

Resistance Solutions in the Communist Prisons and Concentration Camps of Romania Memoirist Writings of the Romanian Gulag

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IN ORDER to survive in the communist prisons and camps, prisoners discovered and created a philosophy of detention capable of supplanting the long lost outside universe, which was now, perhaps, forever irretrievable for them. Still, this philosophy was more than a mere substitute for the real, as it was also a self-contained and versatile world-engendering strategy. With a view to exploring the resistance solutions that I will outline in this study, I have resorted mainly to the testimonies left by the memoirists of detention in the Romanian Gulag.

I will make reference, to begin with, to a text that has already become famous, namely, N. Steinhardt's *Testamentul politic* (Political testament), which prefaces his *Jurnalul fericirii* (The journal of happiness). N. Steinhardt speaks here about three solutions for resistance in the carceral universe: the Solzhenitsyn solution—considering oneself dead or mortified and, hence, unapproachable by the repression apparatus; the Zinoviev solution—playing the part of a lunatic or a vagrant who was structurally maladjusted to the system; and the Churchill-Bukovsky solution—voluptuously fighting against the concentration camp system. N. Steinhardt did not specify whether these major solutions were applicable inside or outside the Gulag, and his references to the concentration camp system were, more or less, general; therefore, they should be brought back into discussion. For instance, the Solzhenitsyn solution was obviously applicable especially inside the Gulag (it would not have made any sense outside it) and the Zinoviev or Churchill-Bukovsky solutions were applicable particularly outside the Gulag (Bukovsky, however, also resorted to that solution inside the Gulag). Insofar as the third solution is concerned, I believe that N. Steinhardt exaggerated by labeling (half of) it the Churchill solution; while Solzhenitsyn, Zinoviev and Bukovsky were personalities who had been connected, to a greater or lesser extent, with the Gulag and with communist totalitarianism, the insertion of Churchill's name was hardly conclusive or appropriate, appearing to have honorary connotations more than anything else. Moreover, the equality that the author of *Testamentul politic* established between the three solutions was strained, since the Zinoviev solution was less involved and more escapist than the other two, which were more trenchant. N. Steinhardt did not exhaust all the solutions of resistance, nor did he intend to do so; by his example, he provided yet another solution, that of faith (which he had assumed, in any case). Here, however, mention should be made of the fact that the solution of faith had two nuances: one that was relatively common, in the sense of faith in tradition, and the other, which was the mystical solution. The latter entailed the spiritual adjustment of the concentration camp universe to the archetypal Christic scenario a prisoner could go through; after experiencing the revelation of faith in caverns and abysses, he could believe, at first, “only in half or quarter meas-

ures, or even less, almost not at all.”¹ N. Steinhardt had overcome the first stage, approaching detention in the manner of a mystic. In his relation to the others, he reached *agapé*, Christian love, being permanently marked, after baptism, by indestructible inner elation.

The fact that detention was fruitful for N. Steinhardt had been predicated upon his conversion to Christianity (he constantly stated that prison as a “place of fulfillment”) and upon his strong moral fiber, which required that he make use of psychological weapons which were tantamount to those of his opponent (the investigator, the torturer), training himself for these confrontations. Aware that the prison itself was small by comparison with the country at large as a prison, N. Steinhardt refused to pass for a traitor or a collaborationist, and gave himself up to the organs of repression, at a time when the authorities merely wanted to test him psychologically. N. Steinhardt’s *Christomorphosis* was revealing to the extent that detention amounted to resuming a saving ordeal. This highly inspired term has been coined by Vlad Pavlovici, who comments as follows: “N. Steinhardt incessantly proves his lucidity in prison. He even displays a sort of *trezvie* (intense wakefulness), as he understands everything and assumes everything. What he assumes, above all, is his destiny. The more tragic it is, the more disturbing his suffering is, the more evident it becomes that his power of overcoming suffering is converted into happiness. The emphasis is on the freedom of experiencing the religious sentiment and his suffering is transfigured. . . . The blessing of the Calvary he faces, the transformation of the most atrocious sources of suffering into sources of joy, the terrible will to retrace, to reiterate the passions of the Saviour—all these converge, in N. Steinhardt’s book, towards a proposed *Christomorphosis*.”² After the period of detention, after attaining inner salvation, N. Steinhardt no longer even posed the question of forgetting evil (he had already solved the problem of forgiveness). Beyond loneliness, disillusion and old age, his gift remained the freshness of Christianity. N. Steinhardt’s case was all the more interesting as he was not a professional dispenser of the faith, which would have ensured the legitimacy of the mystical solution he had adopted (as I said before, this was more than a solution of faith, involving additional nuances, which pertained to the distinction between priests and monks, between monks and the hermits dwelling in desert caves). In any case, it should be noted that the majority of the priests (regardless of their denomination) who went through the Gulag experience found their resilience in faith.

In his notes about prison, the Greek-Catholic Bishop Iuliu Hossu testified, in turn, about a form of innate and instinctual resistance through *Christomorphosis* (even though he did not use this term). Despite the repression, the atmosphere was one of communion and acceptance of the ordeal in the sense of becoming one with God and rising from death through suffering. Iuliu Hossu focused on the idea of a “spiritual feast” in detention; a luminous albeit powerful delicacy consecrated the bishop as a diaphanous warrior, who immersed himself into the intricacies of faith with a devotion that was outstandingly rare. In addition to prayer, Iuliu Hossu also found a solution for enduring his ordeals: he programmatically and strategically recollected his peregrinations as a bishop and a free individual in his diocese, his canonical visitations, the consecrations of churches, the sermons he had delivered during holidays, re-living thus what he referred to as his “archpastorate.” He was the sole prisoner incarcerated for having remained true to his conscience in whom I have encountered this unique solution of resistance through which he had managed to escape the barbed-wire enclosure. In the Sighet prison, Iuliu Hossu silently recited the liturgy every day, adapting it according to the holidays that were to be celebrated, or he even conceived new prayers together with the other prelates. The movement was katabatic, but redemptive: “the higher the restrictions against externalization, the deeper I descended into the recesses of my soul, deeper and deeper, turning everything I experienced in the dungeons of Sighet into holy prayer and offering it with humility to the Lord Jesus.”³ Prayer was perceived as the “supreme university” and as a “vocational school.” Although, out of humility and gentleness, he had never presumed to envisage himself as a “chosen vessel of Christ,” Iuliu Hossu was just that, abundantly. His memoirs about imprisonment could be said to amount to a second *Jurnalul Fericiirii*, because the

only other prisoner in whom the sweetness of suffering and the firmness of the crusader could be encountered was N. Steinhardt. Mention ought to be made, however, that Iuliu Hossu's memories and experiences in detention are to be understood as a form of liturgy.

An interesting case was that of Richard Wurmbrand, a Protestant pastor, whose book is not only a testimony made by a clergymen who experienced the Romanian Gulag for 14 years, but also a manual of how faith can be tested through temptations, revelations, visions, etc. The solution of faith proposed here is refined: "beyond faith and love, there is joy unto the Lord: a profound, extraordinary ecstasy of happiness, unparalleled in this world," as the pastor stated,⁴ differentiating mystical joy from faith and love. He applied this solution especially in isolation. Richard Wurmbrand prepared mentally for detention and torture, like a soldier, even though immediately after his arrest he considered committing suicide. I insist on this testimony, because this entire carceral experience was perceived as a test of his faith. Morally, the solution to overcome the torture and all the forms of aggression was, in the author's conception, the Christian acceptance of death as resurrection; when suffering must be forgotten or when the danger of madness must be overcome, the prisoner resorted to a whirling dance like that of the dervishes or to the technique of the prayer in the heart. Richard Wurmbrand's book is strange for a cleric also because the author spoke comprehensively about his hallucinations and temptations (for instance, the slaying of the demon of lust with the help of the demon of pride). He described the physical degradation that, by way of compensation, led him directly towards an intense spiritual life. During the nearly three years of isolation, Richard Wurmbrand felt haunted and literally tested by the devil, which he succeeded in doing away with only through deeds of faith and, sometimes, through poetry. His moral structure was, above all, that of an astute missionary (in this last aspect, it would be enlightening to recall the strange relationship between the investigated and the investigator, which led to the latter's Christian conversion: at first enticed with Marxist ideas applied in a Christian manner, the investigator ultimately confessed to his interlocutor, like in the scene of a Dostoyevskian novel). While in collective detention, the pastor always spoke in parables and exercised his pedagogical vocation, because in prison witty stories and advice with cathartic effect proved to be essential: "I would often speak for hours on end, although I was sick and dizzy with hunger: a story could keep a man's life going just as well as a piece of bread."⁵

When referring to the resistance through faith, Richard Wurmbrand spoke of a Christian solution "in a living form"; he did not want to experience missionaryism and faith in a rigid way, but in a manner that was adapted to the context, for there is a sense in any suffering that has something of the Christic suffering, the author claimed, converting prisoners of all ages and from all walks of life (his main converts were the young and the Marxists). Sometimes the pastor's sermons were rejected, and then he made up stories featuring picturesque brigands, which nonetheless drew on writings with a Christian touch of Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky and always featured a moralizing subtext. It was not in vain that the cells through which Richard Wurmbrand walked were regarded as "parishes." During the second period of his detention, the pastor met those who had been re-educated in Pitești and other irretrievably hardened prisoners, whom he could not address. The scenes from Gherla were, again, Dostoyevskian, for although mistreated by those detainees, the pastor did not denounce them; on the contrary, his attitude was that of a persevering missionary: neither did he seek vengeance, nor did he give up preaching, for he even managed to bring the virtual suicides onto the path of faith. I would say that as a shift from one extreme to the other, from murder to holiness and repentance, Dostoyevskianism, was the characteristic of Pastor Wurmbrand's great converts, even though their proneness to conversion was ambiguous: "Prison turned some into saints and others into brutes and it was hard to predict who would become a saint and who a brute; but one thing was certain—that most prisoners would continue to live as if in a vacuum."⁶ Richard Wurmbrand's last battle with the devil consisted in his refusal to accept "brainwashing" (during prison sessions of

self-criticism and verbose masochism, with hysterical overtones) and in a dramatic inner Faustian dispute that the pastor eventually overcame.

Those who underwent re-education through torture in the Pitești prison (between 1949 and 1951) spoke about the solution of faith (even if they were not devout believers) before passing through the Caudine Forks of degradation; during the re-education itself, it was no longer a matter of faith, but of repression, death or insanity. For a virtually re-educated man like Emil Cortez (a character camouflaging the identity of Costin Merișca), the solution of faith was the first to be relinquished desperately: “The first I must kill within myself is God! He is the root of all this!”⁷ Dumitru Gh. Bordeianu, another prisoner who had been through the Pitești experiment, stated that if he had been aware of the large-scale torture that was to be applied in the Luciferic prison, he, although a Christian, would have chosen death, in one way or another, for the “heroism of an instant is preferable to lasting heroism, which grinds up, degrades, changes and destroys the human being.”⁸ During the pre-re-education stage, the prisoner was guided by the urge to encapsulate God in his heart; the first step was to cleanse the heart of external reality, to stop the suffering and anguish for the loss of this world.⁹ Though exalted and intricate, this approach was quasi-ascetic, the self-avowed model being that of the penitent recluses in the wilderness. From the “swamp of despair,” the only way one could be soothed and healed was by the “fragrance of faith,” for in Pitești the sole resistance was through solitary faith, not through friendship and solidarity, as Bordeianu stated. Demanded to abjure God, the re-educated prisoner did so in a peculiar way: he did not say *I do not believe*, but instead *I no longer pray*,¹⁰ and, indeed, he gave up inner prayer, feeling satanized from 1951 until 1954, when he attempted to recover the path towards God. His book is, in this respect, also a testimony about regained faith.

In general, the Romanian Gulag witnessed a kind of spontaneous ecumenism and, in some cases (those of the “saints” of the prison), Philokalic propensities were expressed—see the example of Valeriu Gafencu, about whom Mihai Rădulescu confessed in *Rugul aprins* (The burning bush). Not infrequently, the solution of faith provided the prisoner with a “dis-confinement” of the soul from the body, faith becoming a protective layer of the maltreated body. Corneliu Coposu spoke of a certain hieratic transformation of political prisoners; the confessor gave here his own example, for he had lost more than half his body weight (and had been subjected to all kinds of torture, including electrocution), and he genuinely experienced the sensation of flight: once the ballast of the body had been removed, the prisoner felt an intense predisposition toward spiritualization and even the euphoria of purification.¹¹

There were also other ways of resistance, less trenchant or spectacular, but nonetheless valid. Nicolae Mărgineanu revealed the secret of his resistance simply: “the *great advantage* of the Romanian intellectual who ended up in prison was this: the richness of his life, which made it sufficient in itself, preventing him from feeling alone wherever he was.”¹² After almost 17 years of imprisonment, Nicolae Mărgineanu justified his physical and moral resilience through his clear conscience, through a self-imposed intense regime of thinking and, not least, through the camaraderie of detention.

Classifying political prisoners into three psychological categories (optimists, pessimists and mediators—“long-haul vessels”), Constantin Cesianu said that their moral resistance comprised two key components: “hope that is as hard as a steel blade” and “faith, a kind of acceptance of Destiny.”¹³ It was a hope that did not render the self fragile and a faith that was perceived not so much as resignation, as the assumption of fate. Although the Danube-Black Sea Canal operated like a pyramidal system of fear (bottom-up and top-down) and although any plot or resistance would have been absurd there, the author revealed the existence of a network of prisoners that had been organized from inside in 1951 and that, at the possible intervention of the Allies, would have reacted promptly.

Ion Ioanid also referred to the resistance inside the Gulag: he was a tenacious and farcical fighter, a master of games aimed at misleading the informers and the authorities. Describing life

in the labor camps, Ion Ioanid attested that although brutalized and exhausted, political prisoners succeeded in sabotages that defied the repression organs and imposed the observance of their holidays, even through the persecution intensified. In another stage of detention, the challenges of the administration triggered an organized opposition, Ioanid's group starting a hunger strike as a means of defying repression. To jolt the prisoners out of their apathy, the strike was meticulously organized, by categories of strikers—old and infirm, hesitant and resistant. At first, the administration was indifferent, then became conciliatory, but attempted to break the strike; then came enticements, surrenders, and the isolation of the “Mohicans” who were averse to the perspective of artificial feeding. In order to pacify the protesters, the prison regime and the guards' behavior improved, but everything was ephemeral. After the new outbreak of penitentiary despotism, when the strike was defeated, the elderly were demoralized, but the youth exhibited the same radicalism against the system: while living with the hope of liberation, which had to be perpetually postponed, not in utopia but in reality, the youngest political detainees explicitly became a kind of long-distance runners. Ion Ioanid distinguished between two types of resilient endurers in the Gulag: the *intransigent knights*, who had a strict code of honor, and the *adapted moderates*, those who used the same (moral, psychological) weapons as the authorities, sometimes even finding compromise solutions (the author considered himself as one of the latter).

Both the intransigent knights and the adapted moderates found a constant, self-defining temptation in defying the measures adopted by the administration. Ioanid himself made risky gestures, stemming from the insane courage of his youth. To acquire up-to-date political information, he faked a tumor surgery; at another point, he stole the newspaper which popularized the Communist ideas from the commander's mantle or pretended to be sick so as to be isolated in quarantine with a friend from another cell. Finally, he even pierced the cell wall with an improvised drill, to communicate, or to get in touch with his mother, located somewhere outside the prison, but in a spot visible from the cell. One thing needed in detention, the memoirist said, was black humor, a barely optimizing element that nonetheless enabled a sort of ironic adjustment to hell. A scene from *Închisoarea noastră cea de toate zilele* (Our daily prison) is anthological: after catching hundreds of flies, the prisoners hung from their legs strings of colored yarn, alerting and panicking the guards and the investigators, who could sense a large-scale sabotage and felt guilty for their lack of vigilance. While being interrogated about a risky period of his life, Ion Ioanid concocted a genuine *mise en scène*, adopting the position of a trickster. First, he secured the guards' neutrality, impersonating the ideal and docile prisoner; then, to avoid torture, he played the role of a sick man, learning to control both his mimicry as a Molière-like character and the inexpressiveness necessary to screen his thoughts. Ingenuity and imagination often saved prisoners who, despite the strict surveillance, set up a manufacturing industry of the minuscule, managing to establish paradoxical networks of communication.

In prison, know Ion Ioanid witnessed the true communion between very different individuals, connected by a few personalities that had shaped their characters. This mutual understanding regardless of the squalid detention conditions proved that the Gulag was a space for sorting out and testing characters and consciences. “The mundane snob slept under the same blanket with the peasant from Bukovina; the critical spirit of the cold and realistic intellectual was faced with petty-bourgeois prejudices and superstitions; the believer ate from the same bowl as the atheist; the sentimentalist was forced to listen to the cynic's stories, and so on. Under the circumstances, this compost was more than explosive. And yet, humaneness and wisdom prevailed.”¹⁴ During a difficult moment of his detention, when his cell was infested with the plague of opportunism, Ion Ioanid managed, with the patience of a schemer, to organize a miniature “coup d'état,” changing the bleak atmosphere in the cell and imposing a moral code of comradeship. The absence of demoralization in Ion Ioanid's memoirist writings about prison was a result of the inner pact the author had assumed, coupled with a strong instinct for survival and with his defensive optimism.

Alexandru Paleologu considered that detachment was one of the solutions of resistance in prison: neither confronting the guards, nor mentally accepting that you had become a *nobody*; as he confessed: “That a guardian could afford to humiliate me, to hit me, was, of course, a physical inconvenience, but that did not prevent him from remaining an imbecile and a brute, and I was still an individual who had read Plato and Mallarmé.”¹⁵ What essentially saved, however, the incarcerated individual were his intellectual resources and his intellectual-histrionic vocation: “I strove to turn the cells into salons where discussions were held and civility reigned. My method gained followers and achieved several successes.”¹⁶ To give another example: “Everyone was talking about what they knew. Some recounted a movie or a novel. . . Others held true conferences they had prepared beforehand or even delivered cycles of conferences. I also gave several series of lectures on Proust, Balzac, Stendhal, fairly successfully, which encouraged me to reiterate them in other prisons to which I was transferred. I think that in this way, I orally converted a number of people to literature.”¹⁷ On another occasion, Paleologu talked about the way in which he had filtered the prison experience through laughter, noting the comic side of detention and highlighting both its tragic perspective and its self-pity component, to which he was allergic. He discovered in the Gulag, especially in the labor colonies, a grotesqueness of the Rabelaisian and Aristophanic type; his perspective did not sublimate the tragedy and the cruelty of the experience, but incorporated them in the grotesque. Al. Paleologu’s laughter was perceived by the other prisoners from a twofold perspective: it was either valued as comforting or criticized for being cynical and reprehensible. As a spectator of grotesqueness in detention, Al. Paleologu saw the Gulag through the lenses of the carnivalesque, of the world turned upside down, in keeping with a Grand Guignol and clownish model.¹⁸

Teohar Mhadaş survived because he assumed his pride as a fighter (what he understood by pride was strength of character) and his outright (choleric) opposition to the executioners: “There is a certain voluptuousness, perhaps one most manly, in saying NO, regardless of the consequences. This NO represents the voice of the antimatter in us, and having the courage of uttering it in extreme situations means coming to terms with the essence of existence, of the world, of God.”¹⁹ True, the prisoner considered himself to be protected by his spiritual patron, St. Pandu (a warrior saint), but this should be related to the Macedonian origin of the confessor. His reaction was, primarily, one of insubordination to the members of the repression apparatus.

Paul Goma’s resistance was noisy; having been abused in Gherla, his response to violence was a defiant howl, his non-silence as a revolt. The prisoner no longer protected only his head or genitals, the bodily parts where he was voluptuously assaulted, but also protected his mouth; whereas in a usual protest the opponent has words at his disposal, what was available to the tortured Goma was the howl. Later, in the 1977 inquiry, Paul Goma’s body learned, independently of its owner’s natural fear, to reacquire the inmate status; then, his mind also readjusted to the situation. Under interrogation, Goma survived because his body turned out to be a shield, a hardened shell: “Flesh and innards, with their memory intact, followed, in parallel, the pathways of a re-arrested prisoner. A parallel, subterranean road, like a platform on tracks, buried underground. The cells had refused to listen to me, they had reorganized themselves according to the well-known, well-learned formula from twenty years ago (and repeated daily, for twenty years).”²⁰

Not infrequently, resistance in prison occurred through extraordinary pedagogical dedication, as demonstrated by an inmate like George Manu, a professor of nuclear physics who taught in Zarca Aiudului, inventing a new Morse method on a thread. Professor Manu, nicknamed the Rector, represented a model of intellectual survival, resorting to various procedures to initiate his students: lessons on the history of France and England, written on soap or on the bottom of tins, scholarly commentaries on English and French literature etched on wax plates, lessons about the great geographical discoveries on drawn maps, the US Constitution. Ingenuity led him to discover the Morse method on a thread, through which he taught the poem *If* by Rudyard Kipling, considered a model of resistance against the vicissitudes of life.

Oana Orlea belonged to the category of passionate fighters, stating that she had aspired to become an—anti-Communist—Zoaia Kosmodemianskaia (*Ia-ți boarfele și mișcă!*/Take your stuff and get moving!). One of her observations, in which she did not intend to highlight a hierarchy of pain, was that women could cope better with detention than men, due to a structural inurement to pain. Oana Orlea's detention was promiscuous and harsh, but for a passionate teenager it could also be seen as an adventure. Turbulent, Oana Orlea was often placed in isolation and endured the carceral regime, went on a hunger strike—"the prisoner's code of honor to himself"—and simulated a suicide, to avoid solitude. Her solution of resistance in prison was that of *relentless revolt*, even though she committed the sin, as she admitted, of gratuitous heroism. Oana Orlea considered herself to be morally, albeit not physically, resistant, and concluded that prison could not change anybody completely; but torture could.

Adriana Georgescu was a fighter: while continuously tortured and living an endless nightmare, she found two solutions of resistance: on the one hand, the death she assumed (the Solzhenitsyn solution) and on the other hand, a solution she could not apply: the sublimation of fear. There were two equally dangerous types of fear that could bring a prisoner to his knees: mental and visceral. Adriana Georgescu managed to overpower the latter, remaining tributary to the former and obsessed with torture.

A simple soul, the opposite of Lena Constante the aesthete, but also of the impetuous Elisabeta Rizea, albeit made of the same rustic dough, Anița Nandriș-Cudla outlined the three feelings that had inspired and fueled her resistance in the Siberian exile: patriotism, Christian faith, and love of the clan. In her case, there were no ups and downs of the soul, no shades of gray, but only a fatalistic resistance and naive-primitive peasant toughness.

Confessing that she had hidden under a *mask* in detention, Elisabeta Rizea admitted that because of this mask, of her patience, and of the typical peasant cunning, besides her allergic averseness to betrayal, she was able to survive inside the Gulag. True, the mask had also been imposed upon her by the ordeals to which she had been subjected. Calling herself a "rag doll," Elizabeth Rizea mimicked obedience to the authorities, but never gave up, the secret of her resistance being faith (many crosses with the tongue and prayers in the heart!) and silence as divine grace.²¹ When she was arrested the second time around, she was by now an initiated practitioner of intransigence and a camouflaged warrior: although she risked a death sentence, being put in chains and going through isolation, her gestures were adamant.

Nicole Valéry-Grossu experienced the solution of faith in detention in a fundamental manner. This was a prisoner who had a gradual revelation of faith while she was incarcerated and who encountered destiny itself in this revelation. Obsessed and fascinated by Psalm 90 ("The LORD is on my side; I shall not fear: what can man do to me?"), she rediscovers her faith (which she had lost as a young woman) through the very experience of prison: "For me, the chief warden of the prison, the investigators, the guardians, the ministers and the Securitate generals were but actors in a play in which the main role was played by Jesus, looking for his lost sheep."²² Noticing on the cell wall the personal prayer of a former inmate (a prayer that soothed her), Nicole Valéry-Grossu became, in turn, a scribbler of prayers and psalms (with plum kernels) on the cell walls, as she wished to leave a legacy to other possible victims: the means of acquiring inner strength and comfort. Her prayers were therapeutic, because they strengthened her faith in the theological God, rivaled by the investigators who considered themselves, in turn, to be "gods." Her mission became that of converting the others to Christianity. At Mislea, for instance, working in the church that had been turned into a warehouse, she saw a Bible that had been thrown onto the floor, picked it up, concealed it underneath her clothes and carried it into her cell for her fellow prisoners. The holy book was divided into folios and devoured spiritually, bringing the inmates the desired hope; the first reading was followed by comments and meditations. The mystery of the Resurrection (Easter) was also understood more profoundly because of the carceral space: detention as resur-

rection. Christmas received enlightening connotations: “Jesus lived inside me.”²³ Years later and after Nicole Valéry-Grossu’s release from prison, the Bible, divided into a circulating library or in the 66 books of the Old and the New Testaments, saved the souls of the detainees, giving them hope and brightening their gloomy existence. Having been sent to the Danube-Black Sea Canal, Nicole Valéry-Grossu conceived life as a missionary route, feeling blessed and happy, because she knew that her detention had led her to discover her vocation. On leaving prison, her destiny continued on the path she had discovered. Aspazia Oțel Petrescu, another confessor and former political prisoner, experienced, in turn, moments of mystical rapture in prison, considering she had put on the “coat of sacrifice.”

Understanding that not obedience but revolt—albeit not a raucous rebelliousness—was the solution, and feeling the need to confront the external pressures and isolation, Lena Constante built a compensatory imaginary world, during the first stage of her detention, resorting to a “ceaseless intellectual gymnastics.”²⁴ She took—aesthetic—refuge within: sometimes she would build a utopian house underneath her eyelids, at other times her evasion consisted in compiling a mental dictionary of disparate lyrics. The other world, opposed to investigations and detention, was poetry, solitude being overcome by a huge recuperative aesthetic gesture; still, her mental escape was difficult. The detainee made up stories, manufactured dolls, composed fairy tales and theater plays, drew and managed to create, by visually devouring an object, no matter how small, a real landscape, a new world; and when she could not see it, being prohibited to do this, she attempted to see through her hearing, like the blind. A rustle, a murmur, any kind of noise became the lines and colors of a cosmos that she painstakingly reconstructed. Everything happened. Thia, however, at a purely mental level, because the externalization of her inner world would have proved fatal for Lena Constante. Since the periods of abandonment from her aggressors alternated with those of torture, Lena Constante assumed even death as a last hope, but then understood that death was inaccessible to a necessary witness in a Stalinist lawsuit like that which had been filed against Lucrețiu Pătrășcanu. The thought of suicide fortified her, but her spiritual crisis became acute when persecution erupted absurdly. However, Lena Constante did not register an inner failure: on the contrary, she rediscovered a mortification that was accompanied, through a volitional effort, by calm tenacity: “Sadness makes you weak. Anger, stronger. I chose resistance. I made the decision not to weep ever again and I never wept again. To admit hope and I exceeded hope. Confidence set in within me. The certainty that I would find freedom, joy, my family.”²⁵ During the first stage of her detention, Lena Constante’s solution was that of salvation through aesthetic means. Her revelation was foundational: “The power of words. I had words and I had time.”²⁶ Sanda Cordoș does not believe that Lena Constante’s solution was bookish, but existential, using the “frail body of words”; the commentator likens Lena Constante’s inner escape with a “state of grace” “comparable, on its solar route, with that achieved, also while in custody, by N. Steinhardt.”²⁷

The “Black Book” (*Evadarea tăcută*/Silent escape), in which overcoming detention succeeded because she had found refuge in the imaginary, was followed by the “Grey Book” (*Evadarea imposibilă*/The impossible escape), in which the solution of an aesthetic escape was abandoned. In turn, the ephemeral mortification Solzhenitsynian escape from *Evadarea tăcută* was overcome, this time, by tricking death and its attendants through an underground, tempered battle. Relinquishing her mental escape, Lena Constante accepted the human dialogue with the other prisoners; she maintained a certain (psychological) tactical distance, but did not completely discard the cold mask that concealed her inner reactions.

Petre Pandrea confessed to the three elements that had helped him survive as a detainee: creativity, faith and inner freedom. The first element was the explosive creativity, unfolding like an avalanche, variegated, stimulated precisely by the prison void. “The Dostoyevskian prison was a house of the dead. The Romanian republican dungeon is a house of mysteries, a Pandora’s Box with all the surprises. I got used to [...] considering Hotel Celular as a branch of the Writers Union

of the RPR. The writers of the Popular Republic are too surfeited and no longer know suffering. A great creation is born of suffering, from the abyss of despair with vague flickers of hope, above the crater of life, with dramatic dreams and realities.”²⁸ Faith was an even more convenient, closer solution, and, not least, a therapeutic and cathartic one: “Religion is that lever of Archimedes that enables 90% of the inmates to survive. The power of prayer proves to be immense. It is balm, it gives peace, balance, tact and kindness.”²⁹ In the third case, prison provided an inexhaustible freedom of thought: “Freedom sometimes takes refuge in jail. It is not a paradox, but a freedom. People can no longer think and speak freely outside, for fear they might get arrested. Outside, they all whisper, they whisper or remain silent.”³⁰ Those outside “arrest themselves,” Pandrea said, while political prisoners, simply because they had become spiritualized, could liberate themselves at any time.

Collective resistance often manifested itself through symposia, dissertations, foreign language lessons, in other words, through a penitentiary “university” attested by most memoirists. Meticulously, Constantin C. Giurescu inventoried, for instance, all the conferences and lectures given in prison, making a list of references that specified the topic discussed, the cell where the discussion had taken place, the author of the lecture, etc. Because time was a torturer, the word that summed up the life in prison of the person condemned to long-term isolation was “wait,” uttered in a snappy manner by the guards and experienced to the point of despair by the prisoner. The latter became a remotely-controlled automaton, conditioned by the opening of the door and the motivation underlying this event. The cell-house was studied under a magnifying glass, like a matrix with two key elements: the window (an opening to the outside of the prison and the possibility of escape for the gaze) and the door (an opening to the inside of the prison), with the annex of the visor (a double spy: the eye of the guard, but also the eye of the daring detainee). A prisoner like Constantin C. Giurescu sharpened his memory and survived mainly due to the mental training to which he subjected himself both in solitude and in front of an audience.

The imprisoned individuals exhibited varying degrees of psychological resistance: they could be optimistic, naïve, skeptical, pessimistic, or cynical; all of them, however, when it came to the intellectuals (but not only), regardless of the personal survival solutions they had come up with, admitted, as a collective solution, the university atmosphere of the cells, the barracks, etc. “The thirst for knowledge was, in fact, a disguise of despondency, our refusal to become brutes,” as a witness said.³¹ Thus, the detention space had come to replace, at a certain time, the library, the discussions salon, the university amphitheater or even the place of prayer. When there were also erudite scholars in the concentration inferno, they changed the space in keeping with complicated cultural models: this was the case of the Orientalist Sergiu Al-George, who turned the camp at Strîmba into an Indian temple, a center of the world, an *omphalos*, etc., using a carceral meta-language to explain matters to the listening inmates.³²



Notes

1. N. Steinhardt, *Jurnalul fericirii* (Cluj-Napoca: Dacia, 1991), 39.
2. Vlad Pavlovici, “Imitatio Christi,” *Steaua* 8-9 (1993).
3. Iuliu Hossu, *Credința noastră este viața noastră. Memoriile cardinalului Iuliu Hossu*, ed. Fr. Silvestru Augustin Prunduș (Cluj-Napoca: Viața Creștină, 2003), 236.
4. Richard Wurmbrand, *Cu Dumnezeu în subterană*, trans. Marilena Alexandrescu-Munteanu and Maria Chilian (Bucharest: Casa Școalelor, 1994), 7.
5. Wurmbrand, *Cu Dumnezeu în subterană*, 89.
6. Wurmbrand, *Cu Dumnezeu în subterană*, 232.

7. Costin Merișca, *Tărîmul Gheenei* (Galați: Porto-Franco, 1993), 144.
8. Dumitru Gh. Bordeianu, *Mărturisiri din mlaștina dispenării. Cele văzute, trăite și suferite la Pitești și Gherla* (Paris: Editura Mișcării Legionare, 1992), 9.
9. Bordeianu, *Mărturisiri din mlaștina*, 66-67.
10. Bordeianu, *Mărturisiri din mlaștina*, 210.
11. *Mărturisiri. Corneliu Coposu în dialog cu Vartan Arachelian* (Bucharest: Humanitas, 1996), 146.
12. Nicolae Mărgineanu, *Amfiteatre și închisori* (Cluj: Dacia, 1991); resumed in Nicolae Mărgineanu, *Mărturii asupra unui veac zbcuimat*, preface by Mircea Miclea, ed. Daniela Țăranu-Mărgineanu (Bucharest: Editura Fundației Culturale Române, 2002), 155.
13. Constantin Cesianu, *Salvat din infern* (Bucharest: Humanitas, 1992), 62.
14. Ion Ioanid, *Închisoarea noastră cea de toate zilele* (Bucharest: Albatros, vol. II, 1991), 348.
15. Alexandru Paleologu, *Minunatele amintiri ale unui ambasador al golanilor*, Conversations with Marc Semo and Claire Tréan, trans. Alexandru Ciolan (Bucharest: Editura Humanitas, 1991), 131.
16. Paleologu, *Minunatele amintiri*, 131.
17. Paleologu, *Minunatele amintiri*, 132.
18. Al. Paleologu; Stelian Tănase, *Sfidarea memoriei (Convorbiri), aprilie 1988-octombrie 1989* (Bucharest: DU Style, 1996), 163, 170, 172, 181.
19. Teohar Mihadaș, *Pe muntele Ebal* (Cluj: Clusium, 1990), 8.
20. Paul Goma, *Culorile curcubeului '77 (Cutremurul oamenilor)* (Bucharest: Humanitas, 1990), 245.
21. Sanda Cordoș, "Vorbind din adăpostul tăcerilor," *Vătra* 10 (1993).
22. Nicole Valéry-Grossu, *Binecuvîntată fii, închisoare... o fostă deținută politică din România vorbește*, trans. Mioara Izverna, foreword by Ana Blandiana, biographical notes by Mariana Ionescu (Bucharest: Univers, 2002), 62.
23. Valéry-Grossu, *Binecuvîntată fii*, 198.
24. Monica Lovinescu, *Insula Șerpilor. Unde scurte VI* (Bucharest: Humanitas, 1996), 148.
25. Lena Constante, *Evadarea tăcută. 3000 de zile singură în închisorile din România*, in the author's Romanian version (Bucharest: Humanitas, 1992), 201-202.
26. Constante, *Evadarea tăcută*, 56.
27. Sanda Cordoș, "Izbăvitorul trup al cuvintelor," *Vătra* 4 (1993).
28. Petre Pandrea, *Reeducarea de la Aiud*, ed. Nadia Marcu Pandrea (Bucharest: Vremea, 2000), 257.
29. Pandrea, *Reeducarea de la Aiud*, 306.
30. Pandrea, *Reeducarea de la Aiud*, 415.
31. Florin Constantin Pavlovici, *Tortura pe înțelesul tuturor* (Chișinău: Cartier, 2001), 196-197.
32. Pavlovici, *Tortura pe înțelesul*, 312-313.

Abstract

Resistance Solutions in the Communist Prisons and Concentration Camps of Romania: Memoirist Writings of the Romanian Gulag

This study examines the various resistance solutions adopted in the communist prisons and concentration camps of Romania (between 1945 and 1965), as they appear in the memoirs and in the literature about the Romanian Gulag. These solutions differed depending on the detention conditions, the nature and character of those incarcerated, and the emotional and mental readiness of those in the Gulag to overcome their status as victims. What also mattered was the victims' education level and religious beliefs.

Keywords

Communism, Gulag, Romania, resistance solutions, survival, N. Steinhardt, Iuliu Hossu, Richard Wurmbrand, Ion Ioanid, Adriana Georgescu, Lena Constante, Anița Nandriș-Cudla, Elisabeta Rizea, Oana Orlea, Nicole Valéry-Grossu, Petre Pandrea, Alexandru Paleologu, Teohar Mihadaș, Nicolae Mărgineanu, Paul Goma, Florin Constantin Pavlovici, Corneliu Coposu, Constantin Cesianu, Mihai Rădulescu, Dumitru Gh. Bordeianu