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Recollecting the Past: the Testimony and its Role in the Process of Coming to Terms with the Past

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Abstract

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The paper is part of an extended project that focuses on the recuperative memory in post-1989 Romania, especially on the mechanism used to re-appropriate the past. This process includes not only the experiences of those who lived the hard reality of communism in Romania, and implicitly in Eastern Europe, but also those of the second or third generation. As many victims and many of those who directly experienced the communist regime never had the option of writing their memoirs, the oral history is, in this way, one of the main resources of recuperative memory. In Romania the process of coming to terms with the past was initially characterized by political reluctance, thus after the 1989 ideological and political changes the direct testimony was the most used method of presenting and exploring the past traumas. The research proposed here focuses on the role of testimony in re-appropriating the past, as we are interested in the development of oral history in Romania, especially concerning the gathering of information dealing with the recent past. Analysing the extent of the oral history studies and the importance of oral testimonies in the Romanian society, this study underlines not only the official, governmental implication but also the collective and individual projects meant to help Romania come to terms with its communist past. An international approach regarding the process of coming to terms with the past it is also offered in the context of comprehensive knowledge of the past.

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1. International Context and Methodological Aspects

After the 1990 political and social changes the memory studies and implicitly the process of coming to terms with the past gained more visibility in Eastern Europe. This process addresses the traumatic events that occurred during the communist regime that dominated Eastern Europe for a long period of time. It involves a wide range of transitional justice mechanisms, as well as “making room” for individual stories of the past, for victims and survivors’ narratives. The process of remembrance involves not only the direct testimony of the past, but also the second or third generations’ availability to listen and become indirect testifiers of the past. Oral history is, in this way, one of the main resources of recuperative memory. Many victims of the communist regime never had the option of writing their memoirs, thus oral narratives were the only way for them to transmit their stories (Schwab, 2012; Brockhaus, 2012; Reulecke, 2010). The testimonies not only have to inform others about past atrocities, but also help individuals develop personal recuperative memory, allowing ‘the fragments to find the frame of reference’ (Laub and Finchelstein, 2010: 56-57). The testimonies help the victims to reconstruct a narrative of past events and their own historical narrative. For those who suffered deeply during the communist terror, the chance to speak was the key that unlocked their testimonies. By re-enacting the past, they integrated the personal memories of a traumatic past into the collective narrative. At the hearth of the oral history lies the personal and the collective memory. Dominick LaCapra underlines that “memory is the chocolate covered madeleine on which we overdose.” (LaCapra, 1998: 14). Even if it is unreliable and it doesn’t guarantee authenticity it is the direct way of accessing the “foreign country” (Lowenthal, 1985) that is our past.

If the second half of the twentieth century brought the development of the oral history domain in Western Europe, the fall of the Iron Curtain represented the landmark for the this area in the post-communist European society. The European post-communist countries tend to have some common features, as transitional justice mechanisms, lustration laws and various mechanisms of accessing the past through oral histories and life writing. As Alexander von Plato shows in one of his studies we can’t speak of the pan-European remembrance culture (Alexander von Plato, 2015: 35). Each post-communist society based on its political system developed its own culture of memory. Across Eastern Europe each country concentrated on its own past and traumas and some international alliances were made to bring to light the memories of the past. Such is the case of the IOHA - The International Oral History Association, formally constituted in June 1996 at the IXth International Oral History Conference in Göteborg, Sweden.

The next paragraphs offer some examples pointing out the continuous work of different countries regarding the totalitarian painful past. Some of them are national-centred, others tried to extend their objectives at the transnational level. Mainly the projects analysed here are based on oral history and involve the creation of archives. According to Brown and Davis-Brown an archive is not only the guardian of memory but also the manufacturer of memory (Brown and Davis-Brown, 1998: 22).

The Baltic States developed different projects of gathering oral histories concerning the communist past and creating archives dedicated to the recent past. Since 1993 over four thousand life history interviews were conducted, transcribed, digitalized and deposited in the Oral History Archive in Riga. The purpose of this archive is to contribute to the understanding of the Latvian national identity. In

Estonia the project of “giving back the past to the people” was launched at the end of the 1980’s. In 1988, the Estonian Heritage Society published a call meant to gather stories about native places, historical events, etc. The result was a total of 1700 stories that are preserved in the Estonian Literary Museum Archives of Cultural History (Rahni-Tamm, 2015: 215). In 1996 the association “Estonian Biographies” was created with the purpose of organizing contests of life histories. The first call, entitled “On the fate of myself and my close relatives in the twist of history”, was answered by more than 250 persons. The memories of the Estonians were also gathered by museums and memory institutions. In 2014, the local and international associations, engaged in collecting historical memories in Estonia, created an organization called “Kogu Me Lugu” (Collect our Story) that focuses on the young generation and their contribution to the memories of their parents and grandparents.

The Baltic Initiative and Network (<http://coldwarsites.net/>) reunites eyewitnesses, accounts, countless videos containing testimonies of the victims of the totalitarian regimes. One of their projects aims to bring the realities of the past into the present. For example a cattle wagon was established as a memorial at Skrunda railway station (Latvia) in Kuldiga district.

The project “Memory of Nations” is part of the Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes (Czech Republic) and reunites over 5662 witnesses in their database, over 35 000 photos and 15 000 video clips (www.pametnaroda.cz). Their digitized archive, a true memory mosaic, was created in 2008 by three Czech institutions: the Post Bellum association, Czech Radio and the Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes.

Working at the transnational level “The Platform of European Memory and Conscience” is a non-profit, non-governmental international organization that was founded in Prague in 2011 from 12 European member states. Its purposes include research, documentation, awareness raising and education about the totalitarian regimes. As a pan-European organization, the Platform militates for the protection of the European heritage, of the collection and preservation of life experiences and memories of the victims of totalitarian crimes. (<http://www.memoryandconscience.eu/>)

2. Oral Testimonies in Post-1989 Romania

This study aims to introduce Romania in the pan-European image of the communist past. As a former state of the Eastern block and victim of a totalitarian regime, Romania is still at an incipient stage of coming to terms with its own past. Mainly to the lack of political class implication this process of dealing with the past is not fully developed. As part of the recuperative memory process, oral history contributes to the action of coming to terms with the past (Mitroiu, 2016). At this level two directions were established, based on the direction imposed by the process of gathering the information. The first one resulted from the individual and civic interest to know more about the recent past. This kind of initiatives were mainly manifested immediately after the 1989 events, as it is the case with the documentary “Memorialul durerii”, that brought together oral testimonies of the communist regimes survivors. The temporal distance determined the decrease of the interest shown by the public opinion for the communist victims’ testimonies, even if after more than 20 years since the 1989 events the second or third generations seem to show more interest in their parents’ and grandparents’ stories of the

past. The second direction presented here is that of the top-down memory approach, when the initiative of gathering the information related to the communist past was mainly a public and institutional one.

2.1. Testimonials, research and postmemory

The year 1989 is considered to be the landmark of change in Romania, though not an easy one as the communist past was largely present in the various layers of the Romanian society. After the fall of the communist regime the Romanian society was caught in a denial and forgetful stage as a consequence of the desire of change and political lack of interest for the recent past. Lucia Hossu Longin directed the first public video documentary centred on the remembrance of the past atrocities entitled “Memorialul durerii” (The Memorial of Suffering) (Hossu Longin, 2012; 2013) that started airing in 1991. Surpassing the political and social discouragements, she succeeded in gathering and publically presenting a series of interviews of the victims of the communist regime. Her endeavours included not only the memoirs of the survivors but also images of the deportation camps, photographs from personal archives, videos from the National Television Archives, all elements that recreated the existing fear of the totalitarian past: being an enemy of the State. For the first time the reality of the communist prisons was publically presented. Places like Sighet, Periprava, Aiud, Gherla Jilava, and Pitesti were finally acknowledged as places of terror where human condition was dissected and obliterated. Torture, hunger, humiliations and death had been publically presented as attributes of the communist regime. Each testimony, presented in the Memorial, recreates the collective national narrative of the generations that lived and died under the communist regime.

As the victims of the communist regime naturally disappear the second or third generation’s involvement is required and not only at the level of postmemory (Hirsch, 2001), but also in the process of gathering direct testimonies of the past. The volume *Supraviețuitorii. Mărturii din temnițele comuniste ale României* (The Survivors: Testimonies from the Romanian Communist Prisons), edited by Raul and Anca Ștef and published in 2014 by Humanitas, is one of the few collections of interviews with survivors of the communist prisons that were gathered by representatives of the third generation. The nineteen interviews offer memory fragments of the trauma endured by those who opposed in any way the communist regime.

Another example of this type of collection of interviews was published in 2007, as part of an extended project of six volumes coordinated by Cosmin Budeanca. Part of a larger project developed by the Institute for the Investigation of Communist Crimes in Romania, these volumes entitled *Experiences from Prison in Communist Romania (Experiente carcerale in Romania Comunistă)* (Budeanca, 2007; 2008; 2009; 2010; 2011; 2012) reunite the stories of political prisoners and their experiences in a pre-communist, communist and post-communist society. As Cosmin Budeanca points out the documents often present only certain aspects of life in prison. For instance we can’t exactly know the number of prisoners, aspects of daily life in prison, the behaviour of guards, all the tortures that were implemented and this is where oral history saves the day by bringing to light all those painful memories that help us recreate a genuine image of the communist society. (Budeanca, 2007: 10). Following a common line with Raul and Anca Ștef’s volume, this collection presents not only the experiences from prison but also the reason for the arrest, their lives after the release and their struggle

to survive in a completely different society. The reader is able to see the journey of each individual from prison to life outside the physical walls, into a world that was still just a larger prison. Each volume covers different regions of Romania and the interviewees were chosen in order to offer a broad perspective covering the aspects of ethnicity, genre, level of education, and political background. The purpose was to present a real image of Romanian prisons and their inhabitants. This collection, published between 2007 and 2012, brings forward a number of 143 life stories where each interview is conducted differently due to various reasons, such as the health issues, remembrance difficulties, and most importantly due to victims' refusal of remembrance seen as a way of protecting themselves from a traumatic past that still haunts their lives. Each study ends with a few photographs of the interviewees providing the reader the possibility to relate with the testifier, and to view these interviews not only as stories but as memoirs of real individuals that survived one of the most traumatic periods of the Romanian society.

In the scientific research oral history was used as main method for gathering information regarding a specific phenomenon, for example forced collectivization. It was also used as a source for different studies that intend to revive the memory of a specific time, place, and community (e.g. Serbs, Germans, Hungarians, Jews, Gypsies and Romanians). Smaranda Vultur (Vultur, 2000a, 2000b, 2002) focuses many of her studies on the Banat area and on various communities who were persecuted under the communist regime. Cosmin Budeanca is another researcher, whose area of interest covers the German ethnics and their story during the communist regime. (Budeanca, 2008; 2013) Many other studies were conducted under the supervision of the Oral History Institute and some doctoral thesis focused on the memories of different communities and phenomena from the communist past. One of the main area of interest was represented by the armed anti-communist resistance in the mountains. Some examples include the study *Grupul Cruce și Spadă. Mărturii*, published in 2007 and edited by Valentin Orga, Denisa Bodeanu and Cosmin Budeanca, the study *Rezistența anticomunistă din Apuseni. Grupurile "Teodor Șușman", "Capota-Dejeu", "Cruce și Spadă". Studii de istorie orală* under the guidance of Doru Radosav (2003), and also the study *"Suferința nu se dă la frați ..." Mărturia Lucreției Jurj despre rezistența anticomunistă din Apuseni (1948-1958)*, edited by Cornel Jurju and Cosmin Budeanca and published in 2002.

2.2. Public initiatives

In 1993 the National Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes (<http://www.totalitarism.ro/>) was founded under the aegis of The Romanian Academy. From the start its purpose was to gather, archive, analyse and publish documents related to all aspects of the totalitarian regimes in Romania. Even though the purpose of the Institute was to analyse all aspects of life, from economic structures, social issues, institutions, to culture, mentalities, repression, resistance, and daily life, the results offer mainly information about the main political and economic agendas of the communist political class. They also include research that focuses on the main communist leaders whose activities are reviewed in the larger context of Eastern Europe. Unfortunately the Institute has not yet developed an efficient politic of gathering information about the recent past through oral history and testimony of the past.

The Institute for the Investigation of Communist Crimes in Romania was created in 2005 through the Government's decree 1724/2005. In November 2009 this project extended its area of research as a consequence of the union with the National Institute for the Memory of the Exile. The purpose of this institution no longer concentrates only on investigating and identifying the abuses committed during the communist regime but also on retribution and bringing justice to all the silent victims. The Institute underlines through its work the importance of oral history and testimony related to the recent past. One of the projects, Experiences from Prison in Communist Romania, developed between 2006 and 2013, concentrates on interviewing former political prisoners regarding their experiences before, during and after their ordeal. The collection succeeds in creating a genuine image of the communist prisons and their inhabitants. The oral history archive of the Institute also contains more than 450 interviews (video and audio) reaching both repression and resistance in the communist Romania.

The Centre for the Investigation of the Communist Crimes in Romania founded in 2010 under the guidance of Marius Gheorghe Oprea emphasizes the importance of identifying all acts that trespassed the human rights and the moral and legal condemnation of all abuses and crimes that took place in Romania during the communist regime. The most remarkable activity of this institution is represented by its program of contemporary archaeology. The main purpose is to bring closure and justice to the victims and their families. While the Institute concentrate its efforts on this area its project of oral history remains, at least according to their webpage, at a stage of intent. The initial objective was to create an archive of oral history compressing life stories from communist Romania, presenting some aspects from both personal and social-political life between 1945 and 1989.

Created and financed by Aspera Foundation, Memoria.ro is a digitized library that reunites under its roof interviews, memoirs, oral history, studies regarding recent history and photographs, all creating a colourful image of Romania in the XXth century. This online library contains an abundance of data from the latest news across the oral history domain: meetings, conferences, and art exhibits, to testimonials that reach the entire XXth century, studies regarding memory and identity, and a variety of oral history e-books. Overall this online library is one of the richest and most helpful instruments of studying oral history, which can allow even the unexperienced reader to get a glimpse of the Romanian traumatic past.

Formed and administered by the Academic Foundation – the Memorial of the Victims of Communism and Resistance – Sighet Memorial has as main purpose to regenerate the collective memory which during the communist period was obliterated. This institution reunites under its wings both the Sighet Museum and The International Centre for the Studying of Communism. In 1998 the European Council named The Sighet Memorial as being one of the places for keeping the memory of the continent alongside The Auschwitz Memorial and The Peace Memorial in Normandy. This institution succeeded not only in restoring the memory of the Romanian people but also in keeping it alive in the present post-communist society. Perhaps one of their greatest achievements was implementing a Day of Memory. Since 2003 on the Memorial Day (in Romania) people from all over the country, former political prisoners, victims of the communist regime and their relatives are gathering in Sighet to commemorate the fallen ones and their memory.

One of the most important institutions in the contemporary Romanian scene, The Oral History Institute, was created in 1997 as part of the Babes Bolyai University. From the start its primary goal was to gather in an archive and to analyse the oral memories of both those directly involved and of their descendants regarding their experiences during the Romanian XXth century. The institute focuses on the importance of memory in outlining the present view of the past, which could help Romania come to terms with its traumatic past. Its aims are to establish the oral history research as an academic discipline in the recent history and to make this topic part of the high school curricula as an educational instrument. Throughout the years, both individual and collective projects have analysed various subjects of Romania's traumatic past: religion, minorities (Armenians, Jews, Germans, Roma), certain social categories such as professors, journalist, but also national phenomena: the Romanian resistance, the life of prisoners, the collectivization, etc. Since 1998 the Institute has been publishing a yearbook (*Anuarul Institutului de Istorie Orala*) representing a collection of studies on oral history. A series of volumes based on oral histories were also published on the topics of the armed resistance towards communism, the collectivization, and the minorities. The on-line archive of the Institute is rather poor as one would expect to discover more than two audio fragments of interviews digitalized and published on their webpage, but yet again Romania is just making room for the remembering of its communist past.

3. Conclusions

Natalia Khanenko-Friesen and Gelinda Grinchenko (2015) have underlined the existence of four different elements of oral history: oral history as pluralization of post-socialist societies, oral history as a political tool, the impact of oral history over the social sciences of the former socialist countries and the oral history's capacity to produce and legitimize new agents of national histories. It is obvious that Romania has not offered sufficient space and resources to the process of coming to terms with the past and to a consistent politics of memory. The oral history based on the testimonials of those affected directly by the injustices of the communist past is part of this process of reckoning with the past wrongs. Even if there are some individual and institutional initiatives focused on the recent past, the lack of a national politics of memory influences directly the results of the research in the field of oral history. The lack of coordination between various topics, institutions, researchers, national projects, political agents, etc. seems to dominate the oral history agenda regarding the exploration of the recent communist past. It is quite possible that these problems will be long forgotten in time, as the field of memory studies and oral history will be developed in Romania in the years to come. But it is also true that in the meantime important information will be lost forever, as the victims, the survivors and the direct witnesses of the communist regime naturally disappear. That is why we militate for a developed politics of memory that requires the involvement of the victims and direct witnesses of the communist past wrongs, historians, memory researchers, political analysts, non-institutional and civic organizations, but also political agents and national and institutional support.

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