

The Journal of Public and Professional Sociology

Volume 4
Issue 2 *Faculty Development Abroad*

Article 9

September 2012

Historical Amnesia

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Recommended Citation

Fein, Melvyn L. (2012) "Historical Amnesia," *The Journal of Public and Professional Sociology*. Vol. 4 : Iss. 2 , Article 9.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/jpps/vol4/iss2/9>

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Historical Amnesia-Romania Style

As part of the Year of Romania, Kennesaw State University sponsored a talk about Romanian participation in the Holocaust. The speaker, an expatriate Russian professor, documented in excruciating detail how the number of Jews executed by Romanians during World War II was second only to the number murdered by Germans. Approximately a quarter of a million were expelled into what is today the Ukraine, where they were summarily dispatched. Later on, when Romania switched its allegiance to the allies, its leaders regretted this episode. Their hearts had never really been in it, but they needed to placate their Nazi masters. Some Romanians, sad to say, were only too happy to participate in this violence; nevertheless they were a small minority.

This is history. It is well established. Indeed, it is not the worst piece of cruelty on the Romanian escutcheon. Located in the heart of the Balkans, the country has been the scene of many incidents of inter-ethnic violence, even before the villainous exploits of Vlad the Impaler. Romanians have often been described as a warm-hearted people, and on an individual basis, they surely are. Nonetheless, millennia of repression have left a mark. Many of the nation's inhabitants harbor a repressed rage that occasionally breaks forth, as it did when the Nazi boot strode across the continent. Many contemporary Romanians are ashamed of what occurred more than a half century ago, but they must now deal with how to explain it to future generations. Their record in doing so is imperfect at best.

All this came into focus when a faculty group from KSU of which I was a member visited a high school in Piatra Neamt. This moderate sized city is located in the northern part of Moldova. Neat and nestled at the foot of the Carpathians, the municipality is a combination of old monarchial and communist modern. Reasonably prosperous, the town's citizens are proud of the intellectual accomplishments of many of its favorite sons. They are particularly pleased with the achievements of the high school we visited. The Romanian equivalent of a magnet school, it specializes in instructing students in science and math. Indeed, in order to be admitted, students have to possess excellent grades and pass a formidable set of examinations. In other words, they are very bright and very strongly motivated.

When our group arrived, it was clear that the faculty and pupils took pride in their institution. Very clean and well organized, the building's walls were festooned with posters and student artwork. Despite being more than a century and a half old, this edifice exhibited a dignified bearing that reflected the intentions of those who built it and the hopes of those who today maintain it. To all intents and purposes, this might have been an elite American school, albeit one located in a central city. We learned upon being greeted by the school's principal

that back in the nineteenth century a large proportion of those enrolled were Jewish. As members of the city's merchant and professional class, their parents wanted the best education for their children—and the school delivered on this promise.

Now we were shown around slightly rundown facilities that still exuded the gentility of a storied past. Laboratories and classrooms alike were open to us so that we could appreciate how well equipped they were. We were also ushered into the principal's suite, where we were regaled with the overabundant pastries that are the hallmark of Romanian hospitality. As importantly, the principal and a number of senior faculty members candidly explained their difficulties and successes. They wanted us to know that despite their limited resources, they were still turning out some of the nation's best and brightest students.

Eventually we were led to the school's auditorium. There clustered in the back half of the hall were about fifty students. Drawn from the institution's most articulate English speakers, they were there both to learn from us and to teach. We began this encounter with each of my colleagues describing something of his or her background. The idea was to make them comfortable with us before attempting to get them to open up about their circumstances. These, after all, were teenagers and we correctly suspected that they might have difficulty sharing intimate feelings and perceptions.

In any event, the encounter started slowly. But it got going when one of my colleagues, who was originally from Peru, spoke of his experiences in emigrating to the United States. Since so many Romanians have recently emigrated, and many in the room were probably going to do so in the relatively near future, their attention was captured. I then discussed what it was like to be Jewish in the U.S. My point was that unlike in Eastern Europe, where so many massacres have taken place, my co-religionists found a safe-haven in America. Nothing like the exterminations that occurred in Romania had taken place on our side of the Atlantic.

At this, one of the students raised his hand to chide me about my xenophobia. According to him I had it all wrong. There had been no holocaust involving Jews or Gypsies in Romania. This was simply anti-Romanian propaganda. Some people talked about a half a million deaths, but this was totally undocumented. There was, in short, no evidence of a bloodbath whatsoever.

I then replied that he was wrong. The documentation of what occurred was very strong indeed. The exact numbers might be in dispute, but that hundreds of thousands had been executed at the behest of Romanian authorities was not. That huge numbers of Jews were absent from his own city should have been obvious from the particularly large Jewish cemetery that overlooked the town. Clearly these people had once been here, but were no longer.

After this confrontation, the principal apologized to me for this student's temerity in contradicting what I said. He was, I was told, an adolescent and adolescents often believe they understand it all. Earlier schools had apparently not done a good job in informing these youngsters of the country's history and hence they did not know the truth. But the adults did and efforts were being made to clarify the record—now that the communist censors no longer held sway.

About a half an hour after receiving this explanation, I ran into the student who confronted me and for about ten minutes we continued our discussion in the hallway. What immediately became apparent was his lack of hostility. One-on-one, he was not even defensive about Romania culpability during World War II. What best described his demeanor was his curiosity. He wanted to know what actually happened. Almost from the outset he admitted that his information was limited. He was not trying to offend me, but to make sure that his nation had not been gratuitously insulted. I explained that I like his country a great deal, but that history was history. At this point I described what happened and how we knew it did. For his part, he took this in with good grace. More concerned with asking questions to fill in the gaps of his knowledge than with contradicting me, when we parted it was with a smile on both of our faces. We shook hands and went in our separate directions.

Later, after we left the school, there was time to reflect on what took place. At no point did I have a sense of deliberate cover-up, either from the faculty or students. Some history was clearly not as well known as one might have hoped. But it seemed to me that this sort of historical amnesia is commonplace. When I contemplate on how little American students know about the Viet Nam War and how much less they know about the Great Depression, this sort of ignorance seems the norm. First, young people are not usually concerned with history. Much more interested in figuring out what the future holds for them, they typically regard the past as dead and gone—as something with little relevance for their situation.

Second, the young live in an idealized bubble. Despite their rebelliousness, they have simplified, and largely romanticized, views about the nations in which they reside. Just as their ideas about their parents are missing crucial details, so are their ideas about their countries. Thus, parents can seem simultaneously better and worse than they are. This is because, in their lack of experience, there are things the young cannot know. They cannot imaginatively put themselves in some circumstances because they do not have enough data to conjure them up in their imaginations. In *Lies My Teachers Told Me*, James Loewen complains about the distortions communicated to him by his history instructors. No doubt many air-brushed the worst parts of American history, but it could scarcely have been otherwise. Were they to have been more explicit in describing the past, their pupils would have been bored to distraction. Just as

children who are too young to care about sex fail to understand the realities of coitus even when these are explained, so the young cannot comprehend history before they are ready.

This is not a problem specifically for Romania. It is a problem for everyone everywhere. Mistakes are made about history because history is in the past and each new generation takes time to come to grips with it. As a result, simplified and comforting myths are created and disseminated. This is partly in the interests of the teachers, but partly in the interests of their pupils. Idealizing history and/or conversely demonizing it are is part of how we humans deal with the world that existed before we arrived on the scene. The best we can do is gently disabuse the young of their idealizations—when they are ready. Some, of course, will never be ready, but others like the young man I encountered in Romania may eventually get there.