

**Culture Behind Bars: Women Political Prisoners and Prison Culture in Czechoslovakia 1948-1968**

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**Abstract**

Research on women political prisoners in Czechoslovakia 1948–1968 reveals phenomena of culture in prison. Women secretly organised lectures and discussions, wrote poems and made various objects. Exploring gender perspectives of political imprisonment shows the differences and attitudes specific to women, who created an unique space to share and support each other. During my oral history interviews I conducted with former political prisoners, I collected photos of the objects women made and had the opportunity to discuss meaning of culture in prison. Such objects are strongly connected to our cultural memory and identity. I will argue that prison culture helped women to cope, unite and resist in cruel environment. Women's experiences of political persecution can provide better understanding of human behaviour under repressive regimes and allow us to reflect on the role of culture, knowledge and education in such circumstances.

**Keywords:** Gender History, Czechoslovakia, Prison Culture, Material Culture, Political Prisoners, Twentieth Century

## Introduction

If Czechoslovakian women political prisoners are still under-represented in historical studies dealing with Cold War repression, then women's prison culture is almost entirely overlooked. However, a close scrutiny of life writings and prison objects reveals a whole range of cultural activities taking place in prison which deserve to be examined for evidence of the means of prisoners' survival across this period. This article draws on observations and information gained from oral history interviews conducted with former women political prisoners, combined with personal testimonies, memoirs, prison records, and material culture itself, for example objects, handicrafts women made in prison. Prison culture is discussed both broadly and specifically: their way of life, their relationships as well as cultural production in particular, culture of the body and the meaning of embodied in actions and practices. I argue that prison culture helped women to cope, unite and resist. I will first contextualise the situation in Czechoslovakia to establish what was gendered about women's imprisonment. Before then introducing the women whose stories form the core of this analysis. Finally, I will analyse their prison culture, with specific reference to how it enabled them to survive.

## Czechoslovakia after World War Two

After the Second World War, when the Czechoslovak state was re-established, Czechoslovak society went through radical changes. Approximately 345,000 Czechoslovak citizens died during WWII,<sup>1</sup> excluding casualties of ethnic Germans who were a one-third of Czechoslovak population before the war. So-called Sudeten Germans who were living along the borders of the country were treated as Nazi collaborators, with many of them being killed in late 1945. Moreover, about 1.3 million Sudeten Germans were expelled to the American zone (West Germany) and 80,000 to the Soviet zone (East Germany) from Czechoslovakia in 1946.<sup>2</sup> This means that Czechoslovakia lost more than 20% of its population and began to struggle economically in the border areas.<sup>3</sup> After 1945 Czechoslovakia fell

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<sup>1</sup> Anonymous, *Válečné oběti československého státu*. (Sudetští Němci, n.d.) <https://www.sudetstiniemci.cz/cs/hist0/hist5/>, accessed 23 August 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Brian Kenety, *Memories of World War II in the Czech Lands: the expulsion of Sudeten Germans - Radio Prague*. (Český rozhlas, 2018) <https://www.radio.cz/en/section/special/memories-of-world-war-ii-in-the-czech-lands-the-expulsion-of-sudeten-germans>, accessed 23 August 2018.

<sup>3</sup> Tomáš Bouška & Klára Pinerová (2016). *Czechoslovak Political Prisoners: Life Stories of 5 Male and 5 Female Victims of Stalinism* (Second amended edition). Prague: Političtí vězni.cz, p.9; <http://www.politicalprisoners.eu/>, accessed 23 November 2018.

under Soviet influence and the government was known as a 'delimited democracy' due to no opposition to the new political bloc called *National Front*. This bloc was made up of four Czech parties: the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, the Czechoslovak People's Party, the Czechoslovak National Socialist Party<sup>4</sup> and the Czechoslovak Social Democracy; and of two Slovak parties: the Democratic Party and the Communist Party of Slovakia. The Government (and its chairman and deputies) usurped all-encroaching powers instigated substantial changes to the country. In terms of the economy, in 1945 an extensive nationalization began, including confiscation of property, mines, industrial enterprises, food industry, banks, private insurers as well as the production and distribution of films.<sup>5</sup>

### **Communists coming to power**

After the communist takeover in 1948, nationalization was followed by collectivization of private farms forced into agricultural cooperatives. Any opposition or disagreement meant immediate imprisonment and forced labour. Since 1948, the Communist party started to eliminate any enemies and staged massive show trials especially against politicians, church members, kulaks, and even the Communist Party functionaries began. Such show trials were fabricated using various methods of physical and psychological violence and forcing victims to admit crimes they did not commit.<sup>6</sup> Czech historians Karel Kaplan and Pavel Paleček divide the period of the Communist regime in terms of political trials into two phases of political trials: the first phase, 1948–1954, known as Stalinist period, was characterized by extremely long sentences and extensive use of violence, while the second 'milder wave' began after 1968, although physical violence, intimidation and bullying by no means disappeared. Between 1954 and 1968 hundreds of people became imprisoned as well, but the massive persecution happened especially after the Communist takeover in 1948 and first years of establishing the regime in Czechoslovakia. It is impossible to know the precise numbers of political trials; however, 264,429 people were rehabilitated between 1948 and 1989.<sup>7</sup> The estimated number

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<sup>4</sup> Not to be confused with the Nazi Party NSDAP (National Socialist German Worker's Party). The Czechoslovak National Socialist Party was a left wing party.

<sup>5</sup> Bouška & Pinerová (2016, p. 10).

<sup>6</sup> Bouška & Pinerová (2016, p. 13).

<sup>7</sup> Karel Kaplan & Pavel Paleček (2008). *Komunistický režim a politické procesy v Československu* [The Communist Regime and Political Trials in Czechoslovakia]. Brno: Barrister & Principal, p. 237.

of political prisoners imprisoned between 1948 and 1954 is at least 90,000. Only 5,000–9,000 (5–10 per cent) of these political prisoners were women.<sup>8</sup> My research comprises of the period between 1948 and 1968, Czechoslovak historical milestones, when it is even more difficult to know the exact number of political prisoners.

### **Research on political persecution in Czechoslovakia**

Political persecution of Czechoslovak citizens could only be studied after the fall of Communism in 1989. Since then many memoirs, autobiographies, academic publications including archival materials and personal testimonies were published. This article can only mention a few of them given the limited space. Research in women's political persecution in Czechoslovakia began in 2006 with the important work *Ztratily jsme mnoho času... Ale ne sebe!* [We lost a lot of time... But not ourselves!] by Tomáš Bursík. In his book, Bursík outlines investigations and detention of women, work and spare time, health issues, social relations between women prisoners and their release.<sup>9</sup> He also adds a number of examples of women's testimonies as well as archival evidence. His book pays a tribute to women political prisoners and it is an important step towards a deeper research in this topic. For example, his chapter about spare time can be further developed, especially in terms of culture and resistance, which are the main areas of my research. Stories of women political prisoners in Czechoslovakia have been silenced for decades and only recently some of them have started to be heard. By discussing various cultural activities and culture production, analysing them through information gained from oral history interviews, memoirs, archival materials and other academic publications, my research gives deeper insight into women's experiences under the repressive regime, indicates meaning of prison culture and reflects on the role of culture, education and relationships under such circumstances.

There are two important articles on women's experiences and coping by historian Klára Pinerová<sup>10</sup> and psychologist and psychotherapist Kristýna Bušková<sup>11</sup>. Pinerová explores the topic of

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<sup>8</sup> Kelly Hignett, Melanie Ilic, Dalia Leinarte, & Corina Snitar (2017). *Women's Experiences of Repression in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe*. London: Routledge, p. 87

<sup>9</sup> Tomáš Bursík (2006), *Ztratily jsme mnoho času... Ale ne sebe!* (Úřad dokumentace a vyšetřování zločinů komunismu). Praha: Neprodejné.

<sup>10</sup> Klára Pinerová. *Woman and Her Identity in the Prison Subculture in the 1950s Introduction*. (Political Prisoners, 2006) <http://www.politicalprisoners.eu/women-and-her-identity-in-prison-ioha-paper.html>, accessed 1 November 2017.

women's identity and prison subcultures and emphasizes the gendered aspects of imprisonment while comparing women's experiences to men's using oral history interviews she made for the the initiative [politicalprisoners.eu](http://politicalprisoners.eu) ([politictivezni.cz](http://politictivezni.cz)). This project developed into a book, *Czechoslovak Political Prisoners* (2016), detailing the life stories of five male and five female political prisoners. Pinerová's article on issues of women's identity, gender and imprisonment and illustrating examples from her own oral history interviews reveals a broad discussion which can be developed by analysing women's life stories and particular events and experiences during their incarceration. On the other hand, Bušková focuses on historical trauma and reconciliation of traumatic memories. She researches the issue of the psychological consequences of political repression and trans-generational trauma. My research draws on their findings; especially the gendered and psychological aspects will be further developed in terms of survival and coping strategies, how women political prisoners were able to unite, cope and resist, and in contrast, by demonstrating it through culture.

In a recent publication *Women's Experiences of Repression in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe* from 2017, Hignett, Illic, Leinarte and Snitar interconnect women's experiences of persecution from different countries and also emphasise the often neglected issue of secondary repression. Hignett's chapter about Czechoslovak female political prisoners, focuses on women's work, incarceration, social relations, health or resistance, and also persecution of family members of prisoners. Hignett incorporates oral history interviews available at [politicalprisoners.eu](http://politicalprisoners.eu) and archival materials alongside with few women's memoirs and she is able to demonstrate that it is important and worth continuing to research women's stories which although meant to be forgotten, can provide a better understanding of life and human behavior under the repressive regime. My work will draw on her findings, but it will mainly offer new perspectives from different women's stories by using oral history interviews I conducted and on the phenomenon of culture in Communist prisons.

### **Gender and imprisonment**

In order to understand meaning of culture in prisons, firstly it is important to explore the circumstances under which cultural activities were conducted. Women were not treated differently than men. They

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<sup>11</sup> Kristýna Bušková. *Women in Communist Prisons in the 1950s in Czechoslovakia: Understanding psychological effects of political imprisonment and ways of coping using oral history*. (Political Prisoners, 2012) <http://www.politicalprisoners.eu/women-in-communist-prisons-in-the-1950s-in-czechoslovakia-understanding-psychological-effects-of-political-imprisonment-and-ways-of-coping-using-oral-history.html>, accessed 15 November 2017.

faced brutal violence in prisons; there are cases of extreme brutality, such as women who were chained and beaten. For example, Irena Šimonová, neé Vlachová, testifies to the way in which she was treated during the interrogations in Bartolomějská Street in Prague:

They yelled at me to take the clothes off, but I didn't want to do it. I didn't do that. So they came to me, so they ripped everything I was wearing off me. And they had such a heavy blanket there. It was soaked with water. It was a wet blanket, and they packed me into it and threw me on a bench like this, and they started to beat me... so I fainted.<sup>12</sup>

Irena was also beaten about her face with a rubber strap with lead balls attached to it while being interrogated. Later, she was taken to the window and encouraged to 'commit suicide': 'He told me: "Jump! It will still be better than what awaits you."'. Some women miscarried while being beaten during interrogations, as in the case of Julie Hrušková:

There they weren't playing around. I experienced one really rough questioning when they banged my head against a table, dragged me across the room, hammered me against a closet and used whatever they could get hold of. I tried not to fall down. A phone call saved me in the end. They had to get ready for new arrests quickly. A guard took me to Orlí<sup>13</sup>, where they put me in solitary confinement. In the early hours of the morning I realized I was bleeding. I was sent to a doctor, but the secret police officers had no time to take me to the hospital like the doctor ordered them to do. I was pregnant with the child of my American soldier. I was in my third month and I

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<sup>12</sup> Interview with Irena Vlachová-Šimonová, recorded by The Institute for Study of Totalitarian Regimes, n.d. <https://www.ustrcr.cz/uvod/vzdelavaci-projekt-pamet-a-dejiny-totalitnich-rezimu/pametnici-protikomunistickeho-odboje-a-odporu/irena-vlachova-simonova-1929/>, accessed 3 April 2018.

<sup>13</sup> Prison located in Brno.

miscarried. They left me bleeding there for three days until I was totally drained.<sup>14</sup>

There were women who were raped by prison guards and as a consequence became pregnant, for example in the case of Karla Charvátová:

It happened on Sunday. Not a living soul was on the whole floor, because he intentionally sent the other guard[s] away, so he had prepared it. But fight, when he points a gun at you. It's not possible. I was still young, I wanted to live. Often they did it in a way that they beat you and then they said that you attacked them.<sup>15</sup>

Many women were separated from their children who were often sent to state orphanages which caused life-long traumas for both sides, for example in the case of Marie Kovalová and her two sons who were given away and were told that their parents were worse than criminals.<sup>16</sup> Women also lacked access to proper health care, suffered from horrible hygienic conditions and had to undertake heavy labour. Because of the conditions of their imprisonment, many found themselves unable to conceive after their release. The Secret State Police (StB) used methods of both physical and psychological torture, sadistically planned in detail. Violence during interrogations was a systematic and systemic means of humiliation and dehumanization.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Interview with Julie Hrušková, recorded by Klára Pinerová, n.d. In: Bouška & Pinerová (2016, pp. 54–55).

<sup>15</sup> Interview with Karla Charvátová, recorded by Andrea Jelínková on 29 April 2016, Paměť národa (Memory of Nations collection, Stories of the 20th Century, 2016). [http://www.pametnaroda.cz/witness/index=id/5713/page/6?locale=en\\_GB](http://www.pametnaroda.cz/witness/index=id/5713/page/6?locale=en_GB), accessed 5 April 2018.

<sup>16</sup> Petr Chaloupský, *Kdo nás odloučí od lásky Kristovy? Život Marie Kovalové*. Praha: Krystal OP, p. 16.

<sup>17</sup> See e.g. Karel Kaplan & Pavel Paleček (2008, pp. 118-119); *Nesmíš plakat* (Dagmar Průchová, Czechoslovak television, 1990, Prague) <https://www.ceskatelevize.cz/porady/125474-nesmis-plakat/>, accessed 7 April 2018; Dagmar Šimková (2015). *Byly jsme tam taky*. Praha: Nakladatelství Monika Le Fay; Vilém Hejl (1990), *Zpráva o organizovaném násilí*, Praha: Univerzum Praha, pp. 149-163.

## Prison social structure

A variety of women made up the prison social structure: apart from political prisoners, who included nuns and scouts, there were criminals such as murderers and prostitutes along with the so-called 'retribitional' women (Nazi collaborators who were judged by retribitional decrees after the Second World War) and Roma women.<sup>18</sup> Among the prisoners were secret informers, collaborating with the StB; these might be female prison guards pretending to be political prisoners, or female political prisoners who were threatened into collaboration. These latter women ordinarily chose to report bits of information about their inmates in order to protect their children.<sup>19</sup> Political prisoners were considered worse than criminals and were treated accordingly. Drahomíra Strouhalová, one of the women interviewed for this project, stated: 'They told us, that murderers killed only one person, but we wanted to destroy the whole nation.'<sup>20</sup> Not only were political prisoners treated worse than criminals, the government even denied their existence.<sup>21</sup> In spite of the cruel conditions women faced and the injustice of usually fabricated accusations for crimes they had not committed and for which they were sentenced to many years in prison, women managed to find ways to survive. They built strong friendships and bonds between each other full of understanding, care and solidarity. They referred to each other as a family and sisters. Similarly, in Nazi concentration camps female inmates called themselves camp sisters or camp mothers.<sup>22</sup>

## Women's stories

This research project focuses on the experiences of eleven women: they come from a range of backgrounds and professions, and were of different ages. Růžena Vacková (1901–1982), an art historian, an archaeologist, a theatre critic and a pedagogue, was the second female professor in the

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<sup>18</sup> See e.g. Bursík (2006, pp. 32-35); Šimková (2015); Jiřina Zábranová (1994). *Ohlédnutí*. Praha: Torst.

<sup>19</sup> Interview with Julie Hrušková in: Bouška & Pinerová (2016, p. 60).

<sup>20</sup> Interview with Drahomíra Strouhalová, recorded by Marie Mrvová, on 27 December 2017 in Brno-Modřice.

<sup>21</sup> 'There is no political prisoner in our prisons; there are only criminals.' Prime Minister Viliam Široký, May 24, 1956, Cit. in Dora Kubíčková, et al. *Lidé věznění v 50. letech komunistickým režimem*. (Photon.cz, 2003-2007) <http://www.photon.cz/gabriela/index.php?/lide-vezneni-v-50-letech-komunistickym-rezimem/>, accessed 12 December 2017.

<sup>22</sup> Joyece Parker, *Camp Sisters: Women and the Holocaust*. (VCU *Menorah Review*, 2007) <https://www.menorahreview.org/article.aspx?id=57>, accessed 10 June 2018.



history of Czechoslovakia. She was imprisoned during both Nazism and Communism (condemned to death by the Nazis, her life was saved thanks to the end of the Second World War in 1945). Nina Svobodová (1902–1988) was a politician and also the longest imprisoned Czech female author. Albína Palkosková Wiesenbergerová (1908–2002) was a journalist, an author and a pedagogue. My great-grandmother Marie Kovalová (1911–1999) was an activist, an organiser of secret ‘flat seminars’. Vojtěcha Hasmandová (1914–1988) was a nun and General Superior of The Sisters of Mercy of St. Borromeo congregation. Hana Truncová (b. 1924) graduated from the Business Academy and worked in a travel agency. Dagmar Šimková (1929–1995) emigrated to Australia after her release and became an author. She wrote a book *We were there too* (2015); later she worked as an artist, a social worker, and a prison therapist. Božena Kuklová Jíšová (1929–2014) was a poet whose book *Verses behind the bars*<sup>23</sup> was later published. Miluška Havlůjová (b. 1929) was involved in a resistance movement and imprisoned at a very young age while having a baby from whom she was separated. She worked as a fashion model and later as a clerk and an accountant. Drahomíra Strouhalová (b. 1930) was involved in a resistance movement and worked in agriculture. Ludmila Hermanová (b. 1936) was imprisoned along with almost all her family (eight family members in total) and she worked in agriculture as well.

### **Oral history**

The primary sources for this study are based on life writing sources; memoirs and autobiographies, as well as with archival documents, and on oral testimonies recorded and collected by *Memory of Nations* (Paměť národa) which is a historical project by Post-Bellum, Czech Radio (Český rozhlas) and Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes (ÚSTR). This research also draws on oral history interviews I conducted with four former women political prisoners and three persons who were either relatives or in a direct contact with some of the women I chose for my project. As Alessandro Portelli emphasizes, oral history method reveals ‘less about *events* than about their meaning’ and it also tells us ‘not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, and what they now think they did.’<sup>24</sup> To work with survivors, listen to their recordings and read their

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<sup>23</sup> Božena Kuklová-Jíšová (1996), *Verše psané za mřížemi*. Praha: ARSCI.

<sup>24</sup> Alessandro Portelli (2003), What Makes Oral History different? In Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (Eds.) *The Oral History Reader*. London: Routledge, pp. 63-74, here: p. 67.

memories allows to have a first-hand experience which illustrates not only the situations and historical events of a particular time but also understand people's psychological states, emotions and the way they coped with difficult situations including describing plenty of details in a way it would not be possible to find in the official archives. Moreover, interviewing witnesses can reveal more than what is said; even the pauses, unfinished sentences and silence can be eloquent. Such eye-witnessed experiences help us to better understand people's everyday lives, human memory, emotions and behaviour under repressive regimes.

### **Interviews**

Bearing in mind that most of the direct women witnesses already passed away or have poor health, I was hoping to find at least few women I could speak to. I also intended to interview women's relatives or people who were in a direct contact. Luckily, *The Enemy's Daughters's* founder Jana Švehlová was very interested in my research and sent me a contact for Marie Janalíková (from the same association) who kindly sent me four contacts to former women political prisoner who would be able to speak to me. I contacted them by phone and email. All of them agreed and were willing to save the dates, despite my very limited time in Czech Republic I had between middle of December 2017 and middle of January 2018 while I was travelling from the UK. Interviews lasted between one and four hours and usually took place at interviewees' homes. Together I have conducted six oral history interviews. Three of the former women political prisoners were contacted only once due to the limited time, their health conditions and a distance of their homes. One former political prisoner was interviewed twice: in December 2017 and in April 2018 when I was able to travel to the Czech Republic again. Two more women who were relatives or close to some of the female political prisoners were interviewed in December 2017 and January 2018. Apart from that, as a part of the Memory of Nations project in late August 2017, I conducted three interviews with a woman who was very close to one women political prisoner. During this time, I asked her more questions bearing in mind my future research. Furthermore, I kept in touch with three of the women in person or by email. Interviews were semi-structured and I tried to follow women's narrating as much as possible and ask them further questions and encourage them to develop ideas they had.

## Women's prison culture

Women's stories reveal a great deal about prison culture, which as a broad concept usually refers to a set of values of prisoners, their hierarchy and social relations.<sup>25</sup> This article focuses on cultural activities and cultural production which conducted under specific situations and circumstances with particular meaning and as a way of solidarity, survival and resistance. Although the possibility of culture in prison may sound surprising, there were plenty of hidden activities in various prisons and countries. Prison culture was present in both Nazi and Soviet camps. For example, a number of cultural productions can be found in the women's concentration camp in Ravensbrück, such as drawings, poems, dancing, theatre or singing.<sup>26</sup> Czech historian Pavla Plachá, who focuses on Czechoslovak women's culture in Ravensbrück concentration camp, explores the role of such activities underlying its importance and meaning to women; culture as an escape from horror of the concentration camp, culture as a way of resistance and as an opposition to tyranny, culture as a way of solidarity because 'culture, unlike politics, united' as well as deliberated and cultivated human spirit, and helped to keep dignity and hope.<sup>27</sup>

## Objects of memory

Women used to make various memorable objects in prisons which as unique 'symbols of memory' can be traced in different countries across Europe. For example, Divilé Budryté explores in her 2006 study the phenomenon of human memory associated with such objects. She draws on Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory, and her term 'points of memory' for these objects, as they connect

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<sup>25</sup> Dobbs, Rhonda R. & Courtney A. Waid (2004). *Prison Culture*. In Encyclopedia of Prisons & Correctional Facilities. (SAGE Reference Online Edition, 1 Aug. 2012). Thousand Oaks: SAGE, pp. 720-24. <https://studysites.sagepub.com/hanserintro/study/materials/reference/ref2.2.pdf>, accessed 4 October 2017; Sitthana Theerathitwong (2017), *Prison Culture*. Wiley Online Library. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1002/9781118845387.wbeoc284>, accessed 4 October 2017.

<sup>26</sup> Sarah Helm (2015), *If This Is a Woman: Inside Ravensbrück: Hitler's Concentration Camp for Women*. London: Little Brown; Jarmila Janovská (1994). *Velikánky*. Prague: Primus; Pavla Plachá, *Múzy v Ravensbrücku. Kulturní a umělecké aktivity českých vězeňkyň*, pp. 3–17 (Paměť a dějiny, roč. 11, č. 2, 2017) [https://www.ustrcr.cz/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/PD\\_02\\_2017\\_3-17.pdf](https://www.ustrcr.cz/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/PD_02_2017_3-17.pdf), accessed 6 April 2018.

<sup>27</sup> Interview with Pavla Plachá in Ivana Chmel Denčevová, *Kulturou proti beznaději. I v pekle koncentračního tábora Ravensbrück bujel tajný kulturní život*. (Český rozhlas, 2018) <https://plus.rozhlas.cz/kulturou-proti-beznadeji-i-v-pekle-koncentracniho-tabora-ravensbruck-bujel-tajny-7174046>, accessed 6 May 2018.

the present and the past and carry the emotions, memories and experiences of women.<sup>28</sup> Budryté investigates the *vizitélés* (pieces of embroidery) made by Lithuanian women in prison camps and places of deportation. She argues that such objects are 'capable of eliciting strong emotions and an immediate connection with the traumatic past among those who are familiar with everyday life in prisons and forced exile.'<sup>29</sup> My work on prison culture discuss the idea of 'objects of memory', and meaning of such objects made under extreme circumstances, to the creators themselves, their inmates, their family members, prison guards and to us until today. These artefacts are connected to human memory through the strong emotions prisoners experienced in the past. Therefore, the objects trigger the memories and enable us to remind the signs of resistance and strength of those people who went through such traumatic events.

### **Prison culture**

In Czechoslovak prisons in the 1950s and 1960s, women's prison culture can be divided into three categories: intellectual culture, sociable or performative culture, and crafted culture. All of these forms of culture enabled women to make strong affective bonds, share their knowledge, express themselves creatively and resist as individuals and as a community. For example, women organised various lectures, seminars and discussions on different topics such as art history, drama lessons, English or French language classes, political discussions etc. Indeed, this whole phenomenon was referred to by the women as *Prison University* and many of the women describe 'studying' there as the best education they could have had and a way of being dignified and united. They usually met during their very limited free time or as one of the women told me while they were doing so-called 'kroužení' (which meant walking around a prison courtyard). They either congregated secretly in the toilets foyer while smoking smuggled cigarettes and drinking chicory coffee, or sometimes in their prison cells or while walking (in a circle) and whispering prayers or having a lecture. Prison lectures and poems were

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<sup>28</sup> Marianne Hirsch (2012). *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust*. New York: Columbia University Press.

<sup>29</sup> Dvilė Budryté (2016). Points of Memory in the Narrative of a 'Mnemonic Warrior': gender, displacement, and the anti-Soviet war of resistance in Lithuania. *Journal of Baltic Studies*, 47(4): 473-496. doi:10.1080/01629778.2016.1248671. Here: p. 478.

'written' by women into their memory or on pieces of paper if possible and some of them were later published, as for example an exceptional collection of prison lectures by professor Růžena Vacková.<sup>30</sup>

### **Prison poetry**

Poems served as reflections of women's feelings, experiences, joys and sorrow. Here, I have translated a poem by Božena Kuklová-Jíšová which illustrates situations women had to face in prison<sup>31</sup>:

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<sup>30</sup> Růžena Vacková (1999), *Vězeňské přednášky*. Praha: Archiv Univerzity Karlovy. Selections of letters were published as well: Marie Vojtěcha Hasmandová & Remigie Češíková (Eds.) (2013). *Jsem v dlani Boží. Dopisy z vězení*. Brno: Cesta; Milada Horáková (2017), *Dopisy Milady Horákové z pankrácké cely smrti 24.-27.6.1950* (3rd ed). Praha: Eva; See also letters of Milada Horáková translated into English: Wilma A. Iggers (1995), *Women of Prague: Ethnic Diversity and Social Change from the Eighteenth Century to the Present*. Providence: Berghahn. One of these can be found at: *Letter of Milada Horáková*. Women in World History, <http://chnm.gmu.edu/wwh/p/230.html>, accessed 7 February 2018; Růžena Vacková & Marie Valtrová (1994). *Ticho s ozvěnami. Dopisy z vězení z let 1952-1967*. Praha: Česká křesťanská akademie.

<sup>31</sup> Poem called *Tajemství bolestného růžence* written in Želiezovce in 1957. In: Božena Kuklová-Jíšová (1996, pp. 26–27). Translated by the author of this paper.

She lifted the weight of her lashes:  
Death itself is not so terrible,  
worse is the humiliation!  
And many of us have experienced this.

Her eyes cooled with hatred.  
The flames of meadow-saffron  
burned with a sorrowful tinge of fasting  
in withered leaves.

God, how terrible it is  
to be given into the people's hands!  
The memory bent her head  
like the wind bent a crown.

Frost often breathed harshly  
into their growth.  
They also defended their fragility with  
poison.[...]  
What a woman can lose and suffer,  
all I have lost and suffered.

In this poem, Božena Kuklová-Jíšová describes a wailing and crying woman full of despair due to humiliation she experienced. In the beginning a woman is depicted as fragile victim of brutality, however later she is turned into almost a warrior like figure with determination to fight for justice and revenge all what has been done to her. The poem ends as lamentation and testimony of suffering as a woman. Themes of violence, despair, humiliation, but also resistance, fight for justice and resilience illustrated here can be found in many other poems and women's memoirs. Such motifs represent women's determination to actively resist and refusal of staying as passive victims.

### **Prison correspondence**

Another example of resistance in prison were letters. Letters were important method of expression and often the only way (except occasional visits) to stay in touch with family members. As Hana Truncová told me: 'In the letters we received, there were the fingerprints of our loved ones. We read these precious things repeatedly.'<sup>32</sup> However, women's letters went through heavy censorship, a number of letters were never sent and many words were inked or cut out; little remained of the original

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<sup>32</sup> Personal correspondence with Hana Truncová, 18 February 2018

message. Petra Čáslavová uses the term 'fragmentary letters'<sup>33</sup>. Hana Truncová also told me during the interview about a unique activity she used to do in prison. She used to 'write letters in the air': imaginary letters typed like a stenographer on her skirt. Such letters could not be confiscated. Therefore, 'writing' such letters served as a form of resistance of the mind, embodied in the practice of typing onto her skirt. It enabled her to do something more than just think her thoughts – she concretises them, even if it was only in the acts of her body, rather than in any external form. Moreover, in Pardubice prison, women made a unique effort to resist the injustice they faced and a group of 12 women decided to write protest letters to the United Nations Secretary General Dag Hammarskjöld. In letters, which were written in Czech, English, French and German, women described how badly they were treated and deprived of basic human rights.<sup>34</sup> Although the letters were never sent due to the censorship in prison, it was an important way of protest and uniting as a community. Furthermore, women conducted several hunger strikes, particularly to try to get improvements to their hygienic conditions.

### **Music and drama**

Women found many ways how to cope and resist creatively and how to fight the monotonousness of days in prison. For instance, women organised drama lessons and once even a masquerade ball accompanied by music. They dressed themselves up as different historical, mythological and literary characters, such as Ophelia, admiral Nelson or a Hawaiian dancer.<sup>35</sup> Women played hairbrushes and improvised little drums made of paper boxes with a vest stretched over it. After this event, they were severely punished. From time to time, women sang various spiritual songs (lead especially by nuns), folk songs and Christmas carols.<sup>36</sup> Among the political prisoners were also artists who drew various

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<sup>33</sup> Petra Čáslavová (2014). *Cenzura vězeňské korespondence v Československu v letech 1948–1955*. In Jiří Hrabal (Ed.), *Cenzura v literatuře a umění střední Evropy* (pp. 186-204). Olomouc: Univerzita Palackého.

<sup>34</sup> See also: Tomáš Bursík (2006, pp. 44-49).

<sup>35</sup> Šimková (2015, p. 40); Interview with Drahomíra Strouhalová, 27 December 2017.

<sup>36</sup> Personal correspondence with Hana Truncová, 1 June 2018.

pictures often with a theme of women's prison work and daily lives. Such shared activities enabled women to protest despite the danger of punishment, which was also a shared experience.

### **Punishment and resistance**

When these hidden activities were revealed, women were immediately punished by being deprived of their so-called 'benefits': sending and receiving letters and parcels from their family members, and having visits. They were also punished by half rations of food, or by being sent to isolation - usually into a solitary confinement called 'korekce', which was described by my great-grandmother Marie Kovalová as a 'hole in the ground' where women would be put naked without food or light, being cold and facing vulgar comments from prison guards.<sup>37</sup> Korekce was a tiny cold dark room in a cellar area where an adult could not straighten out and which prisoners left physically and psychologically exhausted. However, women resisted repeatedly and in different ways to male prisoners. As Božena Kuklová-Jíšová wrote in her memoir: 'Would one of them risk 'korekce' (solitary confinement) simply because he cut a piece of a prison shirt during a custody and used it as a hair-curler?'<sup>38</sup> Women tried to keep their sanity and dignity in various ways and one of them was care about hygiene and making art and culture. Similar activities can be traced among women incarcerated during the Second World War.<sup>39</sup> In comparison to men prisoners, women had a different attitude towards hygiene. They attentively cared about themselves, they tried to look nicer, washed and 'iron' their clothes and curled their hair. 'We sprinkled [the piece of clothing, with water], folded it nicely and then sat on it—even the summer blouses.'<sup>40</sup> Hairstyling was another way to resist and keep oneself dignified:

What about hair? We're not permitted to have any hair-grips, or lace for tying our hair up. The curling ceremony begins before the evening. We divide our hair into small braids, binding the knot after knot. We no longer have hair like

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<sup>37</sup> Personal communication to author with Eva Chaloupská, neé Kovalová, n.d.

<sup>38</sup> Kuklová-Jíšová (1996, p. 6)

<sup>39</sup> Helm (2015), Janovská (1994), Plachá (2017).

<sup>40</sup> Zábranová (1994, p. 269)



stringy noodles. It's a fantastic hairstyle, something between "Femme Fatale" by Gustav Klimt and an afro. We care about our curls.<sup>41</sup>

Women refused to be denied of their identity, wearing men's prison clothing, being dehumanized and reduced to numbers. They tried to keep their femininity, pride and resist as a community. The sense of community, mutuality and solidarity was very strong and it was also manifested in making objects. Some of the women call them handicrafts, which were made from various materials, such as a toothpaste tube, a soap case, threads, pieces of bread, leftovers from the factories where they worked or other smuggled material. Creating these objects was a secret activity and many of them were confiscated and destroyed by prison guards. But what happened to those objects which were saved until today? Hana said: 'If we were embroidering in Jilemnice prison, the moon shone on our work. We could not put the lights on at night. We smuggled our work out during the visits... Creatively, cunningly... like enchantresses.'<sup>42</sup> Women used their imagination and wits to beat the system and it seemed almost magical. They shared every successful smuggled object out of prison together as a family. Most of these objects were given as gifts to other women or their family members during visits.

### **Handicrafts**

Women transformed their imagination and memories into the objects. They did not make the objects just for themselves. Creating objects was a way of communication and strengthening bonds between each other and their loved ones, as a way of solidarity, unity and resistance, despite the risk of punishment. Here are few examples of such objects made in prison. In figure 1, there are two tiny books with poems, notes, excerpts from literature and prayers. In the middle (no. 2), there is a flax doll made of colourful threads, cannabis spun into flax, skirt made of a tow cloth, hands and arms are made of wire wrapped with cannabis. On the right (fig. 3), there is a picture of a nude woman carved of a toothpaste tube.

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<sup>41</sup> Šimková (2015, p. 34)

<sup>42</sup> Personal correspondence with Hana Truncová, 2 January 2018.



Figure 1



Figure 2

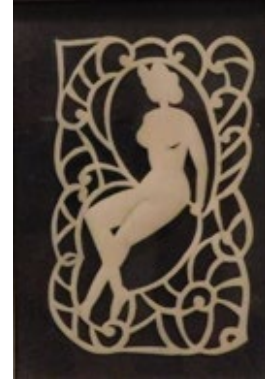


Figure 3

Below them (fig. 4), there is a little fish made probably of a hairbrush. Further (fig. 5), there is a handkerchief with embroidery note: 'For my dear mummy'. Next to it (fig. 6), there is a little donkey made of felt, artificial leather and thread.



Figure 4



Figure 5

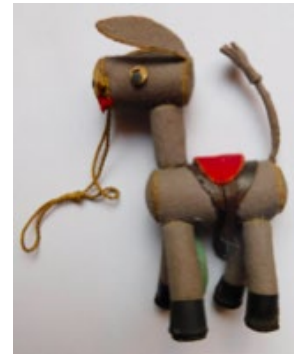


Figure 6

Figure 7 depicts another tiny book with an embroidered cover and with a picture of a woman working on a sewing machine and inside of the book is a calendar with days and poem for every month. Figure 8 represents a velvet hair ribbon which Hana had in prison and while being transported to a different prison, she met her imprisoned fiancé in a van but they could not talk to each other.



Figure 7



Figure 8

While having a small break during a long journey, Hana's fiancé secretly dropped a tiny apple to Hana's hands while passing her by. She ate it later and in order to preserve the apple stem as a precious memory of her lover, she sewed it into her velvet hair ribbon. Later she smuggled it out and still has it to this day. Such objects were miraculously smuggled out of prison and preserved until today in personal collections of former women political prisoners, their families and some of them in the Museum of the third resistance in Příbram in Czech Republic. All of the objects depicted and attached to this article come from personal collections of women I personally met and interviewed. The objects reflect women's own individualities and a way of remembering and coping with the situation.

## **Conclusion**

Despite all the brutality and dehumanization women faced in prison, they managed to create their own world and community full of solidarity and creativity which developed into the cultural activities of various forms: intellectual culture which included sharing intellectual knowledge and experiences, having lectures and writing poems, sociable and performative culture which manifested in plays, dance, music and masquerade ball and crafted culture which was represented by drawings and memorable objects. Such cultural activities empowered women in uniting, sharing joys and fears, helping each other, resisting, protesting, and asserting themselves as women and using their intellectual power and creativity to beat the system and create something expressive, unique and individual in the face of totalizing political regime. Coping with harsh condition of imprisonment is a result of both uniting and resisting, and resistance comes through unity. The consciousness of not being alone but part of a community strengthened women's resilience helping women to continually

challenge the structures of the imprisonment. Women's stories of political persecution provide not only insight into individual experiences, but they can contribute to better understanding of human behaviour under repressive regimes and reflect on the role of culture, knowledge and education in such circumstances.