CHAPTER 1

THE DAILY LIFE OF WOMEN IN THE GULAG IN RESEARCH AND PERSONAL MEMOIRS

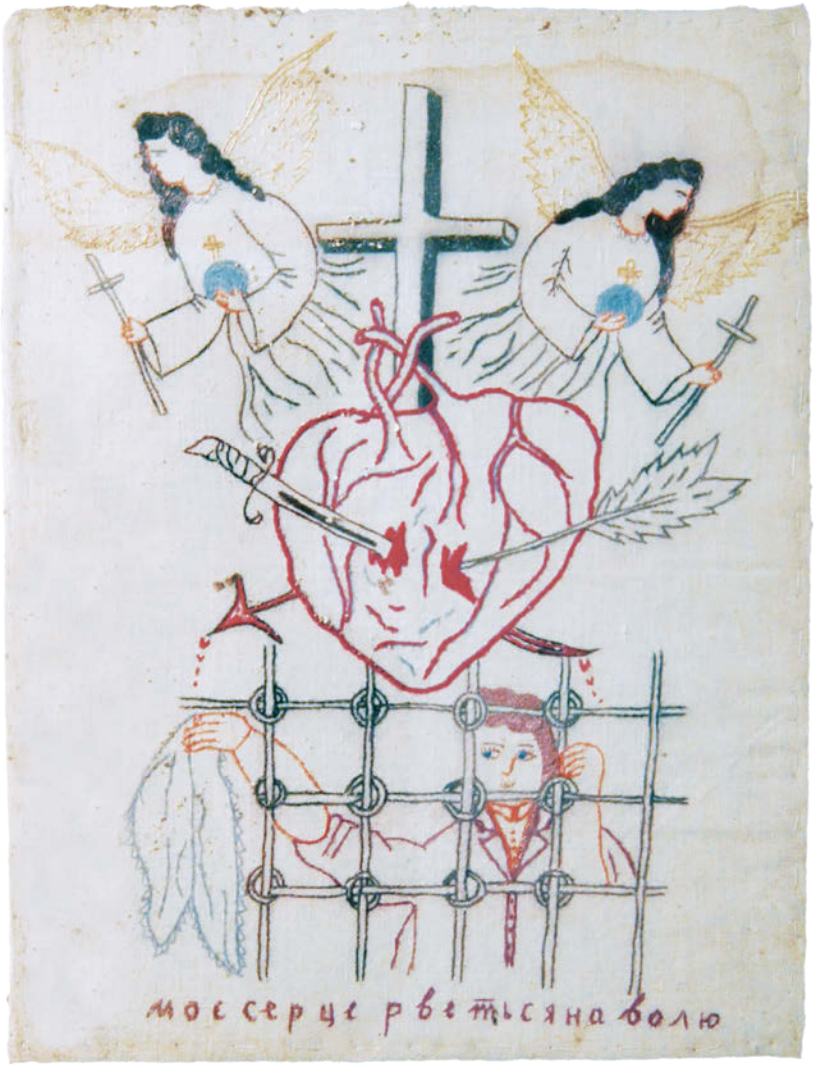


Figure 1.1. "My heart is breaking free." Embroidery by Anna Khomiak, made at a camp in Norilsk, 1948. Exhibit of the Ternopil Memorial Museum for Political Prisoners.

THE POST-SOVIET CONTEXT AND THE EXPERIENCE OF UKRAINIAN WOMEN WHO WERE POLITICAL PRISONERS

The history of Ukraine in the twentieth century contains all too many tragic pages, among the most painful of which were the massive political repressions and imprisonment of hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians during Soviet times, for their political, national, and religious convictions. Across the entire period that the USSR existed, those in power used a variety of measures to crush any form of opposition, resistance, or criticism, mercilessly persecuting and punishing real and imaginary enemies. However, the peak of political repression, in terms of scale and severity, fell during the regime of Joseph Stalin, especially from the late 1930s until the dictator's death in March 1953.

Although hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian men and women went through the hell of the Gulag, countless numbers dying there, historians to this day have not produced a single well-researched study about what happened with Ukrainians who were political prisoners over years of imprisonment in camps and prisons. Instead, scholars have tended to focus mainly on the process of political repression itself (its mechanisms, progress, scale, and impact) and the history of repressive agencies: their organization, operations, changes, personnel, administrative issues, and so on. In Ukrainian historical studies this has to do with the Soviet and post-Soviet tradition of focusing on political and institutional history. Even more, however, it has been defined by access to primary sources for scholars, meaning the open archives

of Soviet penal institutions. This is reflected, for instance, in the name of the main periodical on this subject, *Z arkhiviv VUChK-GPU-NKVD-KGB* (From the Archives of the Cheka-GPU-NKVD-KGB), which has been published by the Institute of History of Ukraine under the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine since 1994.[1]

One of the most recent—and possibly the most fundamental—works on the history of political persecution in Ukraine is Tamara Vrons´ka's 2013 monograph *Upokorennia strakhom: Simeine zaruchnytstvo u karal´nii praktytsi radians´ koï vlady (1917–1953 rr.)* (Submission through Fear: Families as Hostages in the Punitive Practices of the Soviet Government, 1917–1953). Vrons´ka does focus on the victims of repression who were members of the families of "enemies of the people," and she properly illuminates the main reasons behind this repression, as well as its chains of events, forms, mechanisms, and scales. Yet, Vrons´ka dedicates a modest sixteen pages out of more than 430 to the conditions under which women and children were kept in the camps.

In her book and a preceding article, Vrons´ka analyzes an enormous body of archival materials containing the official documents of the repressive agencies, which allows her to fairly accurately establish the factors and scale of repression against women, to restore the chronological line of events, and to track the fates of women who were sentenced as the wives and family members of "traitors of the homeland," labeled ChSIR and ZhIR by the Soviet system.[2] Still, without including the recollections of onetime female political prisoners, including Ukrainian women, she struggles to fully reconstruct the details of women's daily lives in the camps. Moreover, her study concentrates on female "politicals" who were sentenced for family ties to men whom the regime had branded "traitors of the homeland" or "enemies of the people," not women sentenced for their own political views or deeds. The study is also limited to a relatively short period, which does not permit extrapolation to the broader experience of women who were political prisoners in the Gulag.

Other Ukrainian historians who have delved into certain aspects of the lives of political prisoners have also not focused on the gender dimension.[3] For example, Larysa Bondaruk has written about the Ukrainian resistance movement and camp uprisings among prisoners in the Gulag, but she does not single out the involvement of women in these events in her writings, nor does she analyze the events themselves from a gender perspective, although she is aware of the distinctive aspects of the situation for women.[4]

The situation in Russia is similar, with a significant number of fundamental works on the Gulag only being published since the 1990s, once formerly closed archives were finally made available.[5] Yet, it would be hard to find any thorough research on the daily lives of the prisoners in the camps in this relatively large body of published research. In fact, a common trait of post-Soviet historical studies, despite substantial differences in the trajectories of its evolution in Ukraine and Russia, is a primary focus on the macrolevel of historical processes to the neglect of the human dimension in these historical events and phenomena.

This myopia can be seen in the extraordinary efforts that historians put into establishing the facts and restoring the timelines of events, compared to solitary attempts to understand the meaning and sense of what the participants and witnesses of these events underwent, to analyze the motives behind their behavior, and to recognize the long-term consequences of what they went through. This obsession with political and institutional history has another downside: an emphasis on those archives and official documents that were written precisely during the process by the political agencies and institutions involved and, at the same time, an underestimation and almost complete neglect of the heuristic potential of first-person sources such as diaries, memoirs, letters, autobiographies, and oral histories. Although quite a few studies of significant historical figures have been written, the lives of ordinary people, especially under the ex-

traordinary historical circumstances of the twentieth century, remain a black hole in our knowledge of the recent past.

In post-Soviet Ukraine, national memory politics and commemorative practices also show little inclination to explore the social or anthropologized history of Stalinism. Despite the ongoing memory wars in Ukraine, the dominant historical discourse continues to evolve in the direction of strengthening the nation-state narrative, with its characteristic emphasis on the heroism of national leaders and the victimhood of members of independence movements. The glorification of the leaders and the victimization of ordinary Ukrainians, which are best illustrated in the monuments that have been raised since independence, propose an extremely simplistic, black-and-white view of the past and make it difficult to see and evaluate other possible experiences of extremely complicated events in the history of newly independent Ukraine.

Nongovernment initiatives that could, and should, produce alternative narratives—or at least expand the knowledge of Ukrainians about Stalinism as the personal experience of millions of ordinary individuals—appear not to be powerful enough to fulfill such a function. The efforts of the All-Ukrainian Association for Political Prisoners and Victims of Repression, which was established in June 1989 and continues to be active to this day, did not live up to expectations of its impact on Ukrainian society for a slew of reasons. In the 1990s, when this organization's membership was relatively substantial and its members, mostly former political prisoners, were still active enough in public life to make a difference, the country's deep economic crisis made it difficult for them to roll out large-scale activities and shape awareness among the citizens of a now independent Ukraine. In those days, the association's events were mostly local, small-run publications, and its primary efforts were directed at rehabilitating former political prisoners and identifying victims of repression.

By the 2000s, just as the economic situation was improving considerably, the advanced age and poor health of most politicals

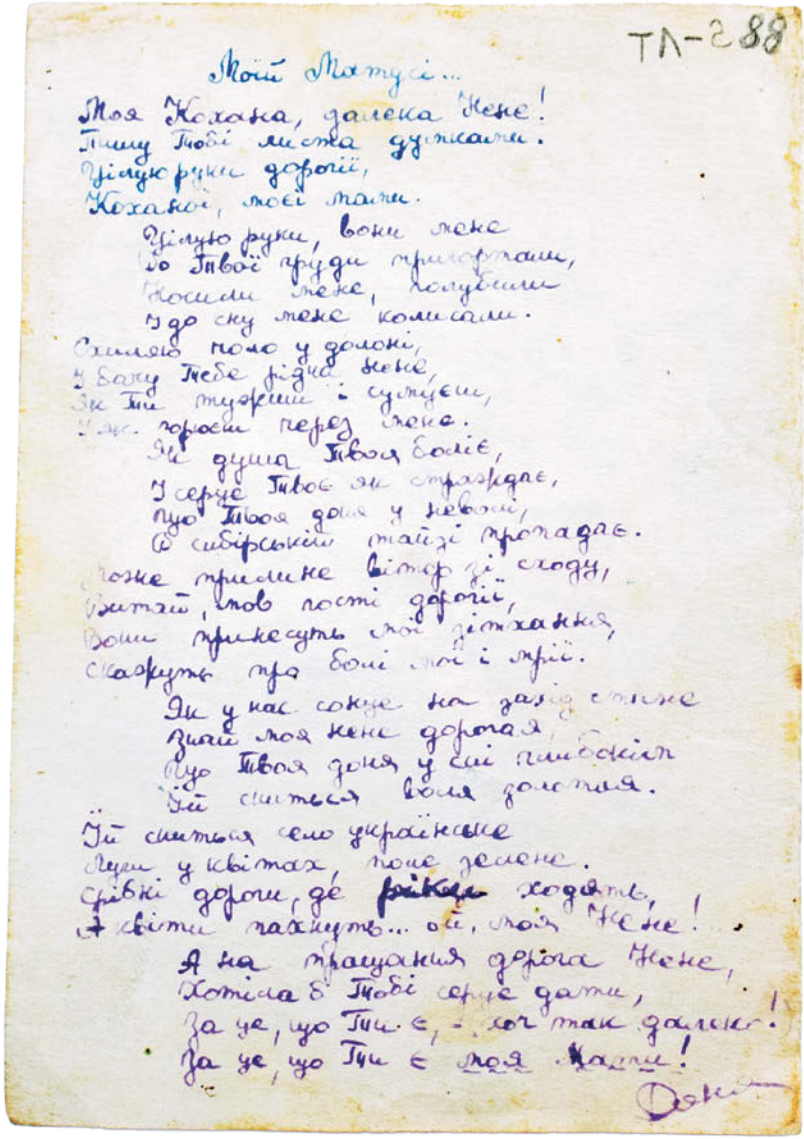


Figure 1.2. Poem "To my darling mother," written by a woman prisoner for her mother on a card from a camp, n.d. Collection of the Lontskyi Prison National Memorial Museum, TL 288.

made them far less active, and the association began to focus more on providing social and legal support for its members, and on honoring their contributions and their memory. This shift was reflected in the association's periodical, *Zona* (The Zone),[6] whose title was a colloquial name for the Gulag. As the association turned its activities inward, focusing on its own membership rather than communicating with the general public, and as natural attrition began to deplete the ranks of those members who had personally experienced political repression, it became more and more difficult to feel optimistic about the organization's prospects. Although a fair number of Gulag memoirs have been published over the years, from lengthy autobiographies and memoirs to terse articles in *Zona* and from professional oral history interviews to short radio presentations, not one researcher to this day has chosen to analyze and summarize this experience based on personal testimony. For now, the scattered histories of political prisoners do not provide a complete portrait that might speak to their descendants.

In Ukraine, the history of women as an area of research has been and remains on the margins of historical studies. With a few exceptions where special courses have been organized by enthusiastic scholars, women's history is not taught at Ukrainian universities. The need to study the past of Ukrainian women was acknowledged as far back as the late nineteenth century, and this area began to evolve actively in the early twentieth century.[7] Unfortunately, it went into decline during the Soviet era.

When historians once again began to study women's history in independent Ukraine, they tended to focus on the pre-Soviet era and actively studied the biographies of famous Ukrainian women and the history of the women's movement. And even this research was affected by the dominant political discourse, so that studies into successful women and women's organizations of the past were often shaped to fit the framework of the national historical narrative, with their authors highlighting what was specifically Ukrainian, as opposed to specifically female, in

almost every aspect of these women's pasts. In this way, women's history has been transformed into an instrument for legitimizing certain political forces and ideologies, rather than a means of discovering the historical experience of women.[8]

The topic of women's daily lives, especially under the Stalinist era, has been poorly developed, both quantitatively and qualitatively. A tendency to glorify famous Ukrainian women that the Ukrainian people are proud of and to bemoan the fates of millions of ordinary women who were the victims of hostile regimes can be seen in publications and in commemorative practices alike. In 2010, the Ukrainian Association for Research in Women's History was established, bringing together professional historians whose scholarly interests are in studying the gender aspects of the past in order to remedy this situation by turning to little-known, controversial, and disputed issues.[9] The association is trying to expand the range of topics and the methodological foundations of research into the gender aspects of history. However, the unofficial status of this association and its small membership mean that the problem of a critical lack of knowledge about the historical experiences of women in the turbulent twentieth century remains very real.

Given all this, the experiences of thousands of Ukrainian women imprisoned in Stalinist camps remain somewhere at the bottom of the list of priorities in Ukrainian historical research. This marginalization of gender studies about the Gulag makes the very history of the Gulag as an area of research one sided and slows down the process of overcoming the totalitarian legacy in the consciousness of Ukrainian society.

WOMEN'S CAMP MEMOIRS AS A UNIQUE SOURCE

To know and understand the daily lives of Ukrainian women imprisoned for political reasons, especially in the camps and prisons of the Gulag, the most important and most informative sources are personal documents: the memoirs, autobiographies, and oral

and written recollections of onetime political prisoners. These contain more than just factual information about the working and living conditions, nutrition, daily regimen, and punishments meted out in prisons, which can be deduced from Gulag documentation such as legislation, decrees, instructions, circulars, and reports. The value of personal testimony lies primarily in the fact that it offers us the essentially human dimension of this experience: how the women perceived their situation and the conditions under which they were being held, how they organized their daily lives, how they managed to survive, how they adapted, in what ways they protected themselves against a merciless, crushing system, where they managed to find comfort, how this experience affected their physical and mental health, and in what ways this experience shaped the further trajectory of their lives.

In describing the line between official documents and the personal testimony of prisoners, Irina Sherbakova notes: "It's as if the individual disappears in these archival documents, turning into little more than the dust covering the camps. Therein lies the poison and even danger of these documents. It's as if they are trying to finish the job that the repressive machinery failed to complete: to destroy the individual and leave behind a nameless prisoner."[10] Anne Applebaum looks at the situation from a different angle, noting that there was little in common between the official norms, regulations, and instructions that regulated all aspects of the lives of the prisoners, without exception, and the real nature of daily life in the camps. She points to the huge gap between what those organizing the Gulag in Moscow imagined and how it was actually organized and run.[11] These often enormous divergences set up conflicts between the written rules and the actual experience of the prisoners and should obligate the researcher to analyze official Gulag documents critically and compare them to the testimony of former prisoners. Indeed, in the post-Soviet environment, where government agencies and the official documents they issued are treated with skepticism, historians who attempt to study the once-taboo pages of the

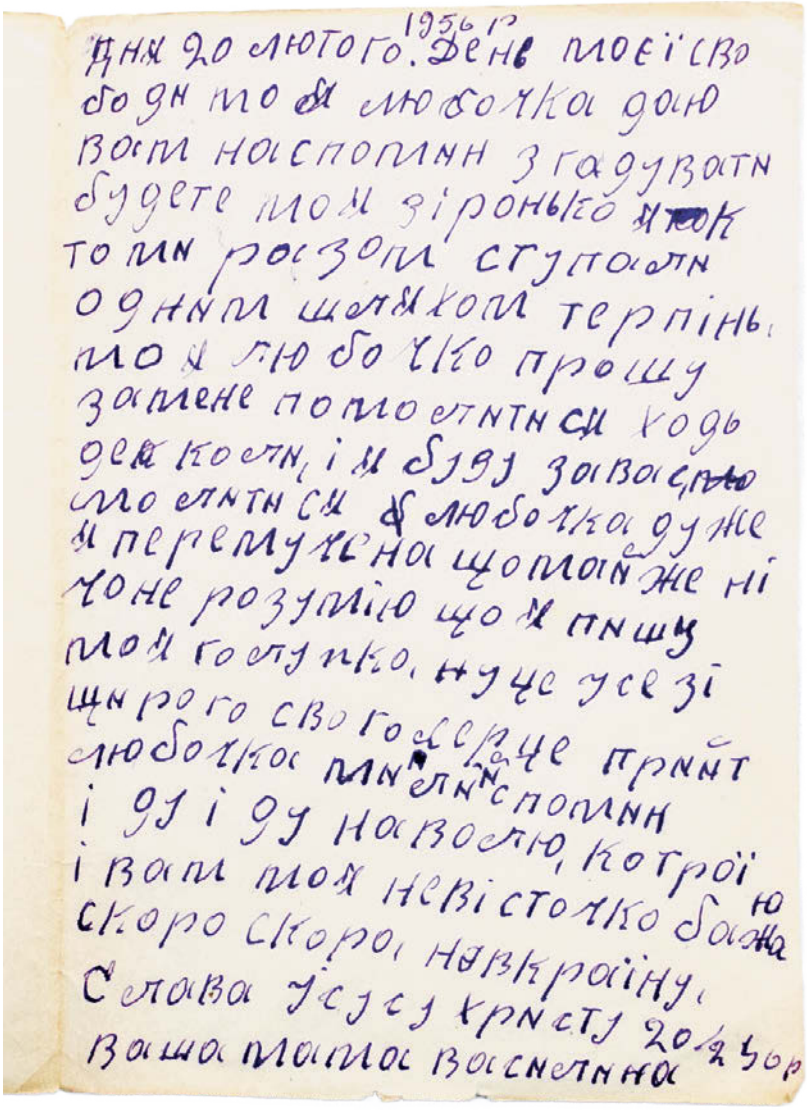


Figure 1.3. Letter by Vasylyna Iliuk, written on the day she was released from camp to her imprisoned daughter-in-law Liuba, 20 February 1956. Collection of the Lontskyi Prison National Memorial Museum, TL 284.

past often give the advantage to personal recollections as a more reliable historical source.[12]

Memoirs about the Gulag are even considered a separate genre of texts: they were written by nonprofessionals or by individuals for whom this was the first serious literary effort, and they focus mainly on the subject of life in the camps, while all other aspects become secondary.[13] Scholars are certain that, as a genre, the memoir was and remains intimately tied to creative literature: whether consciously or otherwise, memoirists have always been oriented toward literary models and examples.[14] Likewise, oral testimony largely follows the conventions of storytelling and, just as its written counterpart, can contain borrowings from other texts, such as published memoirs and journalism.[15]

Self-censorship and current events tend to leave a noticeable imprint on what people say about their own past and how.[16] What's more, when writing up their recollections as a text, the authors tend to structure and edit them in accordance with their own situation at the time of writing—and their vision of the potential reader. An in-depth analysis of large volumes of camp memoirs shows that "most of the works that belong to this corpus are, in any case, hybrid forms that incorporate and rework elements of a variety of traditional narrative genres."[17]

Given the highly secretive nature of official information about the Gulag in the USSR, the first and possibly only source of information was the recollections and stories of those who escaped from behind the Iron Curtain. Occasional testimony about the inhuman conditions of life and the exploitation of prisoners in the camps began to appear in the West only in the late 1940s and early 1950s, when a number of foreigners were released from the Gulag.[18] It was they who first published their memoirs, which contained references to the fate of the women in the camps and even some testimony specifically about Ukrainian women.

This study is based primarily on the personal memoirs of Ukrainian women who were political prisoners and who wrote about their experience in the camps and prisons of the Gulag

system. These recollections differ greatly as to form, as they were published at different times and under different circumstances. Some recollections were written at the initiative of the prisoners in secret, back in Soviet times, and were published outside Ukraine originally.[19] Others were relatively voluminous and detailed stories in the form of autobiographies and memoirs written and published in the 1990s and 2000s.[20] Some recollections were in the form of creative nonfiction, which makes them no less valuable as historical sources.[21] Quite a few shorter recollections were published in various journals in the 1990s, when former political prisoners for the first time had the right and the opportunity to share what they had lived through in the camps. Such testimonies were scattered among local newspapers, which means that tracking them down requires considerable time and effort. Collections of the remembrances of political prisoners are another story: these were written for scholarly or community projects documenting the testimony of victims of Stalinist repressions.[22]

Since the early 2000s, a new wave of public interest in the experience of women who were political prisoners has arisen, which can be seen in the multiple publications of such memoirs. In 2002, a unique collection of testimony by female politicals came out, prepared and published through the efforts of the World Federation of Ukrainian Women's Organizations.[23] It contains fragments of recollections from more than one hundred Ukrainian women who were sentenced in various years. This publication includes short biographical notes and photographs, which helps put together a more complete picture of the course taken by the lives of these women. Organized chronologically according to the year of conviction, these materials provide a sense of the dynamic of changes in the camp regimens and, therefore, changes in the daily lives of the prisoners themselves.

Especially valuable are collections edited by individuals who intentionally selected the testimony of women who were political prisoners, such as a 2009 series of stories from more than twenty women who had participated in uprisings in the camps at Norilsk,

Krasnoiarsk Krai (now in the Russian Federation), in 1953.[24] This project was the initiative of a former political prisoner by the name of Ivan Kryvuts´kyi, who also coordinated the work. The materials published in the collection are based on handwritten letters from former women prisoners in which the women, in response to the request of the editor, shared stories about what they had undergone. The narrative materials are complemented by many documentary photographs of those times, which provide additional material for visual analysis.

As a way to learn about the recent past, oral history has been exceptionally effective with regard to the most taboo subjects in twentieth-century Soviet history: the Holodomor, the Holocaust, the nationalist underground, political persecutions, forced labor, deportations, and so on.[25] It has proven a useful tool for researching the daily lives of female political prisoners. However, only after Ukraine became independent did it become possible to record the personal recollections of women who went through the Gulag system. In addition to professionals such as historians, ethnologists, and folklorists, a major role in this process has been played by local initiatives from community and human rights organizations, local historians, and museum curators. As Sherbakova has aptly observed, oral history is especially useful for recording the recollections of ordinary people: "For those who themselves could not or did not know how to write, oral narratives proved more spontaneous and natural. Experience showed that people were more likely to touch on difficult topics in conversations than they would dare to put down on paper. . . . In oral form, people are more inclined to share legends and myths from camp life."[26] The first such recordings were published in 1993.[27] Since then, women's recollections about the Gulag have been recorded in biographical and thematic interviews through projects of varied focus, so incarceration itself has often formed only part of a broader story that includes other periods in the life of the individual—most often participation in the nationalist

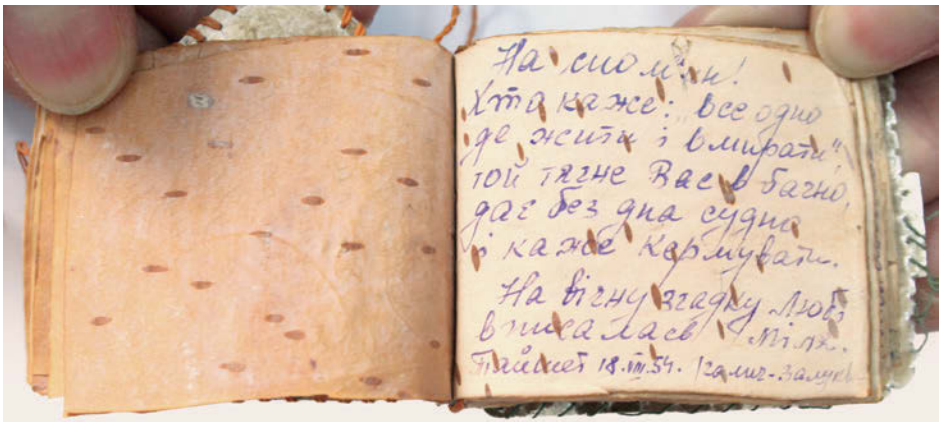
underground, which was typically the reason why the woman was sentenced in the first place.[28]

On the one hand, such interviews reveal the entire life path of the heroine and represent her authentic story. On the other, since the researchers did not seek to study the gender aspects of the past—or did not understand their importance—the women were not encouraged to provide the details of various aspects of life in prison. Dozens of such recordings can be found today in oral history archives.[29] Moreover, individual recollections about the Gulag by Ukrainian women can also be found in electronic memoir archives of special independent centers outside Ukraine for studying the history of political repression.[30]

In Ukraine, a number of projects in women's oral history have been undertaken since the beginning of the 2000s, resulting in the publication of collections of women's reminiscences.[31] Most of these were recorded in the form of biographical narrative interviews, and some of the respondents' stories contain varying degrees of detail about the Gulag.

Far less common are full-length memoirs and autobiographies of female political prisoners, from which much valuable information can be gleaned about the daily lives of the Gulag camps, about relations between the prisoners and the administrators, about work and free time, and, ultimately, about the fate of many of the women who perished without leaving behind their own memoirs.

For instance, the memoirs of Nadiia Surovtsova (1896–1985), unique in their length, depth of detail, and literary quality, were originally published in the annual almanac *Ukraïna: Nauka i kul´tura* (Ukraine: Scholarship and Culture) in 1990.[32] Later, her recollections and letters were published in separate books.[33] Surovtsova was also the only Ukrainian woman whose reminiscences were included in Semen Vilenskii's collection of women's testimony about the Gulag, published in English and Russian.[34] Although the fate and creativity of this unusual woman has drawn the attention of scholars,[35] the experience of thousands of Ukrainian



Gulag prisoners remains largely unexplored and unexamined. With the exception of Surovtsova, collections of women's testimony about the Gulag that have been translated and published in English do not include the testimony of Ukrainian women.[36]

More can be found about what Ukrainian women underwent in the camps in memoirs and autobiographies that were published in the 2000s, including those by former prisoners Hanna Pozniak (Skrypiuk), Hanna Zaiachkivs´ka-Mykhal´chuk, Halyna Kokhans´ka, Oksana Meshko, Anastasiia Zakydal´s´ka, Oleksandra Slobodian-Kovaliuk, Ievheniia Andrusiak, Mariia Vahula, Dariia Korchak, and Mariia Potykevych-Zabolotna.[37] In these more expansive narratives, the authors were able to go into detail about episodes, describe incidents and situations, and talk about the fate of others, including other women—not just laconically provide a general picture or a fragmented series of facts. The memoirs of female politicals about their time in Soviet concentration camps complement the recollections of women who were imprisoned in Poland for working with Ukrainian nationalists during that same period.[38] The voluminous memoirs of Anna Karwańska-Bajlak, for example, provide more living material for comparative analysis of the daily lives of Ukrainian women in prison.[39]

Every type of source has its advantages and limitations. Collected memoirs have generally been edited in preparation for publication, which means they may have lost some authentic elements in a woman's narrative. The themes of the stories that are only about the time the women spent in the Gulag may be informative about daily life in the camps, but they typically don't give any idea about how that experience tied into the lives of these women before and after they were imprisoned. More extensive memoirs that were written over a substantial period of time with the conscious intent of publishing are obviously less spontaneous: they tend to follow the rules of the genre, they have undergone numerous revisions by the author, including self-censorship, and they undoubtedly contain some artistic flourishes.

Recollections differ greatly from one another, not just in their extensiveness and level of detail, but also in their narrative strategies, structure, style of presentation, level of openness, and thematic emphases—and their lacunae. Naturally, when



Figures 1.4 and 1.5. Camp micro-album (4 × 6 cm [1.57 × 2.36 in]), made of birch bark with a mica cover, with best wishes to friend Liuba, n.d. Collection of the Lontskyi Prison National Memorial Museum, TL 260.

the initiative to leave behind recollections belongs to the memoirist herself, her story is typically longer and fuller than when the woman shares her memories in response to a specifically formulated request from someone else to talk about what she went through for a target audience, such as her family or an oral history project.

Differences also arise from the fact that the prisoners themselves were very different people: among them were highly educated members of the intelligentsia with a noticeable literary bent and a tendency toward self-reflection, like Surovtsova or Khrashchevs´ka, and ordinary women for whom thinking about the past and narrating the story of their own lives was not such a simple task. The latter often borrowed subjects, scenes, and phrasings from better known and more literary memoirs, which, nevertheless, does not mean that their testimony is fictitious, but simply that they found it difficult to formulate and express similar experiences in their own way.

Last but not least, recollections were often put together under different circumstances. These broader contexts affect the structure and rhetoric of such narratives, and the impact of the dominant political discourse and official memory policy is often quite visible. This impact is especially evident in memoirs published between 1990 and 2000: prevalence of nationalist pathos, the almost complete absence of criticism of behavior, an emphasis on the moral virtues of Ukrainians in prison, and condemnation and blame aimed at the criminal Stalin regime are all typical features of recollections written since Ukraine became independent.

Still, important issues about the context—political, geographic, temporal, personal, and so on—in which the remembering took place are beyond the scope of this study. Instead, I saw my task as looking for common patterns and characteristic traits in the experience of Ukrainian women in captivity, identifying the themes that were significant to them, and tracing typical survival tactics and common strategies of adaptation to the inhuman

conditions of the Gulag. This approach has made it possible to reconstruct a more-or-less holistic picture of the specifically female daily life in prison while, at the same time, at least partly grasping the personal significance of the experience. Regardless of how different in genre, style, or rhetoric these women's stories are, collectively they complement and reinforce one another, painting a complex mosaic of the everyday lives of Ukrainian women who were imprisoned in the Gulag.

As Applebaum has rightly noted, the memoirs available today belong to a fairly specific group of memoirists and do not reflect the experience of all the female prisoners. Most important is that all the authors of these memoirs *survived*, and they were physically and mentally healthy enough to sufficiently distance themselves from their suffering and to share their memories.[40] Moreover, some memoirists were educated enough to fully narrate the events of the past in written memoirs, whereas oral stories or short notations by less educated women most often were terse and sketchy and did not reveal all the details of their experience.

Almost no recollections exist from individuals who belonged to the upper classes of the prerevolutionary period, of villagers (despite their numerical predominance among the repressed), or of those guilty of the crimes of the Stalinist regime—that is, the upper echelons of the NKVD and the Gulag, investigators, camp superiors or guards, and so on.[41] Also absent is testimony from those who perished, those whose means of survival was troubling from a moral and ethical viewpoint, those whom the system broke physically or psychologically, and those who were unable or unwilling to leave behind memories about what they had lived through in the camps. This effectively limits the range of this kind of study and makes it difficult to generalize about the experience of women who were political prisoners.

Still, given the political circumstances at the time, the absolute majority of former political prisoners, willingly or unwillingly, remained silent for decades. People could neither describe their experiences in memoirs nor tell them to others because of the



Figure 1.6. Fragment of a handmade greeting card made of mica, which the prisoners were extracting, 12 July 1955. Collection of the Lontskyi Prison National Memorial Museum, TL 262.

very real threat of further persecution and punishment. This fear, according to Sherbakova, is behind the huge gap between the number of erstwhile prisoners and the number of memoirs about the Gulag available today: she estimates that no more than about three thousand such texts exist.[42] The combination of fear of public remembrance and the fact that nearly every family had its own vivid memories of political repression not only had political repercussions but actually corroded the individual memories of Soviet citizens.[43]

UKRAINIAN MEMOIRISTS: WHO THEY ARE AND WHY THEY WRITE

In the 1970s and 1980s, Sherbakova recorded more than 250 oral histories of former Gulag prisoners and categorized them into two rough groups: the first was those who would have preferred to forget everything that had happened to them; the second was those who, consciously or not, had chosen to remember. Where the former never talked about their experiences with anyone, not even family members, the latter, even while still in captivity, had resolved firmly to preserve the memory and hand it down to their descendants, in the broadest sense.[44] This sense of moral imperative to testify in the name of the entire group of Gulag prisoners often meshed with various personal motives that drove them to share their stories. For some prisoners, the decision to deliberately set as many details as possible in their memory became a way to resist the totalitarian control over information that ruled the camps. In this way, "one ceased being a victim and turned into a subversive intern, a witness-in-training. . . . Storing materials for prospective testimony enhanced the motivation for the struggle for survival; the writing of memoirs would be a natural sequel to this struggle."[45]

Veronica Shapovalov proposes very loosely dividing all women memoirists of the Gulag into several groups.[46] The first group includes women for whom literary work was an integral

part of their lives prior to imprisonment. These were typically women from the higher classes of society who had obtained a good education and whose professional work was, in one way or another, connected with intellectual activities. These memoirists had a good sense of language, their recollections were expansive and detailed, and their writing was distinguished not only by its fine literary style but also by the quantity of reflections about the meaning of what they had lived through and philosophical musings on various existential themes. For this group, the camp experience became material for autobiographical writing. Among Ukrainian authors of this type, the best example is Surovtsova.[47]

Shapovalov's second group consists of women who were not professionally associated with creative writing, but who had a good education and sought to leave their testimony either as a form of opposition to the Soviet regime or as a means to justify themselves, which was quite typical of wives of "traitors of the homeland," who were labeled ZhIR in the Gulag system. The recollections of Oksana Meshko (1905–91) are a good example of this type of memoir.[48] The third group, a fairly small one, is those memoirists who did not have strong political views at the time of their conviction and who quickly adopted the criminal rules of survival in the camps.

Obviously, this kind of classification, based on a body of Russian recollections, does not capture all the variety of camp memoirs by Ukrainian women, where not a single recollection has been found that matches the features of this third group, and where numerous stories do not fit either of the other proposed categories. What I have in mind here are the memoirists who came from rural areas and had been active in the nationalist underground, for which they were sentenced to many years in prison. Moreover, their education was typically no higher than secondary or vocational school. Women like Zaiachkivs´ka-Mykhal´chuk, Slobodian-Kovaliuk, Vahula, and Zakydal´s´ka wrote relatively detailed memoirs that covered both periods—their underground activities and their time in the Gulag—and that are clearly dis-

tinguished by their anti-Soviet political position. These memoirs may not have significant literary value, but, as personal testimony, they are immeasurably valuable for historical purposes.

Another matter altogether, however, is that the political context and state policy around historical memory in the period during which these memoirs were written—the 1990s and the 2000s—are reflected in the rhetoric used by these memoirists. The media influence on former political prisoners also needs to be taken into account. Nanci Adler, who also recorded oral history about the Gulag, points out that after a huge wave of published memoirs about the Gulag in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the landscape of national memory shifted considerably. For one thing, many individuals had recollected events as their own that had actually happened to others. Adler explains: "For the victims of Stalinism, memory of repressions became so collective after 1988, that one has to diligently and critically explore the individual's own experience."[49]

According to Shapovalov, former prisoners wrote down their recollections, whether consciously or not, in order to reaffirm themselves and to bridge the gap with the society from which they had been excluded for so long, so as to restore damaged connections.[50] Moreover, given that the totalitarian regime was determined to destroy the identities of Gulag prisoners, for some of its survivors, "writing was one of the ways to preserve self-identity and dignity."[51] Such observations are entirely justified when it comes to Ukrainian memoirists, too.

In analyzing personal recollections, especially written ones, the personal motivations of the writer to put down on paper everything that she had gone through matter: what pushed her to share her experience, to whom was she addressing it primarily, and how all of this affected the form and content of the narrative itself. As Vladislav Pocheptsov notes, "the memoirist writes in the awareness of the objective to which his text is subordinate. He is also aware that this text will most likely be read and so he orients himself toward his potential reader."[52]



Figure 1.7. Camp album with embroidered cover belonging to Liuba Barabash-Bilyns´ka, n.d. Collection of the Lontskyi Prison National Memorial Museum.

Some memoirists clearly place before themselves a didactic and educational purpose, so that their recollections might serve as a lesson and provide moral guidance. Others genuinely want to document what they have lived through, to describe it, to be witness to what has taken place. Some memoirs have a clear political purpose and are effectively testimony condemning the Soviet totalitarian regime.[53] For the most part, the Ukrainian women whose memoirs about the Gulag are available today explain, in one manner or another, what prompted them to record what they have undergone and what they see as the purpose behind publishing such recollections.

However, the stated purpose of a given memoir does not always completely correspond to its actual content. Let us look at the motives that the authors of some of the lengthier memoirs offered for having written their recollections and the actual thematic priorities of their narratives.

Anastasiia Zakydal´s´ka (b. 1924) spent ten years in the Gulag and considered her memoirs, written at the turn of this century, to be a kind of lesson and testimony, as well as a historical document for future generations:

> I leave these recollections to my descendants, not for the purpose of vengeance, but so that they might understand that our independence did not fall from Heaven like manna but was fought for over the course of centuries. . . . We should know our own history, written by [Ukraine's] best sons [*sic*], and not by those who subjugated us.[54]

The patriotic fervor of the last lines of this camp memoir is not accidental: the author starts her narrative with a brief recounting of her family, her education, the evolution of her Ukrainian consciousness, and her participation in the nationalist underground, by way of explaining her clear political position against the Soviet regime. During the course of her writing, the theme of national solidarity in the camps and the ideological

confrontation between Ukrainian political prisoners and representatives of the regime loom.

Memoirist Hanna Pozniak (Skrypiuk) (b. 1925), Zakydal´s´ka's fellow member of the nationalist underground, spent eleven years in the camps. She concluded her autobiographical book in 1999 with an exhortation to the entire nation:

> My dear Ukrainian people! I address you and beg you to love your country, your homeland, because nothing can replace it. . . . Remember what freedom is, so that neither you nor your children will ever have to live through such a nightmare. Only brotherly love and unity will help you prevent such a tragedy![55]

This call to patriotism and national solidarity shows that she sees the mission of her recollections as didactic: her experience is intended to be a lesson for young Ukrainians. Yet her actual narrative, which starts with her arrests and ends with the moment she finally returns to Ukraine, cannot really be called politicized. She writes primarily about various aspects of the everyday life of the camp, without reflecting on the regime, ideology, totalitarianism, and so on. One might presume that her declared motive was more a tribute to the political situation, which made it possible to legitimize the public telling of her very personal history, something that even the title of the work, *Meni bulo 19* (I Was 19), suggests.

Hanna Zaiachkivs´ka-Mykhal´chuk (b. 1919) wrote her 2002 memoir under the title *Zaruchnytsia imperiï* (Hostage of the Empire). She begins her story with reflections about the purpose of her memories: "I did not intend to write about how I lived my long life, what I experienced and learned in my life, but maybe it's necessary, so that some of the younger generation growing up today might understand both us and the times in which we lived, what we were trying to achieve, and why."[56] In this way, she presents a completely different motive: the search for understanding in a society that has had no lived experience of repression, a quest

for societal acceptance of onetime political prisoners. Although the themes of patriotism, national self-awareness, and political confrontation do occasionally come up in her narrative, there are neither excessive sentiments nor depictions of epic heroism and self-sacrifice.

The authors of the foreword and afterword to Polina Benoni's (b. 1923) memoirs see the purpose of the publication as conveying the truth about Stalinist political repressions so that new generations might avoid a replay of such crimes. The memoirist herself, on the other hand, notes in her concluding comments that her recollections are testimony to crimes against an entire nation and reflect a moral obligation to those who died in the camps: "What am I writing this for? Do I have the right to remain silent? I was not the only one to suffer. Thousands suffered. . . . To those who have gone to eternity, I pay my last respects to their bright memory."[57] That the author feels empowered to testify on behalf of the community of victims of the Gulag is also evident in her title: *Taka nasha hirka pravda* (Such Is Our Bitter Truth).

Mariia Vahula (b. 1926) felt a similar mission and responsibility before God and her descendants to preserve her personal testimony about what she had lived through. She speaks about this motivation very clearly in the brief preamble to her own recollections, called ***Moia*** *doroha* (My Path; my emphasis here).[58] Still, toward the end, the memoirist cautions that her recollections are intended only for a narrow circle of family and friends, not for a broader audience. She goes on to say that she sees her own participation in the historical struggle for an independent Ukraine as "a miniscule part that. . . does not merit special attention."[59]

As noted in the editor's foreword, Dariia Korchak's (b. 1933) *Pobachene i perezhyte* (What I Saw and What I Lived through) was written at the request of Korchak's children and with the active participation of her family and close friends, who then "consulted, argued, carefully thought through every word."[60] In effect, this collective process of writing casts some doubt on the authenticity of the memories. The selection of themes and

subjects, the detail level of the story, the meaningful emphases, the vocabulary, and the structure of sentences were all choices that were potentially made under outside influence, so the result might not be a truly original representation of personal experience, that is, not a proper primary source. On the other hand, this memoir is very similar to other narratives in terms of structure, contents, and style.

The author of the foreword to Mariia Potykevych-Zabolotna's (b. 1924) memoir, entitled *Nam duzhe treba zhyty* (We Really Need to Live), tries to explain the motives behind and the meaning of Potykevych-Zabolotna's narrative, rather than leaving this job up to the memoirist herself: "She is convinced that prisoners of conscience need to live a long time in order to finally sincerely, openly, and truthfully tell about everything."[61]

Recognizing the impossibility of writing about everything that was experienced, the author of the foreword nevertheless declares such memoirs to be enormously valuable, as "altogether, they provide the testimony of eyewitnesses that will one day be used by the Court of History."[62]

As it turns out, this onetime prisoner wrote a significant body of poems and songs while imprisoned, some of which actually became camp folklore: other former political prisoners even mention them in their own memoirs. In this sense, treating Potykevych-Zabolotna as the voice of the entire prison community seems quite justified.

One set of recollections, by Oleksandra Slobodian-Kovaliuk (b. 1922), was published under the title *Za Ukraïnu! Za ïï voliu!* (For Ukraine! For Her Freedom!). Having spent ten years in the Gulag, Slobodian-Kovaliuk wrote her memoirs bit by bit between 1998 and 2010 as a compilation of thematic sketches about episodes she had gone through, as well as individual events and people from her years in the nationalist underground and imprisonment. These do not follow a chronological story line. The book is filled with nationalistic fervor, replete with patriotic appeals and slogans, and the discourse is nicely supported by visual elements:



Figure 1.8. Fragment of a handmade Christmas card by Hanna Kotsur, sent from camp to her sister, 20 December 1955. Archives of the Lviv Historical Museum, ARKh 16896/9.

the cover contains an image of the monument to Stepan Bandera, the Ukrainian flag, and the red-and-black flag of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN). Appealing to the younger generation, the author encourages patriotism:

> To posterity! I leave you my testament: Do not be tempted by wealth or by Judas's pieces of silver to betray your homeland and your friends. . . . Protect and love Ukraine with all your heart and soul, just as she was loved by Taras Shevchenko and Lesia Ukraïnka. . . and all the known and unknown Heroes of the liberation movement.[63]

An erstwhile member of the nationalist underground, Ievheniia Andrusiak (b. 1919), who also spent ten years in the Gulag, was the wife of one of the legendary officers—*sotnyk*—of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA), Vasyl´ Andrusiak. She explains that she was influenced by her son to write her memoirs:

> I wrote my memoirs in 1990 at the request of my son, whom I had tried to find for eleven long years. I wanted people to know more about my husband, Vasyl´, as a person and not just a soldier. . . . When I told my son everything about his father in 1989, he said: "Write it all down, so that it will be there for your grandchildren." For me, this was an enormous joy.[64]

In fact, the story about her husband is not the only or even the main plot line in her memoirs but is naturally woven into the autobiographical narrative. Andrusiak talks about her own life: her family, upbringing and education, the romance with her beloved, and their marriage in the underground. She describes her own participation in the nationalist movement, the travails of insurgent life, and so on. But the main part of the memoirs is not directly connected to her husband and fellow partisan: nearly one-third of the text is about her imprisonment, and another fifth of the text is about searching for her son and getting him

back after he had been taken away from her as an infant in a remand prison. These two topics add up to a bit more than half the memoir. In short, the author's declared motives and purpose in writing her memoirs are more nominal than actual.

Not long in size, about twenty-five pages, the memoirs of prison life by another underground member, Anna Hoshko-Kit (b. 1926), were first published in 1990 and have been reprinted several times since then in various periodicals and collections. They provide no clue about her motives for writing and publishing.[65] At the same time, this memoirist is distinguished for her active civic position and strong nationalist conviction: in the 1990s, she regularly published articles on patriotic themes in the press, wrote and published open letters to Ukraine's political and spiritual leadership, and penned recollections about members of the nationalist underground whom fate had once connected her with. Given such a background, patriotic rhetoric might be expected in her recollections of the Gulag. Instead, the main motif in her narrative is the drama of motherhood that she witnessed behind bars, embellished with sketches of camp life and portraits of her sisterhood of the wretched.

The author of one of the longest memoirs by a former political, Halyna Kokhans´ka (b. 1925), was also once involved in the underground and spent eleven years in the Gulag camps. She began writing her recollections after Ukraine had announced its independence in 1991, not long before her own death in July 1993. In the very short foreword, she explained her decision to do so:

> The historical events of those years are assessed by different people based on their own feelings, often without any understanding of or even any desire to understand the ideas and the reasons that forced us to act one way or another in this very difficult time in our struggle. . . . Without any doubt, some have assessed it correctly, while others will object and judge us. If I manage to properly illuminate fragments of our people's struggle for freedom and independence, then I will feel that I have reached my objective and



Figure 1.9. "Oh Mary, Mother of God, Our Lady of Perpetual Help, pray for us!" Embroidered icon by Mariia Bereza, made at the Lviv Prison, 1946. Collection of the Buchach Memorial Museum of Political Prisoners, Ternopil Oblast.

> paid at least a tiny part of my duty of honor to those who gave up their lives for this struggle.[66]

The nearly 150 pages of her history as a prisoner offer detailed stories about various aspects of life in the camps. Even the death of Stalin did not inspire her to reflect on political or ideological issues. Instead, she focuses on the changes in the camp regimen and the condition of the prisoners as a result of this event. This stands in stark contrast with the first, larger part of Kokhans´ka's memoirs which is dedicated to her own participation in the activities of the armed insurgency as a convinced nationalist and the broader issues of national liberation efforts.

Kyivite Oksana Khrashchevs´ka (b. 1925) was arrested in 1945, when she was still a student at the Medical Institute, because of her links to OUN. She was sentenced to ten years in the Gulag. She decided to write down her recollections of life as a prisoner when she was already elderly, at the end of the 1990s. Her book distinguishes itself by its considerable literary skill, level of detail, and realistic descriptions of episodes. In contrast to other memoirists, she does not offer any reasons for her decision to write. This memoir is further unique in that, in addition to the book itself, there is an internet page in Ukrainian, English, and Russian that provides a biographical note about the author, some fragments of her recollections, a gallery of documentary photos, and reader feedback.[67] This website makes clear that either the author herself or her family recognized the value of her testimony and ensured that it would reach a broader circle of readers.

Born in the same year as Khrashchevs´ka, Lvivian Oleksandra Blavats´ka was a student at the conservatory in June 1946 when she was given the same sentence, although she had never personally cooperated with the OUN. She began to put down her recollections of life in prison, including the painful experience of motherhood, only in 1995, at the insistence of her own daughter, Vira Bilevych, who was born in a camp. Bilevych only published her mother's memoir in 2010. In her foreword to the book, she explains that her mother was categorically against the

idea of publishing the testimony of what she had lived through, "explaining that she was herself never a hero and that there had been millions like her. . . . In the end, Mama gave me permission to dispose of the memoir as I saw fit—but only after her death."[68]

Unlike the memoirs of other former prisoners from western Ukraine, Blavats´ka's writing is completely lacking in nationalist fervor, showing, instead, the ambiguous relations among Ukrainian women in the camps, including their unwillingness to get close to the Russian women. In addition, Blavats´ka is possibly the only Ukrainian memoirist who, at least briefly, mentions homosexual relations between imprisoned women.

Compared to other memoirs, the recollections of Surovtsova and Meshko stand apart. Born in 1896, Surovtsova was a highly educated woman who completed her doctorate at the University of Vienna. A staunch Marxist, she deliberately returned to the USSR in 1925 to work in a series of managerial posts in the education and arts system. She was arrested in 1927 and imprisoned until 1954. Having a knack for belles lettres and some experience in literary work, Surovtsova put together possibly the longest, most detailed, and most complex memoir of the Gulag. Unlike most of the Ukrainian women who left behind written or oral recollections of the Gulag, Surovtsova did not share any nationalistic beliefs, and so there is none of that rhetoric in her memoirs. In explaining her own reason for writing down her memories, Surovtsova wrote in her foreword:

> In order to write, you have to understand what you are writing about. To know from personal experience and that of the broadest number of other people. Then your work will be useful. For whom? Well, if you're not afraid of strong words, then for all of humanity, starting with those closest to you: the people of your land. Only then can you and maybe even must you write. . . . Fate granted me a long sojourn in this life, and I want it to be creative in the final analysis, so that an eyewitness and participant may record everything that will always be foreign to those who only watched



Figure 1.10. "G.J.C. [Glory to Jesus Christ] Recollections from captivity." Embroidery by Lesia Vorobii, made at a prison in Lviv, 1947. Collection of the Buchach Memorial Museum of Political Prisoners, Ternopil Oblast.

> from the sidelines. . . . I don't philosophize in my work. I simply make note of everything that I saw and experienced. And if there is a main purpose here, then it's only to show how, over thirty hard years, a person can still maintain a burning love for the idea, how one can remain a communist even after having suffered everything that I write about.[69]

At least three factors inspired Surovtsova to write down her memories: the need for creative self-fulfillment through literary work after so many lost decades in the Gulag, the urge to bear witness before humanity and her fellow citizens to the crimes of the regime, and the desire to demonstrate her moral position and commitment to her own beliefs. Despite her denial that she is not "philosophizing," the memoirist devotes a fair amount of space to existential ruminations about the value of her experience, about what she had seen and lived through, about a person facing extreme life circumstances, and so on. But Surovtsova extremely rarely meditates on communist ideals or other politically oriented reflections in the memoir, even in those places that are about her experience in prison.

The story of Oksana Meshko, born in 1905, is especially interesting because she was first arrested in 1947 on completely fictitious grounds—preparing an assassination attempt against Nikita Khrushchev—and spent seven years in the Gulag. From the memoir, it becomes clear that, at the time of her original arrest, Meshko had no strong political convictions, but, starting in the early 1970s, she grew into a staunch human rights activist, a world-renowned dissident, and an opponent of the totalitarian regime. As an old woman, she would cofound the Ukrainian Helsinki Group.

Meshko's recollections were first published in English and in the West, in a series of issues of the *Ukrainian Review* in 1979 and then in a separate book.[70] Only in 1991, after the author's death, did her memoirs appear in Ukrainian.[71] What makes this memoir unique is that it is not limited to the author's first imprisonment but also retells various later periods in which she was engaged

in dissident work. In her closing words, Meshko explains her decision to tell about her life to others:

> I wrote my memoirs with the understanding that I had a civic duty to establish at least an outline of what I had experienced and survived in my not-so-long but difficult life, one in which I knew neither a happy youth nor a peaceful old age. I have neither the skill nor the strength, and probably never would have dared to write, out of sheer self-respect and self-deprecation—and that feeling of abashment that people should never, ever lose. . . . My plan is one to which I was pushed by the endless attacks and repressions of those in power and, most of all, the KGB. The conditions under which I was forced to write determined the speed and weakness of this work. I write everything from my own memory and the memory of people who had a similar fate. . . . I was determined to write the pure truth and genuine feelings of people whose fate was the same as mine and to spite our dreadful misfortune.[72]

Critical of her own writerly skills, Meshko explained her intentions to write down what she had gone through as a desire to leave her own *trustworthy*—something she emphasizes—testimony against a regime that she was in open confrontation with. In this way, her autobiographical story takes on the features of a public political act. The memoirist's political convictions and a civic position held during the period in which she wrote her memoir, the 1980s, left their imprint on her discursive strategy: time and again in her narration, criticism of the Soviet regime comes up and condemnations of its punitive agencies are illustrated through specific situations, incidents, and individuals.

Against the backdrop of other women's recollections about the Soviet Gulag, the memoirs of Ukrainian Anna Karwańska-Bajlak (b. 1924) differ dramatically. Karwańska-Bajlak was involved in the nationalist underground on Polish territory, where she was sentenced for political crimes and spent time in Polish prisons. She divided her memoir into three parts: youth and involvement in the

Ukrainian nationalist underground, imprisonment, and life after her release. Unlike most memoirists, she writes in considerable detail, not just about what she experienced in the underground and in prison, but also about her fate afterward. In her foreword, Karwańska-Bajlak explains that she was urged and inspired to record her recollections by friends who also helped restore the memory of forgotten episodes and facts, but she does not state any clear goal or purpose to her memoirs: "Perhaps I will dare, after all: Now I step onto that trail of recollection, fragile as a person's memory. I return and go forward, as I once did, in Your name, Ukraine!"[73]

The author writes as though she is dedicating her memoirs to Ukraine. Still, her narrative does not stand out as having an excess of patriotic rhetoric, but rather contains primarily autobiographical details about the life path of the woman, with only snippets of reflection on the national theme.

To summarize, some common features exist among the Ukrainian women who were political prisoners and later wrote memoirs of the Gulag. First of all, their stated motives and goals for transcribing their recollections are generally political or ideological, but in most cases these goals are not supported by the content of their narratives. On the contrary, regardless of the authors' political convictions, the texts tend to be autobiographical recountings of their lives, the circumstances that they personally lived through, their fate, and impressions of those whom they met on their life path, detailed and reflective to greater or lesser degrees. At the same time, they consider their personal experience to be representative of their entire generation: "When I talk about myself, I mean my generation, although each of us had her own fate."[74]

Second, just about every one of the memoirists, in one way or another, sees her recollections as a personal testimony, as documentary confirmation of that which she had to keep silent about for decades, a history about which the average person was unaware. At the same time, the memoir is a means of coming to

terms with her social environment, of restoring ties with the society from which she was torn and to which it was extremely hard to return—precisely because the general public had no idea what she had to endure.

Third, the memoirists, whether consciously or not, tend to consider the literary value of their work as less important than its value as a historical document, separately emphasizing the truth of their testimony, their own reliability as witnesses to the events being depicted, and their writing as a historical record, often with reference to "the duty to leave my descendants the story of my generation, not in theory, but as it was in real life."[75] Whatever the motives, methods, and conditions under which the women wrote down their recollections of life as political prisoners, the memoirs have all gained the status of personal testimony by survivors, addressed to posterity as a warning and a lesson.

THEMATIC FOCI AND LACUNAE IN WOMEN'S NARRATIVES ABOUT THE GULAG

Scholars note a certain monotypic quality to memoirs about the Gulag, because of which they, "with some variations of a geographic and temporal nature, seem to merge into a single hypertext with more additions, continuations, clarifications, and sometimes even the same heroes."[76] What's more, often enough "wandering plots" appear in the recollections that are fairly similar stories about extremely similar situations, sometimes retold almost word for word. Although folklorists tend to see in this kind of repetitious subjects the signs of a "folklorized" narrative, in the case of former Gulag prisoners, there's every reason to believe that all these women really did endure the same or extremely similar situations, found themselves in the same circumstances, witnessed similar scenes, and were impressed by and remembered the same kinds of events.

This pattern is especially noticeable in recollections about the details of daily life in the camps: the prisoner transport, the

transfers, the living conditions, the work, the daily routines, hygiene, searches, and food—all of this became an integral part of their lives for many years. The monotypic experience may have emerged in this way: having recognized their experience in stories of the Gulag that they read or heard, the former prisoners, knowingly or not, used the words of others to explain their own life in the Gulag, taking advantage of ready-made (and more effective) phrases to narrate their own experience.[77] Indeed, this kind of repetitiousness and high frequency of certain details create the effect of a verification, as every subsequent story confirms the ones that came before.[78]

Having analyzed a large number of camp memoirs, Leona Toker identified nine recurring themes in the recollections of former political prisoners. Moreover, as the researcher confirms, at least seven of them can be recognized in every memoir.[79]

1. *Arrest*: The scene or situation around the arrest is an integral part of all memoirs by political prisoners. This theme is typically depicted through a description of the harshness of the workers of the repressive system, yet it also includes stories of goodness and humaneness, and it ends at the moment the sentence is handed down and the transfer to the place of imprisonment begins.

2. *Dignity*: The memoirists describe those aspects of their prison and camp experience that humiliated them, highlighting not only the physical violence, but also the intolerable conditions in which prisoners were kept and the contemptuous attitude of camp personnel, and in this way separating themselves from the ethical culture of the totalitarian regime and emphasizing the baseness of the torturers.

3. *Stages*: Following literary traditions, the memoirs are typically organized into chapters that encompass the various periods of being in a given location, whether prisons or camps,

and the transits between one facility and another. It was common practice to move prisoners around from location to location, and every such episode was a breaking point in camp experiences: it meant a departure from friends, a long, exhausting road, intolerable conditions in transit, and painful adjustments to new conditions. Narratives in which every phase is separately reconstructed tend to be more detailed.

4. *Escape*: The dream of a physical escape is common among men's memoirs and common in the memoirs of prisoners of the 1920s and early 1930s, when such attempts were realistic. Escape in the metaphorical sense—into one's own imagination, memories, dreams, creative expression—is typical for memoirs of prisoners of both sexes. Nearly all prisoners believed that preserving their mental health and a clear mind was the true escape from the regime. For many, deliberate memory-making and the accumulation of facts about the topography and functioning of the camp for future testimony were the means to maintain their sanity.

5. *Moments of reprieve*: These are points in the story when the narrator focuses on small pleasures or joyful moments in camp life, such as an unexpected rest, a chance to wash, a piece of bread, some display of kindness, a letter from home, or an important conversation. The rhetorical function of such inclusions is to neutralize the risk that readers will become accustomed to the violence and thus encourage a continuous emotional response from the reader. "The narrative *pulsates*, downward to exhaustion and upward to recuperation, downward to acute suffering and upward to relief. Whether this rhetorical orientation is intuitive or deliberate, the pulsating approach stems from the very nature of the Gulag experience."[80]

6. *Orwellian Room 101, or "untidy spots"*: These are the most horrific experiences of camp and prison for the memoirist, such as certain kinds of suffering, baseness, and atrocities, events that the author cannot "see," that she tends to turn away from and not describe. This kind of avoidance is most often connected to situations in which the author desperately tried to survive or was partly or indirectly complicit, and these emerge rhetorically in a silence or terseness that lets the reader sense gaps in the narrative. Sometimes the testimony of prisoners fills in such "untidy spots" in the testimonies of others, effectively adding details and providing a fuller picture of camp life. The more "successful" the camp fate of a prisoner was, the more lacunae will tend to show up in her testimony. In other words, Gulag memoirs are never self-contained or complete. They always contain gaps between text and context, some of which will never be filled in.

7. *Chance*: In the eyes of the prisoners, survival depended on lucky breaks as much as it did on physical endurance or moral fortitude; whatever chance helped an individual tended to feed into their perception of themselves as a person who was fundamentally special or chosen. Unexpected help or rescue is often presented in the memoirs as a manifestation of national solidarity.

8. *The zone within the larger zone*: In some stories in their recollections, memoirists compare the rules and practices of the Gulag system with real life in the USSR, suggesting a general resemblance between the totalitarian regime in the camps and the regime outside them, with only one difference: in the camps everything became more concentrated and acute. Such reflections are most often about the guards at the camps and the people of nearby settlements, with flashes of humanity and kindness among the guards often

contrasted to examples of cruelty and heartlessness among both the former and the latter.

9. *End-of-term fatigue*: Many of the memoirs end with the release of the author, while the return home and reintegration are described laconically, skipped altogether, or left for another occasion. Former prisoners also tend to recollect very little about their final weeks or months prior to being released, describing them very stingily. Whereas the first months after their arrest are generally presented in great detail, the final period is marked more by impatient anticipation of freedom and anxiety over the possibility that their sentence might be extended.

The written and oral recollections of Ukrainian women about the Gulag largely confirm scholars' generalizations about how women verbalize what they have undergone.[81] Shapovalov points to noticeable gender distinctions in narratives, saying that whereas recollections written by women, in her opinion, have more of a confessional nature and a certain kind of intimacy, "male memoirists are oriented to a greater degree than women to global events and link the assessment of their own lives with broader political cataclysms."[82]

This difference is the result of two factors: there were no established canons for women's camp memoirs, and most weren't primarily intended for publication. In addition, Sherbakova has made note of several other characteristics, including that "women memoirists tend to be more emotional."[83]

> As a rule, women describe in much fuller detail the everyday routine of the prisons and concentration camps, the clothing, and the appearance and character of people; they speak more calmly and with more detachment about the tortures and agonies they had to bear; and they are franker about emotional and sexual life in the camps. . . . Men, by contrast, are more reserved. They more often

> highlight a moment of personal humiliation. . . . Men also usually give more detailed and elaborate descriptions of work, occasionally illustrated by drawings; and they sometimes have a better memory of the names of people they met and of dates.[84]

Of course, these conclusions are based on a study of Russian recollections and would need to be carefully verified against the body of Ukrainian memoirs, especially with regard to the comparison of men's and women's narratives, which lies outside the scope of this study.

Although all the listed themes and specifics of camp narratives, in one way or another, appear in the memoirs of Ukrainian women prisoners, these texts have a number of features that distinguish them from the Russian memoirs that are more familiar to most scholars, as will be shown in detail in subsequent chapters.

One important element in the Gulag memoirs of Ukrainian women is the pervasive motif of confrontation with the Soviet system and resistance to the camp regime: in nearly every story, we can find references to separate incidents of disobedience, deliberate violations of rules, organized protests, and so on, driven by the excessive severity of the administration, the intolerable conditions, blatant violations of the pitiful rights that prisoners were granted, or various abuses.

At the apogee of such recollections are stories about the camp uprisings of 1953–54, in which Ukrainian women played an active role.[85] This topic significantly differentiates the Ukrainian body of women's memoirs about the camps from the more numerous and voluminous Russian ones, in which the theme of resistance is atypical. This divide is explained by social differences between the two groups of memoirists. Whereas the Russian women who left behind memoirs about the camps were mostly sentenced in the 1920s and 1930s, and a significant proportion—as wives of "traitors of the homeland" or as members of the intelligentsia or party elite—did not act in open opposition to the Soviet government, the majority of the Ukrainian women were sentenced for anti-Soviet activity, mainly for cooperating with the nationalist



Figure 1.11. Camp album of Ol´ha Diakovs´ka, put together at a camp in Mordovia, n.d. Collection of the Buchach Memorial Museum of Political Prisoners, Ternopil Oblast.



underground. Therefore, they often had firm political convictions and world views, and they positioned themselves accordingly in the camps. Possibly the only exception to this rule are the memoirs of Surovtsova, who was a dyed-in-the-wool Marxist. Meshko's memoirs are a special case: she was arrested on trumped-up political charges and became an active opponent of the Soviet regime only after she came to the Gulag.

Just about all the women's recollections feature the theme of friendship among prisoners, including mutual support and help, amounting to a kind of "camp sisterhood." Women write often and in detail about incidents when friends supported them, helped them get through the most difficult moments, and even saved their lives. In the memoirs of Ukrainian women, a typical issue is solidarity, both one based on the women's ethnic belonging and also, in a broader way, that among women of different ethnicities. Imprisonment made female solidarity an effective way to survive and oppose the regime, and the women recall with pride how they overcame difficulties together and gained moral victories over their enemies—the convoy escorts, the camp administrators, and even the criminal element in the prison population itself.

The recollections of one former resistance member, Iryna (Orysia) Mateshuk-Hrytsyna (b. 1929), are full of stories about her sisters in misfortune, who, in the words of the memoirist, unfailingly supported her morally and materially from her first days in prison and surrounded her with care, worried about her health, and helped her avoid the worst situations, right up until her release. These stories glow with love and gratefulness.[86] Only two stories, about unworthy women, stand in contrast to this theme: one was a provocateur, and the other betrayed Mateshuk-Hrytsyna. This kind of disproportion is fairly typical of the memoirs of Ukrainian women and creates a lasting impression of the rareness of unworthy individuals or deeds, against a background of predominant and ubiquitous nobility, solidarity, and mutual support among the women—which probably does not reflect the reality of camp relationships.

Gulag memoirs by Ukrainian women are full of stories about sister prisoners whom the memoirists met in captivity. The memoirists often describe their appearance and their social background—ethnicity, age, the reason for their arrest, their marital status, and so on. They also go into detail about their character, relations with other prisoners, creative abilities, various kinds of knowledge and skills that proved useful in the camps, and their later fates. A classic example of this theme is found in Surovtsova's recollections, in which the former Gulag prisoner finds room even for those with whom she managed to spend only a few days in one cell. In her memoirs, she provides numerous short sketches about other imprisoned women who played no significant role in her life. Here are just two such excerpts about brief encounters in the Sverdlovsk and Irkutsk prisons:

> I also met a little gypsy girl. Her entire family had been arrested: her dancer mother, her traveling actor father, and, as far as I know, a brother as well. She was about seventeen. Black eyes, a slender figure, and curly hair. She was grieving, and I convinced her that she would for sure meet her mother again. "My mother is so good, she dances and sings a lot! And she wears a wide silver bracelet on her arm. If you meet, let her know I'm alive." Then the flow of people shifted again, and the gypsy disappeared. We left the second day, if I remember correctly.[87]

> Sofa Pauchel, a German from Königsberg, was a political immigrant. Her husband was editor of some paper in the Urals and also a communist. She was striking, unusually beautiful with a wild, black and silver head of hair. . . . Pauchel came from a wealthy family and had married a communist, breaking off relations with her family because it would not accept her world view. The two emigrated to the Soviet Union, where they were welcomed with open arms and the husband was sent to work for the Party in the Urals. There, bad luck struck the two.[88]

Ivanna Mashchak (Pshepiurs´ka) even included in her book of memoirs a separate chapter of brief biographical notes and portraits of her camp friends and a bit of information about where and how they got to know each other.[89] Such "portrait galleries" in women's prison memoirs make possible a deeper understanding about the demographics of the prisoners and about the life trajectories of those who did not leave behind any memoirs. But in Toker's estimation, the most important function of such sketches is this: "The memoirists attempt to save the images of separate individuals from oblivion—opposing the authorities' drive towards the erasure of the names of their victims from history."[90] Indeed, including the stories of other women in their own memoirs is yet another confirmation of female solidarity—caring about the remembrance of others.

To a significant extent, the specifics of women's experience in captivity are tied to the very nature of a woman's body. The subject of a woman's body and sexuality is among the most taboo in the Ukrainian women's memoirs. It belongs to those "untidy spots" that memoirists prefer to avoid. Mentions of the loss of bodily integrity and of sexualized violence as forced nudity, body searches, voyeurism, and so on, are presented very tersely and filled with negative emotion. In contrast to Russian women, who, according to Sherbakova, are fairly open about sexual life in the camps,[91] Ukrainian women extremely rarely talk about their camp experience in this area. Even when they turn to this kind of subject matter, Ukrainian memoirists tend to self-censor substantially, most often by limiting themselves to a few short phrases, hints, and euphemisms.

On the one hand, this evasiveness is partly a reflection of social conventions, with public discussion of such intimate issues by women considered *de mauvais ton*, which, for the memoirists, led to problems with verbalizing what they had experienced. On the other hand, it can be assumed that the camp experience of women—and of young girls, as they often were at the time of their imprisonment—as connected to their bodies was



Figure 1.12. Embroidered canvas greeting card cover on the occasion of a friend's birthday, made at a camp in Inta, 25 July 1951. Collection of the Museum of Liberation Struggle at the Lviv Historical Museum, TK 5076.

very painful and imbued with humiliation and feelings of shame and guilt that caused the women to avoid bringing up sexual life in the camps at all.[92]

Although nearly every female prisoner in a camp was at risk of being raped,[93] there is not a single mention in the available memoirs of Ukrainian women that something like that might have happened to them: the memoirists limit their descriptions to incidents that they witnessed or to unsuccessful attempts to violate their bodies. It is safe to assume that quite a few Ukrainian women were, in fact, raped or subjected to sexualized violence and abuse, but this area remains a gap in their recollections of the Gulag—either because such incidents were simply repressed in their memories or because they deliberately suppressed them due to the traumatic nature of the experience.

References to nontraditional sexual behavior are also rare, although lesbianism was widespread in the camps, especially among the criminal elements.[94] Yet this topic is almost completely left out of the memoirs of female Ukrainian political prisoners, with the odd mention here and there void of specific details.

Another problematic area in women's recollections about the Gulag is the experience of motherhood in prison. Women who were pregnant or had infants in their arms when they were put behind bars typically describe the difficulties they lived through in considerable detail. Such stories are emotionally intense, conveying the anxieties the mothers felt for their babies and their despair over not being able to properly care for their children. Such recollections contain fairly common stories about the difficulty of transit, the intolerable living conditions for mothers and infants, the unsatisfactory nature or complete absence of medical services, and the drama of separation. By contrast, those prisoners whose children were left behind in freedom speak very little about motherhood during this period. For them, it clearly remained a painful topic because of the pangs of guilt before their children, longing for these children, worries about what would happen to them, and feelings of helplessness.

The prisoners who by force of circumstances observed mothers and children up close in the camps wrote a lot and in considerable detail in their memoirs about the conditions under which mothers kept and cared for their infants, about the rules for mothers to interact with their infants, and about the further fate of such women and their children. Childless women wrote quite copiously about the mothers and children whose paths crossed theirs while behind bars, and while their views are somewhat distanced and pragmatic, they convey a definite sense of empathy. Overall, since caring for children in the camps and prisons was solely the duty of women, women's memoirs are effectively the only source for studying the condition of the prisoners' children and the functioning of nurseries and children's homes attached to penitentiary institutions.

In all their memoirs, Ukrainian women present themselves as the main agents and active participants in the life of the camp: they resisted the regime in various ways and they tried to preserve their sense of dignity and to maintain an intact personality under inhuman conditions, exhausting work, hunger, cold, disease, and physical and psychological violence.[95] Shapovalov notes: "In most instances, these women wrote with the goal of self-affirmation, although not all of them may have been aware of this."[96] The memoirs of Ukrainian women also confirm an observation by Sherbakova: "Women see themselves as generally better able to adapt to imprisonment and they much more often stress the crucial importance of friendship and human relationships in this."[97]

Consciously or not, the women write about various forms and manifestations of their agency: from individual, spontaneous acts that reestablished traditional gender roles and practices, to the development of certain common patterns of behavior or deliberate strategies that, in various ways, helped them survive and at the same time were an expression of resistance to the destructive impact of the regime. Despite being so fragmentary, women's memoirs of the Gulag, taken together and combined with other kinds of documents—official and personal papers,

statistics, and demographic data—form an invaluable source for reconstructing women's experience of the Gulag.

THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF THIS STUDY

The focus of my study is on the daily lives of the women prisoners, meaning primarily the habitual and the ordinary, as opposed to the extraordinary, unusual, exceptional, celebratory, ritual, or elitist.[98] The focus is on examining the stories about this everyday life, seeing what is repetitive, regular, and habitual, and what constitutes the style and means of life of various social groups, including their emotional reactions to life events and the motives behind their behavior.[99]

Although everyday life is often defined *in contrast* to emergency situations, extreme circumstances can turn into the everyday when something exceptional or atypical continues for a long stretch of time, becoming the repetitive, regular, and usual context of quotidian life.[100] This kind of extraordinary ordinariness can be a war, a revolution, a famine, or imprisonment—a framework within which the necessary daily routines and repetitive practices gradually take shape.[101] A survey of the everyday—housing, clothing, food, activities, and so on—is just the beginning stage of research, the main purpose of which is to understand a group's way of life and thinking (its motives and aspirations, concerns and expectations) and to comprehend the meanings with which its members filled their daily actions, behavior, and practices.[102] As Sheila Fitzpatrick has observed, "Recent studies of everyday life focus on practice—that is, the forms of behavior and strategies of survival and advancement that people develop to cope with particular social and political situations."[103]

Nataliia Pushkareva, a well-known Russian scholar of women's histories, emphasizes that studies of the everyday need to be gender sensitive because the daily lives and related historical experience of men and women can differ substantially, even when all other social, cultural, and historical parameters and contexts

converge.[104] Following in the footsteps of Anna Belova, I examine precisely what is everyday in the lives of women, such as: "the means of living and surviving in all kinds of ways, forms, and spheres, and manifestations of noninstitutionalized female experience: reflected upon, mental, verbal and physical, emotional, cultural and symbolic, economic, religious, sexual, and so on."[105]

Precisely because this study is focused on the everyday life of women who were prisoners, on those practices that were repeated from day to day or with a certain regularity and that generally formed the routine of their camp existence, it does not separately cover the camp uprisings of 1953–54, which obviously were exceptional events in the Gulag and sharply contrasted with the everyday.

The central concept of my study is the idea of *women's agency*, which sees women as proactive, effective subjects in the historical process, and proper participants in History whose experience happens to have a gender aspect.[106] In the broader sense, agency means the capacity of an individual to act independently and to make free choices in contrast to institutions in which such factors as social status, gender, religion, age, and ethnicity will tend to restrict or determine opportunities to act.[107] There is a dialectical link between institution and agency, as they mutually define each other. Thus, writes Lata Mani, "structures of domination are best understood if we can grasp how we remain agents even in the moments in which we are being intimately, viciously oppressed."[108] Structure is understood as the set of social rules and resources that simultaneously limit the agency of individuals and provide opportunities for agency.[109] Therefore, actors—the agents of acts—and their acts need to be viewed within the matching structural contexts, and the relationship between the two must be analyzed. In the present case, the Gulag is the structure.

Joan W. Scott warns historians against focusing excessively on the role of those structures that assign and define the situations and status for realizing agency, saying that such an approach

makes it impossible to see in historical subjects autonomous individuals who act out of their own free will.[110] And yet, scholars have also admitted that distinct physical objects and their properties affect agents and determine the direction and course of an action.[111]

Within the feminist approach to studying women's historical experience, the notion of agency has proven productive and has become firmly entrenched.[112] In this book, I follow the feminist approach of Scott, for whom "the central aspect of this approach is the exclusive focus on female agency, on the causal role played by women in their history, and on the qualities of women's experience that sharply distinguish it from men's experience." Scott also believes that historians must "make women a focus of inquiry, a subject of the story, an agent of the narrative. . . . The mission of [feminist] authors remains to construct women as historical subjects."[113]

The notion of agency is often connected to individuality, freedom, motivation, will, choice, initiative, action, creativity, purpose, intention, and more.[114] However, the main characteristics of agency are intentionality, power (resources and capabilities), and rationality.[115] Agency manifests itself in various action scripts, the opportunities for which are predetermined by existing structural contexts.[116] Theorists emphasize that agency is a dynamic phenomenon characterized "by different temporal orientations. . ., allowing us to examine forms of action that are more oriented (respectively) toward the past, the future, and the present."[117]

The past determines agency through a set of available habitual patterns of action and scenarios that can be repeated by agents. The goals and intentions that agents aim to achieve direct their actions into the future. At the same time, agents have to constantly weigh and assess the actual context of their actions, which holds their attention in the present. The structural contexts within which individuals act also change over time, and their temporal dimension dynamically interacts with people's

capacity to act effectively. In order to grasp agency as a complex phenomenon, we must analyze its temporal dimension as well.[118]

Scott emphasizes that simply accumulating historical facts to confirm the agency of women is not enough, that there needs to be deeper thinking about motives, mechanisms, and consequences.[119] In seeking a comprehensive understanding of the categories of agency, we must take into account its different and mutable elements. Agency can be helpfully defined as significant action in which social and political structures interact with the personal motives and desires of individuals: "Readily articulated intentions, frequently unspoken fantasies and ordinary efforts at survival all animate their actions."[120] Scott also underscores the importance of taking unconscious triggers of agency into account: "People are not simply rational, goal-oriented beings, but subjects of unconscious desire. . . people aren't mobilized according to purely objective interests, but rather according to interests created for them by collective fantasies."[121]

For this reason, Scott calls on researchers to be open to various historically conditioned motivations in studying agency, both the obvious and the not-so-obvious ones that determine the agent's decisions and actions. This position is shared by Lauren Berlant, who has proposed leaving behind the normative view of agency and notions about the "hypercognitive historical actor." She insists that "agency can be an activity of maintenance, not making; fantasy, without grandiosity; sentience, without full intentionality."[122]

This broader definition of agency makes it possible to study its many factors, manifestations, and consequences at the level of everyday practices. Scott and Berlant agree that researchers should keep in mind all the range and variety of motives that can underpin meaningful acts. Moreover, such motives can go beyond the boundaries of a rational calculus or a well-defined intention, containing, instead, collective beliefs, physical needs, or the desire to survive. When thinking about agency, we should also see it as a historical category: in the past it might have been

understood and applied in other, more unexpected ways than it is today.[123]

In terms of women's or gender history and a feminist approach to studying women's experience, the concept of agency has proven to be uniquely valuable in view of the need to go beyond the stereotypical presentation of women as passive objects of historical processes and overcome the equally stereotypical image of women as helpless victims in insurmountable circumstances. Such a concept is appealing and promises valuable insights because it allows the researcher to see how ordinary people, even the most marginalized and oppressed, can change their lives and make the world around them more just and less biased.

According to Lynn M. Thomas, at least three factors ensured that the notion of agency was firmly and permanently entrenched in women's history studies. First, feminist scholars have used the concept of agency to show the ingenuity, power, flexibility, and influence of women in different contexts, thereby overcoming the stereotypical images of women as victims. Second, the active use of oral histories and analysis of ego documents (personal accounts, e. g., letters or diaries) have inspired feminist scholars to see in the authors of and respondents to these sources the key agents in past events and in historical narratives about them. Third, agency has proven to be a safe and rewarding category: studies based on it are hard to criticize or question.[124]

Numerous anthropological studies of women's historical experience have unambiguously confirmed that in different countries and different times, women have found ways to counter violence, overcome constraints, resist pressure, and survive under extremely difficult circumstances. By acting at the grassroots level with flexibility and outside-the-box thinking, and by taking advantage of extremely limited resources, they often influence situations unnoticed and extralegally, yet effectively.

In particular, studies of women's experience during the Holocaust have shown that women engaged in grassroots activities even in the most hostile environments, such as ghettos and con-

centration camps, when their rights, opportunities, and resources were down to just about nothing.[125] Judith T. Baumel studied the behavior of Jewish women and men in various circumstances during the Holocaust. In the process, she identified at least four different types of agency and gender-marked survival strategies among women. These strategies manifested themselves in specific contexts, such as during the persecution of the Jews in prewar Nazi Germany, in the ghettos during the war, in Jewish underground organizations, and in concentration camps.[126] According to Baumel, gender-specific strategies that can be observed include, among others, the apparently faster development of mutual assistance groups among women than among men, the larger size and longer life spans of these groups, and the very low level of infighting among them. Given the greater vulnerability of women, these factors clearly increased their level of safety.[127] Baumel goes on to emphasize: "Today, instead of speaking about whether these [agency and survival] skills were 'better' among women than among men, one discusses the *differences* in tactics and intensity between the two groups. . . . *Women's* survival strategies, as opposed to men's, were not better or worse, but often *different*."[128] It is the study of these kinds of specific features that will lead to a better understanding of women's experience in extraordinary historical circumstances.

Irish Jewish political sociologist Ronit Lentin has this to say to women researching women's historical experience: "We must analyze the ways women are targeted by major political projects and catastrophes, natural or 'man-made,' beyond women's victimhood. . . [to] address victimhood and agency in tandem, charting the routes of resistance available to women, even when they are the most deeply jeopardized."[129] The use of the concept of women's agency in my study has allowed me to focus on typical survival strategies used by women, their ways of adapting and forms of resistance, and their schemes for overcoming and taking advantage of structural constraints—all of which enabled the

women to protect their own interests and reach certain goals in the extreme conditions of imprisonment in the Gulag.

An important category for analyzing women's experience in political imprisonment is the concept of *normative femininity*. This refers to the culturally and socially conditioned set of dominant beliefs, norms, rules, conventions, patterns of behavior, and social roles that define the desired or ideal image of a woman.[130] Normative femininity is shaped and maintained through social institutions: the law, religion, traditions, families, and the political system. Women internalize it in the process of gender socialization and, to a greater or lesser degree, embody it in their everyday practices. A series of factors such as class, ethnicity, religion, education, and political views, as well as concrete sociocultural conditions, can affect the individual attitudes of different women toward normative femininity and its practical manifestations.[131]

In a traditional society, the gender socialization of girls takes place within the framework of normative femininity, which serves as the foundation for building women's gender identity and guides adult women throughout their lives. Attempts to transcend the boundaries of these norms tend to draw disapproval and penalties. By putting normative femininity into practice—that is, by adhering to ingrained scripts, rules, and expectations—a woman can gain social approval and recognition and become a full and respected member of her community.

To understand what key features of normative femininity were inherent among Ukrainian women who were political prisoners of the Gulag in the 1940s and 1950s, we must consider their social origins and previous life experience. According to statistical data on political repression in Ukraine, of the nearly two hundred thousand Ukrainians who were arrested for "political crimes" by Soviet security agencies between 1943 and 1957, 116,477 people (or 58.2 percent) lived in rural areas: independent farmers, collective farm workers, seasonal workers, agricultural workers, and officials in county and village institutions.[132]

Ukrainians in Soviet territories felt the impact of the Bolshevik project to forcibly modernize Soviet society, which included radical economic and social changes, and the destruction of the traditional system of values and way of life. Although these processes affected the farming technology, forms of agricultural activity, daily life, and education of villagers to varying degrees, changes in world views came far more slowly. As for gender order, the Soviet Ukrainian village still functioned largely within the framework of traditional notions, norms, scripts, and practices.

In fact, a substantial share of the repressed came from western Ukraine, which had not been part of the USSR prior to 1939, and were generally convicted for cooperating with the nationalist underground or collaborating during the war. Ukrainians from Galicia, western Volhynia, Bukovyna, and Transcarpathia had not experienced the Bolshevik policies of militant atheism, forced collectivization, and Soviet-style emancipation of women, but were actively developing cultural and educational organizations to raise national awareness. With their broad networks in the villages and active involvement in these territories in the interwar period, large-scale women's organizations had been encouraging rural women to be more civically engaged, educated, and professional, but they basically considered the emancipation of the Ukrainian nation to be their main priority. A specifically feminist agenda took second place in their activities. Martha Bohachevsky-Chomiak aptly called this work "pragmatic feminism."[133]

Nationalist organizations, whose influence and popularity among Ukrainians under Polish rule grew especially strong in the 1930s, also did everything they could to cultivate conservative notions about the role and mission of women in the national project.[134] Ukrainian farmers from western Ukraine were quite traditional in their ideas about what a Ukrainian woman ought to be like. In those days, notions of normative femininity generally required women to follow centuries-old gender scripts and ideals: in addition to having the necessary feminine appearance,

a woman was supposed to be a good housewife and a caretaker of the family, a faithful Christian, and someone adept at the basic skills of traditional female crafts.[135]

In feminist studies, normative femininity is generally regarded in a negative light, as a restrictive factor that limits the spheres and means of a woman's self-realization and reduces women's social roles to family and household functions, reproductive labor and child-rearing work. It also burdens women with heightened demands in terms of appearance and a double moral standard regarding behavior.

In my study, I trace how normative femininity works in a situation of restricted freedom in a gender segregated environment. I demonstrate, based on the testimony of the women themselves, how normative femininity and the knowledge, skills, abilities, and practices related to it were mobilized in the Gulag and transformed into a means of resisting dehumanization by helping Ukrainian women prisoners survive. I systematically show that the seemingly trivial pursuits of the women and the traditional norms of behavior, values, and attitudes that can be considered components of Ukrainian normative femininity were effectively transformed into ways and means of surviving, helping the women preserve their gender identity and relatively effectively resist the destructive impact of the camp regimen on their mental and physical health.

The exceptional rigidity, persistence, and conservative nature of gender norms, which were criticized as obstacles to social progress under ordinary circumstances, proved useful under the extreme conditions in Stalinist camps and prisons. When the women's familiar world was under attack and falling apart, and they found themselves in the strange and hostile world of the Gulag, normative femininity became that island of stability and predictability on which Ukrainian women could rest and even restore their lifescape by nurturing the basic elements of "normal life."