

**GAMES
PRISONERS
PLAY** The Tragicomic
Worlds of
Polish Prison

**Marek M.
KAMINSKI**

PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS
PRINCETON AND OXFORD

Copyright ©2004 by Princeton University Press
Published by Princeton University Press, 41 William Street,
Princeton, New Jersey 08540
In the United Kingdom: Princeton University Press, 3 Market Place,
Woodstock, Oxfordshire OX20 1SY
All Rights Reserved

ISBN: 0-691-11721-7

British Library Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available
This book has been composed in Galliard with Helvetica
Designed by Lorraine Doneker and composed by Gary R. Beck
Printed on acid-free paper. ∞

www.pupress.princeton.edu

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

TO MY PARENTS AND SISTER

My sociology advisor in graduate school, Antoni Kamiński, first suggested applying game theory. My online conversations with Diego Gambetta revived my interest in prison behavior. Then, I was lucky to meet the perfect editor—Ian Malcolm of Princeton University Press—who helped me enormously with polishing the book's English and accepted my various nonstandard requests. Mirck Andrzejewski, who himself spent many months behind bars in Poland as a political prisoner in the 1980s, provided wonderful illustrations. The final manuscript benefitted from the comments of Steven Brams, Youssef Cohen, Dominika Dziągiewska, Matt Golder, Grzegorz Lissowski, Joe Oppenheimer, Piotr Swistak, Katherine Tate, the anonymous referees and, especially, Monika Nalepa, with whom I discussed all details and ideas at each stage of writing.

My research was supported by fellowships and grants from ICPSR at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, the Institute for Humane Studies, and the Center for the Study of Democracy at the University of California, Irvine. Two former chairmen of the Politics department at New York University, Russell Hardin and George Downs, provided me with much needed financial help when the Immigration and Naturalization relegated me for a two-year exile from NYU.

Finally, this research would have been impossible without the collective hard work of thousands of anonymous policemen, prosecutors, and judges who tirelessly jailed and imprisoned thousands of Polish and other Eastern European dissidents during the reign of communism. Their efforts are unlikely ever to get the attention they deserve.

Introduction

Prison socializes an inmate to behave hyperrationally. It teaches him patience in planning and pursuing his goals, punishes him severely for his mistakes, and rewards him generously for smart action. No wonder that inmates are such ardent optimizers. A clever move can shorten one's sentence, save one from rape or a beating, keep one's spirit high, or increase one's access to resources. There is little space for innocent and spontaneous expressions of emotion when they collide with fundamental interests. Brutal fights, self-injury, and rapes can all be explained as outcomes of carefully calculated actions. Paradoxically, much of the confusion in interpreting prison behavior arises from both a failure to understand the motives of inmates and an unwillingness to admit that outcomes judged as inhuman or bizarre may be consequences of individually rational action.

The main message of the book is that prisoners optimize under the constraints of their harsh life conditions and the local subculture. Their behavior reflects their attempts at optimization. Such a "rational choice" approach helps us to better understand prison behavior.

A PERSONAL NOTE—HOW DID I OBTAIN ACCESS TO MY DATA?

I beg the reader's forgiveness for a brief personal narrative that explains how I learned this lesson myself, and how I collected the