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# “... as the young girl told them so”: Women and Old Calendarism in Interwar Romania<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This article explores the role of women and young girls in Old Calendarist communities in Romania and presents new sources relating to neglected history of the practice of incarceration in Orthodox monasteries in the region. The community developed into a spiritual mass movement that soon became the target of the secret police. Women played an important role within these communities in terms of membership but also in relation to the preservation of Old Calendarist ideas. Explored through the prism of the former secret police archival documents, these women were deemed dangerous and were accused of luring people into the Old Calendarist groups. In contrast to the extremely negative representation of these women that we find in contemporary Orthodox Church publications, police reports and popular press articles, the letters and postcards that they wrote from detention offer us an insight into the private life, personality and motivation of these women.

**Keywords:** Old Calendarism, women, women agency, gendarmerie, monastic incarceration, secret police, archives, letters.

## Introduction

Lost among the pages of a yellowed penal file, this photograph depicts four Old Calendarist nuns (Fig. 1). Dressed in standard monastic clothes, they pose for what was meant to be a personal memento. Confiscated in 1941 by the Siguranța, the Romanian secret police prior to

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Communism, from two nuns, Steliana Geangu and Măzărel Anica, who were discovered hiding in a hut in the Pralea Woods, Bacău county, the photograph was added to their penal file following their arrest. Born in 1913, Steliana was first arrested in 1935 for taking part in the violent events that happened in the village of Cucova in the same year, which resulted in the destruction of the Old Calendarist church in the village. Probably released by September 1939, the date written down on the reverse of the confiscated photograph, Steliana found shelter in a hut in the woods, together with this younger nun, Anica (Consiliul Național pentru Studierea Arhivelor Securității,<sup>2</sup> Fond Penal, P 096704, file 8). Arrested and tried for “stilist propaganda”, the two nuns were accused of posing a danger to the interests of the state. Amongst the documents that were confiscated from them we find books, personal correspondence, but also confessions of believers, written down and sent to these two nuns. In the absence of a male figure, they conducted church services by themselves in that small hut in the woods (CNSAS, P 096704, f.6). We lose track of Steliana and Anica after 1941, but we are left with many questions about their past and their fate. Who were these women? Were there others such as them? Can we tell their stories?

The history of women has only recently become an important subject for scholars and historians in Romania,<sup>3</sup> some of whom have either published works on the feminist movement or have begun to integrate questions of gender into their research and analyses of the recent past (Jinga and Soare 2011; Jinga 2015; Sircuța 2016; Bucur and Miroiu 2018). However, the issue of religious women and their involvement and importance within their churches and communities, especially in times of crisis, has scarcely been approached by researchers (Ploscariu 2017; Bucur 2011). This article explores the gender relations that existed within the Old Calendarist church during the interwar period, as revealed in the documents contained in the files of the former secret police. It focuses on the important role of women and young girls, not only in terms of membership, but also in relation to the impact they had on the spread and preservation of the Old Calendarist ideas. The Old Calendarist church, or “stilists”, named after “the old style calendar”, rejected the 1924 Church reform in which the Romanian Orthodox Church decided to adopt the Revised Julian Calendar, and went on to organize its own rules of worship and devotion. The group developed into a spiritual mass movement, mostly comprised of peasants, especially in the province of Bessarabia, today’s Republic of Moldova.

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<sup>2</sup> The National Council for the Study of the Securitate Archives, from now on referred to as CNSAS, is the authority that administrates the archives of the former communist secret police in Romania.

<sup>3</sup> Research and studies relating to women’s history began to appear in the first decade of post-communism, and they were mostly focused on so-called “exceptional women” (Bucur 2018, 52).

The primary aim of this study is to contribute to our understanding of the agency of women in traditional religious contexts in twentieth century Romania and Orthodox Eastern Europe, more broadly. Moreover, the topic of incarceration of women has been overlooked in the Romanian historiography, especially when it comes to women religious and their detention in isolated places, such as monasteries. For this reason, the present study also aims to present some important new sources and pieces of information that relate to this neglected aspect of Romanian history.

For the purposes of this article I have consulted archival documents in both the Romanian National Archives and The National Council for the Study of the Securitate Archives, the former secret police archives, and conducted interviews with the Old Calendarist nuns at “Buna Vestire” Monastery, in Călărași county.

This study brings forward the stories of Old Calendarist women, most of whom came from a peasant milieu and were the object of repression by both the state and the Orthodox Church in Romania, but whose identities were obscured by events which were considered much more significant than the ones that framed their lives. Traces of their experiences and voices, although often fragmentary, can be found in the archives. One of the principal sources of this article is a collection of letters and postcards that Old Calendarist women and nuns sent from or received in detention that I discovered in the Romanian National Archives. These archival materials have been supplemented with materials and histories gathered from members of the Old Calendarist community, most of whom are women, with whom I conducted ethnographic research.

### **The Religious, Political and Social Context**

The First World War and the unification of Romania in 1918 with its new territories caused significant difficulties for the state. Three provinces were incorporated by Romania at the end of the war, Bukovina, Bessarabia and Transylvania; out of these, Bukovina was the least ethnically Romanian, with a population mostly comprised of Ukrainians, followed by Romanians, Jews and Germans (Livezeanu 1995, 49). Having belonged to Hungary and the Habsburg Empire since the Middle Ages, Transylvania, the largest of the three provinces, developed a strong national movement. In 1918, Bessarabia was an agricultural province, with most of its rural population consisting of Romanian-speakers that claimed a Moldavian identity, while the urban spaces were dominated by Russians and Jews (Livezeanu 1995, 92; Kapaló 2017, 139). The newly formed state faced a challenging situation, with a growing population due to territorial expansion whose needs it had to satisfy, and a religious diversity

that it had never experienced before. The *Constitution of 1923* failed to provide the basis on which all religious groups would be treated equally or could worship freely; article 22 of the Constitution stated that “the Orthodox and the Greek Catholic Churches are Romanian Churches”, implying that the others which included Roman Catholics, Protestants and many other smaller churches, were not. The Romanian Orthodox Church was declared “the dominant church in the Romanian state; the Greek Catholic Church has priority over other denominations” (The 1923 Constitution of Romania).<sup>4</sup> Increasingly, the Orthodox Church began incorporating elements of national ideology, highlighting the strong connection that existed between the true Orthodox faith and Romanian history and identity (Leuştean 2009, 40), while its influence on the political scene became more and more obvious.

Initially intended to be adopted in Romania at the turn of the century, in 1900, the Gregorian Calendar, which had been used by Western countries since the 16th century, became an issue that was only raised for discussion again after the First World War. Due to the fact that the Julian Calendar was 13 days behind the Gregorian one, Romanian commerce and industry had been greatly affected. The banks, the postal service, the army, and other services were forced to shift to the Gregorian Calendar much sooner than the Church did, mainly due to the country’s territorial expansion. Transylvania and Bukovina, as former territories of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, had already adopted the Gregorian Calendar, and this posed many issues for the newly formed country. Given this situation, in March 1919 the government issued a decree which stated that April 1<sup>st</sup> 1919 would become April 14<sup>th</sup> 1919 (Diac 2012). It was in this context that the Holy Synod decided, in October 1924, after five years of delaying the process, to adopt the Revised Julian Calendar,<sup>5</sup> following a consultative synod in Constantinople in 1923. The Orthodox Churches of Constantinople, Greece, Cyprus and Poland adopted the new calendar in the course of the same year, whereas Mount Athos and many Slavic Churches rejected it (McGuckin 2011, 96). Described as a “faithless” reform by many Orthodox hierarchs (McGuckin 2011, 97), the calendar change was seen as a heresy and an attempt at ecumenism on the part of the patriarchate of Constantinople. It led to dissent movements in parts of Greece, Cyprus and Romania, which came to be known as Old Calendarism. In Romania, it mostly spread in the western part of Moldavia<sup>6</sup> and in Bessarabia, regions with strong monastic traditions (Kapaló 2017, 142), and came to be perceived as a

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<sup>4</sup> [http://www.cdep.ro/pls/legis/legis\\_pck.htm\\_act\\_text?id=1517](http://www.cdep.ro/pls/legis/legis_pck.htm_act_text?id=1517) (accessed on December 3rd 2020).

<sup>5</sup> None of the Eastern Orthodox churches fully adopted the Gregorian calendar, they reverted to the Julian calendar for things that were related to the Easter cycle (McGuckin 2011, 96).

<sup>6</sup> It had been part of Romania since the 1862 unification that took place under the rule of Alexandru Ioan Cuza.

threat to the idea of the Romanian nation state and its modernizing goals (Radu and Schmitt 2017, 6).

Similar to most countries in Central and South-Eastern Europe during the interwar period, Romania was a predominantly peasant society. The peasantry was considered by the political elite of the time as both the social backbone of the nation and the reason for its backwardness (Radu and Schmitt 2017, 1). According to the 1930 Census, 78.9% of the population lived in rural areas, with only 20.1% inhabiting urban areas. The genuine interest in peasant society that characterized the interwar period also led to the appearance of the sociological school of peasant studies led by Dimitrie Gusti. Minister of Education between 1932 and 1933 and professor of Sociology, Ethics and Politics at the University of Bucharest, Gusti developed both a political and a scholarly interest in the countryside and attempted to reform the peasantry through academic knowledge (Muşat 2011, 24). With the help of his students, one of whom was Ernest Bernea, a well-known sociologist and ethnographer of the interwar period, he organized field trips and expeditions in all provinces of Greater Romania. His research, along with that of Bernea, aimed to grasp the mentality and fears of the peasantry.

In his work, *Space, Time and Causality for the Romanian People*,<sup>7</sup> written in three volumes and containing the work he conducted between 1932 and 1966, Bernea approached the issue of the calendar and its significance for the villagers he interviewed. He concluded that the calendar reform was introduced by some and had to be endured by others (Bernea 2005, 205). In the minds of the peasants, the reform had various consequences that impacted upon nature itself,<sup>8</sup> as well as upon their families and spiritual lives,<sup>9</sup> causing ruptures and psychological suffering. Bernea's best known study on the issue of the calendar is the one he conducted in Cornova village in Bessarabia. In this study he talks about the many tensions that appeared in such a small village, the manner in which many peasants were spiritually stripped and labelled as heretics, lost, or backward-thinkers, and how the reform produced a tragedy in the hearts and souls of these people, either because they had left the old calendar, or because, unwilling to accept the reform, they had left the Church (Bernea 1932, 197).

The peasants slowly lost their faith in the local priests, accusing them of accepting and enforcing the calendar reform for money or prestige. Moreover, starting from 1926, various politicians began manipulating the peasants' feelings on the calendar issue, promising the

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<sup>7</sup> Spațiu, timp și cauzalitate la poporul român [translation by the author]

<sup>8</sup> Drought and flooding were seen as consequences of the reform, as punishments sent by God who was dissatisfied with the new order of things (Bernea 1932, 201).

<sup>9</sup> According to Bernea's work, some peasants believed that one would lose his or her status of a true Christian by following the new calendar.

return to the old calendar if elected in 1927, an electoral year. According to Bernea, the reform constituted a revolution “because accepting it brought about a radical change within people and in their attitudes towards life” (Bernea 2005, 205). This revolution materialized in the years that followed as the Old Calendarists became a real “problem” for the state and the Orthodox Church alike. Both state and Orthodox Church institutions reacted to the Old Calendarist movement with a combination of repression and compromise, and the movement, out of necessity, formed a “parallel society” that came to challenge the project of national integration and homogenization (Petruescu 2016, 63). Bloody conflicts between the Old Calendarists and the gendarmes took place in numerous villages in Moldavia and Bessarabia, such as Vânători, Brusturi, Cucova and Albinet, to name but a few. Because of this, in 1936 the authorities decided to take decisive and more violent measures against the Old Calendarist communities in order to definitively solve the issue. Church newspapers, such as *Renașterea*<sup>10</sup> (1936, 3), reported that these measures were taken in order to stop the rebels from continuing their agitations, which were dangerous for both the nation and its belief system.

From a religious point of view, Bessarabia, which had been part of the Russian Empire until 1918, presented a particular set of circumstances. The region had a strong monastic tradition with Russian Orthodoxy, as opposed to the Romanian Orthodox Church, having dominated the spiritual landscape (Baran 2014, 15). On April 30, 1905, however, the Russian Emperor Nicholas II issued an Edict of Religious Tolerance which gave legal status to religions other than the Orthodox Church. At a time when more than 70 percent of the Russian population belonged to the Russian Orthodox Church, this was seen as an outrageous measure. The Decree paved the way for legal recognition for many marginal religious groups such as Baptists, Adventists, Evangelicals, and Orthodox dissenters such as the Old Believers and it led to a greater religious diversity in the region (Kapaló 2017, 140). The strength of monasticism in Moldavia and Bessarabia, as well as the unstable social and political climate ensured the success of Old Calendarism, especially amongst the rural classes who conferred eschatological meanings to the modernizing measures of the state (Kapaló 2017, 143) out of which the calendar change was considered the most spiritually dangerous.<sup>11</sup>

### **Visionaries, con artists or true devotees?**

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<sup>10</sup> The Romanian translation of the title of the Church newspaper is Rebirth.

<sup>11</sup> Many religious groups, such as the Old Calendarists and Inochentists, that also spread in Bessarabia and Moldavia in the 1920s, promoted the idea that the End of Times was near and large scale events such as the First World War, the collapse of the Russian Empire, the rise of Bolshevism, and the calendar reform were clear signs of this (Kapaló 2017, 143).

Women, both young or old, played important roles in the Old Calendarist church from its inception and were considered by its members, according to some police reports, the recipients of divine messages that warned of an imminent apocalypse. The visible role that women played in the Old Calendarist church added to its religiously and politically destabilizing image. Women, in general, and peasant women in particular, were subject to various stereotypes and limitations in early twentieth century Romania. Apart from being deprived of full rights to education, and having roles that were mostly confined to the household area (Nechifor and Dimulescu 2018, 40), women were also portrayed as naïve and more prone to falling into the trap of charismatic religious figures and their mystical ideas (Croitoru 1936, 121). They were discouraged by their families to attend school, especially in rural areas. The 1930 Census shows that there were more illiterate women than men in all regions of the country, with the lowest percentage being recorded in Bessarabia, where only 25.1% of women were able to read and write (Sircuța 2016, 124).

Following World War I and its numerous traumas, however, women started to take over some of the roles of missing men (Nechifor and Dimulescu 2018, 35). This led to changing aspirations that were automatically shaped by their wartime experiences which, at times, proved to be empowering (Bucur and Miroiu 2018, 24). As a result of the war, the woman of the 1930s was either reduced to naivety and frailty and limited to the household arena, or depicted as strong, independent, and educated. In the latter case, however, the tendency towards emancipation was described by the press of the time as “the masculinization of women” (Nechifor and Dimulescu 2018, 35). When it came to the role of women in religion, as in other social and historical contexts, they were discouraged from speaking publicly, excluded from positions of authority or leadership, and prohibited from ordination. The press of the time started conflating the presence of women in close proximity of Old Calendarist monks or priests with promiscuity and immorality, labels that were often used in order to discredit the so called religious “sects” by both the Orthodox Church and state authorities (ANIC, Direcția Generală a Jandarmeriei, D. 48/1935).

Against this backdrop, the image we gain of Old Calendarist women in this period is both varied and contradictory. Similar to the late-medieval works of hagiography about women, which are filled with stories about their supernatural powers (Coakley 2006, 7), the first archival records concerning Old Calendarist women refer to their allegedly prophetic divine messages. Traditionally seen as the gatekeepers to various mechanisms of “sacred support” (Ghițulescu 2012, 226), as well as appointed with a natural gift of prophecy, women began to receive divine messages from God at a time when the persecution of Old Calendarists



intensified. Their messages were interpreted as validation of their faith by the Old Calendarists, and they legitimized the narrative which stated that the calendar reform was a measure that disobeyed God's will.

Two gendarmerie reports, one from 1934 (CNSAS, FD, D 15305, f.4; CNSAS, FD, D 13408/ vol.4, f.334), and another one from 1936 (Arhivele Naționale Istorice Centrale,<sup>12</sup> Ministerul Cultelor și Artelor, Dosar 125/1935, f.1) speak of two young girls who had allegedly seen God who had told them that people should return to the old calendar, as the new calendar was the wrong one. The girls began making contact with God on behalf of others and strengthened the peasants' belief that they were following the right path: "some people have rebelled against the priests and the Church and said that, from now on, they will follow the old calendar as the young girl told them so" (CNSAS, FD, D 13408/ vol.4, f.334). The phenomenon of young girl visionaries was soon ended by the interventions on the part of the gendarmes and, in exactly the same way as the case of the miracle of Maglavit (1935), the most well-known case of a peasant visionary in interwar Romania, contemporaries interpreted them as the direct response to a general socio-economic and cultural depression which led people to search for and hope for immediate miraculous intervention (Radu and Schmitt 2017, 21).

Following the violent suppression of the Old Calendarists between 1934 and 1936, which culminated with the events in Piatra Neamț, when important male leaders of the community were arrested, the popular press of the time began writing sensationalist stories in a manner that stigmatized the Old Calendarist church and its members.<sup>13</sup> The press articles especially targeted women in order to discredit members of the movement and question their morals. Glicherie Tănase, a former Orthodox monk who was defrocked by the Orthodox Church for opposing the calendar reform, became one of the most important figures of the Old Calendarist church and the target of numerous rumours. The press of the time started to portray him as a Rasputin-style figure,<sup>14</sup> and even gave him the nickname of the "Rasputin of Bessarabia" (*Universul* 1936). This comparison was not coincidental, and it mainly referred to his power of attracting large crowds of peasants, many of whom were women. Portrayed as a

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<sup>12</sup> From now on referred to as ANIC.

<sup>13</sup> Some of the newspapers that would usually cover stories about Old Calendarists, such as *Tempo* or *Universul*, were well known for their sensational reporting (Clark 2015, 147).

<sup>14</sup> This comparison with the famous Russian "holy" peasant was not isolated to Glicherie Tănase. Inochentie, the main leader of the Inochentists, was also compared to Grigory Efimovich Rasputin. For writers and journalists in Bucharest or Moscow they were part of the same group of people who were able to use the power of peasant mysticism and spirituality, especially in times of crisis or social change, in order to attract devotees (Kapaló 2017, 141).

womaniser and a conman, Glicherie was also accused of having a harem of women that were brought to him by peasants as offerings (*Tempo* 1936).

In 1936, Grigore Spiru, a well-known journalist of the period, published a propaganda brochure entitled *The Rasputin of Moldova*, in which he attacked Old Calendarist ideas (CNSAS, D 013408, Vol.1). The brochure was published with the support of the Orthodox Church and was part of a narrative that was encouraged and propagated by it. The main characters of the brochure were Glicherie Tănase and his alleged mistress and accomplice, Maria Gârleanu. While Tănase is portrayed as a charlatan who was motivated in his choice of monastic career by financial reasons, Maria Gârleanu is depicted as an adventurous, immoral woman, fascinated by monastic figures.

Maria Gârleanu was not a fictional character, but a real nun whose monastic name was Glicheria. The fact that she was carrying the female version of the name Glicherie might have generated the rumours that she was, in fact, the wife or the mistress of Glicherie Tănase. Despite the negative labels she had received on the part of the press during the interwar period, the contemporary Old Calendarist community remembers and preserves a positive image of the nun Glicheria. According to nun Varsanufia from “Valea Roşie” Monastery: “Maria Gârleanu became a nun at the fragile age of 13. She was a symbol of resistance against the oppressors and lived her life as a hermit, hiding in the woods. After that she lived the rest of her life at the Monastery and died almost ten years ago. She was a spiritual guide for all the nuns at Brădişel Monastery and nothing was done without her consent.”

Old Calendarist women were sometimes given the task of ensuring the protection of the Old Calendarist priest in the village. A gendarmerie report mentions the fact that the Old Calendarists from Albineţ were thinking of organizing an attack against the gendarmerie that should be led by women (ANIC, Inspectoratul General al Jandarmeriei, D 64/1936, f.33). An article published in *Dimineaţa*, in 1935, supports this view. It tells the news of a “Stilist rebellion in Bălţi” during which women and children ensured the protection of Ieremia Pletosul, the Old Calendarist monk (*Dimineaţa* 1935). These accounts suggest that women took on, or were invested with, a responsibility that was traditionally associated with men. Of course, interpreting these antagonistic reports is difficult in the absence of alternative sources. In the contemporary community however, a strong oral history of similar events is preserved. The nuns remember that their mothers and grandmothers told them stories of women, and sometimes children, being sent prior to the sermon to a certain location where it would take place - it sometimes could have been in the house of an Old Calendarist believer. They were in charge of carrying the priestly clothes in a bag, while the priest would follow them dressed as

a civilian. The reason for that was, according to the nuns, that “nobody really looked at women and children, they were not that important in the eyes of society.” However, they were helping the priest to go unnoticed.

The events of 1935 and 1936 still echo in the minds and memories of the contemporary Old Calendarist community. The most striking one, however, is the destruction of the wooden church in Cucova which was labelled as a rebellion by the authorities, but as a massacre by the Old Calendarists. Every member of the community either remembers or was told about the event; even though it is still unclear what caused the incident, it led to the arrest of 40 believers, the wounding of 28 people, the death of five individuals, two of whom were part of the Old Calendarist community, and the destruction of their improvised wooden church. Amongst the arrested was the priest Ioanică Dudescu, of whom I lost track after this event. One Old Calendarist believer, however, told me a story that his grandfather had told him about the priest; he claimed that Cucova was not his first encounter with the authorities, that he was caught and beaten by the gendarmes in the past, and even lost a finger during these confrontations (Fig.2).<sup>15</sup>

Apart from being defenders of their leaders, women were especially defenders of ideas and tradition. Strongly believing that the Old Calendarist church was the right one, some of these women, be they nuns or simple members, fled into the woods where they built huts and tried to hide from the authorities. They made the personal choice to lead a difficult life, hidden, and dealing with sickness and hardships. When caught by the gendarmes, in the woods, or during confrontations, these women were arrested and, most of the time, sent to detention in Orthodox monasteries. There, they were put to work and were forced to accept the new style calendar.

### **Letters and Postcards to and from detention**

In September 1936, after the “stilist rebellion” in Piatra Neamț, news stories covered the front pages of many popular newspapers of the time talking about the decision of the civic and military authorities to close down any Old Calendarist church, monastery, or house of prayer (*Dimineața*, September 1936). Gendarmes and commanding officers set out to arrest the Old Calendarist priests who had allegedly provoked the rebellion, as well as any individual who was associated with the movement. According to the Church newspaper *Renașterea*, The Holy

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<sup>15</sup> This story was told to me in November 2019, during the exhibition organized by the Hidden Galleries Project at the Museum of Art in Cluj Napoca.

Synod officially decided in October 1936 that the fate of the Old Calendarist nuns and monks was to be sent to detention at isolated sketes: <sup>16</sup>

The Holy Synod has analysed the Stolist agitations by and large and, taking into consideration the Government's measures, has decided that all agitating monks and nuns are to be sent to detention at isolated sketes where they have to repent, under strict supervision (Renașterea 1936, 3).

The events at Piatra Neamț resulted in a large number of arrests of Old Calendarist believers, and the authorities spent days and nights searching the woods, houses and any potential hiding places in search of the those who managed to run away. Archival documents in the form of letters, postcards, declarations and police reports, reveal that what happened in Neamț county in the autumn of 1936 was a milestone in the history of the Old Calendarist church, forcing some to allegedly renounce the old calendar for fear of imprisonment, while also strengthening the faith of others, in spite of the consequences. What one also learns from the same documents is that women were at the forefront of these trials. An information note from 1936 mentions nine Old Calendarist nuns who were arrested on the occasion of the Neamț rebellion and sent to detention at Barbu Monastery in Buzău County. These nine nuns were: Irina Copătaru, Ioana Stănoaie, Sevastia Stănoaie, Maria David, Alexandrina Chiriloaie, Anisia Cosmoșanu, Safta Petreanu, Ileana Pista and Paulina Vârganici. With the exception of Irina Copătaru, the documents mention all of the above nuns as being sent to detention at Vărzărești Monastery.

The practice of incarcerating individuals in Orthodox monasteries was common across Orthodox Eastern Europe. In the case of the Imperial Russia, for example, people would be placed in monasteries for a variety of reasons, such as religious disobedience, heresy, apostasy, social disturbance, mental illness or political crimes. The scope was not intended to be punitive, but reformative, as the sentence would involve living under the monastic rule, attending church services and being involved in various works within the monastery (Demoskoff 2014, 43). In Romania, Orthodox monasteries had played the role of prisons since medieval times until the appearance of modern penitentiaries in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and sometimes even after. The Văcărești Monastery, which was demolished in 1986 at the behest of the communist president, Nicolae Ceaușescu, had been used as a penitentiary starting from the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when people who took part in the 1848 revolution in the principalities were incarcerated there.

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<sup>16</sup> A skete is a settlement of monks inhabiting a group of small cottages around a church and dependent upon a parent monastery (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/skete>).

Along with Văcărești, nine other former monastic dwellings were converted into prisons around the same period of time.

One of the monasteries where Old Calendarist nuns were sent in order to correct their behaviour and, presumably, accept the new calendar, was Vărzărești Monastery. Even though there is little to no information regarding this issue, a perusal of the archival documents suggests that the Monastery functioned as a prison for at least three years, between 1936 and 1939. Situated in Urechești, Vrancea county, Vărzărești Monastery became the main place where Old Calendarist nuns were sent to detention. Even though the official historical record fails to mention its function during the interwar period, the archival documents reveal that it was, indeed, used for the incarceration of religious dissenters, namely Old Calendarist nuns. Even though the incarceration was meant to make them change their minds and ways of thinking towards the new calendar, it paradoxically became the place that made it possible for their words and names to be preserved, mainly due to a rather strict control of its inmates' correspondence.

Vărzărești Monastery had strict rules and kept the Old Calendarist nuns under constant supervision. From an instruction sheet, written in 1937 on the occasion of the incarceration of 68 Old Calendarist nuns, we learn the specific instructions that the gendarmes who were in charge of ensuring their supervision had to follow:

[...] Each room will have a nun that will be in charge of ensuring order and hygiene. The nuns will be involved in various agricultural activities around the monastery and will only travel in groups, supervised by a gendarme [...] The back doors of the four pavilions will be sealed, as well as the windows that do not already have bars installed, in order to prevent breakaways [...] In order to avoid contact with people, the stilists will only be allowed to enter the church when they are alone, [...] and forbidden to do so on Sundays or during any other celebration when people might visit the monastery [...] The packages and letters received by the stilists will be closely checked by the head of the gendarmerie post (ANIC, Insp. Gen. al Jand., D. 25/1937, f. 185).

Details about the monastery and the conditions there are sometimes inserted between the lines of the letters and postcards sent by the nuns in detention. For example, two of the 68 nuns, Maria Gliga, also known as Magdalena, and Maria Samoilă, also known as Macaria,<sup>17</sup> wrote a postcard to their families on July 1937, right after their arrival at Vărzărești, describing the surroundings of the monastery, as well as their most urgent needs for the winter:

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<sup>17</sup> The latter were most probably their monastic names. According to information that was provided to me during the interviews, it seems that their monastic names would usually begin with the first letter of their laic name. This was not a compulsory condition, but it happened quite frequently.

Our beloved brother and sisters, brothers-in-law and sisters-in-law,  
By the grace of God, we arrived at Vărzărești Monastery. Here we found 67 nuns.  
The Monastery is situated somewhere in the woods and the location is very nice.  
[...] We need shoes for the winter, if you want to make some for us (ANIC, Insp.  
Gen. al Jand., D. 25/1937, f. 153- 154).

On April 1937 Maria Miron sent a postcard to her parents in which she tells them that she had been at Vărzărești for two weeks and mentions its “beautiful location and orchard filled with fruitful and blooming trees.” She also asks for some “wheat flour, white eggs, tomatoes, butter, cheese, two hemp strings, a cotton scroll, some black thread, an old hat for the shoes, and some money” (ANIC, Insp. Gen al Jand., D 23/1937, f. 143). The constant request for food, clothes, and other supplies indicates that there was a lack thereof. However, from a letter sent by the gendarmerie to the Holy Synod on May 1937 we find out that the superior of the monastery had complained about the large amount of packages received by the nuns from their families, causing an investigation into the issue (ANIC, Insp. Gen al Jand., D 25/1937, f. 59). The situation was looked into by a lawyer who, after visiting Vărzărești Monastery, concluded that the nuns were compelled to ask their families for packages because they did not receive sufficient food at the monastery, nor did they have proper clothing for the winter, most of them walking around “barefooted and naked” (ANIC, Insp. Gen al Jand., D. 25/1937, f. 61- 63).

One of the constant complaints of the nuns, as well as of their families, was that the postcards, letters, and packages often went missing, or were delivered late. In her correspondence with her sister and brother-in-law, nun Melitina Mihăilă expresses her concern about the fact that their communication was made difficult by unknown causes:

My dear sister and brother-in-law,  
[...] I have received the package from you. Nothing got lost, but the bread went bad due to the delay [...] I am, however, saddened by the fact that you do not receive my letters, nor do I receive yours [...] (ANIC, Insp. Gen al Jand., D. 23/1937, f. 155).

In a letter sent by two Old Calendarist believers to nun Maria Vizitiu they inform her that they had only received one letter from her since her relocation to Vărzărești and wonder if “the letters sent from there are being confiscated” as they did not always reach their destination (ANIC, Insp. Gen al Jand., D. 23/1937, f. 272). This continuous state of confusion seems to have been intentionally maintained by the authorities entrusted with their

supervision.<sup>18</sup> By controlling every package and letter, what information got to the nuns and their families, they were hoping to destroy the nuns' will to resist the change and with that to undermine the entire Old Calendarist movement. In the same concerned letter sent to the Holy Synod on May 1937, the authorities asked for a more severe examination of the packages as they worried that there were letters slipped inside of them, letters the content of which urged the nuns to resist (ANIC, Insp. Gen al Jand., D. 25/1937, f. 59).

There was, indeed, a strong sense of admiration for their sufferings and trials, especially on the part of the nuns who had managed to avoid detention. Freedom had paradoxically become a prison for some of them as they equated it with renouncing their faith and the messages they wrote to their imprisoned sisters convey a conscience which was burdened to the point of self-denunciation. An archival document related to the Vărzărești Monastery reveals an extraordinary event that demonstrates the self-sacrifice some of these women were capable of, as well as the strength of their belief. The report states as follows:

To the Holy Synod

We have the honour to report that on July 7<sup>th</sup> 1937, four women turned themselves in to the gendarmes in Urechești, R. Sărat.

- Margareta Ciontu from Liești, Tecuci, 24 years of age
- Ștefana Lefter from Furceni- Noi- Tecuci, 19 years of age
- Ștefana Zaharia from Ciușlea- Tecuci, 24 years of age
- Ecaterina Zaharia from Ciușlea- Putna, 20 years of age.

These nuns declared that they are Stolist nuns and that they know the Stolist nuns from Vărzărești (...) Until now they hid in their houses, but they are fanatics and now they know that that they will never give up on their religion and want to be imprisoned together with the rest of the nuns[...] Please let us know if they should be incarcerated at Vărzărești (ANIC, Insp. Jud. Al Jand., D. 23/1937, f.228).

These four young girls appear to have chosen of their own volition to surrender themselves to imprisonment. They declared to the authorities that they wanted to join their sisters in suffering because they refused to accept the idea of giving up their faith. In so doing, despite the resulting possible incarceration, they exercised personal agency in their choice and regarding their fate.

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<sup>18</sup> Due to the fact that literature on this issue is almost absent, it is difficult to compare the nuns' detention conditions to those encountered in regular prisons during the same period of time. What we know for sure is that in 1929 the Law for the Organization of Prisons placed more focus on the educational aspect, thus all prisoners had to undergo writing and reading lessons, as well as History, Geography, Mathematics and Religion courses (Bruno 2006, 499). In 1937 the newspaper *Aiudul* reported on the visit of Margery Fry, the British prison reformer, at the Aiud Penitentiary which she allegedly found in good condition and she was impressed by the humane and modern state of the Romanian prisons (*Aiudul* 1937, 4).

On May 23 1937 Sofia Lefter, detained at Vărzărești Monastery, received a letter from her sister filled with strong feelings of guilt and self-deprecating expressions:

My dear sister Sofica and all the nuns who are in there and suffer for the right faith, may God strengthen you until the end [...] I wanted to be imprisoned with you, but I am not worthy to be in there with you. I trust God that He will gather all of us who are in the world and bring us all together again (ANIC, Insp. Jud. Al Jand., D. 25/1937, f.99).

Even though she did not sign the letter, we discover from the statement<sup>19</sup> given by her father afterwards that her name was Ștefana (ANIC, Insp. Jud. Al Jand., D. 25/1937, f.102). Unsurprisingly, her name appears on the list of the four women that had turned themselves in to the gendarmes hoping to be imprisoned at Vărzărești, no more than two months after this letter had been written.

Some of the postcards also reveal stories of family ruptures and disobedience. Behind nun Elena Seciu's postcard (Fig.3 and Fig.4), written in May 1937, there lies a heart-breaking story:

My beloved parents,

By the grace of God I am healthy and I am at Vărzărești, but please do not be upset as I am who God wanted me to be [...] I asked you to send me some money and some clothes, and some wool, but as I can see, you did not want to send them to me, as if I were not from your family. I asked because I knew that I have the same rights as my sisters; I did not bother you for 2 years, you did not give me anything. I tell you one more time, if you want to help me, if not, God will take care of me. But I hope you realize that I am entitled to these things and you are not willing to give them to me. I am quite far away from you, if you want to send me something do it via post, but maybe you are willing to come and visit me in person. I wish you happy holidays and please forgive me (ANIC, Insp. Jud. Al Jand., D. 25/1937, f.260).

Her story is revealed to us by the declaration that her father had to write for the police in order to justify the reasons for receiving letters from his daughter. Thus, we find out that Elena, together with her two sisters, had been sent to an Orthodox monastery by their parents who were afraid that they would die of tuberculosis, a disease that took six other members of their family. Once she arrived there, she ran away to an Old Calendarist monastery. For that reason, her father refused to send her money or any other help, until 1936 when he found out that she was in detention. The declaration ends with the phrase: "My wife and I go to

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<sup>19</sup> People who were corresponding with the detained nuns had to write down a declaration in which they gave details about the relationship they had with the respective nun. These declarations, even though at times fabricated, are the source of valuable information regarding the lives of these nuns before imprisonment.



church regularly, and we respect the new calendar. I never thought that my daughter Elena was right to reject it” (ANIC, Insp. Jud. Al Jand., D. 25/1937, f.262). From her letter and other archival documents, we learn that despite being abandoned by her parents, she was confident that what she believed in was right. We witness her struggle and her coming to terms with her situation, while also learning to stand alone, rejected by her family, but nevertheless empowered by her strong belief in God.

The same situation appears to hold true for other nuns who found themselves alone, defending a cause that the other members of their families seem to have abandoned. This abandonment can also be explained by their families’ fear of persecution which was, in those years, widespread amongst the Old Calendarist believers according to contemporary nuns I interviewed.

### **Surviving incarceration**

Analyzing the archival materials, and combining them with the communities’ own historical record, which is sometimes based on first-hand testimonies, allows me to reconstruct some of these nuns’ lives and voices. Their experiences do not end at Vărzărești, but go on for years thereafter, proving that they not only survived incarceration, but that they lived to tell their stories.

The history of Dobru Monastery began with ten nuns: Isidora Stănoiaie, the founder and the first Superior of the monastery, Serafima Stănoaie, Paraschiva Bunduc, Eufrasia Pintilie, Olimpiada Petreanu, Asânefta Dumitroaia, Melania Mardare, Arsenia Archir, Macrina David, and Pangratia Vărganici (Mănăstirea Dobru 2007). Eight of them appear in the documents of the Vărzărești Monastery in the summer of 1937, most of them referred to by their lay names. Choosing the monastic path at young ages,<sup>20</sup> these nuns led tumultuous lives even after their release from detention. Constantly followed by the authorities and forced to also confront the challenges of the newly installed communist regime, they found comfort in secluded locations such as Dobru and other monastic dwellings.

In July 1937 Dumitru Geangu, an Old Calendarist believer from Stănești, Tutova, declared that, as the elder brother of Catinca, known as mother Chirichioaia, who was being detained at Vărzărești, he felt the responsibility of sending clothes and food to his sister. There is no postcard and no other mention of her name, except this short reminder that she

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<sup>20</sup> Nun Serafima, for example, was born in 1913, meaning that she was 23 at the time of her arrest in 1936, and even younger when she became a nun.

was also one of the imprisoned nuns (ANIC, Insp. Jud. Al Jand., D. 23/1937, f.261).<sup>21</sup> Fastforward four years, and we find her again, this time by the name of Steliana Geangu and in her own penal file, after she was found by the gendarmes hiding in the woods, together with Măzărel Anica (CNSAS, P 096704). The photograph that was meant to serve her as a memento, even though confiscated, now serves as a great reminder of hers and other nuns' stories. I know now that her fate did not end with the last page of the penal file, as her name still rings a bell with many contemporary Old Calendarist believers, and I hope that one day I will be able to write a wonderful ending to her story.

## **Conclusions**

The correspondence of these Old Calendarist nuns from detention give us an insight into the personality and character of these mostly young women. Taken away from their families and communities, or sometimes rejected by them, they made extreme sacrifices for their faith and chose to suffer for what they believed in.

Old Calendarist nuns, perhaps unintentionally, had a “transforming power” (Magray 1998) within their communities by providing the strength and continuity which made it possible for the underground movement to survive over several decades of state repression (Snyder and Hecht 1996, 8). While not fighting for rights, but for survival, they contributed to the forging of a religious identity. They were empowered to choose this life for themselves, contravening common societal restrictions on their gender and, as their letters and postcards reveal, they found their source of strength in their faith in God and in a life of prayer (Kilroy 2005, 24). Choosing the monastic path from young ages, these nuns automatically chose a life-path as single women, committing themselves to their religious communities. Entering a convent meant the abandonment of everything which was worldly, including their names, and dedicating themselves to a life in the service of God (Evangelisti 2007, 4). Set apart from the world, monasteries became for them the places where they received an education; even though some of the nuns might have still been illiterate at the moment of their detention, the fact that they were able to write letters and postcards by themselves to their relatives and acquaintances outside the walls reveals that they had received at least a basic education. Given the circumstances, their literacy became their

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<sup>21</sup> Catinca/ Steliana Geangu was most probably sent to detention for her participation in the events that took place at Cucova in 1935.

authority and the postcards they had written function as the main vehicle for their own voices (see Cherewatuk and Wiethaus 1993, 14).

In this article, I have focused on representations of the various roles played by women in the Old Calendarist communities during the interwar period.<sup>22</sup> Portrayed by the press and Orthodox Church publications of the time in extremely negative terms, women in these communities were also shown to be the protectors and disseminators of the tradition, as well as the gatekeepers to the spiritual world. What the press articles and archival documents seem to convey is that Old Calendarist women took on roles that were not very common for women of the time, neither in society, nor within the Orthodox Church. From conducting religious services, to guarding and protecting the Old Calendarist priests and fighting the gendarmes, these women challenged the perceptions of the time. Because they seemed to have abandoned the regular roles that women were supposed to perform and to have taken on more masculine roles, mainly as a survival strategy<sup>23</sup> (Massino 2008, 57), they were deemed dangerous and considered to be encouraging promiscuity and disobedience.

Considered by the Orthodox Church as the most effective measure to bring the Old Calendarist women “on the right path”, monastic incarceration in Orthodox monasteries such as Vărzărești Monastery paradoxically became the way that made it possible for their words and names to be preserved, mainly due to a rather strict control of its inmates’ correspondence. More than 68 nuns were incarcerated at Vărzărești Monastery between 1936 and 1939, and based on archival information such monasteries existed in other places in the country, as well; however, details related to those cases are either insufficient or unavailable to scholars, for the time being. In spite of these measures, a perusal of the letters and postcards that the Old Calendarist women who avoided incarceration wrote to their imprisoned sisters convey a burdened conscience and the idea that freedom had paradoxically become a prison for some of them as they equated it with renouncing their faith.

During harsh persecution and in the absence of men, these women fought for survival and took upon themselves the difficult task of defending something that was deemed by others to be an element of backwardness and tradition, namely the old calendar, by

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<sup>22</sup> During my interviews the nuns have expressed their sorrow that this is the part of their church’s history that is mostly unknown to them.

<sup>23</sup> According to Jill Massino, in times of crisis or disruptions, women are sometimes forced to perform roles that are traditionally seen as masculine, such as heavy labour, in order to ensure their survival, as well as their community’s survival (Massino 2008, 57). This aspect can also be extended to spiritual duties which are supposed to survive despite the absence of a male figure.

challenging, at the same time, and for a limited period of time, another traditional element, namely the role of women in society generally and their involvement in religious issues specifically. As scholars of women have often noted, whenever disruption of the existing order occurs, be it social, religious, or political, despite being subject to stigmatization, women become the main keepers and protectors of values and ideas and take on crucial roles that ensure the survival and continuation of a message, or of a community. This inevitably opens up the discussion about the present role of women in male-dominated environments, such as the Orthodox Church. There are, indeed, many aspects that the Orthodox Church is still struggling to work out when it comes to women's involvement in offices of authority, or councils of the church, for example, aspects that demand extensive reconsideration of the past and the authority of tradition. What history has shown, however, is that even though these kind of crisis and ruptures, such as what happened to the Old Calendarist church, tend to favour female enterprise, the return to stability pushes them back into more discreet stances and male dominance is restored (Coburn 1999, 224). Nowadays, Old Calendarist nuns still struggle for recognition, not of themselves, but of their church and its little-known and suppressed history which they feverishly try to bring to light and make known.

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