

INTRODUCTION



Burrel, Spaç, Qafë-Bari, Ruzyně, Pankrác, Mírov, Leopoldov, Valdice, Jáchymov, Bytíz u Příbrami, Białoleka, 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 Ligio 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.

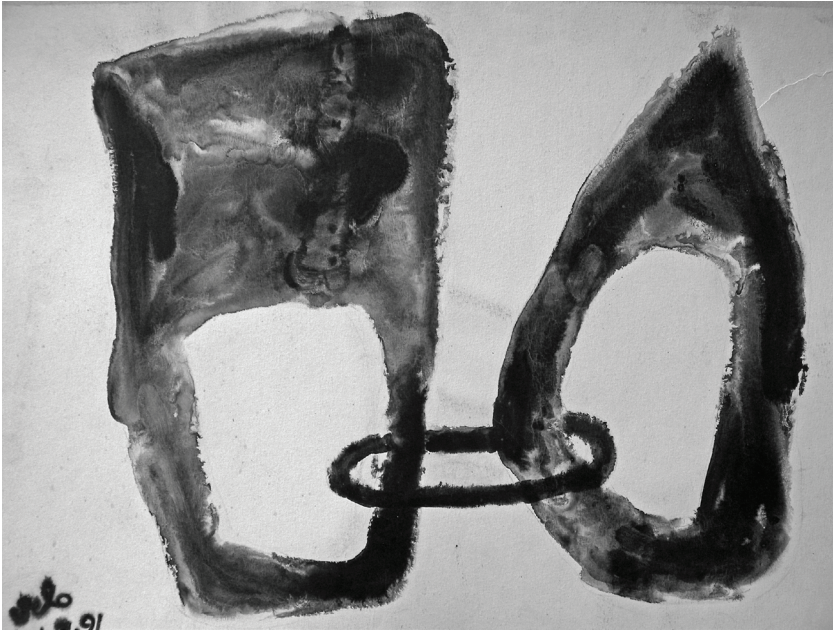
(As the man says
Who will appear at the end.)
They are particularly bad for children.
And for grown-ups.
All my friends abandoned me.
All the girls abandoned me.
A widow said I was a wicked person.⁵

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.