RE-CREATION OF NORMALITY IN THE ABSURD SPACE OF DEPORTATIONS TO THE SIBERIAN GULAG[1]

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Abstract: The deportations to Siberia during and immediately after World War II are part of a phenomenon of forced migration. The deportees experienced a sense of loss which was coupled with the feeling that their home (and hence their normality) had been stolen from them. In this context, one of the consequences of deportations, then, is the loss of human dignity when everything you have, including your ability to determine your own life, is taken away from you. This paper engages various ways by which the deportees attempted to recreate a space of normality in the midst of an absurd reality. These "ways" can be organized in two categories: artistic expression and reconnection with artifacts coming from home.

Keywords: deportation; Siberia; Gulag; music in prison; human dignity.

Résumé: Les déportations en Sibérie pendant et immédiatement après la second Guerre Mondiale font partie d'un phénomène de migration forcée. Les déportés ont vécu l'expérience d'un sentiment d'être perdu, en conjonction avec la tragédie que leur maison (et du coup leur normalité) leur a été volée. Dans ce contexte, une des conséquences des deportations a été la perte de la dignité humaine au moment où tout ce qu'on a, y compris l'abilité de determiner sa vie, est enlevé de soi. Cet article considère les façons que les deportés ont employées pour recréer une enclave de normalité au milieu d'une réalité absurde. Ces "façons" peuvent être organizées en deux catégories: l'expression artistique et la connection avec des artefacts provenus de la maison.

Mots clés: déportation; Sibérie, Goulag; musique en prison; dignité humaine.

The decision to migrate presupposes a difficult uprooting, and taking such a step usually involves a strong motivation that has two aspects: one negative (the difficulty of one's life or the perils for one's life), and one positive (the possibility or the hope for a better life). One can thus say that people migrate toward a hopeful

[1] I am indebted to Mark Klus for helpful editorial comments.

unknown. The 20th century, however, experienced a different kind of migration: the one in which the agency is not internal and leads to a feared and undesired unknown that is associated with persecution or the end of life.

This phenomenon is not new - one other example is the forced migration of populations for slavery. In that case, as in the case of deportations to Siberia, forced migration raises important problems regarding human freedom, agency, and hope, all of them elements that we traditionally associate with human dignity. While discussing examples of people deported from Bessarabia to Siberia, my purpose is to explore the possibility of maintaining human dignity when the three elements mentioned above are absent.

I suggest that, in these cases, human dignity is associated with the place of origin, which becomes for the deportees the means of connection with their own dignified selves. This connection is experienced in the fortuitous encounters with others coming from the same origin (or with objects from home) and the engagement in artistic acts, all of them becoming genuine sacred places.

1. HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The deportations of Romanians from Bessarabia to Siberia during and immediately after WWII took place in three waves. The first wave occurred on June 12-13, 1941. Bessarabia had been annexed by the Soviet Union as a consequence of the 1939 Molotov Ribbentrop Pact, or the Hitler Stalin Pact[2]. The Soviet power proceeded to major deportations, just as it did in the three Baltic states and also the occupied eastern Poland. Roger Moorhouse explains, "*Having identified their opponents, the Soviet authorities in the newly annexed republics then moved to eliminate these groups in the early summer of 1941, mindful of the growing threat*

[2] See MOORHOUSE, R., *The Devils' Alliance: Hitler's Pact with Stalin, 1939-1941*, New York 2014.

on the western frontier and the pressing need to preserve political control in any coming crisis."[3] The other two waves took place after the war, July 5-6, 1949 and March 31-April 1, 1951. The scenarios were similar, regardless of the province where they took place or the time. "*Those affected awoke in the early hours to the arrival of arrest parties, usually a couple of local militiamen accompanied by Red Army or NKVD personnel*"[4]. Given no time to gather any clothes, they were thrown onto trucks and taken to the railroads to be sent to Siberia. Aino Roots, deported from Estonia in 1941, had "*only a quarter hour to organize her three small children*"[5]. She remembers,

> "*We had to get ready so quickly that all I had time for was to pull a coat over my nightgown. I had bare legs, shoes and nothing on my head. One of the men kept screaming that we only have fifteen minutes! What can you do in the fifteen minutes? So I went to Siberia wearing just a nightgown, like a madwoman, with a coat over it*"[6].

Margareta Cemârtan Spânu, deported from Bessarabia during the second wave, remembers the road to the railroads:

> "*People were crying, the women, and especially those seeing their lots in passing, plucked their hair out from their heads. Poor people! They were leaving behind their houses, their gardens, the wealth they gathered, and they went without knowing where to be «food for the wolves,» as the activists said. They did not give any explanation, they did not say, look, we will take you over there to work, or something like this. No! «Food for the wolves! You'll freeze there; the wolves will eat you!» That's all they said*"[7].

The deportees were taken to Siberia, to the Gulag. The term "*GULAG is an acronym, meaning Glavnoe Upravlenie Lagerei, or Main Camp Administration*."[8] I use the term with the broader meaning it has acquired over time:

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[3] Ivi p. 246.
[4] Ivi p. 247.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Ibid.
[7] MOISE, M., *Do Not Avenge Us: Testimonies about the Suffering of the Romanian Deported from Bessarabia to Siberia*, Citrus Heights 2016, p. 35.
[8] APPLEBAUM, A., *Gulag: A History*, New York 2003, p. xv.

> "*not only the administration of the concentration camp but also the system of Soviet slave labor itself, in all its forms and varieties: labor camps, punishment camps, criminal and political camps, women's camps, children's camps, transit camps. Even more broadly, «Gulag» has come to mean the Soviet repressive system itself, the set of procedures that prisoners once called the «meat-grinder»: the arrests, the interrogations, the transport in unheated cattle cars, the forced labors, the destruction of families, the years spent in exile, the early and unnecessary deaths.*"[9]

The Soviet concentration camps formed a part of the oppressive system of the new Bolshevik state from its beginning. The communist government was constituted against real or imaginary enemies and continued to search for them throughout its existence. It posited the existence of a class war and class enemies, even if those imprisoned did not belong uniquely to a class but emanated from any social strata as long as they opposed the communist ideology. The approach, however, was similar to the Nazis, who persecuted and murdered people for who they were. As Anne Applebaum rightly remarks, "*people were to be sentenced not for what they had done, but for who they were*"[10]. Even if children did nothing against the regime, they carried with them the "fault" of their parents, and were known as children of class enemies for the duration of their lives. Nevertheless, the purpose of the deportations that took place during and after World War II in the newly acquired Soviet territories was not only to punish real or imaginary enemies, but also to dislocate people from their homes so that the social and national fabric of the society in the ethnic territories could be remade.

2. A WORLD OF CHAOS, DANGER, BLIND CHANCE, AND SUDDEN LOSS

The purpose of this paper is not to provide a historical account of these events. In recent years, historians have directed their attention to the life of the gulag, and I consider such approach necessary to shed light on the intricate aspects of

[9] Ivi p. xv-xvi.
[10] Ivi p. 6.

WWII, but also on the persecutions taking place in a country that later became one of the Allies. My purpose, though, is more limited in scope: it engages the various ways in which deported people responded to absurd situations. To this end, I primarily consider personal narratives, hence elements of oral history. While they certainly do not provide a complete picture of the deportations, they allow us to glance into the personal traumas of people whose reality became incomprehensible in the blink of an eye.

The stories that I mention are told by people who were deported to Siberia in various stages. The absurd and the absence of human dignity dominated each story, and, at least in this sense, we can perceive the same absence of rationality in all of them. From the moment they were taken from their homes to their actual deployment in a completely foreign land, people were faced with an absurd situation. Most often, deportation came as a surprise. While the deportation lists usually included the leaders of various communities, at times people were placed on them just because the authorities needed to fulfill a quota, so they added those with whom they were connected the least. The experience of the absurd continued with scenes in which people were thrown into and locked inside cattle trains for days, having only a bucket of water for drinking and one for necessities.

The experience of being deported is dominated by confusion and absurdity, which make for a second kind of uprooting. Thus, one may say that the people who were deported were twice uprooted. First, they were taken from their familiar place, from the center that allowed them to make sense of the world around them. The second kind of violence consisted in the annihilation of the core of one's being.

The deported could no longer make sense of the world around them not only because nothing was familiar, but also because the center from which they made sense of the world disappeared. This is, perhaps, one of the most important aspects that differentiates voluntary from involuntary migration. In voluntary migration,

humans continue to experience a center of volition, from which they attempt to make sense of the unknown. In the involuntary one, humans are divested of anything that would allow them to preserve a certain level of meaning. The only meaning they were allowed to experience was that given by their persecutors.

The Siberian universe of concentration camps has been described as a space outside of reality, one in which the rules of logic and of normal behavior no longer apply. It is a space in which rationality is absent. Even in the 19th century, that is, prior to its use by the Bolsheviks, Dostoevsky paints it as a world apart: "*Here was our own peculiar world, unlike anything else at all; here were our own peculiar laws, our own dress, our own morals and customs, a house of the living dead, a life such as is lived nowhere else, and people set apart*"[11]. This experience begins prior to Siberia, at the first moment the deported are taken from the bosom of their families. Anne Applebaum emphasizes that the transportation to the Gulag, especially for those went through it for the first time[12], "*was pregnant with symbolism. Arrest and interrogation had been an initiation into the system, but the train journey across Russia represented a geographical break with the prisoner's former life, and the start of a new one*"[13]. The entire system was a machine of breaking any kind of connection a human being could form, separating prisoners from familiar places and casting them at every turn into spaces deprived of any sense. Applebaum says, "*Every journey was a wrenching leap into the unknown, a move away from familiar cell mates and familiar arrangements, however poor those might be*."[14] The stories of transportation contain images of a world in which any form of human dignity disappears. The guards decided if and when the prisoners could relieve themselves.

[11] DOSTOEVSKY, F., *The House of the Dead*, Oxford 2008, p. 7. Gustaw Herling uses this paragraph as an epitaph of his own book, *A World Apart*, Penguin Books, 1986.
[12] The Bolsheviks had a system of moving the prisoners from prison to transit prison, and then from transit prison to camp.
[13] APPLEBAUM, A., *Gulag*, cit., p. 160.
[14] Ibid.

"*As a result, virtually every memorialist who describes the trains mentions the horrors associated with urination and defecation*"[15].

The lack of any kind of humanity stands out even more when the stories of transportation include children. Applebaum recounts the story of Mariya Sandratskaya. When she was arrested, her child was two months old. She ended up in a transport train that was filled with nursing mothers.

> "*For eighteen days, sixty-five women and sixty-five infants traveled in two cattle cars, unheated except for two very small, very smoky stoves. There were no special rations, and no hot water to bathe the children or to wash the diapers, which subsequently turned 'green with filth.' Two of the women killed themselves, slitting their throats with glass. Another lost her mind. Their three babies were taken over by the other mothers*"[16].

In his *The Quest: History and Meaning in Religion*, Mircea Eliade emphasizes that

> "*it is difficult to imagine how the human mind could function without the conviction that there is something irreducibly real in the world, and it is impossible to imagine how consciousness could arise without conferring meaning on man's drives and experiences. The awareness of a real and meaningful world is intimately related to the discovery of the sacred. Through the experience of the sacred, the human mind grasped the difference between that which reveals itself as real, powerful, rich, and meaningful, and that which does not—i.e., the chaotic and dangerous flux of things, their fortuitous, meaningless appearances and disappearances.*"[17]

The "reality" of those deported from the former province of Romania very much resembles what Eliade describes in the last sentence: a world of chaos, danger, blind chance, and sudden loss.

[15] Ivi, p. 163.
[16] Ivi, p. 166.
[17] ELIADE, M, *The Quest: History and Meaning in Religion*, Chicago 1969. These words appear on the first page of the preface, and the pages of the preface are not enumerated.

The attack upon the core of a human being within communist regimes is not a characteristic that belongs exclusively to the phenomenon of deportations. Whether it consisted of deportations, imprisonment, or torture, communist persecution has included the attempt to destroy the core of one's being. Attempting to create a 'new man' who has only one allegiance, that is, the one to the party-state, the communist regimes had to destroy people's personalities and their connections with each other. For this purpose, they transformed the world into an absurd realm, in which everything that used to make sense was destroyed. Persecution was inflicted haphazardly, just as many were deported to Siberia not because they did something, but rather because the authorities needed to fulfill a quota. Man became wolf to man, and the respect for the dignity of one's fellow disappeared. Within such a realm, where nothing provides meaning, people lose their humanity and thus can no longer put up strong resistance. Perhaps the most radical case is the Pitesti Phenomenon, in which the persecutors went to extreme lengths to destroy a human soul by creating a space in which nothing made sense. The experiment was in essence an attempt to commit "a crime that had no body": a crime against the soul. I cite here Dumitru Bacu's book, *The Anti-Humans*. He says,

> "*The biological destruction of an adversary no longer satisfies, or pleases; or maybe it does not pay any more. The wrecking of the victim's mind and soul is more appealing and more useful: the destruction of human characteristics; the reduction of man to a level of total animality; a definitive dehumanization that transforms what was human into a docile, malleable protoplasm, instinctively responsive to all the trainer's whims – a zombie*"[18].

[18] BACU, D., *The Anti-Humans*, Englewood 1971, p. 3. For more info on the Piteşti Phenomenon, see CALCIU, G., *Interviews, Talks, and Homilies*, St. Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, 2010 and IERUNCA, V., *Fenomenul Piteşti*, Bucureşti 1990. The process of changing a human soul was supposed to take place in four steps and used both physical and psychological torture. The "success" was determined by the transformation of the tortured one into a torturer, a "reeducated." The persecutors were former friends, who lived in the same cell with their victims, and so there was no moment in which one could take a break from the absurd. The 'success' of the Pitesti phenomenon depended on the absence of normality. All events were supposed to be a manifestation of the absurd. In fact, even imagination reflected the absurd. The inmates were forced to participate in various scenes that mocked their faith.

How can then a human respond to an irrational, absurd environment? In the context of deportations the question raises issues about people's ability to maintain their dignity while the world treats them as expendable objects. Since one cannot rationally answer lack of rationality - anything that is rational sounds incomprehensible within an absurd situation - two options remain. The first one is to become oneself irrational - and we can witness such cases in the Pitesti Phenomenon, that I mentioned above. The second one is an attempt to recreate a sacred space by means that are often surprising. In what follows, I describe two of these venues: the connection with people coming from home and the engagement in unplanned artistic acts. The third one is perhaps the most important, but also the most difficult: maintaining a connection with God in one's heart. The result is the creation of a sacred space that provides a bridge between the realm of the absurd and home.

3. POETRY AND MUSIC IN SIBERIA

I begin by describing two artistic moments. The first one involves Teodosia Cosmin, who was born on June 9, 1938, in a village of the district of Soroca, in the province of Bessarabia, which was, at that time, part of Romania. In 1945, her father was taken to Siberia, and after one year they no longer heard from him. "*It was difficult for us during the time of the organized famine, in 1946-1947*"[19], she writes. The new Soviet power used the same methods it had used prior to the war, in Ukraine, during the Holodomor[20]. Soldiers swiped all the grain stored in the athics, confiscated cattle, and made certain that people no longer had any resources. It was a method to break them and convince them to give their land to the kolkhoz. One of

For example, on Palm Sunday, one man had to play the role of the donkey on which Jesus entered Jerusalem, while others were forced into grotesque acts.

[19] MOISE, M., *Do Not Avenge Us*, cit., p. 234.

[20] See APPLEBAUM, A., *The Red Famine*, New York 2017.

Teodosia Cosmin's sisters, Ilenuţa, died of hunger, and the narrator still remembers how the little one used to say, "Mămica[21], *if God just brought dad home, so that he would bring us two loaves of bread and two pretzels*!"[22] Her *bunica* (grandmother) and her younger brother died as well. The famine passed. 1949 arrived, and it "*seemed to be a good year*". But on July 6, the family - or what remained from it, the mother with three girls - were taken to be deported to Siberia. When the soldiers with "*their berets with the hammer and the sickle and the red star on the foreheads invaded the room*,"[23] her mother began shouting: "*What do you want from us? You arrested my husband, you took him away from five children.* […]. *You swept my attic, and there was no grain left! I gave you the cow for meat! What else do you want from us?* […] *Our life? Take it*!"[24].

I have given a brief narrative of this story for two reasons: (1) to emphasize the absurdity of the situation: a widow who lost two children during the famine and whose husband had already been deported is taken from her home together with her three remaining children, with no reason given; (2) to recreate the context of despair in which an artistic moment may be born.

In a train filled with bodies being are transported to Siberia, in an environment governed by confusion and despair, in which people have no idea about their future, Teodosia Cosmin's mother starts singing, using a familiar song but modifying its verses. Here are the lines:

> "*From Cosăuţi toward the valley,*
> *From Cosăuţi toward the valley,*
> *There formed a large, long alley.*
> *Of*[25] *and of again* […]
> *Of and of again…*

[21] In Romanian, endearing word for "mother."
[22] MOISE, M., *Do Not Avenge Us*, cit., p 234.
[23] Ivi, p. 237.
[24] Ibid.
[25] The word "of" in this case is a Romanian interjection; it is used when someone sighs, especially in connection with physical or psychological pain.

And the alley's on three pines,
And the alley's on three pines,
For the deportees in lines.
Of and of again…
Of and of again…
Deportees from Bessarabia,
Deportees from Bessarabia,
Filled with wailing, grief, and woe!
Of and of again…
Of and of again!"

The poem is simple, a lament in verse. This particular moment is interesting because of the combination between the familiar and the new. The woman uses an old song, very familiar song, but the old song needs to make sense of the new, irrational reality, and so the verses are a wailing stemming from the core of her being. In traditional societies, when faced with misfortunes, joy, or sadness, people burst out in song.

It sounds as if, when nothing is there that can be said, the only thing to be done is to 'say' it in song or in a poem. In Monk Moise Iorgovan's collection of deportation testimonies, three of the six narrators break out in song or recite a poem at certain critical moments. Each one of these outbursts is a genuine expression of what is felt at that moment. For example, Ioan Moraru remembers, "*Eventually, my thought dwelled on bunelul*[26]*, and I finally fell asleep. In a dream, or I do not know how, one letter came to me, and I wrote it on a paper the following day, so that I would not forget it*" [27].The letter is in verses. Here's a part of it:

"*What can I write you, dear grandpa.*
With your beard greyed by time,
What can I write you, dear old man,
When the word is filled with crime […]
Thousands of people just like me have
Written of the good, of the bad
But like in a dream, they left, passed on,
Their egos buried in the sand.
Should I write how in these parts
The wilderness is spread?

[26] "Grandpa" in Romanian.
[27] MOISE, M., *Do Not Avenge Us*, cit., p. 185.

Or should I tell of how man sells man,
How many hearts have bled?..."

Galina Baranovski Shapovalova speaks of a poem her mother wrote while in Kazakhstan:

"*By the flowers, leaves, and deer,*
Bad you've cursed me, of, dad dear,
You cursed me on a Monday,
So the world I covered all day.
You cursed me on Tuesday, too,
So I remained alone, and you
Could help me not in wilderness
To feed my children, powerless.
And when we see that night has come,
By cold like death we're overcome,
For our blanket small it is,
And everyone says, «I'm cold, please!»
…
Seeing all these things like this,
I wake up, all is amiss!
I begin to cover them,
And to think, why me, why them?
Why am I in so much torment?
What did I do to men so bad
That God sent me this bitterness
And sent me out in wilderness
With many children fatherless"[28].

Galina herself wrote a poem after she returned to Bessarabia, a poem which she calls "*the cry of my soul*[29]."

"*Little leaf and forest brother,*
Don't you beat me, dear mother,
And I beg you, curse me not
For they'll take me to deport me.
Take me far away they will,
Over freshwater, and then, still,
Over endless sand,
In a far away country,
In the Russian land,
To where none would find me!

[28] Ivi, p. 235.
[29] Ivi, p. 239.

I will live in prison,
No sun, so water given.
Light there will not be,
For people are evil, you see…[30]"

The common feature of all of these moments is that the poems erupt as a "*cry of the soul*," or as a lament that expresses a way of being. While each of them can communicate to an observer something about the life of the deportees, their role is not to provide an account about an external context that is absurd. The absurd cannot come to be in an expression. One cannot say anything about it that can make any sense. Any expression that attempts to explain the absurd is, to a rational mind, incomprehensible, even if words are used. This poetry, then, stems from an absurd environment not as an expression of the absurd, but rather as a cry toward Being, as the affirmation of the remnants of human dignity.

A rational discourse would have no place in a train to Siberia, in a moment in which there is so much confusion in the train station, with people falling into despair. A song or a poem, however, can be part of the landscape. Singing when others around you attempt to destroy your life seems to be so absurd that it makes sense in an already absurd picture. Paradoxically, though, it shines a dim light of normality. If I express my emotion through rational discourse, the people around me would perceive it as absurd. If, however, I express it through song, the same people may have communion with it.

The presence of such songs and poems can constitute the first step toward the return to normality. It is perhaps strange that music or art in general, something that usually works with people's emotions, can constitute in these cases the occasion for the reformation of one's rational space. Still, this can be easily explained: art allows humans to rediscover themselves as what they are. The moment in which they rediscover themselves, rationality also makes its presence felt.

[30] Ibid.

There is another type of artistic moment that takes place in one of the camps. Ion Moraru, whom is mentioned above as well, was taken to a camp in Siberia. At that time, the administration of the camp had softened the work regime, so the prisoners were allowed to organize a theater and even an orchestra, as the narrator remembers.[31] At one of these events, he recognized his former mathematics teacher from high school. The professor recognized him, embraced him, and started to cry.

> "*Then he turned toward the public, holding the violin with one hand and the bow with the other, and said: «If there is even only one Romanian in the audience, the concert will be Romanian!» He turned toward the orchestra, touched the strings of the violin, and magic sounds began pouring on that stage. When he played the Ciocârlia (the Lark), we were all mesmerized. We followed his bow as it traveled across the strings, how he brought up the lark in the heights of heaven, and how he brought it down like all the other birds in the meadow accompanying it. Lord, such beauty!*"[32]

Music in this situation seems to play a slightly different role. If, in the first case, it created a space in which rationality could still exist, now music takes those who experience it into a familiar space: home. The fact that the former teacher plays a Romanian song is not only just the expression of an appreciation for encountering a fellow countryman, but it is also the creation of an embassy, of a territory in which the inmate can ask for sanctuary during a period of time. In fact, although the two events are different, music leads to the creation of a space in which I can recalibrate and rediscover rationality.

4. Artifacts that remind of home

The third example is connected with the *Ciocârlia* moment because it also exhibits the connection with an object coming from home. A family consisting of a grandmother, her widowed son, and his two children was taken to Siberia. The pillar

[31] Ivi, p. 198.
[32] Ivi, p. 199.

of the family from the beginning to the end was *bunica*, the grandmother. She attempted to continue her traditions, to the extent to which this was possible. She had taken a small icon from home and used to pray every night to the Mother of God, so that she could have at least three days at home before she died, so that her body could return to the land from which she came. Her son became despondent. He had lost his center – nothing made sense anymore - and refused to pray together with her. But then one event took place: one night, a man from Bessarabia stopped by in the small settlement in which they deported. He was looking for his father, who had died in Siberia, and the man wanted to somehow find the place where he was buried. *Bunica* and all the members rejoiced in having someone to talk to about home. When this man left, he took from his bag an apple and gave it to the family, "*for the soul of his father*." Margareta Cemârtan Spânu, the narrator of this story, writes,

> "*No, I have no words; I cannot render what we felt because of that apple. For three days, we kept it as if it were God, as if it were gold. Gold was nothing compared to it. It was so dear to us because that apple, with its fragrance, took us back home. We saw again absolutely everything: the garden, the flowers, the fruit, the sheep, the horses, the cow* […] *everything was contained in it* […] *We were home; it took us home completely, and we wanted to feel our home as much as possible. It did not even cross our minds to say, let's cut it, let's eat it, because I can no longer bear it. No word from anyone. Even during the night, when we went to sleep, we saw that apple in our dreams*" [33].

None of them touched the apple until the third day, a Sunday, when *bunica* woke up everyone in the morning, washed the children, and lined them up before the small icon she had brought from home. Cemârtan-Spânu, her granddaughter, remembers:

> "*Before that day, from time to time, dad refused to pray, for, if there were a God, why would He allow something like that. But that time even he prayed before that icon and said «Our Father.» Then,* bunica *took the apple from the middle of the table and cut it exactly in four pieces; she gave it to each one of us as if it were communion* […] *Even now I can see her old, dry hand, how she gave so beautifully that piece to each one of us. She made a cross over it before she cut it, just like she used to do with the bread back at home; that's what she did to that apple. She cut it and she gave each one of us a piece* […] *But we did*

[33] Ivi, p. 51-52.

> *not eat it even then; we took it and licked it, smelled it and stared at it, as if we saw a miracle in it. I think it took an hour before we ate everything*"[34].

In fact, the apple becomes an icon. Just as an icon makes the Kingdom present on earth, the apple made home, Bessarabia, present in the small room of frozen Siberia.

All of these examples show that deportation includes two aspects: on the one hand, the deportees experience the departure from their place as being extracted from a place of normality; on the other hand, and due to the first aspect, they continue to have a thirst for normality which is expressed in a thirst for home. The testimony of Aniţa Nandriş-Cudla, deported to Siberia in 1941, where she remained for twenty years, is very moving in this respect. She wrote her story with the desire to let people know what happened to her and others. The text is written in simple language, and my translation certainly loses its colorful flavor:

> "*We stayed in these wagons for twenty days. In the beginning, people kept it together, but then you could see, when the train was stopping, how they were taking out someone who had fainted to get some air. Another one was taken out dead, and he remained in the train station. What they did with him afterwards, we didn't know. In another session, you could see someone else who had lost his mind. He was yelling, singing, jumping, just like a man who went insane*"[35].

Forced migration presented this danger: the threat of insanity. The source of sanity remained a connection with some other entity that constituted home. For Nandriş-Cudla, it was God. "*I was sitting down, sad, looking at my children, and thinking only of God. And I prayed to Him to give me strength to resist through everything that was to come*"[36].

[34] Ivi, p. 52.
[35] NANDRIŞ-CUDLA, A., *20 years in Siberia: A Bucovinenean Destiny*, Bucuresti 1991, p. 61.
[36] Ibid.

5. CONCLUSION

In all of the examples that I recounted above, we can see that one of the ways in which humans rediscover their dignity in the midst of absurdity is the recreation a space of normality.[37] This can be done by engaging in artistic acts or by connecting with objects that gain meaning because of their origin: home. The artistic moments and the familiar objects of home are the beginning of a sacred space. While continuing to live their lives in the midst of persecution, the deportees could still maintain a connection with meaning because of such sacred spaces. Indeed, bursting forth in song in moments of despair or having communion on a deserted Sunday by means of an apple are, I think, manifestations of this ancestral thirst for normality.

[37] See also Irina Dumitrescu's article "Poems in Prison: The Survival Strategies of Romanian Political Prisoners," in the volume edited by her, *Rumba Under Fire: The Arts of Survival from West Point to Delhi*, 2016. Even if Dumitrescu does not mention deportations, the experiences of those imprisoned were similar. In fact, they lived a different kind of "deportation": they were taken from their homes to be moved into a space without horizon. Many of those accused by the Communist government were intellectuals, and so their recourse to poetry for maintaining sanity is to be expected. The common feature with the accounts of people deported to Siberia, though, is that poetry provided for them as well a sacred space. Here is Lena Constante's testimony, quoted by Dumitrescu (p. 23): "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. […] 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."