realized that he would kill me like this," she said. "So I let go."

The last thing she heard was Pichushkin yell, "Take a bath there," she told the court.

## A Narrow Escape

Waste from all over western Moscow flows through the network of sewage pipes under Bittsevsky Park, according to the city water supply monopoly, Mosvodokanal. In some places, the stream of sewage reaches a speed of up to 7 meters per second, Mosvodokanal official Andrei Fomushkin testified in court.

After falling 8 meters, Viricheva landed in a sewage pipe about 1 meter in diameter with the stream running around 70 centimeters high. The powerful flow carried her away from where she landed, and after several seconds underwater, she managed to come up and grab a breath.

She removed her jacket and boots to free herself up and was eventually able to plant her feet and hands on the side of the pipe to stop from being swept away.

If the current had continued to carry her, Viricheva would have drowned in a section of the pipeline completely filled with water, Fomushkin said.

But Viricheva found another concrete well with an iron ladder running up the side. She clambered her way to the top, only to be met by the 40-kilogram iron manhole cover that she could not completely dislodge.

Luckily for Viricheva, the woman who ran away returned a short time later with two security guards from a nearby cluster of garages. They lifted the trembling, half-naked girl from the well and called an ambulance.

Viricheva was taken to the hospital, and both she and her unborn child survived. But in one of several harrowing twists that helped Pichushkin repeatedly evade arrest, prosecutors revealed Wednesday that the police officer who questioned her at the hospital forced her to sign a statement that she had fallen down the well herself. The officer, identified only by his last name, Kalashnikov, apparently did not want to investigate the case.

Prosecutors have opened a criminal investigation into Kalashnikov's actions, prosecutors said.

### The Other Survivors

Pichushkin told the court that he almost had a nervous breakdown when he saw Viricheva near her apartment about six months after the attack.

Pichushkin looked disappointed when Viricheva was brought in to identify him last year after his arrest, said Andrei Danyushenko, former head of the Zyuzino district precinct.

But Pichushkin quickly overcame frustration and asked her whether she would like to take another walk with him some time, said Danyushenko, who now heads the Severnoye Butovo district precinct.

"No, thanks," he recalled Viricheva saying. "One time was enough for me."

It was not Pichushkin's first such offer to his surviving victims.

Pichushkin's neighbor Konstantin Polikarpov left his apartment on Nov. 15, 2003, to buy cigarettes before a football match on television. Pichushkin invited him to the park for a drink, smashed him over the head three times with a hammer, and threw him down the well, prosecutors said.

Polikarpov managed to climb out of the sewer, but he remembered nothing of the attack. Only his relatives testified in court.

In a telephone interview this week, Polikarpov's mother, Valentina Yurlova, said Pichushkin saw her son on the street about two weeks after he was released from the hospital.

"He offered [Polikarpov] money to help with his medical treatment," Yurlova said.

Pichushkin gave the court a different account of his follow-up encounter with Polikarpov: He said he offered his neighbor to go to the park for another drink. "He declined," Pichushkin told the court. "I asked others to go drink, and they accepted the invitation. There are a lot of freeloaders."

Mikhail Lobov, who was 14 and homeless when Pichushkin threw him down a well on March 10, 2002, is currently serving time for theft in a juvenile prison. He submitted written testimony to the court. He said he tried to tell police about Pichushkin but that they would not listen to a homeless boy.

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