

**”BABEȘ-BOLYAI” UNIVERSITY  
FACULTY OF HISTORY AND PHILOSOPHY  
DOCTORAL SCHOOL ”HISTORY. CIVILIZATION. CULTURE”**

**PERIPRAVA  
EXTERMINATION CAMP  
1957-1964  
BETWEEN HISTORY AND MEMORY**

**Doctoral Supervisor:  
DORU RADOSAV, Professor Ph.D**

**Doctoral Student:  
ANCA IFRIM (LIRCĂ)**

**Cluj-Napoca  
2019**

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION .....	2
<b>CHAPTER I <i>PERIPRAVA IN THE COMMUNIST „GULAG”. A COMPARATIVE APPROACH</i> .....</b>	<b>15</b>
1.1. Holocaust and The Gulag .....	15
1.2. The labor camps during the communist period – a comparative analysis .....	20
<b>CHAPTER II <i>„WE ARE BUILDING THE SOCIALISM”. THE FOUNDATION OF THE LABOUR CAMP PERIPRAVA</i> .....</b>	<b>38</b>
2.1. The establishment of communism in Romania and the birth of the labour camps: Danube- Black Sea Canal .....	38
2.2. Remember Periprava - a forgotten infamous labour camp - „Formațiunea 0830” .....	56
2.3. <i>Periprava</i> – it’s history remembered trough oral testimonials.....	78
2.4. The outside world obliviousness.....	100
<b>CHAPTER III <i>THE LIFE OF A PRISONER IN THE PERIPRAVA LABOUR CAMP</i>.....</b>	<b>111</b>
3.1. Prisoners in Romanian communist gulags.....	111
3.2. Periprava’s detainee fight to live.....	128
3.3. The perception of detainees on the life in the labour camps vs outside world .....	150
3.4. Life vs. Death .....	166
<b>CHAPTER IV <i>THE SECRET OF SURVIVING PERIPRAVA :„THE FOUR RULES OF THOMAS MORUS”</i> .....</b>	<b>187</b>
4.1. The daily food ration .....	187
4.2. The prisoners work regime .....	210
4.3. Prisoners vs Guards – a tormented relationship.....	228
4.4. The University of death.....	245
<b>CHAPTER V <i>TODAY’S MEMORY OF PERIPRAVA</i>.....</b>	<b>263</b>
5.1. Periprava – Personal considerations.....	263
5.2. How is Periprava remembered in today’s society.....	276
5.3. The prosecution of the perpetrators.....	285
<b>CONCLUSIONS .....</b>	<b>299</b>
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY.....</b>	<b>302</b>
<b>ABBREVIATIONS.....</b>	<b>324</b>
<b>APPENDIX.....</b>	<b>328</b>

**Keywords.** Extermination camp. Periprava. Formation 0830. Communism. Romania. Political prisoner. Interview. Oral History. Gulag. Torturer.

## *Summary*

The main theme of this PhD thesis - PERIPRAVA EXTERMINATION CAMP 1957-1964. BETWEEN HISTORY AND MEMORY - is an attempt to bring into the present time the memory of the ones who suffered during the Communist regime, the so-called political prisoners \*, those who opposed the Communist system in one form or another. Political prisoners represented more than three quarters of all prisoners both in the Romanian Communist prisons and the camps from other countries which remained under the Iron Curtain after the Second World War. They were the product of social conflicts that took place after the establishment of the new regime, whose motto was: “Those who are not with us are against us”.<sup>1</sup>

Labor camps, although apparently they were supposed to send prisoners to perform forced labor in many cases, as it is the case that we deal with in this paper, represent a disguised form of extermination and elimination of political prisoners. We tried to demonstrate that “Periprava” was an extermination camp, primarily due to the conditions over there. As a case study we stopped on “Periprava Formation 0830”.

The main goal was to show how the camp world was perceived, both inside and outside. The perception inside the camp reveals a double perspective. On one hand we have the political prisoner’s perspective, developing the image of monotony and the repetitiveness of daily living. On the other hand, we focus on the camp’s employee perspective both witness and co-participant.

The second perception, the exterior one, embodies the image stored in the memory of communities, about the suffering of the prisoners and the attitude towards the labor colony

---

\* In our opinion, the term *deținuți politici*, standardized in the official Communist discourse, has been used incorrectly. During our research, we decided to use the term *deținuți politic*, which is correct from a grammatical point of view.

<sup>1</sup> See the articlel ”The Radiography of a Historical Anomie Periprava – the Narrative Memory of a Communist Labour Camp”, Anca Alexandra Ifrim (*Lucian Blaga Central University Library, Cluj*), in *Philobiblon*, Vol. XVI, No. 2, An 2011.

employees. A large number of sources was used to conduct this research: interviews with the three categories of subjects of archive research (published and unpublished), journals and special and general historiography. However, the main source of our research consisted of direct human contacts, with the help of interviews. Being a political prisoner left huge traces on people's life not just their own but also their families' life. Human and existential impact caused by these experiences and then their stigmatization by being categorized and called as "former" political prisoners, led to the impossibility of being reintegrated in the ordinary society, being considered forever, with suspicion, distrust elements.<sup>2</sup> We proceed in this manner in order to reconstruct a more vivid and closer perspective to the reality that happened in 0830 Formation. Periprava collective memory is reborn from the testimonies of the ones being interviewed together with the general documents and writings about Communism and repression in Romania.

### **Reasons for choosing the subject**

The motivation for choosing this subject is primarily based on an argument that mostly involves the subjectivity of historical research: family implications – especially regarding my grandfather Toader I. Ifrim, who was one of the thousands of individuals obliged by the regime to forced labor in order to build up the communist socialism. The second argument, classified into the category of historic objectivity is the fact that both my curiosity and need to know such a history, prompted me to conduct this research to better understand all that forced labor meant, repression and strategies used by the Communists. Last but not least, the general framework within which the labor camps prisoners routinely lived their life. I had done research in advance in this field when preparing my bachelor degree - research on forced labor on the Danube - Black Sea Channel, being coordinated by Professor Doru Radosav. Being constantly encouraged by Professor Radosav during the three-stage training university we decided to pursue research on labor camp from Periprava. The main argument was that there were no comprehensive studies on the subject and many unknown aspects concerning the people who were sent to work and die there by the Communist regime. The fact that in the previous research I had already met former detainees from Periprava who were afraid of telling everything or were revealing just fragments from the awful moments that they had lived in Periprava was an additional argument to choose

---

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem.*

the topic for my PhD thesis and try to bring to light a small part of what it meant the communist terror in our country. Although I knew it would be a difficult attempt, especially due to the almost complete lack of information, the ambiguity of the existing ones and the reluctance of those who lived extremely difficult times, being encouraged by the coordinator, I thought that, no matter how difficult and time consuming our approach would take, we will manage to carry out this research (even if we were aware of the time limits imposed by PhD legislation in use). Moreover, the memory of those who suffered and sacrificed themselves in Periprava labor camp, deserves at least a little bit of effort.

### **Methodology and working methods**

The methodology that we used when preparing this paper fits perfectly within the general context of oral history. Oral testimony has been more and more appreciated especially during the 20<sup>th</sup> century among sociologists and anthropologists. Although disputed by some historians as being very subjective, Western literature considers it today a fundamental source of history and an undeniable tool for the historian.<sup>3</sup> The expression immediate history-oral history, which has been used for a long time in the history of modern research gives value to a certain type of historiography that positions at the moment in a double proximity. Thus, there is a temporal proximity of the subject and the proximity of the author (historian) on the issue studied. Even though this kind of history values living archives, the witnesses to historic events, it doesn't favor the oral document to the written document, but proceeds to a value equivalency, to the recognition of the two sources used in reconstructing the historical fact.<sup>4</sup> Oral history aims to address to relatively new fields of research, without being so much interested in the event-history or politics. Oral history is placed within the privacy of society, life and its organization, and tries to discover the individual's life with his intimacies, with his personal way of thinking, perceiving history and important events. Oral history, somehow, attempts to frame the individual with his personality and his personal life into history. In general, models of immediate history are written up events: diaries, war chronicles, journals, history retold and reborn by participants and witnesses. Rebuilding immediacy, more or less close, is based on oral history research. This is, first of all, field research and then library research. A very important part of the value and virtues

---

<sup>3</sup> Jean-Francois Soulet, *Istoria imediată*, București, Corint, 2000, pp. 71-72.

<sup>4</sup> Doru Radosav, *Donbas, o istorie deportată*, Ravensburg, 1994, p. 8.

of oral history is the researcher – interlocutor human contact and the interpersonal skills that are gathered during the interview.<sup>5</sup> In the field of history and story there are three combinatory elements of memory and its expression: memories as a confession; memories with objective structure that aspires to history, a “petty history”, autobiography. In general, the confession temptation is circumstantial being determined by either a difficult time in life, which can be overcome by this confession, either by the state of alert induced by the perception of passing one’s lives. Living history connects the past events, the past reality with the individual and collective perception. Never ending obsessions, specific to the historiographical discourse, try to reconstruct objectively and truthfully the past and are substituted, in the case of oral history, by the testimonies of witnesses and participants. There is a strong defiance of this objectivity by the informers’ subjectivity, as long as the real past is replaced with a genuine, lived past.<sup>6</sup> In many cases, collective memory is built up irrespectively of individual memories, imaginary memories, forged by foreign instances and imposed on the individual through the training system, by means of mass communication; collective memory can thus become a cultural and ideological tool, targeting individuals and groups. The individual absorbs the memories that are suggested by the dominant culture and makes a living memory stock, which he shares with the other members of the group or community. The idea of developing a common memory shared by a community has had a long tradition. Myths, legends, beliefs, religions are all constructions of collective memory. By myth, for example, members of a given society, try to convey the image of the past, according to their own representations. The collective memory is nothing more than a transmission to a large number of individuals, of memories of one man or a few, repeated on several occasions. Our memory, individual or collective, is in reality a social memory.<sup>7</sup> Given the methodology used, our responsibility is to take the risk of the above mentioned subjectivity, the working methods and used tools. We do not exclude that this paper is on the threshold of several disciplines, an essential thing for oral history, precisely because our qualitative analysis borrows interdisciplinary tools. Historical anthropology, with its skills for real history, helps the reconstruction of what Periprava camp represented in the 60’s through different methods: use of archive sources, tracing, through testimonies, the everyday life from the camp, the social

---

<sup>5</sup> Idem, „Biografie și istorie (sec. XX). Moș Ivănescu din Rusca”, in *Anuarul de Istorie Orală*, I/1998, Cluj-Napoca, Editura Presa Universitară Clujeană, 1999, p. 38.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>7</sup> Adrian Neculau, *Memoria pierdută. Eseuri de psihologia schimbării*, Iași, Editura Polirom, 1999, pp. 179–180.

movements and the cultural, historical knowledge of man and human societies. Moreover, Jacques Le Goff said that the opening to anthropology led to an anthropological history “more analytical, willing to treat itinerary and civilization progress, which is more interested in the collective destinies rather than the individuals, in the future society more than the institutions, in customs and habitudes more than events.”<sup>8</sup> As stated by Stephane Courtois, oral history means primarily to gather documents, testimonies, to put them together and give way to facts. Both the individual history and the collective one, have a very important role. In this context questions like: When? Where? How? Who? represent the key to restoring the past into the present time by remembering events.<sup>9</sup> The method that we used to harness the knowledge of these last survivors was the interview. We developed three questionnaires (one addressed to former prisoners, one to the camp employees and one addressed to people from Periprava) and based on them, the interviewees tried to recall the moments, days, years spent in detention or the external image that the prisoners have sketched for the ones who were free. The elected ones belong to different professional categories, others graduated higher education institutions or they were ordinary laborers, who had different political orientations before being arrested or just did not have any political orientation. We chose a wide range of subjects in order to eliminate the potential risk of having only one point of view. In addition to the interviews with former detainees, we felt it was necessary to interview other people who gave me their views, the testimonies of those years and, finally, to compare responses with official sources so that we could present a comprehensive and trustful point of view. We have also tried - through these interviews- to find the image that the people from Periprava have made regarding the bringing of thousands of prisoners sentenced to long prison in their village. Testimonies of this work were selected from an archive of official documents from [C.N.S.A.S.] – referring to the history, activity and regulations related to receiving, retaining and supervising regime in the colony. In addition to these, we should also mention the writings of the ones who passed through the camp, former prisoners and interviews that we had over two years of study. First, we should mention that the documents that we have obtained for C.N.S.A.S. research archive provided the information absolutely necessary to our approach. Thus, we could enclose the events chronologically and track information about people

---

<sup>8</sup> Jacques Le Goff, *Histoire et mémoire*, Paris, Gallimard, 1988, p. 333.

<sup>9</sup> Stephane Courtois, in *Școala memoriei, Sighet 2002*, Centrul Internațional de Studii asupra Comunismului, Fundația Academia Civică, 2002, p. 18.

– prisoners and officers, so that we could reach a true picture of what it meant setting up, organizing and functioning of the labor camp from Periprava. Although it was almost impossible to research all archives, we consider that we managed to obtain the most important information needed for our research. Besides the oral history methodology and specific methods, we resorted to the method of comparative information: the interviews, the archives and the detention writings. Even if the interviews that we have taken all these years represent the basis on which our research focused on, we have to mention the fact that that we had access to a rich archive, memorial and bibliographic material. We also used few bibliographic Western sources necessary for such an approach especially in the first chapter of the study.

### **Aim and Objectives**

The purpose of this research is not to victimize the image of the political prisoner from Romanian prisons but to present objectively and analytically the status of the political prisoner. The result should be the acceptance of the historical reality of the Romanian Communism on an intellectual, spiritual and social level. Periprava camp has not received enough interest, research about it appearing only briefly, a few mentions in the *Dictionary of Communist Prisons in Romania (1945-1967)*, Institute for the Investigation of Communist Crimes in Romania [IICCMER], in the writings of former detainees and short articles written by former employees of the colony. In recent years, the Romanian press has been writing and debating upon the issue of political prisoners from the Romanian Communist Gulag. Since 2013 many articles have appeared on this camp related issues, when the IICCMER announced that it has identified a list with a number of 35 employees of the General Directorate of Prisons, who had senior positions between to 1964 and who imposed a system of extermination of political prisoners in detention.<sup>10</sup> Ion Ficior appears on the list, a retired colonel, former commander of Periprava 0830 Formation between 1958-1963. During these years an impressive number of deaths was recorded among political prisoners. Meanwhile, he was sentenced, which is a small symbolic “reward” for those who suffered.

---

<sup>10</sup> IICCMER cere Parchetului începerea urmăririi penale împotriva fostului comandant al lagărului de la Periprava pentru genocid [on line], 18 septembrie 2013, [www.iiccr.ro](http://www.iiccr.ro), consultat la data de 22 septembrie 2013.



## **Structure**

As far as it concerns the structure of the PhD thesis, we can say that it follows the classic canon. We have a more consistent introduction where we present some key facts. These are: motivation for choosing the topic, sources and bibliography, methodology and working methods, purpose and necessity of such a research and the main difficulties that we had to deal with during the research. In **Chapter I**, *Periprava in the Communist "Gulag". A comparative Approach*, we tried to create an image of Periprava labor camp compared to other labor camps in all Communist space. In our approach, we used the studies, especially articles dealing with these issues. We chose to investigate different areas so that we could create a more realistic system of what it meant forced labor and extermination camps in Communist Romania. It was quite sad to realize that, in Communist Romania, forced labor, extermination of political opponents was done in the most extreme ways.

In **Chapter II**, we conducted an analysis of reconstruction. Based on the testimonies and archive documents we have recreated the establishment labor camp. We have to mention that the documents provided by C.N.S.A.S. archive staff was of real help. Based on these documents we were able to reconstruct events, see the main purpose of building this camp, the way in which the authorities from that moment perceived its usefulness and who had to be sent there for work and extermination.

**Chapter III** refers to the detainees and their world from Periprava. For this chapter, we used especially interviews and writings that were available and tried to restore some essential aspects of prisoners' life. Firstly, we made a comparison with other labor camps from the Communist concentration field as it was seen by Solzhenitsyn or other prisoners from other labor camps from Romania or from other Communist countries. Then we wanted to see how the detainees manage to adapt to their new conditions, as they saw the camp and what was their perception of the disastrous situation they had gone through. We mainly focused on existing conditions in the labor camp, what they had to do and what was forbidden, how they reacted psychologically to their new situation. However, after numerous interviews and testimonies that we had, we could make an image of the tragic universe of Periprava prisoners.

**Chapter IV** continues the research about life of the detainees in the labor camp and presents some essential aspects of their lives: lack of food and nutrition related issues, what kind of relationship they had with the guards, how they behaved with them etc. Thus, we managed to reconstruct the guards' humanity degree against the prisoners, if indeed we can talk about it. Based on the same evidence we have researched the working days of the prisoners and how dehumanizing their daily life was. As it is known from other research, the cultural aspects were a common activity among prisoners. Many of those who were sent to extermination had a strong cultural background and a fairly consistent education. Some of them used to compose poems, some of them knew how to deliver educational speeches when others fail, and these events helped them survive in a dehumanizing environment. Some of the cultural creations of these prisoners we used in this PhD thesis, others are found in the annexes.

**Chapter V** is atypical for the Romanian historiography today. It is a presentation about Periprava today from a double perspective: on one hand Periprava as a place that I found out when I visited it to take the interviews. It's a place where people died, by being exterminated in terrible conditions that were imposed by the Communist regime. On the other hand, I tried to present Periprava as seen by its inhabitants today as they live with the memory of former labor camp. Finally, we were trying to present the way in which the Romanian society perceives Periprava phenomenon nowadays.

In **Conclusion** we wanted to provide a synthesis of a grim reality of Romanian society during the Communist regime. Firstly, we noticed that, as reported by Anne Applebaum as well, there is little interest in highlighting the miseries inflicted by Communist regimes. The same is true in case of Romanian society today which has almost forgotten about crimes and misfortunes produced by the Communist regime. At the same time, we have seen what deductions dominate the local residents, but also former political prisoners. Analyzing all documents and testimonies taken from interviews that we have taken all these years and using the specific literature, we have found out that the conditions in Periprava labor camp were extremely difficult. Forced dehumanization was more than obvious. The comparison between all the testimonies and documents that were available made us decide that "Periprava" was an extermination camp, hidden with great caution by the authorities. It represented a secure means for the Communist authorities to get rid of troublesome opponents, done under unbearable conditions. For this

reason, we believe that the Romanian society is morally and legally obliged to react more vigorously to what Communism meant in Romania and take some measures to bring even a moral “reward” to the victims of that period. Convictions in recent years represent a step forward that makes us be optimistic and believe that the sacrifice of those who opposed the repressive regime hasn't been in vain.