



RUMBA UNDER FIRE

THE ARTS OF SURVIVAL
FROM WEST POINT TO DELHI

EDITED BY IRINA DUMITRESCU

POEMS IN PRISON

THE SURVIVAL STRATEGIES OF ROMANIAN POLITICAL PRISONERS

Irina Dumitrescu

In the region of Maramureş in northern Romania, close to the River Prut and the Ukrainian border, two monuments express the ways in which human beings struggle to hold on to beauty, art, and humour in the face of annihilation. The first of these is Cimitirul Vesel, the cheerful cemetery, where in 1935 the sculptor Stan Ioan Pătraş began to etch folksy poems into the town's tombstones. The result is the brightest graveyard imaginable, in which each oaken memorial includes a carving or two of the deceased in their natural element—at the plow or with a horse for the older graves, or sitting at a desk for the more modern ones — along with a rustic verse description of the individual's life and death, written in the first person. The whole is painted in vivid Crayola blue, red, yellow, and green. What emerges from this forest of colorful wooden steles is a chorus of voices, the departed citizenry of Săpânța claiming a right to their brief stories on this earth.

A twenty-minute drive away, in the same town where Elie Wiesel was born, the Memorial Museum of Sighetu Marmăției tells a similar story, but in a much more sombre medium. Established in the notorious Sighet Penitentiary, the museum is dedicated to the memory of the victims of communism, including the prisoners who were there from 1948

to 1955 as part of a communist project to exterminate the cultural, political, and religious elites of Romania. Ironically, the first political prisoners in Sighet were not elites but a group of students, aged fifteen to twenty-four, held at the prison while awaiting sentencing for their supposed crimes. Two years later, in 1950, the prison began to be used for the slow killing of the Romanian political and intellectual class, including four former prime ministers of the country, along with a large number of priests and bishops from the Catholic Church and from the Romanian Church United with Rome.

I visited the Memorial Museum in 2006, and now, ten years later, the contents of two rooms are still vividly present in my memory. On the second floor, in room 51, the walls are covered with text—poetry composed in prison. Arranged in a nameless collage, the lines of verse depict the silent cacophony of prisoners' voices throughout the years. The inscription explains that prisoners taught each other Morse code and used it to transmit poetry from cell to cell. In fact, prisoners used a variety of tapping codes for communication, including an arduous alphabet code in which one tap stood for A, two for B, and so on, along with shortened codes of their own devising. The importance of these tapping alphabets only became clear to me later, as I read the memoirs of people condemned to solitary confinement. The tapping, which could be done without the guards' notice, provided the essential human contact solitary prisoners needed to hold on to their sanity.

Two doors down, room 53 is dedicated to the daily life of prisoners, and filled with the improvised tools and objects they made with stolen or hidden materials. I remember two things in particular: the first was a notebook filled with small, neat writing. Romanian officers imprisoned in Siberia had made ink from blackberries and used it to write down the French poems they could remember from school. The result was an improvised anthology, open the day I saw it to a poem by Verlaine. The second object looked, from a few feet away,

like a plain piece of cloth. Only when I stepped closer did I see the writing. A prisoner with access to the infirmary had stolen scraps of gauze and, by pulling out a few threads, was able to sew near-invisible letters on the white cloth. In contrast to the lively paradox of the cheerful cemetery at Săpânța, where brightly-coloured letters carved in wood spoke for people who were already dead, here the living whispered in white threads.

The hidden poetry at Sighetu Marmatiei speaks not only to individual struggles to survive in the nightmare of the Romanian Gulag, but also to a form of cultural resistance that, in various, often isolated, forms, characterizes an important facet of the Romanian people's response to the destruction of their culture by their own dictator-state. The critic and translator Adam Sorkin has described how Romanian poets active during Ceaușescu's rule encoded messages critical of the government into their lyrics. In their dexterous attempts to evade the censor, so goes a story beloved by many Romanians, writers protected their lives by pushing their craft to ever-greater levels of allusive sophistication. Sorkin describes this favorite myth of Romanian literature as a "fortunate fall," in which "censorship led poetry to a complicated mixture of indirection, deviousness, obscurity, hermeticism, and sinewy, between-the-lines toughness."¹ I, like a number of Romanians who criticize this myth, am wary of romanticizing oppression too much, of idealizing a cold, dank prison cell because it was a space where language and literature really mattered.²

1 Adam J. Sorkin, "The Paradox of the Fortunate Fall: Censorship and Poetry in Communist Romania," *Literary Review* 45 (2002): 886–910, at 889.

2 The validity of "resistance through culture" is now debated in Romania. The Romanian television network TVR+ has produced a series called "Rezistența prin cultură," celebrating forms of cultural resistance such as the public singing of Christmas carols and contraband book circulation. The counterargument is that "resistance through culture" was an avoidance of real, political resistance, and by extension even a mode of collaboration. See, for example: George Damian, "Comunismul și rezistența la români," *Timpul*, February 25, 2011, [http://www.timpul.md/articol/\(comentari\)-comunismul-si-rezistentia-la-romani-20927.html](http://www.timpul.md/articol/(comentari)-comunismul-si-rezistentia-la-romani-20927.html).

Still, it is a dark truth that totalitarian governments are profoundly conscious of the importance of the arts and humanities. The communist government of Romania demonstrated this first by destroying artists and intellectuals in a cultural genocide, and later by manipulating them through censorship, the threat of death or hard labour, and the lure of social and financial advantages. Both strategies met with resistance that at once hid itself, like the white threads on white gauze I saw in the Sighet Prison, and that affirmed the importance of recollection, creation, and meditation in moments of crisis.

Sighet was only one part of the broader undertaking the historian Dennis Deletant refers to as “the Romanian Gulag.”³ This consisted of imprisoning or sending to work camps anyone the illegitimate communist government considered a possible threat. Potential enemies of the revolution ranged from sixteen-year-olds to priests in their eighties, from former members of the fascist, nationalistic, anti-Semitic Legionary Movement to out-of-favour members of the communist party, and included a variety of religions and ethnicities: Greek Orthodox Christians and Jews joined Catholics in prisons, as did Yugoslavs, Saxon Germans, and the occasional Englishman or woman accused of espionage.⁴ The level of political engagement of prisoners also ranged widely, but the government was not overly concerned with legal establishment of guilt. It cast a wide net, and trials, when held at all, followed Kafkaesque laws of the absurd, as when a man named Ițic Goldenberg wound up condemned as a “legionary courier.”⁵ The government held trials for prisoners known to be long dead, and, to balance the score, told concerned families that their still-living relatives had perished in prison.

3 Dennis Deletant, *Communist Terror in Romania: Gheorghiu-Dej and the Police State, 1948–1965* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999), 195–224.

4 Deletant, *Communist Terror in Romania*, 213.

5 Dan M. Brătianu, *Martor dintr-o țară încătușată* (Bucharest: Fundația Academia Civică, 1996), 68–69.

The communist government used the threat of imprisonment to inculcate widespread terror and self-policing, in which goal it succeeded, but it also became notable for its pointed attack on the country's cultural institutions and personalities. The persecutions reflect the Party's attempt to gain an ideological foothold in a country that before World War II had had the smallest communist presence, proportionally, in Eastern Europe. Katherine Vedery notes some of the Party's early moves: the abolition of the Romanian Academy and its replacement with a communist version; the expulsion of so-called bourgeois professors from their university posts; the replacement of the nation's history institutes with a single one, and of its historical journals with a single, controlled publication; the rewriting of Romanian history textbooks; and even the slavization of Romanian orthography.⁶ More tragically, individuals were persecuted: philosophers, jurists, theologians, economists, and artists found their way into political prisons or work camps. The most disturbing example of this process, the notorious Pitești experiment, encapsulates how imprisonment was not simply a way to deal with perceived political threats, but also an exercise in the destruction and "re-education" of humanists. The prisoners at Pitești were primarily university students, and they were subjected to a program of torture, physical, emotional, and spiritual degradation calculated to destroy their sense of self.⁷ The final step of their journey was a demonic farce of the university: the victims were forced to become their friends' torturers and "re-educators" in turn.

Still, some writers of prison memoirs do describe the experience as a university: Stanciu Stroia titles his prison memoir

6 Katherine Vedery, *National Ideology Under Socialism: Identity and Cultural Politics in Ceaușescu's Romania* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 110–11.

7 Deletant, *Communist Terror in Romania, 199–201*. A useful short summary of the experiment is provided by Costin Merișca, *Tragedia Pitești* (Iași: Institutul European, 1997), 57–85.

My Second University, while Petre Pandrea, imprisoned at Aiud, calls the penitentiary “the last university I graduated from, as a vagabond and eternal student.”⁸ Aware of the cultural implications of their imprisonment—and noting, often, the lack of education of their jailers—the memoirists address the intellectual difficulties of their confinement as well as the physical ones. For they did not only have to contend with extreme cold and hunger, beatings, water boarding, enforced physical positioning (including during sleep), and constant supervision, but they faced intellectual challenges as well. Among these were: communicating with the outside world and with each other; ascertaining who else was imprisoned (those held at Sighet were particularly aware of the need to find out which dignitaries were also imprisoned there, and took special efforts to confirm their investigations); dealing with boredom, especially in extended solitary confinement; and, most of all, maintaining a sense of self in a system where truth and lies had lost all distinction.

The following are a few examples of the range of activities undertaken by prisoners as a response to these challenges. Like Prudentius’ martyr Romanus, who kept speaking even after his tongue was cut out, prisoners found ways to speak despite prohibitions on communication, to write without pens or pencils or paper. The most accessible medium was, of course, memory. Thus Madeleine Cancicov, who after ten years of prison learned of her mother’s death, worked through her trauma by “writing” her memoir, composed, memorized, and repeated paragraph by paragraph. In French.⁹ There were physical media too. Lena Constante describes her attempt to write with “a splinter of wood” and her own blood, and how many times she had to bite between her thumb and forefinger

8 Stanciu Stroia, *My Second University: Memories from Romanian Communist Prisons*, trans. Dan L. Duşleag (New York: iUniverse, 2005). Petre Pandrea, *Reeducarea de la Aiud* (Bucharest: Editura Vremea, 2000), 36.

9 Madeleine Cancicov, *Le cachot des marionnettes: Quinze ans de prison: Roumanie 1949–1964* (Paris: Critérion, 1990).

to release this ink.¹⁰ Petre Pandrea recollects George Manu's teaching methods: a professor of English language and culture, Manu wrote his lessons on string, tying knots for each letter.¹¹ Oana Orlea, imprisoned at the age of sixteen, had her first English lesson in the Jilava prison, scratching newly-learned words on stolen scraps of soap.¹² Prisoners created variations and adaptations of Morse and other knocking codes. Orlea explains how prisoners could communicate without tapping the entire word, leaving the end to be understood contextually.¹³ Ion Diaconescu describes the adaptations on Morse used when guards were paying attention: an engineer named Puiu wrecked his chair so that it would squeak when he moved while sitting on it, and used this function to transmit Morse signals. Later, the prisoners cough the code, an arduous process as Diaconescu points out: it took something like 250 coughs for a short message of ten words!¹⁴ Tapping, according to Lena Constante, offered a strange sort of immediacy:

I realized that one's manner of tapping is just as expressive as the timbre of one's voice. As one's handwriting. Sometimes even more so. For it is unaffected by the unconscious censorship of the voice. Or the acquired control of gestures and facial expression.¹⁵

The most impressive invention of a writing medium, however, is described by Dan Brătianu. He and his fellow prisoners were

10 Lena Constante, *The Silent Escape: Three Thousand Days in Romanian Prisons*, trans. Franklin Philip (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 21.

11 Pandrea, *Reeducarea de la Aiud*, 304.

12 Oana Orlea, *Les années volées: Dans le goulag roumain à 16 ans* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1992), 45.

13 Orlea, *Les années volées*, 138.

14 Ion Diaconescu, *Temnița: destinul generației noastre* (Bucharest: Editura Nemira, 1998), 250–51.

15 Constante, *The Silent Escape*, 235.

supplied with DDT to deal with the lice that were tormenting them. They took small, leftover glass medicine bottles they had in their cells, covered them in spit, rubbed them with soap and sprinkled DDT on top. They could then scratch up to four hundred words on this surface with a sharp object, which they did particularly for foreign language training. Brătianu mentions that, after their release, some of the people who learned English from him in this manner passed the qualification exam for translators.¹⁶

Training in, and practice of, foreign languages was a favourite pursuit of prisoners. To some extent, this also served as demarcation of class: several memoirists mention using French to communicate secretly with their families as they were being arrested. The noted historian Constantin Giurescu learned Hungarian from another prisoner and taught it to another, and practiced his French, English, and German.¹⁷ Egon Balas describes his time in solitary thus: "I had language sessions, in which I would conduct conversations in English, Russian, French, or German. Many words that I could not remember at first came to me upon repeated trials."¹⁸ Arnold Schwefelberg also spent time recalling foreign languages he had learned, especially Hebrew, to the point where he could think in Hebrew fluently.¹⁹ Prisoners describe the study of foreign languages as a way of exercising the brain. Language pedagogy joined prisoners in a common intellectual pursuit, but, though none of the memoirists I read say this explicitly, I suspect it also served as a reminder of spaces and lands outside of their own country.

16 Brătianu, *Martor dintr-o țară încătușată*, 83–84.

17 Constantin C. Giurescu, *Five Years and Two Months in the Sighet Penitentiary (May 7, 1950–July 5, 1955)*, trans. Mihai Farcaș and Stephanie Barton-Farcaș (Boulder, CO: East European Monographs, 1994), 108–9.

18 Egon Balas, *Will to Freedom: A Perilous Journey Through Fascism and Communism* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 258.

19 Arnold Schwefelberg, *Amintirile unui intelectual evreu din România* (Bucharest: Editura Hasefer, 2000), 201.

Close attention to language is particularly evident in the prisoners' use of poetry, drama, and fiction. Oana Orlea's experience of prison was changed when she was transferred to a cell with older, more cultured women. She was amazed at their interior discipline, and the rigorous program they had devised to structure their time. Mornings were filled with lessons in German, English, and history, and with calisthenics. In the afternoons, they took turns telling stories, whether invented, from films, or recollections of what they had read; they sang or recited poetry; and they talked about recipes. Rarely did they tell personal anecdotes, or anything that might make them sad.²⁰ Lena Constante began by recollecting lines of French poetry; she scanned, analysed, and learned poetic technique from the snatches of verse she could recall, and then set upon writing her own poetry, in French, of course. Her happiest gift in prison was a book on prosody by Vladimir Mayakovsky. She writes:

The reason I speak time and again of poetry is that my whole life in prison was infused with it. I had nothing. No paper or ink. The books lasted only a short while. But in this vacuum I had struck a rich vein. Words. The force of words. I had the words and I had the time. A huge amount of time. Enough time not to know what to do with it. Time lost. But lost or not, this time was mine. To allow it to become lost in vain was to lose a part of my life and I wanted to live my life. With this joining of words and time I lived. Survived. I even managed to be happy. Sometimes. I owe Mayakovsky a great debt of gratitude.²¹

In her eight and a half years of solitary, Constante also wrote eight plays, only three of which she wrote down after her release, and all of which succumbed to her "more objective

20 Orlea, *Les années volées*, 95.

21 Constante, *The Silent Escape*, 52.

assessment of my literary abilities.”²² While incarcerated next to an Englishwoman, Constante received English lessons—through taps on the wall, of course—and composed some short poetry in English as well. She would complete her verses by tapping the words she needed rhymes for on the wall, often with bizarre results.²³ Arnold Schwefelberg reports “writing” fifty to sixty lyric poems in prison, which he committed to paper upon release, as well as a play, *The Descendants of Manasse*, a two-act sequel to Moise Ronetti-Roman’s *Manasse*.²⁴ Ioan Ploscaru, who spent what seemed like an endless amount of time in solitary confinement writing poems he dedicated to Christ, remarks that, “when they moved me with other prisoners, I almost regretted the loneliness and the space I inhabited in isolation.”²⁵

Poetry was meditation. Poetry was occupation. Poetry served as secret code. Ion Diaconescu describes how another prisoner communicated with him when he was in solitary. His neighbour recited the first stanza of a poem by Emil Gârleanu:

Afară ninge liniștit,
În casă arde focul,
Iar noi pe lângă mama stand
De mult uitaram jocul.

Outside the snow falls softly,
At home the fire burns,
And we, beside our mother,
Had long forgotten play.

Thus Diaconescu, whose cell window was tiny, learned that it was snowing outside. Literature was also food. As Madeleine

22 Constante, *The Silent Escape*, 197.

23 Constante, *The Silent Escape*, 223–24.

24 Schwefelberg, *Amintirile unui intelectual evreu din România*, 202.

25 Ioan Ploscaru, *Lațuri si teroare* (Timișoara: Editura Signata, 1993), 240.

Cancicov puts it, “Sometimes I recount books. The younger girl calls them cakes. The more captivating the books, the higher the cake becomes, it becomes a tiered cake with whipped cream. Dorothy Sayers and Agatha Christie will never know the joy Lord Peter and Poirot gave my companions over the years, allowing them to forget their misery for a few hours.”²⁶

Gheorghe Andreica, who was the first person to enter Sighet as a political prisoner and was a teenager at the time, describes how the only activity that helped him to deal with the interminable hunger was prayer. Hunger, he writes, diminishes the human personality, making the person like an animal without rationality.²⁷ Prayer, for him as for many of the memoirists I read, was what fed him, what helped him to remain human. For a medievalist, the prayer imagery is deeply evocative. I have long been fascinated with the way medieval poetry describes *tasting* the Lord’s Prayer, and imagines people who do not know it as beasts.²⁸ Here, in the prison memoirs of Romanians, I found a practical explanation for this concatenation of images in the real effects of hunger. There were other distinctly medieval aspects to Romanian penitentiary life, and not only the ones one might expect. Ion Diaconescu describes how a priest, Father Balica, used Morse code to teach the other prisoners how to calculate the date of Easter in any given year.²⁹ Computus, in prison.³⁰

26 Cancicov, *Le cachot des marionnettes*, 213.

27 Gheorghe Andreica, “Cu ghiozdanul la închisoare,” in *Memoria închisorii Sighet*, ed. Romulus Rusan (Bucharest: Fundația Academia Civică, 1999): 7–104, at 32.

28 See the poem “Solomon and Saturn I,” edited and translated in Daniel Anlezark, ed., *The Old English Dialogues of Solomon and Saturn* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2009), 60–71.

29 Diaconescu, *Temnița*, 255.

30 “Computus” was a medieval technique for calculating the date of Easter. For more information, see Arno Borst, *The Ordering of Time: From the Ancient Computus to the Modern Computer*, trans. Andrew Winnard (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

As I noted earlier, memoirists, often following consciously in the steps of Maxim Gorky, repeatedly refer to the prison as their second, or lifelong, university. Schwefelberg writes:

the downright febrile intellectual activity of the immense amount of “free” time I had then fixed much of my knowledge in my memory, clarified many ideas, helped me to form a well-articulated system of beliefs. So: a “university” all alone, in jail!³¹

For the jailed professors at Sighet, this was not a metaphorical construction. Giurescu’s memoir contains a lengthy list of seminars held by various faculty members on history, geography, and literature, filled out by the singing of Romanian songs and Italian canzonette. Some examples of the history lessons: “Foreign travelers in Romanian provinces” (twenty-five lectures), “Surcouf, the French Buccaneer,” (one lecture) and “My biography” (twenty lectures). In literature, faculty lectured on *Le Roman de Tristan et Iseut*, “from the modern version by Bedier,” a French version of Poe’s *Descent into the Maelstrom*, and *Gone with the Wind*.³² Most touchingly, and in rather Borgesian manner, Giurescu lists the “new scientific works” he planned and formulated, including:

The History of Bucharest, Fishing and Fish Hatcheries in Our Past, a series of articles on History, Geography, Cartography, Archeology, Philology and Bibliography, about 260 articles, [and the] translation of *The History of Romanians* . . . in French, German, English, Italian, Spanish, Greek, Serbian, Bulgarian and Turkish, each translation having new information about the respective people. The titles will be something like *The History of Romanians with emphasis on their*

31 Schwefelberg, *Amintirile unui intelectual evreu din România*, 202.

32 Giurescu, *Five Years and Two Months in the Sighet Penitentiary*, 103–07.

*relationship with the Greeks or The History of Romanians with emphasis on their relationship with the Bulgarians.*³³

Through language and scholarship, through prayer and poems, by teaching and composing, the prisoners of the Romanian Gulag brought the humanities into a space where humanity itself was under attack. A story from Dan Brătian illustrates how literature could be used as inspiration and secret code, a door to a place beyond the power of Party leaders and prison guards. During a search, a guard discovers a sentence written on the cell wall: "He who does not know how to die, does not deserve to live," signed "Seneca." Brătianu continues:

We were immediately asked which one of us was Seneca. When we responded with total ignorance, the guard said to us, "Don't worry, you pigs, *we'll* find him!"³⁴



Many of the memoirists I read for this essay used the arts and humanities to maintain their spirit in conditions of extreme duress. Sometimes they also used the arts to affirm their identities as scholars, intellectuals, Christians or Jews. Some were aware that they were considered enemies of the state due to their elite status in pre-communist Romanian society, and they composed in French or quoted Seneca in stubborn defiance of the new, anti-class and by extension anti-intellectual order.

At the same time, there is something surprisingly egalitarian about their methods. Anyone could make up a story or describe a recipe. Anyone could write a poem, in Romanian if

33 Giurescu, *Five Years and Two Months in the Sighet Penitentiary*, 108.

34 Brătianu, *Martor dintr-o țară încătușată*, 64–65.

not in French. I learned the myth of the “fortunate fall” from my émigré Romanian parents, knowing that even if I read the books or plays they mentioned, I would never be able to grasp the hidden meanings they had thrilled to. But I was handed another cherished myth as well, that of Romanians as natural, organic poets, rhymes running in his peasant blood. In this sense, there is not such a large distance between the rustic verse carved into the tombstones of the Cheerful Cemetery and the Morse compositions of inmates at Sighet.

I am wary of this story even as I am charmed by it. I have studied and taught literature in countries where it is considered a frilly indulgence, not a matter of life and death. So I gather these old Romanian stories with unacknowledged longing, because they testify to a world where letters were as vital as I believe they are, and not only to a few, entitled people. A woman I know grew up in the western part of Romania, which had more connections to the outside world than Bucharest. When she was in high school, foreign novels would circulate in handwritten copies among the students, a precious contraband. Each student was allowed one night with a volume, so when she got her hands on a book she would tape dark paper over the window on her door and spend the night reading under the covers, with a flashlight. How am I not to be seduced by such tales, when my English majors consider just about everything more important than reading English literature? Would it be any help to tell them about a place where, after the 1989 revolution, people queued outside of bookstores and kiosks to buy words and ideas?³⁵ People desire things they do not have, and I cannot teach my students that hunger anymore than I can understand the literal hunger or pain or fear experienced by the memoirists I read.

35 “Polarizare și tensiuni în presa din 1990,” *Digi24*, January 31, 2015, <http://www.digi24.ro/Stiri/Digi24/Special/1990+-+Anul+o/Polarizare+si+tensiuni+in+presa+din+1990>

The first Romanian prison story I learned is not in any book. In the summer of 2000 I worked at the Canadian embassy in Bucharest, translating interviews and doing background searches on visa applicants. I worked in a room with a group of vivacious, highly educated young women who had figured out that secretarial work for a foreign employer gave you an income five times as high as that of a senior university professor. One day, one of the women told me the story of her in-laws' marriage. Her father-in-law had studied literature and been imprisoned, like other university students, in Pitești. There, he was forced to eat his own excrement and subjected to all the other usual degradations. But he had one escape: he knew French, his cellmate knew English, so they passed the time teaching each other their languages.

Time passed, he was released, and sent to work, like many other intellectuals, in a factory. Under communism, educated people found their way to menial labour whether they wanted to or not. One day when he was leaving the factory he ran into a young woman, and they fell to talking. Like him, she had studied literature and gone to prison. She had also fallen in love with another factory worker, but was warned off from marrying him: due to her imprisonment she had a bad file, or *dosar*, with the government, while her fiancé's was clean. She was told that if she married him, she would ruin his file for life. So she called off the engagement. But now she had met another convict, and the way I heard the story she turned to him at one point and said, "Since you have a bad file and I have a bad file, why don't we marry each other?"

They married. He became a literary translator and used the English he had acquired in his cell at Pitești to render Byron into Romanian. Their apartment became a kind of salon, its doors open to artists and writers of all stripes. The forces that had attempted to destroy them brought them together.

It's a beautiful fairy tale, and like most modern fairy tales, this one veils its darker parts. But I think we can appreciate

its beauty even while looking directly at the ugliness, precisely because the ugliness is what makes it possible. I gather prison tales because their authors have a laser-like focus on what matters. They understand the power of stories and melodies not simply to move and entertain, but to sustain and resist. The people who put them in prison understood this too, thought that someone who lectured on Tristan and Isolde posed a danger to their ideology. Tyrants can be such good literary critics, censorship the best reading list.

We have been taught to think of art and scholarship as decorative, unnecessary, wasteful. We have been taught to think of it as optional. I do not want my students to understand what these memoirists did; the price would be much too high. But I also do not want them to fall prey to this new, more insidious censorship, hard to fight because impossible to see. Each of us will have a second university one day. I hope we also have the reading list.

CONTRIBUTORS

Inspired by Denis Ferhatović's essay, we asked the contributors to name one or more books they would never burn, even for fuel.

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Andrew Crabtree lives in Winnipeg, Canada, in a small apartment where it's always summer. When not teaching living languages (or studying dead ones), he is often found with

his nose in a book, and would sooner succumb to the ravages of Canadian winter than burn any of them.

Cara De Silva is a writer, award-winning journalist, scholar (member of the National Coalition of Independent Scholars), lecturer on the topics of food, food history, culture, ethnicity, New York, and Venice. For over a decade, she wrote for *Newsday/New York Newsday*, where her specialty was ethnic New York. She edited *In Memory's Kitchen: A Legacy from the Women of Terezín*, which became one of the *New York Times's* noteworthy books of the year and a *New York Times* and *Publishers Weekly* bestseller. Her recent essays can be found in *Savoring Gotham* (Oxford, 2015), *Words: A Norton Anthology of Food Writing* (Norton, 2015), and the *Oxford Companion to Sugar and Sweets* (Oxford, 2015). Other articles have appeared in the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, *Gastronomica*, and *Saveur*. Her current project is a book on sixteenth century Venice, and she continues to research and lecture on "War and the Food of Dreams." There are hundreds of books she would want to save for humanity (and herself) if the last copies were to be burned. But among the dearest and most precious to her are Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur*; *The Collected Works of W.B. Yeats*; and P.L. Travers' *Mary Poppins*, a book that has dazzling meaning, breadth, purpose, and value far beyond what the Disney film has reduced it to in the popular mind.

Irina Dumitrescu teaches medieval literature at the University of Bonn, and writes on literature, food, immigration, and dance. Her scholarly essays have appeared in *PMLA*, *Anglia*, *Exemplaria*, *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, and in various collections. Her belletristic writing has appeared in *The Yale Review*, *The Southwest Review*, and *Petits Propos Culinaires*. She blogs about dance at atisheh.com and about culinary disasters at foodgonewrong.com. The two books she needs to live

are *The Poetical Works of Byron* and *Penguin Modern Poets 10: The Mersey Sound*.

Denis Ferhatović currently works as an Assistant Professor of English at Connecticut College in New London, CT. He has published scholarly articles in *Neophilologus*, *Studies in Philology*, and *Forum for Modern Language Study*, and delivered talks in the US, Western Europe, Turkey, and the Balkans. He would never burn *Светом, мојом браћом* (“The World My Brother”), a collection of poems by Liljana Dirjan.

Susannah Hollister recently returned to the Hudson Valley after teaching as Lecturer and ACLS New Faculty Fellow in the University of Texas system. Her work on poetics, geography, and social feeling has appeared in *Twentieth-Century Literature*, *Contemporary Literature*, *Chicago Review*, *Bat City Review*, and elsewhere. With Emily Setina, she edited Gertrude Stein’s *Stanzas in Meditation: The Corrected Edition* (Yale, 2012). Her first literary love was W.B. Yeats, whose poems she could never burn.

Prashant Keshavmurthy is Assistant Professor of Persian Studies in the Institute of Islamic Studies, McGill University. He is the author of *Persian Authorship and Canonicity in Late Mughal Delhi: Building an Ark* (Routledge, 2016). He spends his days looking for real toads in his imaginary rose garden of Classical Persian and Urdu literature. If abandoned on a deserted island with the choice of only one book, he would choose to bring Abdul Qadir Bedil’s three-volume *Divan* or collection of poems whose heft would ensure enough dense poetry would be left over to read after culling it for fire-fuel.

Sharon Portnoff is Associate Professor of Religious Studies at Connecticut College. She holds degrees from St. John’s College (Annapolis), Harvard University, and the Jewish Theological Seminary. She is the author of *Reason and Revelation*

Before Historicism: Strauss and Fackenheim (University of Toronto Press, 2011) and co-editor of *The Companionship of Books: Essays in Honor of Laurence Berns* (Lexington Books, 2012) and *Emil L. Fackenheim: Philosopher, Theologian, Jew* (Brill, 2007). Her most recent articles are “‘Not in Our Stars’: Primo Levi’s ‘Reveille’ and Dante’s *Purgatorio*” (*Idealistic Studies*) and “Reenacted Humanism: *If This is a Man* and Primo Levi’s ‘New Bible’” (*The Value of the Particular: Lessons from Judaism and the Modern Jewish Experience*). Her poems have appeared in *Midstream* and *The Poetry Porch* (www.poetryporch.com).

Anand Vivek Taneja is Assistant Professor in the Department of Religious Studies at Vanderbilt University. He received his PhD in Anthropology from Columbia University in 2013. His research and teaching interests include the anthropology of religion, historical and contemporary Islam and inter-faith relations in South Asia, everyday life and postcolonial urbanism, Urdu literature, and Bombay cinema. His peer-reviewed articles have been published in the *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory and Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*. His other writings have appeared in *Seminar*, *The Sarai Reader*, *Economic and Political Weekly*, *The Indian Quarterly*, and on the blogs *Chapati Mystery* and *Kafila*. He is currently working on a book on time, Islam, and enchantment in the medieval ruins of Delhi. One book he would never burn is Walter Benjamin’s *Illuminations*.

Judith Verweijen is a researcher at the Nordic Africa Institute, Sweden, and the Conflict Research Group at Ghent University, Belgium. She specializes in the study of civilian-military interactions, processes of militarization, and the internal workings of state and non-state armed forces in the Kivu provinces of the eastern DR Congo. She has conducted extensive field research in this area since 2010, including among various army units and rebel groups. Recent

publications include articles on rebel-military integration (*African Affairs*, 2013), military economic involvement (*Review of African Political Economy*, 2013), and military interference in disputes between civilians (*Third World Quarterly*, 2014). Due to her drift for exploration, she would always save from being burnt the one book she has not yet read.

RUMBA UNDER FIRE

THE ARTS OF SURVIVAL FROM WEST POINT TO DELHI

A professor of poetry uses a deck of playing cards to measure the time until her lover returns from Afghanistan. Congolese soldiers find their loneliness reflected in the lyrics of rumba songs. Survivors of the siege of Sarajevo discuss which book they would have never burned for fuel. A Romanian political prisoner writes her memoir in her head, a book no one will ever read. These are the arts of survival in times of crisis.

RUMBA UNDER FIRE proposes we think differently about what it means for the arts and liberal arts to be “in crisis.” The contributors are literary scholars, anthropologists, and poets, covering a broad geographic range—from Turkey to the United States, from Bosnia to the Congo. In prose and poetry, they explore what it means to do art in hard times. How do people teach, create, study, and rehearse in situations of political crisis? Can art and intellectual work really function as resistance to power? What relationship do scholars, journalists, or even memoirists have to the crises they describe and explain? How do works created in crisis, especially at the extremes of human endurance, fit into our theories of knowledge and creativity?

RUMBA UNDER FIRE includes essays, poetry and interviews by Tim Albrecht, Carla Baricz, Greg Brownderville, William Coker, Andrew Crabtree, Cara De Silva, Irina Dumitrescu, Denis Ferhatović, Susannah Hollister, Prashant Keshavmurthy, Sharon Portnoff, Anand Taneja, and Judith Verweijen.