SPIRITUAL BREAKAWAYS REFLECTED WITHIN THE MEMOIRS OF COMMUNIST POLITICAL DETENTION

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Abstract: *The complex universe of the Romanian political detention is accurately expressed through the memoirs of those that survived the horrific journey and spiritual breakaways are without a doubt experiences that strengthened the political prisoner. Thus, a brief analysis of the various ways in which the spirit fights against the misery of confinement is to be unfolded.*

Keywords: *detention, breakaways, spirit*

The need to escape – if only for a few moments, with the help of our inner efforts – from an inhospitable environment or a critical situation is felt by each one of us when risking to lose our self in the torment's maelstrom.

For those condemned or waiting for their sentence, the spiritual and mental powers need to function at a high intensity. There are numerous testimonies of the former political prisoners within communist prisons in which this spiritual life-saving strength managed to manifest itself in a variety of instances and taking many forms.

Most of those who suffered political imprisonment in Romania have returned into the (so called) free world bearing valuable lessons and much more meaning regarding their existence – improved versions of themselves:

> I believe so: that, if you get out of prison and suffering got you bitter and with a desire for revenge, imprisonment and sufferings were useless. And, if the result is a complex of tranquillity and understanding and loathing of any oppression and ruse, it means that the sufferings and imprisonment were useful and are linked to the hidden path that God likes to travel (Steinhardt, 2005: 270).

However, statements as the one above are in conflict with some testimonies of the former prisoners of the Siberian labour camps, such as Miron Markovici, age 82 at the moment of his testimony: "The experience of the camp […] is totally, profoundly, an absolutely negative one. The camp was a school of disintegration. One gets out of there truly traumatised. Our entire people was stricken by this collective experience. The Gulag pierced into our genes" (Werth, 2013: 28). We can thus note an antagonism regarding confinement based on belief, mental strength etc. that managed to leave an imprint on the former prisoner.

Still, it is not the latter grime outcome we are interested in, but the paths that manage to help most of the Romanian former prisoners, which wrote down their experiences, resisted confinement and reached the serenity and insight mentioned by Nicolae Steinhardt.This serenity and the power of resistance against the horrors of existence,

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represented in their case by imprisonment and the torments proper to this form of punishment, brought most of these individuals not only a reassurance of the values which they defended, but also the doorway towards a more profound way of living the lives given to them (the case of Valeriu Gafencu), confinement being seen in many instances as a monastic existence (see the memoirs of Pentre Pandrea: "The prisoners are monks, with touching countenances, engaged in spiritual combats, in chastity, fasting and prayers" (Pandrea in Cesereanu, 2005: 123).

Deepening into the causality of the ones stated above, it needs to be mentioned that the resisting strength of these men and women has often had its source in the spiritual breakaways that occurred during the years of imprisonment. Whether they are brought by memories, faith or simply by bringing within prison walls some of the activities that used to produce joy and relaxation in their free life, these moments of inner freedom are often explicitly described in the memoirs of the ones that populated the Romanian political prisons during communism.

A typological attempt regarding these phenomena, from the point of view of appearance within these memoirs, shall be deployed in the following. Of course, the below categories intertwine and/or differ depending on the writer (his confinement experience, nature and even confessional style), thus one will come across two or more varieties of spiritual breakaways in the memoirs of a singular author, these experiences also merging from the point of view of manifestation.

Spiritual breakaway sprung exclusively from nostalgia and from the strength found within (daydreaming)

Nostalgia is considered to be a handicap in confinement [Nicolae Steinhardt's first solution to escape imprisonment – proper to Solzhenitsyn: telling yourself: "from now on I am a dead man (Steinhardt, *op. cit.*: 13)"; the old prisoner in Dumitru Bordeianu's memoirs: "This and only this represents from now on our world. For us there is no other world except the one we are living here" (Bordeianu, 2014: 70)]. In this way, avoiding memories from the world left behind, the prisoner is able to focus on the present and find the strength of resistance.

Still, there are many episodes within the memoirs of the former political prisoners which show how longing for life in freedom manages to spiritually transport and strengthen the confined individual. In fact, Steinhardt himself finds childhood memories stimulating, as he remembers the walks made with his mother: "In those days of thirst, heat, cold, in detention, from the memory of those ordinary moments I used to pull out – as from a magic well – strengths and comforts" (Steinhardt, *op. cit.*: 399). But these transportations into the past did not only help Steinhardt "escape" from his cell, but also gave him the power to live in the present, if we are to consider prayer as a bridge between the present – seen as a concrete existence – and transcendence: "[…] And especially the strength to pray" (*Ibidem*).

But memories and longing are not the only weapons used against the harsh reality. Galina Răduleanu considers that, in confinement, "time gains a totally different dimension. You get to live within it, not without, almost with a 'whiff' of eternity" (Răduleanu, 2013: 216). Thus, the prisoner has the opportunity to choose a more profound form of escapism,

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one that does not separate him from transcendence, but draws him close to it (Valeriu Gafencu adds himself to this list)[1]. As it has been mentioned above, the power of escaping the cruel present was also found in one's capability to transport oneself outside the prison's gate:

> In the prison's yard there was a large hole in which the filth buckets were emptied. Around this hole, in a single-file line, we were having our walk, hands behind our backs, considering that in this way we were refreshing ourselves. We were not allowed to raise our heads or talk to each other. Sometimes I would imagine myself walking on the sea shore with hands behind my back, because mentally transported in this way I managed to not hear the swears and shouts: 'head down, bandit' (Ionescu, 1998: 47).

As sleep was seen often seen as an "escape" (Răduleanu, *op. cit.*: 227) by the regime's servants in the prison administration and was prevented as much as possible, some political prisoners who possessed strong spiritual resources not only found refuge within themselves, but also learned, step by step, how to discover and widen this inner world: "Gradually, I entered into a wonderful life. A life of the soul, o! much (*sic!*) more intense than the one subsequently led in 'the outside world' (*Ibidem*: 76).

Spiritual breakaways triggered by external agents (nature, fellow inmates)

Secluded and left to contemplate only the four walls of their cells, the prisoners longed for nature's life-bringing touch and almost every opportunity to have a glimpse of it was considered a major event.

Summoned to the warden's office, Demostene Andronescu experiences an intense detachment from reality, triggered by the overwhelming power of winter:

> […] At some point, it started to snow. First there were snow flakes here and there, then abundantly, until, after a few minutes, I couldn't see anything outside. A white curtain of snow stood before me and the hideous world. It was fantastic, enchanting, favouring remembrances. And I daydreamt, losing track of time. I was so absent, so out of touch with reality, that I didn't even notice the door open" (Andronescu, 2018: 115). Finally, the spell is broken by the warden's voice and the prisoner return to the cruel reality of imprisonment. Alongside nature, human approach was also an aspect that managed to launch the secluded individual into journeys that defied prison gates. Galina Răduleanu loved to hear the life stories of her cellmates: "Everything enshrouded me, as an immense 'human comedy' having an intense life flow, removing me from the cell, throwing me into a multitude of existential 'waves' which I greedily, intensely pursued, with the curiosity of one found at the onset of life" (Răduleanu, *op. cit.*: 94, 95).

Ritualistic breakaways

Rituals place the participants above the mere existential background and this systematic form of communication with transcendence could not be stopped by the prison administration. Imprisoned ministers searched for solutions in order to fulfil the Holy Mass,

[1] His case shall not be discussed here, due to the fact that Gafencu's situation is a highly complex one and cannot be encompassed within such a limited space.

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which was adapted to confinement conditions. Thus, as father Dumitru Bălaşa states, in his case the wine was made out of marmalade and water, a towel was used as the stole and a prisoner (the one having the longest sentence) as the table:

> […] And we all started believing that the Holy Mass which had a martyr as communion table and antimins, an innocent man, before the cosmic Energy was welcomed. There were prayers with tears in our eyes, thinking about the ones back home, thinking about the ones departed. The skies would open and we saw the light that surrounded the Godliness. The faith in the aid given by the Almighty strengthened us in suffering, in pain and, even if some of us died, they died in God, in eternity (Bălaşa, 2001: 34, 35).

Alongside genuine rituals (such as the liturgical one presented above), in confinement common activities sometimes gained ritualistic expression due to the conditions in which these activities took place. An accurate example is Lena Constanate's experience, when the women received the proper tools to mend their clothes:

> For two days, my hands, without any activity, affectionately cut and sowed the skirt. To put the thread in the needle, to twist the head of the thread in order to make a knot. To thrust the niddle into the cloth. To bring it back to the surface three millimetres further. To turn back three millimetres. To thrust the needle again and to pull it out six millimetres further now and again three back and again six forward… To cautiously keep going. With carefulness. So as the seam should be decent. As made by made by a sewing machine […]. After the two blessed days in which the skirt was sewed, time started moving again, with its halting steps (Constante in Mihăilescu, 2013: 175).

Cultural breakaways, escaping through arts

Philosopher Lucian Blaga considered that "Each cultural creation, from a poem to a metaphysical idea, from an ethical statement to a religious myth, represents in itself a small world, a universe" (Blaga, 1977: 77). It is in this realm of ideas and expression that the political prisoner often entered, in many cases widening it through communion.

The syntagm "Resistance through culture" has often been used in order to describe the efforts of surpassing political imprisonment's hardships in the Romanian Communist regime and the usage of such a term is by no means without support, taking into consideration the spiritual and educational qualities of those that populated political prisons. Researcher Lavinia Geambei mentions a "true thirst for culture, comparable with the need for food and freedom" (Geambei, 2012: 39). Thus, lectures were given, novels were told and even chess was played, using figures made out of bread and soap (Derdena, 2015: 191).

But one of the main methods through which one could once more leave the cell at least for a few moment was poetry. Of course, not only creation was seen as a refuge (Radu Gyr, Andrei Ciurunga and Demostene Andronescu are just three of the numerous poets which created during political confinement), but also listening to and memorising poetry, and often prose, was a stimulating activity for the mind and soul of the ones who were destined to suffer in Communist prisons. An accurate example is once more provided by Galina Răduleanu, who manages to rediscover the great poet Mihai Eminescu: "It was necessary for sufference to open the gates of beauty and even much more than that" (Răduleanu, *op. cit.*: 271).

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Conclusions

The human spirit finds numerous ways to surpass painful existence and the individual is rarely aware of the powers that hide inside. The above situations are concrete examples of this statement, but they represent only a small piece of an immense puzzle just waiting to be solved. Nourishing solitude giving way for reflection, the inner power to transport oneself outside a painful situation, the direct intervention of nature, the blessing of communion, the mysterious power of ritual or the unquestionable strengths given by knowledge and arts – all of these are weapons used by those which suffered political imprisonment during the Communist regime in Romania. One should study them carefully and learn once more about hope and resistance from these dreadful experiences, because, as it has been seen above, light finds its way when one least expects.

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