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**Women and Repression:
Women in the Romanian Gulag**
Ph.D. Thesis Summary

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Summary

In the present thesis, we deal with the specific way in which Romanian women experienced imprisonment in the Gulag, the Communist system of political prisons. A particular aspect is these women's "non-political" commitment: most women were imprisoned solely for their being in existence (they were either relatives of political personalities, intellectuals, members of religious orders). As such, women were forced to learn how to become "political inmates". Subjected to brutal and violent tortures, Romanian women finally accepted these imposed roles, objecting actively or passively to the process of depersonalization.

In a traditionalist society such as inter-war Romania, women would define themselves in connection to the important men in their lives (fathers, husbands, sons, lovers). Female political inmates were denied particularly the possibility of doing so, since all family connections were forbidden. Moreover, in order to intensify the process of depersonalization, representatives of the administration would often address women only as "whore", "bitch", "animal". Romanian society was turning from paternalistic to macho, and women inmates would bear the consequences: their needs as women (concerning hygiene, menstruation and maternity) were completely ignored, the regime constantly attempting at transforming political inmates in asexual beings.

Romanian prisons in this period were characterized by the constant presence of hunger, cold and the ominous "guardian's eye", all elements meant to contribute to the process of depersonalization. Still, women inmates developed alternative strategies to make up for the lack of liberty and to oppose this process. Some techniques used for physical and psychological "survival" are: manufacturing certain useful items; narration as a means of opposing the technicality of Gulag life; artistic creation as a refusal of brutality; intellectual activity; communication with other cells; religion as opposition to an "atheist" regime

Analyzing the experience of female inmates on the Romanian Gulag allows us to understand the dual relation between Communism and women, a particular sub-division of the relation Communism – individual, and determine the long-term effects of the Gulag on the female population of Romania.

In the second half of the 20th century, Central and Eastern Europe were under the marked ascent of a so-called "innovative" ideology, which, in practice, led to dictatorships such as these spaces had never known before. As a result of direct Soviet pressures (added

to the Red Army's presence), these recently created states embraced Communism, as theorized and applied in the Soviet Union. Such a change of regime meant not only adapting to the ideological requirements of Communism, but also the appearance of a phenomenon overwhelming in its intensity, duration and stretch: repression against political opponents. Inspired by the Soviet model, the Central and Eastern European states create "local Gulags", using the same means of extermination as in USSR, but adapting them to national and regional particularities.

The Romanian Gulag encompassed a vast system of penitentiaries, work camps, hospital-prisons and selection prisons, all of which were densely populated in the period 1949-1964. Out of these, M rgineni, Mislea, Miercurea Ciuc and Dumb rveni were special penitentiaries for women; women also worked alongside men at the Danube – Black Sea Canal, but also in special work camps attached to penitentiaries. As was the case with men released from the Gulag, women were subjected to take forced domicile in isolated locations for periods varying from a couple of years to whole decades. As regards the number of women political inmates, we have as yet no accurate numbers: inside the Memorial Complex at Sighet, one room is dedicated to women's experience of the Gulag, and 4000 names of former political inmates have been gathered, but curators insist these names are not of all women subjected to political imprisonment in the Gulag.

One particularity of women in the Romanian Gulag is the fact that they could hardly be called political opponents. Interwar Romania was a patriarchal society, and women, in general, thought of themselves in relation to the significant men in their lives: fathers, brothers, husbands, lovers. Feminism was a popular ideology amongst bourgeois and noble women, but it did not stand on its own and was mostly attached to such ideologies as Liberalism and Nationalism. As such, though they did oppose the Communist regime, few of them could be considered political opponents. Gra ian Cormo proposes a classification of women a political inmate that draws from this non-political commitment of Romanian women. In his view, there are 2 categories of female political inmates: those who *did something against the regime* (helping groups of partisans, spreading manifests, taking part in anti-Communist demonstrations or being members of former Legionary movements) and those whose *mere existence was an inconvenience* to the regime (female relatives of former political leaders, "bourgeois" intellectuals, members of various religious orders that had been dissolved by the regime).

Another important dilemma in analyzing the feminine experience of the Romanian Gulag is the extent to which women suffered, as compared to men. Most experts seem to

agree that women had an easier time in penitentiary and overall, handled their detention better. Oana Orlea, former political inmate, disagrees with the general argument that women put up with detention better because they are used to humiliations and offers an alternative explanation: women did manage better because small food rations affected their organisms less than in the case of men inmates. Elisabeta Rizea (the archetypical model of women political opponents, active supporter of the Resistance movement), on the other hand, involuntarily admits that women put up with detention and terror because they were accustomed to violence and humiliations: she states she can forgive all but one of her torturers, because they hit her as a man would hit his woman. Most other former female political inmates state as a main argument in this dilemma the higher degree of solidarity amongst women in the Gulag: one proof would be the lack of a “Pite ti phenomenon” in women’s penitentiaries. Certainly, the differentiated treatment in penitentiaries was caused by their lack of importance in the overall political opposition: women were never the main object of Communist repression because they never held important government positions and they could never reasonably be thought to centre mass opposing movements around them.

When analyzing the Romanian Gulag and its effect on the female political inmates, we consider it useful to separate our analysis in 2 distinctive parts: the first phase includes the arrest and inquest (marked by the most brutal methods of dehumanization, both physical and psychological), while the second phase comprises of the period of detention in penitentiaries or work camps. Moreover, most confessions of the period regarding the Gulag phenomenon follow this chronology.

Romanian women that have a personal knowledge of the Gulag more often than not confess that their arrest comes as a complete surprise: though, in their intimate thoughts, they admit to disagreeing with the Communist regime, they can never determine the exact cause for their arrest and therefore, they accept the very polite invitation of officials to accompany them to different police institutions. It is only when thrown in dark, humid cells that they realize they are not under the custody of the Police institution, but in the “clutches” of a darker institution, the Security (*Securitatea*, in Romanian). The reasons for their arrest are often ridiculous: giving money to friends suspected of anti-Communist activities, offering housing to family members later accused of treason, not declaring meeting with friends and family under suspicion, or simply being friends with “the wrong people”.

From now on, the process of depersonalization begins, and victims are subjected to terror, violence and humiliation. The arrest acts as a preamble to brutal inquests and officials use its secretive nature to make victims vulnerable: alone, lacking any knowledge of their families, without any judicial means of defence, women arrested by the Securitate are expressly subjected to treatments that could help inoculate a “delinquent complex” and determine their later confessions.

Inquests concerning anti-Communist activities in Romania seldom show any pretence of justice: questionings most often take place during the nights; victims are not allowed to have lawyers present, while several investigators conduct the questioning. The first moment of humiliation comes immediately after the arrest when women are forced to change into prison clothing in the presence of officials (most officials employed by the Securitate were men): victims are therefore reduced to being treated like infants, with the officials acting as parents that can decide over their needs. Furthermore, the female body, as the absolute “opposition” to male investigators determines their increased violence and determination in forcing the victims to confess: torture over women gains a sexual meaning, and even in brutal violence, women are constantly humiliated, as well as tortured.

The first and foremost characteristic of Communist inquests is brutal violence. A primitive form of torture, physical violence (victims refer to it as “beatings”) is used to determine confessions, and thus the victim’s self incrimination: confessions play a central part in trials instrumented during the first decades of the Romanian Communist regime, and it is often the only proof of the accusers against the accused. The majority of women in the Romanian Gulag testify to the extreme use of violence and the varied means that it employs: from “traditional” beatings, to whippings, extreme hand-cuffing, hanging by the hair, plucking locks of hair, etc. Few of the women later imprisoned in the Romanian Gulag state that personally they were not subjected to violence, but they did witness it in others. Hunger and sleep deprivation accompany these tortures and contribute to the victim’s eventual confession.

Although only one of the former victims testifies about rape, it can be safely assumed that, at least at the beginning of the Gulag system, rape was also used to determine the prisoner’s moral and physical downfall. Adriana Georgescu, member of the former Peasants’ Party, uses certain hints that can make us believe women were also raped during the investigations: the perpetrators were not the investigators, but the night guardians (“the ones that smell of alcohol”) and goes as far as comparing imprisonment to a “brothel”.

Supposedly, both she and her cellmate were raped, and during her trial, she would, again elusively, point out this practice to the judges.

Psychological methods were also employed in gaining the victims' long-awaited confession. For once, we have the ever-present verbal rape: women are constantly referred to by both investigators and guardians as "whores", "bitches", "shrews", "bandits", "stinking toads", "prowlers", "criminals", "the lowest of the lowest", etc. Such affronts affect all women, no matter their social and political status: from peasants' wives to intellectuals, verbal rape is extremely efficient for the investigators because one cannot answer back (both because of their condition as prisoners and because of their common sense or religious beliefs) and it can also seriously contribute to psychological depersonalization, since it attempts at erasing the victim's identity as a reliable member of society, replacing it with that of a sexual object at the disposal of her torturers.

Connected to the idea of this non-sexual rape are the various practices concerning physiological needs: hygienic facilities were completely ignored, a situation that affected women more than men. Used as a punitive method, excretion becomes just another means of gaining complete control over the victim's body and can be equivalent to anal rape, because of its eschatological elements. Constant surveillance (the voyeurism of guardians) adds to the complete impotence of victims and determines reactions of the deepest fear and humiliation. Explanations concerning this voyeurism of guardians refer to the "intoxication on power" and a sexual need disguised under the possibility of hurting others (this intoxication on power is even more present when it comes to constantly watching over women's bodies).

More refined methods of psychological torture are used in the case of those women involved in political trials against former Communists. Lena Constante, a friend of the P tr canu couple (Romanian Communist leader, accused during the mock trials of the '50s), refuses to confess her guilt and would therefore be subjected to a technique of Orwellian inspiration: her investigator tells her about a cell deep inside the Securitate's building, a cell populated with rats kept unfed for weeks before sending a prisoner there. He reports about witnessing such a punishment once: how the accused tried to fight off the rats, but how they crawled all over him, made him fall down and started eating his eyes, his ears, his cheeks; how after only twenty minutes, he confessed everything. Lena Constante breaks down at this point and points out her now deep belief in the reality of the rats' pit: her investigator's eyes are filled with pleasure as he recounts the horror, he seems to envy those rats that can break down a man, and his existence is a proof of the rats' existence.

The brutalities of the inquests are designed not only to traumatize individuals, but also to prepare them for the long terms of detention. Most survivors of the Romanian Gulag present the phase of investigation and questioning as brutal and violent, while when referring to their time in penitentiaries or work camps they go beyond the “miseries” of detention, and extensively present the survival techniques that help them escape the process of depersonalization instrumented by the Communist repressive regime. Life in the Romanian Gulag, as described by former prisoners, is marked not only by the daily routine of penitentiary life but also by a strict regime meant to destabilize the human being and depersonalize inmates. All elements of normalcy were forbidden: conversations other than whispered, communication with other cells, reading and writing, sleeping during the day or possession of objects necessary for everyday existence (extra clothes, pins, needles, dishes and spoons). Living conditions were abominable: small quarters, rare showers, lack of interest for female hygiene and health, constant surveillance and humiliations from guards (male or female).

Added to these restrictions, came those elements generally considered to have been further “instruments” of the regime for the social disciplination of inmates: hunger, coldness and hard work. Hunger is probably most traumatizing: consisting of reduced portions of porridge, shallow vegetable soup and bread, the rations were so reduced that in certain periods a whole day’s meals consisted of only 500 calories. The effects are constant obsessive thoughts and dreams about food, bountiful meals and recipes, and, even more tragically, loss of memory as Dina Bal confesses once: due to extreme hunger, she had even forgotten her mother’s name one day. In winter, coldness would enhance the terrible living conditions: prisons were situated mostly in harsh environments and heating systems were not only rudimentary but also sparsely used. As Lena Constante confesses, water would freeze and breath would come out in vapours for most part of the day. Some inmates were assigned to labour camps: most of them involved production of confections or farm work, but the high quotas imposed by the administration meant that physical work could not be used as a *debouche* or as a means of socializing.

In order to oppose the processes meant to depersonalize the individual, the women in the Romanian Gulag are forced to rely on various psychological methods for survival and mental escape from the surrounding inferno. Such methods have several purposes: transgressing the effects of depersonalization and re-education, maintaining a high morale, refusing the compromise with the system, and, in a general sense, obtaining the illusory feeling of freedom.

One of the most important elements of survival for women imprisoned in the Romanian Gulag is the use of narratives as means of transcending the absurd and brutal everyday life in prison. For most of the female inmates, narratives contribute to recreating the idealized space of their former existences, and provide clearly defined moral values as opposed to the technicality of the Gulag life. Lena Constante will be a “narrator” from the first time she decides to recount a tale: she brings her fellow inmates (most of whom are peasants) an hour of both oblivion (prison) and remembrance (their local villages). It is again Lena Constante that confesses to another technique used as a psychic debauchee: mentally creating poetry, theatre plays, and even stories. She is forced to resort to this method during her long solitary confinement (almost 7 years of solitary detention) so as not to lose her mind: she feels that unlike her body, trapped in the cell, her soul could grow wings and fly everywhere and anywhere. Such escape through culture also comprises the various “lectures” held in penitentiaries: foreign languages, literature, culinary recipes, and religion.

Religion was a practical and spiritual means for women attempting to preserve normalcy and oppose the interdictions of the regime that strictly forbid religious manifestations of all sorts. In this context, religion serves both as an individual and community practice: regardless of their faith, education, political creed or social condition, religion united all of them. In an opposite process from the one in the “outside world”, political inmates turn to religion in their search for moral support and are easily regaining their faith or even converting to Christian faith. For this reason, one can notice the deep respect that religious figures inspire in their female comrades: nuns, priests’ wives or simply educated women with religious knowledge are admired for their forgiving attitude, fortitude and courage. Lacking the iconic and textual representations of faith, women paid particular attention to the faithful reproductions of Biblical events of nuns and priests’ wives. Rarely, Bibles found their ways into penitentiaries, despite the attempts of the administration to limit inmates’ opportunity to read. Famous cases include the Bible found by Nicole Valery-Grossu which was divided into the 66 books and then circulated around the cell, exchanged between inmates until most of them had learned the texts by heart. Hidden during searches, these objects were venerated as relics of faith and representations of the outside world and of a recent past.

Religious manifestations grow in intensity with the approach of main Christian celebrations: Christmas and Easter. These times are symbolic not only for their religious connotations, but also give a testimony of the solidarity between inmates. Women prepare

to mark these moments: for weeks, they would gather some supplies so as to be able to offer themselves a “feast” on these occasions. The Christmas cake is presented by most former political prisons: made out of bread or porridge, sweetened with the sugar provided by Tuberculosis women, this representation of bountifulness is a means of evading back to pre-penitentiary life, and engaging in the important Christian gesture of giving and sharing. Religious hymns and songs are sung despite being prohibited and prayers are recited without fear of retaliation from guards. The fact that most of these celebrations remain without serious punishment is interpreted as a miracle performed by God, further contributing to strengthening their faith. Christmas is also cause for almost theatrical shows: Dina Bal accounts how women managed to create a Christmas tree out of a shawl and even prepare presents for each other (embroideries, or minuscule books). Such almost theatrical representations are in contrast with the grotesque ones organized by the administration (searches, common bathing, carrying the bucket with feces, etc.) and have the almost medieval feel of a carnival, meant to re-instate year after year, the cycle of life.

Women in the Romanian Gulag were forced to “learn” how to be “political inmates”, but once they did so, they would assume this identity for the rest of their detention, opposing the process of depersonalization instrumented by the central administration. Subjected to brutal tortures, Romanian women (whether they resist or not the violence of questionings), finally accept the parts the regime imposed on them: the parts of political opponents, resistant to the Communist regime. They opposed, actively or passively, the process of depersonalization, a process that attempted to turn every individual in unquestioning members of society.

KEYWORDS: Romanian Gulag, repression against women, the feminine experience of detention, the female detention memoires, repressive system.