

Woman
Behind



Bars
in

Romania

ANNIE SAMUELLI

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ANNIE SAMUELLI

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To:

The memory of my sister Nora and of our friend Eleonore zu Wied-Bunea,

Felicia (Mrs Alof Leon) to whom my family and I owe our freedom,

Mother, André and Lydia, who endured persecution and ostracism rather than condemn their daughters and sisters,

And to my companions during the years of captivity,

I dedicate this book,

so very gratefully,

Annie Sammel

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PREFACE

From 1949 to 1961, I was one of a large community of women held in the political prisons of Communist Romania, all harshly convicted, not for their misdeeds but for what they actually represented.

Since the advent of Communism, citizens who upheld faith, justice and the principles of democracy—from former prime ministers to simple peasants and confused members of the working class—now were convicted of treasonable activities on just those grounds.

The elementary freedoms of opinion, speech, movement, religion and charity, hemmed in by arbitrary government decrees, had been virtually abolished, any transgression being paid for by long imprisonment.

Persecution was directed as much against the aristocracy and bourgeoisie, ostensibly the chief targets of class warfare, as against any person, irrespective of origin, who consciously or not expressed criticism or the slightest opposition to the regime. For instance, spouses, parents, children were likewise incriminated as accessories after the fact, and whole families went to prison for having failed to denounce or for having harboured a fugitive from justice for his political beliefs or for violating one of the all-embracing Communist laws.

Thus the women's prisons were filled with representatives from all ranks of society, from the intellectual down to the illiterate. As I shared their lives day by day, night by night for twelve years, I had the opportunity of studying them closely, and it is mainly on them that this book is based.

Therefore, it is neither an autobiography nor a description of Communist political prisons—former prisoners, now

in the West, have already done it in a masterly fashion. What I wish to show is that under conditions aimed at their gradual physical and mental extermination, this community of women never acknowledged defeat. Neither did the men, but that is their story.

My stories are intended to depict the psychological reactions of women of clashing generations, nationalities, classes and creeds who, herded against a common background of years of captivity under constant fear, united in the dogged determination to survive. We sought and found the means to dilute, if only for minutes, the unceasing hell of life in prison. For to live in fear for twelve years is hell indeed.

Fear in various forms haunted us, haunted me. At the prescribed hour of 10 P.M. I fell asleep with the fear of a rudely interrupted night, awoke with fear at 5 A.M., when a minute's delay spelled brutal punishment. Fear of our ever-present oppressors, our jailers, was the strongest; each flick of the peep-hole lid, each opening of the door, any apparition of a strange officer, any unusual order struck panic in the most hardened veterans like myself.

But this constant, corrosive fear was fought, and in the battle waged against it, another predominant fear was our main weapon: the fear of failing to survive until the next minute, the next hour, the next day, which might unexpectedly bring liberty and all we had come to realize it meant.

While we froze in winter and suffocated in summer, this fear bred the will to overcome starvation by filling shrunken stomachs with the repulsively monotonous empty soups, choking over the cubes of polenta* made from corn and its

* *A mixture of corn meal and husks that was cooked, cooled and cut into chunks, much like American corn-meal mush.*

ground cobs, heroically swallowing the offals that were our weekly meat ration, revelling in our daily thin slice of bitter brown bread and tea-spoonful of unsweetened jam. We knew that if we didn't, our bodies would force us into surrender. As imagination ceased functioning, we did not recoil in disgust from the nauseating contents of the chipped tin bowls; they were but the fuel required to maintain the flame of life, nothing else mattered. And to make up for it, the recital of tasty, mouth-watering recipes fed unsated appetites.

Mental starvation induced by "enforced idleness," the Communist interpretation of penal servitude, was as bad as the physical. It bred the fear of insanity. And not even decades in prison could resign us to that evil.

Female ingenuity found substitutes for needles to keep hands busy, while the pursuit of culture became an obsession. Although speaking a foreign language was severely punished, our cell soon turned into a Tower of Babel. French, German, Russian, Hungarian and the prime favorite, English, the language of our presumed liberators, were assiduously studied while we dutifully sat on the backless wooden benches. To rest or sleep during the seventeen-hour day was forbidden. In the impossibility of writing them, as the respective implements in any shape or form were banned, the lessons were soundlessly, endlessly memorized.

At first it was difficult, but our brains rapidly adapted themselves to assimilating lengthy foreign poems and texts of prose verbatim and effortlessly. This attainment, our greatest pride, boomeranged against us later. When my sister and I—just like other prisoners did—finally entered a world where bookshops, public libraries, theatres and films were accessible, the desire to take advantage of them had

shrivelled up. Only the frenzied wish to catch up with the daily concerns of the Western man-in-the-street forced us to exert will-power in order to read newspapers and magazines. But we did not know then that this would be the result, and the exact recollection of what we heard and learned stood us in good stead at the time.

There were periods when even the boon of study was denied me. During seven-day spells in isolation cells, during the frequent transfers from the base penitentiary to the seclusion of prisons of enquiry or to the extra hardships of the underground transit prison nicknamed the "Damp Place," I had to find other means of escaping from the inevitable surfacing of the agony of anxiety about my dear ones and from the urge for freedom that would madden me.

Such means were at hand: fellow prisoners requiring moral support. By helping them, I helped myself, forgetting to wallow in self-pity while pointing out shreds of silver lining in the dark enveloping clouds of despair. Listening to them lighten their burden of distress by relating reminiscences from the past and their adventures in prison stirred an interest similar to that obtained from perusing an exciting novel.

Much of the material in this book was collected in this way. Singular experiences of my own have been added. The only way I could record them was to commit them to memory during the intervals between lessons and during the long months of solitary confinement. At least, this occupation did not involve any breach of the rules. However tight security measures, however vigilant the warders, they had not yet been endowed with the faculty of thought-reading. The

hours flew by while I intensely concentrated on my subject; my mind maintained its agility, a powerful factor in preserving sanity.

When I finally emerged from prison, I found that I had won my battle of survival and, although badly scarred, was ready to take my place in the ranks of the free.

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Basic Prison Regulations

IT IS FORBIDDEN:

1. To stay in bed after the awakening bell, or to stay up after the bed-time bell;
2. To close your eyes, lie down or sleep between the hours of 5 A.M. and 10 P.M.;
3. To speak above a whisper or make the slightest noise;
4. To look out or stand beneath the window or in front of the door;
5. To listen at the door or to approach the peephole;
6. To write with pen, pencil or any other implement on paper or anything that replaces paper;
7. To communicate in any way with prisoners in other cells or dormitories, or with people outside prison;
8. To read, study or teach, whatever the subject;
9. To possess any object that can be used for cutting, sewing, filing, etc. (needles, scissors, knives, nails, broken glass, tin, tooth-paste tubes, etc.);

10. To possess more clothes than permitted by regulations, i.e.: the penal coat and skirt, two penal shirts, two pairs of penal pants, two pairs of stockings or socks, one cardigan or sweater, one short towel, three handkerchiefs;

11. To have a bowl or spoon in the dormitory;

12. To keep back any food in the dormitory;

13. During the airing, to speak or make the slightest gesture, to raise or turn your head, to bend down. You must walk at the correct distance one behind the other (about two yards), with your gloveless hands either clasped behind your back or hanging at the side of your body;

14. To be improperly dressed (i.e., without penal coat and cap) when taken out of dormitory. To speak on the passage, to stop and look through a peep-hole, to turn your head or make the slightest gesture or noise. To cough or clear your throat;

15. To speak to any of the prison staff—including the doctor—unless you are standing and at a three-yard distance. The prison staff must be addressed as “Mr.” or “Miss” and the rank;

16. To refuse to carry out an order given by the prison staff;

17. To answer back when rebuked by the prison staff;

18. To insult the prison staff.

A short summary of these regulations was stuck on some of the enquiry prison cells. They were not posted up in the penitentiaries and had to be learned from bitter experience.

Punishments for Regulation Transgressions

A). Individual Punishments

1. Standing motionless in front of the peep-hole for several hours.

2. Three to seven days in the isolation cell. This was a narrow, empty cell. A straw mat was brought in at 10 P.M. and removed at 5 A.M. For two days, the rations consisted of a chunk of polenta and two bowls of hot water. On the third day, normal rations.

3. Beating across the face or body with an iron ruler was reserved for old offenders and for grave offenses.

4. In 1957-1960, manacles were very fashionable and warders were allowed to use their own discretion and imagination. The manacles were clasped tightly just below the elbows drawn behind the back and were kept on for hours or days. If the victim were in the dormitory, they were removed for meals, but not for going to the lavatory-bucket. Offenders were also manacled to the bed. If there were two, they were manacled to each other. For serious offenses, such as communication, possession of a written soap, answering back or insulting a warder, the offenders were manacled and a gas-mask was put over their heads, which made breathing difficult. The duration was eight to fifteen hours, the gas-mask removed for meals only.

The maximum punishment was seven days' isolation with

manacles on arms, leg-irons and gas-mask. This was inflicted, once, on a chief of cell, a prisoner, responsible for order, who had allowed a Christmas Mass to take place, had not reported it and had even attended it. Collective praying was forbidden, ostensibly because it created a noise and the prayers were interpreted as collective cursing of the prison staff, therefore "insults."

B). *Collective Punishments*

1. Privation of airing or shower for minor offenses.
2. For quarrelling or noise, all the inmates had to stand for hours, sometimes a whole day and night.
3. When the offense was grave, such as tapping to the next dormitory or cell, possession of a written soap, needle, etc. that the owner did not acknowledge, the dormitory was emptied of beds and private belongings, and turned into an isolation cell, with short rations, no fatigues duty, no airing. Not even the sick and aged were exempted. They had to sleep on straw mats on the floor like the rest of us for the prescribed seven days.

The ban on communication totally robbed us of news of our families, of the outside world in general, even cut us off from the inmates of other cells. To defy it was our mainspring of hope. Only when communication was set up throughout the prisons by the medium of tapping on the walls, was a certain mental balance achieved. A regular routine, it supplied a purpose and spice to the imposed monotony of our days, and established between tappers who had never laid eyes on each other a bond that grew into lasting friendships.

In this way, members of the same family held in different cells kept in touch, stale information about relatives outside was occasionally relayed by new arrivals, messages were sent to imminently departing prisoners, a distorted, inaccurate picture of the local and international situation was gained at the risk of severe punishment. This was the most harshly penalized breach of the prison rules.

Communication between the sealed cells was made possible only thanks to the genius of a great American. To honor him, I wish to start my book by saying on behalf of thousands of prisoners—past, present and future:

Thank You, Mr. Morse

The Tribute

New York, September 26, 1962

My Dear Annie and Nora:

Well, this is already my second week in New York and I

am still enjoying the exhilaration that has possessed me since setting foot in America! I don't care if I do repeat myself—I must say again and again that nowhere in the West have I experienced the sensation of liberty to the extent I do here.

It is such a contrast to that feeling of fear and confinement that oppressed me at home since the Iron Curtain was imposed. There I was also obsessed by the thought of what you two were suffering in those horrendous political prisons. The cruelty of refusing a mother communication with her daughters for twelve years—twelve years of ignorance as to whether you were alive or dead—is something that I shall never, ever get over. Thank God, that awful anxiety is now gone. You are safe and sound in Paris, and though we are on different continents, at least I can receive a letter within twenty-four hours!

How distances have shrunk! I am perpetually amazed by the ease with which people move from one part of the world to the other. And the freedom with which they express their opinions leaves me speechless! You wouldn't believe the things I read in the press here. There is not a single aspect of home or world news left out or not commented upon. Nothing is secret from the American public—not even the President is absolved from criticism. They poke fun at him as much as they do at anything else.

As for the Americans themselves, I wish you could be here to see how kind and generous they are! I may be a foreigner in their country, but I am not treated like a stranger. After all, I am an elderly woman—a penniless refugee—but I am overwhelmed by their eager hospitality and desire to help. I think this is part of the tremendous—if

unconscious—importance freedom of communication is to the American way of life. They just cannot conceive that there could be barriers to traveling, speaking one's mind or liking people—regardless what political trend they represent.

I talk at great length with Florence and Donald, who are the same staunch friends as ever. They were such a support to me during the tragedy of your arrests. When Donald was re-posted abroad just before the trial, their frustration at being unable to help, at not having any direct news of us, has left its mark.

I had to give them every detail about events after their departure. Of course, I told them about your life in prison, how you managed to survive the frightful hardships and how you suffered from being totally cut off from the outside world, even from other prison cells.

They hung on every word as I described your struggles against this, and the invaluable assistance the Morse code had been in preserving your sanity.

Florence and Donald were avid for anything I could tell them about your use of the Morse code. Eventually, I said that you had asked me to find out as much as I could about the man you called your "beloved teacher and benefactor," as you were quite ignorant of everything about him but his code.

Donald, who retains a vivid image of his active secretary's gifts for research, immediately enquired why you had not done it yourself, Nora—there being plenty of libraries in Paris. So I sadly had to explain that one of the after-effects of prison was that neither of you sisters could yet make the effort of sustained reading. Finally, they understood that your minds had been so accustomed to listening and memor-

izing what you heard, that a long period of re-education was necessary to get them adapted again to the ordinary media of acquiring knowledge.

I then mentioned that you had also asked me to visit Morse's grave. Well, that set Florence's scholarly mind whizzing. After vainly searching in encyclopaedias at home, she went off to the Public Library. At the same time, she unearthed a lot of data which I will bring you when I return. But some bits are so breath-takingly coincidental that I want you to have them at once.

First of all, you will be glad to know that Samuel F. B. Morse was a man after your own hearts, with a lively imagination and great versatility of interests. His early life was devoted to painting. He was twenty-two and studying art in England when war broke out between America and Britain. Now listen to this:

He heard about the plight of an American prisoner of war in England and did his best to secure his release through the intervention of high-placed friends in Parliament. Although his attempts failed, he wished to make the prisoner's existence as bearable as possible. He generously extended to him a financial aid he could ill afford, since he barely managed to eke out a living on the few picture commissions he received.

Isn't that extraordinary? That this man, so sincerely affected by the thought of a compatriot deprived of freedom, was to invent a system that helps innumerable prisoners a century and a half later!

When Florence explained how he developed the code, I remembered what you had told me about working out a system of your own for communicating with prisoners in

other cells by tapping on the walls. How at first, you formed a dash by scratching on the wall with the tail of a toothless comb or a sliver of wood, and then, owing to the fact that the dashes left tell-tale lines on the whitewashed walls and the dots didn't, you used two rapid dots to replace the dash. How this would have appealed to Morse!

Just as it was a hard struggle for you to become proficient in the code after someone finally taught it to you, it took Morse twelve years to perfect his invention. After all, he had to stick to painting to earn his living. Besides, in those days there were no manufacturers of electrical appliances. The simplest essentials were lacking and he had to do everything by hand.

Morse died at the age of eighty-one. I was appalled that this great genius was not granted the inventor's fame he deserves. As there was no mention of his grave in the biographies she consulted, Florence eventually applied to museums, and discovered that he is buried in an out-of-the-way cemetery. As she was also informed that his statue exists in Central Park, we decided you would not object to our going there instead.

It was a bright cloudless summer afternoon when we set out on our thanksgiving pilgrimage. Luckily, they gave us the exact directions because Central Park is just enormous! Despite the traffic milling through the Park, the stillness in the small deserted play-ground surrounding the statue recalled the hallowed atmosphere of a graveyard. He is standing on a high pedestal—a tall man, with an intelligent, sensitive face, wearing the long frock-coat of that period. Hundreds of pigeons were flying around, perching familiarly on his head and in the folds of his clothes. The pigeons,

messengers for centuries, ignored other statues, and seemed instinctively attracted to the man who had facilitated communication for mankind.

I had brought a simple bunch of wildflowers tied up with a ribbon bearing our national colours which Donald and Florence had treasured throughout the years. I laid it at his feet and with shaking fingers tapped out the message you had written down in the Morse code: "Thank you, Mr. Morse, for all your help." I hope I didn't make any mistakes!

My dears, you know what a sentimental mother you have, so you will not be astonished that I could not stop myself from crying. Florence wept too. We thought of you both and the thousands of fellow-prisoners who would have wished to join in our tribute. I felt that wherever he was, Samuel F. B. Morse would be happy to know the far-ranging benefits his code is still bringing. That not only is his telegraph in everyday usage, but his code provides the sole source of communication between prisoners.

You two can be happy. In this contemporary world, where Morse's name just represents a code, and the man who invented it has long been forgotten, you, by your tribute, have made him come alive again.

The following day, Donald had to give a talk on the value of automation and modern technology to a large group of hard-headed business-men from all over the United States. He used this story to explain that although the scope of the electric telegraph had been left far behind by wireless, television, Telstar, etc., it still serves its initial purpose of facilitating communication in those places where the latter is banned and penalized. Apparently, everybody's attention was so gripped by this introduction that congratulations