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Social relations and internment camps: A socio-psychological analysis on a sample of interviews with former residents from Lushnjë (Albania)

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Special Issue

Face Up. Faces from the past. The fight for freedom and democracy in Albania during the regime of Enver Hoxha

A cura di / Edited by

Michele Rabà - Gaetano Sabatini

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Social relations and internment camps: A socio-psychological analysis on a sample of interviews with former residents from Lushnjë (Albania)

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Riassunto
L'articolo indaga i fattori psicosociali dell'internamento nei campi di Lushnjë durante il periodo comunista albanese, soffermandosi su alcuni aspetti specifici delle relazioni di gruppo in situazioni estreme: le dinamiche di categorizzazione, stratificazione e differenziazione in termini di relazioni tra ingroup e outgroup e la formazione di relazioni coesive interne necessarie alla sopravvivenza. Analizzando le interviste condotte con gli internati selezionati dal progetto Face-Up, si analizza come, anche in contesti di violenza e disumanizzazione, si possano attivare relazioni autentiche e positive con persone sia dell'ingroup che dell'outgroup. Infine, si esamina l'ipotesi che tali relazioni possano contribuire alla resilienza.

Parole chiave
Contesti estremi; deumanizzazione; relazioni sociali.

Abstract
The article investigates the psychosocial factors of internment in the Lushnjë camps during the Albanian communist period, focusing on some specific aspects of group relations in extreme situations: the dynamics of categorization, stratification and differentiation in terms of ingroup and outgroup relationships, and the formation of internal cohesive relationships necessary for survival. Analysing interviews conducted with inmates sampled by the Face-Up project, it is explored how, even in contexts of violence and dehumanisation, positive authentic relationships can be activated with people from both ingroup and outgroup. Finally, the hypothesis that such relationships can contribute to resilience is examined.

Keywords
Extreme Contexts; Dehumanisation; Social Relations.

1. Introduction

The literature on (inter-)group relationships in extreme situations highlights how the ability to create social bonds in extreme settings is a factor that can increase the chances of survival (Davidson 1980; Bělín *et al*. 2022). Studies have shown that "only in rare instances was survival a purely individual achievement. In most cases survival was due to the operation of social factors" (Abel, 1951, p. 155). The literature on environmental disasters also suggests that rather than panic and disorientation reactions, most people respond to crises by making the greatest possible decisions to protect people and property, despite limited resources in terms of time, money, structures, and protective equipment (Lindell, 2012).

An increase in reciprocal relations has been observed under particularly difficult life-threatening conditions, as in the case of Nazi internment camps:

> the phenomenon of spontaneously arising reciprocal human relations among the inmates of the Nazi concentration camps. [...] Interpersonal bonding, reciprocity, and sharing were an essential source of strength for 'adaptation' and survival in many of the victims. (Davidson 1980, p. 2).

Following the initial trauma caused by entry into the camp system, a social structure was quickly reconstituted among the internees through the formation of groups and bonds of trust:

> through innumerable small acts of humanness, most of them covert but everywhere in evidence, survivors were able to maintain societal structures workable enough to keep themselves alive and morally sane. (Des Pres, 1980, p. 142).

Under extreme conditions, then, mutual assistance is seen as a form of resistance to maintain one's inner freedom (Messina, 2017, p. 140); In other words, it is a system to keep one's identity intact despite living conditions being influenced by the total institution in which they reside (Scott, 2011; Wallace, 2017).

Although solidarity and mutual aid often manifested themselves in small gestures sometimes even of a purely symbolic nature, these seem to have had a significant impact on the ability to adapt to the socially and physically extreme living conditions typical of concentration and internment camps; according to Klein (1972), this is a specific psychosocial response termed "cohesive pairing behavior" that sees survival intimately linked to community.

Bettelheim (1943, p. 417) considers prisoners in Nazi concentration camps as persons finding themselves in an "extreme" situation: the prisoners were deliberately tortured, suffered from malnutrition, had to perform heavy labour, were controlled in every aspect of their lives, and were not entitled to adequate medical care (Hodgkins and Douglas 1984). These same peculiarities characterized the lives of inmates in the internment camps of communist Albania; however, unlike Nazi concentration camps, Albanian internment camps are distinguished by their unprecedented duration of more than forty years. This contributed to creating specific long-term in-group and out-group dynamics.

This article focuses on the lives of internees within these camps, in particular the Lushnjë camp. Using hermeneutic analysis of interviews conducted with survivors in the Lushnjë camp, the paper aims to investigate the psycho-social factors of internment through the dynamics of categorization, stratification and differentiation in terms of in-group and out-group relationships, and the formation of internal cohesive relationships necessary for survival.

The dictatorship of the communist regime of Enver Hoxha between 1944 and 1985 (the year of his death) was characterised by harsh forms of repression of dissent through thousands of killings, imprisonments, and deportations to internment camps even for those who were simply suspected of holding different opinions. After Hoxha's death and the protests that broke out in the country from 1989 onwards, the first democratic elections in 1991 marked the end of the communist regime as well as of Albania's isolation from the international community.

Thirty years after the end of one of the most dramatic periods in Albanian history, the process of elaborating on the suffering endured is still in its infancy. In this process, which is undoubtedly laboured by the memory of the horrors of the dictatorship period, an essential part is represented by the testimonies of those who experienced the suffering firsthand, particularly in the internment camps.

These testimonies shed light on modes of resilience based on group cohesion and solidarity between those who faced the same situations of dehumanisation, deprivation, and exclusion. These are processes and dynamics that have in many cases allowed not only survival, but also the creation of strong social bonds that have remained clear in memory.

2. Method

This study is based on the analysis of interviews conducted as part of the EC "Face-up" project "Faces from the past: the fight for freedom and democracy during the regime of Hoxha" (Programme: Europe for Citizens, Ref. N. 609250-CITIZ-1-2019-1-AL-CITIZ-REMEM - Duration 18 months 1.1.2021-30.6.2022). The interviews were with survivors of Albanian internment camps during the communist regime.

Twenty-seven in-depth interviews were conducted involving 21 men and 6 women ranging in age from 51 to 83. All interviewees had experienced the Lushnjë camp although some of them had also lived for shorter or longer periods in other internment camps in the country.

The interview administration was predominantly face-to-face (in different cities in Albania: Lushnjë, Durres, Tirana, Vlora), except in a few case when some online interviews were conducted via the Zoom platform (some participants no longer live in Albania but reside in Italy, the U.S. and Canada). The interviews were conducted in Albanian by expert researchers of the University of Tirana in collaboration with the NGO Zen Qytetar of Lushnje. The interviews were semi-structured, being conducted with the help of an outline divided into three sections: before, during, and after internment. The procedure and the interview outline have been approved by the Ethical Committee of the Department of Psychology of Development and Socialization Processes, Sapienza University of Rome (Protocol n. 241 17/02/2022).

As a preliminary activity, the University of Tirana provided extended abstracts of the interviews in English. Subsequently, three students at Sapienza University of Rome, coordinated by an Albanian mother tongue, first dealt with the translation of the interviews into English and then with an initial coding. At the end, a senior researcher made the review of the first coding and the thematic analysis.

The analysis of the interviews followed the hermeneutic approach, and for this reason ample space was left for the direct testimony of the interviewees, who may sometimes make use of dialectal expressions and idioms. In particular, thematic analysis was conducted to identify patterns and themes. Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data, organizing and describing the dataset in detail and interpreting various aspects of the research topic. Following Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework (Braun and Clarke, 2006), before starting coding each research team member became familiar with the data by independently reading through all the interview transcripts. the

research team then immersed itself in the data through repeated and active reading, looking for common cores of meaning. In phase 2, transcripts were analyzed inductively to identify descriptions of participants' perspectives and experiences across all data (Maguire and Delahunt, 2017). Initial codes were generated to identify interesting features of the data, focusing on three specific elements of the interview analysis: the dynamics of categorization, stratification, and differentiation in terms of in-group and out-group relationships; the role of education and other socialization agencies; and the activation of attachment to place. In phase 3, the different subthemes for each topic were identified. In phase 4, a review of the themes was carried out, eliminating the invalid or overlapping ones and refining the remaining ones. In phase 5, themes were named, labeled as: enmification processes, solidarity between internees, internal and external relations and the role of educational and socialization agencies. The results are summarized in the Table below. Finally, in phase 6, a report was written and reworked for this purpose.

Tab. 1 – The thematic analysis results

Theme	Description
Enmification processes	Is a typical process of total institutions and extreme contexts that aims at the identification of a common enemy, a scapegoat towards whom to focus discontent, through its systematic dehumanisation.
Solidarity between internees	It describes the process of creating a very cohesive ingroup among the internees and the strong opposition to the outgroup caused by the isolation from the rest of society and the persecution to which they were subjected.
Internal and external relations	It deals with the dynamics of creating personal bonds of internees both inside and outside the camp, the benefits of establishing such bonds but also their limitations and difficulties.
The role of educational and socialization agencies	Focuses on the role of socialising agencies such as school and family in the daily lives of internees with particular attention to ingroup and outgroup relations.

3. The processes of enmification: the enemies of people making

Internment camps were used by the Albanian communist dictatorship to conduct a violent campaign of control and repression of dissent. In the camps lived individuals who were deemed by the regime to be "enemies of the people" who were given "class differentiation" treatment aimed at self-mortification.

In The SAGE Encyclopedia of War, Liora Sion (2018) defines enmification as the process through which people dehumanize their adversaries and identifies types of explanations for this phenomenon. First of all, there is a natural explanation, according to which the construction of the enemy is functional to evolution of the species and survival, especially in contexts of conflict (Grossman, 1995). Then there is a psychological explanation, according to which the construction of the enemy is functional to translate people's fears and hostilities, making them targets (Volkan 1985, 1988). Finally, according to the political explanation, enemy image creation is used by governments to mobilize the nation around common goals (Murray and Meyers, 1999). It is a method of social control employed to propagate and maintain the values of the dominant system (Keen, 1986; Spillman & Spillman, 1991) by reinforcing the opposition of us versus them (Sion, 2018).

Many of those interviewed described their enmification by remarking how internees were identified and categorized by the rest of society as "enemies of the people", "tsarists", and "kulaks". The process of enmification affected without distinction anyone who represented a potential threat to the regime, and even children suffered this form of persecution through the degradation of the person, in fact, frequent exposure to enmification language has serious effects on emotional, behavioural and normative levels (Bilewicz and Soral, 2020). This is well illustrated by the words of one of the interviewees:

> From childhood, we were fought by their children, they called us tsarists, enemies, everything. In the elementary school we attended in Savër until the age of eight, we never received a New Year gift. While other children were given a New Year's package (interview 8_M70).

The internees were systematically discriminated from an early age and the use of negative epithets in the common language to identify them contributed to the creation of the enemy image:

> It is true that I was a child, but regarding persecution from an early age, we experienced that class differentiation. (...). Kulak, enemy, it was those epithets in the common language that people knew so much, and, in that sense, it was, sometimes in a low voice, sometimes without a voice, sometimes in a high tone (interview 2_M60).

Family biography often determined the status of enemy of the people. So, if, for example, a family member had been imprisoned or was a fugitive, the entire family group could be interned and sent as far away from their home as possible. It is a system to isolate the internees from the rest of society, not only physically but also morally:

> We were completely separated, our people were separated from us, they no longer even came for funerals, which was the most serious thing, nor for weddings, nor for engagements. I mean, there was a disconnect, a total break. Even those who came, who had closer relations with us, they came secretly (interview 7_M70).

Those who stayed in contact with internees were under suspicion and were themselves at risk of being interned, and sometimes the rest of the non-interned family was persecuted and discriminated against:

> Yes, the uncles there and the whole tribe did not send their children to school, did not give them work, just hard work there in the cooperative. Deprived of every right, watched every step they took, at funerals, at weddings, everywhere they went they were watched. And where you go, we have separate rooms. (...) So, they were exiled even more than us here. That here the blow was distributed to many families, there it was concentrated in one family, and when you concentrate on one family the blow was greater, the pressure was greater (Interview 3_M65).

The consequences of remaining in contact with internees were well known; in fact, it was the internees themselves who decided to avoid relationships with non-interned friends and relatives:

> Our fathers were three brothers. Families were interned, all three families were interned. So, other people, other cousins, we don't blame them. They didn't come because if they came to us there would be consequences (interview 18_M77).

As we learn from the testimonies, this separation was necessary to protect loved ones but still had extremely detrimental effects on the internees' social networks:

> My parents, for example, knew that they would harm non-exiled people if they contacted them. And that's why even my mother, I remember her often, said she had no one. (...) This was a necessary separation for the sake of those we loved (interview 13_F70).

However, respondents do not blame the family or community that abandoned them because they are aware of the situation they are in:

> We absolutely never judged our people by the circumstances under which they happened because we understood very well that it is better to create, so to speak, a kind of communication vacuum than to cause even greater harm to one's family members (interview 26_M65).

The identification of the enemy and its physical and moral isolation was the first process for the creation of a contrast between two groups: the enemies of the people and the rest of free society. Enmification, therefore, set the stage for the realization of other practices of dehumanization. Internment life was characterized by total exclusion from the rest of society and deprivation of many rights; they were forced to do the hardest work, mainly in agriculture and swamp reclamation, and received lower wages than the rest of the population.

In addition, internees were monitored in every aspect of their lives, and to prevent them from straying they had to report for roll call several times a day:

> I remember my father having to go to roll call three times a day in the morning when there were health problems, while other days he went in the morning and in the evening (interview 14_M71).

They were forced to live in overcrowded situations in poor hygienic conditions and were malnourished. Moreover, the mechanism of social isolation of the single person and of her/his familiar group in case of reciprocal contact replicates the same dynamic typically adopted in case of infective diseases and health pandemics.

4. The processes of solidarity among the internees

The isolation from the rest of the society and the persecution to which the internees were subjected thus set the stage for the creation of a very cohesive ingroup and for a strong contraposition with the outgroup. Very illustrative of this opposition is the episode recounted by one interviewee:

> Savër was a camp divided in two. That is, there was a neighborhood built on barracks and a neighborhood built on stone houses. So, it was a large group of people who together constituted a unity in evil and, so to speak, being together with a large amount of people created a kind of common armor of this whole group, (...) they created a certain unity of disagreement with evil. [...)] We also created an imaginary war; we declared war on those children in the other neighborhood. [...] I mean, we simulated a real war, we prepared swords, we made shields, we carved those wooden swords, we made slingshots, we created those group organizations, we even opened up a real war to them [...], I mean, even in those circumstances of the childhood reality, the reality of adolescence, we somehow, being a community that remained firm and in the beginning, with this community we created the idea of the group and the idea of war, and the idea of opposition. We wanted to oppose something, even the idea of opposition within us was a real idea (interview 26_M65).

The creation of a cohesive group among the internees was a process marked by a few stages, the first of which were geared toward the immediate satisfaction of some basic needs among which that of food and shelter from the cold were certainly among the priorities. In fact, the provision of sufficient food for the interned families was the main daily activity even in view of the presence in the camp of entire households with young children. As for shelter from the cold, it must be remembered that the internees occupied barracks and not brick rooms exposed, therefore, to the rigors of winter and the oppressive heat of the summer period. But in addition to such basic needs, isolation was a further factor of dehumanization that made the condition of internees particularly distressing.

One interviewee tells how he was always shunned by the rest of the "free" population and had friends only among the ingroup of internees:

> I had friends who were persecuted, absolutely no one else approached me, not even on the street or in the café no one. We would go here and there, like an animal, coming from work to home, leaving home to go to work. I had no contact at all (Interview 10_M83).

This condition of deprivation and isolation compared to those in the same city who were not interned, the "free" people as they were often called, fostered the emergence of solidarity behaviours among those who were experiencing the same process of dehumanization. These behaviours did not concern only the aspect of mutual aid in times of need, such as those precisely related to basic needs related to survival, but something more, a kind of bond that united those who were in the same condition of deprivation. Beyond, therefore, the differences of geographic origin, but also cultural, social, and religious differences, the process of social cohesion ensured that those who found themselves in the condition of internees were able to overcome very hard trials that they would otherwise not have been able to face as individuals.

From the stories of internees, however, a strong feeling of solidarity, reciprocity, and friendship in the ingroup shines through:

> With people of my generation, let's put it this way, who were suffering as I was, we had such a compactness, such a solidarity that only those conditions impose, that you are under surveillance, under terror, under fear, under physical exhaustion, etc. We did very well, it happened to everyone who needed us, me for them and them for me, always helping each other. And we were compact (interview 9_M80).

The perception of belonging to the same group facilitated the creation of friendly relationships, sharing of moments such as school as well as free time:

> We had friends, we had company, we played soccer, we went to school together, we consulted on everything. The friendship was incorruptible (interview 3_M65).

Despite the critical conditions, internees describe a peaceful and fraternal coexistence with other families that helped them overcome difficulties:

> When we arrived, we lived in one room. In the room the corridor was 1 to 1, the bathroom, it was shared, there was a family from Devolli and we were there. We lived perfectly for seven years, today it is difficult to find a fraternal family, we did not experience even the smallest incident with each other. [...] God had united people's hearts and they overcame all evil, spiritually, and physiologically, to live as Brothers with each other. That pain and suffering brought people together, made them united to face evil. [...] when the oldest daughter of that family in Kapshtica got

> married, we did the united marriage, as one family. So, we had the same concerns, we had the same experiences (interview 3_M65).

While befriending relationships were crucial for internees to break deprivation and isolation, in actual fact many interviewees described such relationships much more profoundly by comparing such bonding to family bonding as one ex-internee describes well:

> Humanity and love existed in us, and we were lucky to always live with very good families (interview 4__F74).

These are thus deeper bonds than those typical of friendship that go even beyond the mutual help, material or moral, that people in the same condition of difficulty can establish:

> The people who were exiled like us were wonderful people. They were people who loved us, and we loved them, they helped us and we helped them, we cried like a real family. Good and bad, we went through everything. Maybe that also helped us, kept us alive. That love, respect (interview 13_F70).

This sense of belonging to the same family is a common feature of all respondents who seem to refer in some way to some form of cohesive social identity process within the group.

> The most positive moment was the familiarity with each other. We had established a kind of friendship [...]. And if you, a family, had a misfortune or a joy, we would all get together and help that family. I mean, she was the most positive thing there was (interview 27_M65).

Thus, it is not about friendship generically understood, but about deep bonds between people who share the same condition of marginalization and suffering. Such bonds concern the most intimate aspects of people's lives, those aspects that are revealed only to those who can understand the reasons for suffering but also those for joy. As the words of one of the interviewees well explain:

> Man will rejoice, laugh, cry, in whatever environment he lives (interview 20_M78).

They try, therefore, to live a normal life in which they play together, engage in recreational activities, and create bonds:

> I always gathered my friends and did theater because I had a great desire to become a theater actress. [...] The times when we girls and boys got together and did theater and had fun, there were hours when we forgot everything (interview 4_F74).

The testimony of another interviewee confirms that the various activities that took place in their free time were a way of finding their own dimension and alleviating the suffering they experienced daily:

> We were active people and tried to build our social life in our own way. We had created a football camp, we played football for our own amusement. Often boys from the camp tried to join the Lushnjë team, but they were not accepted because they were exiled. There were many boys who were talented and knew how to play. [...] In the free time we had, we either played chess, or backgammon, or played cards [...]; we discussed sports, we discussed books, there were some clubs, for example in '79/'80 my father gave an Italian course to a good number of boys there. [...] learning a foreign language became a goal (for the internees), we spread it. [...] But so, individually, or socially, groups were created for everything (interview 26_M65).

5. Internal and external relationships

Obviously, the bonds that were established were constrained by the stratification of society, which did not allow personal relationships to be built between different classes. As one of the interviewees recounts, one hardly ever married for love in such a context:

> At that time, few marriages were made out of love, but at that time there was fairness, there was a decision. So, out of necessity, I did not fall in love knowing myself, but knowing my family and my wife's family in a friendly way (interview 7_M70).

Another interviewee recounts how his first love was interrupted before it even began because of his different social background:

> I can tell it as the story of my life, that my first love in life was impossible and ended up being impossible. Because the girl was on the other side. We loved each other but from afar and one day [...] an agent came to me. I was below the bridge, he was above, and his shadow fell on me in the water where I was fishing. He froze my blood because he said he had come to deport me, to put me in prison. [...] He threatened me: "What about love?" I said nothing, pretending I knew nothing. "Nobody?" he said, Nobody. "For your sake I say this, stay in your rank that (if you insist) with her I will be the one to put you behind bars and you will get ten years in prison". All hope was cut short there and I had to find it in my rank [...] until I found it in Laç, someone who was the same as me (interview 14_M71).

One of the interviewees narrates an episode concerning a relationship between a free girl and an inmate:

> It happened here in our sector. He was an intern, he lived in Gradishte, but with a job here, and he fell in love with a girl here, he had a communist father, he took her home, the organisations understood and took her away from home. It was not conceived [...]. Others did not dare to love, that there were consequences. We tried to find when we belonged in the range, in our people, among ourselves. It was a problem to marry and a problem not to marry. "Why is this one not getting married, what's wrong? Is he going to run away?" And the security spies would think that, provoke conversation, and put him in jail. Or "that you want to get married. Eh, why did he get married? Where did he get it? How, when, where?" (interview 3_M65).

In this last interview excerpt, it emerges how marriage could be used as an instrument to control the internees. This is confirmed by another interview:

> I got married, I got married young because my mother told me to marry you young so that they would not suspect you of running away. Because if you were married, they did not think you could run away and leave your family, even the children (interview 27_M65).

As it has been reconstructed, the life of the internees was controlled in every aspect, even for health problems it was necessary to have specific authorization to leave the camp and visit the doctor: this was granted only in rare cases and it was sometimes denied even in serious situations. In this regard, the testimony of an interviewee is valuable:

> Even if you were sick, you had to ask the brigadier for permission, you had to go to work when you were sick because it was a necessity of life. Even if they gave you permission to go, they didn't report that it was necessary to stay for 2-3 days off, they didn't give it to you because you were the enemy [...]. My younger brother fell ill, 17 years old, and the local doctor left him at home and did not take him to hospital, a week here, after a week when he got worse, the infection became serious, then he was forced to take him to hospital, he was operated on, he went on Monday, on Tuesday he was operated on, on Wednesday he was operated on for acute meningitis and in the second operation when the surgeon came out of the operating room, and the question asked by his colleague: "how did he go?" "One less enemy". My brother has been dead for many years, and I have forgotten him, but I have never forgotten this word, this expression of the doctor who took the Hippocratic oath. "One less enemy" (interview 3_M65).

The episodes outlined so far effectively describe the dynamics of relations between ingroup and outgroup that the internees experienced daily. There is no doubt that the discrimination and persecution suffered by the internees was systematic, but there is no lack of evidence of how free individuals attempted, albeit with small gestures, to reject the class differentiation imposed by the dictatorship. For example, one interviewee reports the reaction of a doctor visiting the camp at the sight of the poor hygienic conditions of the food intended for the internees:

> I was four years old in Tepelena and I understood little about it, but I remember a scene. One day a doctor came from Gjirokastra, the doctors called him Lluka, he was a very good doctor. He came to that big courtyard where food was being made and found that big cauldron of bulgur (couscous-like) and worms, he saw it and called the officer and the cook and was told: "Either keep these people as people, or shoot them", even with courage he kicked that cauldron and spilled the red vermiform mess (interview 4_F74).

Other interviewees tell of one specific figure, Zoga Veliu, a nurse who was highly respected and well-liked in the Savër camp for the help she provided to the internees:

> We had a nurse, for whom I feel respect, for that light because she no longer lives. There was a Zoga Veliu [...]. The lady who was a nurse in Savër did not differentiate between us persecuted people who were called enemies of the people. At any time of night or day when we, the persecuted, knocked, she was ready. She helped us with all her strength and ways, with the little knowledge she had as a nurse (interview 13_F70).

> Her sister was a nurse there in Savër, and I can say that her name as a woman was Zoga Veliu, she was an extremely dedicated woman, and I can say that her mission as a nurse was a high-level humanitarian mission and she never used the fact that she was a privileged family and a communist family as a means to conduct class warfare [...]. So, even in the worst of times, even in those realities that were not very positive, there were absolutely positive people as well as there were negative people (interview 26_M65).

In reality, the bloc division between internees and free people was not so clear-cut. In fact, the behaviour of those who even held public office or belonged to the category of free people and were members of the Communist Party testifies to the fact that they often disagreed with the treatment of internees and their families. Of course, these were more or less explicit behaviours that in any case attested to the existence of certain differences within the non-interned category.

According to some interviewees, most of the communists in Savër did not approve of the party's treatment of the internees and some even tried to help them without being discovered:

> If Savër had 57 communists, for me and many others, 40 were wonderful people. He was a communist, but he absolutely did not like the way they treated us. Then there were these 15 who, if they looked at us on the spit, thought it was little. [...] There were residents who also helped from the neighbourhood of the free, always trying not to be noticed. There were many good people among the free. And those who were in power, who were good like Qani Ganiu, the Cerepi family, in total, a responsible sector Enver Lici, Pal Prifti. There were people who showed you with their eyes that they did not hate you, that they felt sorry for you. But the task had to be done. When you looked at something and there was no one around, you saw

> nothing. The greatest help you give a person is the moral support that they could not take away physically. Moral support was provided by many really good-hearted people and they saw this as a tragedy (interview 14_M71).

In fact, the judgment of internees seems to be able to discern differences from "free people". Respondents show that they understand that there are often no feelings of hostility toward them and that one should not judge those who are not in their deprived conditions as to a single block. In short, these are very diverse positions of free people who secretly show understanding toward internees. The problem, as one interviewee testifies, is the system of which free people are part who are instead perceived, in a general way, as good people:

> The free people... I said that Savër was divided into two factions, so to speak. The main street was the barracks of the internees, ballists or reactionaries as they were called, with all kinds of epithets, and of the freedmen, those who were people who came to supervise or guide us who were interned. Apart from a few leaders, the ordinary people, for me, were good people, they did not hate us. They did not hate us; I mean a free man could not enter us either for death or for marriage. If he came in it was a gamble for them, because to help the enemy of the class, is to go against the party. And others, others. For us ordinary people they were good people, I cannot say they were bad people. They secretly loved us. [...] But it's not the people who didn't love us. People loved us and we loved them. It was the regime; it was the system, and I cannot blame the people (interview 13_F70).

The opposition between in-group and out-group seems to be mitigated by the identification of the outgroup in an inner circle of people represented mainly by those in power or those who wanted to get ahead. In fact, not only do the internees believe there were good people among the military and the inhabitants of Lushnjë who did their best to help them, but in some cases a feeling of closeness and understanding is perceived even with those who were not interned. After all, the whole of Albania lived in poverty:

> Our history as Albanians is in itself a drama, because there were two types of persecution: the economic one that all Albanian families experienced and the one we experienced as a layer of former persecuted people, the other aspect of class differentiation as it was called (interview 2_M60).

Responsibility for the internees' suffering should not be attributed to the freedmen, who indeed demonstrated sympathetic behaviour in a context of general poverty that affected all Albanians. Instead, responsibility is attributed to that system well represented by barbed wire, as recalled by one of the interviewees:

> In Tepelena we found ourselves in a field surrounded by barbed wire, and at a young age like we were, small children, you think that's how the world is, surrounded by barbed wire. There was no difference at school. Even those villagers who were naked like us. We were in the camp and those outside the camp were just as poor. But there the bazaar was held on weekdays and we, to go to school, had to pass through that bazaar and the villagers would give us a piece of bread, some curd. The little they had. They knew we were the children of the camp, and they gave us all the opportunities they had (Interview 18_M77).

6. The role of education and other socialisation agencies

Some institutions played a key role in the daily lives of internees, both at the level of in-group and out-group relations.
The school attendance of interned children represented one of the rare opportunities for contact with the rest of free society. However, as with many other aspects of the internees' lives, schooling was also controlled by the regime as they were not allowed to continue their studies after high school:

> Until high school, we had free choices in terms of schooling, (...) there were many young people my age who had different tendencies that they could not develop, girls and boys who finished high school with excellent results but stayed in the field or worked in agriculture. We had no rights, dreams were blocked (interview 4_F74).

The internees were excluded from certain common moments of school life and were not granted any recognition of excellence as they could not be graded with top marks. The school was, therefore, an ambivalent institution for the internees; while on the one hand it was a place where they suffered discrimination, on the other hand it restored a semblance of normality to the camp children's lives. Moreover, the interviews testify that the teaching staff proved to be a sensitive

group to the discrimination faced by students who came from the internment camps:

> There were also the teachers, for me the level of the teachers was different from the rest of the population. The teachers were a kinder bunch, they felt sorry for us being treated that way. [...] The good students were appreciated by the teachers. Only the teachers were different from the rest of the state institutions at that time. [...] The most difficult thing is to tell the child that you are a tsarist, you don't receive parcels, everyone received parcels for the new year. Or the teacher would tell me, "O star, I can't give you a roll of honour because they won't let me give it" (interview 8_M70).

Even in the case of the educational institution, the system of segregation instituted by the dictatorship did not allow for the recognition of talents in students from the camps, but nonetheless, the majority of teachers were aware of the injustice perpetrated and regretted it, as stated by interviewees:

> Most of the time all the teachers were very human, hurt regardless of the fact that they did not give us an A because they were ordered to, otherwise if they did, they would give the school the right. In a way, you saw 90 per cent of them, you saw that pain, that respect in their eyes (interview 23_M61).

One interviewee tells an emotional story of when the school headmaster went to the boy's family to personally apologise for an injustice he had suffered because of the school system:

> Someone came and said: "Oh Uncle Bilal, Oh Uncle Bilal, they are looking for you at the door, a man came on a bicycle". Says dad "what do they ask me?" 40 degrees, there was someone outside. [...] When we go there, we find the headmaster of the high school, Sokrat Lika. "Dad", I said, "he is the headmaster". The work of a good and humane man, the wonderful Sokrat Lika. He shook hands with us. "O Meti's father, something serious has happened to your son, yes, I have children too, and I felt like it had happened to my son. I am a high school headmaster, regardless of who did this job, I am a high school headmaster, morality brought me here to apologise". "May you have a white cheek" says the father "I would like my son to be grateful". And I wrote a poem for him, the poem "The True Apology of Teacher Sokrat". [...] I remember this good and monumental act that this Sokrat Lika did to me. I have forgotten what happened to me, that is where my life began. I never forget it

(interview 3_M65).

In addition to the school, the interned children and youth could rely on the wider camp community, which was the most important socialisation agency for them. The various families living in the barracks came from an upper-middle class background, were often part of the Albanian intellectual class, were educated and spoke many foreign languages, as reported by interviewees:

> Most of them were intellectuals with two or three faculties, with three or four foreign languages, when speaking you had to think well, so I had the same parents (interview 7_M70).

The interviewees proudly describe how the camp environment in which they grew up and in which they were educated was an asset, the culture in which they were immersed produced positive effects in terms of education from which all internees benefited, not only the youngest:

> Because in Savër there was no district or province in Albania that did not have its representatives, that did not have its dialects, that did not have its culture. Even if it was peasant culture, for example when people came from the border area; also the intellectual culture that were families who were among the most intellectually esteemed and who were part of the society in Savër and this kind of reality produced an extraordinary positivity. Because it created a kind of common defence, it created a kind of rivalry of the boys in their studies, because most of the boys, those who came from the internees, were the first ones in the schools. Although their names never entered the roll of honour, they were undoubtedly the best students. And being better they also created a kind of superiority. And this kind of superiority was the battle these children won because of their background, their abilities, and their courage to be better than someone else who enjoyed privileges (interview 26_M65)

Interestingly, the internment camp itself became in the lives of the internees, but also for those who lived outside as free men, a true educational institution. In practice this is a fundamental function of the internment camp as an educational agency that benefited everyone, youth and adults, internees and freedmen. The Western education that camps intellectuals possessed could not be replaced by any

other state institution because Albania was going through a phase of isolationist politics. The camp thus represented a true cultural resource:

> As I said, I was educated and that greatest education was the internment camp because we grew up there and learned with people who had graduated from high schools of the most famous universities in the world, they had graduated from high schools in Rome, Vienna, London, the United States. So, it was a camp that I would call a university, for every person who lived in that camp, I think not only did we children benefit from this university, but those who stayed with us, older than us, also benefited. The rest of the camp also benefited because the camp was divided into two parts, the part of the internees who were called then and the free part who lived in the brick houses which were called then or we who were in the barracks who were called internees. But, in Savër, that image, that part of knowledge, of civilised and western culture and education since then also spread around Savër and in the town of Lushnjë (interview 15_M65).

7. Conclusions

Having examined the testimonies of some survivors of an internment camp in central Albania, the study shows the dynamics of some socio-psychological processes in extreme contexts.

The first process under analysis is the enmification. From the interview excerpts it emerged that the process of making an enemy was systematic and it contributed to dehumanizing the internees, through depersonalization and total exclusion from the rest of society. Another process analyzed is group cohesion. The interviews show that the situation of extreme deprivation in which the internees found themselves contributed to the creation of group identity. In response to the physical and material needs of survival, people have activated mutual aid, which has given rise not only to a form of solidarity, but also bonds of fraternity, strictly connected with the idea of having a common destiny. As for intergroup relations, the interviews show that, except in rare cases, relations with the external population were completely nullified and the internees were subjected to a complete deprivation of essential rights, including the right to care. However, some examples of positive and constructive intergroup relations with some members of the outgroup are reported too. Finally, an important role was played by socialization agencies and in particular by the school: although school attendance represented one of the rare opportunities for the interned children to

come into contact with the rest of free society, the educational institution constituted one of the main of propaganda, perpetuating injustices and segregations. However, the internees capitalize on internal resources provided by the socialization within their ingroup, thanks to specific assets which may be available within the members of their own group.

The reported processes match phenomena addressed within the broader social psychology literature, such as the ingroup-outgroup dynamic with its several cognitive, affective and behavioural correlates.

In conclusion, the testimonies reported show how the phenomenon of resilience of people forced into extreme situations of deprivation, especially social deprivation, passes through the creation of strong ingroup bonds that have the function, not only of overcoming the adversities experienced in common, but also of being decisive from the point of view of identity. Even though the interviewees experienced situations of severe social exclusion in the internment camps, the feeling of pride, and sometimes paradoxically of nostalgia, of belonging to a cohesive group that was able to cope with hardship, deprivation and injustice remains unchanged.

It is interesting how this difficult past is consciously experienced as a fundamental period in the lives of men and women. Belonging to the category of the ex-interned thus becomes from an indelible mark of a social condition to a privilege for having lived experiences that would not have been possible elsewhere.

Having been protagonists, and of course victims, of such experiences confers a special status, a sort of distinguishing trait on those who have been able to transform a personal, family, and social drama into a positive occasion of cohesion and solidarity to which one remains attached for the rest of one's life.

It is in its own way a form of social redemption and revenge against one of the most dramatic periods in Albania's history.

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