

*George ENACHE**

***CHRISTIAN LIFE IN COMMUNIST PRISONS IN ROMANIA.
CASE STUDY: VALERIU GAFENCU***

Abstract: The study aims to highlight the role played by Christian faith in the life of political prisoners in Communist Romania during 1945-1964. Our interest will focus on those "spiritual groups" which were formed in prisons and I mention here only the one led by the young Valeriu Gafencu, who died in prison.

These groups of prisoners were able, through Christian faith, to resist and preserve national and spiritual values that the Communists wanted to destroy. Through solidarity, these people have managed to save their own memory and thereby their personal and national identity. Those who survived and left the prison wrote their memories in order to keep alive for the next generations what happened in communist prisons.

Some of these books have a strong message, talking about faith, solidarity, spiritual and national identity. One of the most famous books is "Return to Christ", written by Ioan Ianolide, one of Valeriu Gafencu's disciples. Therefore, the second objective of our study is to put in evidence the destiny of this work in the consciousness of the contemporary Romanian society.

Keywords: Christianity, Communism, Romania, prisons, "spiritual groups", Valeriu Gafencu

*

Just like Poland**, Romania is one of the European countries with the highest rates of religious faith. Religious faith was high even during Communism, in

* "Dunărea de Jos" University of Galați, România.

** This paper was presented at the International Conference „Solidarity, Memory and Identity”, University of Gdańsk, Poland, 20-21 September 2012 (<http://solidaritymemory.ug.edu.pl/en/programme/>, Internet).

spite of the persecutions directed at the representatives of religious cults or at common believers.

The various mechanisms of fighting against religion are well-known, being common to the area which had once been under the influence of Kremlin. It is known that Communist leaders were claiming to respect freedom of conscience and they motivated the massive arrests among clerics or believers on criminal grounds¹. In Romania, many clerics and believers were punished for their belonging to the Legionary Movement.

This far right organisation, with a significant impact in inter-war Romania, especially among the youth, with a message partly inspired from Christian ideas, became an obsession for Communists due to its firm anti-Communism. Their representatives stood a generalised repression which did not take into account individual responsibilities. Moreover, the “legionary danger” would become a convenient pretext for arresting and convicting many strong believers, qualified as “mystics”.

In order to understand the origin of this “mysticism” - “legionarism” relationship, and, mostly, the reality behind the Communist authorities’ claims, we will embark upon studying the biography of one of the most remarkable spiritual figures from the Romanian universe, Valeriu Gafencu, named by many of the survivors of the Communist repression “the saint of prisons”.

Valeriu Gafencu was born on December 1921 in Sângerei, Bălți department (today pertaining to the Republic of Moldova). His father, Vasile Gafencu, was a member of the State Council, an institution which governed the territory between Prut and Nistru, known as Bessarabia, immediately after its separation from the Russian Empire, and who voted, on March 27, 1918, the adhesion of Bessarabia to Romania. Therefore, even from his family background, young Valeriu Gafencu had been brought up along nationalistic principles, centred on asserting and promoting Romanian identity in a territory subject to a strong denationalisation for a whole century².

Valeriu Gafencu publicly expressed his convictions since his high school years. He was an active member of “B.P. Hașdeu” Reading Society of “Ion Creangă” High School, Bălți. This society also had a magazine, “Crenguța” (Sprig),

¹ George Enache, Adrian Nicolae Petcu, *Patriarhul Justinian și Biserica Ortodoxă Română în anii 1948-1964 (Patriarch Justinian and the Romanian Orthodox Church between 1948 and 1964)*, Editura Partener, Galați, 2009, p. 28-38.

² Silviu B. Moldovan, “Valeriu Gafencu”, in *Martiri pentru Hristos din România în perioada regimului comunist (Valeriu Gafencu - Martyrs for Christ in Romania during Communism)*, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 2007, p. 257.

in which young Valeriu published several short stories with a strong moral message. In essence, Romanians were urged not to forget their traditions, not to give in to deceitful things, to be diligent and, mostly, to have faith in God, the essential element of an authentic life.³

The message of the young student was not the only one of this kind in the Romanian world of the time. Having passed through many hardships along the history, Romanians felt that, after the constitution of Great Romania, they had been given an extraordinary chance of self-assertion and this opportunity could be valorised by “work, sacrifice and faith”. Among the political organisations of the time, the Legionary Movement was the one to best exploit this feeling.

Built on the remarkable charisma of its leader (Corneliu Zelea Codreanu), the Legionary Movement promoted an ideology which could be qualified as far right. On the one hand, the Legion vehemently contested democracy which “dissolves the soul of the Nation” and spoke intensely of the danger posed by the Jews to the development of the Romanian nation, the anti-Semite side of the Legionary message being unquestionable. But, unlike other similar political organisations, which insisted exclusively on the idea that the “Other” is guilty of all the nations’ misfortunes, Corneliu Zelea Codreanu spoke of the existence of certain historical lacunae in the soul of the Romanian people, which must be filled, and this was supposed to be the main direction of action of the Legionary Movement. This idea, of looking into one’s own sins and fighting for removing them, had a special echo especially with the young generation, inflamed with a heroic pathos at the time⁴.

The values on which the Romanian society had to be built were family, community, faith, gathered in a corporatist-like system, closer to “Estado Novo” advanced by Salazar of Portugal, than to the Italian fascism or German Nazism⁵. As we know, Catholicism played an important part in Salazar’s ideology. For Codreanu, the Orthodoxy, the religion of most of the Romanians, was seen as the foundation of the legionary doctrine and of the future totalitarian state. In fact, Codreanu’s doctrine was a mixture of Christian ideas and totalitarian views, faintly systematised, but which, paradoxically, due to this low degree of elaboration,

³ Arhivele Consiliului Național pentru Studierea Arhivelor Securității - ACNSAS (Archive of the National Council for the Study of Security Archives), fond Penal (Criminal fund), file 23630, p. 30.

⁴ George Enache, *Biserica societate, națiune, stat în România interbelică. Biserica Ortodoxă Română și ispita totalitară de dreapta (Church, Society, Nation, State in Inter-War Romania. The Romanian Orthodox Church and the Right Totalitarian Lure)*, in “Revista Teologică”, no. 2, 94 (2012), p. 280-287 (with bibliography).

⁵ See Mircea Eliade, *Salazar și revoluția în Portugalia (Salazar and the Revolution of Portugal)*, Editura Gorjan, București, 1942.

favoured the accession of a large number of people to the Legionary Movement, each completing with their own view the ideas of the legionary leader. It was not accidental that, after Codreanu's assassination, once the founder was gone, the Legion underwent dramatic reconfigurations and even divergent directions of reflection and action.

As the Legionary Movement was the main enemy of King Carol II who wished to impose his own view of the authoritarian regime, along with the instauration of the royal dictatorship in February 1938, the organisation led by Codreanu was proscribed and a campaign of persecutions was initiated against its members, aimed especially at the young, the main supporters of the Legionary Movement⁶. Among the people questioned and tried during this time by the courts for minors, we find student Valeriu Gafencu as well, who was charged in 1939 for sympathising with the Legionary Movement by donating money to the organisation. At the trial, it was found that young Valeriu was not a member of the Legion and the money he donated was in fact an aid for a severely ill classmate⁷. Justice had not yet acquired the arbitrary and monstrous character of Communist years, therefore, Valeriu Gafencu was exonerated, however, in the minds of the authorities hostile to the Legionary Movement, an idea began to acquire shape that any form of help between people could be defined as "legionary help" (in his writings, Codreanu insisted on the idea of help as a form of solidarity between the members of the legion).

In the summer of 1940, Romania was obliged, after an ultimatum, to give up Bessarabia to the Soviet Union. Vasile Gafencu managed to send his family in free Romania; however, he chose to remain in the occupied territory. Considered a "Romanian nationalist" by the Soviet Union, he was sent to Siberia where he died. Being now the head of the family refuged in Iași, in the autumn of 1940, Valeriu became a student of the Faculty of Law, at the University of Iași, where legionary presence was strong. Sympathising with this organisation, he became a member of the Blood Brotherhoods, the young organisation of the Legionary Movement⁸.

In September 1940, King Carol II was forced to abdicate. The rule of the country was taken over by a government led by General Ion Antonescu, in collaboration with the Legionary Movement which becomes the only party recognised by the totalitarian regime. As the traditional leader had been killed in 1938 by Carol, with a decimated management, the Legionary Movement proved unable to lead and part of its members initiated bloody revenges which caused

⁶ Ilarion Țiu, *Mișcarea legionară după Corneliu Zelea Codreanu (The Legionary Movement after Corneliu Zelea Codreanu)*, Editura Vremea, București, 2007, p. 33-109.

⁷ ACNSAS, Criminal fund, file 23630, p. 50.

⁸ Silviu B. Moldovan, *op.cit.*, 2007, p. 261.

anarchy. Coming into conflict with the legionary leaders, General Antonescu decided, in agreement with Hitler, to eliminate the legion from power. This happened after the events of January 21-23, 1941, presented by the propaganda of Antonescu's regime as a "rebellion" against the legal authority⁹.

In those days, in many towns of the country, there were armed actions of the legionaries, demonstrations, protests which, after General Antonescu's victory, were investigated by the legal authorities. The "rebellion" caught Valeriu Gafencu as leader of the Blood Brotherhoods from Iași, being arrested for having organised strikes and protests of the pupils and students of Iași, actions sympathetic to the cause of the Legionary Movement.

Tried by Iași Military Court, Gafencu was sentenced in May 1941 to two months of imprisonment for public instigation¹⁰. He could be accused of no violent deed, but only of a political attitude. In spite of these, he was retained in prison after the completion of his punishment, being tried again in 1942 and sentenced to 25 years of imprisonment for a legionary meeting he had supposedly organised in 1941 at the Military High School of Iași. The authorities' attitude could be explained starting from Valeriu Gafencu's own words, spoken with the occasion of a meeting: "Students are an explosive stronger than dynamite, for they are elites and the leaders of tomorrow."¹¹

Meritocracy and the focus on young people were two of the main ideas of the legionary movement. The leaders of the Legionary Movement were not imposed by the superiors but chosen by the members on the basis of their qualities. This ensured a remarkable authority and legitimacy of the leaders within the legion. Starting from this state of facts, all the enemies of the Legion closely monitored all those who occupied, at some point, a leading position in the Legionary Movement. During Communism, this control went down to the least important positions. The legionary leaders were deemed "natural leaders" with a strong force of impact over the others. As Gafencu was at the top of one of the most important youth legionary organisation, he was considered too dangerous to be let loose, for fear to influence the young. Consequently, throughout Antonescu's entire regime, he was detained in Aiud, along with other legionaries, most of them young, many former leaders of Blood Brotherhoods.

⁹ *Pe marginea prăpastiei. 21-23 ianuarie 1941 (On the edge of the cliff. January 21-23, 1941)*, Editura Scripta, București, 1992. The legionary perspective is given by Horia Sima, *Era libertății. Statul național-legionar (The Era of Freedom. The National-Legionary State)*, vol. 2,

<http://www.miscarea.net/carti2.htm> (accessed August 21, 2012)

¹⁰ ACNSAS, Criminal fund, file 5710, leaf 321v.

¹¹ ACNSAS, Criminal fund, file 5704, vol. 2, leaf 28.

The regime applied to legionaries in Aiud during Antonescu's government was harsh, though incommensurable with what followed in Communism. All the ones arrested were considered dangerous and the authorities undertook various actions for their "rehabilitation" (a term which anticipates somewhat the one of "re-education" used during the Communist period). One of the ways of "rehabilitation" was enrolling prisoners for fighting against Bolshevism on the fronts of the Soviet Union. If some accepted it, others, among whom Valeriu Gafencu as well, rejected the offer, showing that they would die for the country any time, but they would not do this as rehabilitation for some alleged mistakes for they have nothing to rehabilitate, before no one¹².

During their long imprisonment, the legionaries from Aiud had the time to reflect on the meaning of the Legionary Movement, organisation which seemed to have the mission to change the fate of the Romanian people, but which failed terribly in its governing years. The reflection on the legionary doctrine brought about the inevitable rupture between the religious and the political component. If some legionaries sought to focus on the idea that the legion is a political party in essence, others insisted on the spiritual aspect, finding that, if there is to pin down something good in legionary ideas, this is its Christian side.

Corneliu Zelea Codreanu stated several times that the legion was a spiritual school, based on Christian ideas¹³. For one of the imprisoned young people this seemed like a contradiction given the political assassinations committed by various members of the Legion. Christianity forbids murders and pleads in favour of loving one's neighbour, which is hard to achieve in a political, totalitarian movement. Therefore, for some of those confined in Aiud, the political coat of the Legion was gone, being left with the idea of a school for shaping characters, founded on Christian principles. Soon, it was obvious that this meant the dissolution of the Legion and bringing the individual close to the Church, the authentic keeper of the Christian message.

The initiators of this spiritual trend among the legionaries from Aiud were Traian Trifan and Marin Ion, older than the young members of the Blood Brotherhoods¹⁴. They started from the idea that the legionaries had made mistakes, mistakes which, from a Christian standpoint, are sins, and for these sins man shall

¹² *Sfântul închisorilor. Mărturii despre Valeriu Gafencu adunate și adnotate de monahul Moise (Prisons' Saint. Testimonies about Valeriu Gafencu, Gathered and Annotated by Monk Moses)*, Editura Reîntregirea, Alba Iulia, 2007, p. 42.

¹³ Constantin Papanace, *Stilul legionar de luptă. Concepția tactică a Căpitanului (The Legionary Fighting Style. Captain's Tactical Conception)*, Editura Lucman, București, 2004, p. 34-92.

¹⁴ ACNSAS, Criminal fund, file 327, vol. 1, p. 11.

answer before God. For people, it is essential to make up with God, through penitence and purification from sins. Thus, being aware of one's sins, praying, making penitence and laying one's life into the hands of God were fundamental for the group gathered around Trifan and Ion, reminding of the lifestyle of monks from the Egyptian desert.

During Antonescu's government, Aiud prison housed a chapel (closed subsequently by the Communists) where prisoners attended the mass. By going regularly to church, confessing and communing often, prisoners were trying to lead a Christian life. Wishing to get closer to perfection, some of the prisoners started to practice the prayer of the heart, specific to the Orthodox hesychasm. In the absence of a spiritual leader, they drew upon the *Philokalia* or the "Russian Pilgrim" and, through effort and sacrifice, they reached remarkable spiritual performances¹⁵.

Among all, Valeriu Gafencu made a singular impression. He was a quiet, well-educated, highly generous young man, in search of an ideal. At the beginning of the imprisonment, he was tormented by the issue of justice and suffering. He knew he did nothing wrong; on the contrary, he wished to do nothing but good. Everyone thought well of him in society; why was he in jail?

Troubled by these questions, Gafencu, in the summer of 1943, in a moment of ultimate despair, had the revelation of his sinful life and, at the same time, of God's infinite love: "In my weeping, I began to pray. And, suddenly - Oh, Lord! - I was able to see my soul full of sins. So many sins and the eyes of my soul hardened by pride could not even see them!" Also, the consciousness of sin made him understand the meaning of sufferance: "Suffering, however painful, has no other purpose but to cleanse the soul eager for salvation"¹⁶. All of these remind us of the famous assertion of Saint Siluan of Athos: "keep your mind in hell and do not despair", marking the beginning of spiritual accomplishment.

The testimonies of the people who knew Gafencu and who outlived imprisonment reveal the intensity of this young man's spiritual experiences, through humility and prayer, being known as "prisons' saint". His spiritual power changed many of the prisoners and the prison itself became a real monastery, regretted subsequently. The one spiritually closest to Gafencu was another young man, Ioan Ianolide, who outlived imprisonment and wrote one of the most moving testimonies on the reality of communist prisons: "Return to Christ. Document for a New

¹⁵ Virgil Maxim, *Imn pentru crucea purtată (Hymn for the Borne Cross)*, Editura Antim, București, 2002, p. 106-110.

¹⁶ Ioan Ianolide, *Întoarcerea la Hristos. Document pentru o lume nouă (Return to Christ. Document for a New World)*, Editura Christiana, București, 2006, p. 231-232.

World”¹⁷. First-hand witness of Gafencu’s spiritual transformation, he writes: “When he found Lord, Valeriu cast everything aside and lay his heart to Him, completely and for good. The great fight followed: the war with the sins, watching one’s words and senses, controlling outer manifestations, cleansing thoughts and the slightest inner movements, so that the Holy Spirit gradually pervaded his body, his soul, his mind, his entire life. In the midst of the stormy life of the prison, Valeriu was the firm and pure rock of faith.”¹⁸

In August 1944, Antonescu’s regime was replaced by a political coalition which included the Communist Party as well. All the political prisoners were released, with the exception of legionaries. For a while, they benefitted of greater freedom. Between 1946 and 1948, Gafencu and his fellows could work in a regime of semi-freedom in the labour settlement of Galda (Alba County), developing a community system in which Christian love and charity were fundamental. A series of stories about Valeriu Gafencu date from this time, emphasising the way in which the others saw him, a true abbot, without the frock. According to one story, some villains shot at Valeriu from a close distance but the bullets missed him; according to another, a thief entered the settlement, but simply lost his head before Valeriu and forgot to use the knife he had on him.¹⁹

Among all, the most touching story was the one telling his encounter with the Soviet commissary. After 1944, Bessarabia had been attached to USSR and Moscow asked Romania to hand over for repatriation all the people who had been born in the territory between Prut and Nistru, being considered citizens of USSR. The Soviet commissary who came to see Valeriu offered him freedom in exchange for repatriation, but Valeriu refused, pointing out that he was Romanian, he wished to stay in Romania and his soul was free even in prison, being entrusted to God²⁰.

From 1948 on, the Romanian communists took over power. The prisoners from Galda were brought again to Aiud, in May 1948, where they found the church closed and vandalised. Also, they were forbidden everything that might have had spiritual content. Valeriu managed to save a Bible which he tore into sections and spread among his fellows. Until all of the sections were found, the prisoners had already learnt them by heart, turning themselves into living books²¹.

¹⁷ Ioan Ianolide was born on January 29, 1919 in Dobrotești, Teleorman County. While he was a student in Bucharest, he became a sympathiser of the Legionary Movement, being arrested in 1941 for having participated in a meeting of the Blood Brotherhoods. For this, he was sentenced to 25 years of hard labour. (ACNSAS, Criminal fund, file 327, vol.7, p. 156).

¹⁸ Ioan Ianolide, *op.cit.*, p. 221.

¹⁹ *Sfântul închisorilor...*, p. 89.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 90.

²¹ Ioan Ianolide, *op.cit.*, p. 77.

In December 1949, Romania witnessed one of the most horrible repressive phenomena from the entire Communist area: Pitești experiment²². It was aimed, at first, at students, who were gathered in Pitești prison. Most of them had been members of the Blood Brotherhoods of sympathisers of the Legion. Seen as an elite extremely dangerous for the Communism, due to their “fanaticism”, these young people were subject to an unprecedented process of re-education. The purpose was clearly outlined by one of the torturers: “we must wash your brain, piece by piece”²³.

Re-education had four main stages:

1. Destroying people’s resistance through torture, until they would give in and accept re-education;
2. “Self-revelation” which was supposed to reveal everything from the past and from the present, about friends and strangers. It was made in writing and was confronted with the confessions of others. If they suspected that the one who wrote it was hiding something, a new series of tortures would begin.
3. Then there came the public renunciation to all of the past values and beliefs. An important place was held by giving up God and one’s family.
4. Transforming the re-educated individual into a re-education activist for, although this process had been initiated by the Communist authorities, they made it appear it came from some of the prisoners who understood Communist “truths”. Grouped in the Organisation of Prisoners with Communist Beliefs and benefiting from all the support of Pitești prison management, they harassed and subjected to unimaginable tortures the other prisoners, former fellows in misery²⁴.

The testimonies about Pitești are horrid. Those who had the strength to overcome all of the suffering spoke of the devils who tried to destroy any trace of nobility and human beauty, leaving in place some empty human carcasses, spiritually ruined. Within the craziness of Pitești prison, an important point was mocking God and Christian rituals, in an attempt to destroy the “mysticism” of the re-educated people.

In the summer of 1948, Gafencu, Ianolide and most of the prisoners from Aiud were transferred to Pitești where re-education was on its way. Gafencu, who attracted the others prisoners like magnet, was one of the first to undergo the re-education process. However, things did not turn out as planned. Gafencu had

²² Mircea Stănescu, *Reeducarea în România comunistă (1945-1952). Aiud, Suceava, Pitești, Brașov (Re-Education in Communist Romania)*, Editura Polirom, Iași, 2010. Dumitru Bacu, *Pitești – centru de reeducare studențească (Pitești - Centre of Students Re-Education)*, Editura Christiana, București, 2011.

²³ Ioan Ianolide, *op.cit.*, p. 96.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 97.

suffered from TBC for some time already and at Pitești his condition worsened greatly. One of his fellows in misery described him as follows: He had become a skeleton, who could barely get off the bed, but who did not cease to explain to us the teachings of the Bible. His physical strength was fading only to make his spiritual strength more obvious”²⁵.

In the autumn of 1949 the regime began a campaign for the eradication of TBC which comprised prisons as well. From Pitești, a group of prisoners, suspects of TBC were transported to Văcărești prison hospital, just before the beginning of re-education. Eighteen of them were sent for treatment at Târgu Ocna penitentiary sanatorium. Valeriu Gafencu and Ioan Ianolide were among them.

In very little time, many sick prisoners came at Târgu Ocna from all the communist prisons, with different political orientations and beliefs. Re-education, in the style of Pitești, was meant to be applied here as well, but the conditions did not favour this process. On the contrary, the ones who have been subjected to Pitești re-education and who, due to coming down with TBC, were brought to Târgu Ocna, could, at least partly, find each other. Most of the ones brought here were in the terminal stage, with very few chances of survival, but, in Târgu Ocna, under the guidance of Valeriu Gafencu and his fellows, they could find themselves and God, dying in peace. Therefore, we can legitimately speak of the “Târgu Ocna phenomenon”, in contrast with “Pitești phenomenon”. One of the young men warded in Târgu Ocna, Aurelian Guță, would remember: “Valeriu Gafencu, together with his inseparable brother in faith and suffering, Ioan Ianolide²⁶, created in Târgu Ocna a real spiritual community joined by new people who knew God deeper as

²⁵ Nicolae Trifoiu, *Studentul Valeriu Gafencu – Sfântul închisorilor din România (Student Valeriu Gafencu - The Saint of Romanian Prisons)*, Editura Napoca Star, Cluj Napoca, 2003, p. 150.

²⁶ In a note from 1974, an informer was telling the following about Ianolide’s activity in Târgu Ocna: “About Ioan Ianolide, the source can state the following:

He met him in 1951 at Târgu Ocna penitentiary sanatorium. He stayed with him for about 3 years. During all this time, he rejoiced in great moral authority with all the prisoners, meaning that, whenever problems appeared, his advice was always taken.

He never showed any bad-temper and was very docile and humble in the relationships with the administrators.

In that time, Ianolide thought that the legionary doctrine had reached an obsolete stage and was replaced by Christian values, manifesting a pronounced mysticism, concretised in a state of permanent prayer (hesychasm), he claimed that he told a short 10 minute prayer for about 20,000 times in 24 hours (the prayer of the heart).

He recommended this system of permanent prayer to his closes friends: Lungeanu Mihai, Florin Nicolae, Voicescu Constantin and others.

He considered that there was no better life than monasticism which he recommended to others, provided they could comply with it.” (ACNSAS, fond Informativ (Informative fund), file 28130, vol. 2, p. 87).

well as by others who carried God in their hearts, but had not deciphered His entire greatness.”²⁷

Although the detention regime in Târgu Ocna was milder and re-education in the style of Pitești could not be imposed, there were enough restrictions and privations for the sick and the officer in charge with the Communist propaganda among the prisoners often conditioned medical aid by the patients’ embracing the Communist doctrine which, in most of the cases, was categorically rejected. Gafencu himself refused to take the streptomycin which could have saved his life in exchange of giving up his faith, faith that the Security officer considered to be a form of legionary doctrine²⁸.

Faced with all the privations, the sick organised themselves the best they could, helping one another. The ones who could not move anymore because of the illness were moved in rooms 4 and 5 of the hospital and were cared for by the able-bodied ones. In a place where suffering and lengthy co-habitation inevitable lead to conflicts, Valeriu Gafencu’s spirit imposed an atmosphere of peace and spiritual joy, expressed by small, but significant gestures, which reminded of the parables of the old monks. Thus, one day, a jail keeper confiscated the small pillow on which Gafencu, almost paralysed, was leaning. A more humane warden took the pillow from the confiscated goods and gave it back to Gafencu. Gafencu considered that another prisoner needed it more and gave it to him. In his turn, the new owner passed it on, until, after a while, the pillow came back to Valeriu, given by someone who had no idea who its first owner had been²⁹. The itinerary of the pillow is a sign of charity, of the spirit of love and sacrifice which existed in the prison from Târgu Ocna.

The most famous episode from Târgu Ocna starred by Valeriu Gafencu is the healing of the protestant parson Richard Wurmbrand, a convert Jew. The latter, after 1964, would manage to leave Romania, with American support, and lay the foundations of an international organisation fighting for religious freedom in Eastern Europe. Severely afflicted with TBC, almost dying, he was saved by Valeriu Gafencu who had received from his family a quantity of streptomycin, obtained and introduced with great efforts in the penitentiary. Valeriu chose to give this streptomycin to parson Wurmbrand, saving him from death.

The gesture upset some of the former members of the Blood Brotherhoods, still marked by the anti-Semite spirit of the Legionary Movement and emphasised even more clearly the spiritual evolution of Valeriu Gafencu and of other former

²⁷ Ioan Ianolide, *op.cit.*, p. 528.

²⁸ *Sfântul închisorilor...*, p. 139-143.

²⁹ Ioan Ianolide, *op.cit.*, p. 136.

sympathisers of the Legion. Gafencu did not deny his past, because this is not possible, each time he was asked, undertaking the responsibility for having been a member of the Blood Brotherhoods. He did not stop to analyse his past or to trace lines. He had just overcome his former conditions: "I entered the prison as a legionary. But, spiritually speaking, I went beyond the legionaries' perspective. I am no longer interested in politics, but more in spiritual life³⁰. Christian love was incompatible with race hatred and Gafencu, starting from Wurmbrand's presence, shocked sometimes his former legionary fellows with statements like: "I would like to see the country governed entirely by Jews. Yes, the prime minister, the law-givers, clerks, all Jews. I have one condition only: that they walk in the footsteps of the ancient Jewish rulers, Joseph, Moses, Daniel, Saint Peter, Saint Paul and Jesus Himself..."³¹ The Security officers did not understand or did not want to understand this fundamental spiritual transformation and they went on considering Valeriu and his fellows a "mystical" group of the Legion which, in essence, aimed at its old legionary goals.

Broken down by the illness, Valeriu Gafencu died on February 18, 1952. All the prisoners stood by his side, but also some of the medical and security staff, impressed by Gafencu's remarkable personality. One of the former prisoners remembers that Valeriu told them: "I am happy to die for Christ. Be strong in your faith, for Christ will defeat all of the enemies. Guard the truth unchanged, but stay away from fanaticism. Atheism will be defeated, but beware of what will replace it."³² Gafencu's body was buried in a grave with no cross. The precise spot of the grave is still unknown. His fellows in misery put a silver cross in his mouth which

³⁰ *Sfântul închisorilor...*, p. 69. In spite of these, he did not promote the idea of the complete retreat from the world. In one of their lengthy conversations, Ianolide asked Gafencu whether, in eschatological perspective, one could live separated from the world, from history, from present. Gafencu's answer was the following: "Such a theory is equally absurd and hypocrite. Eternity starts now. Only if we live eternally now, we will have it eschatologically, otherwise we lose it. Therefore, Christians make history, but do not intermingle with history, for only reaching for eternity we will have the light and the power to turn history into new steps, higher and higher, towards God's Kingdom.

- What do we need to build the Christian world?

- We should follow the classical example of the apostolic community: know the Christian teaching well so that we can see its applicability in the present day; let us reunite in a joint mission, by the light and under the direction of the Holy Spirit; let us live in the collective community of love, in God's will, let us pray, let us go to masses, let us unite with Christ, so that we will be with Him in his Kingdom" (*Ibidem*, p. 253).

³¹ Richard Wurmbrand, *Cu Dumnezeu în subterană (With God in the Underground)*, Editura "Casa Școalelor", București, 1994, p. 91-92.

³² *Sfântul închisorilor...*, p. 197.

Gafencu had managed to keep in prison, hoping that his body will be thus identified one day³³.

Although he died, Gafencu's spirit was still alive for the people who had lived by his side. His teachings were coming mouth to mouth and his fame grew, even with those who had never met him. After 1953, part of the prisoners, at Târgu Ocna were released, while others were moved to other prisons (Caransebeș especially). Thus, Gafencu's ideas spread around and some even managed to put them down. Among these writings, one was entitled "Christian Life Principles", made by Ioan Ianolide, inspired by Gafencu's ideas. The principles were the following: love, moral dignity, education, prayer, unity, obedience, freedom, ecumenical advice, community spirit, "spiritual bath", permanent sacrifice, knowledge³⁴.

In 1958, a new wave of persecutions began in Romania. After the retreat of the Soviet army, the Communist authorities from Bucharest considered that they must make it clear that they were able to keep things under control in the country and, therefore, they decided to arrest all those who could rise in opponents of the regime. For a legal motivation of these oppressions, the authorities came up with tenths of conspiratorial plots, on the basis of which hundred of prisoners were sentenced to long years of imprisonment. One of the most frequently used plots was that of the legionary conspiracy, and one of the chapters of this plot was that of the "mystical legionaries", massively directed at religious cults.

More precisely, the Security, on the basis of the information it had that many former legionaries preferred to adopt a Christian approach on life, some even becoming monks, claimed that this was, in fact, a mask, behind which the legionaries hid hostile political actions, contrary to the Communist regime, under "mystical" gown, profiting that the freedom of religions was guaranteed by the law. Gafencu's name was intensely used, he was said to have been one of leaders of this great conspiracy, although he had been dead for 6 years already. In practically no time a group of several tenths of people was formed, gathering free people and prisoners as well, the Security absurdly claiming that there had constantly been a dialogue between those in prison and those at liberty. The leader of the group of prisoners was said to be Ioan Ianolide who continued to be detained in Caransebeș, while the group of people at liberty was claimed to be led by young Constantin Voicescu, future priest, who had been at Târgu Ocna and had met Gafencu³⁵.

³³ Ioan Ianolide, *op.cit.*, p. 191.

³⁴ ACNSAS, Criminal fund, file 327, vol. 1, p. 13-14.

³⁵ ACNSAS, Informative fund, file 28130, vol. 1, p. 52-56.

In the prosecution papers, the Security claimed that Târgu Ocna sheltered a vast and intense legionary activity, developed along three lines: 1. Organising legionary support; 2. Mystical training of the legionaries and recruiting new members; 3. Political activity, meaning, discussing political events³⁶. According to the Security, legionary support consisted in three aspects: “medical assistance, supplying food, supplying barracks and food”³⁷. Thus, in the interpretation of the Security, the Christian help given to the brother in need turned into “legionary help” and the spiritual talks became forms of luring new sympathisers to the legionary cause, Security agents finding that many of those who approached Gafencu’s group at Târgu Ocna had had nothing to do with the Legionary Movement. In the investigation, an important part was played by the “Christian Life Principles” written by Ianolide, interpreted as a rewriting of some legionary principles, in spite of the defendant’s denial.³⁸

The members of the group were given severe punishments, being taken to Aiud where they were subjected to a new re-education process, with other methods, considered more “humane” than the ones applied at Pitești. Ioan Ianolide refused re-education, passing through hard time once more. On 1964, the government decided upon a general amnesty. After 23 years, Ianolide was getting out of prison, leaving Aiud for the larger prison that Romania was at the time. Considered dangerous for the Communist order, he was monitored incessantly, but he never gave up his life of real Christian, he never forgot to speak of those who died in prison. Each year, on February 18, he would go to church, confess and pray, thus keeping alive the memory of the one he considered a real saint, his fellow in misery, Valeriu Gafencu³⁹.

After a time of relative freedom and hope for the best, Romanians saw as the new Communist leader, Nicolae Ceaușescu, although he had separated spectacularly from Kremlin in 1968, was starting to impose a stricter and stricter regime in the country, which reminded in many aspects of the Stalinist period. Encouraged by Helsinki (1975) principles, by the United States leaders’ assertion of the idea of human rights and by the general trend of anticommunist dissidence from Eastern

³⁶ ACNSAS, Criminal fund, file 327, vol. 1, p. 14v.

³⁷ *Ibidem*.

³⁸ A piece of Ianolide’s statement during the inquiry: “In 1950-1953 I stayed at Târgu Ocna. Here, my only true friend was Valeriu Gafencu. The other prisoners were equal for me, irrespective of the political belonging.

From Valeriu Gafencu I know that he left politics and devoted himself to religion. He made these principles and poems. I deny that there is any resemblance between Gafencu’s principles and the legionary ones. Gafencu’s principles represent the Christian Church.” (ACNSAS, Criminal fund, file 327, vol. 7, p. 156).

³⁹ Ioan Ianolide, *op.cit.*, p. 251.

Europe, there were, in Romania too, people who criticised openly the new direction of Ceaușescu's regime. Among them, priest Gheorghe Calciu Dumitreasa⁴⁰ who had passed through the re-education of Pitești and knew Valeriu Gafencu. Encouraged by the example of his former fellow, and also by Lech Walesa's courage and by the rebellion of the Polish people of 1981⁴¹, Ioan Ianolide began to write about his experience in prison and about the Christian perspective on life. Valeriu Gafencu was at the centre of his speech. The explanation was a simple one: "We tried to describe Valeriu for we see not only a personal experience in him, but a human model, a way of salvation from spiritual death, a man who became complete through Christ. We know that he is not the only instance of sanctity in this century and we believe that this avalanche of intense and striking faith will give birth to a new Christian era"⁴².

Carefully hidden from the eyes of the Security, the manuscript was to be sent abroad so that the world would hear about the suffering of the Romanian people. There are pages in the manuscript which betray the author's torment, the difficulty in establishing contacts with people abroad, the disappointment at some of his former fellows' betrayal. Ioan Ianolide died on February 5, 1986, without knowing whether his testimony would ever become public or not. His wife managed eventually to send the manuscript abroad, but not long before the revolution of 1989 and the Occident no longer took any interest in the testimonies of the victims of Eastern Communism. Back in country, the manuscript will be published barely in

⁴⁰ *Viața părintelui Gheorghe Calciu după mărturiile sale și ale altora (Father Gheorghe Calciu's Life in His Own and Others' Testimonies)*, Editura Christiana, București, 2007.

⁴¹ In 1981 Ianolide was writing: "This Christmas I will see Lech Walesa in prison, the man, who became, in one year only, the symbol of freedom and dignity. This man is a hope for the entire humanity, however, he is in prison and no one can save him. But it is only now, in prison, that I feel his greatness, for now I can see his inner strength in rejecting the oppressor's hand with blood on it.

A whole people are again imprisoned, enslaved, humiliated. However, the Poles prove themselves worthy of their heroic history and firm faith. There is a hope for the humanity there, but, maybe, the humanity will miss this chance. There is a strong church there, with apostle priests, with martyr Christians. There is a working class there who know that justice comes from Christ only and who reject anti-Christ injustice; this Christmas, there are thousands of miners who risk their lives protesting in mines and their gesture makes me shudder. There are intellectual elites there who think about the fate of the entire world, but it seems that the world has no ears to hear yet... In Poland, truth was revealed at national level, while in other countries merely fragmentary and sporadically. People from the socialist world know that they have to choose between Târgu Ocna and Pitești, between Iacuin, Calciu, Saharov, Orlov, on the one hand, and Brejnev, Ceaușescu or Kadar, on the other hand, between light and dark, between good and evil, with no compromises, no hesitation, no delay." (Ioan Ianolide, *op.cit.*, p. 296, 298).

⁴² *Ibidem*, p. 250.

2006, with a foreword written by priest Calciu Dumitreasa. The latter writes: “If you have any doubts about salvation, sacrifice or conquest over the seen and unseen enemy through the power of faith and prayer, if you doubt Christ’s love and the efficiency of penitence, this book will convince you”⁴³.

After all, it is a book about some 15-20 year old young men, imprisoned for nothing. Some died in prison, others got out, old, having to live in a society which despised them. Apparently, these lives failed completely. In reality, these young men gave a superior meaning to suffering, through their faith in Christ.

⁴³ *Ibidem*, p. 6.