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Proceduralizing Evil, Proceduralizing Dignity: Memory, Trauma, and Post-Conflict Ethics in a Shared Biography

Abstract: *This article analyzes how large-scale violence in Central and Eastern Europe becomes administratively thinkable – and how dignity is later re-instituted – through a shared biography that fuses two extreme trajectories in postwar Romania: a Holocaust survivor (Nazi camps) and a former political prisoner subjected to the Piteşti Reeducation and forced labor. Rather than juxtaposing sealed histories, the study traces the proceduralization of evil (lists, approvals, selection, transport) and the proceduralization of dignity (measured utterance, micro-solidarities, routines of care). Methodologically, it advances a triangulation of archives, memoir, and oral history, paired with an ethics of measure (tempered voice, economy of qualifiers, disciplined detail). Conceptually, it foregrounds relations between victims and persecutors beyond rigid binaries by mobilizing the gray zone of distributed responsibility and the banality of procedure. The analysis shows how written testimony (a deliberately "low voice") carries memory from the communicative to the cultural register, while post-1989 silence – read through moral injury – relocates testimony into lived practice (care, work, continuity). Addressing reconciliation and transitional justice, the article argues for "slow infrastructures": archival openness with clear finding aids, editorial standards that keep document and evocation apart, curricula that teach operations alongside narratives, and ethically curated memorial sites (including former communist prisons). On the question Is forgiveness possible? the article follows Minow and Teitel: forgiveness is a personal ethical option, not a public policy tool; recognition, truth, and accountability are prerequisites, and no substitute for justice.*

Keywords: *Balkans; Central and Eastern Europe; Holocaust; communist repression; Piteşti reeducation; cultural memory; ethics of measure; gray zone; reconciliation; transitional justice.*

In recent decades, the historiography of the Holocaust and of communist repression in Central and Eastern Europe has shifted away from "grand" chronologies and broad institutional topographies toward a finer-grained attention to the everyday mechanisms of violence: lists, regimentation, files, interrogation protocols, bureaucratic approval

flows – "micro-infrastructures" through which evil becomes administrable and, precisely for that reason, efficient (Braham 1994; Hilberg 1985; Tismăneanu 2003). In this sense, such fine mechanisms are not mere administrative details but conditions of possibility for violence: registers and indexing generate a documentary trajectory that normalizes the exception, while approval flows transform arbitrary decisions into bureaucratic routine (Hilberg 1985). The standardization of evil – that is, its transformation into verifiable and auditable sequences – accounts simultaneously for operational efficiency and for the illusion of technical neutrality within the apparatus (Arendt 1958). This mutation is equally visible in studies of the Holocaust, which emphasize the bureaucratic capacity of Germany's allied states to implement ghettoization and deportation with unprecedented speed, and in research on East European Stalinism, which traces – beyond the apex of the pyramid – local networks of control, documentary language, practices, and the "economies" of coercion.

The theme at stake – memory, trauma, and reconciliation in post-conflict societies – explicitly requires an articulation between this procedural understanding of violence and a reading of lived reality in its domestic, professional, and relational registers. The present article responds to this call through two explicit methodological commitments: (1) the renunciation of rigid oppositions ("victim" vs. "perpetrator," "guilt" vs. "innocence") in favor of mapping constrained positionalities; and (2) a focus on slow, domestic reconciliations rather than official scenarios of forgiveness. In this respect, the article situates itself within the tradition of East European memory studies attentive to the relationship between direct experience and institutional language (Assmann 1992, 1999).

This study deliberately inscribes itself within that thematic field, taking as a double case study Alis (Skamperl/Hamburg) Nisipeanu, a survivor of Nazi concentration camps, and Toni Nisipeanu, a student subjected to the Pitești Reeducation experiment (a carceral program of "re-education" through torture and "unmasking," in which detainees, under the coordination of the Securitate, were coerced into self-accusation, denunciation of comrades, and repudiation of identity, with the aim of annihilating solidarity), followed by forced labor in the Danube – Black Sea Canal colonies. It traces the interweaving of extreme suffering and slow processes of repair, of institutional constraints and micro-practices of dignity. Our contribution is integrative: we revisit the Holocaust and communist repression not through mere juxtaposition

but through a comparative reading of bureaucratic infrastructures and coercive techniques that structure concrete biographies – an approach that, beyond their differences, makes possible a shared grammar of repair (Braham 1994; Tismăneanu 2003). The aim is not to oppose two self-contained histories (state antisemitism and repressed anticommunism) but to observe how these regimes of violence – racial dehumanization, on the one hand, and political de-subjectivation, on the other – produced comparable forms of life and survival techniques which, despite their divergences, can be read through the same ethical lens.

Our wager is to combine archival rigor with a responsible reading of testimony. Methodologically, we propose a triangulation that interweaves three types of sources and three levels of analysis. (1) The documentary – institutional level: criminal and intelligence files from the archives of the National Council for the Study of the Securitate Archives (CNSAS), as well as personnel files and administrative materials from the archive of the Romanian Radio Broadcasting Corporation (SRR). These corpora are read critically, searching for the human voice behind the apparatus and twisting the standardized idiom of documents (Ricoeur 2000). (2) The memorialistic level: *Planeta Auschwitz* (Nisipeanu 1998), with emphasis on its "low voice," devoid of pathos, as an ethical option that preserves the proportions of suffering and the credibility of the witness (Levi 1989). (3) The oral history level: an interview conducted by the author with a witness, which, alongside factual information, conveys the texture of the domestic – tones, gestures, reciprocities – impossible to reconstruct solely from files and reports.

Operationally, a critical reading of the files entails decoding administrative jargon and relating it to scenes of lived experience: formulas such as "atitudine rezervată" ("reserved attitude") or "contacte cu străinătatea" ("contacts abroad") are recontextualized through triangulation with oral history and memoir materials in order to restore their meaning (Felman, Laub 1992). Ethically, we adopt a restrained tone and write in a tempered register: we avoid sensationalism, competitive victimhood, and exemplifications that over-personalize individual cogs within the mechanism (Levi 1989). We do not substitute moral judgment with descriptive neutrality; rather, we calibrate evaluation to documentable constraints, maintaining a distinction between decision-making responsibility and that of lower-level executants (Arendt 1958). The theoretical framework includes cultural memory (Assmann 1992, 1999), the ethics of testimony and "crises of listening" (Felman, Laub

1992), trauma and repetition (Caruth 1996; LaCapra 2001), the "gray zone" of intermediate responsibilities (Levi 1989), the "banality of procedure" as an institutional warning (Arendt 1958), "tragic optimism" (Frankl 1959), and a consequence-oriented ethics of responsibility (Weber 1919).

In Northern Transylvania (1940–1944), the Horthy administration prepared – through norms, abuses, and propaganda – a lightning ghettoization carried out after the German occupation of Hungary (March 1944). From Cluj/Kolozsvár, several successive convoys departed for Auschwitz-Birkenau following a phase of inventorying, concentration, searches, and confiscations, at a tempo that compressed social time to the point of its abolition (Braham 1994; Hilberg 1985). The scholarship emphasizes the operation's exemplary character – the fluid transition from list to wagon – as a sign of local bureaucratic efficiency integrated into the Reich's infrastructure (Braham 1994; Hilberg 1985). The local particularity – a Magyarized, educated, plurilingual Jewish bourgeoisie – was annulled by a cohesive racial grammar. To describe the mechanisms of this annulment with rigor and without melodrama, we fix several terminological markers, used in a restricted sense: banality of procedure (the apparatus's impersonal operationality: Arendt 1958), gray zone (fractured responsibilities under constraint: Levi 1989), cultural memory (institutionally stabilized forms: Assmann 1992, 1999), and tragic optimism (the orientation of suffering toward meaning, within realistic parameters: Frankl 1959).

After 1945, Romania entered a phase of accelerated communization: the abolition of the monarchy and proclamation of the republic, purges, nationalizations, the rewriting of the cultural field, the constraining of the university, the formation of a capillary security apparatus (Tismăneanu 2003), political trials, and a very high number of convictions. Within the Romanian carceral universe, the Pitești Reeducation experiment (1949–1951) became the limit-case laboratory of "unmasking," while the Danube – Black Sea Canal labor colonies transferred coercive pressure onto work performed under compulsion (Stănescu 2010). In parallel, other states in the East European bloc operated similar mechanisms of control – nomenclature and cultural licensing, information networks, mobilization indicators, broadcasting as symbolic engineering – with local variations in timing and intensity (Ramet 1995; Verdery 1991).

The Nisipeanu family's case traverses these two grammars of annihilation and two registers of survival. The article advances in four

movements: (1) Alis's portrait – becoming, camp, profession, ethos; (2) Toni's portrait – arrest, reeducation, forced labor, reinsertion; (3) couple life, 1967–1989 – the ethics of care and the paradox of cohabiting in proximity to former high-ranking officials of the Reeducation; (4) post-1989 – the translation of memory into public life, followed by a close reading of *Planeta Auschwitz* and theoretical conclusions. Each section is constructed as a node between archive, memoir, and oral history. In Alis's case, the stake is to preserve the credibility of the witness: a sober style, a moderated tone, refusing the aestheticization of suffering and turning testimony into a public duty (Nisipeanu 1998; Delbo 1970). For Toni, the stake is moral reframing after the breaking of identity under constraint: a reconstruction through work, care, and discretion, which trauma psychology reads as "identification with the aggressor" followed by a re-appropriation of the self (Caruth 1996; Frankl 1959). Together, their biographies contour an ethic of regained normalcy: rigor, discretion, care, and an economy of speech.

The research limitations are structural: administrative documents privilege the apparatus; memoir writing privileges the witness; oral history privileges a narrative negotiated within the interview setting. Precisely for this reason, their triangulation pursues a stratified truth compatible with verification and suitable for public use. The stake is not only academic but civic: in a landscape where competing memories can be instrumentalized, the standard of measure – a tempered voice, exactitude, and a clear demarcation between document and evocation – becomes a condition of memory's hygiene (Assmann 1999).

Born in 1927, Alis (Skamperl/Hamburg) came of age in the multicultural Cluj of the 1930s–1940s: schooling, music, libraries, and an urban politeness of coexistence. Within this plurilingual ecology – Romanian, Hungarian, German – the family's Jewish identity projected itself naturally into schooling and cultural practices, without an explicit ideological or religious program. The regime change of 1940, however, made visible the "fault line" of citizenship: legal status contracted, and social interactions were reordered by the criterion of origin (Braham 1994). The "gains" accrued to Hungarian nationalist elites (the recovery of the province, the reintegration of institutions), while the "losses" unfolded on two planes: for the Romanian state – territory, population, administrative infrastructures; for minorities – and especially for Jews – an abrupt degradation of legal status through the immediate application of anti-Jewish legislation. After Germany's occupation of Hungary (19 March 1944), the Sztójay government, together with the

Csendőrség (Gendarmerie) and the SS special unit led by Adolf Eichmann, implemented ghettoization and deportation at an accelerated pace.

In Cluj, the ghetto was organized on the grounds of the Iris Brick Factory; inventorying, concentration, searches, and confiscations unfolded according to a standardized protocol, within a logic the scholarship describes as the "bureaucratic efficiency of annihilation" (Braham 1994; Hilberg 1985). Between late May and early June 1944, successive waves of convoys departed for Auschwitz-Birkenau. Embarkation was carried out in sealed freight cars, seventy to one hundred persons per wagon, with minimal water and food rations, a single container for bodily needs, and blocked windows; stops were rare and brief, under gendarmerie guard. The journey typically lasted two to three days; for many, time contracted into a succession of suffocations, fainting, whispered prayers, and continual negotiations over vital space. Survivors' testimonies converge: "the doors were nailed shut; we were on our way," notes Elie Wiesel – deported from Sighet in those same weeks – in a formula that condenses the entire grammar of transport: hermetic closure, withholding of information, the annulment of dignity (Wiesel 2007). Upon arrival at the Birkenau ramp, the mechanical choreography of selection resumed, followed by disinfection, shearing, uniformization, and allocation; at this juncture, the "gaze" becomes both a bureaucratic instrument and an ethical sign of structural culpability (Hilberg 1985; Arendt 1958).

A thread of the young woman's identity can be traced through the succession of names: as the daughter of Arthur Skamperl, she appears in school records up to 1944 as Alis Skamperl; after her parents' divorce (or at least a familial reordering hastened by the conjuncture of persecution), she enters the administrative circuit as Alis Hamburg – her mother's surname – as attested by Buchenwald records; probably Katz (following a very brief marriage); she then reverts to Skamperl and, after marriage, becomes Alis Nisipeanu. Historically, this passage is not merely biographical but symptomatic of the period: the name, as a juridical and ethnic marker, functions as an instrument of classification and as a resource of protection – minimal "adjustment" with maximal effect in an apparatus that decides in its own name. Memorially, the layering of names operates as a palimpsest: *Skamperl* (a Central European, domestic filiation), *Hamburg* (the maternal line and a quietly lived Jewishness), *Katz* (a brief conjugal interlude – a marriage to another camp survivor; a name borne for a short time, signaling an attempt

at a life in two within the limits of wound), and *Nisipeanu* (the relaunching of life within a postwar Romanian horizon). This sequence does not mark identity "victories," but temporalities of survival: prudent choices reconfigured as life demands distance from repetition and continuity without grandiloquence. Philosophically, this "mutation of names" shows how the person is caught between two registers of truth: the "file of the apparatus" (which fixes identities by rubric) and the "file of life" (which negotiates continuity through loyalties and ties). Without relativizing self-continuity, the plurality of names expresses the pressure of history upon biography: an identity that defends itself by precision rather than by emphasis, preserving its ethical core beyond the boxes that contain it.

On disembarking at the ramp, facing selection, Alis and her mother adopted a micro-strategy of action: "we passed as sisters in order to stay together, knowing that mothers were the first to be sent to death" (Nisipeanu 1998: 45). Within the logic of extermination, the detail becomes an ethical instrument: the form of address, the mode of looking, the step; the correct reading of the sign determines trajectories. The figure of the selection "eye" – often abbreviated to the name of Mengele – appears in Alis's account as a function of the mechanism: "procedural banality" (Arendt 1958). In counterpoint, consider Nyiszli Miklós – prisoner-physician and distant relative – whose name becomes lodged in the "gray zone": a professional compelled to operate within a criminal apparatus, at times saving by falsifying a symptom, at others recording loss (Nisipeanu 1998; Nyiszli 2011). The juxtaposition produces nuance: anonymous power versus responsibilities fractured under constraint (Levi 1989). Alis's father was selected separately, transferred to another camp, and perished there – an event that permanently reconfigured the family's affective architecture (Nisipeanu 1998, passim).

The volume marks, with clarity, a double register of accountability: the impersonal mechanism (the functional gaze of selection) and the constrained personal – Nyiszli Miklós, a man caught between professional ethos and the obligation to work within a criminal apparatus. Nyiszli's memoirs, read together with Alis's narrative, render the gray zone visible: there are micro-decisions (a signature, a gesture, a symptom entered in a file) that can effect punctual rescues without the power to halt the mechanism (Nisipeanu 1998; Nyiszli 2011; Levi 1989), culpability in this register being stratified. At the apex stand decision and command – the normative architecture of extermination; at the base, procedural execution – the administrative "work" of lists, signatures,

and the gaze that separates the columns. Between the two lie intermediate functions (kapos, orderlies, constrained medical personnel) that can mimic collaboration without choosing it. *Planeta Auschwitz* maps precisely this scale: without suspending judgment, it refuses to simplify it. Alis's Jewishness remains unobtrusive and is expressed ethically: not occupying another's place in the story; not cosmetizing the moral difficulty of everyday resistance; not converting suffering into rhetoric (Braham 1994; Nisipeanu 1998).

After the selections, the universe of the camp was composed of regimes of the body and techniques of the mind: the rationing of hunger, the economy of gestures, the accounting of energy; and, correspondingly, the reduction of conversation to functional sentences, the avoidance of self-delusion, and the preservation of a small economy of hope (Nisipeanu 1998; Delbo 1970). In Alis's account, these practices are not romanticized as "heroism," but explained as a discipline of everyday resistance (Nisipeanu 1998; Delbo 1970). At Buchenwald, minimal techniques of preservation included micro-solidarities: the efficient sharing of rations, covering for an absence at roll call by interposing one's body, shielding someone from an impossible chore. When she notes that "each additional day meant a new test of moral endurance" (Nisipeanu 1998: 103), Alis does not deploy a heroic rhetoric but advances an austere pedagogy of survival.

A cardinal episode, transmitted through oral history, is the vow between Alis and her mother: if one were to be selected, the other would go "to the very end," so as not to be separated (Mitric-Ciupe 2021). In terms of the anthropology of trauma, the vow functions as a transitional object of loyalty: it converts the terror of separation into a promise. Its reframing, decades later, from thanatology into "care" signals the ethical maturation of memory – fidelity proven through shared life, not through the replication of death (Felman, Laub 1992; Frankl 1959). In Bucharest, with her mother on her deathbed, the reactivation of the vow acquires an extreme intensity: the request is not symbolic but an explicit invitation to suicide. Alis's refusal to literalize the promise – to turn fidelity into co-participation in death – marks the ethical pivot of her life: loyalty is tested by the sustaining of life, by life shared, not by reenacting the end (Mitric-Ciupe 2021).

Liberation in April 1945 is not experienced as triumph but as an exigency of restrained testimony, whose public articulation is suspended, for historical and personal reasons, until the 1990s. The return to Cluj meant scattered or definitively lost kin, poverty, and a faltering

resumption of studies[1]. Meeting another camp survivor, which became a brief marriage, does not yield an idealizing register but a life-for-two marked by trauma: a shared alphabet of suffering that can support co-regulation and, at the same time, the risk of co-reactivation. The loss of a child deepened the rupture: mourning became a secondary trauma, and the couple oscillated between silence and testimony, withdrawal and re-approach. In the logic of an ethics of measure, the fact that the marriage ended in divorce is not merely private biography but a peda-gogy of the boundary: an attempt to protect life from the compulsion of repetition and to prevent the transformation of fidelity into co-partici-pation in death. Separation functions as an act of responsibility – fidel-ity is verified through care and the husbanding of possible life, not through reenactment of the ending. Thus the conjugal relationship re-mains a laboratory of moral memory, in which measure orders what can be borne together and what must be allowed to fall away. This succes-sion of losses imposes, in the immediate postwar years, a discipline of silence. Later, when Alis writes, she will ask of the text what she asked of life: measure, proportion, sobriety (Nisipeanu 1998, passim).

In February 1949, Alis entered, as a functionary, an infrastructure of cultural translation: the Romanian Association for Strengthening Ties with the Soviet Union (ARLUS), an intermediary institution that disseminated Soviet language, literature, and science while working with mobilization indicators (subscriptions, circles, lectures) – a school for the exact sentence and the tempered tone (Vasile 2010). In practice, ARLUS files quantified "impact" through attendance cards, subscrip-tion ledgers, and standardized reports organized by rubric (topic, lec-turer, conclusions, proposals), circulating vertically through the net-work. It is precisely this accounting of forms – seemingly anodyne – that trained the textual discipline which, later, became the infrastructure of Alis's written memory (Vasile 2010). Operationally, such institu-tions functioned as ideological "transducers" with measurable indica-tors: language courses, reading soirées, "scientific" exhibitions, lectures with sign-in sheets and "impact" reports. After a few months, she trans-ferred to the ARLUS General Council. Analytically, her placement as an "activist" must be read within the register of constrained positional-ities: not as evidence of doctrinal zeal, but as pragmatic accommodation within an institutional field that rewarded procedural conformity and

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[1] ASRR, Personnel Files Collection, file Alis Nisipeanu, n.p. The document records the obtaining of the diploma from Boys' Secondary School No. 7 in Cluj only in 1955.

the capacity to deliver quantifiable results. Benefits (professional networks, symbolic capital, access to resources) came bundled with risks (visibility, surveillance, loyalty tests), establishing that gray zone in which bureaucratic competence and ethical prudence co-exist and, over time, shape the economy of testimony: enumerative, controlled, attentive to proportion, and reticent toward spectacle.

Beginning in 1952, she joined Romanian Radio[2] and remained there for more than three decades. She initially worked as an editor in the Children's and School Youth Editorial Office, then as a controller in the Broadcast Control Service, Hungarian-language broadcast controller, editor in the Programs and Syntheses Service, and subsequently lecturer and editor, ultimately reaching the highest grade. The socialist radio was an apparatus of signs: broadcast schedules, chain approvals, ex-ante and ex-post censorship, lists of interdictions – yet also a structural need for infrastructural professionalism (SRR 1998; Vasile 2010). In the "safe" editorial departments (culture, education, science), professionalism functioned as hygiene: broadcast brief, editorial visa, timing, lexical verification, followed by ex-ante/ex-post control. There was no freedom, but there existed a margin within which "good form" diluted the density of propaganda – the space in which Alis would install her ethos (SRR 1998). She specialized in "safe" perimeters (cultural, educational, scientific), practiced an ethics of responsibility (Weber 1919), and navigated the "gray zone" of conformity without zeal (Levi 1989). Internal evaluations record her as "disciplined," "cooperative," and "proactive." An investigated fire ended without sanctions, confirming that procedures had been respected at her level[3].

This episode highlights not only technical "correctness" but also her relation to the institution: respect for procedure as a way to preempt arbitrariness and, at the same time, a strategy of self-protection within an apparatus predisposed to collective sanctions. Alis's statement[4] on this occasion – drafted in the dry register of the official record – retains only the essentials: she entered, left the room to attend to other tasks, returned after an interval; she found a localized fire, extinguished quickly, and succinctly described the damage, without causal hypotheses or imputations. The vulnerable detail – she had left the door open –

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[2] *Ibidem*, n.p. Employment record dated 05.08.1952. At that time, the institution was named the Radio Committee attached to the Council of Ministers of the People's Republic of Romania.

[3] *Ibidem*, n.p. Report on the fire dated 26.12.1952.

[4] *Ibidem*, n.p. Statement dated 29.12.1952.

functions as tempered honesty and self-protection in an apparatus inclined toward collective punishment; the outcome without sanctions confirms the match between her textual style and the institution's expectations.

A second relevant episode occurred a few years later. The loss of her free-pass card – issued by the Radio Committee attached to the Council of Ministers of the RPR, therefore a document with major political weight – exposed Alis to real risk in a regime of suspicion. Her statement[5] responds exactly to the apparatus's expectations: it reconstructs the object's trajectory, marks the effort to verify, accuses no one, and explicitly assumes "lack of vigilance" – a key formula of ideological vocabulary. It is calibrated honesty: sufficient assumption of fault to defuse the hypothesis of intent, without supplying sacrificial scapegoats. The sanction received – a written reprimand – indicated that the institution read the episode as negligence rather than sabotage, a sign that Alis already possessed a reserve of trust derived from reliability and procedural conformity. The episode foregrounds self-control, rigor, and responsibility: Alis internalized the norms of the apparatus (formulating her fault in its terms) yet refused utilitarian denunciation, opting instead for an ethics of measure – saying what is necessary, assuming her share, and shielding the collective from cascading disciplinary effects. Her relationship to the regime appears as pragmatic loyalty: she knew how to speak the "language" of a propaganda institution without rhetorical zeal, negotiating reentry into bureaucratic normalcy by accepting a symbolic penalty and implicitly promising increased discipline. Concluding with a written reprimand, the episode shows how her way of life and of writing – clear, measured, without theatricality – functioned as a strategy of self-protection in a field where minor errors could become pretexts for exemplary punishment.

Normatively, the same preference for disciplined accuracy would guide the demands she later placed on memory (Ricoeur 2000). In a technically oriented, male-dominated institution, Alis built authority through reliability, clarity, and continuity, but also through a technique of voicing that introduced measure and calm into public discourse (SRR 1998). Rhythm, breath, articulation – a sober register with a grave timbre – softened official language without frontal defiance. The effect was practical: the public received information without hyperbole, and cultural programs remained intelligible and circulable in an ideologically

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[5] *Ibidem*, n.p. Statement dated 08.03.1954.

saturated environment (SRR 1998; Vasile 2010). In sum, Alis's trajectory shows how a quietly lived Jewish identity before the war was reconfigured, after the camps, into an ethical sense of utterance: to speak exactly, not to occupy another's place in the story, not to convert suffering into rhetoric. Hence the volume's key intuition: the truth of memory lies less in "effect" than in proportion (Nisipeanu 1998; Levi 1989).

Before colliding with the repressive apparatus, Toni Nisipeanu – born in 1927, like Alis – emerges as a young man formed within the post-1945 student milieu, at a moment when the university became both a space of education and a terrain of ideological reconfiguration. Beginning in 1948, waves of purges, the proliferation of "mass" organizations, and the reform of higher education shifted the emphasis from academic performance to political loyalty, turning the student into a privileged target of the apparatus (Stănescu 2010). Toni's arrest in May 1949 – when he was a third-year student at the Faculty of Medicine in Bucharest – occurred within the logic of the period's student "lots": coordinated roundups, searches, seizure of correspondence, isolation, interrogations. The standard investigative repertoire entailed sleep deprivation, cascading inquiries, staged confrontations, pressures of every kind, and, above all, the use of violence, all aimed at producing the "convergent statements" required for the juridical construction of the case (Stănescu 2010: 314–318).

The accusations against Toni concerned his participation, from January 1948 until his arrest, in several meetings among young men who sought to lay the groundwork for a royalist organization in the wake of the forced abolition of the monarchy[6]. At the time, investigations into student (and other) anti-communist initiatives targeted less acts already consummated than the potential for association. Apartment meetings or discussions of "organization" sufficed to generate charges. The routine practices of the apparatus rarely transpire in the final documents, but they can be read in the texture of the statements: standardized formulas, cautious delimitations, selective memory. In this key, Toni's declarations during the inquiry must be read as products of a coercive regime rather than as a free autobiography.

They reveal a strategy of minimal admission and maximal denial: he confirms presence at several meetings and adopts the terminology of

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[6] ACNSAS, Criminal Files Collection, file no. 1465, vol. 1, ff. 2-13. Record dated 29.06.1949.

"organization," yet he systematically refuses any "active" step (he recruited no one, took no oath, drafted or distributed no manifestos). Psychologically, the discourse is defensively controlled: it inventories interlocutors and settings, marks divergences ("I did not agree with the action"), and then folds back onto the identity of the student ("we resumed our university activity"). Ethically, the tone avoids both heroization and denunciation: he assumes his own positioning without burdening others with additional accusations – a measured stance that seeks to mitigate harm within a punitive field.

At the organizational level, the text shows that Toni understood the alphabet of risk: he differentiates between "organization" (discussion, scheme) and "action" (manifestos); he describes the initiator as oriented toward the spectacular gesture; and he situates his own profile in the register of prudence. Philosophically, the statements practice an ethics of limited responsibility: they acknowledge participation in conversations while refusing a violent teleology, attempting to preserve a minimal space for professional life. As documents of their time, they speak as much to the institutional scenography of testimony – what could be uttered in order to remain within the bounds of the tolerable – as they do to the facts themselves. Taken together, the case places Toni in the gray zone of constrained positionalities: neither militant nor collaborator (voluntary or otherwise), but an actor seeking to limit exposure, negotiating between everyday loyalties and an apparatus that transformed conversation into offense[7].

The trial was summary: the evidentiary record relied on statements obtained under coercion and on the "testimonies" of co-defendants from connected files; the defense had minimal latitude, and the sentence reproduces the indictment almost verbatim, condemning Nisipeanu to five years' correctional imprisonment for conspiracy against the social order[8]. His carceral trajectory included Jilava – the notorious former subterranean military fort near Bucharest – the Pitești penitentiary, where the political regime aimed to restructure/reeducate students and transform them from enemies/opponents – real or imagined – into communist adherents and activists, and the forced-labor colonies along the Danube – Black Sea Canal route, until his release in 1954.

What occurred in the Pitești prison – the limit-case laboratory of "unmasking" (Stănescu 2010: 314-324) – also targeted the annulment of moral identity. Under total pressure, Toni entered a state of "total

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[7] *Ibidem*, ff. 268-269. Statement dated 29.06.1949.
[8] *Ibidem*, vol. 2, ff. 219-223. Criminal sentence dated 25.11.1949.

submission": not an ethical choice but a survival mechanism compara-
ble to "identification with the aggressor" (Felman, Laub 1992; Caruth
1996). In this phase, Nisipeanu was caught in the choreography of un-
maskings: coerced participation in rituals, replication of formulas of
self-accusation, internalization of a vocabulary of culpability, the tor-
ture of fellow inmates, self-indictments, denunciations. The theoretical
framework of "identification with the aggressor" does not exonerate,
but it does explain the mechanism: under torture, the subject alters his
strategy of self-preservation, ceding language in order to save life (Fel-
man, Laub 1992; Caruth 1996).

Transfer to the Danube – Black Sea Canal colonies shifted the
emphasis to labor exploitation, this time within a particular micro-uni-
verse (the Peninsula camp) where the "student brigades" included nu-
merous former detainees who had passed through the Pitești Reeduca-
tion. Norms were both technical and political: failure to meet one's
quota attracted sanctions (ration reductions, isolation, assignment to
harsher sectors). The "construction site" rhythm generated its own tem-
porality: roll call – mobilization – quota – report – meeting. In these
meetings, the leading scholar of the subject notes the continuity of un-
maskings in domesticated formats: analyses of conduct, self-criticisms,
political instruction, and discussions of conscience (Stănescu 2010:
325-328). Although violence no longer matched the intensity of the
Pitești laboratory, the function remained the same: control of language
and the internalization of culpability. The students' educational capital
made them useful for measurements, centralizations, and reports, while
simultaneously rendering them visible to the apparatus; the "brigade
leader" mediated the quota, productivity, and micro-rituals of control.
In this ecology, signs of return appeared for some who had "fallen":
within the exhausting repetition of days, interstices of minimal solidar-
ity opened (task-swapping for an exhausted comrade, shielding a sick
prisoner at roll call) – gestures that, for Toni, marked the beginning of
moral reframing.

Toni's trajectory exemplifies a structural biographical rupture: a
brilliant medical student at the moment of arrest, he became – after con-
viction and passage through Reeducation – a professional deliberately
kept at the margins of his vocation. The resumption of studies was ob-
structed, the carceral stigma remained active, and informational surveil-
lance did not cease; the "file" functioned as an anti-title, converting
scholastic capital into political risk. Sociologically, this is the mecha-

nism of professional closure: merit is decoupled from mobility, and scientific work is permitted only in subordinate, closely supervised forms. The result is a "controlled de-qualification": blocked access to the desired profession and forced acceptance of the status of laboratory technician in a contemporary institute – not because of incapacity, but because the political order demanded docility and low visibility.

Psychologically, we see the loss of a professional identity and the recalibration of hope: the promise of medical practice narrows to technical gestures, yet continuity is salvaged through rigor, exactitude, and usefulness. In Frankl's (1959) terms, this return is a "tragic optimism": suffering is oriented toward meaning through quiet work, care, and fidelity rather than rhetoric. He spoke little of the carceral experience at the time (Mitric-Ciupe 2021), and he neither wrote nor published after 1989. In a clinical-narrative key, the post-1989 silence can be read through the lens of "moral injury" (Shay 1994): the episode of unmaskings wounded the relationship to language, such that silence becomes a "guarding of speech," not an evasion of responsibility. Taken as a whole, his fate shows how the apparatus rewrites biographies through administrative barriers, while the feasible response remains an ethics of modest continuity: doing well what can still be done, within imposed limits.

Although the circumstances of their first meeting in the early 1960s remain unknown, the marriage of Alis and Toni in 1967 inaugurated a trajectory of domestic reconstruction under constraining institutional conditions. In the early years, the couple lived in the attic of the villa owned by Gavril and Eva Birtaș (Alis's cousin). Gavril's biography traces the path of the "professional revolutionary": interwar illegality, imprisonment for communist activity, and then an accelerated career after 1948 within the Securitate, rising to head both Directorate I and Directorate III – precisely the structures that supervised the Reeducation. By the mid-1950s he was purged and sidelined, though later rehabilitated, with full recognition of his communist activity (Stănescu 2010: 401-410). Eva Birtaș also operated in the communist underground; in 1949 she was appointed deputy head of the Securitate's prisons and camps (the Operative Service), likewise indicating a link to the Reeducation. She later headed personnel in the General Directorate of Penitentiaries and then spent several years in the cultural-ideological apparatus – the Directorate for Cultural Guidance (Stănescu 2025: 259). The paradox is evident: a victim of Pitești cohabits in the home of a family once located at the very center of the repressive mechanism. And

yet, today's oral testimony preserves genuine gestures of hospitality: "Eva treated them as her own, and Gavril, though taciturn, took care that nothing was lacking" (Mitric-Ciupe 2021). This is the "gray zone" and the "banality of procedure" in a domestic register: not exoneration, but a complication of judgment (Levi 1989; Arendt 1958).

In 1969, the couple's daughter, Diana, was born; her adolescence was broken by a severe neurological condition involving progressive paralysis and dependence on care (Mitric-Ciupe 2021). Relatives abroad became vital for medication, and precisely these contacts kept the family in the Securitate's sights. The dossier's language fixes ritual formulas – "reserve," "influences from outside," "suspicious correspondence" – which, read critically (Ricoeur 2000), appear as euphemisms for the desperation of procuring treatment and for the verbal hygiene of a family cautious under surveillance[9]. For Alis and Toni, an ethics of care took form: time, work, resources, and sociability were redistributed around caregiving. Care became the matrix of decisions: it reordered priorities, regulated rhythms, and shaped communication (how much is said, to whom, and how). This was not a declaration but a structure: legible in the household budget, in fatigue, in absences from work, and in the obligatory discretion of conversation. Alis continued her work in radio until 1982 (cultural/educational programming), then retired; Toni provided material stability in a mid-level position. A holograph declaration in the Securitate archive retains the same administrative idiom – "contacts abroad," "reserved attitude" – without capturing the reality: medication and the burdens of care for a sick daughter. The 1980s – shortages, cold, queues, power cuts – rendered caregiving invisible labor. Discretion became a strategy of protection: caution in conversation, a narrowed circle. In parallel, the Auschwitz pact returned as a weighty family memory: the recollection of the promise "not to be separated" was reabsorbed into the ethics of care, avoiding the thanatologization of memory (Mitric-Ciupe 2021).

December 1989 found Alis and Toni in a discreet maturity in which the reflexes of prudence coexisted with a new sense of public breathing space. Regime change reset the relationship between memory and the public sphere: partially opened archives, more permissive editorial rules, and a cultural field in search of new measures. In this ecology, old age was no longer only withdrawal but also a time to offer testimony with civic vocation. For Alis, the transition took the form of a memory project: she finalized – cast as epistles to her daughter – the

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[9] ACNSAS, Informative Files Collection, file no. 4404, ff. 21-22.

manuscript that would become *Planeta Auschwitz*. The stylistic choice – short sentence, affective economy, factual precision – was explicitly ethical: "not a cry, but testimony" (Nisipeanu 1998: 207–210). Her death in 1995 transformed the volume into a moral testament. The book appeared posthumously in 1998 through the care of Hanna and Peter Hamburg, whose editorial work – preserving the timbre, drawing a clear line between document and evocation, avoiding rhetorical inflation – secured the passage from communicative memory to cultural memory (Assmann 1992, 1999).

For Toni, the transition confirmed the choice of silence: he remained near the work of care, far from the public accountings of Pitești. This choice can be read through the category of moral injury (Shay 1994): the unmaskings wounded language, forcing it to betray the person. Under such conditions, silence becomes a form of guarding speech and fidelity to lived life – an ethic close to "tragic optimism," which orients suffering toward meaning: work, care, continuity (Frankl 1959). A witness describes him as "a man who carried silence with dignity," refusing both the capitalization of suffering and simplistic allocations of guilt (Mitric-Ciupe 2021). The absence of a written confession can be understood through the lens of the moral injury produced by the unmaskings (Shay 1994), the mistrust of language after its perversion under coercion, and the priority of care as a form of repair. Silence does not annul testimony; it relocates it into the registers of life. In the post-1989 public sphere, *Planeta Auschwitz* operates as a standard of measure, offering a way to tell the truth without hyperbole – useful to historical education and civic hygiene. Alis's written testimony and Toni's ethical silence become complementary: one teachable, the other livable – together sustaining a culture of memory resistant to instrumentalization (Assmann 1999).

Alis Nisipeanu's volume functions simultaneously as document, as a mode of speaking about evil, and as a lesson in method. The "low voice" – short sentences, an economy of qualifiers, a preference for transitive verbs and concrete nouns – is not a stylistic caprice but an ethical choice meant to keep the text close to brute facts and to their proportions. Compositionally, the text avoids both heavy metaphor and rhetorical pathos: sequences are linked by cuts that mimic documentary montage, while transitive verbs compress actions into verifiable units. Spatiotemporal indicators are kept to a minimum (rarely "there," "then") precisely to avoid universalizing the experience. The configuration of space-time remains anchored in the concreteness of logistics

(timetable, roll call, route, physical setting). This austerity is a form of epistemic responsibility: reading should produce knowledge, not a substitute emotion (Delbo 1970). The reader is not pushed to feel but invited to understand: tension is created by exactitude, not by hyperbole (Felman, Laub 1992).

The "gaze" is the narrative's structural operator. *Planeta Auschwitz* does not anthropomorphize evil; it shows it as procedure, as a set of standardized practices. The "eye" of selection – monumentalized publicly in the figure of Mengele – appears as a function within a decision chain: an optic–administrative threshold that "turns" bodies from one column into another (Hilberg 1985). In Hilberg's terms, the "gaze" is one link in an administrative operation: signal–flow (the body set in motion) → verification (the gaze) → sorting (the column) → recording (the list) → transport (railway routine). Reducing the "gaze" to a function does not attenuate guilt; it distributes it through the apparatus: from order to execution, from SS physician to scribe, from guard to locomotive (Arendt 1958). In counterpoint, the figure of Nyiszli Miklós (prisoner-physician and distant relative) introduces the nuance of the "gray zone": a liminal position in which the medical act can, through a bureaucratic falsehood, save a life or, under constraint, record an inevitable loss (Nisipeanu 1998; Nyiszli 2011; Levi 1989). The discreet references to Nyiszli ennoble precisely the difficulty of judgment: a prisoner-physician forced to operate within a perverted medicine, he occupies the point where "saving" and "recording loss" can alternate within the same day. In Levi's reading, this is exactly where "moral compromise" becomes a condition of survival without becoming an excuse (Nyiszli 2011; Levi 1989). The distinction between "function" and "proper name" redistributes responsibility: the mechanism is impersonal, yet it does not cancel individual consciences; their capture within the apparatus explains moral ambivalence without absolving it.

The thread of survivor's guilt runs through the book as a criterion of proportion, not as self-flagellation: a prudence about calling micronormal gestures "heroism" – shielding someone at roll call, calculating the sharing of rations, a practical piece of advice with life value. Consistently, the text refuses to capitalize on the "exceptional": the small successes of conservation (an avoided chore, an efficient division) are presented without halo. Guilt becomes an anti-myth: it prevents moral overbidding and maintains measure between "what could be done" and "what was no longer possible" (LaCapra 2001). At the level of identity, Alis's Jewishness is unobtrusively expressed; a social

and cultural belonging struck by an administrative ontology of "origin," hence the emphasis on proportion and on avoiding the moral "winging" of the text. Accountability is stratified: decision-making actors are distinguished from intermediate functions; local Hungarian institutions appear under the rubric of procedural complicity (Braham 1994).

The "economy" of survival techniques is rendered as an inventory: rationing hunger, economizing gestures, reducing speech to functional sentences, calculating effort in relation to roll-call schedules. In the women's camp, "minimal techniques" include the intelligent redistribution of tasks, covering for a lack of clothing, and protecting the vulnerable from impossible assignments. Solidarity is not mythologized; it is described as risk-calibrated practice (Nisipeanu 1998; Delbo 1970).

Behind this aesthetic stands an ethics of utterance that facilitates the passage of memory from the communicative register (fragile, familial) to the cultural one (stable, citable): a text that does not succumb to the rhetoric of the "spectacle of pain" has a chance to become teachable, discussable, and integrable into educational programs without relativizing evil (Assmann 1992, 1999). Here the network of "late witnesses" plays a decisive role. Magda Stroe supplies the texture of the domestic: the way Eva Birtaș "received them as her own," Gavril's practical silence, the small rituals of care in a house with a heavy history. She also clarifies the lexicon of the Securitate – "contacts abroad," "reserved attitude" – translated in real life into medication and prudence (Mitric-Ciupe 2021). Magda is, moreover, a "Righteous Among the Nations" for the rescue of Hanna Hamburg (Alis's cousin) in 1944 – an act that, by Yad Vashem's criteria, entails personal risk, the absence of any material reward, and independent corroboration (Yad Vashem 2010). Within this frame, Hanna's rescue functions symbolically as a premise for the "rescue of Alis's voice": without the person saved, the posthumous editor would not have existed (Yad Vashem 2010).

Hanna and Peter Hamburg are the ones who transformed the manuscript into a book. Their postface makes explicit the decisions of "care for the voice": preserving the timbre, rejecting rhetorical intensification, drawing a firm line between document and evocation. Thus *Planeta Auschwitz* becomes not only testimony but also a manual of proportion – a standard of measure for cultural memory. Alongside these "late witnesses," another type of witness takes shape – the "silent witness." In our narrative, this is Toni Nisipeanu himself. His post-1989

silence, understood through "moral injury," does not negate testimony; it relocates it into the registers of life (Shay 1994; Frankl 1959).

Conclusively, the Nisipeanu case demands a change of scale: beyond the "great violences," the micro-infrastructures that enable them and the micro-practices through which life is recomposed after them become legible. The shift is methodological: evil appears as networks of repetitive operations, while repair emerges in rituals of the ordinary (order, routine, care). The proceduralization of evil finds its counterweight in a proceduralization of dignity – domestic choreographies, an economy of words, a sober montage of testimony – without conflating regimes: racial dehumanization and political de-subjectivation remain distinct as mechanisms, even if they converge in the need for rhythm, work, care, and measured speech.

The study's contribution is threefold. First, it proposes an analytic bridge between Holocaust studies and research on communist repression by comparing bureaucratic ecologies and coercive techniques that structure experience. Second, it advances an "ethics of measure" as both an epistemic and civic standard – a tempered voice, an economy of qualifiers, a discipline of detail – compatible with cultural memory and resistant to instrumentalization. Third, it treats the ethics of editing as part of historical truth: a "double loyalty" to the witness's voice and to the context of publication becomes a condition for the public transmissibility of trauma.

Here the victim – persecutor relation is decoupled from a rigid dichotomy: Toni's cohabitation with the Birtaș family (former elites of the apparatus) indicates forms of postwar proximity without exoneration and without declarative "reconciliations." "Victim identity" is not essentialized but assumes a civic role: the right to bear witness (Alis) and, conversely, an ethics of silence as the protection of language (Toni). Within this architecture, the "late witness" (transporting communicative memory into cultural memory) and the "silent witness" (testimony through life rather than phrase) are complementary.

Theoretically, the conceptual set is refined: the "gray zone" as a topology of distributed responsibility (judgment calibrated to constraints); the "banality of procedure" as a caution against personalizing guilt without mechanical analysis; "tragic optimism" as an orientation of suffering toward meaning by operationalizing care; and "moral injury" as an explanation for post-1989 silence. Methodologically, the archive – memoir – oral history triangulation remains productive if accompanied by two prudences: decoding "administrative truth" (where

formulas such as "reserve" or "contacts" mask concrete objects of care) and tempering the cathartic effect in interview through "responsible listening." The limits are assumed: not totality, but demonstrative sufficiency; exactitude precedes exhaustiveness.

The institutions of reconciliation appear on two planes. At the macro level: open archives, editorial standards, educational policy, memorialization, and (limited) forms of accountability within transitional justice. At the micro level: ethical editing, pedagogies of practice, and oral history without cathartic pressure – "slow infrastructures" that stabilize public truths in the absence of expansive penal solutions. Is forgiveness possible? In Minow and Teitel's sense, forgiveness is a personal ethical option, not an instrument of public policy: it can arise only after recognition, truth, and accountability, and it does not substitute for justice (Minow 1998: 14-18; Teitel 2000: 4-7). In the case at hand, measured coexistence (not rhetorical reconciliation) becomes a realistic form of living together: the protection of language, care, continuity – an ethic of repeatable dignity that prevents both re-victimization and hasty rehabilitations.

For Romania, the infrastructural asymmetries between the memory of the Holocaust and that of political prisoners call for common standards and the avoidance of a "competition of suffering." Public utility is decided in verifiable micro-institutions: documentary doubling, a firm demarcation of document and evocation, a tempered voice, and curricula that teach ecologies of practice. Thus, post-catastrophe repair rests less on spectacular gestures and more on the conscientious institution of the small orders through which dignity returns as a daily practice.

In light of the foregoing, two clarifications and one practical implication follow. First, the evidentiary field is structurally asymmetric: administrative files foreground the apparatus; memoirs, the witness; oral history, a negotiated narrative. Silence – imposed or chosen – registers not as neutral absence but as missing data. Our archive–memoir–oral-history triangulation mitigates, without eliminating, these biases; accordingly, our claims aim at demonstrative sufficiency rather than totality – exactitude precedes exhaustiveness. Second, reading "procedure" across regimes risks flattening difference. We guard against this by keeping the mechanisms distinct (racial dehumanization vs. political de-subjectivation) while comparing their operational grammars. The analytic gain is portability: the categories *banality of procedure*, *gray zone*, and *ethics of measure* travel across cases without collapsing them;

where portability fails, we mark the seam rather than smooth it. The practical implication is direct: if evil is proceduralized, repair must be proceduralized as well – through "slow infrastructures" such as archival openness with clear finding aids; editorial standards that separate document from evocation; curricula that teach operations (lists, approvals, quotas) alongside narratives; and oral-history protocols that temper catharsis with responsible listening. In this sense, dignity is not a remainder after catastrophe but a routine to be instituted: measured utterance, calibrated care, and small orders performed again and again.

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