

# “Yet Another Fenced World”

Olga Oikonomidou

Olga is one of the imprisoned members of the Conspiracy of Cells of Fire (C.C.F.); see **Return Fire vol.1 pg41**. This was her written contribution to a ‘Women Against Imprisonment’ event at the Patission 61 & Skaramaga occupied space in Athens. Also on the topic of the position of women in armed revolutionary struggle, she spoke in April via video-connection from prison during the Anarchist Black Cross Festival in Vienna, Austria, along with other Greek prisoners, and also about the conditions around them, solidarity across the walls, the topic of claiming actions (see **Clarification on the Attack on the CGT Headquarters & on the Topic of ‘Anonymous Disassociation’**) and membership, and the choice of breaking out of jail. This last point relates to the fact that, **July 8<sup>th</sup> 2016, the Koridallos prison court convicted all imprisoned C.C.F. members to an additional 115 years in prison each**, with various other alleged collaborators inside and outside given sentences ranging from 75 years inside to 6-year-suspended-sentences, for a foiled escape plan (the second by the comrades since their capture, the first ending with them holding screws hostage with guns in their hands in 2011 but ultimately failed).

*“The attempted prison escape of CCF from our probable graves, confirmed that the struggle for freedom never stops while it sounded the alarm of the state apparatus. It made the damage it would inflict to both the validity and the reliability of the state visible, if it was successful. So an escape plan, became the occasion for a whole repressive operation with revenge for the years our tenacious attitude and non-repentance as its sole purpose. [...] The pursuit of new arrests and raids in homes resulted in two detentions. Of the mother of Christos and Gerasimos Tsakalos [C.C.F. prisoners] and the wife of the latter [ed. – democratic repetition of the practices used by the previous military junta against the relatives of rebel prisoners, once again; see **Who Is It?**]. The criminalization of family relations showed nothing but the clear vengeful intention of the state. To blackmail and emotionally destroy those who have hurt the prestige of its structures. [E]ven six months after, our loved ones, either from within prison or from the restricted areas they are due to court orders, still give us smiles of patience and trust, maintaining their own dignity”* (letter from Olga, also in solidarity with Tamara Sol and Natalia Collado; see **Return Fire vol.3 pg79/81**).

These family targetings led to the C.C.F. members and Aggeliki Spyropoulou (a fugitive from the escape case, she was arrested at home of the C.C.F. brothers’ mother) going on hunger strike;

they were soon joined by about a dozen more radical prisoners in Greece who combined their demands, and then eight solidarious prisoners in Turkey joined in. After 32 days, the strike finally ended when the leftist Syriza government's Minister of Justice signed an amendment to free their relatives; but still Evi Statiri, the partner of Gerasimos, wasn't let out, so she undertook hunger-strike herself (during which there was arson of the office of the Member of Parliament responsible, as Minister of Justice, for the initial pre-trial detaining of the relatives) before release.

Whatever else has been said, comrades of the C.C.F. (and not only) have consistently showed that struggles don't end in prison, but another breach opens from there...

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On March 19<sup>th</sup> [2011] a jeep of EKAM [*Greek police anti-terrorist unit*] along with 3 cop cars stop in front of a huge rolling iron door. A guard asks for the papers. Everything checks out... and the door opens. As it shuts behind us, yet another fenced world appears before me. It is the prison of Eleonas at Thebes. I get out of the jeep escorted by two women of the anti-terrorism squad that, for the last four days, had been successfully playing the role of my nanny. It took a few minutes of waiting until they delivered me to my new life-guardians. In those few minutes, I kept hearing remarks from them, like *"it's nice in here... such a well-preserved building."* I found it only proper to leave them with the phrase *"if you like it so much, why don't you come and stay here?"*. Naturally, merely the thought of staying in any prison institution is scary to a visitor, scary enough to make any person – even a subhuman – shut their mouth and simply leave.

**The women's prison of Thebes is a newly built progressive monstrosity with oblong branching corridors, cameras covering every angle with no blind spots, with male and female guards, automatic doors with iron bars every 10 meters, empty concrete courtyards smaller than a basketball court, surrounded by walls that end in barbed wire.** Outside these walls there are security areas up until the external wall that separates you from freedom. There are guards in small raised kiosques that supervise the place almost 24/7, in case someone finds a hole to escape.

A small fenced zoo is located between the outer door and the main entrance of the prison. There is neither access to nor visual contact with anyone but visitors, prisoners cleaning, and while on your way to the warden's office. **They figured the scenery looks more natural with imprisoned animals next to imprisoned people. After all, democracy usually "decorates" its little monsters.** After three weeks of adjustment, I am now permanently<sup>1</sup> on C wing, at a ward with a 14 people capacity. I would say that the forced cohabitation with 12 other women is not the simplest of things. With zero personal space and all sorts of vagaries, anyone could easily go beyond their limits. Apart from 2.5 hours per day that I'm allowed to go out in the yard, the rest are confined to a 20x30m room. This is the space allowed for one to move. In this room I drink coffee, I eat, read, write, listen to music, think. This is the place I've spent my life for the last 2.5 months and will continue to do so, indefinitely more. The walls are painted up to the ceiling with images of meadows, trees, seas and fish. They tried to give prison a more humane face. To make prisoners believe that lack of natural landscape could possibly be replaced with paint. During the first days of stay, it seemed to me like a bad joke, now it has become irritating.

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<sup>1</sup> ed. – Transferred out after beating a snitch moved onto her ward; see latest address at the end of this article.

The staff act in a similar, contradictory manner. Typical prison guards trying to pretend that the kind of work they do could be somehow exonerated. They think that politeness could compensate for the standard evening and morning count, for the insensitivity and indifference they demonstrate when inmates very frequently self-mutilate in fits, or at addicts' outbursts. It is them who are handing out psychiatric drugs generously to avoid troubles, while depon (paracetamol) seems to be the drug for any other illness. It is them, who – depending on the command – will not hesitate one bit to lead you to isolation, who will conduct a humiliating strip search, who have the audacity to get a 'free peek' at your letters. It is them who will lock the door on their way out when it reaches 9pm, as easily as they wish you goodnight. Hypocrisy at its best. **In here, wishing does not seem appropriate. There is no good night or good day in prison. There is only day and night.**

The logic of sovereignty dictates a certain segregation of people according to seemingly fragmentary features. Thus, it creates ostensible communities resulting in the reinforcement of inequality and competition. The morality of society responds to this calling not just by reciprocating this logic, but most of the times by becoming its biggest supporter. Social class, ethnicity, gender are just some of the examples that shape perceptions and attitudes daily. **Prison is a crucial part of the system and the inmate community is a compact, small-scale representation of society.** So it's only natural that the symptoms of the sick world we live in, are transferred behind the walls as well. On one hand, prison somehow collectivises the inmates forcing them to identify themselves within a common identity negatively marked by their penalty. At the same time, segregation appears in all its magnitude when men and women are chucked into different hellholes. Men and women will be proportionally segregated once more in protection wards, drug addict wards, gypsy wards, under-aged wards, mothers wards, insubordinate wards, white [*isolation*] prison cells. **Each one of these categories requires different treatment depending on the actual interests of the system.** The submissive worms (snitches) and former clappers of the system (corrupt cops thrown away by the system itself) will be protected, the mothers will be used to show pretextual humanism, the addicts will receive degradation and indifference. There are decent female prisoners experiencing some of these conditions, such as the treatment of being an addict, who could surely be far more detailed and descriptive about their experiences.

As an anarchist revolutionary, I believe that gender segregation is an issue with much social implication, both inside and outside the walls. It is both an underestimated, and distortedly overestimated issue at times. I find that for ages, there's been a well-rooted perception amongst people as to which attributes and behaviours are suited for men or women only. The roles and social identities one is attributed at birth and carries from then on, are gender based. **This is the deepest segregation society has ever abided by.** Social norms define women as the weaker sex, and the social implications in every day life are vast. Continuous reproduction of such a notion automatically defines a subject as inferior, presents it as a victim and it ends up being treated as protected species. But as in any relationship, there is he who transmits and he who receives/accepts. The female gender in its vast majority accepts its social identity and is lead to the logic of victimisation, either to renounce responsibilities, or to rest on its laurels, justifying its inertia, since "demands" are automatically brought down. A victimised perception of any issue, leads to defeatism and non-utilisation of one's ability and capability. The power and responsibility of an individual on both a personal and collective level, is what promotes liberating moments, conditions, or actions. Speaking for myself, I have never thought of myself as the weaker sex, and

I never wanted to be passive. I released myself from the guilt syndrome society imposes on you, and I've always walked my way according to my personal values and will. **On my path, I've come across stares that were still trapped deep inside gender stereotypes, many times. In my opinion, even within the anarchist milieu there is great prejudice lurking on behalf of men, and complacency or even gender role exploitation on behalf of women. In my eyes, I can't think of a rebel who will not fight for the abolition of social roles.** Primarily for oneself on a personal level, and secondarily for others, at a global level. It is both a process of introspection, as well as basic denial of the ways of this world. Since nothing in this life is granted to you, you have to earn it yourself. The bottom line is, how well can a woman overcome the residue imposed on her by society, and act freely and no longer be confined in it. It's only then that the roles are broken, and finally abolished through active attitude.

I chose to be active in a world of passiveness. I chose active participation in a revolutionary organisation. I did not follow anybody and I was not carried away by anything. *I chose.* I was present at the conversations, decisions, actions, as I am now present to pay the price. I claimed responsibility for my actions while I could of taken advantage of my gender status to get a more favourable treatment. But how decent would that be? **Throughout history, a woman involved in revolutionary ventures, practically breaks two roles. On one hand, she consciously abolishes her identity as a law-abiding citizen questioning law and order, while on the other, her identity as a woman, overcoming the standardised perception of gender roles (mother, wife, chick) that society itself has imposed on her.**

During the '70s when the revolutionary organization RAF [*ed. – Red Army Faction, authoritarian Marxist-Leninists*] was active and had a number of women participating in it, German authorities [operating against subversives] would command to “shoot the women first”. The very fact of essentially overcoming two roles, made women more determined, more conscious, thus more dangerous in comparison to men, and their gender-based compatibility to delinquency (always according to the state-official-scientific approach), who were pursuing a more natural path.

Every era though, has its own characteristics and conditions. **The anti-authoritarian movement often searches within the outlaw milieu for a revolutionary subject, assuming that questioning the law through one or more illegal acts also involves the questioning of the extant system.** *Mutatis mutandis,*<sup>2</sup> it also assumes that a woman that questions the law, questions her social role as well, even unconsciously. As a matter of fact, real life in women's prisons, and specifically in the prison of Eleonas of Thebes, it can be ascertained that the modern-day petty-bourgeois behaviour of social roles has been transferred behind the walls as well. The illegal act that occurred was nothing but a momentum. Characteristically enough, the majority of women don't talk of the “crime” they committed, *but of the crime a man urged them to commit.* Which actually means they don't even find a part of themselves in the illegal act that brought them to prison in the first place, thus reproducing the logic of victimisation. The role of the mother was able to stand aside for them to break the law, but as they experience the condition of confinement, the identity of the mother-protector is quickly brought back into play. They feel that it might just be their only salvation to get away, or their curse since they are forced to live apart from their children. Many times, this role will become a guide for some of the behaviours they will have to put up with in prison, it will become their fear and tolerance. The extortive penal system will step on this weakness, and ask for exchanges of any kind, prioritizing on sub-

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<sup>2</sup> ed. – Medieval Latin phrase meaning “the necessary changes having been made”.

missiveness to prison rules, and reports about other prisoners. At the same time, it will cater to humiliate them in many ways, making them bear much more than their own body search, but that of their children as well, who are often of young age, if the prisoner wishes to see them in open visitation [*ed. – i.e. not behind glass*]. In front of this aggressive actual condition, along with their own inability to overcome social identity, they channel their vigor into dealing with inside prison survival, simulating it with the lives they ran outside prison. Frequent visits to the hairdresser, exchange-selling of clothes, make-up.

In the old days, desperate outlaws mainly comprised inmate population. People who had absolutely no hope to see any kind of change to their actual realities, banned from consumption, marginalized by society. A forced no-way-out placement at the lower social scale generates rage, which is a necessary condition for the birth of any liberating attempt. Besides, rage by itself is not political or apolitical. It all depends on which way it's going to want (or actually manage) to be expressed. This rage seems to be missing nowadays, right here and now. On the contrary, here and now seems to be dominated by resignation. While the majority of women are foreigners and do not even know of the events that took place on "September 3<sup>rd</sup>" street<sup>3</sup> or what followed them, they create a large gap between mere survival and wise insurrectionary behaviour. From a subjective standpoint, having the awareness of the actual external condition and the actual concerns, these women still find themselves at significant confusion.

The prison population does not consist of desperate people (setting aside the addicts who due to their addiction on one hand, and the insidious manipulation and repression through psychoactive drugs on the other, have limited capabilities). Nowadays, financial crime runs women's prison, along with large amounts of drug trafficking. No one is in any way excluded from consumption, fact which by itself alienates rage, and in conjunction with social identities, in the end it enables women to remain victims of their own illusions. **This notion of course is not unanimous. There are still, and always will be, some who hold their dignity and head up high. In their minds, the word "staff", as they now want to be called, will always mean "guards/torturers of human beings" and their uniform will always be a target.** Solidarity to prisoners never loses its meaning, as well. Not by defending the prisoner role, but by opposing to confinement itself. To the condition that deprives us of the most precious thing we have, physical freedom, which in itself is associated with bone-crushing restrictions of many kinds. From the disruption of sexual relations to the humiliating dependence on prison machinery for communication. Within this context, you find particular delight in small pleasures that break away from this repressive machine.

Solidarity should remain alive and kicking, supporting the movement of prisoners, unscathed and alert in cases involving political prisoners. In my opinion, solidarity rallies should not be confined to specific ritual dates, as is New Year's for instance, but should keep their reflexes sharp so they can transmute into leverage when correctional whims go out of their way to test prisoners. Solidarity should serve as a tool to give prominence to anarchist prisoners' cases, not person-focused, not based on personal relations, not by guilt-innocence criteria. Besides, no one in this world is innocent, we are all guilty. Some for their consciousness and action against anything that oppresses them, and yet others for their tolerance towards repressive institutions.

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<sup>3</sup> transl. – It refers to the fascist pogrom [*ed. – against migrants*] unleashed with the active participation of police force after the murder of Manolis Kantaris in May 2011 [*ed. – stabbed to death during a robbery*].

I send out my revolutionary regards to those who tenaciously choose to act against the stubbornness of our times.

– Olga Oikonomidou

**Olga Ekonomidou [Όλγα Οικονομίδου]**, Dikastiki Fylaki Korydallou – Gynaikeies Fylakes, TK 18110, Korydallos, Athens, Greece.

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Translated for #5 of Return Fire, a U.K.-based green anarchist zine.

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