

Halfway between Memory and History: Romanian Gulag Memoirs as a Genre

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Memoirs offer unique human testaments to historical events. This article analyses a sample of seven Gulag memoirs that recount experiences of imprisonment at the height of the Stalinist repression in Romania, between 1947 and 1964. The paper looks at the literary conventions employed by the authors in the recounting of their stories. The memoirs were chosen for the broad range of perspectives they represent, with particular attention being paid to the gendered experiences of imprisonment. The texts will be approached through the lenses of literary criticism, as this article analyses common tropes, motifs, characters, and techniques of narration - elements that make Gulag memoirs a 'genre' in its own right. A close reading of the text will uncover not only the gruesome realities of Communist persecution, imprisonment, and torture, but also the prevailing mentalities of that era. The literary components of the texts provide clues that help in decoding the authors' self and their understanding of history.

MEMOIRS IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The fall of Communism gave way to a frantic search for the 'truth', wherein competing narratives aimed at expunging collective memory and reconstruct national identity. The horrors of the totalitarian Communist system in Romania, as illustrated by its prison system and detention camps, have found a faithful mirror in many published memoirs. The first Romanian Gulag accounts emerged following the de-Stalinization campaign under Gheorghe Gheorghiu Dej's rule and the gradual amnesty of political prisoners between 1962 and 1964. These personal acts of remembrance served a highly politicised goal, namely to reclaim the country's history and reshape its national identity. Moreover, survivor accounts are instrumental in interpreting official data, reconstructing history, and in filling the gap that archival material and history books are unable to do.

Due to their eclectic content, dual nature, and multiple significations, as personal documents with public vocation, works of art, and historical documents, memoirs were situated in-between memory and history. Pierre Nora explained the difference between the two:

History, because it is an intellectual and secular production, calls for analysis and criticism. Memory installs remembrance within the sacred; history, always prosaic, releases it again. Memory is blind to all but the group it binds.¹

Maurice Halbwachs said that there are as many memories as there are groups since ‘it is in society that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they re-call, recognise, and localise their memories.’²

This article analyses a sample of seven Gulag memoirs that recount experiences of imprisonment at the height of Stalinist repression, between 1947 and 1964, by looking at the literary conventions employed by the authors in the recounting of their stories. The memoirs were chosen for the broad range of perspectives they represent, with particular attention being paid to the gendered experiences of imprisonment. Evidently, the texts discussed in this article do not provide a comprehensive account of Communist political repression. The experiences of war prisoners, deportees, or dissidents are only touched upon. The memoirs were selected because of the success they enjoyed after publication, the personalities of their authors, and their narrative styles. Aiming to present different forms of testimonials, I chose the most powerful accounts and the ones that are less politically charged. The texts will be approached through the lenses of literary criticism, through a careful examination of common tropes, motifs, characters, and techniques of narration. These are all elements that make Gulag memoirs a ‘genre’ in its own right. A close reading of the text will uncover not only the gruesome realities of Communist persecution, imprisonment, and torture, but also the prevailing mentalities of that era. The literary components of the texts provide clues that help decode the authors’ self, as well as their understanding of history.

¹ Pierre Nora, ‘Between History and Memory: Les Lieux de Memoire’, *Representations*, No. 26 (1989), p.8.

² Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p.38.

Gulag memoirs constitute a genre of historical writing that has attracted much attention from scholars in different disciplines. The literary critique by Leona Toker, *Return from The Archipelago, Narratives of Gulag Survivors*, is one of the most compelling and inclusive studies of Gulag literature. The analysis is remarkable for the breadth of its evidence, for its careful historical contextualisation, and dissection of literary tropes. Moreover, Toker offered a probing analysis of Russian Gulag memoirs over a span of seventy years. Gulag narratives, argues Toker, share certain features, and the purpose of her book is to establish Gulag memoirs as a distinctive literary genre. Toker also discusses the question of factography and fiction in this corpus of literature. He guides the audience through the process of reading and interpreting Gulag memoirs, because what these texts do not openly say is also critically important. Some other scholars who have used memoirs and personal documents to analyse twentieth-century Russian events are Nancy Adler, Catherine Merridale, Beth Holmgren, and Irina Paperno.³

A similar study which equally informs this essay is Ruxandra Cesereanu's critical analysis of Romanian Gulag memoirs: *The Gulag in Romanian Consciousness: Memoirs and Literature of Communist Camps and Prisons. An Essay on Mentality*. Cesereanu's book aims at reconstructing the punitive space of the Romanian Gulag by examining the geography of imprisonment, the typologies of political detainees, that of the oppressor, the experience of detention, torture, and resistance both inside and outside the Gulag. The study starts with an

³ A list of authors and their books in this sense: Nancy Adler, *The Gulag Survivor: Beyond the Soviet System*, (New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 2004) and *Victims of Soviet Terror: The Story of the Memorial Movement*, (Westport: Praeger, 1993); Golfo Alexopoulos, *Stalin's Outcasts: Aliens, Citizens, and the Soviet State, 1926–1936*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003); Steven A. Barnes, *Death and Redemption: The Gulag and the Shaping of Soviet Society*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011); Catherine Merridale, *Night of Stone: Death and Memory in Twentieth-Century Russia*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 2002) and *Ivan's War: Life and Death in the Red Army, 1939–1945*, (London: Picador, 2007); Beth Holmgren, *The Russian Memoir: History and Literature*, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2003); Cristina Vatulescu, *Police Aesthetics: Literature, Film, and the Secret Police in Soviet Times*, (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2010); Peter Kenez, *A History of the Soviet Union from the Beginning to the End*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Irina Paperno, *Stories of the Soviet Experience: Memoirs, Diaries, Dreams*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), 'Dreams of Terror: Dreams from Stalinist Russia as a Historical Source', *Kritika*, Vol. 7, No. 4 (2006), and 'Personal Accounts of the Soviet Experience', *Kritika*, Vol. 3, No. 4 (2002), pp. 723–894; Nickolas Lupinin, 'The Tale is Now Told: Women's Memoirs and Recollections in Russia and the Soviet Union', *Journal of the Historical Society* (2004), pp. 43–63; Alexander Etkind, 'A Parable of Misrecognition: Anagnorisis and the Return of the Repressed from the Gulag', *Russian Review*, Vol. 68, Issue 4 (2009), pp. 623–640; David J. Galloway, 'Polemical Allusions in Russian Gulag Prose', *The Slavic and East European Journal*, Vol. 51, No. 3 (2007), pp. 535–552; Leona Toker, 'Toward a Poetics of Documentary Prose from the Perspective of Gulag Testimonies', *Poetics Today*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (1997), pp. 187–222; Tomas Venclova, 'Prison as Communicative Phenomenon: The Literature of Gulag', *Comparative Civilisations Review*, No. 2 (1979), pp. 65–73.

overview of the Russian ‘gulag model’ that references famous testimonials, such as those pertaining to Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Evgenia Ghintburg, Varlam Salamov, or Nadezhda Mandelstam. It continues with an overview of more than one hundred Romanian testimonials. The book ends with an analysis of how the institutions of the Gulag and the Securitate are reflected in books published after the fall of the Communist regime.⁴ Literary conventions are of lesser concern to Cesereanu. The author explores the inner workings of confinement, its effect on the individual, the mechanism of punishment, and its symbolical content. This close reading of the memoirs becomes a historical exploration that has a clear aim: to provide material for a ‘trial of Communism’ in Romania.⁵

In the absence of a collective work such as Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s *The Gulag Archipelago*, Ion Ioanid’s book, *Our Daily Prison*, constitutes a treatise on the Romanian Gulag. Being the son of a cabinet minister, Tilica Ioanid, the author was arrested and sentenced to twenty years of hard labor, for committing espionage in 1952. After a short stay in Jilava and Oradea Prisons, Ioanid was sent with a large lot of political prisoners to the Cavnice lead mine. He escaped in 1953, together with several other inmates. He was apprehended in 1953 and sent back to prison. Ioanid spent the next eleven years in six prisons and one working colony: Satu-Mare, Oradea, Aiud, Jilava, Pitești, Timișoara and Ostrov.⁶

Florin Pavlovici’s *Torture for Dummies* details the author’s experience in the working colony of Salcia. A young graduate, twenty-three years old, Pavlovici was arrested in 1959 for having publicly expressed his dislike of a proletarian, then fashionable novel, *Barefoot*.⁷ Pavlovici also made positive remarks about Faulkner, Hemingway and Verlaine. Therefore, he was convicted for bowing to reactionary Western literature, in accordance to the infamous article 209 of the Romanian Criminal Code, which sanctioned the crime of ‘conspiracy against the existing social order.’⁸

⁴ Famous Russian Gulag testimonials: Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago: 1918-1956* and *An Experiment in Literary Investigation*; Evgenia Ginzburg, *Within the Whirlwind* and *Journey into the Whirlwind*; Varlam Shalamov, *Kolyma Tales*; Nadezhda Mandelstam, *Hope Against Hope* and *Hope Abandoned*.

⁵ Angela Furtuna, ‘Interview with Ruxandra Cesereanu’, *Atelier LiterNet*, 10.09.2004. Online at: <http://atelier.liternet.ro/articol/1739/Angela-Furtuna-Ruxandra-Cesereanu/Ruxandra-Cesereanu-Ce-anume-trebuie-pastrat-in-memorie-Totul-istoria-victimele-calaii.html>.

⁶ Ion Ioanid, *Inchisoarea noastra cea de toate zilele* [*Our Daily Prison*], 5 vol. (Bucuresti: Albatros, 1991-1996).

⁷ *Barefoot* is a novel written by the celebrated Romanian Communist author Zaharia Stancu.

⁸ Florin Constantin Pavlovici, *Tortura pe intelesul tuturor* [*Torture for Dummies*], (Chisinau: Cartier, 2001).

The collection of interviews by Vartan Arachelian with the leader of the National Peasants' Party, Corneliu Coposu, records his reminiscences about Romania's pre-Communist period. While most of the political figures of monarchist Romania were either dead or freshly returned from exile, the book offers a rare first-hand account of how a political figure experienced the Communist prison system. Coposu spent, altogether, seventeen years of incarceration in seventeen notorious detention places and hard labor facilities associated with the Communist regime.⁹

Nicolae Steindhart's prison journal, suggestively titled *The Happiness Diary*, offers a unique, mystical view of imprisonment. Born into a Romanian-Jewish family, Steindhart suffered from discrimination during the World War Two fascist Romanian governments. An accomplished writer, he was sentenced to thirteen years of forced labor in 1959 in one of the most famous show trials in Romanian history - the intellectuals' trial, Noica-Pillat.¹⁰ While in Jilava Prison, he received the Orthodox baptism and, after his release, became a hermit and father confessor.¹¹

Lena Constante's acclaimed book, *The Silent Escape*, offers a rare glimpse into the penal treatment accorded to one of the few women tried and sentenced for political activities. A family friend of the by then disgraced Communist Party politician Lucretiu Patrascanu, Constante was arrested in 1954. Implicated in the Patrascanu Trial, Constante was sentenced to twelve years in prison.¹² During repeated interrogations by the Securitate, Constante tried to fend off false accusations of 'Titoism'¹³ and 'treason', but, as a victim of constant beatings

⁹ Corneliu Coposu, *Marturisiri. Dialoguri cu Vartan Arachelian [Confessions. Conversations with Vartan Arachelian]*, (Bucuresti: Humanitas, 1996).

¹⁰ Noica-Pillat Trial is the last of the Communist show trials. It took place in February 1960, but the arrests and investigation of twenty-three notorious writers had begun in 1958. The sentences varied from seven to twenty-five years of imprisonment, but the intellectuals were all freed under the terms of the general amnesty of 1964.

¹¹ Nicolae Steindhart, *Jurnalul fericitii [The Happiness Diary]*, (Cluj-Napoca: Dacia, 1994).

¹² Lucretiu Patrascanu (1900-1954) was a doctor in political economy, left wing militant since 1921, and minister of justice from 1944 until 1948. As chief of Romanian delegation, he signed the Soviet-Romanian armistice in 1941 and the Paris Treaty in 1947. On April 28, 1948, Patrascanu was arrested and came under the investigation of a party committee, under the provisional charge that he failed to report various political crimes. A report on 'Titoism' and collaboration with the maverick Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia was presented. The report established Patrascanu as an 'imperialist agent'. Patrascanu was kept in detention until 1954, when he was executed. He was posthumously rehabilitated in April 1968 by Nicolae Ceaușescu, in the latter's attempt to discredit his predecessors and establish his own legitimacy.

¹³ Titoism is a variant of Marxism–Leninism named after Josip Broz Tito, the leader of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. The term is primarily used to describe the specific socialist system built in Yugoslavia after the country's refusal to take further dictates from the Soviet Union.

and torture, she eventually admitted to the charges.¹⁴ For much of her time in prison, Constante was kept in complete solitude. Freed in 1962, Constante was rehabilitated during Nicolae Ceausescu's de-Stalinization campaign.¹⁵

Elizabeta Rizea's oral memoir, *The Story of Elizabeta Rizea from Nucsoara*, talks about one of the most famous anti-Communist partisan groups in Romania, Colonel Arsenescu's group, *Haiducii Muscelului*.¹⁶ Arrested and sentenced to death in 1952, and then again in 1961, Rizea spent a total of 12 years in Communist prisons and was subjected to various forms of torture. Upon her release from prison, Rizea had no hair and could barely walk, as her knees had been destroyed by torture. After the Romanian Revolution of 1989, Rizea became the symbol of Romania's anti-Communist resistance.¹⁷

Lastly, not so much for the sake of variety, but mostly because of its brutality and singularity, this essay also presents the testimonial of a former Communist torturer. Frant Tandara (1930-2004) was a brigadier working for the *Canal Penitentiary System*, then a torturer working for the Internal Affairs Minister, and ultimately a paid killer. Abandoned by his family, Tandara became an army ward when he was eleven. After the war ended, he led a vagrant life and joined the Communists. As the Communist party gained stronger political influence, Tandara's life improved, but in 1947 he killed his father and was sent to prison. While imprisoned, Tandara became the administration's tool charged with the most infamous tasks. In 1956, Tandara succumbed to mental pressure and was committed into a psychiatric asylum. After his release he worked as a carpenter and beekeeper. His public confession is the subject of Doina Jela's book, *Damascus Road. Confession of a Former Torturer*. Tandara is the only Romanian Communist torturer who insisted on confessing his crimes, asking to be judged by a tribunal of his victims.¹⁸

¹⁴ Tismaneanu, p.294.

¹⁵ Lena Constante, *The Silent Escape. Three Thousand Days in Romanian Prisons* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

¹⁶ *Haiducii Muscelului* [*The Outlaws of Muscel*] was perhaps the biggest anti-Communist resistance group. Created in 1948 by army officers, the group enjoyed the support of both the local population and the elites. The last members of this group were captured in 1961. Over 100 people were sentenced for having supported the outlaws.

¹⁷ *Povestea Elisabetei Rizea din Nucsoara* [*The Story of Elizabeta Rizea from Nucsoara*], ed. by Irina Nicolau, Theodor Nitu (Bucuresti: Humanitas, 1993).

¹⁸ Doina Jela, *Drumul Damascului* [*Damascus Road*], (Bucuresti: Humanitas, 1999).

THEORETICAL ASPECTS, THEMES AND INTERPRETATIONS

Before delving into the different meanings and interpretations of Gulag literature, a few key theoretical aspects of testimonial literature need to be addressed, namely the difference between a memoir and an autobiography. A memoir is often distinguished from an autobiography by its greater emphasis on other people or upon events experienced in common with others, and sometimes by its more episodic structure which does not need to be tied to the personal development of the narrator.¹⁹ Several types of memoirs can be identified in Gulag literature: personal memoir, portrait memoir, spiritual quest memoir, confessional memoir, and political memoir. By examining the terms ‘memoir’ and ‘testimony’, we will be able to set the scene for the exploration of recurrent tropes, characters, and delimitations between literary aesthetics and historical ‘objectivity’.

While the term memoir is widely used to describe the act of bearing witness, literary critics have coined another concept as well: literature of testimony. This term can be used in two ways. In its narrower meaning, it connotes an ethical urge on the part of the author who testifies about crimes and atrocities. However, ‘literature of testimony’ is often expanded and can therefore be given the meaning of ‘eyewitness account’, whether or not the author intended to give evidence for or against specific people or institutions. Memoirs, autobiographies, diaries, notebooks, and letters are genres of the literature of testimony. They are not based on historical documents so much as they constitute them by recording, this is to say ‘documenting’, what their authors have witnessed.²⁰ Historian C. C. Giurescu used the term testimonial [testimoniu], in his writings, claiming total objectivity.²¹ Similarly, Nicolae Margineanu drew the distinction between a personality’s ‘memoir’ and the more humble ‘testimony’. The author included his writings, modestly, in the category of testimony.²² A similar classification was advanced by Gabriel Balanescu, who preferred the formula of ‘abbreviated chronicles’ to the genre of memoirs, because he did not consider himself an

¹⁹ *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, ed. by Chris Baldick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p.202.

²⁰ Leona Toker, ‘Toward a Poetics of Documentary Prose from the Perspective of Gulag Testimony’, *Poetics Today*, Vol. 18 (1998), p.192.

²¹ Constantin C. Giurescu, *Cinci ani si doua luni in penitenciarul de la Sigbet (7 mai 1950-5 iulie 1955)* [*Five Years and Two Months in Sigbet Prison: May 7, 1950 – July 5, 1955*], (Bucureşti: Editura Fundatiei Culturale Romane, 1994).

²² Nicolae Margineanu, *Amfiteatre si inchisori* [*Amphitheatres and Prisons*], (Cluj-Napoca: Editura Dacia, 1991).

exotic personality.²³ Constantin Cesianu, a meticulous analyst of the Canal, also insisted on having written a testimony not a memoir, trying his hand at a theoretical delimitation. The author avoided all aestheticization, favouring a life-like approach:

it isn't about a novel in here or about a literary essay. It's about *a testimony*. I'm not looking for the sensational or for the entertaining. My rendering can often seem dull. It doesn't matter. It tells the truth.²⁴

However, as a literary form, the memoir depends on the act of remembering, which, as the philosopher Edward S. Casey pointed out:

is at all times presupposed, but also because it is always at work . . . There are few moments in which we are not steeped in memory; and this immersion includes each step we take, each thought we think, each word we utter.²⁵

According to Leona Toker, because of similarities in their subject matter and in the writers' motivation for the narrative act, Gulag memoirs tend to display four common features. The first one is the tension between the ethical drive and an aesthetic impulse, closely associated with the bi-functionality of Gulag narrative as acts of bearing witness and as works of art.²⁶ Romanian literary critic Adrian Marino similarly identifies two narrative forms through which Gulag survivors have rendered their experiences: 'through literaturisation, stylisation, the entire set of typical literary process, and through direct, documentary testimony, as objective as possible.'²⁷

One key feature of Gulag texts is the abundance of references. On one level, this can be read as a mark of the 'intelligentsia'. In the sixties, allusions and references served a greater

²³ Gabriel Balanescu, *Din imparatia mortii* [*From the Kingdom of Death*], (Timișoara: Gordian, 1994).

²⁴ Constantin Cesianu, *Salvat din infern* [*Saved from Hell*], (București: Editura Humanitas, 1992).

²⁵ Edward S. Casey, *Remembering: A Phenomenological Study*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), p. ix.

²⁶ Leona Toker, *Return from the Archipelago: Narratives of Gulag Survivors*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), p.74.

²⁷ Adrian Marino, serialul 'Represiune si confesiune', ['Repression and Confession' Series], *Revista 22*, No. 28 (1996).

purpose: to prove the author was telling the truth, particularly in documentary prose where ‘truth can only be proven by corroboration.’²⁸ Normally, the word choice focuses on the similarities between the referenced text and the author’s work. These common referents also intertwine separate testimonials: authors’ accounts are combined and support each other’s materials.²⁹ As a result, historians and writers are reluctant to criticise the account because the prison memoir is presented as truth. Without careful consideration, criticism of an author can be interpreted as an attack on the truthfulness of the representation of their experience, as Leona Toker explains:

When the informational function of a work that testifies to atrocities loses its prevalence, neglect of the work’s aesthetic properties may be perceived as obtuseness; yet when alternative sources of information on the subject matter of such a work are absent, an emphasis on its aesthetic qualities may be perceived as callousness.³⁰

The second characteristic of Gulag memoirs, according to Toker, is the interconnection of individual and communal concerns. The main motivation for the narrative act is ethical: giving evidence is the survivors’ duty to those who have perished. Some texts, such as *Jurnalul fericitii* [*The Journal of Happiness*] by N. Steinhardt³¹, or *Drumul crucii* [*The Road of the Cross*] by Aurel State,³² who links his testimony to an ascent of Mount Tabor, perceived the act of writing as a sacred gesture. Similarly, Elizabeta Rizea’s oral testimony has inventiveness and spontaneity. The witness perceived her deposition, as an animal ‘growl’, with cathartic effect and psychological function. She distinguished between this ‘growl’ and the human cry or outcry, because only an animal ‘growls’. Rizea believed this powerful sound is able to awaken the indoctrinated souls and minds: ‘Cause I wanna growl, not cry’, ‘cause I can’t bear it anymore’ and ‘I’d like to moo like a cow because of all I’ve been through.’³³ In the book’s preface, Gabriel Liiceanu pointed to the confession-like structure of Elizabeta Rizea’s

²⁸ Toker, ‘Toward a Poetics of Documentary Prose’, p. 195.

²⁹ Tomas Venclova, ‘Prison as Communicative Phenomenon: The Literature of Gulag’, *Comparative Civilizations Review*, No. 2 (1979), pp.65-73.

³⁰ Toker, *Toward a Poetics of Documentary Prose*, p.217.

³¹ Nicolae Steinhardt, *Jurnalul Fericitii* [*Happiness Diary*], (Cluj-Napoca: Dacia,1994).

³² Aurel State, *Drumul Crucii* [*The Road of the Cross*], (Bucuresti: Litera, 1993).

³³ Rizea, p.80.

testimony, as a way of lightening the soul's burden, the depositions being meant to shock. This is achieved not through a detached testimony, but through an outcry.

Another kind of testimony comes from a former torturer [tortionar]. Doina Jela, in *The Road to Damascus: Confession of a Former Torturer* speaks to Frant Tandara. Tandara admitted to killing his father, an anti-Communist. He is sentenced to jail and while inside, he is trained as a torturer by a woman. His speciality becomes the beating of testicles with a pencil. In Tandara's words: 'I had become an automat, a robot, without brains, without anything.'³⁴ The sense of one's obligation to testify on behalf of the collective is often intertwined with a specific personal motivation for telling the story. Ruxandra Cesereanu, a Romanian literary critic, provided several reasons for Tandara's confession: a need for redemption, but first and foremost, a need for justice. Tandara looks for a moral tribunal, because no real tribunal will send him to trial: 'I wanted to be judged... but who will trial my case, where should I go?...I want to do some good, I had done enough evil. I want to be tried. I cannot be my own judge.'³⁵ In this context, the reader's role, according to Gabriel Liiceanu, is that of a good listener, not that of a critical eye.³⁶

A third characteristic of Gulag memoirs, according to Toker, is the fact they share a certain typology of characters. In addition, they show a specific set of recurrent tropes, which connect the selection of material. Toker presents a list of nine topoi, suggesting that Russian Gulag narratives usually display not less than seven. Most Gulag memoirs start with the moment of arrest, or just prior to the arrest, and all make the delimitation between the incarceration space and the world outside. Ironically, political detainees enjoyed more freedom inside the zone than outside in the greater zone, as George Sarry explained.³⁷ Once released, former prisoners were assigned a fixed domicile, usually in a remote area, and would find themselves subjected to constant supervision.³⁸ The narrative is carefully constructed to follow the stages of persecution and repression. Climatic moments of absolute degradation

³⁴ Jela, p.17.

³⁵ Ibid., p.37.

³⁶ Gabriel Liiceanu, 'Prefata la o Spovedanie', in *Povestea Elisabetei Rîzea din Nucsoara* ['Foreword to a Confession', in *The Story of Elisabetea Rîzea from Nucsoara*], (Bucuresti: Humanitas, 1993), pp.7-13.

³⁷ In prison memoirs, 'the zone' refers to the prison compound, while the greater zone refers to the free world. The use of this metaphor implies that the whole country was in fact a large prison and ironically, political prisoners enjoyed more freedom under the supervision of professional guards than outside, where anyone, including family members, friends, or former detainees could work as informers for the Securitate.

³⁸ Life-Story Interview with George Sarry, Montreal, July 7, 2011.

are followed by moments of reprieve, usually a romanticised description of a gesture of kindness, or even jokes. Chance is an omni-present motif, since it is mostly by chance that the detainees survived to tell their stories. On the other hand, dignity is another important aspect of Gulag narratives: it is sometimes the only demarcation point that separates the victims from their oppressors. Lastly, all authors have a certain sensitive spot which they carefully avoid, and the narration always ends - or at least shows signs of - fatigue at a particular stage.³⁹

Romanian Gulag memoirs, with the exception of partisan and deportation memoirs, follow a similar narrative scheme. Most of the early Gulag memoirs begin with an account of the author's arrest or the period shortly preceding it. The author's previous experience is eventually sketched in flashback, as a portion of life that has been cut away. The process of becoming a political detainee follows certain stages: arrest and interrogation, trial, transit prison (usually Jilava, which marks the last contact with the outside world), and lastly the destination - the prison or labour camp in which the authors will serve their time according to their sentence. Periodically, they will be moved to other detention facilities in an attempt to prevent the creation of social networks which had the potential, at least in theory, to hurt the regime. The most important difference between the penal spaces of the Soviet Union and Communist Romania consisted in the separation of inmates. In Romania, political prisoners were kept separated from criminal offenders. Accordingly, Romanian prison memoirs do not speak of a Gulag aristocracy, and often mention segregation based on ethnic, politic or religious affiliations.⁴⁰

Lastly, according to Toker, all Gulag memoirs present a modal scheme that can be described in terms of Lent. In the Christian Church, Lent is the period preceding Easter, which is devoted to fasting, abstinence, and penitence in commemoration of Christ's fasting in the wilderness. Leona Toker defines Lent as 'an institutionalised and circumscribed period of voluntary asceticism, with a fast undertaken for physical and spiritual purification.'⁴¹ In Gulag camps, fasting was one of the ways of maintaining personal dignity. Gulag prisoners do not starve voluntarily; they are denied sufficient food. Yet Gulag literature repeatedly suggests that the answer to hunger is fasting. Gulag prisoners clung to their religious beliefs in order to

³⁹ Toker, *Return from the Archipelago*, pp.82-90.

⁴⁰ Coposu, p.103.

⁴¹ Toker, *Return from the Archipelago*, p.94.

survive. They often saw their imprisonment as a test of faith, as is the case of Nicolae Steindhart, a famous writer and Orthodox hermit, whose prison memoirs are entitled *The Happiness Diary*. Strict religious observances amounted to the assertion of freedom through the voluntary augmentation of suffering. In Romanian Gulag memoirs hunger strike is also a fighting tactic, usually the only one available for prisoners to gain a simulacra of privileges which would ensure their survival. Hunger strike was such a widespread protest measure that even school children imprisoned in Targșor Penitentiary used it to gain back the right of the hourly daily walk.⁴²

An analysis of the Gulag memoirs brings to light certain human typologies. There was the warrior, such as Ioan Ioanid, who did everything in his power to resist. A great variety of actions fit this category: hunger strike, escapes, communication with other inmates, and even with the outside world, or smaller gestures to defy authority, such as laughter. In *Drumuri pustiite* [*Desolated Roads*], Dina Bals confessed: ‘The power to laugh has not died, and it makes us reborn.’⁴³ Resistance also took spiritual forms: poetry, conferences, classes, prayer, and meditation. Nuclear physics professor George Manu imparted his knowledge of French and English literature, and history through a unique method that he invented: Morse on thread.⁴⁴ Historian Radu Ciuceanu, explained his initiation into the penal system by an older inmate who teaches him a Decalogue, psychologically constructed to ensure the detainee would survive the incarceration period both physically and psychologically. The sacred commandments of prison life deserve to be listed here: 1. In jail don’t do today what you can do tomorrow; 2. Silence is the worst evil of detention; 3. Don’t talk much, but a lot; 4. In prison there are only two categories of people: those dead outside, and the living from inside; 5. In jail God can hide under any guard uniform, and the devil under any prisoner’s uniform; 6. In your cell you only have one enemy: yourself; 7. Any food is good with the only exception of the one missing; 8. If you feel like crying, don’t use all your tears; 9. Don’t look for hope on the prison’s walls; 10. In jail you free yourself every day.⁴⁵

All Gulag memoirs describe different forms of physical and psychological abuse, but the overarching leitmotif present in each and every one of them is hunger. As a metaphor,

⁴² Victor Rosca, p.173.

⁴³ Dina Bals, *Drumuri pustiite* [*Desolated Roads*], (Bucuresti: Cartea Romaneasca, 1993), p.46.

⁴⁴ *George Manu – Monografie* [*George Manu – A Monography*], ed. by Cornel Jijie (Bucuresti: Elisaváros, 2002), pp.281-317.

⁴⁵ Radu Ciuceanu, *Intrarea in tunel* [*The Entry into the Tunnel*], (Bucuresti: Meridiane, 1991), pp.283-285.

hunger is described as the desire for news from the outside world. Political prisoners were kept in special, isolated areas of the prison. The lucky ones were hosted in communal cells where they could at least talk with their fellow inmates. Those deemed extremely dangerous were kept in solitary confinement. An iconic figure, Corneliu Coposu, who after the fall of Communism would become the leader of the National Peasants' Party, was kept in solitary confinement for eight years. In his book, *Confessions*, Coposu stated: 'after they released me, I had to learn how to talk again.'⁴⁶ In either case, political detainees were forbidden any contact with the outside world; they had no access to books, newspapers, and no right to receive letters or packages from their families.

Yet, it was not the hunger for information that inflicted the highest degree of pain and humiliation, but the forced starvation to which all the detainees were subjected at least once during their incarceration. Gabriel Balanescu explained the feeling of hunger: 'my intestine had eyes, ears, nose and was writhing'; 'From the lips to my toes I was only an intestine.'⁴⁷ Nichifor Crainic, who together with Radu Gyr wrote beautiful poems in prison, which were then passed orally and learned by heart by the inmates, described hunger as a perpetual torture and admitted to having crawled on hands and feet, because of weakness created by starvation.

On top of somatic and neurological symptoms caused by years of hunger, hard labour, corporal punishments, and untreated diseases, the former prisoners typically suffered from a particular psychological condition, which one could reasonably attribute to the deferred impact of their traumas. Alexander Etkind, citing Nadezhda Mandelstam, explains this condition as a disturbance of memory, lack of sense of time and change, and cyclical re-enactments of the critical moments of survival. Former prisoners are described as follows:

[they] did not draw a firm line between facts, which they witnessed, and the legends of the camps. [...] In the consciousness of these stricken people, places, names, and events mixed together into a roll that I had never been able to untangle. Most of these camp stories, as

⁴⁶ Coposu, p.96.

⁴⁷ Gabriel Balanescu, *Din împărăția morții* [*From the Kingdom of Death*], (Timișoara: Gordian, 1994), pp.81-92.

I learned them, were confused lists of those bright moments when the narrator was on the brink of death but miraculously stayed alive.

When life was reduced to its bare essence, only death was meaningful enough to enter the narrative.⁴⁸

A special case in the history of the Romanian Gulag narratives is represented by women's memoirs. Testimonies of female victims of Romanian political imprisonment take two forms. On the one hand, some are written retrospectively by the surviving victims themselves, such as Lena Constante's memoir on her detention years, and Anita Nandris-Cudla's on her deportation years in Siberia. On the other hand, some stories are told by the survivors, but recorded and written by a secondary agent, as is the case of Elizabeta Rizea's or Lucretia Jurj's testimonies. In their testimonies, female prisoners used a more severe tone than their male counterparts.⁴⁹ Adriana Georgescu was deeply moved by the swarming and subhuman atmosphere:

Who could accurately describe that swarming penumbra of human breath, those shadowy silhouettes laying directly on concrete, crouched on the covered closet, projected towards the window, those bare-boned necks, the grin on their faces, all this underground humanity, who in order to move takes the form of rats or moles?⁵⁰

Dina Bals described the non-functionality of female body, which in conditions of detention, inhibits and atrophies, and Annie Samuelli explained that after several months of imprisonment menstruation simply ceased.⁵¹ Fertility control was imposed in Romanian Communist prisons, as Mariuca Vulcanescu, an adolescent in those days, explained: 'But I remember they were putting bromine in our food, that is our menstruation stopped and it

⁴⁸ Alexander Etkind, 'Parable of Misrecognition: Anagnorisis and the Return of the Repressed from the Gulag', *Russian Review*, Vol. 68, Issue 4 (2009), p.628.

⁴⁹ Cesereanu, p.258.

⁵⁰ Adriana Georgescu, *La început a fost sfârșitul [In the Beginning Was the End]*, (Bucuresti: Fundatia Culturala Memoria, 1999), p.18.

⁵¹ Annie Samuelli, *Woman behind Bars in Romania*, (London, Portland, Oregon: Frank Cass, 1997) p.68.

was good because we were able to be clean'.⁵² The absence of their period may have constituted a cause of joy for the inmates for hygienic reasons, but the artificial procedures used illustrate once more the oppressors' thinking, their excessive concern for efficiency, seen here as cleanliness, to the detriment of human beings with their necessities and inner life.⁵³

The percentage of those women, who were incarcerated on account of their public attitude towards Communism, is very low. A large part ended up as 'political detainees' for completely non-political reasons. Women from rural areas, such as Anita Nandris Cudla or Elizabeta Rizea, simply stood by their husbands, lovers, friends or families out of love and devotion, but that did not make them less 'dangerous' to the regime. The self-written testimonies of women who survived the Gulag tend to devote greater attention to the expression of subjective, inner history. In Elizabeta Rizea's account everything was personal. Instead of hiding one's subjectivity and feelings, as most Gulag writers do, the witness permanently felt and expressed a self-imposed censorship for fear 'they' would turn the history again against 'our people'. Rizea's account is filled with oral markers: exclamations, sighs, and tears are recorded along with the interviewer's interjections and interrogations. When meeting her two interviewers for the first time, Rizea asked them whether they were members of the Securitate or not. 'I'm afraid, I'm afraid', she kept repeating throughout her account. As is the case with most oral testimonies about the Gulag, Rizea's impetus for testifying was that evidence of atrocities must be preserved, and people should know the truth. However, the account had to be delayed until it could not hurt anymore. 'I still have many secrets left to tell', Elizabeta Rizea confesses, 'but I will only share them on my deathbed.'⁵⁴

The pain of losing everything and of being subjected to torture is somehow embraced as a price these women willingly pay to protect their loved ones. As Lucreția Jurj described it, she was given the gift to bear the whole suffering for her entire family. Elizabeta Rizea similarly viewed suffering as some enduring destiny, implacable and worth all the pain: 'But I had been resting for the last two years, they hadn't beaten me for two years, and so I could

⁵² Andrea Dobes, 'Testimonies about the Romanian Woman's Drama Between 1950-1964', in *Year Book of Oral History*, Volume IV, (Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitara Clujena, 2003), p.221.

⁵³ Gratian Cormos, 'Women Humiliated in the Romanian Communist Prisons', *The Scientific Journal of Humanistic Studies*, Vol. 3, Issue 5 (2011), pp.72-75.

⁵⁴ Rizea, pp.27-28.

take the pain again.⁵⁵ None of the women voiced regret for the choices made, in spite of the life-in-prison convictions of most. Elizabeta Rizea, Anița Nandriș-Cudla, and other Romanian political prison-survivors had a deep faith in God. They strongly believed that justice and relief would be brought to them in due time by divine intervention. Their aggressors had sinned not merely against humans, but, more importantly, against God. In this respect, their endurance was a matter of dislocating the aggressor, since endurance became the supreme act of resistance.⁵⁶

An exceptional case is that of Lena Constante, whose connections to Lucretiu Patrascanu and the political world were seen by the Securitate as reason enough for her condemnation. This could explain Constante's more philosophically inclined testimony. *The Silent Escape* starts abruptly with a factual exhibition:

I have been convicted to 12 years in prison [...] I have lived alone in my cell for 157,852,800 seconds of loneliness and fear. This is not something you say, but something you cry out! They condemn me to live another 220,838,400 seconds.⁵⁷

Instead of a historical document, the narrative articulates a story of escape. Incarceration became the spring-board to a different, hidden life, where the body was mortified and the spirit won, wandering around freer than it could be imagined. This does not mean that the body is ignored, but that it is, in its turn, subordinated to the spirit: 'My body could be nowhere else. I could be anywhere'. For Constante, surviving the prison regime and then living to tell her life-story was an act of resistance, 'against absolute power'. The overarching tone in Lena Constante's *A Silent Escape* is one of pity, not one of Christian love or friendship. Unlike the above-mentioned testimonies, in Lena Constante's account we are confronted with an atheistic point of view. To her, the collective 'all', from the testimonies of Elizabeta Rizea of Lucreția Jurj, had no meaning anymore, overriding the strict delimitations

⁵⁵ Rizea, p.78.

⁵⁶ Mihaela Ursa, 'Women Imprisoned – History and (Her)story', *Echinox Journal*, Vol. 15 (2008), p. 88.

⁵⁷ Constante, p.5.

between ‘angels’ and ‘demons’: ‘my conscience went blind [...] I shall not be a hero. I said ‘yes’.’⁵⁸ For Constante, Christian forgiveness is not a plausible answer to these crimes.⁵⁹

THE INFLUENCE OF GENDER DISCOURSES

The political, cultural, and familial worlds that women and girls inhabited and the discourses about gender according to which they had been socialised prior to detention influenced how women understood, responded to, and - for those who survived - recollected the experience of detention and deportation.⁶⁰ Gratian Cormos argues that women endured prison better than men. Citing the perception of former political prisoners, Cormos claims that the explanation for this lies in the gender politics of that time.⁶¹ Oana Orlea, a former political prisoner, agrees: ‘Generally, all testimonies and analyses lead to the conclusion that women endure prison better than men. Some explain that by the fact the woman was more accustomed to humiliation than the man.’⁶² However, Orlea suggests a more practical explanation: meagre food allocations, already insufficient for women, had devastating and irreversible effects on men, especially on their muscle mass.

Several reasons help account for the gendered treatment Romanian authorities accorded to political prisoners. The first reason was purely pragmatic: women had not held key-roles in the former society, and therefore their prosecution could not have the resonance of the male actors within the masses.⁶³ In the most serious cases women political detainees were relatives of politicians and members of the academia or had minor positions in the social-political hierarchy of the moment. Adriana Georgescu, lawyer, journalist and head of the Office of the Prime Minister Nicolae Rădescu⁶⁴, was one of the exceptions. That was exactly why she experienced the special violence of the investigators, identical to the one applied to male opponents of the regime. The hard treatment applied to Lena Constante was

⁵⁸ Ibid., pp.69-70.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p.88.

⁶⁰ Jill Massino, ‘Gender as Survival: Women’s Experiences of Deportation from Romania to the Soviet Union, 1945-1950’, *Nationalities Papers*, Vol. 36, No. 1(2008), p.57.

⁶¹ Cormos, p.72.

⁶² Oana Orlea, *Ia-ti boarfele si misca!* [*Get Your Rags and Move It!*], (Bucuresti: Cartea Romaneasca, 1991), p.112.

⁶³ Cormos, p.73.

⁶⁴ The last Romanian democratic government before the Communist takeover.

also exceptional given the context of her investigation, which was driven by the need to obtain ‘conclusive’ proof in the show trial of the Patrascanu Group.⁶⁵

A second reason was represented by the gender clichés which structured the minds of the torturers, guardsmen and other members of the repression apparatus. Inside the prison system, it was ‘normal’ for men to be subjected to physical violence, and for women to be sexually harassed. In the case of the repression of politically sentenced women, orders stated that physical violence should not be used, a fact confirmed by Lucreția Jurj’s testimony.⁶⁶ However, the diminished physical violence was counterbalanced by sexual abuses, such as voyeurism, and by abuses against motherhood.

Even sexual abuses followed gender differences. Sexual abuses of men took the form of physical violence with serious repercussions for their health, while in the case of women prisoners, the members of the oppression apparatus generally gave them a more erotic touch. The testimony of the former communist torturer, Frant Tandara, highlights an original procedure of violence against the male genitalia during investigations: hitting their testicles with a pencil.⁶⁷ The consequences of the experiment put in practice by him and other torturers were extremely serious: tumefaction of the testicles, coma and death.

The testimonies of the former political detainees confirmed the gendered treatment of prisoners. Elizabeta Rizea, for instance, declared that she could not forgive one of her prosecutors, of the name Carnu. According to Rizea’s testimony, Carnu was the most ferocious of her torturers: ‘cause the others... I forgive them, come on, they beat you as the man beats his woman.’⁶⁸ Elizabeta Rizea’s involuntary statements communicate the gender politics of that time: that it was acceptable for the husband to beat his wife, and that women were used to humiliations and violence within the family. For male political prisoners, the beatings of the investigators were felt more intensely at a psychological level. In this sense, to suffer physical violence at the hand of prison guards and torturers amounted to a humiliation

⁶⁵ In order to consolidate his power, Gheorghiu Dej decided to get rid of all the Communist personalities who could threaten his position as head of the Communist Party. The Patrascanu Group included Communist intellectuals such as Belu Zilber, H. Braumer and his wife Lena Constante. The trial focused on L. Patrascanu’s condemnation for nationalism, Titoism and bourgeois attitude. Proceedings lasted for six years because the accusations were difficult to prove.

⁶⁶ ‘Suferiți a nu se dă la frați...’. *Mărturia Lucreției Jurj despre rezistența anticomunistă din Munții Apuseni (1948-1958)* [‘Suffering is not Transmissible to Brothers’ Lucretia Jurj’s Testimony about the Anti-Communist Resistance in Apuseni Mountains (1948-1958)] ed. by Cornel Jurju and Cosmin Budeanca, (Cluj-Napoca: Editura Dacia, 2002).

⁶⁷ Jela, p.20.

⁶⁸ Rizea, p.37.

of their masculinity.⁶⁹ Annie Samuelli made an interesting observation: political prisoners viewed the members of the repressive apparatus as belonging to the neutral genre, neither a 'he', nor a 'she', but rather an 'it'.⁷⁰ Sexual identity or the recognition of any form of virility was therefore denied. Real men were considered to be only the political prisoners.

There were, however, exceptions to the rule. Adriana Georgescu, Lena Constante, Elizabeta Rizea, and other women endured severe beatings during the Securitate investigations. During her twelve years spent in prison, Elizabeta Rizea was subjected to various forms of torture: she was hung by her hair from a hook and beaten until she fainted due to broken ribs. She was also scalped, burned, and beaten with a shovel. However, none of the books on feminine political detention mentioned cases of strangled women, deadly blows to the back of the head, crushing fingers by the door, or atrocities such as those which took place at Pitesti, which must be considered tortures reserved exclusively for men.⁷¹

CONCLUSION

The estimate number of those persecuted for political reasons by Romanian Communist authorities ranges between 500,000 to 2,000,000 people.⁷² The number of published memoirs is very small when contrasted with the number of those who found themselves imprisoned at one point in their lives, yet their symbolic importance is tremendous. While according to James Wertsch the purpose of memory is to provide a 'usable past',⁷³ Romanian Gulag memoirs also function as a counter-memory to the official state narrative of both Communist and democratic Romania. For the Communist state, the control over the historical narrative was essential in imposing and preserving power. The building and evolution of a unitary national state was the central trope of this single-layer narrative, while social, ethnic, or religious diversity were never mentioned. The repression mechanisms of the Communist state

⁶⁹ Cormos, p.73.

⁷⁰ Samuelli, p.53.

⁷¹ Cormos, p.74.

⁷² *Raportul Final al Comisiei Prezidentiale Pentru Analiza Dictaturii Comuniste din Romania, 2006* [*The Final Report of the Presidential Commission for the Study of Communist Dictatorship in Romania, 2006*], ed. by Dorin Dobrinu and Cristian Vasile (Bucuresti: Humanitas, 2007), p.636. The document can also be accessed online, on the official website of the Romanian President: www.presidency.ro; http://www.presidency.ro/static/ordine/RAPORT_FINAL_CPADCR.pdf

⁷³ James Wertsch, *Voices of Collective Remembering*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p.31.

or other tragic episodes of the country's history, such as the Holocaust, or the Soviet occupation, were also completely absent from this narrative. In the decades following the regime's demise, the National-Communist narrative survived. Romanian historiography was still dominated by the nationalist canon that faced a sustained attack by an alternative discourse.⁷⁴ Gulag memoirs are part of this alternative discourse, but they can also serve to reinforce ideological interpretations of history.

Milan Kundera famously said that 'the struggle of humanity against power is the struggle of memory against forgetfulness.'⁷⁵ Situated at the border between history and memory, these testimonials should be read both as documents and as works of art.⁷⁶ On a personal level, Gulag memoirs allow readers to process the horrors of prison, work camps, and torture sites in the form of individual, personalised stories. Many of these stories were lost to violence, death and post incarceration experience. Most Gulag memoirs have been written after the author's release, during the Communist period. Once again, former detainees risked their lives and liberty in the production and circulation of these texts. This process in itself was yet another act of resistance.

Survivor accounts are instrumental in interpreting official data and reconstructing history. Beth Holmgren argues that memoir writing has boomed in Russia after the fall of Communism, precisely as an attempt to refute Soviet historiography.⁷⁷ Official records cannot be taken face value neither in Russia, nor in Romania. Memoirs can help decoding the official Communist jargon, as Leona Toker underlines: 'it takes a veteran to explain to us that 'absence of drying facilities' translates into death by freezing.'⁷⁸ The historical details, ethical questions, chronologies, uncontested evidence, records, and recollections, may be contradictory, but survivor accounts are instrumental in filling the gap that archival materials and history books are unable to do. According to the Romanian literary critic Ion Manolescu, the popularity of Romanian Gulag memoirs in the late nineties stems from a variety of factors, from documenting a historic reality, to literary aesthetics. In such a context, he claims,

⁷⁴ Constantin Iordachi, 'Entangled Histories: Re-Writing the History of Central and Southeastern Europe from a Relational Perspective', *European Studies*, No. 4 (2004), p.122.

⁷⁵ Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1980), p.3.

⁷⁶ Leona Toker, *Return from the Archipelago: Narratives of Gulag Survivors*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), p.7.

⁷⁷ Beth Holmgren, 'Introduction', in *The Russian Memoir, History and Literature*, ed. by Beth Holmgren (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2003), p.xxv.

⁷⁸ Toker, p.3.

any speculation relating to the motivation of production of memoir literature becomes irrelevant, as long as these memoirs give the public that particular substitute for universal history and exemplary private life that said public was deprived for half a century.⁷⁹

⁷⁹ Ion Manolescu, 'Ce este literatura de frontiera, locul literaturii memorialistice', ['What is Frontier Literature, The Place of Memoir Literature'] in *Literatura memorialistica, Antologie*, [*Memoir Literature, An Anthology*], ed. by Ion Manolescu (Bucuresti: Humanitas, 1996), p.8.

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