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Repression and Resistance. Women Remembering their Daily Life in Romanian Communist Prisons

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ABSTRACT

The everyday life in a communist prison was characterized by terror, repression, harsh living conditions. Nevertheless, women, former political detainees, struggled to overcome all the difficulties in order to survive and to tell their story. This is the story of their faith in their victory over unfortunate and unpredictable historical events.

KEYWORDS

Communist repression, women's agency, everyday life, prison, post-communist discourse

” You were not with us in the cells
to know what life in darkness is
in the claws of beasts with gaping maws
You don't know how a human being screams
when crushed by iron chains
– Radu Gyr, *You Were Not With Us in the Cells*

Introduction

Scholars interested in the history of daily life are still searching for answers to a question essential to the understanding of Western modernity and postmodernity: "is the everyday a realm of submission to relations of power or the space in which those relations are contested or at least negotiated in relatively interesting ways?" (Highmore, 2002: 5) There are two major theoretical approaches to this problematic: the first privileges agency, while the second emphasizes structures.

The first approach is masterfully exemplified by Michel de Certeau. His studies of daily life investigate individuals' emotions, experiences, reactions, and, most of all, resistance to the system of domination. The second approach is inspired by Henri Lefebvre and Michel Foucault. Both philosophers emphasize the permanence of structures, of institutions, and of dominant representations in the

daily life of individuals from specific societies and particular historical moments (Highmore, 2002: 5).

This article does not discount the influence of structures, dominant representations, and institutions in individuals' daily lives. However, it privileges individuals' capacity to resist power relations, to subvert dominant representations, and to assume risks; in other words their ability to exercise what Anglophone scholars define as agency. 'Agency' stands for "the freedom of the contingently acting subject over and against the constraints that are thought to derive from enduring social structures. To the extent that human beings have agency, they may act independently of and in opposition to structural constraints, and/or may (re)constitute social structures through their freely chosen actions." (Loyal, Barnes, 2001: 507) Judith Butler defines agency not only in terms of resistance to power relations, but also the risks assumed by this resistance (Butler, 1997: 29).

The starting point of this study is a particular microcosm, namely communist prisons. The analysis focuses on the memories of a distinct category, that of Romanian women detainees during the 1950s. The study of prison daily life raises a number of questions regarding the definition of daily life in a universe that is not normal, usual, or stable - a universe out-

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side of the private and of the family spheres. If we define daily life as the space in which human beings exercise a direct influence through their behavior on the real and immediate circumstances of their lives (Wierling, 1995 : 151), is it possible to detect the human capacity to resist power relations (assuming even mortal risks) in an incarcerated space such as communist prisons? Can we apply to the world of prisons the definition according to which daily life is both an arena in which dominant social relations are reproduced and a locus of resistance, of revolt, of transformation?

To find answers to my questions, I will analyze a few interviews I have conducted with

former political detainees. Between 2003 and 2006, following the theory and method of oral history (*récits de vie*) (Bertaux, 1997), I have questioned eight women and seven men imprisoned in the 1950s by the communist authorities. The women informants were incarcerated for various periods in the Jilava and Mislea prisons. Most of these ladies received amnesty in 1955. This was due to changing East-West relations, to Romania's accession to the United Nation organization, and to the country's adoption of the "Universal Declaration of Human Rights".

Their narratives may be regarded as "life reviews" (Thomson, 2000: 137), since the interviewees were over 70 years old (except for one woman who was 68 at that time). All women and men were retired and involved in various activities related to the memory of communism. They were informants for research projects, consultants for movies, documentaries, and involved in trials pertaining to the communist repression. The criteria for choosing my informants were related to their education, to their confidence in me as a researcher, and to the reasons for their imprisonment (i.e., their anti-communist endeavors).

The research followed the snowball interview sampling technique, one informant introducing me to another. This technique is the most appropriate in dealing with sensitive issues, such as political persecution, because of the need for trust between informant and researcher.

The main informant was a woman who had known me for years. She introduced me to some of her women friends and former cellmates as a young Romanian historian conducting a research on the memory of political persecutions in Romania. Furthermore, she explained to her friends/ colleagues that I would defend my PhD thesis in front of intellectuals from Europe and Canada. My informants were keen to make their life-stories known to the Western world. They wanted to prove that Romanians opposed communism, which was a destructive system. They all firmly stated that they were very pleased to



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collaborate in a research project leading to a PhD thesis that would be defended in the West.

Thus, my focus group consisted of friends, family, and former cellmates imprisoned by the communist authorities for various reasons - some invented by the Securitate officers with no proof - such as espionage, disturbing the public order, conspiracy, and other similar charges.

All my informants belonged to the inter-war middle-class, the so-called "bourgeoisie", and they all eventually built intellectual careers during communism. They were researchers, teachers, translators, engineers, etc. The interviews were conducted in Romanian, in their homes. No family or friends ever attended these interview sessions, which lasted from 30 minutes to a few hours; the length depended completely on the interviewees themselves.

The "non-directive" technique of interviewing presupposes a broadly framed opening question. I asked my informants to tell me their lives from the earliest time they remembered until the time of the interview. In order not to disturb their logic and chronology, I restrained myself from asking questions. I interrupted them only if there was something I did not understand, or needed an explanation concerning prison jargon. The interviews were recorded on tape. During each session, I wrote down the gestures and/or body language of my informants. Afterwards, I transcribed their life-stories for the purpose of narrative analysis.

This article will focus only on women's experience of repression and everyday life in Jilava and Mislea prisons. Without adopting an explicit gender perspective, my article will explore what daily life in the communist prison meant for women. What were the women's daily living conditions? How did they experience the reconstruction of their subjectivity after undergoing the methods of identity destruction practiced by the communist regime? How did these middle-class prisoners from the interwar period face the burden of their own femininity?

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Jilava: A Romanian Bastille

Jilava was one of the harshest prisons, where the communists terrorized thousands of people for more than two decades. Its former inmates called it the "Romanian Bastille". People who waited to be interrogated, to go (or go again) on trial, or were brought back for "an additional interrogation" - as it was said at the time - were detained at Jilava. Because it was a transit penitentiary, Jilava was a mixed prison, housing in different buildings both women and men.

One of the women I interviewed describes her arrival to the penitentiary in the following manner:

After the trial, with black glasses on, we were transported in vans to Jilava. Here they took our glasses off [...] Jilava was a fortress built in the era of Carol I. Around Bucharest there were several fortresses, the one at Jilava bore the number 13. It used to be a prison even during the time of Carol I [...] Once at Jilava, our trial "lot" was divided into the four cells for women.

Another woman remembers what such a cell looked like: "At Jilava they took us to a very damp room, water was running on the walls! In the room we had a bucket of water, but this water was green because we were not allowed to properly wash the bucket."

The four cells had three rows of bunk beds. Such a cell could house up to 80 prisoners, some of them belonging to the same trial contingent. The beds were equipped with straw mattresses and blankets. The pillow consisted of a bundle of clothes, but this only in the case of the "lucky" prisoners who came to jail "prepared." The other women slept with their heads directly on the mattress, which was often stained with the blood of those who had already suffered in communist jails.

The cell windows were nailed shut and in the middle of the room there was a stove in which the inmates lit fires during the winter in order to warm themselves. They were given green branches that were hard to light and

produced more smoke than heat. Also in the cell, there was the slop bucket where the women had to relieve themselves in sight of everybody. Once filled, the pail was taken outside and emptied. One of the participants in my research recalls with horror this experience, which traumatized her profoundly: "At Jilava, I got to know the slop bucket. I was prudish and not used to this community of women. For me, it was a shock to see women carrying on conversations while relieving themselves."

The daily hygiene routine took place in the room. Once every two weeks, the women were allowed to take a shower, the shower room being located in another section of the prison. The shower, however, was more akin to a method of torture rather than of sanitation. The water was either very cold or very hot, and it stopped suddenly. The women had to wash in a hurry - within five or ten minutes. In this short time, the women also washed their lingerie, which they then wore wet. If they did not hurry upon exiting the shower, the inmates were beaten. A woman described to me her experience in the washing room in the following way: "We had a wicked female guard who hit us every time we got out of the shower. One day, being pregnant, I stuck my belly out and she dared hit me no longer. Shortly thereafter, she was reassigned."

The food was terrible, sometimes downright inedible. Another lady who participated in this research tells the following story: "The buckets full of food were taken to the door by the male prisoners, after which we took them into the room. One time, the food smelled so bad that the female guard who watched us placed her handkerchief over her nose. Another time, we were served the famous worm-infested pork scraps".

The food regimen, together with the bromine in the food rations, caused the women's menstrual cycle to stop. In the delicate period before this happened, the inmates received an additional piece of wadding and a cup of water above the usual norm.

Life at Jilava was terrible. Nevertheless, for

the persons incarcerated there, the winter of 1954 exceeded any limit. A woman recalls those days with horror: "In February 1954, there was a huge snowstorm. The snow reached to the height of houses. There was a story circulating then, that a prisoner who had just been released had to return to jail because of the storm. The irony of fate!"

In Jilava, the women prisoners were permitted to walk, daily, for half an hour around the interior courtyard. The walk took place in a circle with hands behind the back. Talking was forbidden. Any breach of the rules was punished with beatings and/or confinement to the lock-up room. Care packages or letters from home were prohibited. Nothing from outside the prison was supposed to enter the cells, sometimes not even a ray of sunlight.

The daily life of the prisoners was regimented and controlled by the holders of power. It was a life surrounded by secrecy. A lady recalls that "at Jilava everything was done in secret: if cell 4 was allowed out, the other [cells] were not supposed to see... well, big secret..." The daily life of the prison was designed as a method of torture. The object was the annihilation of individual will and of the prisoners' capacity to (re)act.

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Mislea, the Women's Prison

All the ladies with whom I have collaborated in the course of my research were incarcerated between 1952 and 1960 at Mislea, one of the most famous women's prisons during the communist regime. Mislea was an old Orthodox nunnery already converted before the Second World War into a regular women's prison. After the communists took power, Mislea was transformed into a penitentiary for women political prisoners. Outside the enclosure of the former monastery, there were still barracks housing ordinary convicts (Grossu, 1976: 82). In 1954, Mislea counted 397 political prisoners. (Ciuceanu, 2001: 18)

My informants who left Mislea after the

amnesty of August 23, 1955 were compelled to sign a promise that they would never discuss what they saw there. The former prisoners respected their commitment and did not do so during the communist period. However, the collapse of the regime released them from any vow of silence. It offered them the chance to tell the story of what they have lived through and to describe what daily life in prison meant.

The arrival at Mislea was by its very nature a traumatizing experience: the transit to the Bucharest North Railway Station, the journey by cattle train, the march or transport by truck from the Câmpina train station to the prison, in the dead of night. One of the women remembers this sad journey, yet another occasion for the communist authorities to inflict humiliation and torture:

Last stop, Câmpina. From the bowels of the railway car, and after 18 months of detention, we were pushed into fresh air. Because it was June, the chestnut trees were in full bloom. We were about 50-60 women who journeyed without luggage. After we disembarked, we were immediately surrounded by soldiers with their weapons pointed at us. We were shoved into a partially uncovered truck and traversed the city.

It was the first time when we were seeing regular people, greenery, flowers, shops...

Other women, however, lived through the long and exhausting march:

It was the winter of 1955. From Jilava, they took us, again by train, to Mislea. In the train, I had the opportunity to know Vida Nedici, who was accused of spying for Tito. I don't know if this name tells you anything; it is then that I found out who she was. She had ascended to a high rank in the Ministry of Interior; she conducted inquests and investigated all those who used to be paratroopers, spies sent to organize the resistance, and she tortured them [...] Then, we were in the train at night, going from Bucharest to Mislea, [and] one could not discuss a great deal, but she told me how it was, how elegant [she used to be] and how high she had risen, and then what happened to her. When we arrived at Băicoi, they disembarked us from the train and we walked to Mislea. It was winter, but there was such a beautiful field, everything was frozen, everything seemed translucent. The stars above shone so beautifully that it seemed to me an amazing landscape. I was looking at how all of us were walking, each with her little bag and dressed how she could.



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'The lifers', as they were called, [namely] the women with long or life sentences wore leg irons and walked very slowly, dragging their chains. Under that light, under those clear and starry skies, the convoy had a sinister air about it. We looked like little bundles heading towards death or who knows what...

Mislea housed a 100-person dormitory reserved for women with sentences shorter than 10 years or those not yet tried. "The Big Secret" was organized in other cells for women condemned to more than 10 years or for the "lifers." Close to the "Big Secret" was a small cell called the "Little Secret," used for confining punished inmates. The monastery's church served as a storage space.

Daily life at Mislea started with the headcount, which took place in the yard. There followed washing, dressing, and the morning meal. Inmates who had the right to work then headed for the workshops. Lunch break took place in the monastery's former refectory. At the end of the 12-hour work shift, the prisoners headed to the dormitories. Lights-out was at 22.00 and no activity was allowed after that time.

There were three workshops at Mislea: the first for threading wool, the second for weaving carpets, and the third for manufacturing shirts. In communist jails, labor was conceived both as a method of oppression and as a means of rehabilitation.

The detainees who had the right to work, namely those with light sentences or those not yet tried, could choose one of the three workshops. The work quota was 12 hours per day. The women worked non-stop. The advantage of working was better food and purchase coupons that could be exchanged for sugar, marmalade, and cigarettes. Working conditions were harsh, especially in the winter.

A former prisoner recounts that, "in the winter, during the nightshift, we warmed ourselves with an old iron carpet beater, which we warmed over the only stove in the room. We tried to unfreeze our hands. There were work quotas that were sometimes exceeded by zealous prisoners, and this made the situation of

those who were frailer more difficult."

Laboring in the workshop helped the inmates to cope better with their confinement. As one lady recalls, it even offered them opportunities for amusement:

What I tell you happened in the carpet-weaving workshop where one used looms, one of these looms [called in Romanian "razboi", the same word for war] being very large and used for weaving immense carpets. One time, this loom fell down and the girls started yelling "razboiul, razboiul [the war, the war...]" Everybody thought that the war between the USA and the USSR had started, and that the noise had been caused by an exploding bomb: We rapidly convinced ourselves that they weren't talking about the long-awaited war...

Sanitary conditions were better at Mislea compared to those at Jilava. In the morning, the prisoners washed themselves with cold water. Once a week, they took a shower. Since the inmates were tasked with housekeeping both in the washroom and in their own rooms, there was a high level of cleanliness. Even those detainees less used with personal hygiene, such as peasant women, were required to wash regularly and to take care of their clothes. A former prisoner relates the following:

The washer was a sort of trough fit for horses to drink water from. There were some faucets that one could turn on and wash. Warm water did not exist, there was only cold water. There was only one bar of soap, which passed around from one to another. There was plenty of time to freeze, to get a cold, to get sick. Due to this experience, I acquired a lifelong obsession with being cold.

The more diversified food continued to be a means of humiliating and even destroying the inmates. A woman remembers how, at Mislea, she became reacquainted with the "famous" pork scraps: "After some time they served us some scraps, but the scraps crawled with worms. They had made a kind of gruel to which they added these scraps, but the scraps had such a horrible smell that one could not even stay in the mess hall. We entered, took



our piece of bread, and ran outside... This story lasted about 3 days..."

In order to demonstrate their dominance by terrorizing the detainees, the prison authorities conducted regular dormitory and body searches. Most of the times, these took place in the middle of the night. The inmates were taken into the courtyard and stripped, while the guards searched every corner for a pencil, a scrap of paper, a pin, or a peel of soap. A lady characterized these searches as "the periodic amusement of the guards."

Challenging authority or showing dissatisfaction with living conditions was a good reason for confinement to the "hole." An eyewitness described the "hole" in the following terms: "a cement cell normally used for storing provisions, but now used for punishment." This lady had the misfortune to be punished because:

One spring, a prosecutor showed up. He inspected our dormitories and we stood aligned near our beds. We talked and he asked us if we had anything to report. He was accompanied by the prison commandant... And in that entire crowd who do you think had the bright idea to report?! "I say yes, I have something to report". Look, they took our soap away and I also told him that we had been given rotten food, so that for three days we could not eat. He says, "all right I will investigate and take measures." I don't think the prosecutor reached the gates that I was simply swept away to be punished... I stayed for 7 days in the "hole," and had only a canteen full of water and a piece of bread. My bed was brought into the cell in the evening and taken away at 5 in the morning. The bed was one of those "campaign beds" with no mattress or pillow, only the metal reticulation. Once in a while, the warden came by and told me to "wake up." I stayed for 7 days and was cold and hungry. After 7 days, they took me out of there and stuck me in "Secret."

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The Construction of Subjectivity

Daily life in prison was dominated by repression, anxiety, violence, but also (re)adaptability, and the reinvention of self. Although subjected to the brutal oppression which characterized life in communist prisons, the ladies I interviewed succeeded by means of various "tactics" (Certeau, 1984: 37-38) and "rhetorical maneuvers" (Phillips, 2006: 312) to resist and (re)construct themselves despite the system's "strategies" (Certeau, 1984: 35-36) employed to destroy them. This was the mode of resistance typical of daily life, a type of resistance that undermines the force and the representations of the dominant power (Certeau, 1984: 151).

Daily prison life was a creative bricolage whereby the self repositioned itself in extreme conditions. Socialized in a bourgeois milieu, my informants incorporated norms and practices disavowed by the communist regime. During the interwar period, middle class women were reared in the values of liberty, individualism, patriotism, of respect for others, and idealism. In prison, these values were observed. Affirming them meant punishment by the prison authorities. Nevertheless, these women upheld these values both in prison and thereafter. In fact, as many of them stated, being in jail was regarded as normal, because they represented the bourgeois class enemy of the communists.

One of the women told me she even wanted to go to jail, because "all the quality people had been or were in jail. In my mind, prison was like an adventure [...] I wanted to penetrate this mystery, to see for myself what occurred there..." Treated as "enemies of the people," these ladies proudly assumed this new identity by translating it into their own idiom. They regarded themselves as the "personal enemy of the communists." One of my informants states: "They tried to crush us... they tortured us... but we had the satisfaction of not letting ourselves be humiliated, that we fought them even in prison."



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Agency and the Prison Practices of Disobedience

Despite the domination, which aimed to be total, as well the constant repression, the political detainees circumvented the system at every opportunity. Most of the times, they created these opportunities by deploying various "tactics."

In prison conditions, communicating with others became a means of resistance. In Jilava, a piece of newspaper, news transmitted via Morse code, questions addressed to new arrivals or inmates in transit, were ways of finding out about the outside world. Although strict, the control of the Mislea authorities could be more easily evaded. The women incarcerated here were freer. They could move around the prison courtyard and sometimes succeeded in communicating with the regular inmates. The latter worked outside the grounds of the monastery, had access to information, and, when it was possible, shared with the political prisoners what they knew about the outside world. It was the regular prisoners who brought them the news about the re-privies of 1955. In addition, the regular prisoners donated them vegetables when they could mislead the guards.

Another way of disobeying prison rules was to refuse food. Hunger strikes or the rejection of spoiled food were methods for gaining concessions, such as obtaining medical care for an ill prisoner. Most of the times, such an initiative resulted in the punishment of the "recalcitrant" persons.

Sometimes, in order to avenge themselves, the inmates forced to wash the shirts and personal lingerie of the soldiers and guards scrubbed them until they tore apart, especially when these items were very dirty. The risk to the prisoners was great. If caught, they could be beaten, tortured, or punished with confinement to the lock-up.

Human solidarity, too, was a means of circumventing oppression, domination, and the communist authorities' desire to destroy the

women prisoners. One of the ladies remembers such a gesture:

My friend Mariana was with me in the cell... The girls insisted that Mariana, who had a terrible cough, be taken to the hospital. Finally, they decided to take Mariana to the Văcărești prison-hospital. They notified us one day in advance. It was shower day, but I decided to stay with her and help her, because she was extremely weakened, incapable of moving by herself. I remember that, and I regret it to this day, hearing the key in the door, I wanted to give her something and I climbed quickly into bed, I slept on the third level and, trying to descend, I fell on my back, it hurts even now, and thus I did not give her anything and neither did I manage to say goodbye to her. After two months, someone who came from Văcărești told us that Mariana had died...

The communist strategy was to destroy the individual, to deprive him/her of any capacity for action, reaction, and even reflection. Despite these circumstances, the women found resources to manage their daily lives. In a manner similar to what happened at Jilava, at Mislea the resistance was organized through study, storytelling, prayer, and play. Prisoners shared cooking recipes, described places they had visited, recounted books, recited poems, and even staged plays. In the inhuman conditions of detention, every gesture represented a condensation of memory and every remembrance played the role of bringing the past into the present. (Certeau, 1986:4)

Faith in God played an important role in the detainees' survival, in their adaptation to prison life, and in their salvation from the despair brought about by seclusion. The inmate population included a good number of Catholic and Greco-Catholic nuns, women belonging to the legionary movement (fond of Orthodox religion and traditions), and Jewish women. This enabled the practice of rituals specific to each religious denomination. Worship was held in each separate dormitory, and was conducted either by nuns or by persons versed in the specific practices of their religious denomination.



Because they were banned, all religious practices were observed in secret. Prisoners were punished for expressing their faith. Nonetheless, the inmates succeeded in celebrating Christmas and Easter. By means of skill and "tactics", they even managed to prepare the special Easter cake and sometimes knocked eggs smuggled in or made ad hoc.

Even desperate situations, such as confinement to "Secret", were turned to the prisoners' advantage by dint of will and ability. A lady recollects:

There were some entertaining moments at Mislea. There was a female guard there, who was naive and easy to fool. We started to keep this guard busy, we plucked her eyebrows [and] we refined them. But how to tweeze her when we didn't have tweezers?! I had with me a small button, and this is what I used. Of course, I didn't have any cream and so I requested a medical cream, a cream for hemorrhoids. I sat up in bed and, while she put her head in my arms, the other girls went to talk with the "lifers" and the other inmates with long sentences, because we were all on the same floor. When she entered our cell, this guard left the door open, and the girls swarmed everywhere, they went to see their [trial] mates, to find out one thing or another. Times were good as long as we had her as a guard. It was we who ended up guarding her, because she was so comfortable in my arms waiting to be tweezed and massaged, that we ended up standing sentry in order to prevent anyone surprising her in this position.

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Repressed Femininity, Feminine Resistance

Daily life is the locus in which not only subjectivity, but also femininity is constructed. Feminist theory even discusses the concept of a gendered everyday life. Naomi Shor argues for the existence of a "feminine daily life" tied to the rituals of private life, unfolding in the domestic sphere. She further maintains the existence of a "masculine daily life" that takes

place on the streets, markets, and other public places - regarded as the domain of men. (Shor, 1992: 188)

Middle class girls/ women of the interwar period internalized during their growing-up process a certain conception about the masculine and the feminine, as well as about the qualities characterizing both sexes. Femininity was regarded as comprising of grace and elegance, sensitivity, discretion, and esthetic refinement. The modern woman was inoculated to eschew vulgarity, spontaneity, and violence. She was encouraged to mind her personal appearance in accordance with the feminine ideal promoted by the cosmetic and fashion industries. (Duby, Perrot, 1992: 303)

Once in power, communist authorities did all they could to destroy the middle class. The emancipation of women at any price, promoted by the art and literature of the period, was one of the key points of their agenda. In prison, the communist program to eradicate middle class acquired a different meaning and new dimensions. Nevertheless, even in the seclusion, the femininity, although not necessarily destiny, (Butler, 1990: 8) but rather a component of the gender habitus (Bourdieu, 1980), represented a form of resistance to communist endeavors.

As the relationship of women with their own bodies, with others, with society at large, is mediated by the dominant culture by means of quotidian practices, of representations, as well as the clothing items associated to daily life (Bordo, 1993: 15), the everyday life in prison was meant to indulge a new mentality. Brutal measures were taken in order to destroy the "bourgeois" vision of femininity. The detainees' body, their interface with the outside world, was first and foremost targeted by the authorities.

The regimen of nutrition, of hygiene, of rest, as well as esthetics played an important role in the "ritual annihilation" (Le Breton, 1998: 97-99) of the prisoners' bodies. The body was subjected not only to torture, but also to a type of ritual rape in the form of gynecological exams. One of the women re-



counts that these regular controls seemed to her the most dreadful thing that happened to her in communist jails.

Despite these circumstances, the persecuted women tried to subvert the domination and control over their own bodies. In prison, the woman's body became a "site of resistance" (Frigon, 2002: 58-59) against the system. During the period of seclusion, they did everything possible to maintain a rigorous personal hygiene by washing daily. They also tried to eat the most varied foods possible, resorting to different tactics in order to do so. In Mislea prison, the inmates stole salad and cabbage leaves, as well as carrots when they were deposited in the courtyard. Moreover, despite the extreme conditions, some of these ladies even managed to preserve certain stylishness. One of the women remembers that, since she was not sentenced, but rather detained by "administrative decision," she used to arrange her hair

"in curls" every day, thinking that she would be released any moment, and wishing to appear "proper" and feminine. Another woman used to mend her silk stockings for the day when she would leave prison.

The violence, although present in the body to this day, is passed over in silence in the discourse of the women interviewed. A lady showed me her broken hand, while another told me about the method of torture inflicted on her. No one talked about rape, not even in regards to their fellow inmates. This is an attitude reflecting the habitus of the bourgeois woman - an outlook that presupposes the non-display of violence over the body and its absence from discourse. However, this silence may also be interpreted as an inability to talk about extreme experiences. (Pollak, 2000:182)

Another method of control over individuals and their bodies, which the detainees keenly felt as a stigma, was the requirement to wear the prison suit. This garment was fashioned from an awful material that scratched the skin. The prisoners wore it over their own clothes.

The clothes worn in daily life signify a person's position and status in society. (Joyce, 2005: 142) Depriving the inmates of this signifier of social identity was yet another communist strategy of annihilating the individual and the group to which s/he belonged. Without being a communist practice, the prison's habits being invented before communism, zeghea, the clothes worn by political detainees, were made of very scratchy material which destroyed the skin.

The experience of prison was a boundary-stretching experience for the women who participated in my research. The fight for survival, renewed daily, dictated first and foremost a struggle against one's own body. The force of character displayed by these women allowed them to push limits of personal endurance, to overcome hunger and thirst, to endure the cold, the absence of sleep, and the inhuman treatments inflicted on them.



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"Hell is the Others"

Daily life is not only the site for the construction of the self and of gender identity, but also an arena where the individual performs various acts. During his/her interaction with others, s/he interprets different roles, thereby trying to influence them with the aim of obtaining something. (Goffman, 1959: 3-16) This performance carries within itself the vision of the world and the values of the group to which the individual belongs. (Lemert, Branaman, 1997: 97)

The prison was an arena where the detainees had to endlessly perform roles: in front of the guards, the prison authorities, their fellow sufferers. The permanent presence of others created an external discomfort. At other times, it produced miracles.

In addition to the roles imposed by the authorities, the inmates lived through the daily staging of self-performance in relation to their fellow sufferers. A former inmate recalls that the quotidian inferno was sometimes marked by quarrels:

We clashed among ourselves, sometimes over nothing. Even for a piece for bread. The room boss, all rooms had a boss, had to allocate bread that had already been cut, thus distributing all the slices, whether larger or smaller. Still, even the smaller pieces had to be dispensed. The tension in the cells was very high. There were days when we got along very well and days when we fought over inane reasons.

One ray of light warmed this inferno: the intense cultural activity that took place in the cells. This became both a form of resistance against the communist system and a method of survival for those who had been incarcerated. The detainees learned foreign languages, recited poems, and narrated novels and films. Conferences were held on various subjects, while the women who had not lost their faith prayed.

A lady evokes with pride the image of an environment where culture was the only

means of tearing them away from the evil that had become a banality of their daily lives:

There were distinguished people in our cell at Jilava. Wives of former ministers, university professors, high school teachers, the Secretary of the American Embassy who taught us English... We spoke among ourselves mostly in French and German so that the guard could not understand us. Many women prayed and everybody told stories.

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Conclusions

Daily life in communist jails questions the pertinence of analyzing daily life through the prism of the influence of power relations and of the existence of a subtle resistance to domination. In the world of the communist prison, everything was controlled, manipulated, and repressed. The system aspired to the total annihilation of individual will, capacity for action, and even reflection by means of an oppressive and inhuman lifestyle. Nonetheless, the life histories shared by the ladies who participated in my research, also confirmed by other prison memoirs (Constante, 1993; Orlea, 1991, Samuelli, 2001), prove the human capacity to resist terror and, most importantly, show that even in extreme conditions, the individual finds resources to oppose domination, thereby assuming the risks inherent in this stance.

The daily prison life of the political detainees I interviewed was marked by the efforts of the communist regime to maintain total control over the individual, to dehumanize him/her. Communist social engineering endeavored to create the "new man", a machine devoid of reflexive capacity and will to revolt against the system. Despite these efforts, the life stories of the participants in my research show that, even in the daily world of incarceration, the "total colonization of daily life by the system" (Certeau, 1997: 137-138) is practically impossible.

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