

escape

STORIES

BEHIND

BARS

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ABOUT THE ESCAPE PROJECT

The three most rewarding types of rehabilitation for prison inmates are: Education Rehabilitation, Employment Rehabilitation, Counseling Rehabilitation. Different countries in Europe have different capacities to provide adequate rehabilitation to prisoners. This explains the great gap among EU countries as regard to the level of incarceration, with East European countries more than 100 inmates per 100 000 inhabitants (Bulgaria – 105), Scandinavian countries around 50 inmates to 100 0000 inhabitants (Finland – 49,9), Italy – 101.

The Covid-19 crisis has had a strong impact on the labour market increasing unemployment among inmates leaving detention structures. There is an urgent need to take action. If prison inmates receive the opportunity to learn professional skills and acquire knowledge in a specialised field, not only do they rarely return to prison (single-digit percentage), but they also go on to build businesses, create jobs, and inspire their local communities. Change doesn't have to wait until after a sentence is over. Change can happen in prison, all along the way.

[ESCAPE project \(Professional Skills and Competences – Alternative to Prison\)](#) is co-funded by EU Erasmus+ program and its main objective is to foster exchange of good practices among professionals working in rehabilitation of prisoners, especially in education and employment. Professionals from Bulgaria, Italy and Finland will be involved in 3 training and exchange activities to discuss most effective rehabilitation practices with a focus on education and employment. Training activities will take place in Tampere, Alessandria, Plovdiv/Sofia and will involve professionals and volunteers interested in helping inmates rehabilitation.

PARTNERS

UISP Alessandria, ITALY

SILTA, FINLAND

COURAGE FOUNDATION, BULGARIA

ORBI AGENCY, BULGARIA

EXCHANGE OF GOOD PRACTICES

SILTA (Finland)

ABOUT SILTA

Silta-Valmennusyhdistys is a non-profit, strongly value-based, non-religious association established in Tampere, Finland in the year 2000. The primary task of Silta-Valmennusyhdistys is to increase societal equality, participation and welfare by coaching and helping hard-to-employ people in overcoming their life's obstacles and to improve their ability to work and to function, and to find their place in society.

Silta-Valmennusyhdistys offers various services to improve the vocational and studying abilities of its clients which mainly consist of vulnerable groups of people with partial work ability including probationaries, offenders, ex-offenders and mental health and substance abuse rehabilitators.

The core values that guide all of our operations are:

- Respecting the individual
- Effectiveness
- Perseverance
- Succeeding together

Our staff has a wide knowledge of the spectrum of criminal customers' problems and challenges of their social inclusion. In addition, our staff members have the knowledge in developing service models and practices for multidisciplinary cooperation. The expertise of the staff also covers methods used in work with vulnerable groups of individuals and evaluation of their need for assistance, coaching and pathways forward.

Silta-Valmennusyhdistys has special expertise in rehabilitation services with criminal clients concerning their comprehensive rehabilitation especially at the final stages of incarceration and upon their release. The operating model provides a chain of services, where the support for reintegration into the society starts already while the client still is incarcerated as well as where the clients themselves plan their personal

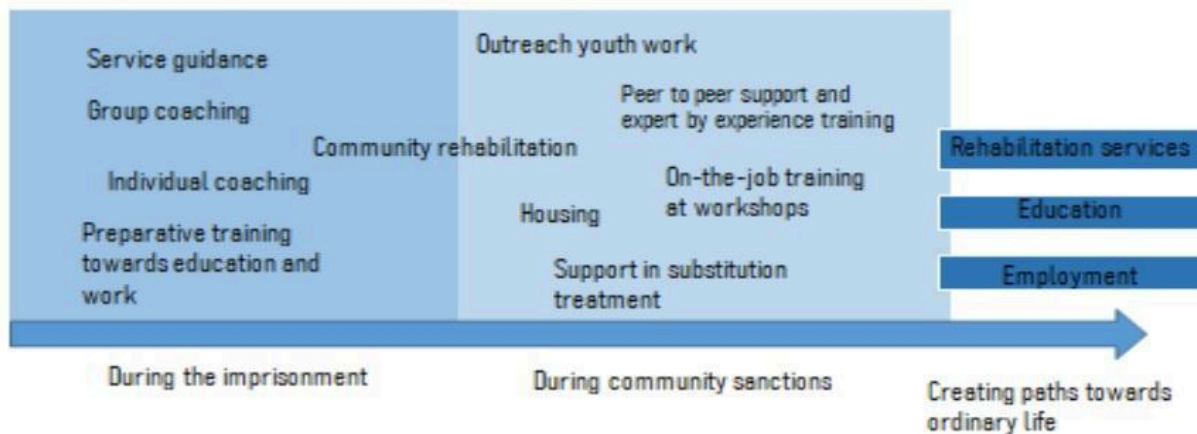
rehabilitation paths. The aim is to increase the social inclusion of prisoners, as well as participation in education and employment. Silta-Valmennusyhdistys's services are carried out individually and in groups and work orientation, as well as community rehabilitation methods.

Silta-Valmennusyhdistys works in close cooperation with the official Finnish Criminal Sanctions Agency (RISE), the Prison and Probation Service of Finland, municipalities, educational institutions and many organisations working with similar target groups both nationally and internationally.

Additionally, Silta-Valmennusyhdistys is a part of the consortium of Centre of Expertise for Social Enterprises which aims at offering nationwide advice and guidance to entrepreneurs and communities involved in or starting up a social enterprise, regardless of the type of company or sector.

GOOD PRACTICES FROM SILTA

PATH TOWARDS EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT FOR CRIMINAL SANCTION CLIENTS



COACHING TO FREEDOM

Freedom coaching is an activity organised by Silta-Valmennusyhdistys ry in cooperation with the official Finnish Criminal Sanctions Agency to support prisoners who are to be released in their final stages of their sentence. The goal is to help the released prisoner cope with the challenges of civilian life and to encourage and support independent living and managing affairs. Each client is offered personal

support according to their needs, which can be related to e.g. finding an apartment, handling agency matters, substance abuse rehabilitation, daily life management and planning for the future.

TOWARDS ORDINARY LIFE

The “Towards ordinary life” service is based on the application of a service and value chain model in building a rehabilitation and learning path for those to be released from prison.

In the service, the activity begins in prison and ends through the various stages of the chain with integration into society and employment, the usual employment route through rehabilitation to education or directly to working life. The provider of the service is Silta-Valmennusyhdistys, whose workshops, production school and housing services offer a career path for those who are freed.

From the perspective of someone released from prison, the service offers a genuine opportunity to change their lifestyle towards an "ordinary life". Running customers from one door to another decreases and trust in the service system's ability to help increases.

The service supports those who are released in order to stick to the services in three ways. Clients are dealing with the same people and organisations at different stages of the path, they know what opportunities are actually available to them and that they have the opportunity to proceed according to their own resources and plans. The persistent work approach also aims to enable a return to the service chain if necessary

The target group of the service is primarily prisoners released from prisons in Western Finland to Tampere and the urban area through gradual release.

PRISONER'S LEARNING PATH

The purpose of the activity is to develop, implement and evaluate systematic service chains, paths to studies and working life for prisoners who are to be released.

The operation is divided into two entities. The target group of the first entity is primarily the male prisoners who are studying in Riihimäki and Turku prisons. They are offered an educational path, the opportunity to continue studying at Silta-Valmennusyhdistys's Tuotantokoulu (Production School) after release from prison, or possibly during supervised probation.

The aim of the second entity is to promote the education of juveniles, young people and female prisoners and to support the joint stages of release. The work is primarily carried out in prisons in Helsinki, Hämeenlinna, Turku, Vanaja and Vantaa.

The learning coaches of the prisoner's learning path work both in collaborating prisons and supporting released clients. The learning coaches' offices are in Tampere, Helsinki and Turku, from which the work with released clients is carried out. The work includes both individual and group coaching. In addition, learning coaches do on-the-go work, e.g. assisting clients in running errands.

SÄRÖ PROJECT "From broken to whole"

The purpose of the project is to identify severe traumatisation and develop rehabilitation for people with a criminal and substance abuse background using a trauma-sensitive approach. The goals of the trauma-sensitive approach are an increase in clients' understanding of being traumatised and a reduction in symptoms. The project has developed a stabilisation group model, which is implemented in cooperation prisons and the Pirkanmaa area. In addition to groups, the project's activities also include individual support for clients. Individual support

includes service guidance, discussion support and reinforcement of methods learned in the group.

In the project, we cooperate with professionals working with people with a criminal and substance abuse background to jointly develop services in a more trauma-sensitive direction. We can provide consultation and training. Especially in the final phase of the project (2023-2024), the goal is to train professionals working with people with criminal and substance abuse backgrounds about trauma and trauma-sensitive work, so that a trauma-sensitive attitude, stabilisation group model, and individual work methods take root as part of the current criminal sanctions and substance abuse services.

PRODUCTION SCHOOL

Silta-Valmennus organises training for undergraduate degree goals in cooperation with Luovi Vocational School. Fields of education include basic degrees in cleaning and real estate services, vehicle and construction, and a basic degree in restaurant and catering.

The Production School graduates car mechanics, small machine mechanics, house builders, real estate caretakers and cooks. The education is secondary vocational special education. The scope of the training is 180 competence points and the duration is about three years. Vocational studies are studied at work, in working life and based on the concept of learning by doing. Learning is supported by methods that foster responsibility and community spirit.

The student is covered by the study support system, being entitled for allowances.

The Production School model has been implemented and developed since 1995.

Educational goals of the Production School:

- Lowering barriers to learning
- Development of working life skills
- Growth in responsibility
- Learning professional skills

- Employment
- Completion of the degree

The vocational training model of Silta-Valmennusyhdistys and Luovi Vocational School is called Tuotantokoulu (Production School). In the Production School, production goals are set for the activities, thus creating a business-like working and learning environment. The student's professional competence accumulates at work i.e. learning by doing. The work and learning environments enable the development of working life skills in addition to studying for a profession.

SILTA WORKSHOPS - Strengthening, rhythm and structure through the practical concept of “learning by doing”.

Silta-Valmennusyhdistys has developed an innovative workshop working model which is based on a hands-on approach where people gain experience, perception and know-how in working in different lines of work.

The workshops serve as learning environments in various services and projects. Silta-Valmennusyhdistys's workshops aim to prepare trainees for working life and studying. During the workshop period, trainees gain experience, insight and know-how from working in the field.

Silta-Valmennusyhdistys's workshops are work communities where learning takes place through doing work - i.e. utilising the concept of “learning by doing”.

People can apply for enrolment at any time. In the communities, coaches and teachers work with trainees guiding them with their tasks and supporting them in teamwork.

Trainees are helped with their own educational and employment goals and supported and encouraged to manage their everyday life in a positive way. During the training period, evaluation and feedback discussions are held so that the trainees can assess their suitability for the field.

Many workshops also produce goods and services for private customers and companies.

Car and small machine workshop

Silta-Auto is an educational workshop where cars and vans are serviced and repaired as a part of the training by the students. The work of Silta-Auto includes, for example, tire work, engine, chassis and control equipment repair, as well as clutch, brake and gearbox work. The tools used are e.g. compressed air tools, vehicle lifts, tire and balancing machines and many other work tools of the car repair shop.

This educational workshop is a work community where trainees, teachers and coaches work. Trainees at this workshop are students completing the basic degree in the automotive field of the Production School, which is a collaboration between Luovi Vocational School and Silta-Varmennusyhdistys.

In the small machine workshop, trainees can learn about the repair and maintenance of small machines. Small machine tasks include, for example, basic maintenance of bicycles and chainsaws and lawn mowers, as well as repair work on moped engines and brakes.

The small machine workshop works in close cooperation with Silta-Auto. The trainees do not have to have previous experience in the field, in the training they learn how to use machines and other necessary skills while participating in the training.

From a smaller scale workshop, there may be an opportunity to enter the Production School's auto or real estate training.

UISP (Italy)

ABOUT UISP

UISP Committee of Alessandria APS has been organizing sports events since 1960, along with activities involving local administrations and social promotion bodies in the province, such as: summer camps for young people; school sports activities; maintenance gymnastics activities for the elderly and those with physical impairments; educational and sports activities in the two Penitentiary Institutes of Alessandria.

In particular, UISP promotes: a) sports practice in its recreational and competitive aspects, with educational and recreational purposes; b) the dissemination - in sports and, through sports, in social life - of a culture of rights and equal opportunities, environment, and solidarity, recognizing sports as a citizenship right and as a resource for inclusion and cohesion; c) the educational function of sports both in individual growth and in the community; d) active lifestyles centred on movement and inclusion.

Since 2019, UISP has modified its statute by becoming an APS (Association for Social Promotion) and fully converting its focus to activities of recovery and social integration, aimed at breaking down all barriers and discrimination, and containment of various forms of aggression.

Prisons, always at the centre of our attention, continue to be a primary focus of intervention: for more than 20 years, we have been collaborating with the two Penitentiary Institutes of Alessandria, providing support to inmates with our sports and recreational activities, aimed at educating and containing aggression.

The activity is understandably very demanding, but we aim to contribute to reducing psychological pressure on inmates by offering them the opportunity to find moments of detachment from the detention process and to experience socialisation moments.

The social function of motor promotion in penitentiary institutions is undeniably recognized by the Ministry of Justice and local authorities: impulses of aggression,

confrontation, and even possible abandonment to feelings of passivity or indifference, thanks to continuous and targeted work, significantly decrease.

Such educational interventions encourage individuals to aim at recovery and social redemption, concurrently with a significant release of tension. These interventions focus primarily on the containment of various forms of aggression, discharge therapies, behavioural re-education and reintegration into society at the end of their detention period, providing them with first approach skills to the outside world.

Release from prison at the end of the detention period remains a period of great uncertainty regarding possible recidivism: our experience, confirmed by the prison management, shows that individuals involved in this sports-social activity significantly reduce this risk (from 80% to 20%).

The disciplines employed always originate from a sports foundation, yet they are administered with keen attention to their underlying purpose of fostering social rehabilitation for the participants.

Our instructors are adequately trained, they attend pedagogical and psychological meetings as every lesson must maintain a re-educational function. It is a particularly complex task both due to security checks for access and behaviour within the prison and due to the associated psychological pressure.

GOOD PRACTICES FROM UISP

Recently, thanks to the contribution offered by an Alessandrian banking foundation, we have proposed gymnastics, chess, yoga, and football referee courses: each proposal for sports activity focuses on the educational aspect and seeks to stimulate reflections on correct life behaviour.

A great appreciation, both from the inmates and from the prison management, has been received for the referee course: it is considered highly educational, but also because at the end of the course, the inmates are fully promoted as 'UISP football referees'. They receive a uniform, a whistle, and a certificate that is fully recognised and gives them the right to referee in our leagues.

As is evident from our description, the positive results obtained must be the result of delicate and precise work that manages to build an empathetic relationship with the inmate and must necessarily be of medium-term duration.

In this sense, our intentions are to obtain annually the necessary funding to carry out the activities mentioned above, funding that our Committee normally obtains from banking foundations or charitable organisations in response to rigorous planning based on the competence and professionalism demonstrated by our operators.

In recent years, in collaboration with the UISP Committee of Settimo-Ciriè, we have successfully implemented the "Spirits" project, a European project with training and insight into prison realities in Greece, Bulgaria, and Romania, hosting the operators themselves in Alessandria.

THE ESCAPE PROJECT - IUSP's diary on the experience

Currently, working in synergy with Bulgarian friends from the "Courage Foundation" and Finns from "Silta Valmennus", we have achieved the same results within the ERASMUS+ Program with the ESCAPE Project "Skills and Competences as Alternative to Prison".

Throughout the project, we had 4 transnational project meetings:

1st Stop - FINLAND

The actual activity took place on February 6th - 7th - 8th, during which our counterparts " Silta Valmennusyhdistys ry" Finnish NGO based in Tampere engaged in social work to promote social equality, individual participation, and the well-being of people having difficulty integrating into the labour market. They showed the Italian and Bulgarian delegations the places and structures used for their courses and workshops.

The association based in Tampere sets up real work communities that produce goods and services for people and companies in need and, furthermore, organises seminars in many fields: high school vocational education and services for individuals of working age, youth, and those rehabilitated from substance abuse, including housing services.

Our delegation, comprised of UISP Committee President Maurizio Arduino, manager Mara Scagni, penitentiary police officer Giulio Romeo, and volunteer Martina Arduino, were able to appreciate the organisation and professionalism with which SILTA manages learning pathways for former inmates, programmes for

psychosocial rehabilitation, workshops where recovered individuals build furniture. Finally, we heard success stories and tales of social redemption directly from those involved.

On the third and final day of the training, there was a visit to the SILTA headquarters where opinions and experiences were exchanged, comparing mutual experiences and obtaining valuable insights from the methods adopted by partners.



2nd Stop - ITALY

On June 30, 2023, our Committee organized a meeting at the Circolo Canottieri in Alessandria to present to the attendees the highlights of the Tampere experience and introduce the program for the July meeting, which includes visits to the two prisons in Alessandria (Don Soria and S. Michele) and the museum of the former “Nuove” prisons in Turin.

In attendance were representatives from the Alessandria Penitentiary Administration and the Heads of Associations that volunteer in correctional facilities. Uisp instructors reported on the positive outcomes achieved with their chess, football referee, and yoga courses within the S. Michele prison.

Furthermore, Franco Galliani, Vice President of our Committee, emphasized the successful continuation of the previous similar SPIRITS project, when the Alessandria

Uisp collaborated with partners from Bulgaria and Romania, leading to fruitful exchanges between different realities.

In the afternoon during the commentary briefing, Don Beppe Giunti, a religious worker in correctional facilities, drew attention to the unique role of justice collaborators, an Italian phenomenon used to highlight their particular condition and the social recovery and role of family members.



At the conclusion of the briefing at the Canottieri, the program for July 17-19 was presented, agreed upon with the Alessandria Penitentiary Administration, emphasising the opportunity to offer the hosted groups an experiential journey within the correctional facilities, where associations and social cooperatives operate to provide inmates with work opportunities and opportunities for social reintegration.

On July 17, 2023, the Finnish-Bulgarian delegations (SILTA VALMENNUS – COURAGE FOUNDATION – ORBI AGENCY), who arrived in Alessandria the

previous day, were escorted to visit the "S. Michele" Penitentiary in Alessandria. This institution offers detainees the opportunity to enrol in university courses in Law, Political, Economic and Social Sciences, and Science and Technological Innovations (computer science) under an agreement between the Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of Public Education. They were able to visit the bakery, pastry shop, vegetable gardens, and hop yard where incarcerated individuals work. Additionally, at S. Michele, there is an experimental section for space design with a striking chromatic and functional setting.



Upon returning to the city, at the "Cantiello e Gaeta" Detention House, our guests visited and appreciated the "Fuga di Saponi" (Escape of Flavors) shop, the only shop of its kind in an Italian prison (now replaced by a successful bistro, the only restaurant inside a penitentiary along with "In Galera" restaurant in Bollate prison, Milan). The products packaged and/or cooked by "Fuga di Saponi" all come from prison facilities across the country.

The next day, our team, composed of Maurizio, Mara, Giulio, along with Enrica Fieno as translator and Fra' Beppe, accompanied the partners on a visit to the Don Soria Prison, where inmates have been running carpentry workshops for several years producing quality furniture and furnishings, facilitating their social and work reintegration.

After the two-day visit to our city's prisons, the hosted delegations expressed their appreciation for the quality achieved in the collaboration between UISP and the Penitentiary Administration, noting the professionalism demonstrated in initiatives aimed at creating employment for inmates both inside and outside the prison walls through the Social Cooperative "Idee in fuga" (Ideas on the Run), the carpentry workshop "Social Wood," and the social cooperative "Company &," as well as the "Agorà Project" providing access to educational and cultural pathways.

Following the prison visits, there were moments of discussion and exchange with contributions from professionals of the Associations operating in correctional facilities and the top authorities of the Alessandria Penitentiary Administration.

On the third and final day of the program, July 19, the delegations travelled to Turin to visit the Museum of the former prison "Le Nuove," made possible thanks to the availability of the non-profit association "Nessun uomo è un'isola" (No Man Is an Island).

The historical and museum tour was very moving for the participants. This place closely witnessed the major events of the last two centuries of Italian history, and its cells housed rebels, anti-fascist partisans, and terrorists.

During the visit, the staff of the association, which advocates for the recovery and affirmation of the former prison's role as a historical memory and testimony to civic values, explained to the attendees the various historical stages and dramas experienced within the former prison.



Source: Museo del carcere Le Nuove/ FullTravel.it

3rd Stop - BULGARIA

In the current year 2024, between March 16th and March 20th, the third stage of the "Escape" project took place in Bulgaria between the cities of Plovdiv and Stara Zagora. The UISP delegation included Maurizio, Mara, Giulio, Martina, Don Beppe, Simona Di Mauro (Head of Treatment Area at Don Soria Prison), and Silvia Coscia (from the BETEL Association operating in prisons).

On March 16th, after arriving in the capital Sofia, the three delegations travelled to the charming city of Plovdiv, where the three-day activities of the final operational phase began the next day.

During the first day (groups participated in various coordination briefings where experiences from previous stages were reviewed, and activities for the following two days were planned.

On Monday, March 18th, we visited a school in Plovdiv in the morning, focused on the training and education of children with special educational needs, and in the afternoon, we visited a theatre forum centre where recreational activities involving inmates from the local prison were described.

The next day, we travelled to the city of Stara Zagora, where project participants were welcomed by the leaders of the large prison. After observing the facilities that enable inmates to embark on paths of personal redemption through work and culture, we were able to compare our respective prison realities in the presence of the staff working at the correctional facility.



During the meeting with officials and volunteers, the discussions mainly focused on the rehabilitation activities carried out by associations working in synergy with institutions for the rehabilitation of inmates.

CONFERENCE BACK HOME

On April 4th, the closing meeting of the "Escape" project was organized, inviting representatives from the Penitentiary Administration and volunteer organizations operating within the two prisons in Alessandria.

With the help of photos taken in Bulgaria, the transnational experience was narrated to the numerous attendees, highlighting the great opportunity to interact with entities operating in countries and contexts different from ours.

After the introduction, among others, Don Beppe Giunti spoke emotionally about his encounter with the Orthodox chaplain at Stara Zagora prison.

Subsequently, the two young interpreter-translators, Martina and Enrica, who participated in the "expeditions" to Finland and Bulgaria and collaborated during the Alessandria stage, were asked about their impressions of the experiences. Both commented very positively on their participation in the project, emphasizing the quality of the people involved and the uniqueness of the situations faced.

Dr. Di Mauro and former officer Giulio Romeo then highlighted the aspects and differences between the Bulgarian and Italian prison systems, confirming the usefulness of these cultural-experiential exchanges.

The newly appointed commander of the Penitentiary Police in Alessandria, Dr. Alessia Chiosso, also greeted the attendees, appreciating the spirit behind projects like the one under discussion.

The briefing concluded with a toast and the wish and intention to meet again in the future to share international projects like this one.

COURAGE FOUNDATION (Bulgaria)

ABOUT COURAGE

Courage Foundation is a non-profit organisation with a non-political purpose whose main goal is to provide opportunities to vulnerable groups. Over the course of our work since 2007, we have worked with people who experience physical, mental and geographical challenges, realising projects mainly under the scope of “Erasmus+”, but we also have a few projects with the Municipality of Plovdiv.

Courage Foundation implements projects with stakeholders (local and regional decision makers) and partner civil society organisations from Bulgaria, Romania, Italy, Denmark, Hungary, Slovakia, Turkey, North Macedonia. The Foundation has developed local and transnational projects in the field of adult education aiming inclusion. It places special attention on educating adults in life skills.

The Foundation has very good partnerships with local NGOs, local and regional authorities, prisons in Plovdiv and Stara Zagora, media in the Plovdiv region. Media in Bulgaria has reflected Courage Foundation initiatives reaching thousands of ordinary citizens in their everyday life.

Courage Foundation has implemented several transnational projects targeting offenders and professionals working with them:

- SPIRITS - KA2 with partners from Italy and Romania on the role of sport for developing life skills of offenders
- CHANCE - KA2 with partner from Finland, Greece, Italy, Romania, Spain on alternative measures to detention
- ESCAPE - KA2 with partner from Finland and Italy on increasing professionals competences in rehabilitation

GOOD PRACTICE FROM COURAGE FOUNDATION

SPIRITS PROJECT

The SPIRITS project was founded by Erasmus plus in 2018 and it involved partners from 4 different country (Italy, Bulgaria, Romania and Greece). The primary goal of the project is to break down prejudices and improve the skills of inmates through sports education. This initiative emerged from the need to address some deeply ingrained societal prejudices. Among these is the belief that inmates are inherently evil, that they do not respect others, and that they are incapable of positive change. Additionally, there is a prejudice that professionals working in prisons, such as educators and police officers, are insensitive individuals. Another erroneous belief is that sports perceived to be aggressive, like boxing, should be banned in prisons to avoid violent behavior.



Contrary to these prejudices, the SPIRITS project has highlighted some fundamental truths. Many professionals working in prisons, including educators, psychologists, and police officers, are actually caring and compassionate people. Furthermore, inmates are normal individuals with emotions, aspirations, and the ability to plan for their future. These discoveries challenge the negative image often associated with both inmates and prison workers.



A key concept of the SPIRITS project is well expressed by a quote from Ovid, an inmate in Stara Zagora prison with a life sentence: "Without difficulties, nothing has value." Indeed, sports represent those difficulties that can give value and meaning to life, especially for those living behind bars. Sports activities not only help inmates maintain physical fitness but also offer them a sense of achievement and an opportunity for personal growth.

To disseminate the results and activities of the project, SPIRITS utilized various communication channels in Bulgaria. Among these, the Bulgarian National Television broadcast reports on the initiative, while the national newspaper 24 Chassa published dedicated articles. Social media also played a crucial role, with private and project pages on Facebook helping to reach a broader audience. Finally, the news site DC News covered the event and related activities, ensuring comprehensive media coverage.



The impact of the SPIRITS project is significant, as it demonstrates that "there are many ways to reach people's hearts. Sport is one of the best." Through sport, the project has succeeded in creating a bridge between inmates and society, promoting understanding and empathy, and thus contributing to a positive change in common perceptions.

PAVLINA BRATANOVA

Pavlina is spreading light in one of the darkest places - the prison



Pavlina with her husband Dimitar, both teachers in Plovdiv prison

Pavlina is a full-time teacher in the prison of Plovdiv "St. Ivan Rilski". She has experience working in the school of Stara Zagora's prison as well. Before going full-time in prison, she also worked with children in after school classes . In relation to that she reflects - *'within one working day, I meet people who have committed crimes, with confused notions of faith, justice, beauty, honour, morality, dignity, people with devastated souls... and with children, who are like a sponge that absorb every single word, gesture, reaction of mine. What do they have in common? Everyone needs to be understood, accepted, inspired, find a goal and work for it... everyone trusts me, and that makes me very happy, but also twice as responsible! "*

Here is what she shared with us:

Can you tell us something about yourself?

For some I am Mrs. Polya, for others I am Mrs. Bratanova... I like to communicate with people, I like to smile, I like books, flowers, the sun and the sea... I rebel very strongly against injustices, and I believe in the good in man. I believe that there are no good and bad people... each person be either good or bad at some point. And maybe this is what makes me constantly being involved in extracurricular activities - organizing and staging theatrical performances and sporting events, recycling, applied arts... and a bunch of other things that make inmate students feel differently – being part of a team. I write for the newspaper "Stalbitsa" (Stairs) in Plovdiv Prison, the purpose of which is to show that there is good, there is light, there are people who do not give up and can be free-spirited behind bars ... and that good things happen in any place.

"He went to prison, came across good people and became a man" is a famous quote from Nikola Vaptsarov's poem "A Song for the Man". Does your long experience prove that transformation for the better is possible? How can people deprived of liberty be helped to take the 'right' path - and live without breaking the law?

People enter prison with already developed characters, with a certain experience, sometimes sad, with bad and good habits and their own views on life. This makes the whole catharsis impossible. But transformation for the better is always possible. I think that my job, and that of the people who work in prison, is to lit up the "light". And to make it burn as fire, it is necessary to go a long way, to make a lot of efforts both by inmates and us. It can be achieved in the first place by gaining their trust. If in their eyes you prove to be an authority that they accept to follow, the educational-corrective activity is much easier. To make possible the "right path", very good synchronisation of institutions is needed. Because it often happens that they come out of prison, with a desire for change for the better, with a desire to work, to study... and outside they face bureaucracy, heartlessness, illiteracy which make them "lose their way". They are assigned to certain social institutions. What they need is education and work when they get out of prison! Otherwise, they have no choice and they find themselves in the same vicious circle and environment, which, like sticky mud, "stains" them and inevitably brings them back behind the bars.

Throughout the ESCAPE project, we have implemented Forum Theatre. You have previous experience with it, too, alongside the UPSDA project. What is it, and why do you do it?

Forum-theatre is a theatrical play in which a problem that is important for the audience is shown and discussed openly. Audience is invited to suggest and play different solutions. In this way, the viewer becomes an actor and so the problems that are presented are elaborated, analyzed, and made meaningful by everyone". In a natural way, we find ways to solve the problem. This is the easiest and painless way in places like the prison, to reach the person, his problem and solution. Simply because through the forum-theater they, both the problem and the solution, come from the person himself.

LILIYA SEKOVA

Imagine a TIGHTROPE WALKER who steps over the prison walls overcoming boundaries.... Liliya has been crossing prison boundaries for more than 8 years.



Liliya Sekova is an actress, graduated from the class of prof. Nadejda Seykova and Assoc. Violeta Genadieva. She acted in the Haskovo theatre and later graduated in theatre directing and shows again under prof. Nadejda Seykova and Leonid Kapon. She staged in Sofia the play "Night Guest" by K. Karageorgiev, the children's play "Knock and Pook" and other works. He has been involved as a volunteer in various social projects almost throughout his studies, mostly with children. She says that in 2015 she came almost by chance to the project "Everything is possible" of the OPUR Association, intrigued by the fact that as an actor she could enter the prison and encounter "live" people who had committed different types of crimes, and observe and get to know their behavior /a real challenge for every actor and director/.

Lilia says it never crossed her mind before that she would be in prison discussing art with people convicted of the worst crimes. But, working with them, she never for a moment felt fear or embarrassment, perhaps because she entered without any scruples towards the prisoners. That's why, invited to run the Tetratral Workshop again by the Skills for Freedom project, she accepted without a second thought.



Mediasource: Лилия Секова: Никой не е застрахован от това да попадне в затвора - MediaCafe

Apart from the inspiring things that we have read in articles about you, could you briefly introduce yourself?

Hello, my name is Liliya - I am a director and a psychologist. I was born in Pazarjik, have lived in Sofia, but now I am in Plovdiv. I am involved in theatre and psychology, and I love walking among trees. Meditation is also among my hobbies.

With which social groups are you involved? What are the challenges

I work with many social groups - from different generations, backgrounds, etc. Patience is a strong key element when working with such a variety.

What connects you to the ESCAPE project?

My experience with convicts, namely - prevention through art. Forum theatre as well and the willingness to exchange good practice with various countries.

What is forum theatre? Which social group does this practice influence the most?

Forum theatre is a a short scene based on a true story with a negative ending , in which aacting out - the viewer has a say to change the actions of the characters so that the action ends with a happy ending. The discussion that arises during the choice to change the plot scene - is group therapy for the participants.

There is no particular group where it does not work ! It is for everyone !

It is important to have a common problem that the "group" wants to solve.

In February earlier this year, the ESCAPE project implemented an afternoon dedicated to Forum theatre. The theatre presented an outlook on some common problems such as domestic violence and drug abuse. What can a person learn from such an experience?

Usually the audience is seemingly aware of all the earthly problems - but , practically does not think about real and actionable solutions . By participating in such a format - senses the real problem , threat and hears or gives ideas for solutions , which through a nice debate becomes clear which is the working tool to solve the problem . The audience is usually chosen according to the submitted situation / problem by the group. It is always good to have a higher standing authority who makes decisions and is aware of the laws in the respective country.

People rarely associate the Forum theatre practice to prison. Why? How effective is forum theatre in prison?

People don't associate prison with anything good ! In practice, that's the way it should be ! But, prison itself is - a body in which you have to "reform" , when you don't understand your mistake , even if proven in court , the art and in particular this method is well suited to the demonstration of seeing yourself from the sides - to work on yourself , and the decisions you made to get to where you are now. Not only FT and theatre in general provides an opportunity to work with the personality - which is very important in the growth of oneself. There is an effect - but to have more serious results there must be much more serious practice and perseverance.

What would you say to people who work with prisoners, and consider implementing forum theatre? What advice would you provide them with?

Don't hesitate.

Cheese in Prison - a path to integration

In 2018 one of the national televisions in Bulgaria broadcasted a report called “Making cheese behind bars”. The reportage is about the importance of preparing the prisoners for future realisation by providing them with the right environment and skills to integrate themselves on the labour market.

The prison in Smolyan, Bulgaria is located in one of the cleanest areas around that is hospitable for raising animals, mainly dairy-producing. Therefore, the administration of the prison came up with the idea to integrate this opportunity to the prison’s activity - looking after the animals and making dairy products (cheese and milk). The idea was set, the equipment was bought and a specialist in the industry was hired to work with the prisoners - 6 of them would work to produce and 6 of them would care about the animals. The cheese and yoghurt are made according to Bulgarian’s standards for the industry. One of the main reasons they are established well in the market is because prison does not allow powdered items, therefore all the milk and additional products are naturally made. In the report, it is mentioned by the prisoners that the opportunity they are given has encouraged them to gain professional experience, to feel useful and to let time pass faster. Some of the interviewees even mention that thanks to the experience, they have managed to reflect further on the causes of why they ended up in the establishment.



SUCCESS STORIES: STORIES OF EX CONVICTS

SAKU - From inmate to social worker



I was born and raised in a wealthy upper middle class family with no financial worries. I was able to complete primary and secondary school, even though I had symptoms even then, e.g. with drugs and belonging to gangs, like many others at that point. There was alcoholism in my family, but the scenes were kept up and it produced a lack of belonging and a lack of love, at least for me. In the family, of course, I was already well on my way to the wrong paths and gangs, i.e. drifting into crime and illegality as a result of the use of intoxicants.

I already tasted beer and tobacco when I was in kindergarten, and by that time I was caught smoking for the first time. From there the problems started to rise. The presence at home was low and had to be sought elsewhere and my friends who were a few years older and also used drugs, so there was a sense of belonging

through the use of drugs and they also caused the removal of inhibitions, so the lifestyle that included danger, excitement, indifference, fearlessness, etc., carried me away.

After secondary school, I tried to study for a bachelor's degree in commerce and administration at a commercial school, but it lasted just a few months because intoxicants were a strong priority and everything else illegal interested me. That was the life I was living and I drifted from the family more and more. Prisons and other institutions became familiar during the 25-30 years of addiction and crime, and the latest conviction for homicide was the turning point when I realised that my life was a dead end and I couldn't live like that anymore!

I needed help and a lot of it, and then while serving my sentence I made a decision about a total life change and went to the substance abuse worker in prison and told them that I needed help with the substance abuse problem and life change in general. We started thinking about options and the best option was Silta-Valmennusyhdistys, which turned out to be a really good solution because in the substance rehabilitation there were peers who knew what I was going through and how to give me peer support and guide me in a certain right direction towards things and people who shared the same ideas.

At the beginning I followed the others from activity to activity because I didn't know where and what I should do until I started to find my own way. With the rehabilitation team we went to different events and places and had group/individual discussions in an open and honest spirit. The expertise of the staff and the guidance of peers was a great help and little by little I started to notice that being sober and the so-called normal life was quite meaningful and easier and more comfortable without the constant fear of the police and fear of death and other distractions and problems.

I started to find my own way and little by little I started to recognise who I really was and wanted to be. When life started to slow down, I started thinking about turning

my past into my strength and skills, so I went to study to become a practical nurse and I managed to graduate, which was a great achievement and success. I had already studied carpentry in prison and graduated.

Right now I'm not studying, but focusing on work under the new professional profile.

The future looks and has been looking quite good and peaceful for many years now. (Of course, the government in Finland is currently doing absolutely incomprehensible things that the human mind can't understand). I believe however, that we will survive and life will go on and THERE IS ALWAYS SILTA!

In addition to my main job, I also belong to the board of the local social and health sector association and to the residents' committee of my place of residence, and I work hard to run a self-care group, etc. While I was a substance abuser, such things would have been impossible. Things and my life and activities have changed significantly, and such change is possible only if you know how and dare to ask for help and then get that help and support in the right way and on time. It's hard to say where we'll be in 5 years, but hopefully still working and alive, and why not still at Silta-Valmennusyhdistys.

Young people have challenges in today's world especially with belonging and with the pressures of the environment. Therefore, discussion and presence is important because it can prevent the feeling of not belonging and lack of love, especially at the level of families, so that the young person does not go looking for it elsewhere. Of course, the tossing and turning of emotional life and the determination of self-worth are important and to get healthy perspectives. But perhaps the most important things I consider to be the presence and interest in the young person's affairs and the genuine expressions of love, especially from the parents at home.

I first started to work at Silta-Valmennusyhdistys during my substance abuse rehabilitation/after completing my probationary period at Silta-Valmennusyhdistys. During the probationary period I already worked as an assistant instructor in rehabilitation and as a chauffeur as well as in different projects.

At the moment I work at Silta-Valmennusyhdistys as a Coach of Vocational rehabilitation supporting the integration into work. This service of Vocational rehabilitation promoting employment is aimed at young people (16-29 years old) and working-age youth and adults. The service is suitable for those who, due to illness, impaired functioning or the overall situation, need individual support from a job coach in choosing a job, professional field or field of study. The ability to function must be such that the customer can commit to working at the workplace. Throughout the service, customers are supported by a vocational coach who guides and supports them towards their goals. There are 3–5 rehabilitation days per week and the length of one rehabilitation day is 4–6 hours. The length and number of rehabilitation days are agreed individually according to the customer's situation.

PEPPINO - After many year of prison in a cooperative



(second on the right side of the picture)

Peppino was a minor living in one of the "tough" neighbourhoods of Naples. There, the issue wasn't about getting into violence; it was inherent, daily, and pervasive in life itself. The real question was whether one could ever escape it. Perhaps Peppino tried too, but against the evident destiny of violence, he was overwhelmed.

Peppino committed a homicide.

Thus began his usual path: trial, conviction, and atonement. But Peppino didn't give up. He managed to process what he had done, the inevitability of that act in his life at that moment, and developed the determination to write the end of that heavy chapter of his life.

He participated in all opportunities for good practices, meetings, courses, and schools. With the seriousness of his behaviours, his determination, and deep maturation, he built a network of friendships and relationships based on great mutual trust.

He obtained some permits, repeated job opportunities, and never cheated. With great awareness, he chose not to use the permits to return "home," knowing that his ongoing prisoner status in his homeland would put him at a disadvantage as a non-free individual or worse, create problems for his family.

Instead, he used the permits of the adoptive city, where the prison was located, and crossed paths with other people from that city. As he approached the end of his sentence, granted due to his young age at the time of the unfortunate event, he chose to stay and live in that city again, finding a home and work.

Today, he is a happy citizen, reconciled with the world, with many friends, and many prospects ahead. He has reconnected with his homeland, serene in his journey and for our community (a dear friend and also a small son of the effort that many of us have made for this success).

It is a joy and an example that encourages us never to give up and not to consider anything lost, making us proud of him.

Luydmil's story - from Prison to boxing trainer



In Stara Zagora prison, boxing and football are the favoured sports among inmates, who engage in regular monthly tournaments. Professional boxing coaches, who are also inmates, lead the sessions. Impressively, the prison's boxing team has clinched the national prison boxing championship title three years in a row. One of the coaches aspires to train Olympic champions post-release. This is Luydmil.

He was arrested for drug smuggling. Boxing has always been a passion of his and when he was arrested, he got the chance to encourage other prisoners to use boxing as a tool to manage the situation. He has participated in multiple inside prison tournaments as well as tournaments between prisons.

Currently Luydmil is training teenagers in Svilengrad teaching them that boxing is a sport of self control, respect and fair play.

Luydmil Dimitrov himself confessed that in the difficult days of his imprisonment boxing for him is a way to manage stress and treat the pain of the separation with

his loved ones. "Boxing has always been like a prison - in the ring it looks like you're locked up, confined and there is no way out, but at the same time you are the freest person in the world and you know that there you are actually the master of your own destiny," he says in an interview.

Acknowledgement

In conclusion, we want to express our deepest gratitude to all the ESCAPE partner organisations and their stakeholders who are tirelessly dedicating themselves to such an extraordinary work - to fight prejudices and help inmates often excluded from society.

The ESCAPE project partners believe that only through collective awareness and sustained action can we effectively combat prejudices and ultimately help inmates get out of the vicious circus and live a normal life.

May this handbook serve as a valuable resource and inspiration to anyone who wishes to embark on a similar journey of advocacy and change. Together, let us continue to push boundaries, challenge norms, and work towards a world where everyone is treated with dignity and respect.