

*Fearlessness and Resistance in the Gulag: Estonian Prison Camp Poetry*¹

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Abstract. During and after the Second World War, over 50,000 Estonians were sent to Soviet prison and forced labour camps. Within these camps, some of the repressed Estonians developed their own subculture – prison camp poetry, secretly written on sheets of paper and also memorised. The poems examined in the article were composed predominantly during the latter half of the 1940s and the 1950s, within various prison camps situated in the Karaganda Region, the Kazakh ASSR (Spassky), the Komi ASSR (Vorkuta, Intalag, and Ukhta), Mordovia (Dubravslag), the Gorki Oblast (Unzhlag) and the far northern camps of Kolyma and Krasnoyarsk Krai (Norilsk). The focus of this article is on the emotional depth of these poems and how they encapsulate feelings of fear and fearlessness, despair and hope, anger and sorrow, vengefulness and loathing. The article demonstrates how not succumbing to fear became a survival strategy within a regime of terror for Estonian Gulag poets, and how poetry provided diverse avenues for exploring this approach. Fear was transformed in various ways: Artur Alliksaar’s poetry confronts the possibility of cataclysm with beauty, while the lyrical selves of Valve Pillesaar, Leenart Üllaste, and Helmut Joonuks chose to shut down their minds. Venda Söelsepp and Annus Rävälä, on the other hand, replaces his fear with sarcasm, while Enno Piir and Enn Uibo’s poems call for terror to be turned against the system itself.

Keywords: Estonian poetry; Gulag literature; prison camp poetry; poetics of resistance

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In memory of all the poets of the Gulag.

1. Introduction

As Estonia lost its independence to the Soviet Union during the Second World War and entered a period of Russian occupation, Estonian poetry, like all literature, became divided into several layers². Publishing possibilities were subject to censorship, and the visible facet of poetry was the so-called ‘public poetry’ – poems that obtained state approval for publication. On the other hand, a counterculture of prohibited poetry also thrived, disseminated orally, for instance, in unofficial gatherings and cafes, as well as through handwritten or typewritten manuscripts. Sometimes, this poetry was penned exclusively ‘for the drawers’ (authors never shared their writing), which is why it is also referred to in Estonian as ‘drawer poetry’ (*sahtililuule*). Thirdly, within the realm of published literature, free Estonian poetry persevered abroad within exile communities, forming the core of Estonian poetry in the post-war era. Yet, at the same time, there was a fourth significant layer, Estonian Gulag poetry.

During and after the Second World War, over 50,000 Estonians were sent to Soviet prison and forced labour camps. Within these camps, some of the repressed Estonians developed their own subculture in the form of prison camp poetry, secretly written on sheets of paper and also memorised. These poems reached beyond the confines of the prison camps through letters to relatives and friends, often sent only after imprisonment during the years of subsequent forced resettlement somewhere in the Soviet Union. Back at home, the recipients discreetly preserved the poems they had received. Needless to say, these poems could not be published during the period of Soviet occupation.

However, a handful of poems written within the Gulag prison camp were as an exception published in Soviet Estonia as early as 1968, featured in a selected posthumous collection by the renowned poet Artur Alliksaar. This collection, entitled *Olematus võiks ju ka olemata olla* (*After All, Non-existence Could also be Non-existent*) included several verses written during his time in different forced labour camps, although these poems focused on existential reflections without any direct reference to prison life. The first collection of Estonian poems reflecting directly on Gulag camp life was published in Sweden in 1981 as *Vorkuta värsid* (*Vorkuta Verses*) under the pseudonym Annus Rävälä. The author, Helmut Tarand, had already been released from Vorkuta by this time although the publishers, perhaps to protect him, falsely claimed that the author had died during his imprisonment (Rävälä..., 64). Actually, Tarand, who had

² See, also, Langemets 2001: 3.

been sentenced to the Vorkuta coal mining camp in 1946, managed to escape to Estonia ten years later and lived in Estonia until his death in 1987.

Themed around prison camp life, Gulag poetry could be published in Estonia only after the Restoration of Independence in 1991. Viljar Ansko (1948–2016), who, out of a sense of mission spearheaded the establishment of a dedicated series for Estonian Gulag poets, named the Memento Poetry Book series, played a notable role. Between 1993 and 2000, this series witnessed the publication of eight poetry collections: Helmut Joonuks' *Õhtu nagu tulekahi: Sõja- ja lemmelaulud* (*Evening Like a Fire: War and Love Songs*, 1998), Ilmar Onton's *Ebakõlad* (*Dissonances*, 1993), Artur Pihlapuu's *Püramiidi siluett*, (*Silhouette of a Pyramid*, 1995), Enno Piir's *Sunnitöölise Mekka* (*The Forced Labourer's Mecca*, 1994), Valve Pilleaar's *Kuradi kuristik* (*The Devil's Abyss*, 2000), Venda Sõelsepp's *Narilaulud* (*Bunk Songs*, 1993), Enn Uibo's *Testament* (*Testament*, 1995), and Leenart Üllaste's *Lind tormis* (*Bird in a Storm*, 1994).

Published with limited financial backing, these volumes often underwent extended waiting periods for publication while authors accumulated sufficient personal funds to publish their prison camp poetry. For instance, Valve Pilleaar, who was terminally ill, saved money for five or six years to get the amount needed for publication, managing to release *Kuradi kuristik* in 2000, the year of her death (Ansko 2000: 180).

Despite providing invaluable insights into the lives of Estonians in Gulag camps, there is a dearth of academic literature addressing these Memento poetry collections. The eight poetry books, along with collections by Annus Rävälä and Artur Alliksaar, are the primary sources for this article. The poems examined in the article were composed predominantly during the latter half of the 1940s and the 1950s, within various prison camps situated in the Karaganda Region, the Kazakh ASSR (Spassky), the Komi ASSR (Vorkuta, Intalag, and Ukhta), Mordovia (Dubravslag), Gorki Oblast (Unzhlag) and the far northern camps of Kolyma and Krasnoyarsk Krai (Norilsk). The focus of this article is on the emotional depth of these poems and how they encapsulate feelings of fear and fearlessness, despair and hope, anger and sorrow, vengefulness and loathing.

2. The documentary, survival, and moral functions of the poetry

Writing poems of resistance inside the prison camp was itself an act of bravery, given that their discovery could result in further repression. Simultaneously, poetry served as a mechanism to cope with fear and the unknown. Therefore, these poems offer a worthwhile perspective on the everyday lives of political prisoners and their psychological states. As pointed out by Claudia Pieralli,

Gulag poetry conveys the immediate experiences, emotions, and thoughts of the repressed because unlike prose, it was not narrated retrospectively:

Poetry, even more than prose, is composed as a 'trace of the first trace': the text is often written by those who are suffering at the same moment, those who, of course, know nothing about the potential reaction of their future audience outside the zone in the event that liberation comes, and also know nothing of the socio-political context in which their writing will find itself (if it is published). (Pieralli 2018: 150)

Additionally, prose works being written after release from the Gulag camps means they represent the perspectives of survivors. In contrast, some Gulag poems are authored by individuals who died during their imprisonment, as in the case of Enn Uibo, who managed to send his poetry to Estonia in letters. Gulag poetry is often more immediate, directly reflecting the lives and mental states of prisoners, and also serving as evidence. At the same time, Pieralli highlights the documentary function over the aesthetic, with language and form often being quite simple (Pieralli 2018: 156).

Although poems written in the Gulag mirror the conditions of these camps as well as representing the state of mind of many of the repressed, it is important to remember that they were written only by a small group of prisoners. As Anne Applebaum has indicated, those who were physically or mentally crippled by camp life did not write; nor did those who survived by doing something they were later ashamed of, or if these people did write they did not tell the whole truth in their texts (Applebaum 2004: 317).

Addressing the psychological toll of excessive physical labour in Gulag camps, Leona Toker states, "Ways of resisting the self-denigration that excessive physical labor imposes on people whose abilities would have been much more beneficial to society if applied in appropriate fields are a general problem of forced labor." (Toker 2019: 115). Applebaum has pointed out that there were many strategies of survival in the Gulag, a diversity that reflects the different types of human nature: some collaborated with the guards, some practiced hygienic routines, some created craftwork, and for some, the solution was to engage in various mental or artistic practices (Applebaum 2004: 316–364). Therefore, writing poetry was just one of the many survival practices. Often these different strategies were combined. For example, the poet and political prisoner Helmut Tarand wrote a letter from prison in June 1947 in which he thanked his wife for the abundant package and described how it could help him attain some level of freedom in the camp:

Today, I bought my freedom with a piece of ham and a little butter from the foreman, the superior. Utilising the economic prosperity that has arisen from receiving the package, I will attempt to get a vacation again, and if somehow successful, out from underground. Here, everything and everyone can be bought, but most of the time, nobody has anything to buy with. (Tarand 1992: 16)

A month later, in July 1947, Tarand writes from the prison hospital about Vorkuta, adding, “By the way, under the conditions here, being in the hospital does not mean being ill, but rather being clever, rich, or the lucky one” (Tarand 1992: 25).

In addition to individual survival strategies, these texts also served a moral function. Simon Belokowsky highlights the significance of the so-called Gulag culture, which permeated specific camps throughout the system, characterised by shared themes, pastimes, and attitudes; this culture was upheld by prison folklore, common jokes, and poetry (Belokowsky 2019). Valve Pillesaar has also pointed out the function of poetry as not only an individual practice but also a social activity. She viewed the poems she wrote as a form of substitute for both herself and fellow prisoners, serving to alleviate feelings of suffocation (Ansko 2000: 178). Yet, according to Venda Sõelsepp, who started writing poetry to ease his homesickness, most of his fellow prisoners were not interested in this form of art: “...during those enduring Siberian years, poetry served as a beacon to illuminate numerous sombre days. In certain instances, it was not just for me, but for others as well. However, regrettably, only for a handful of them, as my fellow compatriots in the vicinity were not commonly inclined towards poetry.” (Sõelsepp 2021: 298)

3. Estonian prison camp poets

Estonian prison camp poets shared a common fate within the broader context of the Soviet Union. Similar to other regions, Estonian political prisoners came under the purview of the infamous Article 58, which included sub-articles covering a range of allegations related to counter-revolutionary activities.³ From a letter sent by Helmut Tarand in 1948, it appears that within the

³ Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn ironically describes Article 58 in his *The Gulag Archipelago*: “One can find more epithets in praise of this article than Turgenev once assembled to praise the Russian language, or Nekrasov to praise Mother Russia: great, powerful, abundant, highly ramified, multiform, wide-ranging 58, which summed up the world not so much through the exact terms of its sections as in their extended dialectical interpretation. Who among us has not experienced its all-encompassing embrace? In all

camp, this article was referred to as *ёбанная статья* – the “fucking article” (Tarand 1992: 167). Vanda Sõelsepp has noted that individuals incarcerated under Article 58 were often the most dependable: “You could trust them with your food and belongings; they were generally honest and diligent” (Sõelsepp 2021: 135). Echoing this sentiment, Pillesaar recounted an incident where even a prison guard proclaimed political prisoners to be the most honourable individuals in the country (Pillesaar 2000: 7). Intriguingly, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, in his novel *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, featuring two Estonian characters, portrayed not only political prisoners but specifically Estonians in a very positive light: “Nowadays people say it doesn’t matter where you come from, and that there are bad people everywhere. But of all the Estonians he’d seen, Shukhov had never come across a bad one” (Solzhenitsyn 1963: 55).

All the Estonian Gulag poets were convicted under this article. Valve Pillesaar (1922–2000), the sole published female Estonian Gulag poet and a teacher in Jõgeva⁴, had founded a student hobby group post-World War II to acquaint students with Estonia’s authentic history and suppressed authors. As expected, her endeavours led to her arrest in 1948. She was sentenced to 25 years in labour camps under Article 58-1a (treason) and 58-11 (organisational actions). Pillesaar’s ordeal played out in the Karaganda region of Kazakhstan, specifically within the confines of the Spassky prison camp. Finally, in 1956, she regained her freedom to return home.

Journalist and poet Vanda Sõelsepp (1923–2006), arrested in 1944 and also convicted under Article 58-1a, experienced the grim reality of one of the most infamous Gulag prison camps, Kolyma, in Magadan Oblast. His imprisonment commenced a year later, and it wasn’t until 1952 that he was released from the labour camp. Forced resettlement in Magadan Oblast’s Orotukan settlement prolonged his ordeal until 1956. According to his recollections, out of around 8,000 Estonian political prisoners transported to Kolyma, only 10% managed to survive and return home. Sõelsepp found solace in composing his Kolyma verses, scribbled with a short pencil in the dim corners of his bunk. To evade detection, he concealed the poems in the sand-covered attic of the barrack (Sõelsepp 1993: 5).

truth, there is no step, thought, action, or lack of action under the heavens which could not be punished by the heavy hand of Article 58.” (Solzhenitsyn 1973: 60) According to Solzhenitsyn, the youngest individual to face punishment under this article was a six-year-old boy, a story he had learned from the Estonian Dr Uusmaa. “For Article 58, in fact, no minimum age existed!”, concluded Solzhenitsyn (1974: 463).

⁴ In total, around 5,000 Estonian women, comprising approximately 10% of the overall number, were sent to various Gulag prison camps during the first post-war years (Ansko 2000: 179).

Distinguished among Estonian Gulag poets, Artur Alliksaar (1923–1966), revered as one of the greatest poets in Estonian literary history, was arrested in 1949 and confined to prison in Narva, Estonia. In 1954, he received another 25-year sentence, this time for treason under Article 58-1a. Alliksaar's imprisonment spanned various camps: Narva, Estonia; Unzhlag in Gorky Oblast; and Dubravslag in the Mordovian ASSR. Remarkably, in 1958, he reached Tartu secretly, where he engaged in diverse roles spanning brewery work, construction, and railways.

In 1945, Ilmar Onton (1921–1971) was arrested while attempting to flee to Sweden by sea. His conviction under §58-1a and 58-11 resulted in his transfer to Komi ASSR, where he endured imprisonment within the Intalag, Ukhta, and Balhashlag prison camps. Liberation came in 1954, followed by a five-year period of forced settlement in Krasnoyarsk Krai. Onton returned to his homeland in 1959.

Forest officer Artur Pihlapuu (1911–2000) was arrested in 1944 and convicted under the same sub-articles, although Article 58-8 (pertaining to terrorist acts against the Soviet Union) was also added. His sentence was 10+5 years and was primarily spent in the Komi ASSR's Vorkuta prison camp. After his release in 1954, enforced settlement continued in Vorkuta. Pihlapuu eventually returned to Estonia in 1956 (Ansko 1995: 241).

Historian Helmut Tarand (Annus Rävälä, 1911–1987) encountered a similar legal web. His 1945 arrest on charges of participating in an anti-Soviet group based in the National History Museum, where he served as a deputy director, culminated in convictions under sub-articles 58-1a and 58-11. Like Pihlapuu, his sentence played out in Vorkutlag, concluding with his release in 1954.

Journalist and librarian Enno Piir (1910–2006) also served his time in Komi, in the camps of Intalag and Petshorlag. During the war, he tried unsuccessfully to escape to the West, after which he became a national partisan (a group known as the Forest Brothers). He hid himself in the forests and farms in Võrumaa, Valgamaa, Viljandimaa, and Pärnumaa, writing poems during that time (Ansko 1994a: 212). Later, in 1952, arrest came at his workplace, resulting in convictions under articles 58-1a, 58-11, and an additional 58-10 (pertaining to anti-Soviet propaganda and agitation). Redemption arrived in 1957.

War correspondent Helmut Joonuks (1924–2001), arrested in 1945, faced a different trajectory. He found himself in the Leninsk-Kuznetsk forced labour camp in Kemerovo Oblast, only to return to Estonia the following year.

Estonian and German teacher Leenart Üllaste (1910–2003) experienced a sequence of arrests. His actions as a journalist during the war led to a 1944 arrest. In 1945, he was ensnared under article 58-1b (involving treason by

military personnel). His sentence translated into time at Norilag's labour camp in Norilsk, Krasnoyarsky Krai, lasting until 1952 (Ansko 1994b: 134).

And lastly, the most tragic and most legendary Estonian Gulag poet Enn Uibo (1912–1965). His 1944 arrest culminated in convictions under articles 58-1a and 58-11. Sentenced to Norilsk, he reclaimed his freedom in 1956. However, a subsequent arrest in 1957, prompted by alleged anti-Soviet poetry, changed his fate. Relocation to Mordva followed, and Uibo's journey concluded within the confines of Dubravlag in 1965. Uibo's poems resonated deeply with fellow prisoners, who memorised, transcribed, and sang his verses, ensuring their enduring legacy. Additionally, Jaan Isotamm recalled that as a 17-year-old in 1957, he encountered Enn Uibo at the 18th Mordva camp. Prior to his eventual release, Isotamm undertook the task of committing approximately one hundred of Uibo's poems to memory, with the intention of carrying them to his homeland. Once there, he transcribed these poems from memory and directed them towards broader circulation. (Isotamm 2015: 270).

4. Writing and disseminating poetry in the Gulag

Initially, the act of composing poetry inside the camps was predominantly an oral tradition, due to the prohibition of pencils and paper, at least in most camps, until the passing of Stalin. According to Valve Pillesaar, her poetry emerged from a craving for literature. Prior to Stalin's death, books, whether in Russian or Estonian, were prohibited. This compelled prisoners to craft their own texts, and these prison songs served as the only reading material in the Estonian language for several years (Ansko 2000: 178). However, the situation varied over the years and across labour camps. In his letter, written in July 1948 in Vorkutlag, Tarand mentioned that he was reading *The Pearl Thief*, by Berta Ruck, and *Eugénie Grandet*, by Balzac (Tarand 1992: 166). He did not specify in which language he was reading, but it is possible that it was Estonian as Ruck's novel had been translated into Estonian in 1935 and Balzac's in 1928.

Yet, even transcribed poems primarily spread orally due to the risk associated with sharing them in written form. Therefore, the mnemonic elements became crucial, and the poems often based on simple meter and common rhymes. Many prison poems circulated through song, using popular melodies, and new tunes were also created specifically for these poems (Riives 1995: 287). In addition, the poems spread from one labour camp to another, across the entire network of the Soviet Union's Gulag system. For example, after the death of Enn Uibo, who was considered a classic of Estonian Gulag poetry, secret poetry readings of his poems in his memory were organised in several prison camps across the Soviet Union (Riives 1995: 288).

Viljar Ansko has likened this poetic subculture to folklore, specifically slave songs and laments as, often, nobody knew who the author was, and based on circumstances the lyrics were sometimes altered (Ansko 1993: 73). On multiple occasions, the original works were lost or destroyed, forcing poets to recover them from memory after attaining freedom. Leenart Üllaste recalls:

We were forbidden from even possessing a pencil or writing materials for a long time. I redeemed my first (3–4 cm-long) pencil for 300 grams of bread, and for paper, I used the kraft paper from cement bags that acquaintances who were ‘free’ would post. Some of these even made it home (I still have two such letters, along with the poems they contained). In general, my poetic output of that time was subject to constant confiscation. I managed to reconstruct a few poems from that period from memory, sometimes not as good as the original versions, sometimes better, but they always lost their authenticity... (Ansko 1994a: 136).

Enno Piir has labelled his poems, stemming from the depths of pain, worry, anguish, anxiety, sadness, and longing of a simple person, “hate songs”. He has reflected on creating these poems in a forced labour camp where he spent five years:

The poems were born while shovelling coal at work, capturing the more essential parts in memory, jotting them down on a piece of newspaper in the dim corner of the barracks at twilight, then slipping them into the crevices of the bunk slats. Later, they would be retrieved at a suitable time and carried out of the camp when heading to work, handed over to a former inmate who, now ‘free’, could move around the town and post the writings. The correspondence occurred under a false name and address. Yet, these dispatches managed to reach both the homeland and the right individuals. Such a situation persisted until the summer of 1954. Afterward, conditions became more lenient, and the preparation and delivery of the parcels became simpler – the previous risks were no more. (Piir 1994: 6).

Inside the prison camps, written poems were concealed within shoes, hat linings, under mattresses, and in other hiding spots. However, on the other side of the barbed wire, there was no freedom either, and it was not a straightforward task to store these acquired poems. Piir wondered how his wife managed it, but never asked. While publishing these poems, she had already “fallen silent forever” and so this remained a secret (Piir 1994: 6). Homes were indeed searched by representatives of the Soviet authorities. For instance, Merike Riives (back then Roop), compiler of Enn Uibo’s posthumous poetry collection, along with her parents Maire and Rāni Roop, exchanged letters with Uibo over a span

of twelve years from 1953 to 1965, until Uibo's death. Along with the letters, their imprisoned friend Uibo also sent his poems. In fear of a home raid, the family hid these letters inside the base of the chimney. In 1957, when Uibo was arrested again, the homes of dozens of people who had corresponded with him were searched, but thanks to their hiding, the more valuable poems were preserved. (Riives 2023).

Several Estonian Gulag poets have disclaimed being 'real poets', instead identifying as amateurs. Therefore, we can see in the prefaces of these poetry collections a rhetorical device of self-abasement, carried out with a touch of self-irony. Enno Piir introduces his book:

Dear literary friend! Have you come across many such books that are supposed to be collections of poems, but are written by someone who has never studied the art of poetry, who is unfamiliar with meter and hexameter or pentameter, who doesn't know the significance of metrical feet, trochees, and iambs, and barely recalls the teacher's instruction that a poem should have a definite rhyme and rhythm? ... Such a book is now in your hands. (Piir 1994: 5–6).

Piir paradoxically insists that he has never heard of the verse elements he lists. A similar warning can be seen in the preface to Sõelsepp's book:

If you are a refined poetry enthusiast, if you are a poetry connoisseur, or if you enjoy frivolous verses, then close the cover of this book immediately, so that you won't have to fume angrily afterwards. Because this book contains neither highbrow nor lowbrow poetry. ... And within this book, there are thoughts that have lingered in my mind and taken the form of verses, not only written down under the comfortable light of a 100-watt bulb at a convenient writing desk, but also in some dim corner of a Kolyma prison camp with a short pencil, hidden during searches and finally concealed in the sand of the barrack's attic. (Sõelsepp 1993: 5).

However, both Sõelsepp and Piir, along with the other Estonian Gulag poets, demonstrated skill in utilising a range of technical aspects of verse, showcasing a comprehension of various metrical patterns and rhyming techniques. While iambic and trochaic meters prevail, a variety of other syllable-stressed meters, including anapestic, are also discernible. Among the fixed poetry forms, an elevated count of sonnets emerged, particularly in the works of Sõelsepp, Piir, Pillesaar, and most masterfully by Annus Rävälä and Artur Alliksaar. The sonnets attributed to the latter represent some of the most outstanding Estonian poems crafted within this distinct verse structure.

5. An emotive layer of Gulag poetry: Fear

Gulag poetry offers valuable insights into various facets of life within those confines. This includes relationships, living conditions, work dynamics, and, most importantly, the psychological state of the prisoners. While these writers utilise poetry as a survival tool and a testament to their resilient spirit, their literary works reveal a diverse array of emotional expressions. These expressions mirror the moods and emotions of the political prisoners, a sense of loneliness and exhaustion, moments of sublimity and loathing, as well as longing, pain and dread. Given that terror is a key operative mechanism within concentration and labour camps, the next section examines the poetics of the emotional dimension of Estonian Gulag poetry as it relates to fear.

5.1. Fear and beauty

For Artur Alliksaar, writing in imprisonment was an existential concern. In February 1954, he wrote from imprisonment that he foresaw an era of brutal power, where poetry would be deemed a luxury, and the delicacy of the soul a mortal sin. “Despite this, or rather because of this”, Alliksaar wrote, “one must dare to be wise and keep the blade of the mind sharp. The wise, unable to avoid a destructive cataclysm, adorns themselves with a halo of contentment in the awareness of this destruction” (Artur Alliksaar... 2007: 9). According to Alliksaar, as the impending destruction was inevitable, it had to be met with peace and beauty. In his case, this beauty was manifested through the verbal art.

Many of Alliksaar’s poems yearn for beauty and eternity. For instance, in the poem “Asylum”, the lyrical self seeks asylum in the art of poetry: “Poetry is to voice the unspeakable, / to seek hints and shadows, / for emotions not yet born, / to suddenly make them ring. // The beauty that lay voiceless within you, / transforms into words in the sleepless vigil”⁵ (“See on luule – öelda öeldamatut, / otsiskella vihjeis, varjundeis, / mõnda tunnet, alles olematut, / äkki helisema panna neis. // Ilu, mis sus hääletuna kaikus, / sõnaks muutub valves unetus”, 1997: 8). While the lyrical self has lost his outer freedom, he maintained inner freedom, within which he could create a sublime world.

Beauty conquers fear. The sonnet dedicated to his friend Rein Sepp addresses the theme of fear in elevated poetic style, depicting how the lyrical self’s suffering has tempered the clarity of his perspective on life: “The clarity of colours of my life panorama / became mild in the amalgam of sufferings,

⁵ Here and hereafter, when poem is quoted within the text, a word-for-word translation is used without adhering to the original meter or rhyme.

/ and fear of death and cowardice of life / has calmed down. An ancient woodland of dreams is flourishing” (“Mu elupanoraami värvikargus / sai malbeks kannatuste sulamis, / tas laiund surmahirm ja eluargus / on taltund. Puhkeb unelmate hiis”, 1997: 63). Both fear of dying and living have dissolved because of the harshness and injustice of life, leading again to inner freedom: he has been liberated from all negative emotions and attitudes, indicating a shift towards a more courageous and fearless approach to life. In the last verse, the lyrical self transcends reality and escapes into dreams, where ancient woodland and enchanting melodies reside.

One of his most iconic sonnets, “Antidolorosum”, written in January 1952 in Narva prison camp, begins with the disappearance of pain and fear. In the triplets, the lyrical self asserts that nothing in the world vanishes, everything returns through strange paths, and death is also only a journey of one being. The sonnet closes with almost sublime verses, noting that while the human soul wanders around, it absorbs divine wealth and becomes more and more perfect every moment:

The strangulating agony again subsides
and slowly then becomes but broken spell.
No more in dread, aghast, of deadly depths,
of menaces, so sable and insidious.

All once held dear had left you running,
yet, though lovelorn, you still were loving.
All terrors, tribulations you survive
as long as dreams in you keep wide awake.

I know that nothing ever vanishes,
but will return in most mysterious ways.
Death is but passing from one existence to another.

Thus travels the human soul its journey's length,
from there imbibing the wealth of the divine
and every moment growing more sublime.
(Tuulelaeval... 2001: 73)

Taas taganeb sind lämmatanud valu
ja lagunevaks lummuseks saab vaid.
Ei enam karda õudset surmasalu,
ta musti ohte kurikavalaid.

Mis kalliks pidasid, läks jooksujalu,
 kuid hüljatultki armastada said.
 Sa katsumuste koledusi talud
 niikaua, kui sus virgub unelmaid.

Tean, midagi maailmas pole kaduv,
 kõik naaseb kaudu kummalisi radu,
 surm ainult olemisest teise retk.

Nii läbib inimhingki rännu pikkust
 ja imades säält jumalikku rikkust
 ta täiuslikumaks saab iga hetk.
 (Alliksaar 1997: 8)

The fear is left behind in the very beginning of the sonnet, the lyrical self is no longer afraid of death, he has embraced his fate and finds divine beauty and even the perfection of the soul each second of his life. For Alliksaar, poetry became a source of beauty and offered escapism during his imprisonment.

5.2. Emotional enclosure and detachment

Using poetry as a form of escapism is also apparent in Valve Pillesaar's work, albeit with a distinct approach. Pillesaar has said that her poems were not fuelled by anger towards the prison guards or regime workers, as she believed they were simply carrying out their duties. Additionally, she has explained that she omitted descriptions of camp life in her poems, as her intended audience was already familiar with those aspects. Instead, her focus was on offering something unique to herself and her fellow detainees. (Pillesaar 2000: 7) Her poetry reflects a survival strategy centred on escapism and finding solace in nature, along with a deliberate closing off of her emotions, as evident in her poems.

Kuradi kuristik by Pillesaar encompasses poems that portray the paradoxical challenge of crafting verses, whether for her faraway homeland or her current enforced surroundings. In one poem, she laments: "I cannot sing to you, you windy land, / your winds do not hear my song. / I cannot sing to you, you desert land, / your sand fell and covered my mouth" ("Ei saa ma laulda sulle, sa tuuline maa, / su tuuled mu laulu ei kuule. / Ei saa laulda sulle, sa kõrbede maa, / su liiv langes kattteks mu suule," 2000: 60). Thus, her homeland is too far to reach with her song, and her current land has silenced her voice.

Another recurring theme in Pillesaar's poetry involves the act of shutting off her mind, as exemplified by the lines: "Close all the doors of the soul

completely! / And forget where the key is” (“Kõik hingeuksed keera sootuks lukku! / Kus võti on, sa ise unusta”, 2000: 46). The present reality is filled with pain and fear, where the brightness of the sun intensifies the darkness and the heart trembles with anticipation of impending doom: “Because the brighter the sun shines, / the darker the darkness, / and the little bird of my heart / trembles in anticipation as if in the mouth of death...” (“Sest mida heledamalt sädeleb päike, / seda süngem on pimedus, / ja mu südamelinnuke väike, / väriseb ootel kui surmasuus...”, 2000: 59). The lyrical self longs for an end to this horror, questioning when the pain will cease. However, despite the despair, the subject of the poem finds consolation and strength in nature: “But in life’s darkest hour, I found solace / Embraced by the tender gaze of flowers” (“Kuid elu kõige tumedamail hetkil / mind hoidis mõne õie malbe pilk”, 2000: 76).

Emotional detachment can be seen in Artur Pihlapuu’s poems. According to Pihlapuu’s verses, Vorkuta has emerged from the struggle of its people: “Here, from despair and pain / the sombre Vorkuta is born” (“siin meelegeidest ja valust / on sündind süngel Vorkuta”, 1995: 35). At the same time, his own verses stem from anger and angst. The author calls the labour camp a “vestibule of hell”, discussing in the poem “Minesite” (“Kaevandus”, 1995: 37) whether it could be worse than the real hell. Death is seen as liberation: “You can walk among the cold barrels, / and suddenly forget the spleen of life.” (“võid minna, vahel külmi püssiraudu, / ja järsku unustada elu spleen’i”, 1995: 46). In various poems, the lyrical self becomes disconnected from his emotions, questioning whether he is truly himself, having lost the meaning of life (1995: 59). This is most strongly evident in the poem entitled “Feeling” (“Enesetunne”, 1995: 64): “I am altered beyond recognition, / my gaze is sombre, wicked – / my heart is painfully pricked / by life’s poisoned needle. // From the mirror peers the jaw of an evil creature / with whom I’ve had to imbibe / from the same cup...” (“Olen tundmatumaks muutund, / pilk on süngel, õel – / südant valusalt on puutund / elu mürginõel. // Peeglist vaatab kurja looma / äraevavat lõust, / kellega ma olen jooma / pidand ühest nõust...”).

5.3. Exhaustion and fear

The poetic persona of Vanda Sõelsepp, who endured the harshness of the most severe prison camp of Kolyma, often finds himself too drained to experience fear. As Belokowsky discusses the significance of exchanging jokes across different prison camps, he highlights the prevalence of varying renditions of a rhyme centred on Колыма: “Колыма ты, Колыма, / Чудная планета. / Девять месяцев – зима, / остальное – лето” (“Kolyma, Kolyma a planet full

of wonder / [Just] ten months of winter, [then] all the / rest is summer”, see Belokowsky 2019: 1293, 1305).⁶ These rhymed jokes served the purpose of reflecting upon and collectively acknowledging the injustice of their situations. In Estonian, Vanda Sõelsepp created two puns using the name Kolyma. The first, ‘kole maa’, translates to ‘ugly land’, while the second, ‘koolemaa’, means ‘land of dying’ (see Sõelsepp 2021: 311). If the Gulag camp was a vestibule of hell for Pihlapuu, then Sõelsepp likened Kolyma to an additional circle of Dante’s hell (Sõelsepp 2021: 323)⁷.

In Sõelsepp’s poetry, the theme of physical exhaustion and hunger is prominent, as evident in “Gold Song” (“Kullalaul”, Sõelsepp 1993: 42). The stanzas vividly depict the arduousness of a demanding day’s labour, while the lyrical persona yearns for respite, eagerly anticipating the evening. It asserts that everything else has lost its significance except the wait for the day’s end. The refrain in each stanza resonates, with the repetition of “gold! gold! gold!” (“kulda! kulda! kulda!”).

The majority of Sõelsepp’s poems depict the harrowing reality of life in the labour camps. In the poem “Dystrophic Night” (“Düstroofiku öö”, 1993: 48), he portrays, in a rather naturalist manner, the experience of a scurvy sufferer who is compelled to leave his bed multiple times during the night because of his physical needs: “You come from urinating. Already asleep / in the deepest sleep of death. / In half an hour, once again, / you must rise and go... You sink. Instantly asleep. / Half an hour passes. Again, you must / stumble around the corner. / Oh, the scurvy-frail bladder...” (“Tuled kuselt. Juba magad / põhjatumat surmaund. / Poole tunni pärast jälle / tõusma pead ja minema.../---/ Vajud. Silmapilkselt uinud. / Pooltund möödub. Jälle pead / komberdama nurga taha. Oh skorbuudinõrka põit...”). Throughout the days, the prisoners endure gruelling labour, and their illness causes them to wake up every half hour during the short nights. With each awakening, the lyrical persona experiences panic, leaving him with less and less time to sleep. Similarly, in the poem “In the Lazaret”, (“Laatsaretis”, 1995: 52) Sõelsepp describes a scene where a consumptive fellow inmate, an “old phthisic blatnoi” (“vana tiisiker blatnoi”), masturbates next to him. The lyrical self attempts to

⁶ There’s also an Estonian version of this stanza:

Kolõma, sa Kolõma,
imeline maa,
ainult tosin talvekuud,
suvekuud on muud. (Oll 1999: 18)

⁷ Gulag camps are associated with Dante’s hell by other authors, for example Shalamov’s *Kolyma Tales* consists of 33 chapters, while Solzhenitsyn names one of his novels *In the First Circle*. See Schmid 2021: 65.

block out the disturbing sight and exclaims, “Ehh! I don’t hear, I don’t see, I don’t know!” (“Ehh! Ei kuule, näe, ei tea!”).

Sõelsepp, like Pillesaar, also utilises the defence mechanism of suppressing his own emotions. His lyrical self conceals itself behind indifference (1995: 108). In one poem, he likens himself to a mummy who neither sings nor laughs (1995: 75). Nonetheless, there are moments when songs seemingly offer solace. The poem “Our Hearts are Light with a Funny Song”, (‘Meil süda on kerge lõbusast laulust’, 1995: 45) portrays the nocturnal torment inflicted by bed bugs, along with the agony caused by toothless mouths and scurvy-induced bleeding, and other horrors of imprisonment. However, each stanza concludes with a contrasting and uplifting refrain: “Our hearts are light with a funny song!” (1995: 45). Nevertheless, this sense of lightness is nothing more than sharp sarcasm: the verse ironically alludes to the song “Марш весёлых ребят” (“Marsh of the Happy Children”) from the film *Веселые ребята* (*Happy Children*, 1934). Sõelsepp’s published memoirs make it clear that the irony in this poem is based on a real-life situation as this very song was played upon the prisoners’ arrival at the camp in Kolyma. He writes, “But when the wide camp gate was opened, an orchestra began to play beside it: an accordion, a balalaika, some screeching brass wind instrument, and a small drum. The cacophonous strains of ‘Our Hearts are Light with a Funny Song’ could not drown out the cries and wails of those who were being beaten by the guards...” (Sõelsepp 2021: 50).

5.4. Fear and despair

A profound sense of despair intertwined with sharp cynicism is also encountered in *Vorkuta värsid* by Annus Rävälä (Helmut Tarand). In one poem, the poetical persona laments how his Vorkuta songs are destined for the oven, while dogs urinate on his wreath (1984: 30). The despair is candidly expressed in the “Sonnet from the Sad Prison” (“Sonett kurvast kongist”, 1984: 23): “Bleakest of the deepest dawn / is the ceaseless fall of my mood; / angst squeezes my heart like a blacksmith’s tongs / and the last hope dissipates” (“On süngeim sügavaimast päevaloojast / mu meeoleolu lakkamatu lang; / äng südant pitsitab kui sepatang / ning viimne lahtub lootus õnnetoojast”).

Fear and its causes can also be depicted through nature. In the poem “Sweaty Subtext” (“Higine alltekst”, 1984: 31), landscapes and plants are described, with the observation that “The lawn and wasteland are heavily wet / as if in a sweat of fear” (“Nurm ja kesa raskelt märg / nagu hirmuhigis”). Similarly, in the poem “Bird’s Freedom Song” (“Linnupriiuse laul”, 1984: 64) the lyrical self, deeply traumatised, cannot tolerate the presence of birds,

particularly starlings. As they come and go without having any conflict with the state (“Their voices are never husky, / they never have a quarrel with Moscow” – “Iial ei ole neil hääled kähedad, / Moskvaga pole nad riius”) they symbolise envious freedom to him. When they begin to sing, it becomes overwhelming and intolerable for the lyrical self, who experiences horror and exclaims, “Birds songs? / Horrible topic! / I must cover my ears / with my hand!” (“Linnulaulud? / Kohutav teema! / Kõrvad peab / kätega katma.”).

Rävälä’s prison camp writings include numerous sonnets, one of which portrays the never-ending winter in Vorkuta. The quatrains of “Late Winter Sonnet” (“Hilislume sonett”) depict snowfall persisting even in May, suggesting that the lyrical self longs for summer. But it turns out to be the opposite: according to Rävälä, winter and sorrow are fitting for this land, not spring and joy. In the triplets, the lyrical self expresses his three fears: firstly, the fear that these carpets of snow won’t endure, then the fear that the ice will break, and ultimately, the fear that he will break along with the ice (“Ah, mul on hirm: ei pidama ei jää / need varakevadised valged vaibad... / Ah mul on hirm: pea murdub jälle jää // ja annab välja armunute laibad... / Ah mul on hirm: jäis murduma pean neis ma! / Kuis ma, kuis ma saaks panna aja seisma?”). Therefore, he is mainly afraid of the dissolution of the protective layer of coldness, leading to an emotional collapse. In Vorkuta, only cold people can survive, and the perpetual winter serves as a symbol of this harsh reality.

These poems reflect the author’s state of mind, which he expressed in a letter to his wife in March 1948 from Vorkuta: “...it is foolish to debate whether life is worth living or not, as the fact of living or not living doesn’t truly make a difference. And if someone were to ask me directly why I don’t opt for a voluntary death, my response would echo that of Protagoras, stating, precisely because it doesn’t matter.” He is not capable of sensing anything other than basic physical needs and pain: “Overall, however, you are apathetic and uninvolved, much like nature itself. Nothing particularly prospers for you, and unless your unfortunate body is beset by hunger, insomnia, or some trivial ailment, you scarcely remember to be vigilant about safeguarding your own existence.” (Tarand 1992: 120, 121).

This recurring motif echoes throughout the poetry of those in the prison camp, where they envision themselves as shadows, mummies, or among the dead.

5.5. Fear of the future, and the inability to live

Hence, the poetic persona frequently becomes so drained that it is unable to experience immediate fear; instead, it can only perceive weariness, suffering,

and hunger. Furthermore, within the Gulag environment, emotions often become numbed, a sentiment echoed in Leenart Üllaste's writing penned amidst the desolation of Norilsk in February 1949:

Sometimes I wonder if, upon my eventual return home after a few years, I were to resume writing, the mountains in my songs would appear taller, the seas deeper, and the sky above bluer. The distances would become more extreme, and the storm in my heart would be more terrible than in my humble verses, which rarely and with difficulty reach home. (Üllaste 1994: 99)

The imprisonment has dimmed all the colours, including those within the lyrical self's feelings. Nevertheless, in some poems Üllaste has projected his fear into the future: the most frightening prospect for his lyrical self is the thought that upon his next encounter with 'you', he will be an outcast in 'your' eyes (1994: 73).

On the other hand, Helmut Joonuks's poetry conveys his deep emotions, albeit in secrecy: during the night, when everyone else is asleep, the lyrical self surrenders to tears. Joonuks writes, "It's several hours past midnight, / but I can't sleep, I can't. / It's not because of a bed bug gnawing at me / or the heavy hooting of a factory beyond the fence. / All miners are snoring heavily, / some sleeping away their pain. / Yet sobs escape from within me. / I want to live, but I can't" ("Kell juba mitu tundi üle kesköö lööb, / kuid ma ei suuda magada, ei suuda. / Ei sellepärast mitte, et mind lutik sööb / või aia taga raskelt vabrik huugab. // Kõik teised kaevurid nüüd raskelt norskavad / ja mõni oma valud unes sonib. / Mul aga järjest uued nuusked purskuvad, / ma tahaks elada, kuid ma ei tohi", 1998: 92). Life is stolen from him.

The same theme is portrayed from a different perspective in Ilmar Onton's poem "Me Leaving..." ("Minul minna...", 1993: 29–30), wherein a voice is given to a friend who died in a prison camp in 1953. The lyrical self states that departing is not arduous, abandoning all the sorrows and despair is not demanding; what makes dying difficult is the realisation that he will never lay eyes on the white birches of his homeland ("Polegi nii raske / jätta mured, ahastuse tee, ainult – ei näe valgetüvest kaske! / – sellest, sellest võtab silma vee").

5.6. Terror, fearlessness and revenge

On the other hand, former partisan Enno Piir addresses the aspect of prison camp terror in his poetry. Throughout his verses, the concept of terror permeates, yet it is precisely this terror that strengthens the lyrical self. Piir muses,

“One day, our prisoners’ dream will come true. / Then the homeland will witness the acts / of a man crushed by nights, terror, plague, and curses. / With the hands of a political prisoner, / the nation will ignite the fires of victory, / and the true freedom of the people will reveal itself” (“Me, vangide, unistus ükskord ju täitub, / siis kodumaa alles näeb, kuidas veel käitub / mees, keda on muljunud öö, terror, katk ja söim. / Poliitvangi käega maa võidutuld läidab, / siis tõeline vabadus rahval end näitab”, 1994: 76). Furthermore, Piir states that amidst all the horrors, a resilient spirit is cultivated, and even in the face of severe terror, violence, and power, Estonian national sentiments remain unbroken (1994: 71).

In January 1954, in the prison camp of Norilsky, Enn Uibo penned these somber lines: “When there is no sun, when there is no day – is it darkness? But I, in the land of the never-setting sun and the glow of thousands of electric lights, learned to know the deepest, most terrible darkness, the darkness without hope of escape – the sad graveyard of a lifetime. Shall I speak about it?” (Uibo 1995: 71).

Yet, even in the depths of this darkest darkness, Uibo refuses to succumb to despair and instead discovers inner strength, which becomes his poetic creed: “And lives the one who knows that life is a struggle, / where one must be brave, tough, and – tender...” (“Ning elab see, kes teab, et elu – võitlus, / kus olema peab julge, karm ja – hell...” 1995: 152). His lyrical self is not afraid of the terror, but of those who blindly submit to the oppressive system: “I can live with wolves, / I can even live with ghosts, / Never with a herd of slaves! // These are not people” (“Elada võin huntidega, / lausa püsti tontidega, / eal ei orjakarjaga! // Need ei ole inimesed”, 1995: 196).

Alongside Uibo’s fearlessness, the theme of revenge also emerges: “And we passed here places / where even Satan was stunned. / The fist of these days hit / now the very head of Russia!” (“Ja läbisime siin paiku, / kus Saatangi jahmunuks jääb. / Nende päevade rusikas, kaiku / nüüd Venemaa lagipääl!”, 1995: 77). Despite being sentenced once again back to the Gulag camp upon his return to his homeland, Uibo boldly declares: “I don’t need amnesty, / I don’t need your ‘grace’! / I need your neck and / your swollen cheekbones! ...I just need... one nuclear bomb / to lock the Kremlin cave!” (“Mina ei vaja amnestiat, / mina ei vaja te “armu”! / Mina kord vajan te kaela ja / te pundunud põsesarnu! /.../ Mina vaid vajan... üht aatomit / Kremli koopale suluks!”, 1995: 98).

6. Conclusion

Not succumbing to fear becomes a survival strategy within a regime of terror, and poetry provides diverse avenues for exploring this approach. Fear can be redirected or transformed in various ways: Artur Alliksaar's poetry confronts the possibility of cataclysm with beauty, while the lyrical selves of Valve Pillesaar, Leenart Üllaste, and Helmut Joonuks choose to shut down their minds. Venda Sõelsepp and Annus Rävälä, on the other hand, replaces his fear with sarcasm, and Enno Piir and Enn Uibo's poems call for the turning of terror against the system itself.

Viljar Ansko highlights how the notion of inner freedom was forged within the confines of forced labour camps and deportation sites, finding clear expression in the Gulag poetry. Ansko also notes that many individuals experienced a sense of disappointment upon their return to their homeland (Ansko 1993: 74). Inside the camps, they could freely communicate in Estonian and had nothing to lose, which fostered a culture of direct expression and resistance. In contrast, upon their arrival in Estonia in the late 1950s, they were met with silence. "Even worse than the camps was the so-called 'freedom' here, where lies and fear had become the norm of life... It seems paradoxical that for a long time, the camp zone surrounded by barbed wire, guarded by gunmen, was the only place where people dared to think, speak, and, as it turns out, write poetry... One could argue that the entire Estonian nation was repressed. The entire country resembled a vast Gulag archipelago," Ansko concludes (1993a: 77). The same notion is conveyed by Helmut Tarand, who wrote in 1947 that he was increasingly convinced that life within the confines of a closed prison was even preferable to that in the so-called 'open prison' (i.e., the Soviet Union) because there was less hypocrisy within the Gulag prisons (Tarand 1992: 82).

Thus, fear is not the prevailing feeling in Estonian Gulag poetry, but rather emotional numbness or a sense of fearlessness and resistance. This might also arise from the fact that, as previously mentioned, only a small fraction of prisoners in Gulag concentration and labour camps wrote poetry: crafting forbidden verses required distinct personal attributes, which encompassed, among other qualities, courage.

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