

HAROLD B. SEGEL

THE WALLS BEHIND THE CURTAIN

EAST EUROPEAN PRISON LITERATURE, 1945-1990



THE WALLS BEHIND THE CURTAIN



**PITT SERIES IN RUSSIAN AND
EAST EUROPEAN STUDIES**
Jonathan Harris, Editor

THE WALLS BEHIND THE CURTAIN



**EAST EUROPEAN
PRISON LITERATURE,
1945–1990**

Harold B. Segel

UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH PRESS

Published by the University of Pittsburgh Press, Pittsburgh, Pa., 15260

Copyright © 2012, University of Pittsburgh Press

All rights reserved

Manufactured in the United States of America

Printed on acid-free paper

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

The walls behind the curtain : East European prison literature, 1945-1990 / edited by
Harold B. Segel.

p. cm. — (Pitt series in Russian and East European studies)

ISBN 978-0-8229-6202-1 (pbk.)

1. Prisoners' writings, East European—Translations into English. 2. Europe, Eastern—
Literary collections—Translations into English. I. Segel, Harold B., 1930-

PN6069.P7W35 2012

808.8'9947—dc23

2012022364

Three Romanian poems by Ion Caraion (1923–1986)

Neconoscutul ferestrelor

Mă-ntorceam de la propria mea
înmormântare.
Fusesem pus să vorbesc despre
mine.
Dar am uitat unde și am uitat cine
ieșea din țintirim c-un ospiciu-n
spinare. . . .

La marea putredă

Vă vom chinui, vă vom ucide și
vom râde
pe urmă vom fi uciși și se va râde
sîntem destul de bătrini și de vicleni
să nu ne pese
totul e adevăr, chiar și minciuna
totul e minciună, chiar și adevărul—
înturnericul se face singur.

Halucinație

M-au luat și m-au executat.
Mai e liber un pat.
Privește și-ascultă:
niciodată singurătatea n-a fost mai
multi.
Prin ciulinii somnului,
umblă desculță Maica Domnului.

[The Mystery of Windows]

[I was coming back from my own
burial.
I had been asked to speak about
myself.
But I forgot where and I forgot who
was leaving the cemetery with a
madhouse on his back. . . .]

[At the Putrid Sea]

[We will torture you, we will kill you
and we will laugh
then we will be killed and be laughed at
we are old enough and clever enough
not to care
everything is true, even the lie
everything is a lie, even the truth—
darkness creates itself.]

[Hallucination]

[They took me and executed me.
Another bed is free.
Watch and listen:
never was there more solitude.
Through the thistles of sleep,
the Mother of God walks barefoot.]

CONTENTS

About the Artist, Maks Velo ix

Introduction 1

ALBANIA 15

- Jusuf Vrioni 18
- Arshi Pipa 24
- Kasëm Trebeshina 30
- Maks Velo 37
- Fatos T. Lubonja 50
- Visar Zhiti 64
- Besnik Mustafaj 70

BULGARIA / MACEDONIA 77

- Venko Markovski 81

CZECHOSLOVAKIA 89

- Jiří Hejda 93
- Jan Zahradníček 97
- František Daniel Merth 105
- Jiří Mucha 110
- Lenka Reinerová 118
- Karel Pecka 125
- Eva Kantůrková 142
- Milan Šimečka 151
- Rudolf Dobiáš 158

Poets from Dobiáš's *Básnici za mrežami:*

Antológia poézie napísanej vo väzení 167

- Vojtech Belák 168
- Pavol Brodnaňský 171

Vojtech Jenčík 173
Alexander Rodan 177
Štefan Sandtner 178
Marian Skala 180
Ladislav Záborský 182
Václav Havel 185

HUNGARY 201

Tibor Déry 205
György Faludy 209
Árpád Göncz 224
Ádám Bodor 229

POLAND 237

Marek Nowakowski 243
Adam Michnik 247
Tomasz Jastrun 250

ROMANIA 259

Nichifor Crainic 267
Radu Gyr 270
Nicolae Steinhardt 274
Ion Caraion 287
Marcel Petrișor 291
Paul Goma 311

YUGOSLAVIA 321

Milovan Djilas 326
Igor Torkar 334
Vitomil Zupan 344
Eligio Panini 358
Branko Hofman 366
Borislav Pekić 371
Dragoslav Mihailović 384
Vlado Gotovac 392

Afterword 405
Acknowledgments 407
Notes 411
Index 425

ABOUT THE ARTIST, MAKS VELO

The illustrations in this book are the work of the celebrated Albanian artist Maks Velo. Much of Velo's career has been defined by the years he was forced to spend in the notorious forced labor camp at Spaç. He had already begun an impressive career as an artist and architect when his work was interrupted and he was sentenced to ten years' imprisonment for deviating from the norms of socialist realism and demonstrating too great an interest in Western avant-garde art. Released after eight years by the terms of an amnesty, he had to wait until the collapse of the Communist regime before he could resume his career. The degrading conditions he had experienced in prison were seared in his memory and eventually given voice in most of the books he has published to date as well as in his creative work as an artist.

The most impressive pictorial legacy of his time as a forced laborer in the copper mines at Spaç is a collection of well over one hundred brush and ink drawings. Velo used a number of them as illustrations for his two books of prison camp stories, *Palltoja e burgut* (The Prison Coat, 1995) and *Thesi i burgut* (The Prison Sack, 1996). The collection as a whole was exhibited publicly for the first time in Tirana in 1995 under the title *Kokëqethja* (Shorn Head), and subsequently published as an album under the same title. Velo's prison illustrations, several of which are reproduced in this book with the artist's kind permission, powerfully convey the inhumanity he was forced to endure and to which he bore witness as a prisoner at Spaç. Velo's abstract style heightens their impact. Tormented and twisted figures in a stark landscape often lack limbs and heads or appear yoked by chains or impaled in macabre group portraits. Implements of torture are omnipresent, and a certain predilection for Christian imagery is evident in a number of illustrations with crucifixion motifs. Velo's contempt for tyranny and dictatorship pervades and animates his work, visual and literary. Authoritarian figures loom menacingly over the collected skulls or bodies of victims. Death

wears the crown as animallike figures with grotesquely monstrous beaks and claws assume the role of jailers or participants in torture. The attenuated figures of Velo's prison sketches underscore the fragility of the human being hopelessly trapped in the hell of the camps.

Velo's oeuvre embraces more than the Spaç sketches for which he is so well known and admired. A number of oil and acrylic canvases retain the prison camp figures, but there they move playfully through space as if in absurd dance routines. Other works are devoted to Albanian national and folk subjects; one important album consists entirely of images of Mother Teresa. Since his official "exoneration" in 1991, Maks Velo has exhibited his art and architectural designs throughout the globe, including the United States on four separate occasions. In recognition of his championship of human rights and democratic freedoms, in 1992 he became an active member of the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights.

THE WALLS BEHIND THE CURTAIN



INTRODUCTION



Burrel, Spaç, Qafë-Bari, Ruzyně, Pankrác, Mírov, Leopoldov, Valdice, Jáchymov, Bytíz u Příbrami, Białołęka, Aiud, Gherla, Jilava, Pitești, Recsk, Lovech, Belene, Idrizovo, Goli otok. These are names that mean little or nothing to many. But to East Europeans from Central Europe to the farthest reaches of the Balkans, they form an indelible part of their collective memory as the darkest page in the forty-five-year history of communism in the region. They are the names of detention centers, prison camps, and forced labor camps that corrupted the landscape of Eastern Europe from the end of World War II to the collapse of communism in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Although less familiar than the Soviet gulag made famous through the writings of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, and undeniably Soviet in inspiration, they were no less brutal and dehumanizing.¹ They became a living hell for a huge number of human beings from every walk of life, especially intellectuals, artists, and students whose only crime in many instances was a repugnance for the repressive Communist system that demanded conformity and brooked no opposition.

Resistance to the imposition of Communist rule throughout Eastern Europe manifested itself almost from the very beginning and grew into mass, and sometimes violent, eruptions of protest, among them the Poznań riots in Poland in October 1956, the Hungarian Revolution later that same year, the Prague Spring that led to the Soviet and Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, the rise of Solidarity in Poland in the early 1980s—the reverberations from which were ultimately felt throughout all of Eastern Europe—and the bloody upheaval that ended the reign of Nicolae Ceaușescu in Romania in December 1989.

Driven by fear and paranoia, the Communist regimes saw conspiracies under every rock and around every corner. In order to squelch opposition—real or imaginary—for the sole purpose of retaining power, the Communists put in place an extensive system of detention centers and forced labor camps along

Soviet lines. Despite inevitable differences between them from one country to another, they shared an utter disdain for human and civil rights. The number of people hauled into this Eastern European gulag in the nearly half century of Communist hegemony numbered in the millions. Because of their visibility in society, their ability to shape opinion, and their encouragement of democratic reforms, prominent literary figures were among the chief targets of Communist repression. Many were taken into custody, accused of hostile acts against the state, including treason—often in show trials reminiscent of Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany—and sentenced to prison for short or very long periods of time. Their lives and careers were disrupted or even worse. Conditions in some prisons were so mindlessly brutal it is a wonder that as many survived as did. Yet despite the physical and mental hardships, the degradation they were subjected to on a daily basis, and the smell of death in the air, they not only survived but continued to write—on paper, if they had any, even toilet paper, or in their minds—as they sought to create testimonies of what they had experienced, legacies in a sense for fellow countrymen and peoples beyond Eastern Europe who they believed remained ignorant of the true conditions of life under communism. They wrote in different genres and styles and viewed incarceration from different perspectives. Some of their writings—those, for example, by the Albanian Jusuf Vrioni, the Czechs Jiří Mucha, Karel Pecka, Lenka Reinerová, and Eva Kanturková, the Bulgarian Venko Markovski, the Hungarians György Faludy and Adam Bodor, the Romanian Paul Goma, and the Yugoslavs Vitomil Zupan and Borislav Pekić—were detailed prose accounts of the day-to-day wretchedness of the prison routine; some assumed the character of thought-provoking essays on society, politics, and religion, especially those by the Pole Adam Michnik, the Slovak Milan Šimečka, the Czech Václav Havel, and the Yugoslav Milovan Djilas. Although often intellectually substantive, they did not aspire to the extraordinary accomplishment of the *Quaderni del carcere* (*Prison Notebooks*) of the Italian Marxist political theorist and philosopher Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937). Others were lyrical in nature, contrasting the beauties of the natural world with the manmade drabness of prison cells—those by the Czech poet Jiří Heyda, for example—or philosophical in nature, inquiries into good and evil, as in the mystical verse by the Czech Catholic poets Jan Zahradníček and František Daniel Merth. The Slovak prison poets—some of them priests—brought together for the first time in the anthology *Básníci za mrežami* (*Poets Behind Bars*, 2009), by the prominent Slovak writer and dissident Rudolf Dobiáš, spiritually relate to these Czech poets but rarely approach the same artistic level. Their poems are simple, sincere attempts to find literary expression for the degradation of humankind that had engulfed them.

Among East European prose writers, the epistolary form was as popular as

the memoir. But it contained risks. Direct descriptions of prison life were prohibited except for innocuous items. Thus the letters from inmates to members of their family often had more to do with what was happening on the outside, and these, too, had to skirt the political. The domestic routine in the absence of the incarcerated was a matter of great concern. The prisoner was anxious to fill his life behind bars with thoughts of home, of what various members of the family, near and far, were doing, or there were reminiscences of shared moments of happiness. No subject was too small, or too banal, not to be of interest to the person imprisoned. For some writers of prison letters, such as Šimečka and Havel, the epistolary form served as a vehicle for a wide variety of thoughts on society, intellectual and artistic life, and philosophy and religion. Prison provided ample time for such ruminations. Šimečka's letters to his son, Martin, who became a well-known Slovak author in his own right, were filled with interesting thoughts on the meaning of the literary text and, in a more philosophical vein, on the nature of reality. In his letters to his wife, Olga, the internationally celebrated Czech writer and dissident and the first president of an independent Czech Republic, Václav Havel demonstrated a less engaging nature through his intense preoccupation with his physical and emotional states. Intellectual concerns, such as his ideas on faith, were also shared with his wife but raise the question ultimately as to the real addressee of these letters. If one cannot easily imagine a world audience becoming absorbed in the minutiae of Havel's physical and emotional self-analysis, one may more easily predicate a considerably wider readership for his thoughts on faith and reason than his long-suffering and forbearing wife. However, as in the case of Havel's Slovak fellow dissident Milan Šimečka, it is difficult for even the most remote reader to disregard the invitation to become privy to the innermost musings of intellectually gifted individuals forced by the circumstances of imprisonment to confront their solitariness, introspection, and compulsion to communicate no matter the hardships.

How resourceful an incarcerated writer could be in his use of the epistolary form is demonstrated by Tibor Déry, one of the more formidable presences in twentieth-century Hungarian literature. Although Déry touched on his three-year incarceration in such autobiographical works as *Börtönnapok hordaléka* (Prison Days Deposits, 1958) and *Ítélet nincs* (No Decision, 1971), they deal mostly with the prewar years. Far more interesting, in a sense, is the collection of letters, written in German, that Déry exchanged with his Viennese-born mother who was quite elderly at the time. In order to spare her from knowing anything about his arrest and subsequent incarceration, he devised a plan to maintain the fiction that he been called abroad for a lengthy period of time in connection with film scripts he was writing for foreign film companies, including one in the United States. With the help of his wife and friends, he was able to smuggle his

letters to his mother out of prison where they were reposted from foreign countries where friends were traveling and, of course, with the appropriate foreign stamps on them. His mother never discovered the truth.

A number of writers, whether because they were former inmates or otherwise close to the events, sought to recapture the East European gulag experience by fictional means. No genre of literature was neglected in the pursuit of this goal, although full-length novels tended to be fewer. Several of the most effective were by the Albanian Besnik Mustafaj, the Hungarian Tibor Déry, the Romanians Paul Goma and Marcel Petrișor, the Slovenes Igor Torkar and Branko Hofman, and the Italo-Croatian writer Ligo Zanini.

A novelist as well as an essayist, and for a time the Albanian ambassador to France and Albanian foreign minister, Mustafaj was an ardent champion of human rights who had repeatedly condemned political injustice in Albania. Although he had never been imprisoned, he did make prison life the subject of one of his better novels, *Një sagë e vogël* (*A Small Saga*, 1993). Although the time frame of the novel is unspecified, it seems obvious that the story of the young boy Omer Tsatsa, who is taken by his mother to visit his father who is imprisoned for political reasons, reflects Communist rule in Albania. The continuity of imprisonment as a fact of Albanian political culture is stressed in the second (and chronologically later) part of the novel when Omer's son, Bardhyl Tsatsa, himself a political prisoner, eagerly awaits a conjugal visit with his wife Linda. Although hopes for the visit are high on both sides, prison life has taken its toll on Bardhyl and the visit is largely unsatisfying. As the third and last part of the novel unfolds, prison has become a surreal environment with an old prison guard lamenting the absence of prisoners once the cells have been emptied and trying to fill the void with rocks. Surreal also is the ambience of a huge dystopian novel, *G. A. úr X-ben* (*Mr. G. A. in X.*, 1971), written in prison by the Hungarian Tibor Déry and published the same year as his autobiographical *Itélet nincs*. A bleak, almost Kafkaesque picture of an unfinished metropolis where people seem to lead an irrationally bleak existence, the novel includes two substantial chapters obviously motivated by Déry's own experiences. But since they portray an incarceration so pleasant and comfortable that a major figure of the novel resists offers of amnesty, they can hardly be regarded as valuable in developing a sense of what Déry himself had endured behind prison walls. In the topsy-turvy world of the novel where time and space mean nothing and strange things occur without rhyme or reason, it would make perfect sense to want to stay in a prison where creature comforts are handsomely accommodated in contrast to the bleak uniformity on the outside.

The richly detailed novels of incarceration by the Romanian authors Paul Goma and Marcel Petrișor paint a picture of such overwhelming brutality and degradation that their prison world assumes a surreal character of its

own. Obviously drawing heavily on personal experience, the novels often become unbearable for the inhumanity portrayed in them. Acts of degradation so loathsome as to be almost unimaginable commingle with tortures capable of bringing an inmate to the threshold of death—and often yearning for death. Regarded as the Romanian Solzhenitsyn, Goma was a lifelong dissident whose spirit remained unbroken and who succeeded in calling the world's attention to what was happening in the Romanian gulag under the Communists by publishing several of his works in French and German in Western Europe. Unfortunately, the no less powerful novels of Petrișor have not yet been translated into a single foreign language.

Besides portraying the horrors perpetrated in the camps, the novels of Goma and Petrișor also expose the banality of their evil, to borrow Hannah Arendt's phrase: the callous disregard for human life by camp officials and their underlings who seek only to please their superiors; work schedules within the camps that ensure failure hence hideous punishment; the inadequacy of proper clothing, nutrition, and medication for harsh climate changes; and the exploitation of one group of prisoners by pitting them against another group. Without an appropriate introduction to the culture of the Romanian camp system, it may be easy to overlook the special demography of the prison population. To be sure, dissident thinkers and artists were a prime target of the penal system, as elsewhere in Eastern Europe. But apart from the wide variety of political prisoners of one stamp or another, one group stood out for special treatment: former members of the extreme right-wing, ultranationalistic, anti-Communist, and anti-Semitic Iron Guard (*Garda de fier*), founded by its charismatic leader Corneliu Zelea Codreanu in 1927. Its embrace of an Orthodox Christianity filtered through the prism of intense nationalism, and its assaults on any political figure or intellectual who stood in its way, made the Iron Guard an anathema both to the monarchy before World War II and to the Communist Party after the war. The back of the movement was broken in the early years of the war after a failed coup d'état, but it was the Communists who set about finishing the job. Members of the Iron Guard were rounded up and packed off to prison camps where they were then subject to brutal tortures aimed at "reeducating" them. "Reeducating" meant getting them to disavow every component of their ideology and transforming them into robotic servants of the regime. Through the use of every conceivable kind of degradation and humiliation, from the physical to the spiritual, they were made to renounce religious as well as political beliefs, family, and friends. The process also aimed to turn them into informers and, when they were properly reeducated, use them to inflict the same tortures on others as had been inflicted on them. It is to this program of reeducation that the prison works of Goma and especially Petrișor are devoted. In addition to excerpts from the works of these writers, the present book also includes several

poems written in prison by two prominent members of the Iron Guard, Nichifor Crainic, a poet and theologian who after several years in prison wound up becoming a spokesman for the Communist regime, and Radu Gyr, a well-known poet of the 1920s and 1930s.

Among South Slavs, two novelists stand out prominently for their depiction of prison life, Igor Torkar and Branko Hofman. Torkar knew incarceration firsthand; Hofman through hearsay. After surviving internment in German concentration camps during World War II, Torkar was arrested again by the Communists after the war and sentenced to twelve years in prison on specious charges of having been a Gestapo agent in the German camps, payback for refusing to give testimony against former colleagues and friends similarly taken into custody by the Tito regime. Torkar's personal experiences, captured in the novel *Umiranje na obroke* (Death by Installments, 1988), are notable above all for the minute descriptions of seemingly endless interrogations by agents of the Yugoslav secret police intended to break down a prisoner's will to resist. Known primarily for the novel *Noć do jutra* (Night Till Morning, 1981), Branko Hofman apparently was never a prisoner on the Yugoslav "Devil's Island" of Goli otok (Barren Island), but he knew enough about it to make it an important part of his novel. Embedded into what at first glance appears to be a mystery thriller about the murder of a young woman, *Noć do jutra* was explosive enough in its depiction of Goli otok to be denied publication until after Tito's death in 1981. An unusual perspective on what it meant to be an inmate on Tito's barren island of death off the northern coast of Croatia came from the pen of an Italo-Croatian writer named Ligio Zanini. If a few of the most notorious prison camps in Romania were used for the reeducation of former members of the Iron Guard, Goli otok was the principal place of internment for unrepentant Yugoslav Stalinists following Tito's break with the Soviet Union in 1948. This was the crime that sent the Bulgarian-Macedonian writer Venko Markovski to Goli otok, and the crime for which Zanini was also sent there. But Zanini was by no means the only Italian on Goli otok. His novel *Martin Muma*, based on his personal experiences on the island from 1949 to 1952, also sheds light on those Italians on the Istrian peninsula who chose to remain there after much of it was ceded to Yugoslavia at the end of World War II. Many of them were Socialists firmly committed to Stalin and enthusiastic about joining their Yugoslav compatriots in building socialism in the largest South Slavic state after 1945. Tito's break with the Soviet-backed Cominform in 1948 was taken as a bitter betrayal of their ideals. When they persisted in supporting Stalin and denouncing Tito—like Venko Markovski—their fate was sealed.

Two other genres cultivated by prison writers remain to be discussed, the sketch and the drama. The most impressive sketches were written by the Albanian Maks Velo and the Pole Marek Nowakowski. Velo's sketches are by far the

more gripping, based as they are on what Velo lived through in the notorious forced labor camp at Spaç in northern Albania. Their power lies in laying bare, often in an understated manner, the extreme cruelty of a regime, like the Albanian one, committed to the suppression of even the most basic calls for human rights through a nightmarish gulag of its own. Nowakowski's sketches are set in the time of martial law in Poland (13 December 1981–22 July 1983) when the Solidarity movement was under siege. They reveal the petty harassments as well as harsher measures inflicted by the police and security forces of a Communist regime bent on breaking the back of the most important democratic movement to emerge in Eastern Europe since the end of World War II.

Václav Havel's one-act play *Chyba* (The Mistake, 1983) dramatizes the terror within a prison cell as prisoners menace a neophyte, who appears to be speechless, and follows the line of a number of successful excursions by Havel into the realm of absurdist drama. Similarly absurdist in its premise is the Hungarian writer Árpád Göncz's play, *Rácsok* (Iron Bars, 1979), about a writer who refuses to disavow his (legitimate) authorship of the unnamed country's national anthem—which the country's dictator insists is his own composition. Yielding to no blandishments to abandon his claim, the writer prefers to remain behind bars where he is prevented from composing further poetry.

In prison Emmanuel, the writer, receives one package of toilet paper every two weeks. The officer overseeing his incarceration protests that despite his best efforts he can't stand behind everyone at every occasion to make sure the toilet paper is used properly and not for the writing of poems. The black humor aside, the issue of how Emmanuel uses his tiny toilet paper allotment points to one of the stark realities of prison life for the writers. In many instances, they were able to obtain writing paper and implements and so—like Havel or Šimečka or Djilas—could produce substantial texts during their internment. But many others were less fortunate. Jiří Mucha, the son of the celebrated Czech Art Nouveau artist Alphonse (Alfons) Mucha, describes in painful detail in his memoirs the lengths to which he had to go to be able to write while forced to work in the dreaded uranium mines in the Jáchymov labor camp. The hardships involved in smuggling his little notebooks out of the camp foreshadows the smuggling out of Tegel military prison and subsequent publication of what became the *Letters and Papers from Prison* of the heroic German theologian and anti-Nazi resistance fighter Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–1945).

In some instances, as with the Albanian poet Visar Zhiti or the Czech poet Jiří Hejda, when writing implements were strictly prohibited, the only recourse remaining was to try to compose poems in one's head and then memorize them—an activity shared on occasion with other inmates. However difficult this may be to imagine, it was practiced by more than one writer and was a way to preserve sanity by keeping the mind as agile as possible. In Zhiti's case, while

in prison he composed and committed to memory nearly a hundred poems that were published for the first time in 1993, two years after the collapse of the Albanian Communist regime. More astonishingly, the collection of 153 poems that appear in Hejda's collection *Sonety zpívané šeptem ve stínu šibenice: Ruzyně-Pankrác-Mírov-Leopoldov-Valdice 1950-1962* (Sonnets Chanted in a Whisper in the Shadow of the Gallows: Ruzyně-Pankrác-Mírov-Leopoldov-Valdice, 1950-1962, 1993), all issued from the poet's memory. For the incarcerated writer desperate to create a record of his or her imprisonment—in whatever period of history—the need for writing materials was ever paramount. Silvio Pellico (1789-1854), the author of the tragedy *Francesca da Rimini* (1818), was arrested by the Austrian authorities in 1820 on charges of being a member of a revolutionary Carbonari society and initially sentenced to death. The sentence was subsequently commuted to fifteen years of hard labor, but Pellico was released in 1830. Soon after his release, he began publishing several works he had composed in whole or in part while in prison, above all a remarkable account of his misfortunes. This appeared in 1832 under the title *Le mie prigioni* (*My Prisons*) and became Pellico's best-known work. It has been translated into nearly every European language and came to play an important role in the Italian Risorgimento. At one point in *My Prisons*, Pellico laments the hardship of getting an adequate supply of paper:

As it was not always so easy an affair to get a reenforcement of paper, I was in the habit of committing my rough drafts to my table, or the wrapping-paper in which I received fruit and other articles. At times I would give away my dinner to the under-jailer, telling him that I had no appetite, and then requesting from him the favor of a sheet of paper. This was, however, only in certain exigencies, when my little table was full of writing, and I had not yet determined on clearing it away. I was often very hungry, and although the jailer had money of mine in his possession, I did not ask him to bring me anything to eat, partly lest he should suspect I had given away my dinner, and partly that the under-jailer might not find out that I had said the thing which was not true when I assured him of my loss of appetite.²

If it is inaccurate to speak of a prison literature genre as something typologically discrete, it is appropriate to speak of writers in prison making use of whatever literary forms with which they were comfortable. But whatever the differences from one writer to another in terms of form and style, the inspiration was essentially the same: the desire to reach out to others, to bear witness, to make known the outrageous assault on liberty and human dignity, the belittlement of the individual, and the monstrous inhumanity of the camp system that had been imposed on them. These prison texts by East European authors, whether produced during incarceration or subsequently, collectively represent

one of the most important bodies of literature of the period. Now that communism has departed the stage of history in Eastern Europe, this prison literature should be regarded as a living testimony to the sometimes astonishing strength of the human spirit, the will to persevere in abysmal and extreme conditions, and the universal yearning for freedom. The desire to keep alive the memory of the camps and to draw lessons from them also informs a variety of contemporary enterprises in Eastern Europe from commemorative memorials and museums, such as the Calvary of Aiud and the Sighet Memorial Museum (which also comprises an international study center) in Romania, the Terror Háza Múzeum (House of Terror Museum) in Budapest, the Muzeum komunismu in Prague, and the museum now located on the site of Spaç prison camp in Albania, to organizations of former prisoners along the lines of the Confederation of Political Prisoners in Slovakia with which the writer Rudolf Dobiáš has been deeply involved. It has also fueled a growing body of investigative literature addressed to various facets of the East European gulag, as, for example, the Romanian Dumitru Bacu's *The Anti-Humans: Student Re-education in Romanian Prisons* (1971) and the Romanian poet and scholar Ruxandra Cesereanu's two major studies of the prison system and political torture in Communist Romania and elsewhere, *Călătorie spre infernul: Gulagul în conștiința românească* (Journey Through the Inferno: The Gulag in the Romanian Conscience, 1998) and *Panopticum: Tortura politică în secolul XX: Studiu de mentalitate* (Panopticum: Political Torture in the Twentieth Century: The Study of a Mentality, 2001). The distinguished Bulgarian literary theorist Tzvetan Todorov has also published two books dealing with the concentration camp in general and the gulag specifically in Bulgaria, *Facing the Extreme: Moral Life in the Concentration Camps* (1991) and *Voices from the Gulag: Life and Death in Communist Bulgaria* (2000), the latter dealing mainly with the notorious prison camp in Belene. No less worthy of mention is the organization in 1960 of the Writers in Prison Committee of the International PEN. The committee remains in existence and is as vigorous as ever in defense of the writer's right to speak his or her mind and to create without fetters.

The present book is organized on a country by country basis in alphabetical order. In order to frame the appropriate context for the literary texts, we first survey those historical and political developments in twentieth-century Eastern Europe that led inexorably to the ascendancy of communism in the last half of the century and that terrifying hallmark of its rule, the gulag. The authors and their texts then follow, the authors in chronological order each preceded by a bio-literary sketch with emphasis primarily on the circumstance or circumstances leading to their arrest and imprisonment. In determining which authors and which texts were to be included, certain criteria were taken into consideration. In most (though certainly not all) cases, the prominence of the writer and

the significance of the texts were paramount. At no time was thought given to maintaining an across-the-board parity. The size of an individual country had little or no bearing on the extent or severity of its prison system. Tiny Albania, isolated from the rest of the world through most of the regime of Enver Hoxha, had a notoriously repressive gulag in comparison with, let's say, that of a considerably larger country such as Poland. Romania, with a somewhat smaller postwar population than Poland, had arguably the most brutal and degrading gulag network of any in Eastern Europe, followed by Albania and Czechoslovakia. Some countries, for example, Albania, Czechoslovakia, and Romania, seem to have had more writers imprisoned than others. Although Hungary had no less dictatorial a regime, the shattering revolution of 1956 sent many thousands of Hungarians into exile, a number of prominent intellectuals and artists among them. The suppression of the revolution by Soviet tanks rescued the regime, but despite stiffening resistance as time went on reforms were instituted and the repression lessened, sparing creative artists the sterner measures that surely would have been applied to them earlier. Poland was a more tolerant regime until the birth of the Solidarity movement in 1981 and the subsequent attempt to crush it in the period of martial law. Not surprisingly, the Polish texts included in this book date from that time. Although some Polish writers wrote compelling accounts of their imprisonment in Soviet labor camps, notably Gustaw Herling-Grudziński (1919–2000) and Leo Lipski (1917–1997), the circumstances in which they were interned and their experiences were of a different order than those literary figures incarcerated in Polish camps and so they were excluded from this book. This is true as well for the Hungarian writers József Lengyel (1896–1975) and János Rózsás (b. 1926), who was in the same camp as Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and is the author of several books about the Soviet gulag, among them the *Gulag-lexikon* (Gulag Encyclopedia, 2000).³ German writers have also been excluded, in part for much the same reason. Perhaps the best-known Communist-era prison text by a German writer is *Die Zelle* (*The Cell*, 1968) by the novelist Horst Bienek (1930–1990), who also distinguished himself as a lyric poet. Arrested by the NKVD, he was sentenced to twenty-five years in the infamous Vorkuta camp in the Soviet gulag. Released in 1955 by terms of an amnesty, he resettled in West Germany where he published *The Cell* in 1968. Bienek's case is typical of East German writers who ran afoul of the regime for two reasons. He was taken into custody and sentenced by Soviet authorities, not by East German ones. And when he was amnestied, he was allowed to leave East Germany for West Germany. This recourse—of resettlement in West Germany—was widely available to dissident East German writers who were either permitted to emigrate freely or were hustled out of the country by the East German authorities. Rather than imprison them, the East German regime reasoned that it was more expedient to get rid of prominent artists and intellectuals it regarded

as troublemakers. The most notable example of this was the “Biermann affair” whereby the highly popular but troublesome balladeer Wolf Biermann (b. 1936) was deprived of his East German citizenship while in the West German city of Cologne for a concert on 16 November 1976 and forbidden to return home. The existence of two Germanies in Europe during the Communist period, with West Germany functioning as a kind of safety valve for the East German authorities in dealing with dissidence, was unparalleled elsewhere in Eastern Europe and the principal reason for German writers being omitted from this book. Bulgaria might also seem underrepresented, but the Bulgarian situation to a certain extent replicated the East German one. No, there was no second non-Communist Bulgarian state to which dissident writers could resettle or be exiled, but rather than stuff their prisons with artists and intellectuals, the Bulgarian authorities preferred other means to curb dissidence and exact compliance. Apart from the durable threat of imprisonment, their greater leverage lay in their ability to snuff out a person’s career. A writer could be denied further publication and his published works confiscated. In one internationally celebrated case, that of the writer-dissident Georgi Markov (1929–1978), the destruction was physical. After he succeeded in immigrating to London before he could be arrested and placed in a camp like Belene, he became an even greater thorn in the side of the Bulgarian Communist regime by continuing his attacks on it over the BBC, Radio Free Europe, and the German Deutsche Welle program. It was not long before the regime—with the help of the Soviet KGB—decided to kill him even though he was living abroad. After two failed attempts, it finally succeeded on 7 September 1978 (Todor Zhivkov’s birthday, incidentally). Markov was assassinated by means of a ricin-filled pellet injected into his leg by a man wielding an umbrella as he waited for a bus on Waterloo Bridge. Markov died three days after the assault, on 11 September 1978. He was forty-nine years old. His killer was never identified or apprehended.

A more typical Bulgarian case of intimidation through career busting was that of Fani Popova-Mutafova (1902–1977). A prolific and highly popular writer of historical fiction before World War II, she fell into disfavor because of “pro-German” and “Greater Bulgarian” chauvinistic writings during and immediately after the war and was sentenced to seven years imprisonment. It was a convenient way for the postwar Bulgarian Communist regime to repudiate the Bulgarian alliance with Nazi Germany during the war. However, Popova-Mutafova was released after eleven months for reasons of health. Although reeducated and “rehabilitated” into contrition, she was still prohibited from publishing anything between 1943 and 1972. A similar case involved the older writer Trifon Kunev (1888–1954), most of whose works were published before World War II. In the aftermath of the crackdown on the democratic opposition in the late 1940s, Kunev was arrested and sentenced to five years in prison (1947–1951). His books

were prohibited, and his name was deleted from Bulgarian literary history. A more likely scenario is exemplified by the highly visible poet and screenwriter Konstantin Pavlov (1933–2008). A ban on further publication by him was imposed in 1966 and lasted a decade.⁴ And even when it was lifted, it came with a condition: Pavlov could still not publish poetry, only screenplays for the Bulgarian state film industry. Pavlov characterized his own plight in a mock self-pitying poem:

No one wants to publish my poems.
No one wants to read them.
They are dangerous.
They arouse base instincts
and corrupt the spirit.

(As the man says
Who will appear at the end.)
They are particularly bad for children.
And for grown-ups.
All my friends abandoned me.
All the girls abandoned me.
A widow said I was a wicked person.⁵

In such circumstances it is hardly to be wondered that even if tempted Bulgarian writers would have found it extremely difficult, if not impossible, to translate prison experiences into literary form. Thus, the sole representative of Bulgaria in the present book is Venko Markovski, a Bulgarian born in Macedonia who wrote in both Bulgarian and Macedonian and wound up in Goli otok for his unswerving loyalty to Stalin after Titoist Yugoslavia's split with the Comintern in 1948. Although the Yugoslav Communists operated prisons and labor camps other than that of Goli otok, this barren, rocky, and inhospitable island became the principal place of internment for those deemed enemies of the state for one reason or another and the focus of almost all Yugoslav prison literature. Much about it can be learned from the massive *Goli otok* (1990), by the Serb novelist and short story writer Dragoslav Mihailović. A nearly seven-hundred-page documentary, consisting of three larger interviews with former prisoners of the camp, several lesser ones, as well as maps, detailed notes, and lists of inmates who lost their lives on the island, the work makes for compelling if demanding reading.

The issue of antecedent traditions of prison literature in Eastern Europe has no particular relevance to the texts included in the present book. These are texts that arose out of the specific conditions of that forty-five-year period of time—1945 to 1990—when Eastern Europe as a whole was dominated by Com-

munist regimes. Similar circumstances—political, social, and cultural—did not exist in the prewar period when most political prisoners were for the most part Communists who were opposed to the monarchies and right-wing governments of the time. Nevertheless there are texts dating from the post-World War II period that hark back to the decades before the war. A case in point is the celebrated Yugoslav writer Ivo Andrić's novella, *Prokljeta avlija* (*The Damned Yard*, 1954). Andrić was imprisoned for nearly a year in 1914–1915 because of his involvement in the nationalistic Young Bosnia movement that was implicated in the assassination of the Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife in Sarajevo in 1914, the event that sparked World War I. His imprisonment, in grim circumstances, eventually bore literary fruit in the form primarily of *The Damned Yard*. The novella is built around the belief that where other forms of escape from behind prison walls do not exist, storytelling truly offers a release. And so the intriguing novella, set primarily in a Turkish prison in Istanbul, becomes a demonstration of polyphonic narrative within a frame structure. Milovan Djilas, the author of the widely resonant exposé of communism *The New Class* (1957), had also done time in prison in the interwar period because of his opposition, as a member of the Yugoslav Communist Party, to the monarchy. But Djilas's recollections of his time in prisons both during the monarchy and under the Communists, and the ideas they gave rise to about ideology and the life of the spirit, appear mainly in his nonfictional *Of Prisons and Ideas* (1986).

Eastern Europe in the interwar period was no more a monolith than it is today. The political and cultural traditions of the countries comprising the region are as varied as the languages. Imprisoned writers in one country created their texts independently of those elsewhere and responded to specific local circumstances and challenges despite elements of the universal to be found in all their writings. They were by no means unaware of an antecedent *European* tradition that would surely include such extraordinary texts as Silvio Pellico's *My Prisons* and Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The House of the Dead* and in fact mention these forebears in a few instances. But direct influence is neither found nor sought in the East European prison literature of the period between 1945–1990. More germane perhaps is the matter of the awareness by the East European prison writers of the post-World War II Communist period of the writings of such Soviet dissident authors as Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn (1918–2008), Aleksandr Zinovyev (1922–2006), and Vladimir Bukovskij (b. 1942). Although there is scant evidence of any productive awareness, at least one response to these titans of Soviet dissidence appears in the preface to the hugely erudite prison memoirs published in 1991 under the title *Jurnalul fericitii* (*Journal of Happiness*) by the brilliant Romanian man of letters and later monk Nicolae Steinhardt. In his preface, Steinhardt briefly considers what he regards as the three practical and accessible



solutions to the problem of escaping a totalitarian concentration camp universe (“a ieși dintr-un univers concentraționar”). The first solution, exemplified by Solzhenitsyn’s novel, *The First Circle* (1968), is utter submission, which Steinhardt regards as a self-imposed sentence of death. The second solution is that of the character known as Troublemaker in Aleksandr Zinovyev’s wildly satirical novel *Yawning Heights* (1976), whose defiance of the system rests on a complete detachment from and utter indifference to it. The third solution, that of Winston Churchill and Vladimir Bukovskij, when confronted with evil either in the form of imminent war with Hitler’s Germany or Stalin’s Soviet Union, is to oppose it, to challenge it with whatever means possible. “Only these three solutions exist,” declares Steinhardt, and “each is good, suitable, and liberating.”⁶ As often in Steinhardt, intriguing ideas are tossed about without deeper exploration.

Now with regard to the literary texts that follow the separate author introductions, it should be noted that the originals on which the translations are based are all indicated by title, publisher, year and place of publication, and page numbers. Many of the texts have not previously been translated into English and all translations are by me except in those instances where acceptable English translations already exist. With verse, the goal of translation has been fidelity to the original as much as possible with no consideration to preserving meter or rhyme. In this sense, the verse translations are literal and not interpretive.

ALBANIA



Albania became an independent state in 1912, in the wake of the First Balkan War, after centuries of Ottoman Turkish domination.¹ Before being engulfed by World War II, the country made slow progress into the modern world. Throughout almost the entire interwar period it was ruled by a single individual, Ahmed Bey Zogolli (later changed to Zogu; 1895–1961), a member of a powerful feudal landowning family in the Mati region of northern Albania. Zogu first came to power, with Yugoslav backing, in 1924. But fearing Yugoslav designs on Albanian independence, he threw his lot in with an Italian-led coalition that included Bulgaria, Hungary, and Romania from 1924 to 1927. In 1925 he was elected the first president of Albania. After intercession with Yugoslavia by the United Kingdom and France, the alliance dissolved and the Albanian parliament declared Albania a kingdom with Ahmed Bey Zogu as its first king under the name Zog (the Albanian word, coincidentally, for bird). With considerable Italian assistance, Zog turned the dusty provincial town of Tirana into a national capital and introduced a series of social and economic measures aimed at modernizing the least developed country in Europe at the time. One of his major accomplishments as a constitutional monarch was the abolition of Muslim law in the country. However, Zog's ever-increasing dependence on Italy turned the country into a virtual Italian colony, which Zog subsequently tried to contain with limited success. Annoyed by Zog's defiance, Mussolini ordered the invasion of Albania on 7 April 1939, five months before the outbreak of World War II. The small inexperienced Albanian Army was no match for the Italians and the country was quickly subdued. Zog and his family were forced into exile, and Mussolini proclaimed Albania a protectorate under King Victor Emmanuel III. But stiff Albanian resistance, primarily by Communist-led partisans, continued in the form of guerrilla fighting first against the Italians and then against the Germans, who in 1943 felt constrained to send in their own forces in the face of Italian weakness

and incompetence. As the tide turned against the Axis powers, the Albanian partisans, under the leadership of Enver Hoxha (1908–1985), succeeded in liberating their country in 1944.

A negligible force in Albanian politics before World War II, Albanian communism came to life during the war. The Albanian Communist Party was officially founded in 1941 (its name changed in 1948 to the Albanian Party of Labor), nominating Hoxha as first secretary in 1943. Hoxha's long rule was marked by such determined resistance to outside influences that Communist Albania became a virtual terra incognita for many years. Moreover, Hoxha's rigid Stalinism eventually pitted him against his closest former allies, beginning with Yugoslavia. After the expulsion of Titoist Yugoslavia from the Cominform in June 1948, Hoxha relied ever more heavily on Soviet economic and political support. This lasted until 1956 when Nikita Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin alienated Albania from the Soviet Union, resulting in a complete break between the two countries in 1961. Desperately in need of a big power backer to replace the Soviet Union, Albania turned to the People's Republic of China under Mao Zedong in 1960. So close did the Sino-Albanian relationship develop that Hoxha undertook his own Chinese-style cultural revolution in the 1970s. Despite massive Chinese aid, relations between the two countries began deteriorating and became so strained after Mao's death in 1976—largely over ideological differences—that the alliance was formally dissolved in 1978. The oscillations of Albanian-Soviet and Albanian-Chinese relations provided inspiration for several major works of Albanian literature, among them Ismail Kadaré's *Dimri i madh* (The Great Winter, 1977) and *Koncert në fund të dimrit* (The Concert, 1988), and Fatos Kongoli's *Dragoi i fildishtë* (The Ivory Dragon, 1999).

Deprived of Soviet and Chinese assistance, Hoxha pursued a relentless policy of extreme self-reliance that despite some achievements made Albania the basket case of Europe. It remained in that backward and neglected state until the collapse of communism a few years after Hoxha's death in 1985 and indeed into the early post-Communist period. Hoxha's uncompromising foreign policy was paralleled by an uncompromising domestic policy. The small community of artists and intellectuals was treated harshly as no deviation from Hoxha-style Stalinism was tolerated. Before long, Albania had its own gulag.

Whatever penal institutions existed in Albania before communism were carried over from the centuries of Ottoman rule. After the Communists came to power all prisons in the country fell under the authority of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. In 1955 the Ministry issued an edict declaring that the prisons operated by the Communists were to be designated as quasi-military organizations to be referred to as detachments and with assigned numbers. Hence, the camp of Maliqi and later Bulqiza became Detachment 301; Spaç became Detachment 303; the most notorious of all, Burrel, Detachment 321; Tirana, Detachment 313;

and so on. The prison director was called commander, and all other officials similarly were assigned military ranks. Three of the most infamous Albanian Communist-era camps—Spaç, Qafë-Bari, and Bulqiza—were closed in 1991. The only two remaining are Burrel and Tirana, both in serious disrepair.

Spaç and Qafë-Bari, located inland not far from the historically important town of Shkodra in northern Albania, were known for their copper mines (as was Bulqiza) and for the wretched conditions in which prisoners were expected to work in them. Nestled amid forbidding mountain terrain, in a part of Albania known for its harsh winters with little sunshine, the physical setting of Spaç and Qafë-Bari alone was enough to act as a powerful depressant. Large numbers of political prisoners of every stamp and hue were confined to these camps for long periods of time, subject to humiliation and torture; many gave up their lives in them, either through execution or from the sheer inability of the human body to withstand further abuse. Particularly odious to the Communist regime, hence recipients of some of the harshest treatment, were intellectuals, writers, and churchmen, especially members of the well-established Catholic community of Shkodra and representatives of the Bektashi, an order of Muslim mystics of Iranian origin established in the sixteenth century. Some of the most prominent names in the arts in Albania passed through the hell of these camps and managed to summon up the courage to write about them: the Jesuit prose writer and publisher Dom Ndoc Nikaj (1864–1951), who died in prison in 1951; the Catholic archbishop of Durrës (1940–1949) and poet Vinçenc Prennushi (1885–1949); the important Bektashi poet Baba Ali Tomori (1893–1948), who was executed in 1947; the poet Manus Peshkëpia (1910–1951); the prominent translator of Ismail Kadaré's works into French Jusuf Vriani (1916–2001); the poet and literary scholar Arshi Pipa (1920–1997); the prolific and long imprisoned poet and dramatist Kasëm Trebeshina (b. 1926); the painter, architect, and writer Maks Velo (b. 1935); the internationally honored writer and dissident Fatos Lubonja (b. 1951); the poet Vasar Zhiti (b. 1952); and the novelist Bashkim Shehu (b. 1955), the son of General Mehmet Shehu (1913–1981), the second most powerful man in Albania until his untimely (and mysterious) death in 1981.² Several of these prominent cultural figures had been victims of the Stalinist show trials under General Mehmet Shehu and the red herring witch hunts of Koçi Xoxe (1917–1949), defense and interior minister under Hoxha until he was purged, and subsequently hanged, for alleged pro-Yugoslav sympathies at the time of the Tito and Stalin break in 1948. Ironies of this kind permeate East European political culture throughout the Communist period.

Jusuf Vrioni (1916–2001)

Best known as the esteemed translator of Ismail Kadaré into French, Jusuf Vrioni, one imagines, might have been spared the wretchedness of prison that befell so many other prominent (and not so prominent) Albanian literary figures. Unfortunately, his personal relationship with Kadaré and his immense service to Albanian culture by making Albania's most famous writer accessible to readers in a major Western language were insufficient when the heavy hand of the Communist regime reached out for him in September 1947. His offense? Allegedly spying for France. The son of an old aristocratic family, Vrioni was born on the Greek island of Corfu. In 1923, at the age of seven, he moved with his family to Paris where his father, Iljaz bey Vrioni (1882–1932), a former prime minister of Albania, was then serving as Albanian ambassador to France. Thus Vrioni's long ties with France and French culture, and his impeccable knowledge of the French language that enabled him to fulfill a different ambassadorship than his father, set the stage for his subsequent arrest and imprisonment.

Between 1939, when he made a short return visit to Albania, then under Italian occupation, and 1943, when he returned to Albania for what proved to be a considerably longer and more arduous stay than he could have foreseen, Vrioni lived mostly in Rome. By 1947, when Albania was firmly under Communist domination, the notorious defense and interior minister Koçi Xoxe (1917–1949) had instituted a true reign of terror. In an effort to destroy the small Albanian cultural elite as well as landowners and opposition politicians, Xoxe brought thousands of alleged state enemies to trial. In consequence, large numbers of them and their families were sentenced to long terms in work camps and prisons. The desire of political moderates at the time to maintain ties with the West and to slow the pace of Communist control over the Albanian economy foredoomed an aristocrat like Vrioni who had spent so many years in France and was presumed to be an agent of Western influence. Vrioni was duly arrested on 13 September 1947 and accused of being a French spy. Until his sentencing in July 1950, he was compelled to remain in custody in an absurdly tiny cell for fourteen months, from February 1949 to April 1950. In July 1950 he was officially sentenced to fifteen years imprisonment and hard labor, mostly in the dreaded Burrel camp. Vrioni's horror of what lay ahead was at least somewhat mitigated when in 1949 the man responsible for his misery, Koçi Xoxe, a pro-Yugoslav and pro-Tito enthusiast, was himself brought up on antistate charges in the aftermath of Tito's break with the Soviet Union. Accused also of serving clandestinely as an agent for British intelligence, Xoxe was hanged in June 1949. Vrioni's sentence was reduced at the end of 1958, and he was freed from internment. Upon his re-



lease he was ordered by the Albanian dictator, Enver Hoxha, to translate his works into French. Able to earn a living now as a literary translator, Vrioni soon turned to translating Kadaré. In 1997, with communism at an end in Albania, Vrioni returned to Paris for good. He served for a time as Albania's ambassador to UNESCO and was also made a member of the French Légion d'Honneur. His memoirs, which contain vivid and painful descriptions of what he experienced in Burrel and elsewhere in the Albanian gulag, have appeared only in French under the title *Mondes effacés: Souvenirs d'un Européen* (Obliterated Worlds: Memoirs of a European). The following excerpts are from *Mondes effacés: Souvenirs d'un Européen* (Paris: J.-C. Lattès, 1998), 125–28, 154–55, 167–69,³ and have been translated from French by Harold B. Segel.

from *Mondes effacés: Souvenirs d'un Européen*

I was waiting and the agitation created rage in my head. My turn to be interrogated came rapidly. I began courageously to assure my interrogators that I knew nothing. The fist blows, the slaps, the kicks to sensitive body parts, soon began to rain down on me, accompanied by crude insults. Then, rising in the degree of pain, I was given terrible blows with a cudgel, I was subjected to electric shocks, and finally I was made to undergo the torture known as “the vest.” This consisted of tying the victim's hands behind his back, then sliding a long rod horizontally between his arms and his back, laying him down on

the ground, completely helpless, and at that point after making him pass his legs over the ends of the rods, beating his hands mercilessly with a cudgel as big as an arm and crushing his sensitive parts in order to make him respond to all kinds of specific questions. That is how I was tortured six days a week, for eight months, with a certain alternation in the harshness of treatment. When I was returned to my cell, my hands continued to be tied behind my back. I was unable to sleep that way and, since I had large muscular shoulders, it was horribly painful. The only time I was untied was when I was allowed to eat.

The hardest was the period of fifteen days and fifteen nights, with the inexplicable exception of the Sundays in between, when I had to remain suspended by my hands with thirty to thirty-five kilos of chains around my neck. I barely was able to touch the ground and was forced to support myself just by the tips of my toes. To be sure, this was all calculated so that a person could not rest on his heels. I was untied for just three quarters of an hour, twice a day, in order to use the toilet; the rest of the time I was suspended day and night with this weight, this weight. . . .

I was the object of persistent interrogation, but at the beginning I was asked nothing about the French. The questions were directed at the English, the Americans, and my relations with the heads of military missions in Tirana as well as with subordinate officers. I was constantly asked what information I had been able to provide them. The questioning sometimes went in a completely different direction. They tried to get me to explain my political attitude at the time of the first so-called democratic elections of December 1945, to get me to say who was invited, who were the members of our group, and what did our meetings consist of. I was bound to deny everything, systematically, acknowledging only one single fact—that our sole intention was to form a legal opposition, within the terms provided for by the electoral law. I kept on repeating this without commentary in order to avoid implicating anyone, and I sought to demonstrate that such opposition had nothing legalistically objectionable to it. “What was your group? With whom did you get together? What did you tell yourselves? On what day did you see so-and-so?” The questions rained down at the same time as the blows, but what amazed me was that they never tried to obtain from me a deposition on the promise of more favorable treatment, a practice that was widespread and that led to the ruin of many of those who allowed themselves to be apprehended.

From September to November, I remained in the same room in the company of four or five other detainees. Later, I was transferred to another cell of the old prison where I had only a single companion. Rotting in an adjacent cell was the great Albanian writer Mitrush Kuteli (whose real name was Dhimitër Pasko), who recited to me in whispers underneath the gate his long poem “Kosova.”⁴ . . .

It was in February 1948 that I began my period of total isolation, which was to last for twenty-seven months. I was taken to the new prison in Tirana and placed in a cell that was relatively spacious but so gloomy that it might have been taken for a burial vault. There was nothing in it, not a living soul nor any object; just a single skylight fifteen by fifteen centimeters that allowed a weakened day to pass by and a very high ceiling more than four meters from the floor. For several months it was impossible for me to receive the slightest bit of information coming from the outside. But the worst was that my cell was near the river, and I knew that all the executions took place on its banks. Moreover, I understood that these cells were reserved principally for those prisoners destined to be shot. Once or twice a week I heard the same scene repeated: guards halted before a gate, opened it, exchanged jokes with the prisoner, then commanded him: "And now, follow us; you're off to the party." A half hour later, without fail, the machine guns began barking. The guards returned and exchanged remarks such as "Did you see how he was wriggling before he went down?" The party was over. Until the next one. Death, in these places in the new prison was always present. The prisoner had only one question in mind: Would he save his head or not? At the bottom of the heart of each lay the hope, however thin, of a reversal of the situation, an illusory sentiment but one indeed characteristic of human nature. But this small hope was undermined by the sounds of firing on the banks. . . . When I was again in the old prison, I managed to learn by the incredibly recondite network of information that we had succeeded in creating that at the trial of members of parliament eighteen out of twenty-four of those convicted received capital punishment. Never since has Albania known a more gloomy period. We were in the worst moments of repression. The number of people dead from torture was horrible, as was the number of executions. Few survivors of that hell remain today, and rare are those who can imagine the degree of cruelty of those years. I passed countless days with my hands tied behind my back, convinced that I was two steps away from death, thinking of my fate, of the reason for my returning to Albania, passing in review those factors that influenced my decision . . .

We were also dealing with another type of prisoner, those who, unlike us, were not opponents but on the contrary openly presented themselves as fanatic supporters of the regime that had clapped them in irons. Some Communists of the Koçi Xoxe group had been arrested and thrown into our cells, but they refused to have anything to do with us. Indeed in prison they continued to believe in the regime. They acknowledged their errors and were hoping for a pardon. These incorrigible goons were again spreading their ideology through the wall journal that they edited. They tried to denounce us in the cramped rooms as the bad elements, those who were persevering in the

“voice of treason” and refused to make honorable amends. In order to send them where? What could be worse? Could one again be “arrested” in prison? Among the prisoners a climate of ideological hunting also prevailed. The wall journal denounced in no uncertain terms those who did not wish to repent. In the prison courtyard some meetings were organized for the purpose of denouncing those of opposing views by accusing them of theft or homosexuality. They wanted us to understand full well that each of us could fall even lower if that was the will of those on high.

Our situation grew somewhat worse again in February 1951 because of a mysterious bomb that landed inside the walls of the embassy of the Soviet Union. This act was followed by some thirty summary executions on the river bank. The victims’ remains were not recovered until quite recently. A grand ceremony was held in their memory, a respectful and belated tribute.

During this tense period, seven prisoners—myself among them—regarded as the instigators of I don’t know what resistance were taken down from the floor with the solitary confinement cells. All seven of us were tossed into a six-by-six-meter cell where we remained for the next two months. Only later did we learn that we had been destined to undergo eventually the same fate as the thirty suspects who had been executed. I see again the face of an agent of the Department of the Interior, a vile type of the Sigurimi, who, during a round of inspection, flung at me: “Well now, Vrioni, are you leading the class struggle against us?” To which I responded: “The class struggle—I do not lead it, I serve it.”

Burrel

The trucks turned to the right, toward the east, inland. Soon there would be the mountains and, nestled among them, this infamous prison. There was no other detention camp in this direction.

In total, there were eight hours of dismal travel in the course of which the trucks encountered every difficulty imaginable, one after the other. We suffered at every bump, at every pothole—and God knows how many of them there are along these roads! At long last, we arrived at Burrel, amid the sarcasms and hazing of the guards.

What can one say about this prison? . . .

Burrel was the very symbol of Stalinist repression, just as the camp at Maliq had been and as the one at Spaç would be later on. Burrel was considered to be the toughest in the entire country, more so even than the Gjirokastër fortress with its damp dungeons. Burrel, in fact, was the capital of the Albanian concentration camp system. People who were dead in their cells had been literally left to die there. The inmates were compartmentalized and unable to

exit to the courtyard together. This was done so as to avoid any communication between different groups. Contrary to what went on in Tirana, it was impossible to circulate in the corridors and to visit other rooms. But we were not more constricted than in Tirana; that would have been impossible in any case. The feeling of isolation was even worse than before, and as regards visits, our families were now kept at a greater distance from us and the means of communication were execrable. Just in other prisons, a meeting with a visitor took place on both sides of two rows of railings in order to prevent any hand contact. Visitors were also nothing more than images. There was no handshaking, no embracing of one's loved ones. You just had to content yourself to see them and to hear the spare words that were permitted. I received a few parcels from my mother; sometimes she sent a cousin to bring them to me.

Everything was more somber, more gloomy than in the large rooms in Tirana. For every infraction, even the slightest, you got the cudgel. We made two trips a day to the courtyard. For washing up there were two spigots of ice-cold water, and we went to the latrines at fixed hours. Meanwhile, we remained locked up, and it was matter of survival. In the absence of forced labor, every activity for the inmates—with the exception of three or four among them—consisted of technical work. We remained squatting on our mattresses. The rooms were a little smaller: seven by five meters, which gave us one square meter living space apiece, since there were thirty-five to thirty-eight of us living together. I had the good fortune to remain there only until the beginning of 1953. Others languished there for ages!

Save for the rooms, there existed at Burrel some cells that, while not strictly speaking underground, were caves illuminated by barred basement windows level with the ground outside and barely open. These damp and cold nooks didn't hold more than three or four. They sent us there when they wanted to punish us. I found myself in one of these dungeons at the same time as Arshi Pipa, an intellectual now living in the United States, and Gjergj Kokoshi.⁵ Both of them, like me, belonged to a group of "subversives" denounced as "couriers." Pipa was already there when I arrived. As he managed to get more books than anyone, thanks to the ingenuity of his sisters, I was able to read a collection of Byron's poetry. I remember a sonnet entitled "Youth" and one line that moved me then and continues to move me even now, twenty-five years later. It said essentially: Even if sometimes the old have a certain brightness, it's that of ice.⁶

Arshi Pipa (1920–2002)

Pipa was a scholar of Albanian and Italian literatures, a poet (mostly in the Gheg dialect, of which he was a staunch defender), an implacable foe of communism, and an intense antagonist of Albania's major contemporary writer of fiction, Ismail Kadaré. Accused of "counterrevolutionary" activities, he was first sentenced to twenty years in prison. The charge was later reduced to ten years.⁷ After his release in 1957, Pipa fled to Yugoslavia and subsequently to the United States, where he taught for a number of years at the University of Minnesota. Once in the United States, Pipa published several books intended to expose what he regarded as the true nature of communism in his native country: *Albanian Literature: Social Perspectives* (1989); *The Politics of Language in Socialist Albania* (1989); *Albanian Stalinism* (1990); and *Contemporary Albanian Literature* (1991). Pipa's *Libri i burgut* (The Prison Book, 1959) is a loose account in verse of his years in prison. It is divided into nine sections: "Tirana 1945–1946," "Durrës, Prison of the Sigurimi, April–October 1946," "Durrës Prison, October 1946–July 1948," "The Camp of Vloçisht, Korçë, July–November 1948," "Durrës, Prison Hospital, July 1949–January 1950," "Gjirokastër, Kalas Prison, July 1950–June 1952," "Tirana, The New Prison, June–November 1952," "Burrel Prison, November 1952–April 1956," and "Shkodra, 1956–1957." The excerpts that follow are from *Libri i burgut* (Rome: Apice, 1959), 27, 28, 63–64, 138–39, 156, 191–92, and have been translated from Albanian by Harold B. Segel.

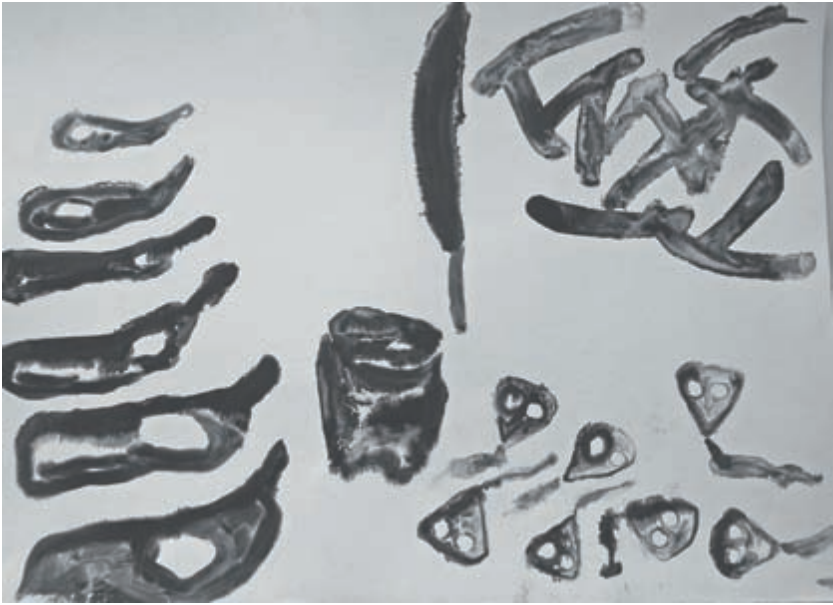
from *Libri i burgut*

Natë e parë (The First Night)

A kitchen no longer used.
Over the porcelain-tiled sink,
a kerosene lamp gives off strands of soot,
the door locked, the windows shut.

A throng of shadows packed tight against the wall.
A chamber pot behind the door. Nearby, peels
of an onion. A rat gnaws scattered crumbs of bread.
Someone drinks from a flask.

The shadows change position, inquisitive
eyes and faces emerge from under
coarse overcoats. . . .
A heavy step climbs the stairs. . . . Silence.



The crash of door bolts . . . a scream near the office.
Then another one, horrifying, long . . . behind it
despicable verbal abuse. Then the bolts slam shut . . . steps . . .

Agim (Dawn)

Dawns that cannot be seen
can only be heard.
Sleep, anguish, dreams that shatter
frighteningly. . . Confound
the snoring of the guards, the odor
fumes of gas
with cries, with clamor,
and the stench of decay.
And suddenly from the other side
a voice that beckons . . .
a general murmur!
Chirping, twittering. . .
The birds in the pines
bid farewell to the night.

Kanal (The Canal)

[A long poetic work in twenty-three parts; parts I, II, and XII appear here.]

I

Thunder over Korça. Sheets of rain
run down oilcloths over straw mattresses.
Groups of men bunch together, huddle beneath their covering,
a mess of stinking rags and human flesh.

Evening. Blood trickles from a mouth near someone.
A Gypsy youth sings a song gently,
someone quarrels over a drop of water a friend was drinking;
another curses that his bread was stolen. A guard enters.

Thrashing and kicking. Cries. A whistle blows.
Silence. Exhausting fatigue grips everyone,
whoever can grab sleep for the night does.

Moaning and groaning from the hospital barracks.
Tomorrow the canal and the marsh await all,
except those whom a forsaken grave awaits.

II

The work contingent falls in; the soup is dished out,
two to three potatoes floating in water.
Trembling hands reach out. . . . But there are many,
why wasn't an order set up, the pot's not even ready.

This one dips his bread in salt, another peels
an onion. His pocket and bag are emptied.
For dregs they rush in a jumble at the boiling caldron
like a greedy raven at carrion.

Afternoon. Sun. Now they wash up, wipe mud
from their thighs; dry their outer garments; attach patches.
Someone inspects them. One, feverish, wants medication,
like an addition for supper; another ties a shoe.
A white-haired professor in spectacles
collects tobacco from cigarette butts and makes a wick.

XII

They amaze the world, and not for nothing,
how is it possible the Pharaoh built the Pyramids

and Nero the Roman Coliseum
and artist and master terrified the public.

The slaves did all the work, as had been the custom.
This happened a thousand years before us.
But you are here today and astonished!
Now we have modern slaves: partner with them.

Canals like the very ones that connect Moscow
with the Volga, with the hydroelectric
power plant and arable soil that used to be swamp
and steppe, are testimony and proof
what slaves can do when there are millions of them.
Their work a miniature of ours . . .

Neli

Not one of my prison friends
did I like as much as Neli.
He had a monkish look,
he was a man of simple words
that blossomed on his lips like flowers,
rare autumn flowers,
that gave off the scent of life
of memory where they existed.

Dark eyes he had
beneath thick brows
alight with shadow
of sweet melancholy.

He was a peasant
from the Durrës region,
plagued by rheumatism and fever;
he had a few serious illnesses,

besides the wound in his knee
as he tried to escape,
when two of his brothers
were killed, he alone was caught.

And he was taken away wrongfully
by soldiers: he left behind

three motherless children
at home with two elderly parents.

But I never saw him,
when we stood next to each other,
bemoaning or cursing his fate,
or once letting it out on his friends.

Far from any nasty word,
from envy and anger;
he was ready to give his soul
for his friends; and calmly, without fear.

From where came so much
virtue and strength?
From a good heart,
from a heart of the purest gold
that he had . . . and didn't know it!

In prison I learned many truths
that I did not know from books,
that life did not give me.

The raw nature
of the men here became clear.
I saw: and it repulsed me,
such was the ugliness.

When, as I came to know better,
I found among them simple hearts
grown human. I wanted,
and I could go on with my life.

Burg i burrelit (Burrel Prison)

Evening. The oil lamps burn. Prison. Burrel.
Two rows of cells; throughout, toilets
that stink. Between two wings, a corridor
as among trains, with no end. The opening and shutting
of giant door bolts and locks. . . . Doors with squares
cut in the middle through which hands can barely pass.
Concrete cells. Right in front, level with your waist,
a chain; high up a window, without glass.

The next day, we get to know the yard: without foliage.
A well nearby, without an opening, water sloshes
from a bucket, a mess kit, as they pour.

A turret commands the surrounding walls,
high up a terrace, the path to which is closed to view.
On the other side just the peaks of mountains, a forest nearby.

Elegji për Gac Çunin (Elegy for Gac Çuni)⁸

And yet another died! Cry, friends, for the pitiful one!
Lament mightily his loss! Died long before his time!
At least his suffering ended, after he became wearied
fighting death! He died, and departed with death!

They squeeze and shrivel the forces of the fallow lands of Beden,⁹
right over there he was hurled into the marshes of the lake;¹⁰
the weakened youth fell. . . . He came frail of body,
he wasn't fit for a pickaxe, he wasn't fit for a hoe.

May heaven pardon him for not giving to each
the breath of music, the muse of the nightingales.
Oh, how many times amid the gloom of slaves
did he capture a languishing heart and become your balsam!

He trembled softly, wistfully, at the sound of the melody
now of the song of Shkodra, now of the Ave Maria.
He tolerated the noise of the room that all might listen closely,
lost in thought amid sweet memories that they awakened.

Gac, oh suffering friend, my old pupil,
not to hear my voice again, not to encounter me outside!
They took you away to work in the grain hopper of Burrel
when the fallen leaves crackle under foot. Gac, are you perhaps wailing?

Wail a song of freedom for which they shut you up in the camp!
Bewail an artist's life that bore no fruit!
Wail, and right after you let those lament
who proclaimed to us his value, let the youth lament without exception!

Kasëm Trebeshina

(b. 1926)

A highly esteemed poet, prose writer, and dramatist, Trebeshina had to wait until after the collapse of the Albanian Communist regime before being able to bring to light most of his literary works, which until the 1990s existed only in manuscript. Thirty years separate the publication of his first book, the poetry collection *Artani dhe Min'ja ose hijet e fundit të maleve* (Artani and Minja or the Last Shadows of the Mountains, 1961), and the post-Communist volume of stories *Stina e stinëve* (The Season of Seasons, 1991). A native of Berat, Trebeshina left school in Elbasan in order to join the resistance movement during World War II. After the war, he studied at the Theater Institute in Leningrad but did not remain long. Trebeshina's early enthusiasm for communism led him to become a member of the Communist Party and to join the Writers' Union. But these affiliations did not prevent him from addressing a public memorandum under the title *Promemorje* (Pro memoria) to the Albanian dictator Enver Hoxha on 5 October 1953, admonishing him on the perils of dictatorship and cultural censorship, stressing that the Writers' Union was an organization "of free individuals and not a part of a feudal society in which feudal rights and obligations are practiced in the strangest way."¹¹ This act of daring and defiance—spectacular for its time and place—cost him seventeen years in prison, followed by twenty years of absence from the literary scene. He has since been embraced as an early champion of political and cultural freedom in Albania and as an important writer whose many works dating back to the 1940s and early 1950s have finally begun to reach the public. After the ice-breaking *Stina e stinëve* in 1991, Trebeshina went on to publish *Koha tani, vendi këtu* (Time Now, Place Here, 1992), *Legjenda e asaj që iku* (The Legend of Those Who Departed, 1992), *Qezari nisët për në luftë* (Caesar Has Set Out for War, 1993), *Rruga e Golgotës* (The Road to Golgotha, 1993), *Lirika dhe satirë: Shfletim i paqëllimtë kujtimesh* (Lyrics and Satires: Aimless Leafing Through Memories, 1994), *Hijet e shekujve* (The Shadows of Centuries, 1996), *Ëndrra dhe hije: Drama* (Dreams and Shadow: A Play, 1996), *Histori e atyre që nuk janë* (The History of Those Who Are No Longer, 1995), *Kënga shqiptare* (The Book of the Albanians, 2001), *Tregtari i skeleteve* (The Skeleton Salesman, 2006), and *Drama: Antologji personale 1937–2006* (Drama: A Personal Anthology 1937–2006, 2006). The following excerpts come from *Lirika dhe satire: Shfletim i paqëllimtë kujtimesh* (Tirana: Marin Barleti, 1994), 3, 4, 12–13, 14, 15, 17, 18–19, 63, 80, 86, and have been translated from Albanian by Harold B. Segel.



from *Lirika dhe satire*

Aisbergu (The Iceberg)

An Iceberg from the Pole broke off,
yearning to embrace the Equator.
It made its voyage across the oceans,
above the azure vault it swam both night and day . . .

Kissed by the waves it slowly melted
but hot passion returned as it swelled,
and the Iceberg shortened its path,
dissolving in order to freeze without knowing why!
(Prison, 1954)

Mediokrët (Mediocrity)

They boast of the age and letters,
pleased, always shameless,
it seems genius itself
and all the others can learn!

Nothing knows how to compromise,
garbage that time slowly tramples,

comes from life and passes into nothingness,
lives with noise, forgets its death!

(1949)

Pamje e përgjakur (A Bloodstained View)

I have no calm night or day,
except for the ancient songs I hear.

I awaken with them at dawn,
I sit with them in the evening.

When darkness covers the place,
the rivers and waves lament
and the mountains, silent like graves,
continue the silent discourse.

The field is covered with blood
and the bodies of fallen boys,
the crows come and scratch, and eat,
when the cuckoos have taken up the lament.

Like a shadow there spins among them
a girl with loosened hair,
cadavers gaze by turns,
tears flow until the dawning.

She seeks the one who is not even known,
neither wailing, nor understanding words,
tranquility covers the Moon,
it can be heard in the midst of tempests!

And the songs that have never ended
through the centuries I hear anew:
in the heart they are reborn with me,
in the heart I bury them again!

(1953)

Melankoli (Melancholy)

The two of us stand at the window
and gaze at the Moon.

No longer as one and distant
we search for one another.