

Tales from the Walled City: Aesthetics of Political Prison Culture in Post-War Greece

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my birthplace vanished, my citizenship earned,
in league with stones of the earth, I
enter, without retreat or help from history
the days of no day, my earth
of no earth, I re-enter
the city in which I love you.
And I never believed that the multitude
of dreams and many words were vain.

—Li-Young Lee

The grandmothers, as they are called—elderly women imprisoned for refusing to testify against their children regarding their resistance involvement—sit on the stone steps leading to the upper floors of the prison and learn from other prisoners how to read, write, and count. They are among the estimated 70 percent of illiterate Greek women at mid-century, and the plan is to reach full literacy within the prison. “I’m learning so I can write about the history of my village during the Albanian war, the resistance, the German occupation, and the civil war. How and why our children were forced to take up arms again and head for the mountains . . . I know this history well because I helped both in Albania and in the resistance,” says Maria Zoga. She has lost two sons, one killed by the Nazis and the other by “Greek fascists.” “My son Stamatis wanted me to learn to read and write. And I will learn, I will learn. I’ve just started to read,” says Violeta Tsamoutalidou. Stamatis, a communist and member of the resistance, was tortured at the police station and killed during an alleged escape attempt in 1948. “Teach me to read and to count,” says Grannie Regina. “Now that I’ve lost my husband and I’m by myself, who will count the grains?” The grandmothers scattered about the prison “learning letters” and taking life on their own terms is a prominent theme in the accounts of political prisoners.¹

¹ See Papadouka (1981:36–39). The Averoff Women’s Singing Group, formed during the 1940s, sang and continued to perform the song, “The Grandmothers Learn Letters” into the 1980s. Its lyrics depict this peculiar pedagogy: “The grannies are bent over, with their eyeglasses/They are learning their ABC’s and yet their hair is white as snow./The grandmothers hold their pencils

The Greek resistance movement began to take shape soon after the Axis onslaught, when German troops invaded the country through the Yugoslavian corridor in April, 1941, initiating a tripartite German, Italian, and Bulgarian occupation. In September, members of the small prewar communist party (KKE), newly released from prisons of the Metaxas dictatorship, inaugurated the EAM or National Liberation Front. The movement began as an organized effort to resist Nazi occupation but by 1942 had also devolved into a populist movement designed to grant disfranchised groups unprecedented political voice and to teach mass citizenship. This inclusive ideology was both a critical symbolic gesture and was to an extent played out in movement organizing strategies—through institutions such as popular courts, literacy campaigns, and assertiveness training for girls within a network of proto-organizations—though inevitably many remained untouched by the movement's mass incorporative ideals and aims.

The evacuation of Axis forces throughout most of the country in the autumn of 1944² brought the hope of liberation from fascist assault, both internal (the Metaxas regime held power from 1936 up to the eve of the war) and external. Public discourse was guardedly optimistic. In 1946, the opening battles of the Greek civil war marked, however, the beginning of a more protracted conflict—one firmly rooted in the resistance period itself—which would last beyond the formal armistice of 1949 and continue into the 1950s, 60s, and 70s, as differing conceptions of the postwar state and politics clashed on various fronts. Indeed, to describe modern-era Greek politics as a continuous bifurcation between left and right glosses over historical ambiguity and yet provides a reasonably faithful backdrop to twentieth-century events. Begun in earnest with the 1909 officers' coup at Goudi,³ the split culminated in a civil war that was constituted as, in the broadest of terms, a struggle over which side would define the Greek nation.

and paper and write slowly/Their first letters will be sent to their grandchildren, who will receive them with joy./And if in their old age, many problems weigh on their hearts/Closed up just like the young inside the prison, they are learning to read and write./Spreading their gentle caresses among us, they remember the old days/Our every storm, they weathered first, and they put glasses on us.”

² The island of Crete was liberated in the spring of 1945.

³ In August 1909, officers from Athens mutinied in support of the demands of the Military League. Inspired by the Young Turk rebellion, the League directed its attack against elitism, favoritism and other antidemocratic practices in the army. The broader political significance of Goudi was as an assault on older, entrenched institutions such as the monarchy (embodied in Crown Prince Constantine) and established parties. The Goudi insurgency launched the political career of Prime Minister Eleftherios Venizelos and his Liberal Party; Venizelos in turn spearheaded and symbolized the center-left coalition. His election in 1910 inaugurated a longstanding and often violent contest between left and right, which continued through the 1930s and reached a climax with the 1936 fascist putsch led by General Ioannis Metaxas. It is this prolonged encounter that George Mavrogordatos characterizes as the battle between the forces of Venizelism and Antivenizelism (1983, 1995). Ironically, Goudi was the site of partisan executions during the civil war period, despite its earlier connection with radical democracy. For a detailed analysis of twentieth-century Greek politics, see Clogg (1992).

The postwar years in Europe bred numerous dislocations and legions of wounded, haunted, and displaced. In Greece, counterintuitively, among the most dramatic casualties of wartime events were former partisans, their relatives and associates, significant numbers of whom were taken into state custody, exiled, indicted, and thrust before firing squads. Through the 1950s, critical sites for the production and redeployment of narratives about Greek politics and nation were state prisons and island exile camps.⁴ Most had been built during the Metaxas dictatorship to isolate and punish an earlier wave of official enemies of the state. In the anticommunist backlash of the Cold War era, EAM participants and their relatives—designated accessories to anti-national crimes—were arrested, tortured, executed, and ostracized.⁵ Here, it is worth taking special note of the institution of the so-called *dilosí metanoías* (statement of repentance), or “certificate of correct political views.” Dating from the 1930s and methods of punishment perfected by the Metaxas dictatorship, signers declared resistance participation a shameful subversion and agreed to cease all further efforts to destroy the Greek state and family. Frequently, partisans and kinship group members, often broadly construed, were required to “sign” in order to obtain various types of employment, leave the country, enroll in educational programs, avoid incarceration or stints on death row and to escape, in the worst instance, execution (Alivizatos 1995:225). The *dilosí*, in fact, dovetailed effectively with the more general mechanism of public shame. Signers were caught in a bind, since they were now not only exposed as “red sympathizers” but also derided by former comrades and in many cases deeply ashamed personally for having “folded,” with no guarantee against future persecution.⁶ The women whose voices are heard here were labeled as incorrigibles, whose steadfast refusal to sign cost them dearly indeed.

⁴ On the interactions between official and popular narratives and the often mixed results, see Jayawardena (1989), Layoun (1992), Swedenburg (1995), and Hart (1996).

⁵ Alivizatos (1981) discusses the direct and indirect expansion of the state coercive apparatus during the period of “White Terror” (roughly 1944–46) and Civil War (1946–49). Alivizatos notes that “during part of the ‘white terror,’ up to the March 1946 general elections, more than one thousand persons were assassinated, more than sixty-five hundred were wounded, more than thirty-one thousand were tortured, and more than eighty-four thousand were arrested in one way or another, according to EAM estimates that seem quite near to the truth” (1995:222).

Following the general elections and the KKK’s questionable decision to abstain, more formal legal codes were enacted. These injunctions were rooted in the discretionary interpretation of a nebulous and highly politicized concept of intention. Here, the major fulcra were Resolution No. 3 and Emergency Law No. 509. Alivizatos states that Resolution No. 3 “punished with life imprisonment not only conspiracy and mutiny aiming to detach part of state territory, but also acts preparatory to those crimes, and to these was assimilated the mere diffusion by *whatever means* of ideas having this aim. The same is true of ‘Emergency Law’ 509, which imposed the death penalty not only for concrete acts but also for any attempt ‘seeking to apply ideas aiming manifestly at the overthrow, by violent means’ of the prevailing political and social order” (1995:224–5).

Though female executions for the most part ended in 1949 with the lifting of martial law in early 1950, death row sections of prisons were maintained throughout subsequent decades and the fear that authorities might decide to revive the death penalty persisted in prisoners’ minds.

⁶ Further research remains to be done on those who did sign, although members of this enforced community would understandably be reluctant to acknowledge or give account of their histories.

The urban prisons and the so-called dry islands of the Aegean were dank structures and barren land masses, where detainees were pressured to renounce the past and adopt “sunder” political views. Prisoners were coerced on a smaller but no less-emphatic scale in county and municipal jails, and those who made it to the larger configurations from rural areas had often managed to circumvent an abundance of hazards. Prior to arrest, many experienced extensive and unwitnessed tortures (rapes, dismemberings, beatings, executions of friends and family members) at the hands of the roving right-wing gangs that constituted the “parastate,” a network of thugs and fascist operatives originally recruited by the Nazis.⁷ Though not officially sanctioned, these bands constituted the long and effective arm of the law. Armed gangs were part of the postwar scene elsewhere, in Italy and France, for example. But nowhere did such bands operate as flagrantly in the name of state authority. Stretching into the 1960s, the considerable variety of sites on which the renegade Greek body could experience pain, to paraphrase Elaine Scarry (1985), and hence deconstruction and reconstruction, was tied to a concerted effort to silence left political alternatives abroad in the polity. Thus, as Constantine Tsoucalas notes,

Dating from, or intensifying after, the civil war are the following: the establishment of concentration camps on a permanent basis; the radical purge of the civil service; the organization of propaganda under the “preserved” auspices of the armed forces . . . ; the systemization of police repression throughout the country; the enormous swelling of secret police activities (60,000 persons were allegedly on the payroll as late as 1962); and the institutionalization of the “certificate of national probity” (or loyalty)—characteristically extended to the entire family on a quasi-hereditary basis, as the formal prerequisite for all licenses, permits, public authorizations, and employment. Through such means the “apartheid” state was systematically created. Even the extreme measure of the deprivation of the nationality of exiled communists did not reach its apex until the late 1950s.⁸

In this essay, I focus my attention on *the political prison*, a place where female inmates understood their crimes as an explicit affront to state practices and ideologies. I examine Greek women’s experiences in the deceptively small prison world, “our little society” (*i mikri mas koinonia*) as one woman called it, and about culture forged behind bars. The smallness was deceptive, since despite an enforced isolation, in each individual case and within the larger penal colony, exchanges with a complex state and wider civil society were constantly under negotiation. In considering questions of political prison culture, I concentrate on one of the most symbolically important arenas, the Averoff Prison

⁷ These were the so-called Security Battalions (*Tagmata Asfaleias*). See Gerolymatos (1985), Close (1995), Douatzis (nd). The Lebanon Conference (May 1944), the Caserta Conference (September 1944), and the Varkiza Agreement (February 1945) all included provisions to guarantee the civil liberties and personal safety of EAM sympathizers and the purging of collaborators, essentially to no avail. (Alivizatos 1995, 1981; Vlavianos 1989; Papastratis 1981; Kedros and Hajis 1980) For a vivid description of the *kinigita* (the hunting), see Evangelia Fotaki, pp. 15–36, in Theodorou (1976).

⁸ Tsoucalas (1981:328).

in Athens. The exile camp circuit,⁹ whose main pivot was the tiny island of Trikeri, located just off the Pelion Peninsula near the town of Volos, was also a highly significant site on the postwar map. In these places, women from various class and regional backgrounds¹⁰ were punished, at the national level, for alleged anti-national (*antiethnikofrosyn*) crimes.

My examination of prison life in postwar Greece falls roughly into three categories. First, I look for the sources and signs of the identification process, what Hall (1996) describes as a “recognition of some common origin or shared characteristics with another person or group, or with an ideal, and with the natural closure of solidarity and allegiance established on this foundation” (1996:2).¹¹ Identification, especially the overtly political variety, rests on consciousness and what the Brazilian activist and educator Paulo Freire (1970) terms “conscientization,” as realizations begin to emerge about life as a particular kind of predicament and as individuals and groups begin to situate themselves and contend with structures of domination. This is not to say that in this case all prisoners invariably identified with a single counterhegemonic order. But as I will argue, a certain genre of political prison narratives does tend to cloak discrepancies and to emphasize communal interpretations of experience.

Given that sustained counterhegemonic action is rarely wholly spontaneous, a key influence on the newly conscious behavior was the stratum of intellectual guides represented locally by such prominent resistance movement leaders as Dimitris Glinos, Stephanos Sarafis, George Siantos, Andreas Tzimas, and Alexandros Svolos and his wife, Maria Svolou.¹² All were integral to the inau-

⁹ The typical trajectory began on the “sorting” islands of Tinos, Ikaria, and Chios. Holdouts were eventually transferred to Trikeri island (approximately 1,200 women), then Makronisos, where the numbers began to decrease as some women were released and others signed statements. Eventually, the remaining group was taken back to Trikeri and most were released in 1952.

¹⁰ These were *yinekes apo oli tin Ellada*—“Women From All Over Greece”—the title of a book of sketches done by the well-known artist Katerina Hariati-Sismani during her long incarceration. The theme of unity in the face of difference is a common trope and source of pride in the prison stories, though the degree to which women from particular regions, class backgrounds, educational levels, and cultural traditions felt stigmatized or subjected to hierarchical divisions is hard to figure.

¹¹ On this point, Hall writes that “we have now to reconceptualize identity as a *process of identification*, and that is a different matter. It is something that happens over time, that is never absolutely stable, that is subject to the play of history and the play of difference” (1994:344).

¹² Dimitris Glinos, a prominent member of the demotic movement whose principle aim was to democratize Greek language usage, was the intellectual architect of the EAM. He began political life as a liberal and held the post of Minister of Education under Prime Minister Venizelos government before converting to communism in 1936. Glinos returned from political exile in 1941 to help found the EAM organization. Stephanos Sarafis, also formerly a prominent Venizelist and a high-ranking military officer, became commanding general of ELAS, the resistance army, in 1943. George Siantos was KKK General Secretary throughout the war and a pivotal figure in the EAM. A member of the KKK Central Committee in Athens in 1941, Andreas Tzimas soon became the political officer of ELAS. Alexander Svolos was a professor of constitutional law at the University of Athens when the war began, and was later sworn in as president of the EAM-led Government of the Mountains of Free Greece in 1944. Svolos was the highest ranking noncommunist in the EAM, who maintained his membership in the social democratic Union for Popular Democracy

guration of definitive policies and the ongoing administration of the EAM. As community role models, these individuals were also part of a larger wave of modernist activity that sought to re-envision the nature and role of the state in more participatory terms and to engineer a new, if unclear, political future.¹³ The novel schemes aimed at mass incorporation and empowerment and were clearly linked to such enlightenment goals as popular literacy and voice and national self-determination. It is also particularly significant that during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, gender and the political rights and social roles of women became central items on the global agenda.¹⁴ Not coincidentally, these foci were among the core preoccupations of the EAM, which continued to shape prisoners' perceptions and allegiances in the postwar era.

Second, what kinds of situated practices and rituals grew out of the experience of being incarcerated? Many were innovations and many hybrid cultural forms which mined personal and national histories to serve current needs. This prison produced more than a series of opaque maneuvers; it fostered an *aesthetic*, a concept that happens to derive from the Greek word *aisthēsi*, or "sense perception." In more precise terms, Pierre Bourdieu identifies the sort of working aesthetic I am suggesting as a feat that is close to universally possible:

Although art obviously offers the greatest scope to the aesthetic disposition, there is no area of practice in which the aim of purifying, refining and sublimating primary needs and impulses cannot assert itself, no area in which the stylization of life, that is, the primacy of forms over function, of manner over matter, does not produce the same effects. And nothing is more distinctive, more distinguished, than the capacity to confer aesthetic status on objects that are banal or even "common" (because the "common" people make them their own, especially for aesthetic purposes), or the ability to apply the principles of a "pure" aesthetic to the most everyday choices of everyday life (1984:5).

Thus, contrary to the judgment that an aesthetic can only have meaning in opposition to the politics of everyday life, the political prison aesthetic seeks to shape and is shaped by the stony, grimy, tangible facts of daily life. The notion that an aesthetic by definition presents a pleasing escape from everyday life—that there is such a thing as a pure aesthetic of entertainment, devoid of the kinds of maps that help us to make sense of or even overcome our life circum-

(ELD) throughout the period. Maria Svolou played an important role in the EAM from the outset and was later elected to the parliament of Free Greece. "A communist and a feminist" (Hondros 1983:208), she was a frequent contributor to a range of communist and resistance publications. The couple, in effect movement celebrities, maintained a reputation for upstanding and progressive leadership, and a tight bond in spite of their differing party affiliations. Papadouka (1981) mentions "*tin kyria Maria, tin agapimēni olon mas*" (Mrs. Maria, beloved by all of us) several times in her text about the Averoff Prison, including a description of tender exchanges between Professor Svolos and his incarcerated wife during visiting hours (1981:48–49).

¹³ For discussions of the modernizing generation of political intellectuals, see Boggs (1993). Fox and Starn's 1997 volume is a major contribution to the literature on the local and global interconnections which tend to fuel social movement activity.

¹⁴ For example, Jayawardena (1989) for rich descriptions of these processes in a variety of settings.

stances—is relatively commonplace, owing partly to prevailing Kantian doctrine. What marks the prison aesthetic, however, is both its origin as a stylized response to oppression and that it mingles so frequently with routine practices, with recurring dreams, nightmares and coping mechanisms. In her book on Catholic resistance in Northern Ireland, for example, Begona Aretxaga (1997) cites the “dirty protests” that took place at different junctures in both the women’s and men’s prisons of Belfast. Day after miserable day, according to accounts, prisoners were forced to live amidst their own bodily wastes, with no provisions made by prison officials for cleaning, flushing or removal. The collective response was a kind of art: the smearing of feces and menstrual blood, in the women’s case, on the prison walls, a grotesque and pungent mural of protest.

The political prison aesthetic, as I use it here, is a social construction and necessary blend of survival and the assertion of citizenship. It is necessary in the sense that Ranajit Guha means when he writes of the archetypal peasant rising in revolt under the Raj [a claim which I think ought not to be read as violating a commitment to contextual specificity but rather as a minimum perceptual criterion for sustained insurgency]: that “to rebel was indeed to destroy many of those familiar signs which he had learned to read and manipulate in order to extract a meaning out of the harsh world around him and live with it. The risk of ‘turning things upside down’ under these conditions was indeed so great that he could hardly afford to engage in such a project in a state of absent-mindedness.”¹⁵ The prison aesthetic constitutes an *aesthetic* because it helpfully transforms the most dire circumstances into a fabrication which is a source of pride, can be appreciated as a compelling act of creation, engages the senses, and has a lasting value for those who are able or care to remember. As with all art, the conditions of its production *matter*. The prison aesthetic is about *survival* because the predominating alternative is a deathly one. Later, we shall see how the Greek prisoners reinterpret the fate of death by execution and the death-row category as the macabre elements of political theater, involving song, dance, and satire, thereby forcing a kind of ritual “enjoyment.”

Finally, the political prison aesthetic is implicated with the notion of *citizenship* because—and this relates to my earlier point—it is an avowal of a modernity that strives for “the progressive attenuation of inertia by consciousness.”¹⁶ That modernist paradigm, and at this point in the discussion content is irrelevant, takes seriously the development of private and public selves which draw upon an ethics of government or “self-binding”¹⁷ in various concentric arenas, from personal to group, community, national, and international. This kind of citizenship drama shares ground with, among other strange philosophical bed-

¹⁵ Guha (1988:45). ¹⁶ Scialabba (1996:132).

¹⁷ See Salecl’s 1992 discussion of this concept, especially 61–65. Salecl cites Jon Elster’s definition: “self-binding is ‘achieving by indirect means the same end as a rational person could have realized in a direct manner’” (1992:61).

fellows, Gramsci's cultural politics, certain feminist consciousness-raising approaches, the German notion of *Bildung*, Adorno's anti- or post-Kantian aesthetic theory, Giddens's "reflexive modernization," and certainly Foucault's comments on the aesthetics of existence and self-making. In other words, as a template for political behavior, the artful managing of culture has a broader purchase which connects prison life in grand conceptual terms to a rather powerful assemblage of humanist theory and praxis. Despite their differences, the above principles are all partially inculcated with citizenship, including the ideas that persons or groups may expect certain rights of expression and participation in contemporary "regimes of power," and that all deserve equally to be educated to a level of civic competence. Indeed, conversations about the contours of citizenship were a hallmark of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when the number of previously disfranchised groups now seen to merit unconditionally the benefits of citizenship increased dramatically. The resistance movement with which the jailed Greek women were variously engaged demanded citizenship rights of more conspicuous Nazi occupation and of less licit internal structures. That the women were imprisoned at all, many refusing on principle to acquiesce to state demands, signaled the internalization of citizenship norms—with civil society as the national connective tissue even in "an uncivilised place" (Anderson, 1996)—to a degree unfathomable to previous generations.

A further tie-in with citizenship debates abroad in the European land in the 1930s and 1940s—in Britain, Germany, France, Spain, and Hungary, for example, variously concerning communism, bourgeois liberalism, and anarchism, who should rule and the full range of social contracts conceivable between rulers and ruled—involved the construction of a viable antifascist movement. Even after the official defeat of fascism in 1945, antifascism as a counterhegemonic contribution to the battle of the century continued to color Greek prisoners' narratives and self-perceptions, providing a key *raison d'être* for the advancement of an incontrovertible sort of political culture which could cancel, or at least offset, reactionary forces. As Anson Rabinbach characterizes the resistance *ur-mythologies*, which for many maintained their motivating influence into the postwar era: "In the global life and death struggle against fascism there could be no middle ground, no neutral space, and no non-combatants. The negativity of 'antifascism' was the exhilarating intellectual tonic of the epoch."¹⁸

Third, how have former prisoners chosen to frame and characterize decisive encounters? I use the narratives of two women in particular, Olympia Papadouka and Maria Sideri, whose books are classics of Greek postwar prison testimony, to consider questions of individual and collective self-representation. Arguably, these remind us that the moments of opportunity which launch

¹⁸ Rabinbach (1996:3).

pivotal changes exist only as discursive history; they come alive and take on significance in the tales of eyewitnesses and other historians, who assemble pictures of the past using a range of raw materials over which the researcher has no special control (see Fabre 1994; Fields 1994; Portelli 1994; Darian-Smith 1994; Alcoff and Gray 1993; Lipsitz 1990). These episodes form the basis of “*lieux de memoire*” (Nora, 1994) or “sites of memory,” which “prompt both the processes of imaginative recollection and the historical consciousness”¹⁹ and define past, present and future selves. As with all organized revolutionary activity, collective and individual agency merge often imperceptibly (Gardiner 1995). In this sense, my subject is as much the way culture is remembered by two individuals as it is a review of cultural practices.

A crucial, and related point pertains to the historiography question and to the issue of what constitutes archival evidence, much contested across disciplines. At stake is how we listen and what we listen to in assessing and representing the past as well as the genres we deem to be appropriate ways to recount History.²⁰ In this essay, my evidence rests on *narrative* truth: the stories and anecdotes told by eyewitnesses. The testimonies are necessarily interested and should be seen in the context of a relatively stylized commitment to a political cause. In this sense, each story—in effect, performance—is meant to offer a collective truth, similar to what Doris Sommer (1988) describes as “women’s *testimonies* and the plural self” with reference to the political narratives of Latin American women. Movements, in fact, are distinguished by their collective agendas and their need to establish consensus around particular narratives, goals, tactics, corrective visions. That so many of the testimonies are expressed in the first-person plural (that is, *eihame*—we had; *kaname*—we did, made, performed; *dhen mas afisan*—they did not let us) underscores the retrospective power of earlier mobilizations and the capacity of repression and counter-movement to strengthen communal bonds. Thus, my predominant focus is the cultivation of shared perspectives so vital to explicitly transgressive action rather than the less stable complex of negotiations that closer and more subtly layered readings of particular cases seek to reveal. What I examine are the cultural, intersubjective texts produced by the political prison experience, a collection of grievances, manifestos, depictions of survival tactics, object lessons, humorous anecdotes, poignant memoirs, horror stories, moral positionings. The passages are colored by affect and can in turn evoke strong sentiments. How to reconcile (and treat critically) testimonies of violence, trauma and resistance remains a matter of ongoing discussion,²¹ and the problem of mediation and how

¹⁹ Fabre and O’Meally (1994:6–7). On social memory as the tool of present-day needs and struggles, also see Collard’s (1989) central contribution to the debate, and Connerton (1991).

²⁰ On these spirited conversations, see Chandler et al (1994); Tonkin (1992); McDonald (1996); Schneider and Rapp (1995).

²¹ See Agger (1992); Daniel (1996); Coronil and Skurski (1991). Also Ortner’s 1996 discussion of “ethnographic refusal,” or the tendency to gloss over internal conflicts, ambivalences, antino-

those “who weren’t there” might process the claims of victims is a matter that cannot be resolved here. Finally, in keeping with the familiar social paradox, Greek events in the 1940s and subsequent decades were at once profoundly and exclusively connected to that time and that place *and* reflected a larger set of developments with implications for other, comparable realities.

STRUGGLES FOR SELF AND SOCIAL CONTROL

Th(e) discrepancy between prisoners’ orientations and the realities of prison life produces a permanent struggle for self and social control. It is ironically tragic that prisons aim to the very characteristics that women need in the struggle for a dignified existence.²²

Much of the available literature on women’s political prison experience consists of reports compiled by human rights organizations for purposes of legal documentation. These narrative accounts detail abuses prior to and during incarceration. Less attention has been paid to prisons as places of residence, marked by quotidian practices, rituals of communication and survival, negotiations of power and desire. My point is not, of course, that those plain and terrible chronicles are inconsequential or that the kinds of tortures they describe are not endemic. Rather, I assert that what goes on in the desperate corners of the prison-city is animated by internal logics that warrant exploration in their own right. Prison life is neither anarchic nor entirely congruent with its characteristically harsh disciplinary measures. Political captives remain agents whose actions are informed by shared plights, cultures, histories, and coping mechanisms. Whether or not these bonds incur deeper, transmittable meanings or foster more resilient identifications is an open question and largely a discursive one, qualified by what prisoners choose in retrospect to voice.

The Averoff Prison was located on a major Athens boulevard, Leoforos Alexandras,²³ and consisted of two adjacent structures, one for women, the oth-

mies, certainly a significant trap for resistance studies. Yet overexuberant attention to the conflictual, it seems to me, errs in another direction, erasing the fundamentally romantic, affinity-seeking, self-protective drive behind any subaltern movement, and giving inordinate weight to domestic power struggles and contradictions. We are thus left with poorer analytic tools to process the defining emotions that emerge from such moments or to interrogate why protagonists might feel moved to represent their encounters in “sanitized” ways. On the latter, for example, see Swedenburg (1995).

²² Nancy Stoller Shaw, “Female Patients and the Medical Profession in Jails and Prisons,” Rafter and Stanko (1982), quoted in Scheffler (1986:181).

²³ The Averoff Prison was destroyed in the late 1960s as part of the push for urban renewal. My reading is significantly based on Olympia Papadouka’s extensive descriptions of the prison lifestyle and environment and Maria Sideri’s memoir of her 14 years in the Averoff and several other prisons. Papadouka spent nearly 7 years in jail. Other interpretive slants and basic points of information come from Dalianis-Karambatzakis’s study of children confined with their mothers. Dalianis-Karambatzakis was imprisoned in the Averoff for 21 months between 1949 and 1950. As a recent medical school graduate, she assisted the prison doctor and much of the early data for her longitudinal study was collected at that time, when she was able to develop fairly intimate relationships with the women prisoners in her care. Dalianis-Karambatzakis analyzes the cases of 120 mothers

er for men. Prisoners were transported to the Averoff at various points in the trial and sentencing process. Built around 1890, the prison was designed to hold approximately 200 people; however, during the late 1940s and early 1950s several thousand women were housed there.²⁴ The approximate age spread of prisoners was between 12 and 80. In addition, some women were incarcerated with their infants and young children. Large cement cells were assigned to hold different kinds of prisoners—those awaiting trial, those with light sentences, those sentenced to life and to death. According to Papadouka, between 1947 and 1949, when, with United Nations intervention executions were halted, death was the most common sentence; consequently, three cells were devoted to the numerous “*mellothanates*.” Seventeen of the 276 women sentenced were executed during this period (Dalianis-Karambatzakis 1994).

Cells were located on two floors of the prison. The lower floor opened on to a courtyard with a large and, as we will see later, symbolically significant palm tree. “Conditions in the prison were extremely primitive, almost medieval,” Dalianis-Karambatzakis recalls. “There was no furniture and the stone floors and walls were bare. The prison administration did not provide enough equipment for all the prisoners. A majority of the prisoners slept on the stone floor in their own blankets and bed linen until they could get a private camp-bed . . . Meals were eaten on the floor, using only an aluminium plate, a cup and a spoon. Glasses, forks, and knives were not allowed in the wards. Sanitary facilities were minimal. The ventilation was poor. Although the windows were kept wide open, the air in the wards was stale, particularly during the summer months. There were no facilities for heating the wards in the winter. Wood stoves were used only for heating water in the washroom and cooking food in the kitchen” (1994:18–19). Prisoners were subjected to body searches as well as internal moves, when they were forced to switch to other cells, transporting all of their belongings. These relocations sometimes led to spats and shoving matches as tensions mounted.

Everyday life was organized around particular chores and activities. Crews were assigned tasks by a prisoner committee according to a rotating schedule. These included washing clothes, cooking, scrubbing steps and floors, and toilet duty. The various teams were parodied with the label of “*Marias*,” “*Marias of the sidewalk*,” “*Marias of the washbasin*.” Time was allotted for exercises and lessons on a range of subjects, including the aforementioned *grammata* (reading and writing) for the many often rural, illiterate women. Between

and 167 of their children, providing detailed quantitative and qualitative findings, the latter based on a model originated by a Swedish team of pediatric psychologists headed by M. Cederblad. I conducted oral histories with Papadouka and Sideri in 1985; Dalianis-Karambatzakis I interviewed briefly in the summer of 1996.

²⁴ Dalianis-Karambatzakis writes that “from February 1945 to May 1948 the Averoff Prison register lists 1,771 admissions. These prisoners had been sentenced for criminal or political offenses. By December 15th, 1950, the total number of admissions since February 1945 had reached 3282.” (1994:18).

reveille and early curfew, some women also spent spare moments knitting, embroidering, and making assorted handicrafts. Prisoners divided into quasi-families within the larger cell groupings, an arrangement which provided a degree of emotional security, especially for those whose more conventional ties had been destroyed. Moreover, Dalianis-Karamatzakis notes that “each child confined in prison was . . . sponsored by a small group of fellow prisoners, ‘the godmothers’. The godmothers offered their child and his/her mother both material assistance, food, clothes and support in several matters” (1994:292).²⁵ A distribution committee also divided the spoils of visitation among the young, the sick and the elderly. Sideri comments:

In the Averoff Prison, we had a kind of socialism. Packages from home would come for us, with food, with clothes, and they would all be gathered in one place and the goods would be distributed to those who needed them. I never would know exactly what my family had brought me. Many times, though, they [the distribution committee] would tell us the specifics so we knew what to thank our families for; and there were women who designated what would go where. That is, this would go to someone who is sick, who needs it; this will go to the youngest girls who need it to grow; this will go to the elderly women who no longer have good teeth to chew because it’s soft (Hart, 1996: 257–8).

All forms of communication with the outside were strictly monitored. Letters went through rigorous censorship by prison officials before being stamped with the words, “Prisoner Correspondence: Written in a brief, clean and absolutely family-oriented way”²⁶ and delivered from cell to cell by a messenger, amid much pandemonium:

The crier (*o kraktis*), jumping for joy, because she knows how much the prisoners from the countryside adored receiving letters—the only contact with their relatives—running, emerging from the main office, opened the door to the yard and shouted “Leeteers!” She wasn’t even able to finish the syllable, “leeee” before all the women, especially those from the country, flew at her from all corners of the prison, even the w.c.’s, and merged in a lively mass at the door (1994:122–3).

Papadouka notes that visiting hours were especially challenging. Prisoners talked to their visitors through a screen (*sita*). Each was allotted exactly five minutes to hear news about the fate of relatives, discuss legal strategies for pending court cases, and express a range of emotions, before a guard tapped on the window of the booth to signal the next person’s turn. Because the majority of women were from rural areas, a relatively small percentage of prisoners, mostly the several hundred Athenians, took regular part in visiting hours. However, Maria Sideri, from the Kozani region in north central Greece, comments that a much larger number of women were touched by these exchanges, even

²⁵ Dalianis-Karamatzakis continues: “The godmothers also kept in touch and remained responsible for the godchild and its mother even after separation or release from prison.” This arrangement matched the traditional godmother role in Greek culture, the principle difference being the anomalous way in which the parties were brought together.

²⁶ Papadouka (1981:122).

those deprived of visitors because their families and friends were far away, themselves incarcerated, or dead, noting, despite this:

... but we too were happy about the other women's visits. We knew all their visitors and we saw them as our own relatives, which was mutual. What we wanted from the outside, they would bring us. Whatever pieces of needlework we had for sale, they would find a buyer. They ran around to lawyers, to ministries, and they made a point of bringing us the medicines that they would not give us in prison. They accommodated our parents when they came in from the provinces (1994:133).

Sideri's remarks, in the language of the plural self, indicate not only the kinds of nonkinship bonds that were necessary (and for that matter such affective ties may be typical of institutional living but not always with the same degree of urgency and emotional charge), they also testify to the desire on the part of many prisoners to reinforce and continue the spirit of "beloved community"²⁷ inaugurated during the resistance. As I have argued elsewhere, that movement, as part of its constituent ideology, took the business of youthful socialization especially seriously. In a manner not unusual for social movements, participants were mobilized around a cultural politics that stressed the reinforcement of solidarity ties and tools of survival on many levels. My point is not to assert an explicit causal connection but to suggest that identifications and coping mechanisms forged within the threshold of prison life were notionally related to movement themes and litanies.²⁸

Visitation engendered complex emotions. For a mother-child dyad interviewed years later by Dalianis-Karambatzakis in 1986, for instance, these encounters mingled streams of remembrances, symbols, and current sensations. Plato was 10 months old when his mother was arrested and tortured by the secret police in March of 1949.²⁹ "His father," writes Dalianis-Karambatzakis, "was arrested three years later, on November 25th, 1952, and was sentenced to death and executed in 1954, even though the execution of political prisoners had been stopped by the government." Unlike some (mostly female) children, Plato did not remain in prison with his mother but rather was brought in periodically during visiting hours:

Up to the age of 3, Plato was allowed to enter the prison and spend some time with his mother among the other prisoners.

He visited his mother regularly with his grandfather or his foster father or foster mother. The visits with his grandfather, who was very fond of and attached to his daughter,

²⁷ This term is used to describe an early goal of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the youth branch of the American civil rights' movement.

²⁸ Other prominent themes in the organizing literature were: people's democracy, popular justice, national self-determination, antifascist struggle on all fronts, and as EAM's official anthem proclaimed, "All Greeks shall speak with One Voice." These universalisms, important catalysts for joining the fight against the Nazis, represented an abrupt reversal which prisoners continually struggled to reconcile in the face of persecution by other Greeks after the war.

²⁹ Plato's mother was released and reunited with her son some ten years later in 1959 when he was 11.

were emotionally loaded. Plato saw his mother through the visiting window, which was covered wire-netting and iron bars.

During the visits with his foster father, who was a lawyer and had the prison porter as a client, or with his foster mother, who was a school friend of the lady governor, Plato was allowed to meet his mother in the duty nun's office. Plato always felt confused about the visits when accompanied by his foster mother. Having seen his mother, his aunt and he were invited to tea by the governor in her residence, next to the prison entrance. This seemed very odd to him. He wondered whom he was visiting: his mother or the prison governor.

Each time he visited the prison he was offered a plate of sweets on behalf of all the fellow prisoners. He was very interested in this plate, which was one of the things that made the visits pleasant. His mother also painted for him, small animals, handkerchiefs, etc. She even gave him toys, cars etc. which a cousin of hers had bought on her behalf.

Plato recalled: "During the visits to my mother, I was always very afraid they would keep me inside the prison. The huge prison doors and the bang of the heavy iron bolt made a deep impression and frightened me." He continued, "I also felt afraid of a tall, fat nun who used to hold my hand. She smiled at me but her smile seemed strange." He remembered a long corridor with iron bars on one side and three lines of beds on the other and many smiling womens' faces. "Those were my earlier memories from my visits." . . .

Ariadne also described his visits. Plato was brought to the prison immediately after her admission, when he was 11 months. She realized at once that he had started to talk and walk. The child cried when a nun (the one Plato was afraid of) holding his hand, lifted him "like a bag" and passed him to her. He continued to cry inconsolably, even when she embraced him and put him on her knees. He was comforted, though only for a while, when he was carried by a fellow prisoner wearing a black dress. Plato had forgotten Ariadne completely. He cried and wanted to go back to her sister, who had brought him.

Once he spent the night in prison in a three-tiered bunk. When the bell rang in the morning, he thought it was the dustman collecting rubbish from the houses and said cheerfully, to the prisoners' amusement, "Ring the bell again, dustman, ring the bell."

Ariadne described many scenes from their meetings, pointing out that children visiting their mothers in prison were especially cared for by the lady governor and the fellow prisoners. The plate of sweets offered by the prisoners was a generous gesture by needy people. The prisoners were keenly interested in the children's visits and shared the mother's joy by listening carefully to their stories. Plato used to expect and appreciate the sweets, even when he was older (1994:230).

Margaret Kenna (1991) argues that Greek political prisoners of the Metaxas regime in the 1930s appropriated space and meaning, effectively redefining the situation to serve their own ends, through a process of "semiotic colonization." The political exiles on the island of "Nisos" that Kenna describes organized their lives around various tasks and activities, named their rented houses and rooms after admired communist heroes, male and female, and decorated their walls with emblems, slogans and artifacts symbolizing philosophical tenets which they found especially compelling (1991:64). The Averoff women, too, attempted to colonize their living spaces and to shape authoritatively prison culture. Their actions, as depicted in memoirs and testimonies, involved passive resistance, self-actualization, collective ritual and myth-making, various ruses and, occasionally, outright protest.

THE SERPENT'S GIFT?

The snake has learned, over the generations, to change color, and has developed warnings like the rattle . . . The snake is a survivor. But most important of all," he went on, "when it gets finished with the skin it's wearing, it sheds it, crawling on out of the past and into the future. It is life and it is death, Olive, and that's the serpent's gift. The gift of renewal."³⁰

During the critical formative phase of the Averoff aesthetic, between 1947 and 1949, the events with the broadest reach and collective impact were the executions of 17 women and girls. It is significant that had any one of the 17 or any other death-row prisoner in Greece at the time been willing to sign a statement of repentance, they would more likely than not have been able to escape their fate. The flagrant willingness to die rather than submit to unjust authority made others who were left even more determined not to sign. Those who held out until their sentences were eventually commuted partly based their decisions on mental images of their intimates' steadfast refusals. Because prisoners were so tightly bound to one another by their daily schedules, by the cause, by the penal code and by external forces, each execution was a profoundly emotional experience. Descriptions of the process play a major role in the testimonies and personal accounts of Sideri and Papadouka. The list of women executed (Papadouka 1981:79) varies along dimensions of class, regional background, age, and occupation. The youngest were the 16-year-old Maria Repa and her classmate, Yiorgia Poligenous; the oldest was in her fifties. Like the general population of political prisoners, the women came from various parts of Greece: Athens, Kilkis, Florina, Trikala, Sparta, Mitilini, Patras, Ikaria. Occupations listed are seamstress, teacher, factory worker, maid, student, farmer (*agrotissa*), housewife. The first to be executed was Stathoula Levendi, a textile worker from Athens, on 21 February 1948. Levendi became the muse for an important prison ritual and myth. On the eve of an execution, the women would gather in the prison courtyard and dance around the palm tree, singing, "*Ehete Yeia Vrisoules*" (Goodbye, Women of the Well), an old popular tune.³¹ The song referred to the Souliote women of northern Greece who committed mass suicide, dancing their way over a cliff to avoid capture by Turkish forces. According to prison folklore, the women who were to be executed viewed themselves as fulfilling an honorable destiny; and many reportedly bounded cheerfully out of the cell to meet their deaths as a final political statement.³² The tenet of willing and

³⁰ Lee (1994:189).

³¹ Intended to impart a powerful Greek national identity, the song was routinely taught in grammar and secondary schools. Its lyrics proclaimed: "Goodbye sad world, goodbye sweet life/And you, unfortunate country, goodbye forever/the Souliote women know not only how to live but also how to die and not bow down to slavery//As though on their way to a festival, like a flower-filled Easter day/Down into the underworld they go, with songs, with joy//Fish don't live on dry land, nor flowers in sand/And Greeks don't live without freedom//Goodbye women of the well, forests, mountains, hills/Goodbye women of the well and to you Souliote birds."

³² As far as I know, this ritual was specific to the Averoff Prison. Prisoners executed in other parts of Greece may not have faced firing squads with such aplomb and it is also of course possible that not all of the Averoff prisoners were quite so unambivalent.

uncontested martyrdom, not uncommon among national revolutionaries, was linked to the glorious national sacrifice of the Souliote women in the song lyrics. This performance event created an essential connection between the broader moral economy, which rejected the expectations of tyrants and in which death was not too high a price to pay, and the women's own identities. Thus, despite their official framing as being "antinational" and "enemies of the Greek state," the ritual allowed the women to recast themselves as national hero/ines, creating a chain between resistances, against Turkish, Nazi, and now the unfortunate fact of native fascism. The dancing women called themselves "Stathoules" in tribute to the primordial icon of their present struggle.

Other, subsequent executions took on crucial symbolic importance. Particularly noteworthy was that of Ismini Sideropoulou, the 28-year-old prison math teacher, on August 26, 1948. Sideropoulou was extremely popular, especially among her young students, and the women were devastated. The song, "For Ismini," was composed for the prison chorus, which has Ismini, forever young, transported on a bed of flowers to her prized resting place. Papadouka blends her story with that of the youngest prisoner, 12-year-old Nina Oikonomou ("Ninaki," or little Nina), who was crushed at the loss of both her teacher and her prison classmate, Maria Repa, and remained despondent many years later. Papadouka recalls a conversation with the adult Ninaki:

P: I remember you, Ninaki, silent. Always silent, in a hurry, and angry at the world.

N: And I'm still angry. Angry at everything and everybody. They gave their lives, their most beautiful youth, for a peaceful and just world. And where is it?

P: But we must believe in THOSE who left (died), in WHAT they left for. For what would ultimately happen, that peace, justice, love, would prevail over violence, injustice, hate.

N: You're romantic. All I can say is that in prison I was fortunate enough to know the most beautiful people who could possibly exist. People like Ismini, Yiorgia, Maria, and so many others. The faces of all the people I knew who were executed will never leave my mind or my heart.

P: But that's it, Nina, the world that will come. Definitely it will come. Those who brought it about are gone . . . But the happiness they made possible will be what they sacrificed their lives for.

N: How romantic you are (1981:78).

The passage shows the mixed legacy of prison experiences in a discursive field that tended toward the consensually storied. As a counterpoint to Ninaki's bitter recollections, Papadouka's insistent idealism indicates the continuing power of an intra-generational³³ narrative that attempted to achieve some sort of core resolution to problems of sudden death, destruction, and anguish. The narrative bespeaks the romantic underpinnings of involvement, in which the speaker sees herself as engaged in a momentous quest which has the power to

³³ By this I mean pertaining to a specific political generation, which despite its unifying potential, clearly did not encompass all Averoff prisoners. This poses a problem for collective movement narratives, since their totalizing tendencies make it difficult to isolate registers of experience which do not conform.

make suffering meaningful. Thus, the traumas of prison life will result in ultimate victory and lead to an enlightened telos, similar to the narrative genre that Gary Fine (1995) calls “happy endings.” “In these narratives,” Fine observes, “the speaker surprisingly benefits from movement participation, or changes occur for the better . . . Public activity, these stories assert, is filled with surprises, and collectively these surprises will lead to triumph” (1981:136). In another vein, Maria Sideri describes the torturous wait before the last execution in the following interview passage; a rendition of the same story also appears in her book, suggesting its central role in personal and perhaps collective memory as well. The selection provides a sense of the different textures of violence contained in one vivid moment. Here, we see Lambrini Kaplani following the established cultural practice of a dignified exit:

In jail, on death row, it was a terrible thing waiting for your name to be called. Every day, we would say to ourselves, who will they execute next? Every day. We would go to sleep at night and wonder that every morning. When they took Lambrini, and later, the pardon came, right after they had killed her . . . when they came to get her, just the day before she had been brought to our prison chamber, and we said to ourselves, why did they bring her here? Maybe she’s an old communist, from before the war, and we are charged with more serious crimes. Maybe that’s why they’ve brought her here. Anyway, the girl hadn’t even gotten her things together, she hadn’t even put away her clothes . . . well, we had them hanging around the room, so where was she supposed to put them, anyway? So when we learned the news, the news was passed around the prison . . . the employees, everyone, we learned that there would be an execution. Well, usually we knew in advance who they were going to take, because they would send the name around. That day, we didn’t have a name. We didn’t know . . . no one had any idea who they were going to take.

And you had 40 women, all readying themselves, getting dressed, combing their hair, fixing ourselves up . . . it was about 5 in the evening . . . writing our final letters to our families . . . and covertly looking around the room at one another. Perhaps you know? Perhaps it’s me? We all said to ourselves, maybe it’s me. Each person was worried about herself, thinking that perhaps it was them. We were all terrified that we would be chosen. The only one who we never suspected, who it never crossed our minds would be taken, was Lambrini—the tribunal vote was 3 to 2 against executing her. So this one was making her bed, the other one was packing her clothes, another one was writing her letter . . . we were fixing ourselves up for a few hours. [In her book, Sideri comments that Lambrini was the only one who made no preparations whatsoever.] The time came to eat, no one ate, who had any appetite?! We saw the women in the other chambers pressed to the windows, all looking around, secretly, though, trying to figure out what was happening.

Then it was quiet and we just waited. And suddenly, in the quiet, as we all waited in agony, a woman named Anthoula, an old woman . . . Her teeth were knocked out when they were torturing her at the police station after she was arrested, Anthoula Palikaridou. Her husband was an officer in ELAS and we figured it would be her. She had two underaged children, still up in the mountains somewhere. She had only one tooth left. “We’ll leave you one tooth,” they told her. “Tell us, where is your husband?” And each time she refused to tell them, they would pull out another tooth.

And suddenly, cutting into the silence, this Anthoula started to sing the Souliote song, with her shrill voice . . . and at such a terrible time, it was like death was in the room

with us. And we all yelled, “*Stop it, Anthoula! In the name of God,*” The song, “*Ehete Yeia Vrisoules,*” you wouldn’t know it probably, it was sung by the Souliotisses in 1821, as they jumped off the cliff, in Ipirus, and committed suicide rather than let the Turks take them. And they sang that song. Up in Souli. And she was singing that song. It was really such a tragic moment, her voice was so frightful. [mimics the old woman’s voice] I don’t know if I’ve been able to capture it for you. Just dreadful at that moment. She stopped. The woman stopped, because we all became wild, it was so creepy. It was frightening. Because it drove us all crazy, she stopped. . . .

And in the meantime, we heard them coming. We heard keys, and the nuns who usually accompanied prisoners to the executions. And even they didn’t know this time who it would be. They entered the chamber. Lambrini was standing up, hanging her clothes and arranging them up on the bed, and we were all waiting to hear our names, and we heard, “Lambrini Kaplani.” She threw her clothes aside, and she said, “That’s it. Don’t be sad, women. Don’t anyone cry. I will close all the graves. (*tha kleiso olous tous tafous*).” And as it turned out, she was the last one to be executed. They didn’t execute any more of us. And can you imagine . . . in two or three months, her pardon came through.³⁴

One of the mothers monitored by Dalianis-Karambatzakis testified to being haunted by such images months after her release. “Popi emphasized several times during the interviews, with tears, that the first year at home had been terribly difficult,” reports Dalianis-Karambatzakis. “‘My mind was still in prison. Seventeen women were taken from my ward, the ward of the ‘to-be-dead’ (*mel-lothanaton*), and executed. The nuns used to take them away and push us back, like lambs into a pen. We then lay down on our camp-beds and covered our heads with the bedcloths. I used to look at the to-be-deads and wonder: Are they deeply affected? Are they crying and hiding their tears? The Averoff prison should become a hero’s tomb, a tomb for the women who were condemned to death and executed. I could not forget how we parted from all these women . . . the young teachers Ismini and Leventaki and all the others. I could not forget the old woman from Lesbos who came with a basket of food to visit her daughter in prison and found that she had been executed the day before’” (1994:191).

ENCODING CULTURE

Clandestine prison culture takes a variety of forms in the narratives. One practice involved the creation of a communication apparatus with the men’s prison, “the telegraph,” using handkerchiefs to spell out messages. This allowed the women to converse with male relatives across the way. Eleni and Mitsos Sotiropoulos, a married couple serving sentences on either side of the divide, originated the idea. Forced to leave two pre-adolescent children to fend for themselves for four years, they managed, between the telegraph and the children ferrying messages during visiting hours, to dispose of the family shoe-making business and to take care of other pressing legal matters (Papadouka 1981:85–86).

³⁴ Hart/oral history: Athens, 25 November 1985.

Messages about impending events also flew back and forth between the buildings. In this manner, according to both Sideri and Papadouka, a small but significant number of prisoners were rescued immediately prior to execution. Papadouka, for example, describes an episode in which 16 young EPONites are sentenced to death. Even after the stay of execution arrives the authorities, working behind the scenes, decide to execute four. As is customary, the young men are put in solitary confinement pending their transfer to Goudi the next morning. Through the telegraph system, the male prisoners notify the women of this crucial step, who are in turn able to contact the boys' families through a sympathetic staff member in the women's prison. As a result, the families spend the night lobbying officials and publicizing the retraction. Finally, word arrives from the prison directorate, just before the four are loaded, handcuffed, into the van, that three are to be returned to the prison and only one executed. The prisoners take pride in their partial victory and in their telegraph system. The son of an Athens neighborhood priest, the remaining victim has been crippled by torture and left with his posture bowed in the shape of the letter *gamma*. In his final statement, he wishes his three companions well and vows to use all his strength to stand straight in front of the firing squad (1981:90–92).

Sideri codes several other incidents of collective action as “successful.” One scene took place during the trial of Nikos Beloyiannis.³⁵ Authorities arrive to announce that his wife, Elli Ioanidou, who has been released from the Averoff to attend the trial but has left her son behind, decides she wants her child with her after all. The women suspect foul play, fearing the child is being used to extort confessions or information from his parents. Moreover, they reason that it is unlikely that such a request would come from Elli herself, knowing that she has her sister by her side at the trial and assuming that she would be loathe to subject a child to such a trauma. The women cover the child with clothes and blankets and hide him under a bunk-bed, hoping he will not cry. Several strong, fiercelooking women are posted around him. When the van arrives with Elli in the front seat to pick up the child, one of the women clambers to an upper window and yells down, “Elli, if you want the child, tell them to let you out and come up and get him!” Elli shouts, “Don’t give up the child!” The liaison races back down to the cell and reports Elli’s response. “At that point, we all started shouting wildly,” writes Sideri, “and we forced them to leave. . . . In the end, they didn’t take the child. We won that time. Our voice was our weapon” (1981:115–6). Once again, the triumphant tone of the story is a common one in survivor *testimonios*, even though the story itself is puzzling for several reasons. It is not entirely clear why Elli left her child behind in the first place, why the women were allowed to communicate with her from the window, or

³⁵ Nikos Beloyiannis was an intermediary between the exiled KKK leadership and the center-left EDA party. He was accused by the government of spying and executed along with three other communists in 1952. As a result of the highly publicized show trial, he remains an icon in leftist Greek historical memory.

why the authorities did not forcibly remove the child anyway. What is clear is that the role of the story and the incident itself, whatever its exact terms, is a powerful moment in personal *qua* collective memory, which asserts a scrupulous refusal. Many of Sideri's anecdotes, in fact, end with some sort of victory for the prisoners through the force of their combined will. My point, however, is not to debate the veracity of these stories or to advocate "truer" accounts but to use these narratives to draw a picture of remembered culture.

The testimonies describe the ample use of farce as a means of resistance and collective redemption. Both books discuss performances of skits, songs, and dances that took place either in the most remote cell of the prison, the so-called EPON chamber where the youngest prisoners slept, or after hours. The productions were often occasioned by national holidays, and cells were decorated with paper, string, and other materials. Papadouka describes a dance called the "mental dance" (*o noutikos horos*), accomplished in complete silence by the partisans in the mountains during the war. Two prisoners played lookouts, and others mimicked the resistance fighters throwing their guns in the middle of the circle, while the rest moved slowly and rhythmically around the invisible pile. Dances and songs from the prisoners' various home regions were taught to the others as a point of local pride under Papadouka's supervision as the prison dance teacher and choral director. Short plays in classical and modern style by Vasilis Rotas (EAM Minister of Culture) and other Greek playwrights and by the women themselves, as well as recitations, also made up the programs. In fact, the connections between prison and resistance culture and practices are fairly traceable. This crossover effect is evident in the scripts of inmates' makeshift musical and theatrical productions as well as in other types of prison folklore. For example, "O Horos ton Zalongou" (The Dance of Zalongou) or the Souliote song, a key moment and reference point in prison expressive culture was frequently performed during the resistance in the form of a play adapted by the prominent resistance composer and playwright, Sofia Mavroeidi-Papadaki, by Rotas's traveling Theatre of the Mountains troupe and by other partisan ensembles.

In 1949, eighteen women on death-row were separated from the others, labeled *epikindines* (dangerous ones) and placed under a particularly strict regimen. In Papadouka's book, Ariadni Kristopoulou recounts this particular set of experiences, since Papadouka herself was not part of the group. The women were watched closely and witheringly by a nun. Kristopoulou utilizes the script content of the performances, which took place at night after the nun's departure to portray key episodes in the life of the cell. According to Kristopoulou's narrative, the death-row inmates were especially keen on satire, no doubt as a device for deflecting their fears with their own brand of gallows humor. The sketches parodied the nuns and suspected spies planted by the prison administration. There were makeshift performances of Don Quixote and various classical dramas, organized largely by incarcerated teachers. Kristopoulou de-

scribes a mini-play called “World History,” whose farcical plot and the emotions behind it are somewhat difficult to discern from an outside point of view. Kaiti Zevgou and Maria Svolou (along with their husbands, both prominent figures in EAM and notably in the P.E.E.A.) are featured surrounded by thick tomes and playing “pin-the-tail-on-the-donkey,” respectively. Nearby, a third character draws abstract works of art. The scenarios take place in the imaginary Building of Prisons and Tourism. In addition to its entertainment value as theater of the absurd, the piece also appears to admit a waning belief in a future that can be anything but surreal. In another skit, the de facto “heroes and heroines” created by the repressive state apparatus are mocked. Here, the premise is that whenever a village fell into partisan hands during the civil war, prisoners from that region were executed in retaliation and therefore canonized inadvertently (it is not clear from the story by whom) not, however, on the basis of their record of combat. Among other things, this piece is fueled by anger at the nation’s failure to appreciate the prisoners’ own contributions to the national liberation struggle.

In the 1950s, the journalist, Yolanda Terentsio, wrote a series of exposés on the prison system for the magazine, *Taxidromos*. With the unexpected support of the editor, a Mr. Lambrakis, she arranged to visit the major Athens prisons and her articles, which became fairly well-known among the older leftist generation of the 1970s and 1980s, were published between 1954 and 1955. When I interviewed her in 1985, she recalled the following scene:

They told us which ones were sick, which ones had tuberculosis, some had eye infections so that they had lost their eyesight and couldn’t make their way to the infirmary. Finally, they took us up to where there was a kind of terrace, with hanging cells, something like wild animal cages surrounded by a wire net so that they wouldn’t fall or try to kill themselves, or whatever. And at that point, I let out a sob and I went over to the corner and hid so that the supervisor couldn’t see me crying. Because it was so incredibly sad that, I could really feel for these women who had been behind bars for so long and how many years they still had to go . . . because some of them were in for 20 years, at least. And the supervisor found me and came over and said, “What kind of a journalist are you? What are these tears? Come on, let’s go.” So we left. On the train home, he was telling me that actually the situation was quite horrible, worse than he had imagined, that is, for a woman to be sick and not be allowed to go to the doctor, such was the hatred that the Greek state had for these women, for these people, the political prisoners, in jail for *so many years* such was the loathing.³⁶

In the texts, the constant pressure from family members and prison officials to sign statements, which a number of women, especially those with children, succumbed to created strong bonds among the remaining “hold-outs,” whose numbers began to dwindle as the 1950s wore on. Papadouka cites cases in which husbands, unwilling to continue living alone, divorced their wives for refusing to sign (1981:43). Sideri recalls a confrontation between the Averoff

³⁶ Hart, interview, 9 September 1985.

women and the Director of Athens General Security, a Mr. Rakitzis, after a group of intractables has been temporarily transferred to the even harsher Kastoros Prison in Piraeus in 1952. The women, including the old and the sick, are assembled in the prison courtyard:

And suddenly Rakitzis says, "So, what do you say? The doors are open, whoever wants to can return to her little house, to be near her loved ones, you older ones with your children and families, you young women can get married and have your own families, and enjoy the beauties of life; what a pity to spend one's youth locked up in a prison!"

"That's what we say!" came a single voice from among the group of prisoners. The others laughed.

"Well, come then, all you have to do is sign a statement and your tortures will be over." He waited for a bit and repeated, "Don't hesitate; life awaits you."

"The Souliote Women," someone said.

He pretended he hadn't heard this and continued, "You can go back to your homes, and get married; otherwise you'll end up old-maids."

The women smiled and nudged one another. He said a lot of such things, and still got no answer. He lost his patience and angrily began to slap his thigh with his whip. He waited a while longer and shouted, "Since you don't want to sign a statement of repentance, at least say that when you get out you'll be law-abiding (*nomimofronos*)."

And again, no answer. They just gazed at him indifferently. Suddenly he turned, headed toward the door and shouted, "You're all going to die here, not one of you will get out alive," and ordered the guards to lock them up in the cells, even though it wasn't yet time.

As soon as the prisoners left the yard, they burst into laughter and that evening in the cells he became theatre (1981:122–3).

These texts, however, do more than construct life in the Averoff prison and the process by which some measure of corporate spirit was built as a series of stories with salutary outcomes, emphasizing humor, dignity, and force of will. Both also narrate the painful dilemmas and injustices political prisoners faced and to a lesser degree, are able to convey the sheer monotony of daily life. Predictably, little mention is made of arguments, tensions, feuds, bickering or any kind of overt conflict, since presumably such dystopic memories would endanger the aesthetic profile. In a recent interview, one woman mentioned in passing some ideological strong-arming of the more moderate EAM women and the incidental captives related to partisan men, by certain communist women who were, she said, "too rigid," but she was reluctant to elaborate or to attest to any serious controversy. She further admitted that despite the surface cohesion, "underneath there were many conflicts" but again was not inclined to give details or the impression that these disrupted basic affiliations in any fundamental way. Papadouka, Dalianis-Karambatzakis, and to a lesser extent Sideri, do portray the tragic circumstances of lives—women in deteriorating health, locked away for years on end for their beliefs and refusal to testify against family members—and the massive toll taken by clinical depression and a sense of futility. Papadouka acknowledges a number of cases in which news of a family member's death or execution inflicts terrible grief and despondency, which no amount of playful satire, ritual, or organized activities can heal.

As for the aesthetics of political prison culture and the enactment of citizenship rights these scenarios pose, the fact is that politics and aesthetics rarely run on separate tracks. For participants, audiences, and assorted facilitators, the power negotiations that constitute political assertion are invariably also artistic endeavors, which seem to make most sense when arranged for effect. Examples of the union of politics and aesthetics range across vast stretches of time and space, from Qing dynasty courts to post-apartheid South African elections to mayoral races in Illinois to hostage-taking in Tehran. Even such grotesque events as public hangings have an aesthetic quality, designed to create a desperate appreciation in family members, the society, and the victims, the soon-to-be “strange fruit” of politics, dressed in black, symmetrically positioned. George Mosse has written extensively about the fusion of aesthetics and politics in the German context, noting that “political acts were often described as particularly effective because they were beautiful, and this whether German nationalists were describing their festivals and monuments, or German workers were talking about their own May Day parades.”³⁷ That fascist regimes throughout their twenty-five-year reign in Europe used aesthetics to advance a cluster of causes is well-documented by Mosse and others such as De Grazia and Kertzer.³⁸

Aesthetics provide a means of gaining control and of mobilizing interest and commitment, even in the direst of circumstances. Moreover, aesthetics are profoundly tied to memory as a way of altering and of coming to terms with events over which we have not enjoyed full control. Such affirmative actions work in the present and subsequently as tools of recollection, vital to prison narrators’ attempts to secure the kinds of guarantees that ideal citizenship promises to provide: voice, acknowledgement, inclusion, influence, and the right to resist unjust authority. For the subaltern, opportunities to transform tight spaces into aesthetic productions, to aestheticize, thus become chances to accrue strength and resiliency. By the same token, aesthetic expression also works to enhance the identification process and the kind of internalized power that may increase the odds of survival. Hence, in the case of the Averoff women, we have the aestheticized prison experience that developed over time in the cells, the courtyard, the halls and behind the mesh visiting screen, wrought expressly to make the experience more collective and less brutal. We have the aestheticized memory of prison life, developed in the accounts of specific survivors, with depictions of scenery, colors, shapes, characters and faded costumes. And we have our “enjoyment” as readers, “where what is essential is not found in a series of verifiable truths (but) lies rather in the experience that the book permits us to have.”³⁹ The closest we can in fact come to the experiences themselves is in picturing,

³⁷ Mosse (1975:9).

³⁸ See De Grazia (1992) and Kertzer (1988). Though not labeled as such, a classic analysis of political aesthetics is Hobsbawm and Ranger (1988).

³⁹ Foucault (1991:36).

as in a film, the women dancing around the palm tree, the communications system with the men's prison operating at full capacity, the child gobbling candy on a visit to his mother, the stooped patriot straining to stand tall in front of the firing squad, the Marias on their cleaning shifts, and indeed, the white-haired grandmothers draped around the stone chambers learning to read and write, hoping to become literate citizens.

Zygmunt Bauman (1996) terms the interludes that make critical meaning *pilgrimages*, noting that "this 'bringing-in' of meaning has been called 'identity-building.' The pilgrim and the desertlike world he walks acquire their meanings *together*, and *through each other*" (1996:22). Similarly, the jails and concentration camps where citizens are sent when their behavior fails to conform to the policies of the current regime articulate and are articulated by their radical populations and serve to organize the various interactive processes linked to identification. The political prison in fact demarcates many zones where crucial identifications and counter-identifications take shape, among them, the broader *polity* whose standards must be enforced; the city, in this case, signifying the jail as a web of social networks and playing on the ancient notion of the polis as condensed political entity; the insurgent *group* or *movement* whose goals are deemed antinational by authorities; the *family* as support system and set of reciprocal relationships; the *gendered self* in transition. Few identities escape restructuring once the citizen-demon is arrested. Most are destabilized and somehow reconfigured in the course of a sojourn as a prisoner of the state. As sources, eyewitness accounts often speak to but also around these various layers, which are interconnected and not readily disengaged. When it comes to the most sensitive and profoundly traumatic episodes, many victims cannot bring themselves, in present times, to testify at all (Burhardt, 1993). Anchored in a culture of defiance, however, the individual can frequently be heard speaking in a collective voice, a production whose capacity to endure and command attention in large part depends on its aesthetic caliber.

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