"I'm not one of those strong people": Traumatic Experiences in Gulag Letters

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Abstract. Letters exchanged between people encourage a shift from emphasising individualism and separation to highlighting relationships. Even in complex traumatic situations, it is helpful to view them as shared experiences, as this increases ways to cope with trauma and demonstrates that correspondence can be a form of healing.

Based on a collection of Gulag letters gathered by Lithuanian museologist Kazimiera Galaunienė (Kairiūkštytė) (1924–2016), this article features over 550 items held at the Galaunė House and Museum, part of the M. K. Čiurlionis National Museum of Art in Kaunas. The core of the collection consists of letters written by Kazimiera herself and her younger sister Janina, who were detained in various prison camps between 1953 and 1956. A notable section contains letters from relatives and friends sent to the camps. The collection preserves the network of correspondence and provides insight into the traumatic experiences from multiple perspectives. It highlights the trauma faced by young imprisoned women, which spreads to their relatives, penetrating their daily lives. The ongoing relationships turn out to be a strong motivation for overcoming trauma.

The article presents the modality of non-life as a specific experience prevailing in the prison camp, inseparable from slowing time, when years are indistinguishable from decades. Although the letters from the camp are limited by external and internal censorship, they carry the pain of survival in the camp as well as numerous daily prison details that provide at least a partial understanding of past personal and political historical events, which remain relevant today as a healing dimension of contemporary culture.

Keywords: Gulag letters; trauma; non-life; healing; relationships

This article is based on research on Gulag letters written and received by two Lithuanian sisters between 1953 and 1956. They were arrested in December 1952 after the KGB discovered that in 1949, the younger sister had rewritten an

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.12697/IL.2025.30.2.6

anti-Soviet proclamation and sent it to the addresses. Both women underwent brutal interrogations. For anti-Soviet propaganda and agitation (Article 58–10 of the Criminal Code of the Russian SFSR) and failure to report counter-revolutionary activities to the authorities (Article 58–12), Kazimiera Kairiūkštytė was sentenced to twenty-five years in a prison camp and five years of enforced exile. The same court sentenced her sister, Janina Kairiūkštytė, to 10 years in a prison camp and 5 years of exile. At the time of her arrest, Janina was 23 years old and living on a farm with her father. The older sister, Kazimiera, after studying museology at Vilnius University, worked at the Museum of Vilnius History and Ethnography and at the Institute of History. She was 28 at the time. This sister, a museum curator, kept all the letters she received in the prison camp, and after leaving the camp collected correspondence sent by her and her sister to their homeland. The preserved corpus of letters reveals not only life in the camp but also highlights the nurturing and healing aspects of maintaining relationships through correspondence. Although Kazimiera made a diligent effort to collect her sister's correspondence, the collection was smaller than expected. Therefore, considering both sisters, I will focus more on Kazimiera's experience.

After occupying Lithuania in 1940, the Soviet Union carried out mass deportations and imprisonments (Kuodytė, Tracevskis 2004; Anušauskas 2015). "Namely, article No. 58 of Russia's penal code provided the opportunity to try every player of an independent state for 'anti-Soviet activities'" (Anušauskas 2015: 100). The deportation plans were implemented across the entire Baltic region; roughly 10 per cent of the populations of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania were deported to remote areas of the USSR. Between 1940 and 1953, around 132,000 Lithuanian residents were forcibly deported to Siberia, the Arctic Circle, and Central Asia. During the same period, another 200,000 Lithuanian residents were imprisoned and put on trial. More than 150,000 were sent to forced labour camps within the huge Gulag system developed by Russia[2]. The two sisters who are the subject of my investigation were sent to different prison camps within that system. After Stalin died in 1953, the remaining prisoners and deportees were gradually allowed to leave the camps. Janina returned home in May 1956, and Kazimiera in June of the same year. Their release from the camp was important, but they were not rehabilitated and could not feel safe.

[2] It is estimated that during the period of Gulags, from 1930 to 1960, around 18 million people were imprisoned there. Although the Nazi concentration camps and the Soviet Union's Gulag were similar systems of violence and human destruction, their equivalence has long been disputed. The commander of Auschwitz was executed, while the Gulag chiefs received high pensions, largely due to Russia's victory in World War II.

During the 2017 Kaunas Biennial, at the train station, the artist counted out the number of deportees to Siberia, which totalled 300,000, without mentioning their names. Listening to this, it seemed that the counting would be endless, which helped "to get at least some idea of the extent of the broken destinies" (Krikštopaitytė 2017). This article examines two single destinies among the 300,000. The survival of a large and diverse collection of letters distinguishes them. The collection contains over 550 letters, including greetings, notes, telegrams, and official requests. Of these, 156 letters were written from the camps by Kazimiera and Janina, 258 letters were received from their relatives and friends and about 90 letters from women released from prison (including an Estonian woman who wrote to her in Russian, a Ukrainian woman who wrote in Ukrainian, and a Latvian woman who wrote in English and Russian). The collection also includes correspondence among her relatives raising their concerns about her imprisonment, greetings from other imprisoned women, and several greetings from the former men's camp nearby addressed to all the Lithuanian women in the camp. It is not so much the number of letters that is important, but rather the diversity of relationships and their exceptional significance that they reveal.

This entire Gulag collection is held by the Galaunė House and Museum (GHM), part of the M. K. Čiurlionis National Museum of Art, in Kaunas. The collection was compiled and organised by Kazimiera Galaunienė (Kairiūkštytė) herself in 2006. Based on this archive, a bilingual book *Moteris ir dangus: Kazimieros Galaunienės (Kairiūkštytės) ir jos artimųjų lagerio laiškai, 1953–1956 m. / A Woman and the Sky: The Prison Camp Letters of Kazimiera Galaunienė (Kairiūkštytė) and Her Loved Ones, 1953–1956* has been compiled by the author of the article, Giedrė Šmitienė and is forthcoming. Eighty-three letters are included in the book: fifty-two by Kazimiera, thirteen by her sister Janina, and the rest by their relatives and friends.

The phenomenological anthropological approach used in this article enables description of the traumatic experience of the prison camp and reveals, from a lived experience perspective, how people survive under different conditions. Since the main source of the research is correspondence, the description of experiences is combined with observations of how they are expressed and maintained in language. The focus here is on the singularity of narration, meaning it reveals not only the narrator's individuality but also how the narrative depends on "the changing social and cultural situations in which it is told" (Brockmeier 2015: 176). In this regard, delving into a particular Gulag epistolary collection reveals shared lived experiences.

The article has three main objectives: 1) to describe how the letters reveal the traumatic hardships of life in the camp, 2) to demonstrate how the

epistolary collection enables us to see the trauma spreading among the network of correspondents, and 3) to reveal how maintaining relationships that help people live with trauma brings about a healing effect. To the extent that the material allows, a more general question is raised: how does the prison camp experience affect the rest of a person's life, and how is life perceived from the perspective of those who were repressed?

Lithuanian Gulag Narratives and Their Research

Since 1988, when the Sąjūdis national revival movement began the process of restoring the Lithuanian state, there has been a boom in memoirs about deportation: over a decade, nearly 500 publications appeared, most of them small in scope, published on the initiative of the authors themselves or the communities to which they belonged (Matulevičienė 2003). This phenomenon was because, until then, deportees and prisoners were afraid to talk about their past, not only in public but also within their families. After this boom faded – incidentally, it has not been studied as a phenomenon to this day – the common opinion, even among academic institutions, was that Soviet repression in Lithuania had been thoroughly researched. The Genocide and Resistance Research Centre of Lithuania indeed conducted research, but its work remained confined within its walls; other scientific institutions did not participate, and no interdisciplinary approach was developed. Presumably, the failure of lustration in Lithuania and the continued presence of many Soviet-era figures in state service contributed to the prevalence of this 'forgetfulness' approach. The prevailing attitudes corresponded to post-traumatic situations, where both those responsible for causing the trauma and those who experienced it, albeit for entirely different reasons, tend to succumb to oblivion (cf. Gailienė 2022: 130–137).

The main Lithuanian autobiographical narrative of enforced exile is Dalia Grinkevičiūtė's memoirs, published in Lithuanian in 1988.[3] When the memoirs appeared, news of them spread quickly, shaping perceptions of both the past and the present. Today, looking at the reception of these memoirs over

[3] There are three English translations of Grinkevičiūtė's memoirs*: Reconciliation*, translated by Romas Kinka and illustrated by Elena Gaputytė (Oxford: Charlbury, 2001); *A Stolen Youth, a Stolen Homeland: Memoirs*, translated by Izolda Geniušienė (Vilnius: Lithuanian Writers' Union, 2002); and *Shadows on the Tundra*, translated by Delija Valiukenas (London: Pereine Press, 2018). Memoirs have also been published in German, French, Italian, Finnish, Dutch, Icelandic, and several other languages.

more than thirty years, it is surprising to realise that this text has not become a firmly established part of the school curriculum and is therefore not widely known among the first generation born in independent Lithuania. Talking about other narratives in addition to Grinkevičiūtė, it is worth mentioning several collections of memoirs published by state publishing houses during the first decade of independence: *Leiskit į tėvynę. Tremtinių atsiminimai* (Let us Return to Our Homeland: Memoirs of Deportees) (Pukelis 1989), *Ešelonų broliai* (Brothers of the Echelons) (Venskevičienė 1991), *Ešelonų sesės* (Sisters of the Echelons) (Venskevičienė 1994). These books were also widely recognised at the time of publication. However, after this period, narratives of deportation and imprisonment likewise moved away from the centre of interest across various social groups.

The topic of deportation and repression was revived in both public and academic discussion through the research of Lithuanian clinical psychologist Danutė Gailienė, conducted with her colleagues after she observed the societal effects of repression and the challenge in recognising these as such. Gailienė's research, published in the book *Ką jie mums padarė. Lietuvos gyvenimas traumų psichologijos žvilgsniu* (What They Did to Us: Life in Lithuania from a Trauma Psychology Perspective, 2008) initially went unnoticed. It took a decade for her work to be acknowledged in academic and public circles, leading to the release of the second and third editions. The response to this study has initiated a new phase in understanding and examining repression, shifting focus toward primary life documents.

Diaries were rarely written in prison camps and during exile, but almost everyone wrote letters to stay in touch with their loved ones. These letters were treasured and, when permission to return to Lithuania was granted, taken home. Some letters were transferred to memory institutions, but there is still no comprehensive register of deportation documents. Some documents remained within families, where there is often no guarantee that the younger generation will preserve them. Individual letters have been included in memoirs or photo albums, and several small publications have been prepared. Private individuals have published their family letters in small booklets that remain within their families. The National Museum of Lithuania published a book of letters by two brothers, Antanas and Vladas Pajedas, titled *Stalino gniaužtuose* (In Stalin's Claws, 2013). Also noteworthy is *Laiškai* (Letters, 2023) by Blessed Teofilius Matulionis, most of which were written from Gulag prisons. The most attentive and consistent researcher of published exile and Gulag ego-documents and memoirs is Monika Pokorska-Iwaniuk from Poland, who presents new arguments for the value and interest of Lithuanian exile and Gulag literature in her works (2009, 2015a, 2015b, 2017). In addition, the works

of Ona Dilytė-Čiurinskienė and Jurga Sivickaitė-Sadauskienė, who research their fathers' Gulag ego-documents, are worth mentioning (2019, 2023). It is clear from the scattered state of exile ego-documents that there is still much work to be done. My research into Kazimiera Galaunienė (Kairiūkštytė) letters from the prison camp, which forms the basis for this article, should be considered part of a new phase of research into repression that draws on life documents.

"Only Those Letters are Our Entire Life"

In one of her earliest letters from the prison camp, Kazimiera responded to her aunt's request to describe her daily life.

> When the pale white light of the morning begins to appear and the radio starts to play, I quickly jump out of my double wooden bunk and run to wash up. Then I get dressed. It takes me a good fifteen minutes to dress – putting on my own clothes and some that have been given to me. Then I shake out the straw mattress, cover it with a spotted red sheet I brought from home, then cover it with my own gray blanket.…
>
> After making my bed, I make a sandwich for work, then I take a spoon, a slice of bread, and run to the canteen for breakfast. We line up in groups of seven and they lead us off to work. Until now, I've mostly been working in the fields – digging potatoes, carrots, and picking cabbage. I haven't had to work much with logs or in the woods.… The quotas are high. Impossible to meet. But you don't need to reach 100% to get a full day's ration. Less is enough. But if you don't or are unable to reach even that amount, then the next morning you only get breakfast.…
>
> We work until 5 o'clock. By the time we walk home, wash the dirt from our hands and feet and have supper in the canteen, it's already 8 o'clock. Then we all pray together … It's nothing. I'll get used to it. I'll get tougher. After a year of work like this, I won't go to bed so fast in the evenings. I'll be able to spend some time reading, too. (K. Kairiūkštytė to J. Garmuvienė, ca. October 20, 1953)[4]

[4] The letters quoted here and further are taken from the book *A Woman and the Sky: The Prison Camp Letters of Kazimiera Galaunienė (Kairiūkštytė) and her Loved Ones, 1953–1956*, translated by D. Sužiedėlis. Kaunas: M. K. Čiurlionis National Museum of Art, 2025 (forthcoming). Letters not published in the book will be indicated separately.

Unlike Kazimiera, sister Janina was accustomed to physical work, knew how to do it, and felt the sense of satisfaction it gave her. Even in the camp, the work itself did not scare her or exhaust her.

> The work isn't hard. We work in cellars, sorting spoiled potatoes. … the only thing I don't like is that I can't use my own brain – I just do what I'm told, I'm pushed where they push me. It feels like you're a tool and not a person. (J. Kairiūkštytė to O. Garmuvienė, December 16, 1953)

The sisters, like all prisoners, were only allowed to send two letters per month. All letters were subject to censorship and a general prohibition on mentioning anything about the camp. Letters never mentioned someone's death, health problems, or an inability to perform camp labour. When Kazimiera or Janina were absent due to illness, they never wrote that they were sick, but instead said they had received rest. It was common to start a letter with casual phrases like "I feel pretty well" or "the food is not bad here", which would prevent censorship from delaying the letter and make sure it reached its recipient.

The story of Kazimiera's day quoted above lacks many details. For instance, she mentions that after breakfast they line up in groups of seven, but she does not say that the entire journey to work (usually about 10 km) was guarded by armed guards with dogs, that their territory was monitored from guard towers, or that the high prison enclosures were topped with barbed wire. The letters do not mention relationships with criminal prisoners, nor such things as an uprising by political prisoners against women convicted of crimes. This uprising at the Ertsev labour camp was led by an Estonian lawyer, whose name Kazimiera could not remember in her old age.

Descriptions of life in the camp were influenced both by external restrictions and internal self-censorship as both sisters understood that it was painful for their loved ones to read about their imprisoned lives. For this reason, the letters to more distant relatives – such as their aunts – were more candid than those to their father or brother, who had been particularly affected by their hardship. The letters also left much unsaid, not just because they wanted to avoid causing pain, but because it was difficult to fully understand their own experiences in the camp and even harder to find the right words to describe them. Sometimes, it seemed that only those who had actually lived through it could truly understand what had been endured. As the Polish psychiatrist Antoni Kępinski has carefully observed, the people bound together by this experience share a commonality that outsiders cannot penetrate (1978: 97–98).

Despite the various restrictions on correspondence mentioned above, the letters from the camp repeatedly state that "only those letters are our entire life" (K. Kairiūkštytė to J. Kairiūkštis, October 11, 1953). From the very

start of their imprisonment, more extended periods without mail caused both Kazimiera and Janina to fall into despair and become destabilised. It is crucial to recognise that an arrested and imprisoned person was isolated from the world, unaware of the fate of those important to them, and that letters are their sole means of communication. Throughout their time in the camp, the significance of letters is emphasised. Kazimiera says this not only about herself but also about all the women in the camp.

> Letters from home are our only joy here. That's why post days are never dull for us. It's been two years now that I wake up every Monday and Thursday with the idea of it being letter day. You carry that thought in your mind and heart, and even repeat it aloud several times a day. You have it in your thoughts when you come home from work, when you open the door, and when you see Nadė, our post woman, and then wait with a trembling heart by the table, wondering if she'll call your name or not. Your entire mood that night depends on it, and for several nights after that – until the next mail delivery. (K. Kairiūkštytė to J. Garmuvienė, November 4, 1954)

> People at home have a hard time understanding what it means to receive a letter or package. It's not the things inside them – it's receiving them. When I come home, I'll tell you more about how much we celebrated, like children, with every letter and parcel. (K. Kairiūkštytė to V. Kairiūkštis, February 10, 1954)

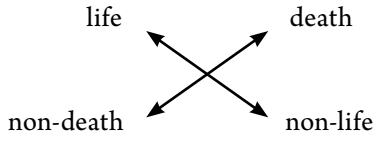
Kazimiera understood that the significance of a letter in the camp was one of those experiences only people who had been there could truly understand. This again highlights the uniqueness of the letter as a phenomenon in this situation. Correspondence helped maintain the belief that, despite radical life changes, the world still existed somewhere and had not become a prison. Writing and reading letters were the main activities if there was any time and energy left after long workdays. The women read not only the letters they had just received but all the letters they had. When correspondence was temporarily paused, the outside world began to seem more like a mirage than something real. Therefore, reading a letter in the camp was not just about gaining information but about transformation or transfer, which changed the current situation or moved the women reading it to a different place.

Although the importance of the letter is clearly and repeatedly shown in both sisters' letters, the significance of the statement that "only the letters are the entire life" seems overstated. The quoted story about how the heart trembles while waiting for a letter, how the thought of the letter stays in the mind and heart throughout the entire day of mail delivery, and how the mood for several days depends on whether a letter is received or not, sounds more like

a rhetorical device than an actual experience. Considering how prison camp letters are received by readers today, these repeated episodes emphasising the extraordinary importance of a letter might be overlooked.

Expression of Traumatic Experiences in Letters: Non-Life and Non-Death

If "only the letters" of imprisoned women are perceived as "the entire life", then everything else, meaning the majority of their life during that time, is experienced in a way other than life. French Lithuanian semiotician Algirdas Julien Greimas and French linguist François Rastier, in creating a semiotic square – which they describe as the fundamental model representing "the deep structures" of human cognition and defining "the fundamental mode of existence of an individual or of a society" (1968: 87) – identified different modes of being. Although I was familiar with this theoretical tool, it was not until I reflected on the life experiences shared in the camp letters that I saw the vertices of the semiotic square as genuinely justified by lived experience. The dualistic opposition of life and death in the semiotic square is challenged by expanding it into four terms.



Alongside absolute opposites, there are two intermediate compound terms where opposites merge: a person can be not only alive or dead, but also both alive and dead at the same time. When there is no life, but you are not dead, you can live non-life. When there is no death but you feel as if you are in a grave, it is appropriate to talk about non-death. According to Greimas, the deixe containing the terms /life/ and /non-death/ is positive and can be called Existence, and the one with the terms /death/ and /non-life/ is negative and can be designated Non-Existence (1988: 43). To understand radically different ways of being of the same thing as experiential, existential liminal conditions are necessary.

> Today is a sad anniversary for me. It was exactly one year ago, at this hour, that the train carried us through the fields of our Homeland into the unknown … it was very difficult. My first days here were very hard, too. I felt like someone

> had dropped me into a pit, waiting to be buried, still alive. It took almost six months to recover from all those impressions, until I found a place and time for them. (K. Kairiūkštytė to O. Garmuvienė, August 8, 1954)

During her first six months in the camp, Kazimiera felt as if she were trapped in a pit. It took her another six months to realise and be able to articulate that this was how she felt. Being in a pit means being without a horizon, senses, or perceptions. Kazimiera mentioned that at the beginning of her imprisonment, she thought she had lost the ability to read books and had forgotten the foreign languages she had learned. It seemed that, along with the outside world, her abilities had disappeared. She noted this in her letter when she saw that her abilities were gradually returning. French phenomenologist Natalie Depraz, describing traumatic experiences at the micro level, draws an analogy with micro-descriptions of surprise. She demonstrates the structural dynamics of traumatism as a powerful surprise that impacts a person so profoundly that it shuts down the senses and disrupts attention. Such an "emotional-attentional blank" is regarded by Depraz as a non-experience; a person disconnects from everything they have accumulated within themselves for a specific period (2018: 55, 67). It must be acknowledged that both sisters were unprepared for the camp, especially for the brutal interrogation, and they experienced everything with sensitivity. When researching the historical traumas experienced during occupations and resistance, researchers have noted that people who consciously participated in the resistance movement show weaker post-traumatic symptoms, which is linked to their awareness of their actions and possible consequences (Gailienė, Kazlauskas 2005). However, the sisters did not participate in the resistance movement and had no prior training.

Feeling as if she had been thrown into a pit grave, Kazimiera perceived unimprisoned people as being "on the edge of an abyss from which only wailing can be heard…" (K. Kairiūkštytė to O. Garmuvienė, August 8, 1954). The image of the abyss reflects the recurring idea of a pit grave, helping us understand that in Kazimiera's mind, her experience affects not only herself and the women imprisoned with her but all people, because it erodes the basic trust in humanity and compassion. That is why she wondered "how people can be happy, find joy, and build a life" when the Gulag exists (ibid.). Recognising Kazimiera's feelings, her empathetic aunt wrote to her that the Nemunas (the river in their homeland) flows just as it always has (J. Garmuvienė to K. Kairiūkštytė, August 31, 1953). In this way, she showed that although Kazimiera's situation and that of many others had changed, some things remained the same, and Kazimiera eventually understood this too.

> Now, I understand that life is like a rushing river that flows with equal joy through the prettiest valleys and over the highest, most terrifying cliffs. And there is no power on this Earth that can hold it back, that would make it pause and fall silent and think for a moment, bowing your head before human pain… (K. Kairiūkštytė to O. Garmuvienė, August 8, 1954)

The vitality conveyed in this letter may connect to the most foundational layer of affectivity, which offers pre-reflective bodily attunement to the lived world, making it meaningful (Fuchs 2015: 614–615). It also serves as a way of finding oneself in the world (Ratcliffe 2008: 2). Kazimiera and Janina's letters reveal the background affectivity that sustains attachment to the ordinariness of life, focusing on caring for a few personal items available in the camp; this attempt to survive by holding onto ordinariness was also observed by Leena Kurvet-Käosaar (2014), who studied Estonian deportation diaries.

Nevertheless, the letters constantly convey the feeling that life in the camp is non-life: food is non-food, clothes are non-clothes, and work is non-work. There are only a few references to the food received in the camp, and later, in her old age, when asked about it, Kazimiera had little to say, probably not because she had forgotten, but because of the insufficiency of the thing itself. From the available context, we can understand that non-soup would be something served as soup, but, in fact, cannot be considered as such due to its insufficient composition. The indifference of the imprisoned women toward food and clothing in the camp contributes to the perception of these items as non-food and non-clothing. When talking about the camp, both sisters repeatedly said: "It doesn't really matter here how you dress or what you eat." (K. Kairiūkštytė to J. and V. Kairiūkštis, December 12, 1954). Kazimiera's attitude toward work also reflects the idea that nothing in the camp is real. Realising that the Gulag aimed to extract economic benefits from the prisoners, she boycotted work as much as she could, although she was unable to refuse it and so tried not to give her all, even though she had little strength to begin with. Her sister Janina, on the contrary, devoted herself to work; she was used to farm labour and found it unacceptable to work poorly. Many rural girls in the camp shared this attitude. The camp administration, especially after Stalin's death, sought to create the illusion of regular life: work was 'paid' by reducing prison sentences, music was played on the radio, concerts were held, amateur activities were encouraged, and in the camp store, it was possible to buy not only sugar but also face powder. Kazimiera firmly kept her distance from this illusion of normal life and thus partly chose non-life for herself.

The most powerful episode, which provided the most profound insight into the modality of life in the camp, is the story of one of the prisoners receiving a visit from her husband.

> Not too long ago, the husband of one our women arrived. There's not much else I can say about how happy she was, but our own joy was just as great. I saw the visitor myself (but you know that already perhaps?). It's hard to describe the feeling I had when I saw a good, civilized face, so well-mannered – something I haven't seen in over a year. (K. Kairiūkštytė to V. Kairiūkštis, February 10, 1954)

The visiting man was an ordinary person, one of many like him that Kazimiera lived among in Lithuania. However, seeing him at the camp made a deep impression on her; she felt she had seen something she "hadn't seen in over a year", meaning simply a human being. In one episode, Janina, talking about her and the other women's daily lives, refers to them and herself as "shadows of people".

> We've been thrown out beyond the boundaries of life. Our friends carry the same longing that we do. Our eyes see the same people wearing their black *fafaikė* [the standard quilted jackets issued to male and female Gulag prisoners] in the mornings, axes thrown over their shoulders, moving out into the ancient forest. They walk slowly down the path, morning and night, their tired souls concealed by the twilight. You look at them and they look like people, but they're only shadows of people, and you yourself walk like a shadow. (J. Kairiūkštytė to K. Kairiūkštytė, December 16, 1954)

Kazimiera's friend, who was released from the camp earlier due to her young age, wrote similarly. She recounted that after returning to Lithuania, she would see shadows moving around her in her dreams at night or as soon as she closed her eyes during the day, and she would hear voices arguing over these shadows (I. Mažutavičiūtė to K. Kairiūkštytė, May 26, 1955, GHM). The letters clearly reveal a weakening sense of humanity and the camp's characteristic non-human modality. Although Kazimiera's period in the pit was affected by the realisation that something was more potent than her trauma, her daily life was increasingly overshadowed by feelings of non-existence, uncertainty, and dullness.

The experience of non-existence expressed in this collection of letters – such as non-food, non-clothes, non-human, and so forth – is recognisable as quite universal, as evidenced in others' documents of life in imprisonment.

Living with Trauma through the Diffusion Process

Writing letters stems from the desire and will to maintain broken natural ties. In the case of Kazimiera and Janina, this required years of effort from their father, brother, aunts, and cousins to find the time and energy for it. Many of

their letters were written late at night and finished with their eyes heavy with sleep. It was the only way to stay connected.

"When I read your letters, it's as if I'm talking with you," Kazimiera's father wrote (October 29, 1953). One of the aunts wrote how relatives would bring letters from the camp to family celebrations: "We gather in one corner, share letters, read them to each other, cry, wondering where our dear and precious daughters are, what they are doing today, what they are working at" (A. Krikščiūnienė to K. Kairiūkštytė, July 4, 1954). Kazimiera also used letters as substitutes for her loved ones: she would spread the letters around her on the bed and feel as if she were with the people who wrote them (K. Kairiūkštytė to O. Garmuvienė, January 1, 1955). This experience of reading letters when you hear the voice of the person who wrote them, and feel his or her body as if he or she were there with you, is described in Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* (1993: 342).

Half of a Christmas Eve wafer sent from the camp by Kazimiera to her father and brother, enclosed with a letter dated January 1, 1955. GHM, Prison camp collection compiled by K. Galaunienė (Kairiūkštytė)

Maintaining contact reveals how the trauma of imprisonment spreads, profoundly affecting not only those who are imprisoned but also their loved ones. Someone who has not been repressed can still be deeply affected by their loved ones' repression. In 2000, psychologist Danutė Gailienė and her colleagues conducted a study of Lithuanian people who had experienced repression and, following standard methodology, included a control group of those who had not. It was surprising to find that people without the status of victim exhibited similar sadness to those who had been repressed. This research data can be explain by saying that one in four people who had not been repressed had lost a loved one due to political repression (Gailienė 2022: 102). These losses and the repression experienced by their loved ones, even if it did not lead to death, inevitably affected those who were not directly repressed. This is especially evident in the letters from Kazimiera and Janina's father and aunts.

> Dear Kazimiera,
> It has been quite some time since you left us, Kazimiera. We all miss you very much and remember you with every step we take. It would be difficult to describe, how wonderful it would be to see you among us again.… (April 14, 1953. From Piliuona to Lukiškės Prison in Vilnius, GHM)[5]

> My dearest daughter,
> I thank you so much for your letter and that you don't forget me in my loneliness. I remember you every day, every hour.… (October 29, 1953. From Piliuona to Ertsev)

Through space and movement, the first letter conveys the constant presence of the missing daughter: "we remember you *with every step* we take" (my emphasis). In the second letter, time is used to express this sense of absence: "I remember you *every day, every hour*" (my emphasis). After writing that he remembers her each day, Kazimiera's father realises this is not accurate, so he adds that he remembers her each hour. The first letter was written four months after Kazimiera's arrest, the second six months later, with the father still in a state of emotional pain, constantly feeling the presence of someone who is not there. We also see a lingering sense of pain and suffering that does not diminish with time in the aunt's letters.

> Dearest Kazimiera,
> It's been a year since I saw you, Kazimiera. I miss you very much. This past year was deeply sad and my heart is so heavy. I just wait for any news from you.…

[5] Unpublished letter, translated by the author of the article.

> During the winter I didn't go anywhere, I was mostly alone at home. Adomas was busy with all sorts of things, the children would go to school and I'd be home alone. I cried as much as I wanted to. My heart is so heavy. Whether I'm lying down or walking, I can't stop thinking about that horrible misfortune and there's nothing I can do to help. (A. Krikščiūnienė to K. Kairiūkštytė, October 11, 1953)

> Dearest Kazimiera,
> How quickly the time passes. It's been three years since you last visited us. It seems so recent, but so much time has passed, and God only knows how much more will go by.
>
> I so miss you. If only we could see each other soon, I would be so happy. I can't stop, and probably never will stop thinking that there is never a more lovely and dear person among us than you. (A. Krikščiūnienė to K. Kairiūkštytė, February 12, 1955)

Long-term imprisonment is a complex form of separation. You're unable to grieve because the person is still alive, even if they are not with you. The experiences of Soviet repression are often characterised by an inability to mourn because the repressions were not openly acknowledged as such (Lindy 2001: 24). Kazimiera and Janina's grandmother, who had no hope of seeing them again, would constantly pray to dream about them (A. Giniūnienė to K. Kairiūkštytė, February 17, 1955). After losing direct contact, she tried to maintain that connection indirectly.

Another way to keep in touch was through parcels. Relatives packed as much as they could. There is a lot written about them in the letters.

> Today, with the children, I prepared a parcel for Janina and you. I gave it to the post office once, but it hasn't arrived yet. Please write, Kazimiera, when you receive the parcel, to let me know if everything is ok, especially the eggs – did they break or spoil? The butter probably won't spoil. (A. Krikščiūnienė to K. Kairiūkštytė, April 29, 1956, GHM)[6]

Lithuanian Rabbi Israel Salanter, who influenced the philosophy of the Other by Emanuel Levinas, writes: "My neighbour's material needs are my spiritual needs" (Pažėraitė 2006: 82). This accurately explains what happens in people's experience when they send an egg, an apple, or a needle and thread to Siberia. Awareness of the prisoner's hardship and the pure physical effort, separating the missing food from the family, packaging, and sending it with hope that the

[6] Unpublished letter, translated by the author of the article.

product will arrive undamaged. This serves as a spiritual practice of opening the heart and maintaining relationships. Kazimiera felt this spiritual act of her loved ones in the material form of the parcel: "It's not the things inside them – it's receiving them." (K. Kairiūkštytė to V. Kairiūkštis, February 10, 1954). She mentioned more than once how, when she opened the parcels, she felt the hands of her loved ones, whom she knew well, who had assembled these parcels: "how grateful I am to you for your holiday parcel! … All Christmas Eve night and through the holiday I felt you so close to me. It was as if I could just reach out and embrace you…" (K. Kairiūkštytė to O. Garmuvienė, January 1, 1955).

The three years of correspondence with the prison camp reveal how Kazimiera and Janina's relatives suffered their loss, constantly remembering the imprisoned women and trying to help in any way they could. Over time, it would be natural for this hardship to fade from consciousness, with less and less time devoted, according to Salanter, to spiritual practices like preparing parcels and writing letters, especially since great distances separated the relatives, and the sisters' hardships were not immediately visible. Nevertheless, the distance itself emphasises the spiritual dimension of these ongoing practices of maintaining contact.

By staying connected, loved ones share their struggles and destinies, experiencing each other's pain. This is especially evident when, for example, Janina begins to think about her father suffering because of her and her sister, saying she cried about it all night. She feels not only her own pain and hardship but also her father's pain, which is caused by her pain (J. Kairiūkštytė to K. Kairiūkštytė, December 16, 1954). George Kunz, interpreting Levinas' face-to-face encounter with the other, notes that the vulnerability of the other leads to empathetic responses and inspires one "to suffer others for the sake of their good" (2007: 622). In this way, sharing each other's pain and suffering weaves into a single fabric.

Having connections with loved ones motivated the sisters to survive the camp. As Viktor E. Frankl wrote, having a goal for the future was essential for surviving in a concentration camp, and that goal could be as simple as seeing loved ones again (1984: 81–85). In their letters, Kazimiera and Janina frequently expressed their endless desire to endure imprisonment so they could return home and reunite with their father. The thought of never seeing their father again was the most terrifying and heart-breaking thought for both of them. "If he isn't, then, I think, freedom will not be freedom, and home will not be a home", Kazimiera wrote in a letter to her brother, asking him to take care of their father (K. Kairiūkštytė to V. Kairiūkštis, April 28, 1955).

Every instance of maintaining relationships during trauma is singular, yet it is also a shared cultural phenomenon rooted in social values and specific transmitted practices. I would consider the father's farewell to his daughter, which Kazimiera described as one of the most memorable events of her life, one of those singular, culturally rooted moments. During the interrogation, one night, she was taken back to her parents' home, where only her father was present. After searching, the KGB officers permitted them to say goodbye. With guards present, at the very moment his most treasured possession was being taken, the father was powerless to resist. However, he managed to convey his love for his daughter and their strong bond by holding her close and kissing her.

> I can still feel his kisses on my face and how strongly he embraced me that last time … that parting with father will burn in my heart, like a painful flame, until I die. I not only felt my own pain then, but also his grief, the weakness we both felt, and our helplessness. And his pain was so great that he fell silent – only that strong, strong embrace and those burning kisses – no words, no tears… (K. Kairiūkštytė to V. Kairiūkštis, April 28, 1955)

> As long as I live, I will never forget my father's embrace and the warmth of his kisses that still burn on my face fifty-three years on…. ("About Me", 2006[7]).

Kazimiera's father managed to connect with his daughter through an unbreakable bond of support. By hugging her as she was being taken away, he established a lasting relationship built on sharing everything. Her vulnerability triggered a response from him that helped her survive. Quantitative studies have shown that human relationships, support, and compassion are crucial in coping with trauma (Gailienė 2022: 201, 209–210). Kazimiera's preserved correspondence details the daily practice of such support.

[7] Text included in the book *A Woman and the Sky* (2025, forthcoming). Translated by Darius Sužiedėlis.

The handmade 'grape branch' brooch and powder compact bought in the prison camp shop are gifts received by Kazimiera from other inmates on her name day at Ertsev camp in 1954. GHM, Prison camp collection compiled by K. Galaunienė (Kairiūkštytė)

Instead of Conclusions: The Trace of the Prison Camp

Although both sisters spent only three years in the camp, considering their experiences, this period felt very long. In her second year of the Gulag, Kazimiera reflected on her life using the metaphor of the seasons: "Spring and summer have passed. Autumn is almost here…" She was only thirty at the time (K. Kairiūkštytė to J. Garmuvienė, March 9, 1954). They were eager to return to Lithuania, but their plans and expectations for the future had been shattered.

"How will we feel when we're free, my sister? Don't you wonder? I think I'll be looking over my shoulder for 'chaperones' for a long time", wrote Janina (March 16, 1956). Kazimiera, dreaming of her life after returning home, wrote, "We won't even notice how another ten years pass by, when each of us leaves for Pakuonis to be with mother [Kazimiera's mother was buried in Pakuonis cemetery]. After all, what is life? Just a blink of the eye" (K. Kairiūkštytė to J. Kairiūkštis, June 24, 1955). After leaving the prison camp, Kazimiera's recurring dream of returning home was replaced by a recurring nightmare that she had to go back to the camp and serve her remaining sentence. Over a dozen years after the camp, her sister Janina would involuntarily start shaking all over when passing the KGB headquarters where she had been interrogated. The young niece, who accompanied her aunt, always mentioned it, but for a long time, she could not understand what was happening to her aunt. Janina married, raised children and worked, but ended her life by committing suicide.

It is impossible to identify a single reason. We should not overlook the fact that Gailienė's research on repressed people indicates that some survivors of the Gulag tend to be more sensitive and less resilient. Kazimiera lived a long life, passing away at 91. After the camp, she did not return to her scientific research but worked as a museum curator. It seems that she did not hide her prison experience, but she never talked about it either. As I knew Kazimiera during the last decades of her life, I would say that the traces of the prison camp were felt in her mood, her understanding, and her attitude. Although difficult to define precisely, this could be interpreted as a sadness of the soul and a slight, permanent detachment from everything around her. However, this did not prevent her from being tender in her relationships and persistent in her activities.

It is essential to comprehend Kazimiera's reflective attitude towards her personal experience. She viewed her time in the prison camp as a significant part of her life. Although undesirable and unchosen, the experience was accepted because it occurred and affected her life. Kazimiera regarded the experiences of imprisonment or deportation of others in precisely the same way. Whenever she learned that someone she had met or whose work she was familiar with had been deported, she would always write this down in her notes, considering it an essential part of that person's life. Several points reveal her relationship with her imprisonment. Among many work notebooks in her archive, there is one titled "About Me". The entire notebook is filled with the story of one of her most terrifying interrogation episodes, and it is the only story she tells about herself. In 2007, after sharing her camp memories and allowing me to read her letters, she gave me a photograph as a gift. Next to the date on the picture, she wrote, "when I opened myself up". Such notes indicate that, for her, any talk about going through camp meant openly speaking about herself. Kazimiera did not think that she could ever fully recover from this traumatic experience or that it could be erased from her mind. Instead, she saw it as the essence of what life had given her. This attitude is rooted in trusting what life provides.

One of the bundles of Gulag letters contained a note from Kazimiera requesting that letters not be destroyed, as "*the exceptional experience of human existence* is placed in them" (my emphasis). Contemporary epistolary research indicates that letters uniquely capture experience and daily life. As the researcher Maria Tamboukou emphasises, they do not merely illustrate what is known but also provide new insights that we did not possess before (2020: 161–162). In accordance with Kazimiera's prediction, and current epistolary research guidelines, this article provides descriptions of some sensitive aspects of life in the prison camp, which permit the following conclusions to be drawn.

First, regarding traumatic experiences, the imprisoned women go through different stages, including complete detachment from the world and numbness, gradual withdrawal from pain, and the realisation that one's loss does not encompass the entire world. The letters provide insight into the specific negative mode of non-life. This difficult-to-grasp mode, seen through close letter reading, requires perceptual sensitivity. Nevertheless, as the testimonies reveal, many prisoners experienced this condition. The second finding concerns the diffusion of trauma. The network of correspondence reveals how traumatic experiences affect not only those who were imprisoned but also profoundly transform the lives of their loved ones, shaping their perception of the world and their daily routines. This changes the understanding of the extent of trauma and its effects. The third conclusion concerns the significance of the letter itself and its healing effect. The letter manifests as a relationship, which in those challenging circumstances was the only feasible form. This relationship, maintained through written communication, appeared to be healing, supportive, empowering, and vital for survival under harsh conditions. Such a detailed account of the Gulag experience is a novel approach in research on Lithuanian Gulag letters and other autobiographical narratives. It enables the establishment of a new connection with life documents from imprisonment.

Although this article focuses on the experiences of several individuals, it also uncovers traits shared by others and a phenomenon that permeates culture. In her later years, Kazimiera considered the multiple experiences of repression not only as personal but also as interpersonal, as belonging to a region. By preserving letters, she cared less about individual memory and healing than about restoring a community whose members need mutual understanding and reconciliation. When talking about traumatic events affecting the community, it is common to focus on the adverse effects of trauma. Nevertheless, Kazimiera suggested that trauma can also become a "vertical dimension" of culture. Traumatic experiences can provide a certain depth of understanding of life, emphasise the need to recognise its complexity, and enable individuals to confront difficulties without fully identifying with them. This uncovers a potential underlying connection between fragility, vulnerability, and resilience.

These long-term effects of traumatic experiences emphasise the need for further research and promote efforts to investigate and publish Gulag sources, creating a comprehensive corpus, not just focusing on individual texts. Kazimiera's agreement to publish her collection of camp letters, along with the research and dissemination of other Gulag documents, can be seen as a display of cultural confidence or the capacity to recognise what life genuinely is or can become. This can be understood as the courage not to ignore trauma and as a gradual, steady process of healing.

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