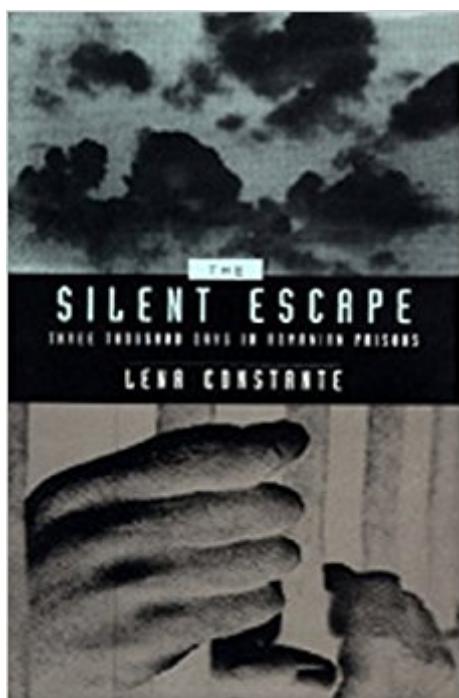


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# The Silent Escape: Three Thousand Days In Romanian Prisons



## Synopsis

"I have lived, alone, in a cell, 157,852,800 seconds of solitude and fear. Cause for screaming! They sentence me to live yet another 220,838,400 seconds! To live them or to die from them." from The Silent Escape

Victim of Stalinist-era terror, Lena Constante was arrested on trumped-up charges of "espionage" and sentenced to twelve years in Romanian prisons. The Silent Escape is the extraordinary account of the first eight years of her incarceration; years of solitary confinement during which she was tortured, starved, and daily humiliated. The only woman to have endured isolation so long in Romanian jails, Constante is also one of the few women political prisoners to have written about her ordeal. Unlike other more political prison diaries, this book draws us into the practical and emotional experiences of everyday prison life. Candidly, eloquently, Constante describes the physical and psychological abuses that were the common lot of communist-state political prisoners. She also recounts the particular humiliations she suffered as a woman, including that of male guards watching her in the bathroom. Constante survived by escaping into her mind; and finally by discovering the "language of the walls," which enabled her to communicate with other female inmates. A powerful story of totalitarianism and human endurance, this work makes an important contribution to the literature of "prison notebooks."

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Romanian artist Constante and her companion, Harry Brauner, an ethnomusicologist, were caught in the dragnet for the show trial of Romanian Minister of Justice Lucretiu Patrascu in 1954. Patrascu was convicted of treason and executed; Constante was sentenced to 12 years'

imprisonment?as was Brauner?with five years deducted for the period she was detained while awaiting trial. In this expressive, desolate memoir, she recreates the test to her spirit of the solitary confinement she endured for seven years: "For 576,000 minutes I was subjected to this assault... 288,000 times," she writes of the surveillance at the peephole of her cell. After her conviction, prison became marginally more endurable when she mastered the technique of "talking" to other prisoners?23 taps on the wall, for example, conveyed the letter w. At the end of this volume, Constante is moved into a communal cell?her experiences in which, she says, she will recount in another book. She also tells us that she was released in 1961 and exonerated in 1968. Copyright 1995 Reed Business Information, Inc.

Constance, an artist convicted of espionage in 1954, endured 12 years in prison in Romania. The first eight years, which she spent in solitary confinement, are the subject of this powerful and terrifying book. Constance re-creates the rituals of everyday life in prison and the brutal interrogation methods, offering gripping descriptions of physical and psychological pain. During her confinement, Constance kept her mind active by memorizing artistic compositions and learning the "language of the walls" to communicate with other prisoners. She also became engaged in intense solidarity with the other women in prison, which bolstered her will to survive. This is an important contribution to the literature of the Stalinist period in Eastern Europe, to prison narratives (joining the works of Arthur Koestler, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, and Evgenia Ginzburg), and to the literature of the human spirit. Highly recommended for all libraries.?Thomas Karel, Franklin & Marshall Coll. Lib., Lancaster, Pa.Copyright 1995 Reed Business Information, Inc.

This is the story of a Romanian artist, a young woman who spent eight years out of twelve in solitary confinement, for the crime of having organized a puppet show together with the wife of a disgraced Communist leader. . . . Despite all of that, Lena Constante never lost her dignity or pride. . . . One of the most powerful prison memoirs ever written!

In 1945, an artist named Lena Constante collaborated with a major Romanian Communist figure's wife to create a puppet theater in Bucharest. As a result, in January 1950 Lena was arrested, convicted of trumped-up charges of espionage, and imprisoned for the next twelve years under miserable circumstances. Her first eight years, spent in solitary confinement, are the subject of this memoir. Lena writes modestly -- she claims to have no talent for writing, which is obviously untrue -- and without self-pity. The format of the book, with each section headed "Day \_\_ of My Detention,"

forces the reader to count the days with her. I cannot help admire Lena and the other prisoners in the story for their ingenuity and fortitude. Although, aside from a few isolated incidents, there wasn't any physical torture, the mental torture and isolation were crushing. Lena had to fend off sexual abuse from the male guards, she was never adequately fed and often outright starved, she had to wear the same clothes until they quite literally disintegrated, and she contracted tuberculosis. Yet somehow, she was able to keep from giving in to the despair or going insane. She was able to maintain a rich inner life by writing stories and poetry in her head, and by drawing when she got the opportunity. Any little scrap she got her hands on could be made into something useful -- she made a comb out of soap and broom straws, for example, and a little backgammon game out of pieces of bread. And, though she almost never saw anybody besides her guards and her interrogators, when there were prisoners in adjoining cells she was able to communicate with them and sometimes have actual conversations with them by rapping on the wall and stomping on the floor -- always under the threat of seven days in "the hole" on bread and water if they were caught. Once, some women in another cell were even able to sneak her a pair of socks they had knitted for her themselves. In spite of the terrible injustice done to her, Lena doesn't seem to have carried any bitterness from her experience, and even tries to give her interrogators and the prison staff the benefit of doubt, pointing out that most of them weren't really vicious and were just trying to do their jobs, and they would be subject to severe punishment if they were caught being nice to a prisoner. In the afterword, Lena explains briefly the larger circumstances going on in Romania at that time that lead to her show trial and imprisonment. To her, locked up in solitary, these were hardly relevant, but the reader is able to get some context from what she said and could look up more information about her trial if necessary. If you're interested in political prisoners and Stalinist ones in particular, I would HIGHLY recommend this book.

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