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Anton Makarenko and the Pitești Phenomenon

Abstract

Can any connection be justly postulated between re-education according to the views of Anton Makarenko (1888–1939), a Soviet and Ukrainian educational theorist, and the “re-education” of political detainees in the Pitești prison in Romania (1949–1952)? How did Makarenko come to be regarded as the “father of Pitești re-education”, as well as a “criminal Bolshevik educator”? His major work, the famous *Pedagogical Poem*, was published in 1933 in the USSR, and the first translations of Anton Makarenko’s writings into Romanian were published in 1949 and 1950, while “re-education” was in full swing, and we do not doubt either the recollections of the survivors, or the fact that Makarenko’s work was recommended for reading in several prisons. The present study compares Makarenko’s work, more precisely the particulars of “re-education” according to him, with the main elements of the truly criminal experiment at Pitești. To ascertain the truth, we follow the biography of the educator, his complex relationship with the Soviet secret services, and the main aspects of the re-education process *apud* Makarenko. Although there are certain common elements between the two

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types of “re-education”, the Soviet educator does not bear the blame for the atrocities of Pitești prison.

Keywords

Makarenko, reeducation, Pitești (prison), Romania, communism

I. A profile of the future educator

Before addressing his methods of re-education, a point needs to be clarified: how communist and Stalinist is Anton Makarenko, described by the survivors of Pitești and by Romanian researchers as “the monstrous Bolshevik pedagogue” (Bordeianu, 1995, p. 121), “the Stalinist theorist of public education” (Tismăneanu et al., 2007, p. 294) “the typical representative of Marxist-Leninist hypocrisy” (Ianolide, 2012, p. 85), etc.

Anton Makarenko was born on March 1/13, 1888, in Belopolie/Bilopillia (Ukrainian Білопілля - “White Field”), the Kharkov region of present-day Ukraine, into a working-class family. A few elements of his biography would suffice to portray him as a rebellious, uncomfortable, non-conformist character, who was very far from the model Soviet citizen. He was not even 17 when he fell passionately in love with Elisaveta Fyodorovna Grigorovich, the wife of the local parish priest, and their relationship spanned about 20 years, without them ever marrying (priests were not allowed to divorce). Elisaveta worked alongside Anton in the Gorky colony and this strange relationship, unacceptable for the rigid moral standards of those times, could be regarded as the first “weak point” of Makarenko’s biography.

The second major “issue” would be his brother, Vitaly Semyonovich Makarenko (1895–1983), an officer of the Russian Imperial Army, a participant in World War I, wounded several times and decorated with the Order of St. Vladimir IV. In 1919, Vitaly became involved in the White Guard movement in southern Russia, and in 1920 he was forced to leave his homeland. He tried to leave together with his wife, who was pregnant, but the woman was unable to board the train

and was separated from her husband. Their daughter Olympiada was raised by Anton, and Vitaly never met her.

The two brothers exchanged letters until 1928, when Anton's wife put an end to this correspondence; having relatives abroad was dangerous. Vitaly had settled in Paris, where he was struggling to make a living. In 1970 he was discovered by the German Götz Hillig, a doctor of philosophy and an expert in education and in the works of Anton Makarenko (he edited *Opuscula Makarenkiana*). G. Hillig invited Vitaly to write his memoirs and the book *My Brother Anton Semyonovich* was thus created.

Another "interesting" figure in the biography of the future educator is Galina Stakhievna Salko, his only official wife, who played a pivotal role in shaping the public perception of Makarenko after his death. During the Great Terror, Salko divorced her first husband (citing family problems), was expelled from the Party and moved into the colony run by Makarenko, whom she had met several years earlier during an inspection. Galina's maiden name was Rohal-Levytskaya and she was descended from Polish aristocrats; thus she also had "unhealthy origins" (Hillig, 2014, p. 296). When many years later, wishing to protect her son (from her first marriage), a future aircraft engineer, Galina timidly expressed her desire to rejoin the Party, her husband Makarenko tenderly but firmly warned her: "My sunshine, if you go back to that kolkhoz, I'll hang myself" (Hillig, 2014, p. 428). Strangely, several sources state that the loving wife did not attend the funeral of the great educator (citing health reasons...).

It is important to point out that, in fact, Anton Makarenko was never a member of the (communist) party, which was reproached to him, especially during his lifetime. After his death, however, he was adopted by the Soviet authorities and declared a proud "Stalinist", in complete disregard for the truth.

The opening line of his *Pedagogical Poem* (English translation *The Road to Life: an Epic of Education*) reads:

"In September 1920, the head of Gubnarodobraz¹ summons me and tells me..." (read: "orders me"). He was therefore "proposed" to take charge of the colony for young offenders, with the mention that "no

1 *Gubnarodobraz* – the gubernatorial education department.

one will accept it; whoever I turn to, fights it with his claws and teeth” (Makarenko, 1956, p. 8). In the following pages, Makarenko himself expresses his despair, wryly noting that “no one wanted to devote himself to educating the «new man» in the middle of our forest; everyone was afraid of the «thugs» and no one believed that such a feat could be pulled off” (Makarenko, 1956, p. 15). The author did not openly say that he was not particularly pleased by this proposal either, but with such vulnerabilities in his biography, he obviously could not refuse.

Although the Gorky colony headed by Makarenko enjoyed certain popularity locally, it was constantly criticised by Nadezhda Krupskaya, deputy to the People’s Commissary for Education. In a letter to his wife, Anton Makarenko asks:

Have you read the «Komsomolskaya Pravda» of 17 May? How Krupskaya attacked me? I’m beginning to get excited. She cancelled me in the eyes of the whole Union. Again they started the horrible outcry against my colony, threatened to prosecute me. I’m sick of it. Eventually, they’ll manage to lock me up just because I won’t bow down to every fool (Evtsev, 2014; Hillig, 2014, p. 190).

However, Nadezhda Krupskaya’s antipathy and constant criticism of Makarenko may have served the latter well, for after Lenin’s death (in 1924) she sided with the old Bolsheviks Lev Kamenev and Grigory Zinoviev against Stalin’s candidacy; this choice was never forgiven and had her gradually marginalised in the later years.

II. Makarenko and the secret services

In 1927, Makarenko was transferred, without the right to appeal the decision, to the “Dzerzhinsky” labour commune, which belonged to the CHEKA (while the first colony, which was closed down in 1928, had been subordinated to the People’s Commissariat for Education). Feliks Dzerzhinsky (1866–1926) was the very founder of the Russian, then Soviet, secret services – the infamous CHEKA (All-Russian Extraordinary Commission), set up in 1917, which in 1922 became the Gosudarstvennoie Politiceskoie Upravlenie – GPU (State Political

Administration/ Directorate), a branch of the НКВД. Clarifications on the context of this event are needed. Before his official dismissal from the Gorky Colony, Makarenko was called to account during a Party meeting. This moment is described at length in the *Pedagogical Poem* and is one of the reasons why originally no publisher was willing to publish his book. “I had to explain to the scholars, educators and wise men of pedagogy what my pedagogical creed consisted of, and which principles I professed. There was no lack of pretexts for asking me to give such account” (Makarenko, 1956, pp. 637–638). Grave charges were brought against the educator during the meeting, which at the time was very serious. Criticism against him was harsh, Makarenko’s arguments – were useless, even the room’s silence was reproachful, and the sentence merciless: “The system of education he proposes is not a Soviet system” (Makarenko, 1956, p. 640).

Also: “There were many friends of mine in the assembly, but they kept silent. There was also a group of Chekists. They listened carefully to the debates, wrote something in their notebooks and left without waiting for the sentence to be pronounced” (Ibid.).

Thus there is evidence that the Chekists watched him closely and knew all of Makarenko’s “innovations” in detail. They certainly realised the importance of his achievements and that is why they invited him to run a new colony instead of sending him to the Gulag, as happened to many others who had fewer “sins” than our educator.

In 1932, Anton Semyonovich was removed from his position as head of the Dzerzhinsky Colony, and demoted to the somewhat honorary position as deputy supervisor of the education (pedagogical) department; on this occasion, he also had his first heart attack (a very serious second attack followed in 1935, another in July 1938, days before his final transfer to Moscow) (Hillig, 2014, pp. 380–382). At one point, the Chekists came up with proposals regarding the working hours in the colony, which Makarenko rejected, probably as tactfully as possible, but he made it clear, and also wrote in his poem, that he was fashioning people, not cameras (an allusion to the camera factory where underage offenders worked).

Early on, criticism stated that “one of the shortcomings of the colony is the absence of Komsomol and communist organisations” (*Komunist* newspaper, September 1925, *apud* Hillig, 2014, p. 422).

The Gorky period is referred to as the “Partyless Pedagogical Province” by his best biographer, G. Hillig, in his study *Makarenko and Power*, with the remark:

In the context of the non-partisan character of the Gorky colony, it is necessary to emphasize the deliberate unwillingness of the person in charge to accept any political organization in his institution, be it a Komsomol body or a detachment of pioneers. He formally based this prerequisite on his desire to preserve the integrity of the juvenile team. Thus, in one of the questionnaires from early 1923, the educator wrote: «The colony has such a tight-knit community that there is no need to organize other special social forms» (Hillig, 2014, p. 422).

When, at the insistence of higher bodies, a political activist arrived in the first colony, they could not get along well and Makarenko was dismissed shortly afterwards. Four years later, the same happened in the Dzerzhinsky commune, where the GPU/НКВД of the Ukrainian SSR dispatched the Chekist R.O. Barbarov to take charge of the political activities, forcing Makarenko – “a man without a party affiliation and also not a GPU member”, as he would later be characterised – to leave in search of new employment (Hillig, 2014, p. 422).

On July 1, 1935, he was transferred to Kiev, to the central office of the НКВД of the Ukrainian SSR, as assistant director of the Department of Labour Colonies.

The Pitești Phenomenon is said to have been initiated by the Soviet secret services, which actually coordinated the entire process of communization (and Sovietization) of Romania and the Eastern Bloc after World War II. Writing about this period, historian Mircea Stănescu (2021, p. 20) stated that Makarenko “became, from an obscure pedagogue, the deputy director of the Gulag in Soviet Ukraine”. This is one of the most unfair statements regarding him. Admittedly, the НКВД did also administer the Gulag, but Makarenko worked as an assistant to the director of the department for the ОТК – *Otdel trudovykh kolonii* (Department/Directorate of Labour Colonies).

While this might be regarded as a promotion, it was a tragedy for Makarenko. As he himself puts it, he had no choice and his departure

was not voluntary, but indeed it was a moment that deeply hurt him (he had another heart attack), and he always remembered it as a dramatic event:

You understand that it was one of the most tragic moments of my life. I had received a telegram to report immediately to Kiev, where I had been appointed. A surprise telegram. I was working for the НКВД, I was to leave on the first train. I got the telegram in the morning, the train was leaving at five. I had to say my goodbyes as soon as possible. I had been working with this staff for 16 years. The more emotional ones were moved to tears. I was unable to speak, too (Makarenko, 1960, p. 205).

The question that naturally arises is: how did Makarenko end up working for the НКВД? In brief: in 1926, probably during inspections, Makarenko met Natalia Balitskaya, fell in love with her and even intended to marry her (he would meet G. Salko a little later). Natalia was the sister of the head of the Ukrainian НКВД, Vsevolod Apollonovich Balitsky (1892–1937). He took this position in 1934, and in 1935, when Ukraine's capital moved from Kharkov to Kiev, a large team of specialists from Kharkov, including our educator, was brought to Kiev in order to join the НКВД (Hillig, 2014, pp. 295–296). Even though the secret services were already aware of his work history, Natalia's warm and enthusiastic recommendations propelled Anton Makarenko, despite all his vulnerabilities which he did not attempt to hide when presenting his biography.

His new job didn't suit him. Among his notes we find the reason for his dissatisfaction: "Reports, reviews, summaries, presentations. They are handwritten, typewritten, proofread, typewritten again many times and then abandoned because nobody needs them. This drives one crazy..." (Hillig, 2014, p. 299). In addition to the paperwork, he also inspected colonies around the country, but even this failed to bring him any satisfaction.

Makarenko arrived in Kiev at a very troubled time. He had hardly managed to settle in, when the first arrests began among his own department employees. On 31 July 1936, his immediate senior, Lev Solomonovich Ahmatov (Ahmanitsky), a legal expert, was arrested. During interrogation, he pointed to Makarenko as an accomplice

in “Trotskyist activities”. V.A. Balitsky himself, the NKVD People’s Commissary, intervened and personally ordered Makarenko’s name to be removed from the protocol, thus saving him from imminent arrest. With the help of Gorky and then Gorky’s secretary², Makarenko was quickly transferred to Moscow... (Hillig, 2014, pp. 133, 289, 355).

During this period, Gorky, who had always supported and helped Makarenko, died on June 18, 1936; on March 8, 1937, L.S. Ahmatov was shot; in July, V.A. Balitsky was arrested and on 27 November 1937 he was executed, and many other officials were arrested and killed...

In the midst of the Trotskyist trials, when the fight against the “enemies of the people” was fiercer than ever, Makarenko attended a festive meeting in the Dzerzhinsky commune (where he no longer worked). At this meeting, he had the unfortunate idea to declare in his solemn speech: “We all work under the leadership of the Party and Comrade Stalin, and if Comrade Stalin makes even a thousand mistakes, and one, whose name I do not wish to mention, leads us on the right path, then we must still follow Comrade Stalin.” (*Apud* Hillig, 2014, p. 364). By alluding to Trotsky, who had fallen into disgrace, but also by pointing to the fact that Stalin could be wrong, Makarenko added a few more tabs to his already thick dossier, which was not forgiven and never forgotten. This compounded the troubles he already had.

Many scholars have interpreted Makarenko’s departure for Moscow as an escape. There are testimonies that he received a phone call in the middle of the night from Vladimir Zatonsky, the Minister of Education, who told him, “Run, run away immediately!” (Hillig, 2014, p. 386). There were also many whistleblowers. However, the NKVD was hard to flee from. Several circumstances, some difficult to explain, may have aided his temporary evasion. Probably, no one had seen him as too dangerous an enemy. Officially, he died of a heart attack on April 1, 1939, at the age of 51, on a train that stopped at Golitsyno, a town not far from Moscow; he was on his way to a film studio and had a screenplay with him. The Militia officer thought he was drunk. Three months later, Margarita Barskaya

2 P.P. Kryuchkov (1889–1938), jurist, Gorky’s personal secretary and collaborator of GPU/NKVD, close to G.G. Yagoda.

(1903–1939), co-writer of the script for the film *Flags on the Battlements* (Eng. trans. *Learning to Live*), whom Makarenko was probably going to meet, (officially) committed suicide.

III. How original were Makarenko's methods?

When asked about his education methods, Makarenko was evasive and did not offer any categorical statements. Here are such instances of hesitation, found in his *Complete Works*:

No pedagogical method, not even the mildest one, nor that which is generally called remonstrance, or explanation, conversation, the shaping of society, can always be counted as absolutely useful (Makarenko, 1960, p. 212);

I have acquired certain convictions, I have arrived at these convictions not without hard thinking and not at once, but by going through several periods of rather tormenting doubts and errors... (Id., p. 67);

“Please do not take my words as a prescription, norm or definitive conclusion” (Id., p. 215).

In Makarenko's words (1960, p. 33, 90):

[The child] must be cheerful, confident, disciplined, able to fight and to build, eager to live and love life. The child must be happy. And be happy today, not only in the future, but right now, at present, day by day.

Temperance, respect for women, for children, for the elderly, for oneself, the whole theory of our conduct, whether it concerns society as a whole or a particular group, can be taught to our pupils in an extremely convincing and thorough form.

One of the central elements of Makarenko's method was the collective and the postulate of its important, even essential role in reeducation. However, his paternity of this idea has been questioned by scholars, since at the time there were hundreds of such colonies, all operating according to similar principles, some enjoying much

better coverage than Makarenko's. For instance: the Bolshevskaya commune, run by M. S. Pogrebinsky; "F.M. Dostoevsky" school-commune, run by V.N. Soroka-Rosinky; the "Red Dawn" school-commune, run by I. V. Ionina; the First Experimental Station (Pervaia Opytnaia Stantsiia) of People's Commissariat for Education, run by S. T. Shatski; Lepeshinsky experimental school in Moscow, run by M. M. Pistrak; the "School of Life", run by N. I. Popova, etc. In the 1920s, in the aftermath of the First World War and two revolutions, Russia had more than 7 million homeless children. Most of them could only survive on theft. Those children caught stealing were often beaten to death, and their tragedy was regarded as the "price to pay for the revolution". Eventually, CHEKA tackled the problem of homeless children. F. E. Dzerzhinsky, also director of the CHEKA, is considered to be the initiator of labour communes for underage offenders. On 18 August 1924, order no 185 of the administrative and organizational department of OGPU was issued, under the signature of G. G. Yagoda, deputy head (vice president) of OGPU. When the Great Terror reached the members of the NKVD, Yagoda was arrested in 1937 and executed in 1938, and the labour camps were abolished, with their staff usually arrested or even sentenced to death. Whereas films had been made and books have been written about these colonies, Makarenko's work only became known with the publication of his *Pedagogical Poem*. On the other hand, the Ukrainian educator was closely acquainted with the work of similar colonies, some of which he visited with the children (Hillig, 2001).

In order to restore the historical truth, M. V. Boguslavsky advises us "to definitively abandon the persistent myth of Makarenko's uniqueness and, even more so, that of his supremacy in Soviet pedagogy of this period", stating:

Only A. S. Makarenko managed to emerge «clean-faced» [be exonerated] from the repressions of the late 1930s. Although we now know very well that the danger of arrest always loomed over him, and an arrest warrant was actually issued, Anton Semyonovich died a free man, as a respected person and as a decorated writer³. His fellow writers were

3 Note that in 1928 Makarenko was awarded the "Red Flag" Order of Labour.

much less fortunate. Those few of them who survived the repressions of the 1930s ended their professional and personal journey in complete oblivion and disgrace (Boguslavski, 2009, pp. 54–66).

Certainly, both work and community were essential to the functioning of the colonies. It may be assumed that, as these were subordinate to the КГБ-НКВД, the secret services found a source of inspiration on re-education in all colonies, not just the “Gorky Colony” in an obscure Ukrainian forest.

In this context, we should also mention the role of Makarenko’s younger brother Vitaly, who directly contributed to the implementation of some elements in Makarenko’s pedagogy. From 1917 to 1919, he was assistant to his brother (Anton), who was at that time director of the railway school in Kriukov, and at the same time (also Vitaly) was a member of the amateur actors’ troupe of the Corso Theatre in their small town.

V. S. Makarenko, a military school graduate and demobilized officer of the Tsarist army, introduced – at first against the wishes of his brother, who was a convinced antimilitarist –, paramilitary elements in the teaching of physical education and in extracurricular activities, such as military training exercises, or marching with the flag to the sounds of a brass band (Makarenko, 1985). Later, Anton took up these elements, which would become very important in the successful organisation of the colonies, although his penchant for discipline is also attributed by some scholars to his father’s severity, not just to the closeness between the brothers (Rakovitch, 2014).

Anton Makarenko (1960, p. 190) was sometimes even called “colonel” by disgruntled superiors, and he felt the need to clarify: “There are still people today who think I was a colonel. Not only was I not a colonel, but I never served in the military.”

This “militarization” was reproached to him from his early years of activity. The educator found it necessary to explain what he intended to achieve by this method and even to cite his friend, the writer Maxim Gorky, in his favour:

I’m extremely glad that all our collective discoveries enjoyed Aleksey Maksimovich’s full approval, including the famous “militarization”, for

which some critics still bite into me, and in which Aleksey Maksimovich was able to see in only two days what needed to be seen: a little game, an aesthetic addition to a life of labour, to a life that was nevertheless hard and rather impoverished (Makarenko, 1960, p. 62).

He also added to the point:

There must be an aesthetic side to everyday military elements: timing, precision, by no means mere marching. [...] On the matter of the uniform I am ready to go even further. I believe that children should be dressed so nicely that they are admired. In past centuries, it was the army that dressed up. It was the pomp of the privileged classes. [...] To a certain extent I persevered in this direction, but I was hindered. We had gold and silver badges, embroidered caps, neatly pressed white collars, etc. A well-dressed group is halfway won over (Makarenko, 1960, p. 86).

However, he could not give credit to his brother Vitaly, a White Guard member and emigrant: “Where this tradition came from, I have no idea” (Makarenko, 1960, p. 85).

It was also Vitaly who proposed to create a drama class in schools, a tradition taken up by Anton enthusiastically in his future colonies, where children had their own drama clubs. The chapter on theatre in the *Pedagogical Poem* (entitled “Our Theatre”) sheds better light than any educational theory on the colonists’ life. Let us read a few excerpts:

Almost all our spare time was devoted to the theatre.

In the new colony we got possession of a real theatre. It would be difficult to describe the rapture we experienced on having the mill shed placed entirely at our disposal.

Our theatre could have seated up to six hundred persons – as many as the spectators from several villages. [...] During the winter season we produced about forty plays, but we never went in for the usual light entertainment found in clubs, offering only full-length, serious plays in four and five acts, mostly taken from the repertoire of the theatres in the capital. This may have been the utmost impertinence, but it was certainly not hack work.

By our third performance, the fame of our theatre had spread far beyond the boundaries of Goncharovka. Villagers from Pirogovka, Grabilovka, Babichevka, Gontsy, Vatsy, Storozhevoye, the dwellers in the Volovy, Chumatsky, Ozersky farmsteads came to see us; workers from the suburbs of the city, railway workers from the station and from the engine workshops; and soon the town dwellers also began to arrive: schoolteachers, people from the Department of Public Education, soldiers, Soviet activists, people from the cooperative administration and supply workers, or just boys and girls, friends of our own boys and girls, and friends of their friends (Makarenko, 1956, pp. 268–269).

In a paper on the educator, entitled “Key Pedagogic Thinkers: Anton Makarenko” (2014), historian Terje Halvorsen dwells on the central elements of Makarenko’s pedagogy: the role of the adult in child’s education (“Grown-ups as guides”); the collective and the individual; model learning (“He describes how the elder colonists made a decisive impact on the younger ones. To realize this potential he had to consider thoroughly how to compose the detachments”); the care and compassion that need to be offered to the child by those around; polytechnicalism (“Makarenko is a prominent exponent for polytechnicalism, i.e. a tradition in pedagogy and social science where the need to provide humans with some kind of professional competence is emphasized. For the individual qualifications imply access to paid work, which in turn brings self-confidence and social integration”); architecture psychology (“a research field dealing with how humans are affected by physical environments”); planning of activities: music, drama, literature, sports, travelling, and others, not related to any particular political regime but to pedagogical science. The politicized approach, mainly with reference to communism, proposed by Romanian scholars, is not unjustified, but Makarenko is an interesting personality for specialists in several fields, in a broader context, for times and places outside and beyond the communist regime in which the author lived.

IV. Makarenko and the Pitești prison

All the above would appear to indicate no connection between the “Pitești phenomenon” and Anton Makarenko’s pedagogy. In an effort to disprove such an association, Arleen Ionescu notes (2022, p. 3):

Țurcanu never mentioned Makarenko. He did quote Lenin’s *Complete Works*, which he hid in April 1949 during a search (ACNSAS, Fond Penal/Criminal Cases, File 001114, vol. 6: 238). Moreover, Țurcanu had been in prison since 1948, and the book (*The Pedagogical Poem*) was translated into Romanian only in 1949, when the Pitești experiment had already begun: the connection is far-fetched.

We find it less relevant whether or not Eugen Țurcanu, the leader of the Pitești torturers, did read pedagogical or other texts. He certainly received precise orders, which he carried out, and reading Makarenko would not have helped him. However, there is abundant evidence that Makarenko’s writings were known in several prisons, not just Pitești.

For instance:

At Târgșor prison, the *Pedagogical Poem* was read out, and also too, on the third floor, a “school of sorts” was organized, where conferences were held on several topics – political economy... etc. but also on Makarenko’s pedagogy (Stănescu, 2010 b, p. 27; Mureșan, 2007, p. 31).

Makarenko was also discussed in Gherla prison. At Târgu-Ocna Penitentiary “pedagogical articles by Makarenko” were on display (Stănescu, 2010 b, p. 221; 2012, p. 38). “Probably to avoid being accused of not undertaking any activity, Pătrășcanu and Badale exhibited pedagogical articles by Makarenko in room 2 (ground floor), which were also read out at Pitești, when there were prisoners on the same side of the barricade in the room” (Mureșan, 2007, p. 62). In Suceava prison, prisoners were provided with several books, including Makarenko’s pedagogical works. The Danube-Black Sea Canal detainees read *Flags on the Battlements*, which “made me realize in horror that the origins of Pitești phenomenon lie in Soviet «pedagogy»”, stated one of the former prisoners (Mureșan, 2007, p. 31; Stănescu, 2012, pp. 56, 190).

Researchers of the phenomenon go further than the witnesses in their accusations, positing an essential role in re-education for the pedagogical theory promoted by Anton Makarenko (Cesearanu, 2018, p. 190), which served as a “model of re-education” (Cioroianu, 2007, pp. 315–318), “according to the principles highlighted by Anton S. Makarenko in his seminal work, the famous *Pedagogical Poem*: applying torture constantly, without allowing individuals any time to recover” (Petrescu, 2010, pp. 507–508). Other scholars also accuse him of violence (Stănescu, 2010 a, p. 28), but he was also blamed for it during his lifetime by fellow educators and others. How well-grounded is this accusation?

Let us go back to 1920, when A. Makarenko was given the directorship of a delinquents’ colony not yet named “Gorky”. The place where it was to be set up was on the edge of a pine forest, in a dilapidated building without doors and windows, a ruin that sorely needed repair. The locals had already looted the old building of everything that could be used, as described in the chapter on this period entitled: “The inglorious beginnings of the Gorky colony”. The famous and oft-quoted scene of violence occurs in the following particular context:

The first colonists (six in number), were not even underage, actually. Four of them were 18 years old and had been charged with armed burglary, and the other two appeared younger and were only charged with theft (Makarenko, 1956, p. 14). In fact, the colonists had declared younger ages in order to avoid jail, given that in a colony for juvenile delinquents they had a milder regime and, most importantly, were not placed behind bars (1956, pp. 16–17). The “children” went around town whenever they felt like it, they went out at night if they wanted to, and soon one of them, Bendiuk, was seized by the judicial police and charged with murder and robbery. So these were actual lawbreakers (young, tall, strong, brawny men), for whose education (re-education) his previous experience as a pedagogue was useless, a very worried Makarenko noted. However, the educator still hoped for some miraculous solution and, in search of it, read books on pedagogy day in, day out, in search of a method enabling him to manage his “juveniles”. Of course, he could not find the answer in books and was then accused of repudiating the

classics of pedagogy. Apart from nocturnal escapades and walks, the “young bandits” did not want to do anything and refused any task, expecting the educators to clean up, chop the firewood (it was winter), shovel the snow to clear the road, fetch water, cook for them and serve them as in a restaurant. They would not cooperate, they didn’t care about anything, and they simply mocked the poor team of desperate educators who didn’t know what to do or how to behave. This would happen daily.

Here is the all-important, and widely criticized moment:

One day, inmate Zadorov was asked to chop wood and replied cheekily to Makarenko using the informal rather than the formal “you”: “Do it yourself!” Enraged, Makarenko could not help slapping the boy, who was caught on the wrong foot, lost his balance and fell. He slapped the boy a second and third time, then seeing him terribly frightened, he apologized in a low voice. The others were watching the incident, and Makarenko, again enraged, shouted at them, “Either go get some wood or get the hell out of the colony!” (Makarenko, 1956, pp. 18–19). They considered it for a moment, then approached Makarenko and said, “We’re not such bad chaps. Everything will be all right. We understand...” (1956, p. 20) Clearly, violence was the only idiom that worked.

That Zadorov was actually a strapping, strong man, not afraid of anything, not so much intimidated by the blows as surprised and impressed by the courage of Makarenko (a short, frail man) to stand up to him, by his indignation, “his all-too-human outburst” (1956, p. 22). And the “children” understood that the educator was taking things seriously, and he had reached his limit: either they accepted to do as he asked, or they had to leave the colony. They had no choice. They understood that all these unfortunate teachers were working for them, living there in the forest, on the outskirts of the civilized world, and what was asked of them was not impossible, so they decided to behave and do their share with chores, in other words to cooperate. Later, when dozens of other, much younger offenders began to arrive, these first members of the colony became the educators’ right-hand men.

The book’s conclusions: “The incident with Zadorov proved to be a turning point in discipline”; “It should not be thought that

I believed, even for a moment, that I had discovered a sovereign disciplinary method in the use of physical force” (Makarenko, 1956, pp. 21, 22).

However much he later criticized this scene of violence, however harshly he criticized his own behavior in later writings, his amends did not matter. The method must have been carefully recorded by the watchful eye of the GPU (political police) agents, then the NKVD. But the connection between the extreme violence of Pitești prison and this scene is still far-fetched, although it cannot be ruled out as inspiration for the “foolproof procedure” and for the use of violence as an element of surprise. Anyway, given the extensive Gulag network that existed in the USSR, presenting Makarenko as a proponent of violence is still unfair.

I was incredibly surprised when I was overwhelmed with accusations that I recommended beating. That is not my point in the *Pedagogical Poem*. The incident was regrettable, not because I had come to this desperate act, but because the solution was not found by me, but by Zadorov, the boy I had struck... Not everyone is lucky enough to meet a man whom he hits, and who then lends him a hand and says: I will help you; and does help him (Makarenko, 1960, p. 225).

Also about that incident, A. Makarenko added: “this demonstrated, first of all, my poor training as an educator, my poor endowment with pedagogical technique and my deplorable state, my desperation”; “One can punish, but he who punishes is a bad teacher. Good is the teacher who does not punish!” (1960, pp. 100–101, 108.) To conclude firmly and clearly:

I am against physical punishment. I was against it before. In general, I cannot accept physical punishment as a method. I have never known a family in which physical punishment has brought any benefit;

A child should not be scolded, humiliated or reprimanded for poor work. [...] Even more so, the child should not be punished for work badly done or work not done (Makarenko, 1960, pp. 263, 321).

The harshest and most unfair accusations against Makarenko come from Mircea Stănescu, the first Romanian scholar to investigate the source texts, i.e. Makarenko's pedagogical work, and comment on it. Holder of a PhD awarded by the University of Bucharest (1999) with a thesis on the re-education at Pitești prison, author of the trilogy *Reeducarea în România comunistă (Reeducation in Communist Romania)* (2010–2012) and of the book *The Reeducation Trials in Communist Romania, 1952–1960 – Procesele reeducării în România comunistă* (2011), as well as of other volumes (of single authorship or co-authored), Stănescu has written a substantial chapter on the subject: “Nașterea noii metode: Makarenko (The emergence of the new method: Makarenko)”, included in the first volume of his trilogy. In this study, Makarenko never enjoys the thorough and unbiased examination that would have lent more credibility and reliability to the text. First of all, the “Makarenko Method” has been addressed, over the years, by dozens or even hundreds of researchers around the world, there are studies in English, German, French, not to mention the existing research in Russian and Ukrainian (but these two languages are less accessible and less familiar to Romanian researchers)! However, no name, no book or article relevant to the topic under discussion is mentioned, even in passing, by Stănescu (Alain Besançon is referenced in the notes, not in connection to Makarenko, but to the “wooden language” of the time). This is surprising since the book is the result of doctoral research, whereby authors tend to be overzealous in bibliographical matters.

Secondly, when one thinks Makarenko, one thinks *The Pedagogical Poem*. This book is the educator's most important testimony. Here one can learn about his “method”, here one can see how close it was to the Pitești phenomenon, herein lies the unravelling of the “mystery”. Although the book has been reprinted several times in Romanian translation, Mircea Stănescu never quotes from it, confining himself to indirect references and explanations provided by Makarenko, citing only the second edition of the *Selected Pedagogical Works*. These pedagogical works, lectures, articles and speeches were published – almost all of them for the first time – after Makarenko's death, and it can no longer be ascertained how much of the text is strictly Makarenko's opinion. Moreover, some editions state that

several texts were written in collaboration (with his wife Galina Salko, who assumed the role of a censor).

In the following, we will only dwell on one process, called “explosion”, which has been the focus of many studies and which is related to the “re-education” at Pitești prison. Stănescu insists on this method – employed and explained at length by Makarenko – but he comes up with his own interpretation, which is consistent with the violence applied at Pitești, claiming that Makarenko does not provide details on this “explosion”. Moreover, he quotes some excerpts from a study by Makarenko, which explicitly states: “I have given above an example of the method I call the **explosion method**.” (Makarenko, 1960, p. 219) [emphasis mine – L.C.].

Stănescu’s commentary:

“Shock”, “avalanche” – these terms ought to alert the reader and are deeply disturbing. What could cause this catastrophe of the Self? **The author does not provide any details about the nature of this disturbance**, of the cataclysm described above. For this reason, but also because it is not easy to believe that such a thing is possible, it is hard to accept that the author is talking about actual facts. Makarenko, however, does not write literary essays as he used to do in his youth. He is talking about terrible things. **Mental pressure and psychological torture, beatings, collective hatred** – all taken to extremes – are the means of this truly revolutionary method (Stănescu, 2010a, p. 28) [emphasis mine – L.C.].

Indeed, “mental pressure and torture, beatings, collective hatred – all taken to extremes” did exist at Pitești prison, but they are completely absent in the writings of Makarenko.

What, then, did Makarenko pursue by this method, which he describes at length in the section “Some Conclusions of My Pedagogical Experience” in the volume *Selected Pedagogical Works*, which includes a long essay (1960, pp. 215–235) neutrally entitled “On My Experience”? In brief, the educator aimed to persuade vagrant, homeless children to join the colonies willingly: “This is the method I used to make the strongest impression on newcomers. Of course, this method had many aspects; it also consisted of preparing the

accommodation, the dormitory, the place where they would work, the classroom, preparing the outward appearance: flowers, mirrors” (1960, p. 217).

Children were first gathered from railway stations, from trains passing through Kharkov at night, from rooftops, from public toilets, from under train wagons. “Communards were good at gathering these «passengers». I would have never been able to find them” (Makarenko, 1960, p. 217).

Our communards would address the children, saying: “Dear comrades, our commune has great difficulties for lack of labour force. We are building a new factory, we have come to you to ask that you lend us a hand.” [...]

And the next day, at noon, the whole commune with the brass band – we had a big band, a very good one with 60 trumpets – carrying flags, in parade attire with impeccable white collars with monograms, lined up in a row, near the station. When the detachment of homeless children appeared in the square before the railway station, seeking to cover their nakedness with the hems of their overcoats they were wearing one on top of another, taking small steps with bare feet, they suddenly heard the music resounding and found themselves facing the whole front aligned before them. We greeted them in the sounds of the orchestra, as we would greet our dearest companions (Makarenko, 1960, p. 218).

And so they all solemnly set out for the commune, stirring the admiration of emotional passers-by. Then the newcomers had their hair cut, were washed and dressed as neatly as the communards, in suits with white collars. Their old clothes were doused with gasoline and burned in a solemn setting.

An even more telling instance of this method at work is found at the final part of the *Pedagogical Poem*, which describes it in over 200 pages; it is not yet termed an ‘explosion’, but contains all the elements later theorised (the term itself would be used in his subsequent pedagogical essays). This is when the settlers moved to Kuryazh, a former monastery near Kharkov, founded in 1663 and closed after 1917. In 1923, a children’s colony was set up there, which after a while fell into disrepair, “the forty educators and four hundred boarders

appearing to the listeners as sinister jokes on humanity, the product of the sick imagination of some miserable, mean-spirited misanthrope, some disgusting scoundrel, happy to be able to sully the notion of humanity” (Makarenko, 1956, p. 394). It was a veritable “nest of bandits right next to the capital” (Kharkov was then the capital of Soviet Ukraine), a “dreadful place” (Ib., 1956, p. 395), characterized by filth, degradation, despair, thievery, home of all evils.

Initially, Makarenko refused to move there: “we cannot endanger the Gorky colony...” (1956, p. 401), “the move will turn into slaughter” (1956, p. 410), “What could have attracted us to Kuryazh? In the name of whose values were we to leave our life which flowers and the Kolomak⁴ embellished, our parqueted floors, our restored estate?” (1956, p. 402). They all reckoned that these wild vagabonds outnumbered them 280 to only 120, that most of them were thieves with violent tempers, that many were grown ups and only a few were young children.

The Gorky colonists nevertheless decided to move to Kuryazh and began preparations.

Preparing for battle against the Kuryazh, I was banking on a single, lightning-fast strike; the Kuryazhites were to be taken by surprise. Any procrastination, any hope in some evolution, any reliance on a «gradual penetration» would have turned our whole operation into a dubious enterprise. We knew well that not only our forms, traditions and tone would have penetrated «gradually», but also the traditions of Kuryazh anarchy. The Kharkiv sages, who insisted on gradual penetration, were actually taking long outdated views: that the good guys would have a good hold on the bad guys (Makarenko, 1956, p. 418).

Man cannot live in the world if he sees nothing ahead him that gives him joy. The real stimulus of man’s life is the joy of tomorrow. In pedagogical technique, this joy of tomorrow appears as one of the most important goals of work. First you have to organise the joy itself, bring it to life and make it a reality. Second, you must stubbornly transform the simpler aspects of joy into more complex and more meaningful

4 Kolomak was a small river that ran through the territory of the colony.

ones. An interesting line joins these points: from the primitive satisfaction given by a piece of gingerbread, to a deep sense of duty (Ib., 1956, pp. 572–573).

Eventually, the children of Kuryazh were impressed with the songs, the clean clothes, the discipline of the colonists and the experiment was considered successful. However, following this resounding success, Makarenko's methods were declared anti-Soviet and he was dismissed from office. At this point, "friends" from the GPU/NKVD appeared with a proposal to have him work in their colony (Dzerzhinsky).

I have described this moment at length, because herein lies the most important similarity to the "re-education" at Pitești prison, namely the idea that re-education occurs between two groups (children or inmates), one already re-educated and the other to be re-educated by the former. At Pitești, where the detainees were mostly young students accused of anti-communist activities (real or imagined), the process symbolically called "re-education" consisted of the torture of the inmates by other inmates, who were all sharing the same "cell". The group of torturers, inmates brought from other prisons, initially appeared very friendly, trying to gain the trust of their colleagues, learn their secrets, etc. A few days later, their behaviour changed abruptly and, from former fellow sufferers, they suddenly turned into executioners, ferociously beating their colleagues. Both the element of surprise and the shock can be found in Makarenko's writings, but not the idea of violence, of course. Makarenko's "explosion" was taken up and used against the "enemies of the people", in a distorted, perverted, altered form, but Anton Makarenko is not to blame for this misuse of his pedagogical ideas and methods with criminal purposes.

Certain elements – such as re-education as a pedagogy of the collective, violence as an element of surprise (not just any violence), the interaction between two groups (one of re-educated people shocking the other, uneducated ones) and the role of the collective, the shock ("explosion" or surprise, lightning-fast action) – exist in both Makarenko and Pitești. However, the Pitești prison also featured other crucial elements, which are not found with

Makarenko at all: unceasing violence, torture, humiliations of all kinds, “external delation (unmasking)”, i.e. “confessing to one’s entire activity and divulging those who acted, spoke and thought against the communist regime. In this way, the political detainee became a collaborator of the Securitate (secret police) and a potential witness in other trials” (Stănescu et al., 2008, p. 28), as well as “internal unmasking”, which aimed “to convince the victim that he was a scoundrel, a villain, hiding his wickedness under the mask of religion, honesty, love of country...” (Stănescu et al., 2008, p. 29) etc.

I did not set out to be “devil’s advocate” by presenting evidence of Anton Makarenko’s innocence. Thousands of pages have been written on this subject and studies, polemic exchanges, as well as original documents from the educator’s archives are still being published. I simply endorse research into the sources, unbiased and fair interpretation, *sine ira et studio*. In the process, I discovered a formidable book, the *Pedagogical Poem*, undeservedly ignored by Romanian researchers, from which much can still be learned today. The “Makarenko case” in Romanian historiography demonstrates how easily we can make mistakes when we ignore the voice of the “accused”, when we accept someone’s assertions without consulting the original source. We cannot identify with certainty the reasons for this injustice: shallowness, mediocrity, indifference, ill will, but sooner or later, hopefully the historians and experts will accept a different image of Anton Makarenko: a complex, nuanced one, free of prejudices and ungrounded labelling.

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