

Bless You, Prison!

Screen version of the novel with the same title by Nicole Valéry-Grossu

Brief Synopsis

A young intellectual woman, Nicole, is arrested in the years of Stalinism simply for being an active member of an opposition party. There follow three months of exhausting interrogation and isolation. Alone in a cell, she undergoes a spiritual experience similar to that of the great mystics. She proceeds to an in-depth soul-searching that helps her discover the power of faith and steels her to put up resistance. Nicole goes through the ordeal of communist prisons, conflicts and risky activities, and manages to provide a heartening example for the other inmates. Daily prison life is not drab but full of unexpected happenings like a story. This is an extremely objective film that scans with warmth and sensitivity a woman's emotional testimony of faith.

Nicolae Mărgineanu

Bless You, Prison ! Treatment

A young intellectual woman, Nicole, is arrested during the years of Stalinism on account of being an active member of an opposition party.

In the first three months of interrogation and isolation she has a special spiritual experience. Once a superficial girl for whom religion was just another constraint hard to accept, she now discovers ardent faith that will no longer leave her, not even at the worst of times. Subject to endless interrogation, burdened with trumped-up charges, pressured to give false testimony that could endanger the freedom of others, beaten and tortured to the bitter end, she remains undaunted in front of her executioners. Driven to despair, the interrogators put her to the “manege”, a terrible punishment that consists of walking up and down one’s cell from six in the morning till ten in the evening, without interruption. Then an exhausting interrogation would follow at night. Prayers and her inner world help her. Her spiritual elevation becomes much more important than the daily worries. Her thoughts get purged of all avenging, evil reflection, being permeated with love and understanding. She manages to smile at the guards who mock her, thinking her crazy. One day, when making terrible efforts to move her swollen legs, she discovers scribbled on a wall in her cell a barely visible psalm: “God is with me and therefore I fear nothing...” This revelation gives her fresh strength. With a plum stone she manages to scribble on the wall, during the short breaks from the “manege”, letter after letter, and write other psalms, hoping that another wretched creature who will live in this cell may be succored by these lines from the Bible.

Next she is taken to Mislea, a prison for women arranged in an old monastery. She lives in a dormitory-cell with other 60 inmates. Life here is not free from tension and conflict. Nicole becomes a light-bearer in this world of darkness. During her daily walks she attempts to pass some little

sacks with food through the bars of the cages and this results in a very harsh punishment: a day of hard labor alongside common law prisoners, then a night in the hole. While carrying sacks from in the church of the monastery, now turned into a storehouse, Nicole discovers a Bible that at great risks she hides at her bosom and manages to sneak into the dormitory. The detainees separate the book into tiny fascicles, sewn and bound together, in order to be hidden more easily. Thus, the Bible becomes the most precious library that will completely change the atmosphere of the camp.

Then follows the painful experience of the Danube-Black Sea Canal, called the Death Canal, with its exhausting toil, miserable barracks and daily humiliations. The presence of the thousands of prisoners who carry out slave work is illustrative of the terrible scope of the communist regime in Romania.

After four years she is released for lack of evidence, without trial. She comes out stronger from this experience as the prison years have proved more useful than many of the years spent at large.

Alone in the desolated area in front of the prison Nicolae admits: “How far from God I am now when free as compared to how close I was to Him in prison.”

Nicolae Mărgineanu

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Director's Note

The novel “Bless You, Prison!” was issued in 1976 by Plon Publishers of Paris, and was reprinted in 1977, 1978 and 1983. It was also published in English, German, Italian, Norwegian, and, after 1989, in Romanian too.

It is a book of intense and simple prose that makes a spell-binding read.

It features “a tiny part of the huge white blot that is the history of the last half of this century, left unwritten because of the dearth of documents, a great part of them forged, destroyed or banned.”

If for most of the people who wrote their memoirs from prison, this is a place of hatred, where wrecking images of torture and humiliation prevail, in Nicole Valéry Grossu's book suffering exorcises evil, steels the spirit and makes kindness and solidarity possible.

An inspiring film that means to prove — while revealing the shuddering methods of physical and mental torture used in the communist prisons of Romania — that any God-inflicted suffering that man accepts willingly may bring about immense blessings. Suffering manages to pierce the armor of indifference and torpor, and material hardships stand ridiculous when compared to the much more important gift of spiritual elevation.

Nicolae Mărgineanu