

THE GULAG IN ROMANIAN PRISON CONSCIENCE

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“Steaua” Cultural Magazine, Cluj

Introduction

Most of the Romanian prison memoirs concerning the autochthonous Gulag (and in some cases the Soviet one as well) have wanted to be partial or total analyses of power and totalitarianism. Some are written in the form of reports, others, the majority, confessions, revealing the how-I-suffered-then syndrome. Some authors make apologies for their ponderous style and the stuttering manner of writing, preempting readers' observations on the lack of literacy of these texts which are not intended to be literature but honest confessions.¹ Whereas the Western reader is accustomed to this kind of literature, the Romanian reader in particular and the Eastern reader in general has to make up for an ethical-moral delay which has political reasons. He suddenly passed from a *literature of hypocrisy* to a literature of the *infernal truth* followed then by the *monotony of horror*, getting used to the horror of Gulag.² One thing is sure: the memories of communist imprisonment equal those of the Holocaust, because they represent the *inferno which confesses*, as André Glucksmann says.³ Hannah Arendt

¹ See Vasile Gurău, in: *Zâmbet printre lacrimi (Smile and Tears)*, vol.I. *După gratii (Behind Bars)*, vol.II. *Valea Neagră (Black Valley)*, Freiburg, Editura Autorului, 1985, p.13, vol.I

² Nicolae Baltă, *Sertarul și tipăriturile, (The Drawer and the Printings)*, in: *Luceafărul*, nr.16, 1994. Doina Jela, author of *Cazul Nichita Dumitru. Încercare de reconstituire a unui proces comunist, 29 August - 1 Septembrie 1952 (The Nichita Dumitru Case. An Attempt to Reconstruct a Communist Trial)*, București, Edit. Humanitas, 1995, proposes even a “literature of denunciation” (p.258) written in a twofold language, that of fear (p.73) and of the instinct of preservation.

³ André Glucksmann, *Bucătăreasa și Mîncătorul de oameni. Eseu despre raporturile dintre sat, marxism și lagărele de concentrare (The Maid and the*

observes that the survivors of the Holocaust who have written about their infernal experience, show a certain resigned doubt as if on one hand they themselves could not believe the horrible history related by them or and on the other they expect that others will not believe it.⁴ Is this an exaggerated modesty or a typical mentality of the victim whose fate remains sealed even if he survived the horror, because he is haunted by the ghost of a virtual, omniscient and omnipotent executioner? This is rarely the case with Romanian memoirs of the Gulag. Romanian memoir writers in turn display two of the three forms of shame mentioned by Tzvetan Todorov⁵: though the shame of survival is bypassed, the former prisoners of the Pitești prison (1949-1952) often feel the shame of memory and in addition the shame of being a man.

Some prison memoirs have been confiscated by those the repressive organs. The author was compelled in such cases to write a second version of the “hostile” manuscript. N. Steinhardt’s *Jurnalul fericității*⁶ is the third revised version, completed and corrected by the author on the basis of the first two versions (the first version was confiscated by the authorities and then handed back to the author). Similarly, the *Monarhia de drept dialectic* by Andrei Șerbulescu⁷ (Belu Zilber) was confiscated and edited in a second version, and, later, in the first version. It would be an interesting exercise - not only for literary historians - to examine if the

Man-Eater. Essay on the Relations between the Village, Marxism and Concentration Camps), translated from French by Mariana Ciolan, București, Edit. Humanitas, 1991, p.15

⁴ Hannah Arendt, *Originile totalitarismului (The Origins of Totalitarianism)*, translated by Ion Dur and Mircea Ivănescu, București, Edit. Humanitas, 1994, p.569

⁵ Tzvetan Todorov, *Confruntarea cu extrema. Victime și torționari în secolul XX (Confronting the Extreme. Victims and Torturers in the 20th Century)*, translated from French by Traian Nica, București, Edit. Humanitas, 1996, p.250-251

⁶ N. Steinhardt, *Jurnalul fericității (The Diary of Happiness)*, Cluj, Edit. Dacia, 1990

⁷ Andrei Șerbulescu, *Monarhia de drept dialectic. A doua versiune a memoriilor lui Belu Zilber (The Monarchy of Dialectical Law. The Second Version of the Memories of Belu Zilber)*, București, Edit. Humanitas, 1991

different versions differ not only in mere details but also in style and as a whole.

Most of these memories are edited after detention, the only exception being Onisifor Ghibu's journal⁸ which was edited at the place of expiation. The possibility of editing the journal as well as its consistency are due to the fact that the Romanian Gulag was not yet conceived and organised meticulously in 1945 when Onisifor Ghibu was at Caracal: he experiences in fact a Pre-Gulag.

Some prison memoirs are disguised but their mask is transparent. Adrian Marino speaks about two essential ways of treating imprisonment as a literary theme: "literariness, stylised texts, the use of specific literary devices and direct, documentary confession, objective as possible."⁹ The two modalities of this informative classification are not standard formulas that can be listed, therefore Adrian Marino adds that a hybrid formula is also possible: "Finally this cold narrative also becomes 'literature', it can be viewed as such. But this is another story."¹⁰ The same critic calls our attention to three aspects which can distort communist prison memories, whether they be disguised or not: *heroics*, *emphatic euphemism* and *amateur 'literariness'*.¹¹ As Adrian Marino did Al. Mihalcea¹² also senses

⁸Onisifor Ghibu, *Ziar de lagăr. Caracal 1945 (Camp Newspaper. Caracal 1945)*, ed. by Romeo Dăscălescu and Octavian Ghibu, preface by Romeo Dăscălescu, chronology, afterword and notes by Octavian Ghibu, București, Edit. Albatros, 1991

⁹ Adrian Marino, *O carte de sertar (An Unpublished Book)*, in: *Tribuna Ardealului* nr. 68/1993

¹⁰ Ibidem.

¹¹ Adrian Marino, *Politică și cultură. Pentru o nouă cultură română (Politics and Culture. Towards a New Romanian Culture)*, Iași, Edit. Polirom, 1996, p.40. Otherwise Adrian Marino takes up again the discussion on the 'congenital' errors of prison memoirs in a serial entitled *Represiune și confesiune (Repression and Confession)*, published in the 22 periodical (beginning with nr.28, 1996). The critic reproaches the writers for their really offensive tendency to provocatively assert themselves. He also opposes excessive moralising and heroics, aggressive resentments, conventional literariness and the abundance of clichés.

¹² Al. Mihalcea, *Jurnal de ocnă (Convict Prison Diary)*, București, Edit. Albatros, 1994, p.238

the risk of flattering the image of the Romanian political prisoner. He thinks that their icon would equal the false image of proletcultist heroes. But in my opinion Al. Mihalcea's fear is an 'iconoclast' one.

A confessor like Paul Goma¹³ poses the problem of the *real truth* of these memoirs. He gives an aprioric and indirect answer to Adrian Marino's fears for he maintains that the memories of detention, though subjective documents, do not offend the correctness of narrated events. They are subjective but in an honest way; they are *variants* of truth. On the other hand one of the characters in Paul Goma's novel *Ostinato* speaks about a certain heroism of political detention.¹⁴

A witness such as Ion Cârja¹⁵ wants his confession to be a source of inspiration for men of art who could expressively immortalise the Romanian Gulag. In other words, Ion Cârja, who is a first rate confessor

¹³ Paul Goma, *Gherla*, București, Edit. Humanitas, 1990, p.18

¹⁴ Paul Goma, *Ostinato*, București, Edit. Univers, 1991, p. 396:

"political detention was ... how should I say? I dare say : false - the honest citizen only realised there that he is a 'hero'; before that poor fellow had not the vaguest idea who he was: there he began to form not only an appearance but also the psychology of hero (political hero, naturally); as far as I know, those who had guns, explosives and who knows what else ('men of action', as we could say) were despised, considered to be intruders by the 'quiet', former dignitaries, government loyalists, 'propagandists'; students as well, who fell like flies, not because they had 'committed' something but because it was presupposed that they intend to 'commit' it; they themselves began to believe that they were 'superior' to men of action; Marian [another character, former political prisoner] is enviable from this point of view: he had the opportunity to be at the place where everybody became a 'hero'; they gathered people but not those who were a real danger to the society; some people only there learnt to endanger society;"

I have used this long quotation from Paul Goma because I think it tries to deal with this subject without false taboos. However, if I refer with good reason to certain political prisoners who do not want their heroism idealised, I by no means refer to the dishonest discourse of former members of the oppression who denied any heroism or denied any suffering of those who experienced the Gulag.

¹⁵ Ion Cârja, *Canalul morții (Death Canal)*, București, Edit. Cartea Românească, 1993, p.13

considers his memoir a preparatory writing, not an exemplary text. This self-depreciation is characteristic of the excessive modesty of a non-writer.

There are detention memories which resemble novels, such as the memoirs of Marcel Petrișor¹⁶ or Costin Merișca¹⁷. Marcel Petrișor narrates in the third person, changes with precaution the names of former prisoners who are still alive but keeps the names of the dead. Nevertheless, the discussions between the commander and the political officer of the Jilava prison are fictitious rather than real. Costin Merișca also uses the third person. He only changes the name of the hero (Emil Cortez), which is he himself.

The memories of the Gulag resemble the Tower of Babel from a stylistic, emotional and structural point of view. Paul Goma's *Gherla* is like a pseudo-dialogue which encompasses negative Proustian fragments about detention. The author's particularity consists in his aggressive, radical style characteristic to a pamphleteer whose aim is to write *live*, without embellishing suffering. Some prison memoirs are written in a melodramatic style and give the impression of being false. They lack depth and they are demagogic due to their anticoncentrational language. Others are passionate, marked by the "seal of hatred".¹⁸ Interesting is the case of Nicolae Mărgineanu¹⁹, whose confessions are explicitly selected. The author avoids presenting the atrocities of his detention because of patriotic shyness. Instead Nicolae Mărgineanu differentiates between the *memories* of important personalities and the *confessions* of the nameless. He modestly

¹⁶ Marcel Petrișor, *Fostul 13 Jilava. Convorbiri din detenție. Memorii I (The Former Jilava 13. Prison Conversations. Memories I)*, București, Edit. Meridiane, 1991, and *SecretulFortului 13. Reeducări și execuții. Memorii II (The Secret of the 13th Fort. Reeducations and Executions. Memories II)*, Iași, Edit. Timpul, 1994

¹⁷ Costin Merișca, *Tărîmul Gheenei (The Land of the Bottomless Pit)*, Galați, Edit. "Porto-Franco", 1993

¹⁸ Radu Budișteanu, *În secolul luminilor stinse (The Dark Century)*, translated by Despina Skeletti Budișteanu, Madrid, Edit. Carpații, 1986

¹⁹ Nicolae Mărgineanu, *Amfiteatre și închisori (Amphitheatres and Prisons)*, Cluj, Edit. Dacia, 1991

adheres to the latter category. Gabriel Bălănescu²⁰ has a similar classification. He claims that he does not write a memoir (for he is not an exotic personality) or memories (for this can only be paradisiacal). He pleads for the genre of *succint chronicle*. Constantin Cesianu²¹, meticulous analyst of the Canal also insists on the idea of confession and experience, offering a theoretical delimitation. The author avoids euphemism. He is an adept of liveliness: "This is not a novel or a literary endeavour. This is a *confession*. I am not looking for the sensational or the amusing. My writing might often appear dull. But this does not matter. It tells the truth."²² The author says that his writing is selective and consists of short prison monographs; it is often flat but truthful. Ioan Victor Pica also pleads for the idea of confession instead of improvised literature when he assumes that he writes a "fire-book" about resistance in the mountains.²³ He urges all the virtual confessors of the Romanian Gulag to speak: "*It is an unforgivable sin to withhold the truth!*"²⁴ Sometimes the memoirist of the Gulag is "too shy to confess"²⁵, either because of his temperament or for fear not to seem vindictive and inquisitorial; he longs for the right level which is an essential component of confession.

It is with historical meticulousness that Constantin C. Giurescu uses the bookish term "testimony"²⁶ which means objective document and

²⁰ Gabriel Bălănescu, *Din împărăția morții. Cronică rezumată din închisori* (*The Kingdom of Death. Succint Prison Chronicle*), Timișoara, Edit. Gordian, 1994

Gordian, 1994

²¹ Constantin Cesianu, *Salvat din infern* (*Escaping the Inferno*), București, Edit. Humanitas, 1992

²² Ibidem, p.48

²³ Ioan Victor Pica, *Libertatea are chipul lui Dumnezeu* (*Liberty Resembles God*), Edit. Arhipelag, Tg. Mureș, 1993, p.9:

"History will be written by others, my role is more simple: I have to tell what I have seen, heard and felt."

²⁴ Ibidem, p.177

²⁵ Viorel Gheorghită, *Et ego Sărata Pitești-Gherla-Aiud. Scurtă istorie a devenirii mele* (*Et ego Sărata Pitești-Gherla-Aiud. Short History of my Life*) Timișoara, Edit. Marineasa, 1994, p.7

²⁶ Constantin C. Giurescu, *Cinci ani și două luni în penitenciarul de la Sighet, 7 mai 1950-5 iulie 1955* (*Five Years and Two months in the Sighet*

evidence. The author says that he writes his prison recollections without hatred and partiality; his aim is to write history. Political prisoners are history because they are part of history, they bind all memories which have a role of testament. Generally, the political prison is a formative matrix and an interior projector or “the canvas of thoughts” as Al.Mihalcea²⁷ calls it. Ion D. Sîrbu considers it the metaphor of the world, in prison and after detention.²⁸

There are also ingenious confessions: the epistolary confession of Maxim Holban (he knew Kolyma) enframed by the commentary of his son, Ioan Holban²⁹ or the *bildungsreport* about the Danube-Black Sea Canal written by Doina Jela, who uses various documentary sources and makes a collage of shorthand records, denunciations, fragments from journals of epoch, letters of the victims’ relatives, mini-interviews with survivors from all the camps, marginalia, etc.

Some of the texts, *Jurnalul fericirii, Drumul crucii*³⁰ or *Jurnalul unui figurant*³¹ have an elaborate, almost baroque style, others are written spontaneously. This is also the case with Anița Nandriș-Cudla³² whose

Prison), Introduction by Dinu C. Giurescu, ed. by Lia Ioana Ciplea, București, Edit. Fundației Culturale Române; 1994, p.31

²⁷ Al. Mihalcea, op. cit. p.206

²⁸ Ion D. Sîrbu, *Jurnalul unui jurnalist fără jurnal, glosse (Diary of a Journalist without a Diary. Squibs)*, 2 volumes, Second revised and enlarged edition, Chronological table and critical references by Toma Velici and Elena Ungureanu, Preface by Ovidiu Ghidirmic, Postscript by Marin Sorescu, Craiova, Edit. Scrisul Românesc, 1996. vol.2, p.178

²⁹ Ioan Holban, *Tata în cămașa de oțel (Father in Steel Shirt)*, in: Serafim Saka, *Basarabia în Gulag*, Chișinău, Edit. Meridianul 28, Edit. Uniunii Scriitorilor, 1995

³⁰ Aurel State, *Drumul crucii (The Way of the Cross)*, 2 volumes, București, Edit. Litera, 1993

Aurel State considers his confession a climbing of the mountain of Tabor and the act of writing a sacerdotal gesture.

³¹ George Tomaziu, *Jurnalul unui figurant. 1936-1964 (Diary of a Figurant)*, translation by Mariana and Gabriel Mardare, Preface and Postscript by Gabriel Mardare, București, Edit. Univers, 1995

³² Anița Nandriș-Cudla, *20 de ani în Siberia. Destin Bucovinean (10 years in Siberia. Bucovinian Destiny)*, București, Edit. Humanitas, 1991

primitive and naive picturesqueness resembles the paintings of Henry Rousseau³³, but in a Siberian landscape. Similarly, the story of Elisabeta Rizea³⁴, although it is verbose (it is a ‘spoken’ book), it has freshness and spontaneity. The author conceives her confession as a beastly ‘roaring’ with a cathartic effect and a psychologic role. She distinguishes this ‘roaring’ from a human cry because only a beastly ‘roaring’ can rouse the indoctrinated hearts and minds. Otherwise, Gabriel Liiceanu insists in the Preface on the confessional structure of this writing (it is an easing of the soul). The role of the testimonies is to shake up people and this cannot be done by a detached confession but by a scream. Therefore the role of the reader is to be a good listener, says the writer of the preface, not to be a critic. The dialogue between Oana Orlea and Mariana Marin³⁵ is also vivid: in order to suggest prison atmosphere the interviewed uses a cruel language. She recalls the Gulag linguistically as well. The elevated memoir (no matter how difficult it is) of Lena Constante³⁶ (who considers her confession a *human* one) is the opposite of the above mentioned writings. The concise report of Adriana Georgescu³⁷ is situated between these two poles. We do not mean a ‘discipline’ of the confession but the fact that Adriana

³³ Monica Lovinescu sees in this naive style “a language unspoiled by knowledge, paradisiac in fact.” Monica Lovinescu, *Insula Șerpilor. Unde scurte VI (The Snakes Isle. Short Waves VI)*, București, Edit. Humanitas, 1993

³⁴ *Povestea Elisabetei Rizea din Nușoara. Mărturia lui Cornel Drăgoi (The Story of Elisabeta Rizea from Nușoara. The Confession of Cornel Drăgoi)*, ed. by Irina Nicolau and Teodor Nițu, Preface by Gabriel Liiceanu, București, Edit. Humanitas, 1993

³⁵ *Ia-ți boarfele și mișcă. Interviu cu Oana Orlea realizat de Mariana Marin (Take Your Junk and Move. Interview with Oana Orlea Conducted by Mariana Marin)*, București, Edit. Cartea Românească, 1991 Aurel State, *The Way of the Cross (Drumul crucii)*, 2 volumes, București, Edit. Litera, 1993

³⁶ Lena Constante, *Evadarea tăcută. 3000 zile singură în închisorile din România (Silent Escape. 3000 lonely days in Romanian Prisons)*, București, Edit. Humanitas, 1992

³⁷ Adriana Georgescu, *La început a fost sfârșitul. Dictatura roșie la București (At the Beginning There Was The End. Red Dictatorship in Bucharest)*, București, Edit. Humanitas, 1992

Georgescu considers figures of speech only rhetorical flowers of suffering; suffering is suffering, it cannot be embellished.

However, prison life has its picturesque side too. There is even a club-like atmosphere as all the prisoners enact sometimes the role of Scheherazade (they experience the pleasure of storytelling) or that of a Magister. The stories are cruel, horrible or eccentric and humorous; their picturesque atmosphere is always dominated by terror. Last but not least there is Ion Ioanid's exceptional work³⁸, *Închisoarea noastră cea de toate zilele*. We do not have a treatise about the Romanian Gulag, a work such as Aleksandr Solzhenitzyn's *The Gulag Archipelago*. However, Ion Ioanid's recollections are a panorama of Romanian prisons viewed by an expert's eyes. Ion Ioanid's memory³⁹ resembles archives: each prison is a book of life written under the sign of narrative calmness and viewed through a magnifying glass. The author describes the 'districts' of each punitive space, the microcosm of cells; minute gestures are presented in slow-motion.⁴⁰ It is also remarkable that Ion Ioanid's text is not flat, on the contrary, its stream of consciousness and nuanced conciseness is charming. The author suggests that the list of all anticommunist political prisoners should be compiled. There had been such attempts but none of them equals the excellence of Ion Ioanid's narrative style and overall view. Ion Pantazi⁴¹ considers his

³⁸ Ion Ioanid, *Închisoarea noastră cea de toate zilele (Our Everyday Prison)*, București, Edit. Albatros, 1991, vol. I, II, 1992, vol. III, 1994, vol. IV, 1996, vol. V.

³⁹ This memory "is in itself a heroic form of opposition to the communist regime", as Alex. Ștefănescu says; *Închisoarea noastră cea de toate zilele* is a "report addressed to a supreme instance (God or history or the conscience of humanity)". The same critic says that Ion Ioanid's memories create a "prison nostalgia" as they give the impression that "all that we read is our own recollections". Note Alex. Ștefănescu, *Amintiri despre vremuri mai pure (Memories of Purer Days)*, in: *România Literară*, nr 39, 1991)

⁴⁰ Monica Lovinescu, op. cit. p. 340: "Another feature of Ion Ioanid's writing: the time of writing is that of the imprisonment; the endless day of suffering must be fragmented by gestures and preoccupations in order to be endurable. In such a time there is place for every detail, the 'dust' of everyday life which is otherwise cast away to preserve only the essence, the event".

⁴¹ Ion Pantazi, *Am trecut prin iad (My Journey in Hell)*, Sibiu, Edit. Constant, 1992

memory a 'screen' on which the concentrated film of detention is shown: the prisons appear as existential stations. Pantazi also tries to make a synthesis of the prison system in the final part of his memoir, divided according to type of imprisonment, age, social class. He builds a hierarchy of portraits and behaviour. However, his text is vulnerable because of its exaltation and lack of memorialistic serenity.

Critics have not initiated the classification of prison memoirs or prison literature for the very reason that they are unusually varied.⁴²

The memoir writers of the Gulag do not confess because they stick to the past; there is no nostalgia or "reminiscence poetry". Those who experienced the Gulag write about their descent to hell out of moral duty, to make a deposition and to promote redemption and perhaps after then comes the cathartic need. Memory and the words are the spiritual patrons of the confessor: remembering is a late and partially recovering revenge. This revenge is not a characteristic of the memoir writers of the Gulag; it is specific to the whole Romanian literature which has an "unceasing aspiration towards testaments".⁴³ From a historical-literary point of view Romanian memoirism has two great forerunners: Ioan Slavici and Tudor Arghezi. *Închisorile mele*⁴⁴ proves Slavici a praiseworthy ancestor of prison memoirs, although his writing is hybrid; he has diaries, pamphlets, political commentaries, confessions. This book was viewed with suspicion at the time of its publication because of its polemic nature. For today's researchers it is essential for at least two reasons: first for its realist-moralist vision characteristic to the style of Slavici and secondly, for its Dantean scene (the prison in Vaș is rigid, austere, but moral and paradisiac as compared with the bottomless pit of Văcărești; to paraphrase the Dantean initiation Slavici

⁴² Nicolae Baltă distinguishes between the detached vision (C. Noica), the sarcastic-furious (Paul Goma), the infernal-desperate (T. Mihadaș), the profoundly Christian (N. Steinhardt), and the objective and neutral (I. Ioanid, M. Bănuș) one; see N. Baltă, *Rezumatul unei detenții (Summary of a Detention)* in: *Contrapunct*, nr.25, 1991

⁴³ Nicolae Florescu, *Profitabila condiție (Rewarding Condition)*, București, Edit. Cartea Românească, 1983, p.10,15

⁴⁴ Ioan Slavici, *Închisorile mele. Scrisori adresate unui prieten din altă lume (My Prisons. Letters to a Friend from Another World)*, București, "Viața Românească", 1921

has a guide, an adapted Virgil.) Tudor Arghezi writes about the same prison in Văcărești in his novel *Poarta neagră*⁴⁵, but his style is grotesque-lyrical, presenting morals and manners with cynicism and irony. Stimulated by the dehumanising but picturesque prison he writes an expressionist prose.

Although the memoir novel *În preajma revoluției* is about Czarist prisons, we cannot omit C. Stere⁴⁶ from this brief survey. His hero, Vanea Răutu experiences “paradisiac” prisons, without torture and starvation, where the cell becomes “pandemonium” only for a short time. The prisons on the way towards Siberia are really infernal, here the hero becomes acquainted with the promiscuous world of common law prisoners. He feels that he is in a cavern, a “cloaca”, a “whirl of moor” and has “abysmal visions”.⁴⁷

Mircea Damian and Zaharia Stancu are also representatives of this remarkable prison literature before the communist regime. Mircea Damian⁴⁸ examines prisons from the point of view of social class and age; he presents those from Văcărești as social-administrative corpi. He is also interested in a synthesis of the abjectness of detention. His live confession is written in the form of tablets and it aspires to literary physiology. It divides the world into masters (gurdians, “bailiffs”) and prisoners. Mircea Damian⁴⁹ writes about his second detention in *Rogojina*. The perspective is interiorised and the writer gives up exterior panorama. The second detention is more dismal as the author experiences worsening conditions. Zaharia Stancu⁵⁰ writes short reports about a concentration camp during the Ion Antonescu regime. Its atmosphere is mild in spite of the miserable conditions and certain infernal episodes. It is marked by a kind of *dolce far niente* as the *First Circle* of Aleksandr Solzhenitzyn.

⁴⁵ Tudor Arghezi, *Poarta neagră*, București, Edit. “Cultura Națională”, 1930

⁴⁶ C. Stere, *În preajma revoluției*, 2 volumes, edited by Z. Ornea, București, Edit. Cartea Românească, 1991

⁴⁷ Ibidem, vol. I, p.555, 559

⁴⁸ Mircea Damian, *Celula nr.13(Șaptezecișicinci de nopți în închisoarea Văcărești)* (*The 13th Cell. Seventy- Five Nights in the Văcărești Prison*), București, Institutul de Arte grafice “Vremea”, 1932

⁴⁹ Mircea Damian, *Rogojina*, București, Edit. Forum, 1945

⁵⁰ Zaharia Stancu, *Zile de lagăr (Prison Days)*, Second Edition, București, Edit. Socec & Co., 1945

Slavici, Arghezi, C. Stere (through his hero, Vanea Răutu), Mircea Damian and Zaharia Stancu belong to a romantic epoch of detention which is followed by a new, neorealist epoch. The romanticism of prisons surrounds the authors with an aura before the communist invasion. Certain modern confessors of concentration camps, such as N. Steinhardt, Ion Ioanid or a fighter like Ion Gavrilă-Ogoranu also possess such an aura. The romanticism of prisons comes perhaps from an exterior view whereas the inferno is linked to an interior vision.

Short history of the Romanian Gulag

The theme of this essay must include an overview of the main moments in the history of the Romanian Gulag. (Panait Istrati is an exception: I consider him as pioneer of the disillusionment offered by Soviet communism; the confessions of the Basarabian deported are also an exception.) Therefore I am going to present some books that tried to synthetise the workings of the Romanian repressive system and the formation of the Gulag.

Panait Istrati is one of the first Romanian writers who vehemently accused communist totalitarianism and intuited the Gulag. He was a “defeated” who denied communism which he had once sustained in its false-heroic aura. He passed the complex of being a “defeated” and the humility of publicly recognizing this. Disillusioned, the inconstant Istrati incriminates official sectarian communism and the corrupt superclass, the red mafia which “kills” the purifying revolution. He defends communism from the communists. Panait Istrati denies *this* communism, because he is an adept of the Russian ideal of revolt and not of this new type of delation and demagogy. Therefore he assumes his “apostasy” only partially. His confession is not a rigorous and meticulous pamphlet but a Dostoievskian confession. His merit lies in drawing the portrait of the communist as a cynical propagandist, oscillating between

mercantilism and fanaticism, embodying all nuances from the 'apostle' to the 'rascal'.⁵¹

The Soviet Gulag began to function in a chaotic way from 1918 onwards, whereas the Romanian Gulag became severe in 1945 when the so-called Mobile Brigade (Brigada Mobilă) attained full powers, and reached its height in 1948 when the Security Service was founded, until 1964 when it was abolished, at least theoretically.⁵² There are attempts to draw a historical-social synthesis of the Romanian Gulag, which I will present selectively. Gheorghe Boldur-

⁵¹ Panait Istrati, *Spovedanie pentru învinși (Confession For the Defeated)*, Cluj, Edit. Dacia, 1990, p.24

⁵² Taking into account that the number of communists in Romania was low, the repressive apparatus was built from the exterior to the interior. The Soviet troops were an occupation army which imposed the communist regime from outside, but the Romanian society had to be inoculated with the communist system so that the repressive apparatus had to be a coercive factor in the centre of the society. At the beginning Soviet and pro-Soviet officers were the 'brain' of this apparatus, whereas the executives of repression were recruited from the peripheries and then the centre. For a short time Soviet soldiers were those who spread terror. Afterwards this role was given to certain ex-centric social and ethnic categories. From a social point of view the down-and-out were used, those who were compromised in former dictatorial regimes and could therefore be blackmailed because of their former abuses. From an ethnic point of view Romanian communists, directed by the Soviets appealed to real interethnic tensions and transformed them into instruments of discord to consolidate their power. Thus, in the period between 1945-1950 the role of torturers (officers as well as guardians) was played by individuals belonging to the Jewish, Hungarian or Roma minorities. This way the resentment of the population was diverted from its real object (communist torturers, irrespective of their ethnic origin) towards a false object: the minorities. This form of quarreling was not related to an ideological chauvinism, as the communist one did, but a situational one. This is also proved by the fact that after consolidating their power the communists renounced the ethnic instrument of repression and began to set up a purely Romanian apparatus, Romanianising the Security Service. This evolution reached its height during the dictatorship of Ceaușescu, who forwarded the idea of national communism (which was paradoxical within the internationalist ideology of communism), distinct from the Soviet one.

Lăţescu⁵³, for example, divides Romanian communism in four stages (1945-1947 - the preparatory stage; 1948-1963 - Stalinism proper, with and without Stalin; 1964-1970 - relaxation; 1971-1989 - Ceauşism) and describes the degradation of Romania (atheism, class struggle, terror, massive pauperisation, the propaganda of lie, double thinking, the depopulation of villages and chaotic urbanisation, economic bankruptcy, ecologic degradation, growing a hybrid and devitalised social class, the 'megalomaniac-nativist' policy). However, this book is a popularising one, it has almost nothing in common with political essays.

Constantin Dumitrescu's *Cetatea totală* is completely different. This is a pioneering work in the deconstruction of Romanian communism from the point of view of political science. Reviewing the four dictatorial stages of communism (the nationalising Sovietisation, defeating resistance, apparent normalisation and structural crisis), the author nuances this dismal political scene which resembles slave-markets rather than the messianic reverie of a perfect future. Constantin Dumitrescu's work begins with a historical presentation of utopias which traces the regression of the myth of Eden from the biblical context to the communist one, through Plato (the first who reveals a 'police-like paradise' and a prison-like utopia)⁵⁴ Morus, Rousseau and Marx. The author asserts that the aim of utopias is to set up a rationalised-dictatorial Communopolis which turns into revolution, that is, a forced and false historical-social salvation. If theoretically utopias have a rhetoric of ascension, practically they recur to instruments of repression. The content of utopias is therefore time-server and heretical. Concerning the false modern utopia, Marxism, the author makes the robot-portrait of communism seen as a mercenary as with Panait Istrati) and a Jacobised 'monk'. Due to the de-utopianisation of utopia the Marxist prophecy of the modern Apocalypse became palpable: "the Garden of

⁵³ Gheorghe Boldur-Lăţescu, *Genocidul comunist în România (The Communist Genocide in Romania)*, Bucureşti, Edit. Albatros, 1992, p.57

⁵⁴ Constantin Dumitrescu, *Cetatea totală (The Total Fortress)*, Bucureşti, Edit. Eminescu, 1992, p.35

Eden” became a “pestilential barrack” where terror is rather preventive than punitive and “Dictatorship is the only realisable socialism.”⁵⁵

In Constantin Dumitrescu’s opinion there was no de-Stalinisation in Romania at all, as an official system of extermination functioned until late. The zealous imitation of the Soviet Gulag has many reasons: the necessity of a wild repression, the tradition of the Romanians’ submission and the general misery. The author presents in a detailed fashion the last phase of Romanian communism, drawing on the portrait of the megalomaniac dictator, a hybrid generated by two political epidemics (“Moldo-Vlachian Führer” with tribal-dinastic mentality and “Ottoman-Danubian Lenin”). With such a leader the inhabitants of the total Town is stereotypical and lacks will-power; therefore Romanian resistance in the Ceauşescu period was a passive one. Active resistance had been suppressed in the first ten years; the author uses the metaphor of the endless night of St. Bartholomew when speaking of repression. The massive process of redressing the population turned Romania into a huge totalitarian Zoo, with mandarins, technocrats and the “rest”. After all, Romanian totalitarianism is denounced as a hybrid one, the mixture of three devastating components: Prussian bureaucratism, the Levantin-Phanariot mentality and Russian conspiracy⁵⁶.

In *Istoria stalinismului în România* Victor Frunză⁵⁷ builds his analysis on what he calls legal terror. Romania became a “Stalinist pashalik” and adapted the Eastern brother’s harsh methods of spreading terror. The first phase begins with public put-up affairs, and spectacular masquerades: the repressive organs pretended that they caught subversive-terrorist organisations otherwise ‘made up’ by the Security Service. In the second phase the Romanian system of repression passes from the diurnal to the nocturnal, the directness of terror in daylight to the perfidious modesty of darkness; repression is

⁵⁵ Ibidem, p.134

⁵⁶ Ibidem, p.249

⁵⁷ Victor Frunză, *Istoria stalinismului în România (The History Of Stalinism In Romania)*, Bucureşti, Edit. Humanitas, 1990

accompanied by a secretive silence, put-up affairs become mysterious. Analysing communist repression Victor Frunză enumerates four mini-epochs: the invasion of the country by the Soviet army which stays in Romania for 14 years, the deportation of the Saxon in the USSR, the suppression of the revolt on 8 November 1945 (“the first East European revolt while becoming satellites of Kremlin”), beheading the historical parties and staging their treason, destroying royal authority and the abolition of monarchy, the communists seize syndicate power, the repression of anticommunists and anti-Soviets, the repression of Greek-Catholics, weeding out “enlightened” communists (Lucrețiu Pătrășcanu especially, the “rare bird of the party” among “stalinist ravens”), the repression of peasants, weeding out the Pauker-Luca-Georgescu group, the trials of the intellectuals, the new wave of terror after 1956. It is noteworthy that in Victor Frunză’s opinion there were “modifications in the style” of repression, but there was no “melting” proper, on the contrary, the Khrushchevian “melting” had a consistent “frozen Stalinism” as its correspondent in Romania. They condemned the cult of Stalin but not Stalinism. (This is why Lucrețiu Pătrășcanu, who could have played the role of a Romanian Khrushchev was executed immediately after Stalin’s death⁵⁸). The partial “melting” begins in Romania only after

⁵⁸ *Principiul bumerangului. Documente ale procesului Lucrețiu Pătrășcanu (The Principle of the Boomerang. Documents of the Lucrețiu Pătrășcanu Case)*, ed. by Nicolae Henegariu, Angela Dumitru, Cristina Cantacuzino, Silvia Colfescu, Mihai Giugariu, București, Edit. Vremea, 1996

These documents prove that Lucrețiu Pătrășcanu was a moderate communist, who was not blinded by the policy of the USSR and the RCP (Romanian Communist Party); This Romanian Buharin pined for a democracy with opposition in the parliament and not the dictatorship of the proletariat. He criticised the harsh method of suppressing the historical parties and monarchy, conceiving communism not as a technique of terror but as a progressive and progressist technique. He declares the Stalinist process a “filth” and a “meanness”, refuses to defend himself and does not collaborate with his inquirers to preserve the “pure” image of the Party. As an “enlightened” communist he played the role of one of the sons of Cronos in a game of political cannibalism.

1964; it does not refer to individual liberty but to de-Russianisation. The 1964-1970 period is a liberalising one, followed by a return to a primitive Stalinism asserted in the July Theses. Gheorghiu Dej the “father” and Alexandru Drăghici the “brother” are repudiated by Ceaușescu. He does not want to be the “son” of Dej, instead he strives to become the “most beloved son of the people”, at least according to the political psychoanalysis put forward by Victor Frunză.

In Vlad Georgescu’s opinion Romanian communism leans upon a teleological ideology which reinterprets history according to political requirements, subordinating history to politics. Vlad Georgescu considers 1944, the year of the Soviet invasion in Romania an equivalent of 1711, the year of the Phanariot invasion. His analysis synthesizes the situation of the satellite-countries of Moscow with an amazing expressivity: “From a social point of view, East-European socialist regimes oscillate between abolishing serfdom in the Romanian Principalities (1746-1749) and abolishing villeinage in Russia.(1861). They are characterised by relations of neovassalage between members of the leading political class and the appearance of the third serfdom in the relations between the state and the rest of the population.”⁵⁹

Most of Vladimir Tismăneanu’s books⁶⁰ analyse the strata of Romanian nomenclature, the generations of leaders, their ascension

⁵⁹ Vlad Georgescu, *Politică și istorie. Cazul comuniștilor români (Politics and History. The Case of Romanian Communists)*, București, Edit. Humanitas, 1991, p.133

⁶⁰ The most important for this subject are:

Vladimir Tismăneanu, *Condamnați la fericire. Experimentul comunist în România (Condemned to Happiness. The Communist Experiment in Romania)*, Brașov, Edit. Astra, 1991

Vladimir Tismăneanu, *Arheologia terorii (The Archeology of Terror)*, București, Edit. Eminescu, 1992

Vladimir Tismăneanu, *Fantoma lui Gheorghiu-Dej (The Ghost of Gheorghiu-Dej)*, Preface by Mircea Mihăieș, translations by Mircea Mihăieș, Alina 152

and fall and the struggle for power, divided into epochs and marked by mischievous personalities. Tismăneanu's books aim at the radiography of terror, analysing mainly the communist fratricide, the political self-cannibalism and the reversibility of the victim - executioner relationship within the communist elite. The main point of the author is that the brutal Stalinist political style is constant in Romanian communism (the "melting" was an appearance, a wrongly used expression) and that the de-Sovietisation of Romania (which was confounded with "melting") coincided with the neo-Stalinisation of the country: although Romanian leaders renounced sometimes the Soviet primacy to play the cards of the recuperated nationalism, they never renounced Stalinism, but modernised it and adapted it the new requirements. As an investigator of terror Vladimir Tismăneanu is not so much interested in emotionalism; he aims at conceptualising the Gulag and describing the structure of terror. His politological discourse is almost mathematical; he deconstructs the portraits of communist leaders from Ana Pauker to Ceaușescu and the lesser tyrants, leaders of the Security Service, etc. He is not so much interested in describing the communist inferno, rather he presents its theoretical premises. He treats Romanian communism as a horror story and relates it politologically but with black humour, positing a strongly Stalinised tribal communism which becomes Byzantine in the Dej period and Asiatic in the Ceaușescu period. The author characterises the two stages of terror in Romania: in the Dej period, terror was mostly physical, "palpable" and "nude" whereas in the Ceaușescu period it took the form of denunciations.

H.R.Patapievici draws a distinction between the two stages of Romanian communism: "1948-1964 was the epoch of destroying classical Romania and its human, social, political, institutional, etc. structures"; "after 1964 the epoch of a social contract between the regime and society commenced, which was carried out in the

psychological conditions of terror”.⁶¹ The first period is “the epoch of extermination”, the second one that of “perverting”; Romanians were anticommunists in the first period and they were trained during the second period.

Most memoirists of the communist detention do not write a history proper of the Romanian Gulag, but sketch some premises of the repression (there are also exceptions, when the interwar and postwar events are summarised), trying to draw a historical fresco. Paul Goma makes reference in all his books to short historical insertions and agrees with the idea of *Romanians occupying Romania*, that is, social-political self-mutilation. Others insist on the Sovietisation of the country, a robot action which divides society in two specialised classes: the exterminators (secret advisors but also concrete executioners) and the executed. However, the majority of the authors avoid historical analysis, recurring to essayistic speculations in defining communism and its ill-fated consequences. Nicolae Dima⁶² defines the threefold negativity of communism: anti-Christian (from a religious point of view), pathologic (from an anthropologic and medical point of view) and de-nationalising (from an ethnic point of view). The author speaks about *antihistory* as a consequence of communist reeducation, the descent in the bestial, a process called “apeification”. Nicolae Dima denounces the political success of communists which was supported by a rudimentary-scientific sense of extermination and led to malefic results. Being a perfidious, not at all simplist totalitarianism, communism is a perfect murder committed by a clan of maniacs. Unlike other totalitarianisms communism uses misleading cheats, so that only the initiated are able to trace its hypocrisy.

Marxist authors and those disillusioned from the interior by communism blame Stalinist despotism for the “negative” communism of the Gulag. This is the case of Belu Zilber who writes about his

⁶¹ H.R.Patapievici, *Politice (Political Writings)*, București, Edit. Humanitas, 1996, p.103

⁶² Nicolae Dima, *Amintiri din închisoare (Prison Recollections)*, Ontario, Canada, Edit. Humanitas, 1974

detention. His allegory of the Gulag is convincing: the mad have revolted in the asylum and treat the sane as mad. The leitmotiv of his theory is a witticism: Romanian communism is the combination of Stalin and I.L.Caragiale, that is, of Soviet atrocity and the Balcan smile in the face of adversity which is a tragical-absurd mixture. Otherwise, the author calls the Pătrășcanu case “a *Stormy Night* [Caragiale’s famous tragicomedy] with a Stalinist ending”.⁶³

In his controversial book on detention Constantin Noica places communism under the badge of the void, analysing it as an “organised historical stammer”.⁶⁴ The author presents the inner distortions of communism and the alienation produced by it; he shows the communists as “engineers of empty hearts”. Communism wants to make people happy by force, serving the masses and not the individual. Noica considers this an attenuating circumstance, nonetheless he accuses it for transforming the individual into an object and developing the utopia of equalitarianism. Nevertheless the portrait of the communists is partially aestheticised, Noica’s charges being, somehow, euphemisms.

Nicolae Mărgineanu who has an exacerbated psychological sense draws a parallel between totalitarianisms starting from the assertion that the absurd process of Kafka is outstripped by the fascist or communist reality. The author stresses the perfidious collaboration with the Soviets, a fact which belongs to individual but also social-political criminology and pathology. Concerning Romanian fratricide the author presents the procedures of the Sovietisation of Romania: missionarism, the abolition of political parties, the subordination of the government, stimulating proselitism among minorities and the déclassé, massive arrests.

Even though they do not write a history of the Gulag, most memoirists throw light on the circumstances of their arrest and detention, implying fragmented historical points of reference. This holds good for Anița Nandriș-Cudla whose destiny is emblematic for

⁶³ Andrei Șerbulescu, *op. cit.* p.70

⁶⁴ Constantin Noica, *Rugați-vă pentru fratele Alexandru (Pray for Brother Alexander)*, București, Edit. Humanitas, 1990, p.23

the deportation of the Bucovinian collectivity in 1940. The author does not begin her book with the Siberian exile but makes use of an antithetical construction, presenting the edenic part of her life which was spoiled by the Gulag. Ioan Holban, who comments his father's confession, considers that the Gulag had a special role in the Basarabians' life: it was not only the Soviets' method of extermination but also the archetypal Calvary of Basarabians beginning with 1812 and until the Stalinist "steel monasteries".

Ioan Ioanid "maps" the Gulag and makes a detailed inventory of its prisons, prisoners and guardians. His memories are not a confession but an "organon", a dictionary of the Gulag, because the author processes information from all the prisons where he was; he notes the names of denunciators and men of pronounced character. The prison inventory of Ion Ioanid is, on the one hand, general; on the other it lists and offers concrete data. The aspect of his book is combined with that of a balanced saga. The literary conception of Paul Goma resembles that of Solzhenitzyn because almost all his books treat the phenomenon of concentration. *Închisoarea noastră cea de toate zilele* is a less essayistic and rather epic *Gulag Archipelago*; its author collects the lives of those whom he met in detention and comments on detention with an imperturbable serenity.

The book written by Doina Jela is a very special one as its author is not a memoirist of the detention but a late "archeologist" of the first process of the Canal who has tried to reconstruct events. She conveys the mentality of the epoch and the paranoid atmosphere, reconstructing the two stages of the Canal in the Dej period: the frenetic one of demagogical idealisation when the Canal was an "adored deity"⁶⁵ and the repressive one when the "divinity" proved to be devouring, sacrificed its builders on the altar of a communist Baal. The first Canal process is in Doina Jela's opinion a continuation of the process of the rightist deviationists removed by Dej or even a mimetic repetition of it, technically assimilated by the repressive apparatus and the common mentality as well. This research starts from the dilemma of Nichita Dumitru's death sentence. He was an

⁶⁵ Doina Jela, *op. cit.* p.29, 196

insignificant person in the politics and economy of the Canal, a Romanian Ivan Denisovici who was unfortunate enough to be executed after a typical Stalinist trial in which the victims accused themselves, playing roles established linguistically and penally by the inquirers. All the noisy commotion about the first Canal process aimed at the imminent execution of the condemned; the audience assisted hypnotised and “drugged”, considering the process something abnormal but bearable. (Note what the author calls the process of depressureisation.) The portrait of Nichita Dumitru illustrates a case of political self-cannibalism of the working class in power. Doina Jela draws four types of portraits: the accused, the witness prosecutors, other secondary characters and the representatives of repression. Most interesting is the portrait of the witness prosecutors, who were stimulated by class hatred and identified themselves with the image created by the Party, that of the “poor exploited proletarian”. The author analysis acts of accusation, public declarations during processes and delations, linguistically as well.

Finally I am going to draw the portraits of five prisons which seem to be illustrative of Romanian repression. (This does not mean that I am initiating a hierarchy of the suffering of former political prisoners, considering absolute the suffering of those who had been in the five negative matrix-spaces.) All Romanian communist prisons were, more or less, “institutes of criminology”.⁶⁶ The most heinous was the Pitești prison in the period of the reeducator named *Țurcanu*. Although it functioned for a limited time (1949-1952), it belongs to metahistory, as Dumitru Bacu⁶⁷ says. Pitești was a modern, eminently luciferical prison (on account of its pre-eminence in defying religious belief), therefore I do not think that it should be perceived as the Golgotha and the Mount of Olives⁶⁸, as a witness suggests. The mutant status of the reeducated excludes the possibility of a metaphor

⁶⁶ Radu Budișteanu, *op. cit.* p.125

⁶⁷ D. Bacu, *Pitești, centru de reeducare studențească (Pitești, Centre for Student Reeducation)*, Hamilton, Ontario, Edit. Cuvântul Românesc, 1989

⁶⁸ Rev. Gh. Calciu, *Prefață (Preface)*, in: D. Bacu, *op. cit.*

such as the Golgotha and the Mount of Olives which is appropriate only for those who died during torture.

There follow three obsolete, rigid and stiff prisons built in the Hapsburg period: Gherla, Aiud and Sighet. Gherla is the black prototype of Transylvanian prisons, its unrusty “coat of arms” is that of the political prisons *par excellence*. The negative myth of this austere, college-like prison exercised a morbid fascination which was the result of the traumatism of anchorite-type confinement. Aiud, the “Monastery-Academy” was renowned for its disciplinary exigence and for two exterminating agents legalised by the authorities: cold and hunger. Akin to these two prisons but especially to Aiud, Sighet incarcerated former ministers as it was specialised in the systematic extermination of the old, manifesting an almost racist hatred towards those who held offices in the former regime. Even if the maliciousness of torturers was present here too, the Pitești experiment was accomplished only partially at Gherla and later at Aiud; these three prisons were famous for the “zarca”, their pivot. I would like to mention one more prison, the matrix space of Jilava, a transitional prison, a lock-up malaxator, the anteroom of death.

These five demonic spaces appear to be representative of the wider network of the Romanian Gulag which also contains centres of extermination, concentration camps, psychiatric asylums, the Canal and other labour camps, the cellars of the Security Service, etc.⁶⁹ Ion Ioanid and other memoirists mention the specialisation of prisons: Pitești - centre of “traitors of the country”, Aiud - centre of iron-guardists and former dignitaries, Gherla - centre of the “enemies of the nation” (this is a vague denomination which points to the generalist character of Gherla), etc. The specialisation of prisons depended on the different periods of the Romanian Gulag, but also on the social or professional status of the arrested and their political

⁶⁹ A structural classification of the Romanian Gulag in *Memoria, revista gândirii arestate* (1990, nr.1) proposes five terms, five types of captivity which are inventoried numerically as well: great centres of extermination (4), exterminating prisons (29), exterminating camps (54), deportation camps (11), psychiatric asylums (13).

“offence”: thus, pupils were kept at Târgșor, women at Mislea, Codlea and Miercurea-Ciuc, students at Pitești, former employees of the State Security (Siguranța statului) at Făgăraș but also at Târgșor, tuberculars at Tg.Ocna, political leaders at Sighet. This shows the bureaucratic aspect of the Tower of Babel of Romanian prisons, it has nothing to do with an alchemy of the inferno, for “Prisons resemble one another like dead bodies of prisoners. The same squalor, putrefaction, the same aspect of terror and death.”⁷⁰ Communist penal code contained three punishments (penalty of less than five years’ imprisonment, hard prison and hard labour), however, in the case of political prisoners they did not differentiate between these: “the severity of detention fluctuated according to external and internal political events and factors and often depended on the whims of bosses.”⁷¹

⁷⁰ Radu Budișteanu, *op. cit.* p.138

⁷¹ Viorel Gheorghită, *op. cit.* p.199