

La Muselière, un détenu écoute et rêve, by Georges Matoré, La Pensée Universelle, Paris, 1975.

La Muselière—The Muzzle, or a Frenchman in a prison of occupied Lithuania

The Soviet Union is a country in which the inhabitants can be divided into three categories: those who have been in prison, those who are in prison, and those who will be in prison.

And that is because in this land of unusual "freedom" it is not necessary to commit a crime—the slightest suspicion or assumption of guilt or even insufficient display of delight with the earthly "paradise" created by soviet communism suffices to seal your fate.

That is why no one is really safe there. And there is no guarantee that someday, having gone out for a minute, you will not be arrested and will not find yourself in a concentration camp similar to the ones described in Alexander Solzhenitsyn's **The Gulag Archipelago**.

Such a division of its people is particularly appropriate to the recently occupied countries by the "freedom loving" Soviet Russia. Almost all of their inhabitants are potential enemies of the occupier. And not without reason—who and when has anyone enjoyed slavery?

And that is not unknown to the occupier. Thus, it follows that one of the very first phenomena in occupied countries is the apparition of a net of prisons along with the demolition of everything else. And that is indispensable, for so many are arrested that nowhere is the existing number of prisons sufficient, which already overflow with men, women and even children.

The spectre of prison is no less of a reality to foreigners who choose to remain in the occupied country. The very fact that you are there is suspect in the eyes of the occupier. Why have you chosen to remain instead of returning to your home?

That is why these people are quickly arrested, interrogated, threatened, and tortured until they confess to crimes that they have never dreamed of, much less committed.

That was the very fate of a professor of the Sorbonne, Georges Matoré. At the time of the Soviet occupation he was a lecturer at the Institute of Commerce of Šiauliai and, against the advice of the ambassador of France, chose to remain in Lithuania and immediately found himself in the prisons of Šiauliai and, a little later, Kaunas.

Matoré's experiences in the Soviet prison gave birth to his novel, **The Muzzle, a prisoner listens and dreams (La muselière, un détenu écoute et rêve.)** The meaning of the title is not to be understood directly—as a certain constraint put on a dog or another animal to prevent him from biting or eating, but as a means of preventing free expression of one's opinion.

The words of the subtitle indicate the silence and darkness of the sentence inflicted on the victims of a totalitarian regime. And here **la muselière** is also to be understood as a purely Soviet innovation: oblique wooden shutters installed on prison windows blocking out light and even air. In this sense the term **muselière**—muzzle is used by one of the characters in the novel—Doutov. Basically, this title is appropriate to Matoré's novel both in the physical and psychological sense in as much as here the arrested are barred just as effectively from daylight as from the right to speak and even the right to see.

Many a literary work, if not in its events, then at least more or less in the experiences of the author, the inner historical moments, has autobiographical characteristics. This is particularly true of George Matoré's novel **La Muselière**. No doubt remains about its biographical character.

The entire novel—a memorable period of the author's life, **tranche de vie**, reveals not only his own experiences and suffering in a Soviet prison, but also captures characteristic and concrete moments of life in Lithuania from the very first days of Soviet 'Liberation' to the occupation by Nazi Germany.

The main character of Georges Matoré's novel is the architect Georges Marcherat, a lecturer at the Institute of Commerce of Šiauliai. When Lithuania is occupied by Soviet Russia, Marcherat, like the author himself, against the advice of the French Ambassador, chooses to remain in Lithuania to be near his fiancée Aldona. What is more, why would a person who has committed no crime assume that he might be arrested and imprisoned? This would be neither logical nor psychologically plausible. It is particularly difficult to make such an assumption for those who do not know the true nature of Soviet communism which chooses to ignore that which is noble, beautiful and human and whose character is a totally new phenomenon in the history of the world.

And so Marcherat, as he unsuspectingly steps out of a cafe, feels a hand on his shoulder and finds himself in the clutches of the NKVD and in the prisons of Šiauliai and, later, Kaunas. Here he constantly meets newly arrested prisoners of different ages, different social classes, different nationalities and from different prisons in Lithuania. Their accounts show various moments of life under the Soviet system and thus broaden the geographical space of the action of the novel. And who and for what one is arrested effectively if not directly characterizes the occupier himself.

The reader meets Sidzikauskas who was arrested because he was the secretary of the Lithuanian boy scouts, the director of the Ministry of Commerce, Sedis, arrested because he studied English, a high school student of Radviliškis, arrested because he had written on the blackboard: "Long live independent Lithuania." Many are arrested simply because they collected postage stamps. Others don't even know themselves why they were arrested and why they are in prison.

All of the characters in the novel are individuals. The accounts of their experiences they show not only their sufferings and their inner worlds, but also characteristic moments of the social system under the Soviet regime. Thus, for example, Baranauskas, a farmer from the city of Alytus, tells how the Bolsheviks want to suppress personal property through extremely high assessments. The "saboteur" Sagys whose job requires considerable travel throughout Lithuania and even to Moscow, tells of the enormous amounts of meat, butter, milk and other products that have been demanded of Lithuania and the other Baltic countries.

Needless to say, the physical and real place of action is the prison. It is here that the imprisoned suffer. A Lithuanian officer, arrested for espionage, tells how he is tortured so that he would betray his friends.

They would hit me on the bottom of my feet with a steel ruler. I wanted to withstand the blows as long as possible in order to allow my friends who were still free to find shelter. The swine! They knew that and did not spare me. They pushed needles under my nails so I gave them false names to gain time. But the next day, they understood and were furious. They beat and beat me. They wouldn't let me sleep. They made me sit naked in a kind of glassed-in cage the size of a telephone booth. I was exhausted. When I would fall asleep, a cold shower would wake me. Chilled to the bone, I warm up again and fall asleep again. Again, I am inundated with icy water. That lasted three days.

I didn't say anything. Not one word! Don't think that I had a great deal of merit: I couldn't speak any more. I drew strength in a way from what I had already endured; sometimes I regretted not having admitted everything in the beginning, but now it was too late. Finally they stopped torturing me because my accomplices, as they say, had been betrayed by someone else. I think that they are going to shoot all of us. Not all; I believe to have understood that one of us has fled successfully; another committed suicide; he threw himself into the stairwell of the grand staircase.

Finally the realistic accounts of the Russian Doutov who is familiar with life in the Soviet prison not only extends the time of action of the novel to the very beginning of the revolutionary struggles, but also shows other moments of that life. And these accounts are often frightening. For example, some of the prisoners had themselves tattooed with the words "Slave of Stalin." They would peel off that skin without using any anesthetic. The fate of women prisoners was particularly horrible—even more so than that of the men.

The limited physical space of Georges Marcherat's cell of five steps cannot, however, constrain his thoughts. His mind breaks through the physical barriers of time and space. The light that filters into his cell provides the physical-temporal link with the outside world. By counting the hours and the days George imagines his friends in their daily activities and thus somewhat escapes the constraint of the prison walls. He journeys with them into the past and into the future. This journey provides the necessary mental escape for self preservation and gives rise to this novel. Marcherat gives himself a double role. He becomes both the protagonist experiencing his life in prison and the future author observing and cataloging his experiences.

Matoré's novel presents not only a detailed but also a broad and characteristic image of life in a Soviet prison. Within it arise the most tragic and dark moments of the historical fate of Lithuania. The reader sees the sweeping wave of the Soviet army, the mass deportation of Lithuanians to Siberia, the mass murders in Telšiai, Panevėžys, Pravieniškiai and other areas. And finally, the war and a new occupation, that of Nazi Germany.

The events of the novel do not follow a strict chronological order, but are for the most part motivated by the appearance of one or another character.

Perhaps one could even propose that it is not the outside event in itself that is important but rather its experience by the protagonist. As it emerges from the inner world of the protagonist it reveals the man himself and his human condition.

In this sense the subtitle is important: "a prisoner listens and dreams." It characterizes Matoré's novel from the point of view of inner space. Marcherat, the main character of the novel, not only gives the outside—the physical life of the prison, the interrogations, the accounts of every newly arrested, through which emerge moments of real life and its various aspects but also shows his inner life, which reaches to the depths of his subconscious world. This psychological space is of three dimensions: the present, the past and the future. The present, life in prison is the center from which his thoughts radiate in two directions—to the past and to the future. The reveries of the past bring back the bright and limpid moments of childhood in which appear parents, relatives, acquaintances. And the leaps of thought into the future, usually take him to the Siberian tundra where he finds himself with the other slaves at hard labor cutting trees.

All of it—the present, the past and the future—deeply and organically merge in Marcherat's indivisible inner world. And thus show man in the very deepest sense.

And that—the deep and wide three-dimensional space of time not only characterizes Matoré's novel, but also makes it rich in its portrayal of the soul of man as well as convincing from the viewpoint of psychological realism.

It is noteworthy, that in the physical space of the action of the novel, and in its atmosphere in general there is a Lithuanian spirit. It comes not only from well-known and familiar places, with their specific character, such as Vilnius, Kaunas and others but also from numerous characters that Marcherat meets. Lithuanian girls' names - Marytė, Aldona, Steputė, as well as frequent Lithuanian sayings contribute to the local color.

Marcherat himself is very close to the Lithuanian people; the girls call him by endearing Lithuanian diminutive—Jurgutis, and he wholeheartedly joins in the daily worries of life, seeking scarce commodities such as food and fuel, helping alleviate the plight of the Jews.

Marcherat is close to the Lithuanians not only in his human condition and in the well described and deep inner life but also in his sincere spiritual warmth and love for Lithuania, that country with which he was so intimately joined by fate. Having quoted the song "Du broliukai kunigai, du broliukai urėdai" impregnated with sorrow and longing he says: "I love this land, I love these people... and if I criticize them, it is as if I would criticize my cousin Alice or my aunt Isle Adam: they belong to my family. And when, on my last day in the corridors of the prison I sang with them the national anthem 'Lietuva tėvyne mūsų,' Lithuania our fatherland, I felt as if I was one of them.

Georges Matoré's novel ends with a symbolically realistic moment; the telephone rings and a woman's voice is heard, "Ponas Marcherat," she says in German, come tomorrow at twelve o'clock to the Gestapo . . . bring your pyjamas and toothbrush just in case." The clock of St. Ann's Church strikes: one—two—three— four—five. It is five o'clock.

And these one—two—three—four—five of the clock tie the end of the novel with its beginning, which is also: one, two, three, four, five steps counted in the prison cell. It is an overture to the further space of Marcherat's destiny forshadowing the events in the Gestapo rooms, and also from the literary viewpoint an artistic ending of the novel.

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