

Arrest and Liberation

By Dr. Rakovsky

On the morning of the 23rd of September, approximately one month after Rumania's entry into the war, the police of Bucharest entered my house and after a careful search of my room, arrested me. A police sergeant and a plain clothes agent of the secret police were posted in the hall. I was absolutely denied all communication with the outside world. My wife, who was immediately expelled from our common apartment, brought me my meals from outside, but was not allowed to see me. The plain clothes man had to go down stairs to take from her what she brought me.

Besides the guards in the house there were two policemen stationed, one on the sidewalk across the street, and the other at the front door of the house. During the night the watch was more strict.

I was allowed to receive books and newspapers, but was given no opportunity to take any exercise. I had to stay in my room day and night walking up and down like a beast in a cage.

Nevertheless, there were times when I could get some fresh air; that was when enemy aeroplanes and zeppelins appeared over the Rumanian capitol. At these times I was permitted to go down stairs with my guardians to the cellar or to a sort of tunnel in the courtyard. There were gathered the other tenants of the house, among them an army doctor with whom I passed the time in agreeable conversations. These promenades from my room to the cellar took place mostly at night at hours more or less regular—the zeppelins who visited us also appeared to have regular hours—usually between eleven o'clock and midnight.

The sound of all church bells of the city, the strident whistles of the police, announced that danger approached and that the zeppelin had been sighted. These moments full of anguish for others were for me moments of joy.

I stayed at Bucharest in my improvised prison until the evacuation of the city. The hostile armies were only some dozens of kilometers away, the refugees of surrounding villages already poured into Bucharest, when one night I was awakened at four o'clock in the morning with the order to prepare to leave in two hours for an unknown destination.

During the first week of December, after a trip of several days in the midst of retreating troops, and in cars so crowded that we were obliged to stand up, I arrived at Vasslui, capital of one of the Moldavian departments, situated on the Foscany-Jassy railroad. There in a foul prison, in a dark cell where on the brightest days it was difficult to read a book, I passed three months. The prison keeper was an inveterate drunkard and I witnessed savage scenes between him, his subordinates and the prisoners, whom he cursed and beat. From my cell I could hear the sound of his night orgies. In the same prison were some Hungarian dancing girls who used to be invited by the keeper to his private room, separated from my cell by a thin wall, where, in the company of officers and local civilian officials, he passed the night in gambling and drunken bestialities.

In the prison of Vallui I suffered a good deal because of my complete isolation and the absolute lack of news of my mother and my family, who remained in occupied territory. When I was still a prisoner at Bucharest alarming news reached me, brought by a colonel of the Rumanian Army, that "bandits" had violated and assassinated my eldest sister. Several months later when I was a free man in Petrograd this rumor was denied, but I learned other facts of which I had a presentiment at Vallui. My mother was dead and my two nephews had been arrested at the outbreak of the war, one of them thrown into jail, the other interned in a concentration camp in northern Moldavia. They are there still. And while we three, the only males of the family, were persecuted by the Rumanian authorities, the armies of invasion had destroyed everything on my property in Dobrudja. Immense provisions of grain, horses and cattle, expensive agricultural implements, a threshing machine, and other things—all that became war booty. Even my books were packed in cases and shipped no one knew where.

In the eyes of the Rumanian authorities I had two faults which made me a criminal: I was a militant Socialist, and had been born under the Bulgarian flag before Dobrudja was annexed to Rumania in 1878. To the Bulgarian authorities also I was a dangerous because a militant Socialist. So on me, and by consequence on my family, the blows fell from two sides.

When the Police Commissioner from Bucharest arrived with me at Vasslui, by chance I was able to read the confidential order directed to the keeper

of the prison. Significant thing—my name did not appear. I was referred to in these terms: "By superior order you will imprison the person accompanied by Commissioner Vladimir etc." Why did the government conceal my name? It desired to keep secret the place of my detention, for fear that my political friends might attempt to get me free. It wished also to suppress all trace of an illegal act. My arrest was absolutely arbitrary, and the best proof is that during all my term of imprisonment, which lasted about eight months, no accusation was formulated against me, and there was no examination before any magistrate.

At Vasslui I had as companion in captivity a Rumanian second lieutenant born in Germany, son of the former Intendant of the royal house of Rumania. The Intendant came to our country with Queen Elizabeth and remained in the Palace for forty-three years. Old Fischer became a Rumanian citizen and had three sons in the army. Two of them continued in the army, but the eldest was accused of espionage and thrown into prison. As much as I could judge this accusation rested on nothing of importance. They had seized copies of letters which he sent to his fiancee in Berlin before the war and the police had completely twisted the sense of them.

All communication with Fischer as well as with the other prisoners was forbidden me. Nevertheless I managed to get him some books which I procured secretly, the rules of the prison allowing only religious reading matter. Noticing that my companion in misfortune was downcast I tried to encourage him. One day I was able to send him on a scrap of paper a German song which I had just read in Romain Rolland's *Jean Christopher*:

"Auf, auf deinen schmerzen
Und sorgen sagt gut nacht
Lass fahren was das Herzen
Trubt und traming macht."

From Vasslui I was transported to Jassy. That took place toward the end of February. At the station I met a group of German civilian prisoners, kept until then in an improvised prison in Police Headquarters, who were returning to Germany: at least that is what they told me, for personally I was skeptical, supposing it more likely that they were being sent to a concentration camp. I begged them to take my greetings to my German Socialist friends, but it was impossible to continue the conversation. At Jassy I was put for two days in a barracks of rural police, repulsively dirty, with a chair as bed. After this they shut me up in the house of an assistant Police Commissioner, where they improvised a prison like the one at Bucharest. I was guarded by secret agents who slept in my room.

At Jassy I was again able to receive newspapers and books. A small detail but very important for a prisoner: I was allowed for the first time to go out for a bath. The prison at Vasslui had had no bath room, and I was refused permission to take one in the city.

The proclamation of the Russian Revolution, however, brusquely modified the liberal treatment I was receiving in Jassy. They commenced by suppressing my newspapers; the agents who guarded me had severe orders not to give me any political news, or indeed to speak with me at all. A friend of mine, a Professor in the University, and even a Senator of the Government party, were not allowed to see me. Having learned that one could communicate with the occupied parts of Rumania through the Red Cross, I wanted to telegraph my family, but was refused.

The guard was also reinforced. Four secret agents instead of two alternated day and night at my door. Two policemen were stationed on the sidewalk before the windows of the house. An inspector came frequently to see that orders were strictly carried out. The government was very uneasy. The police saw the Russian Revolution was reviving the courage of the few militant Socialists who were not in the trenches, or in occupied territory. They had reasons to suspect that my friends were communicating with me, and that I even knew of the violent attacks on the government published in the columns of the most nationalistic of Rumanian journals, *La Race Roumaine*, organ of Professor N. Jorga.

What the government feared above all was my escape, and it betrayed its fear by the scarcely concealed nervousness of the agents who guarded me. My impatience was growing. I accommodated myself very badly to forced inactivity, isolation and monotony—but since the Russian Revolution my captivity had become almost insupportable. I could not sleep. An insane desire to be over there among all those

comrades bound to me by mutual souvenirs—I myself having participated in the Russian revolutionary movement for many years—took away all my calm, all possibility of reading and writing. The most fantastic plans succeeded each other in my imagination.

But escape was not easy. I was guarded day and night. All my movements, all my gestures were watched closely. During my walks in the courtyard an agent followed right behind me. Before the window of my one-story house a policeman walked back and forth, glancing savagely at the window every time he saw my face there.

But nothing is more inventive, more ingenious than the mind of a prisoner. I managed even to consult with my friends. It was long and difficult. The first difficulty was to send them letters and receive answers. The second was to be able to say everything in these letters, without, at the same time, betraying the details of my preparations, so that if the letters fell into the hands of the police they would learn nothing. I had to adopt a figurative language, in which my escape was presented as a romantic adventure cited by Greek historians as an episode of the reign of Queen Semiramis. The persons who were to act, the geography of the house, the squares, the buildings and the gardens around were all designated by names borrowed from the history of Babylon. Maps on which were marked the corner of the courtyard where I would attempt to climb the wall, where a ladder should be placed, and the street corner where an automobile should await me—all that was given as part of the same history.

These preparations, however, became absolutely superfluous when I learned that my liberation was to be accomplished by daylight, and by the will of the Russian Revolutionary garrison at Jassy. It was to take place on the first of May, as part of the May Day demonstration. When one can have such an Ally—an entire military organization—escape by the aid of outlaw tricks becomes unworthy of a Socialist.

I hailed with joy this plan, which was communicated to me two or three days before its execution.

On the eve of the event a circumstance occurred which almost ruined the whole affair. I discovered that in the morning, during the daily report which took place in the office of the Chief of Police, an agent had declared that the Russian soldiers were preparing my liberation. This agent even gave certain details. Immediately—it was ten o'clock in the evening—I managed to communicate to those outside the alarming news. I even expected that night to be transported to another place. The next morning when I woke up in the same room my joy was extreme. I immediately sent a courier to communicate this to my friends and to tell them to continue their work. They answered that all preparations were made, and that they had not even had time to report to the Russian Revolutionary Committee the rumors in the Police Department.

They gave me final instructions. My liberation would take place in the afternoon between four and five o'clock. The signal was the *International*, sung by the soldiers as they approached my house. At this moment I should try to reach the courtyard.

The first of May seemed to me the longest day of all my captivity. I believed the victory half won by the fact that the police did not take any special measures. But at three o'clock in the afternoon, suddenly at my door appeared the Chief of Police. He came to invite me to a little automobile trip around the "beautiful and interesting suburbs of Jassy." To make the party more agreeable he brought his two children and his brother-in-law, a doctor.

Ah! All my plans destroyed. My dream of liberty vanished. Perhaps it was my last chance. I had to make a superhuman effort. I must make an offensive of excuses and polite words. I must at all costs refuse to go, but not betray my intentions. For a whole hour the Chief of Police remained in my room, using all his eloquence to convince me. For reasons unknown to me he did not wish to use violence. Without doubt he was not certain that the Russians intended to do anything. Probably he was not certain that he was convinced by my attitude. I pretended to be a little indisposed. The comedy must have been well enough acted, for after an hour of discussion the inspector went away.

Four o'clock—it was time. Scarcely a quarter of an hour later a distant roar, scarcely perceptible, came to my ears. More by intuition than through my senses I knew the crowd was near. With one leap I crossed the empty hall and burst into the courtyard. The agents were there parleying with a group of five

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