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Political Escapes from Prisons and Camps in the 20th Century Antisystemic Mentalities

Abstract: This study embarks on a definition of escape from prisons and camps in the twentieth century, referring strictly to prisoners of conscience (political prisoners, captive in any kind of totalitarian system) and prisoners of war, but not to common law offenders. In this regard, the study discusses the mystique of escape and its meanings: the legitimation of life, the therapy and rehabilitation of identity, pedagogy and morality, opposition to Power, punishment and vengeance.

Keywords: Escape; Political Prisoners; Prisoners of War; Camps in the 20th Century; Identity; Pedagogy; Morality; Opposition to Power.

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Referring to escape in general (from society, into literature, but also from a totalitarian, punitive space, regardless of its type), Emmanuel Levinas considers that escaping defines the very idea of being, since as stasis and action, it entails a departure from somewhere (a point, a state, a structure) and an arrival somewhere else – progressing along the pathway and becoming are essential in this respect. But escaping must not be confused with the *élan vital* or with the survival instinct (even though they may arise along the way, as inherent attitudes of resistance). Escaping is defined by the idea of *egress*, and the way out acquires palpable, concrete contours, between the walls of the “prison” (an en fleshed, spiritual, mental prison, or one surrounded by barbed wire). The way out also has, at times, a metaphysical component; insofar as the runaway’s mental structure is concerned, the escapee may be said to come out of an old skin in order to renew himself, to seek another identity, in order to replenish himself or, perhaps, to retrieve something that was lost. Specifically, the way out may represent any possible opening (which, up to a point, used



to be a closure): a window, a door, a hiding place, a tunnel, a pit, a wall, etc. Through philosophical nuances, Emmanuel Levinas refers to escaping from oneself, with a view to retrieving one's identity, but his definition and demonstration may also be valid for escapes from prisons and internment camps,¹ which often involve a transgression from the vantage point of identity: a metamorphosis or, conversely, the retrieval of something misplaced, forgotten, prohibited or lost. As a multiple escapee (in every sense of the word), you get to come out of yourself or of immediate reality and accede to something else: another stage, existence or identity.

Besides this philosophical definition of escape (with its myriad ramifications), there is also a precise legal definition. According to this, escaping refers to an inmate illegally fleeing from prison, without complying with the mandatory penitentiary procedures. Hence, an escape involves no less than three offences: the offence committed by the escapee, the offence of the persons who helped him to escape and the offence of those who were unable to adequately guard the prisoner. From a legal point of view, an escape is a violation of the law and an act of disobedience to the judicial authorities. This definition applies, however, only in the case of common law prisoners, and not in that of political prisoners or prisoners of war. In particular, political prisoners are detained illegally and abusively by a system of repression that humiliates and often exterminates the inmates it has under control. Thus, escaping actually becomes a duty or a mission that must be assumed by these prisoners of conscience.

There are, of course, several types of escapes and several types of classifications

thereof. According to the least intricate classification, escapes can be improvised (*facile*) or thorough (*complex, difficult, heroic*). Since the fugitive does not always manage to escape from the punitive system to which he is subjected, the volley of escapes means, in fact, that these are escape attempts with a high hazard ratio. There may be ordinary, "vulgar" or complex getaways, which are the product of genuine escape networks. There are naive, ignorant getaways, without any strategy (for instance, pedestrian escapes, which can easily resemble aimless wandering), but there are also arrogant, "competitive" escapes and, of course, "scientific," ingenious, methodically calculated escapes. The latter are, in fact, considered to be the ultimate, truly remarkable getaways. Escapes may sometimes appear to be no more than "steered vagrancy"² when they do not have a clear purpose. Escapes may be obscure (confusing) or consummate, elegant. They may be reckless, dare-devil or cunning, elaborate. They may be to-the-minute, as they say, i.e. swift and effective, or lengthy (dependent on the digging of a tunnel, for instance). Escapes may be individual or collective. They may be famous or anonymous. Some escapes end tragically, while others have something comical about their (liberating or punitive) finale. Others simply render meaning to life and normality. There are even suicide-escapes: the individual knows that he cannot escape, but can no longer remain entrapped in the punitive space; that is why he prefers to die during his escape. Sometimes, a painstakingly prepared escape is "stolen" by another individual (who may be unaware that another inmate designed it). But the one who conceives (designs) an escape should not feel betrayed,



because escapes cannot be stolen, literally, but only borrowed and shared, given that several candidates are likely to have, at the same time, similar ideas about being rescued from a carceral space. Sometimes escaping depends on inspiration, given that it may be an “art”!

In the harsh conditions of a restrictive space, escape may also become a form of mystical experience: the universe restructures itself according to it, life acquires a new rhythm in light of the future escape and relations among people receive different connotations because of this potential getaway. The mystical overtones of escape are obsessive because it legitimizes survival:

An escape was something sacred. Everything was placed in its service. Escaping amounted to a goal that was unquestionable, a goal for which every inmate could, at any moment, rely on the others. Still, it sometimes depended on the prisoner’s way of being, perhaps even on his selfishness [...]. Some thought of escaping as a strictly individual matter, others saw it as a collective project [...]. But all agreed upon its supremacy and abided by it, for an escape could polarize everything.³

Other definitions emphasize two key elements of escapes – the will and the ability to cope with the unpredictable: “Escaping is a suite of surprises the fugitive must face and, with the help of his will, this is always possible.”⁴ Or: “Escaping is a science in which hazard and the unknown prevail.”⁵ For others, what is essential in any definition of escape is one’s desire to leave, to adamantly change one’s space, one’s territory: “One escapes... in order to leave.”⁶

Fugitives should know, however, always why, how and where they can get away, for their escape attempt would otherwise be pointless and purposeless. Many analysts consider that foremost in an escape are the prisoner’s courage and legitimate pride. In *The Gulag Archipelago*, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn defines escape as motivated by the political prisoners’ “desperate boldness” and as a “conceited means of suicide.”⁷ Solzhenitsyn recalls two nicknames under which escape attempts from the Gulag were known, depending on the season: “the green prosecutor” (escapes during summer) and “the white prosecutor” (escapes during winter). Escapes are seen, in this case, as prosecutors (in a clearly distorted sense) of political prisoners, as accusers who paradoxically urge inmates to run away from the punitive system.

A few of those who have provided testimonies about escapes have sketched out a sort of “Decalogue,” indicating the essential conditions for a successful prison break. These conditions and laws are the following: 1. any individual who has a sense of orientation and a desire for freedom must try to escape; 2. the escape must always take place at night, on account of the camouflage effect; 3. during the day, the runaways must stay hidden in ingenious hideaways; 4. visible and crowded spaces (cities, towns, villages) should be avoided; 5. official roads, bridges, viaducts should also be avoided; 6. the fugitive should have chocolate, sugar and water on them (no bread or meat, since these foods can be detected by dogs); 7. escapees should possess civilian clothing, to ensure a minimum of disguise; 8. escapees should walk in such a way as to hide at the slightest sign of alarm; 9. they should avoid frontiers or officially



supervised locations; 10. before contacting a “free” man (possibly a middleman), fugitives should make sure he is reliable, so as not to be betrayed by him.

Naturally, there have been several “decalogues” of this kind, with different nuances. In another testimony, such a set of principles is labelled as a “Vademecum for a candidate to escape” and lists the following conditions: 1. the prisoner should never give his word of honour that he will never try to escape; 2. the candidate should be discreet and cautious; 3. the fugitive should be in possession of a map of the place; 4. he should possess false documents, clothes and money; 5. he should avoid being downcast by the fact that he looks like a pariah or an outlaw; 6. his desire to escape should be matched by his desire to be active, not passive.⁸ In another testimony, the term used is “manual for a perfect escapee,” and it provides the following tactical information: 1. the fugitive should not trust anyone; 2. he should not be afraid of the myth according to which his persecutors appear to be all-powerful; 3. he should not trust his feet blindly, because they may let him down; 4. he should learn to be “invisible”; 5. he should have a knife (for hunting and defence) and a razor blade (for suicide, if he should get caught); 6. he should possess matches, salt and a watch – deemed to be necessary ingredients for survival; 7. he should possess tobacco, so as to throw off the scent of dogs; 8. he should not be elated with the joy of freedom during the first stage of escape, because exhilaration is dangerous, strategically speaking, etc.⁹

Finally, here’s another incomplete “decalogue,” similar to the ones above, even though certain nuances are different: 1. escaping is necessary and mandatory for

any imprisoned individual; 2. an escape is a test of virility, only those who attempt to escape being considered proper men; 3. the fugitive must be healthy and robust; 4. in the case of collective escapes, there must always be a mastermind, a grey eminence, a leader; 5. the fugitive must be able to stay away from bounty hunters; 6. escape is a matter of instinct; 7. the fugitive must be cautious, courageous, patient, stubborn, calm.

In general, there are four stages of any escape: 1. intra-muros preparations for escape; 2. the attempt at escaping (departure from the punitive and restrictive space); 3. the successful extra-muros escape (the flight from the punitive space); 4. the terminus point, when freedom can no longer be obstructed.¹⁰ Preparing an escape often takes a long time, because the plan must be thoroughly laid out lest the escape should fail – those who improvise may get lucky, but their venture is usually doomed to failure.

After escaping, the fugitive must find a hiding place – a “cocoon,” where he can stay protected until the “hunters” lose track of him. Some fugitives resort to the “Russian doll” or escape-within-escape model, finding a hideaway inside the prison or the camp for a day, and escaping literally only the next day, to outwit their pursuers. From this larval (“cocoon”) stage, the fugitive becomes, by pursuing this initiation route, a “butterfly” capable of flight, if he manages to pass the tests he is subjected to. Almost all escapees suffer from agoraphobia, feeling exposed in open, visible spaces. Hence, their option for travelling at night and for hiding themselves in a provisional “cocoon.”

Escaping is perceived by theorists and practitioners to have the following



purposes: the legitimation of life, individual therapy, the recovery of identity, a form of pedagogy and morality, opposition to the establishment, punishment and revenge against persecutors.

Escaping functions as a mental stimulus for prisoners of war, because in preparing a breakout they experience the feeling that, although they are incarcerated, they nonetheless participate in the war, albeit undercover. There are claustrophobic detainees or prisoners with a penchant for nomadism who try to escape because they cannot bear (physically and mentally) to live in a confined space; in their case, escape becomes a vital necessity. For a fugitive, freedom can also be measured in small, insignificant things, which nonetheless impart immediate meaning to life: smelling the forest, hearing the chirrup of birds, perceiving domestic sounds, etc. When the inmates detained in Nazi camps or in the Gulag became aware that they would die from dehydration, hunger and exhaustion anyway, they would rather attempt to escape (risking their lives along the way) than perish like animals, i.e. like subhumans. In these escapes, impending, humiliating death was an essential catalyst: the escape itself mattered (it had the effect of activating immediate salvation), regardless of its success or failure. Some fugitives may believe that in seeking to escape, they have placed their lives in the hands of God (since faith is part of their life); on the other hand, they may perceive the obstacles in their path to freedom as the signs of wrathful God (thunderstorms may be interpreted as the "flood," for instance). What gains contour, therefore, is a mystical experience of escape, especially since escape is identified with freedom. The life of a fugitive is

a struggle for survival, sometimes guided by the rough laws of the jungle: "I became an outlaw in this country [said a French escapee in Germany, during World War II, my note]; I've been stealing to nourish myself, killing to defend myself, yes, it is a continuous, legitimate struggle that consciousness does not reproach me for, since I'm a soldier in a time of war."¹¹

Escaping as identity therapy and retrieval is the most clearly articulated goal for a fugitive fleeing a coercive and punitive system. One of the key scenes of an escape is its end, when reaching freedom and safety, the former fugitive washes, cleans his face (usually shaving the beard he had grown during the clandestine flight) and looks at himself in the mirror, recognizing himself. He gains again control over his personality and identity, after participating in an excruciatingly long *bal masqué*. The bathing scene is essential and symbolic: the dirty skin, the old epidermis of the escapee flakes away, making visible, underneath, a new, thinner, more sensitive skin, which nonetheless pertains, in physical and psychological terms, to another status, to a different identity. Dances and songs are, in turn, elements that reinstate him in his rights, reminding him who he is and humanizing him, removing him from the state of wilderness and primitiveness. Songs and dances represent natural gestures of release: the flight is over and the fugitive returns to who he was before, or, on the contrary, becomes another, a stronger or more profound man than the one he used to be. Recognizing himself in the mirror is, however, essential, because it fosters a regaining of self-esteem. Narcissism is necessary in this case, because it has no overtones of selfishness, but merely assists



in the recovery process and is positive. The major riots in the Nazi camps at Treblinka, Sobibor and Auschwitz (which led to hundreds of escapes, only a few dozen of these remaining valid and functional, as most of the fugitives were captured and killed) were also aimed at regaining a sense of humanity, which had been wiped out by the Nazi regime, and relinquishing the sub-human condition. For an escapee, even a few days of freedom matter, because even if he is apprehended, he has managed to take a dose of survival and to retrieve his identity during this fleeting period of freedom. There are gourmands enamoured with freedom, who will always seek to escape (who are never tired of freedom), until they are captured and killed; and there are gourmets of freedom, for whom a respite suffices for re-personalization, re-identification and re-humanization. What is characteristic of them is that, within a few days of freedom, they assume their own destiny of insurgents who defy the repressive authorities. It is not so much the success of their escape attempt that matters, but the individual's exigency towards himself. His adventure of self-recovery redefines him.

One of those who have provided testimonies about such experiences, a Jewish escapee from the Nazi camps, used the term *self-resurrection* or *self-revival*. According to his demonstration, the Jews interned in the Nazi camps were already dead, symbolically speaking, or at least they were like the living dead. Having fled the camp, the confessor himself led the life of a beggar and a pariah, beyond the limit of subsistence. A representative of Power apprehended him and wanted to shoot him, but eventually set him free, cynically telling him that he should carry on fleeing, because either way

he already was or would soon be dead. This fugitive managed to survive because his psyche and his mind frame provided him with a supporting shadow, a double, an alter ego. He hallucinated, in compensatory and therapeutic manner, about another fugitive (who was, of course, himself, projected as a super-ego) who guided him towards freedom. The entailing metamorphosis was strange, as the fugitive described himself as a hybrid or schizoid individual: the healthy feet of the other fugitive, his alter ego, were attached to his own body and, with the help of this Virgil-like shadow he was assisted in surviving and overcoming the inferno. Eventually he realized this had been a defensive psychic mechanism that he had set into motion in order to regenerate himself; thus, he used the term (verdict or diagnosis) of *self-resurrection*.¹²

Escaping is understood as a form of pedagogy or morality: even though it may result in death, it implicitly becomes a lesson, a revelation of dignity, more specifically a lesson in which dignity may be retrieved. Escaping is always an adventure, but some fugitives invest it with the meaning of a way out of lethargy and paralysis (mental, spiritual), seeing it, not least, as a reaction of their injured pride (especially in the case of prisoners of war).

Often, an escape acquires meaning as a gesture of opposition against the establishment, against the authority (political or military Power) that enforced the system of repression to which political prisoners and prisoners of war are subjected. The escape of the Jewish prisoners from the Nazi camps (in the few places where such successful attempts took place) also meant that German (Nazi) Power could be demythicized and, hence, that the spirit of



Judaism could be re-mythicized. Some fugitives were impelled to break out by their very condition of humiliated and rundown slaves to which they had been reduced. One can often sense, therefore, a certain bravado in their confessions. It should be noted that there are cases in which the would-be escapees smugly inform their overseers of their intentions, voicing their competitive spirit, their (sometimes infantile) desire to challenge them or grandiosely assert themselves, but especially to counter, with their ethical gestures, the dehumanizing actions of the power-holders. This is what many escape networks sought to accomplish during World War II, orchestrated from neutral countries like Switzerland, from unoccupied countries like the United Kingdom, but also from countries occupied by the Nazis, such as France or Italy. Sometimes, even the authorities perceived such escapes as anti-establishment gestures. Some German commanders of prisons and camps (but this held true only in the case of prisoners of war coming from the West) respected a code of honour: they admitted that while the prisoners' duty was to try to escape, the authorities' duty was to try to recapture them. There were cases when ingenious escapes triggered the German commanders' respect and admiration for the fugitives, being led to regret having to recapture the escapees, whom they appreciated and sympathized for the beautiful tactics of their escape. In the fortress of Colditz, for instance, escape – seen as a resistance strategy and a way of life – became a kind of “institution” for both the prisoners of war and their guardians. Colditz, however, was more than a fortress. It was a carceral space specifically designed for recidivist escapees. Therefore,

in military terms, escaping was perceived by both camps as a kind of cat-and-mouse game. During World War II, the German authorities created even centres (cities), designed like “mice traps,” in which the fugitives were kept under surveillance and recaptured.¹³ In general, however, escapes triggered angry and hateful reactions from the authorities (and the individuals) who perceived the prisoners' flight as an attempt to humiliate and ridicule them personally, as well as the institution they officially represented (at the military, administrative, national level, etc.).

More rarely, there can appear cases in which the attempt to escape is generated by the anger and helplessness of the prisoner of war, who can no longer put up with what is happening to him, which is why the escape is perceived as punishment and revenge. The would-be escapees can no longer tolerate mental paralysis (induced, for instance, by the howling of those who were gassed in the Nazi concentration camps) and abhor their generalized impotence. Hence, paradoxically, their acute rebellion and desire to flee. Another specific case: the American prisoners of war in Korea and Vietnam were allergic to the Chinese type of re-education that threatened to “brainwash” them. That explains why their fury (and fear) of being turned into lobotomized puppets gave them the strength to escape, even though they were exhausted by the ordeals they had been through. Anger does have, as is well known, an energy that can motivate individuals to act in order to save themselves. Despite the fact that they are exhausted, they regain their energy through anger, so escaping can be understood as pushing the limits of their destiny, as stepping beyond



its bounds and as a way out of the limits imposed upon these individuals. Escapees are, in their own way, like the characters of a Greek tragedy, who reject the implacable

mechanics of fate and obstinately assert their free will.

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NOTES

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