

These days we had an opportunity to witness the importance of the preservation of the places of suffering and opening them up to the people. We saw what a powerful instrument the places of suffering are when it comes to passing down history to the young generations. This is the only way how we can make sure that they we will not repeat the same historical mistakes.

This is the former Communist prison of Spaç in Albania (show picture).

This is one of the main destinations where the Communist Regime would send its political opponents.

What is very particular about the prison of Spaç, is the geographical location. Situated in remote mountainous area in the Northeastern part of Albania, the place is surrounded from all sides by mountain tops. A small surface of sky is all what you can see from there. It is like nature has intended it to be a prison.

The second particularity is that besides being deprived of their freedom, the prisoners of Spaç were subjected to extremely hard and dangerous forced labor. Since the area is rich in the mineral of copper, the prisoners had to work every day in the galleries to extract mineral from the depths of the mine. Each prisoner was expected to dig out 7 wagons of mineral during each working shift. Failure to do so was punished by solitary confinement in the isolation cells.

The prison opened in 1968 and it was closed in 1989. It started with a few barracks, and it was expanded gradually to match the increasing number of political prisoners and the demand for workforce in the mine. When the prison was fully operational in its maximal capacity, as many as 1400 prisoners were suffering there.

Another very important historical detail about the prison of Spaç, is the fact that the first anticommunist revolt in Albania took place there. On May 21st 1973, two prisoners were refused food in the dining hall as a punishment for not fulfilling the daily quota of work in the mine. Overworked, starved and humiliated, one of them hit one of the guards in an outburst of desperate anger. This episode of violence escalated very quickly in a clash between the prisoners and the unprepared guards. The inmates took over the prison. For three days, they were the masters of the place.

Caught by enthusiasm, they chanted out anticommunist slogans from the terrace of one of the buildings. The revolt culminated when they rose the national flag without the communist star on the top of the building. Unfortunately, the revolt was violently crushed by the authorities using special troops of the military. Four of the organizers were executed and many other participants had their sentences prolonged.

Another fact that is worthy to mention, is that some great personalities of the cultural and intellectual life in Albania, all opponents of the communist regime, many of them Catholic priests, have suffered in Spaç.

Since the downfall of the communist regime in 1991, none of the governments made it a priority to preserve the historical patrimony of communist persecution and use for educational and commemorative purposes. All the places of suffering have been abandoned and let to decay from time, atmospheric agents and the irresponsible hands looking for construction material and iron scrap. The prison of Spaç was no exception. Very few buildings have been left standing, and there is nothing to remind you of the identity and significance of the place.

The idea to turn the attention to the violence burdened past related to the communist persecution in Albania, was conceived 7 years ago in one of these international workshops organized by the Maksimilian Kolbe Foundation in the Memorial of Auschwitz.

In 2012, in collaboration with our main partner and donor Renovabis, we launched the project “Dealing with the Communist Past of Albania”. MKS has also given some precious contribution with lobbying, coordination and technical expertise.

In the course of the project, we identified and documented the main places of sufferance throughout the territory of the country. We chose to concentrate our efforts in the prison of Spaç because it is the most associated destination with communist persecution in Albania; it has the element of forced labor, it has the element of the revolt and it is easily accessible.

In conclusion, I would like to mention some of the achievements that have been made in the course of the project during these 5 years:

1. 500 hundred students from the high schools have been taken to visit the former prison of Spaç under the guidance of survivors.
2. The physical deterioration of the place has been stopped by appointing there a guard.
3. We organized in the premises of the prison of Spaç the first ever round table with the Participation of groups of interests and donors.
4. The Association ‘The Museum of the Prison of Spaç’ has been created with the purpose to do lobbying to the Albanian government to turn the place into a museum for educational and commemoration purposes.
5. We realized a documentary about the place
6. We have been organizing each year on May 21st the commemoration of the Revolt of Spaç.
7. We have made several bilingual informative publications about the place
8. We installed around the place some tables that indicate the infrastructure of the prison.
9. We managed to make the preservation of the communist persecution patrimony part of the social and political discourse in Albania.
10. In terms of lobbying, we managed to get the support of international NGO and governmental institutions. For instance, one month ago we organized a tour in Spaç for the Ambassador of Germany in Albania, Ms. Susane Schutz.