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Taxonomies of pain

Museal embodiments of identity and belonging in post-communist Romania

Carmen Levick

Introduction

In a working paper presented as part of a seminar organized by the Council of Europe and the European Cultural Centre of Delphi in September 1998, Raymond Weber, the then Director General of Culture, Education, Youth, and Sport, presented the Council's expectations of the meeting: "to encourage interaction between two key concepts in contemporary European debate, heritage-history-memory on the one hand and citizenship on the other" (Council of Europe, 2000, p.27). The discussions that took place at Delphi between 25 and 27 September invited academics, politicians, and artists to explore the complex relationships between heritage, memory, and national identity, within the framework of European belonging and identity. The fall of communism in 1989 represented a turning point in the political and cultural development of the European continent, demanding more careful definitions and consideration of the use of heritage and memory in the construction of new Eastern European national identities. The collapse of communism assumed a vacuum of national identities in the East, that needed to be filled with concepts of diversity and multiculturalism, closely connected to the principles of democratic citizenship (Council of Europe, 2000, p.7). The main worry voiced at Delphi was that this identity gap might be filled by manifestations of nationalism and intolerance, using the tools of memory and heritage to create state narratives that moved against the image of Europe proposed by the Council: "a common cultural heritage enriched by its diversity" (Council of Europe, 2000, p.8). The way to counteract such potentially nationalistic tendencies was a vision of Europe as an inclusive and heterogeneous cultural space that allowed for a framework of common values but respected the multiplicity of interacting communities within it. This chapter proposes a re-evaluation of the concepts of memory, identity, and belonging within a theoretical frame that assesses Eastern Europe "otherwise" (Boatcă, 2021), highlighting decolonial aspects in the relationship between Eastern Europe and European institutions and examining the position of heritage and citizenship in the processes of national historical becoming.

Sighet as a site of European memory

My analysis focuses on two institutional “sites of citizenship” (Council of Europe, 2000, p.42), a term proposed at Delphi by H el ene Ahrweiler as a way to avoid the tension contained in Pierre Nora’s “lieux de m emoire”,¹ in the northern Romanian city of Sighetu Marmat iei (or Sighet): the Elie Wiesel Memorial House, dedicated to the town’s renowned Jewish son, and the anti-communist Sighet Memorial Museum. The apparent uncertainty about the name of the city reflects the position of many Eastern European places that often existed between overlapping empires. Sighet is known by the full Romanian name of Sighetu Marmat iei, often shortened to Sighet, but also by its Hungarian name, M aramarossziget, and German name, Marmaroschiget.

The importance of Sighet as a site of European memory and belonging becomes clear from a brief look at its complex history. Inhabited from as early as the Bronze Age, Sighet was in turn part of the Kingdom of Hungary, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and eventually Greater Romania after the Treaty of Trianon in 1920. During the Second World War, the city was once again under Hungarian administration as a result of the Vienna Award (1940), to be returned to the Romanian state and communist rule at the end of the war.² Thus, Sighet can be viewed as a microcosm of European historical becoming, a site clearly shaped by the great events of the twentieth century, where a multi-ethnic population strived to create narratives of belonging both at a community level and as ways to align with wider national and international narratives of identity. In addition, according to Nira Yuval-Davis, “borders are privileged sites for the articulations of national distinctions – and thus, of national belonging” (Yuval-Davis, 2011, p.95). Therefore, discussing commemoration practices in a border city like Sighet offers an opportunity to examine the ways in which national boundaries and narratives of belonging are created and engaged with at the local level.

The complexity of the city’s past unveils ontological insecurities that can be seen in many Eastern European communities. Jelena Subot ic argues that the ever-changing political and cultural circumstances of these countries not only created “ruptures in routines; they also lead to the questioning of state identity and, most important, the questioning of foundational state narratives on which this identity is built” (Subot ic, 2019, p.27). These uncertainties were then institutionalized in museums, memorial sites, and official days of remembrance that often reflected significant fractures between local and European narratives of belonging. The coexistence of the Elie Wiesel Memorial House and the Sighet Memorial Museum within the same commemorative space aligns with the two conflicting master narratives of European cultural memory: the Holocaust and communism. Although a small Romanian border city, Sighet has the extraordinary capacity to encapsulate the tensions that become apparent on a larger national and international scale. It hosts the memories, traces, and remains of a strong and vibrant Jewish community, largely destroyed during the Second World War, and of one of the most notorious communist prisons in the country. The narratives of display observed

in both locations will be addressed through the lens of decolonial terminology proposed by Walter Dignolo and Anibal Quijano, in order to reveal the tensions between local, national, and European commemorative processes. In her book *Yellow Star, Red Star*, Jelena Subotić traces the history of this conflict in Eastern Europe, noting that Holocaust remembrance is so central to European memory that it has become closely connected with the idea of Europeanness itself: “joining, contributing, and participating in a shared memory of the Holocaust defines what a European state is, especially for late Eastern European entrants to the EU” (Subotić, 2019, p.21). However, while communist remembrance is a defining characteristic of Eastern European narratives of identity, Holocaust commemoration is seen not only as an enforced Western memory narrative but also as a reminder of Eastern backwardness and inferiority. Ewa Stanczyk notes that during the first EU enlargement to the East, the new member states were seen to be “lagging behind and thus in need of re-education where the remembrance of Shoah is concerned” (Stanczyk, 2016, p.418). Terms like “re-education” and “backwardness” reinforce the Western view that Eastern European countries need to change and do better before any discussion of adherence to European institutions could be considered. These terms were further underpinned by official language in the European Parliament discussing a “Europe with different speeds” or “multi-speed Europe”,³ which, according to Manuela Boatcă “reflected historical hierarchies between multiple and unequal Europes resulted from the shifts in hegemony between different European colonial powers” (Boatcă, 2021, p.6). Furthermore, the European insistence on Holocaust remembrance and on the official recognition from Eastern European states of their involvement in the Holocaust was tied to what was generally seen as a process of “Europeanization” which highlighted the paradox of the European discourse of unity and singularity and reinforced a “historically consistent politics of difference within Europe that has systematically reproduced the East and the South of Europe as peripheral formations of a Western European core” (Boatcă, 2021, p.6). Contemporary decolonial theories and processes allow for a troubling of the official narratives of identity and belonging through a “rhizomatic thinking necessary for understanding the social and cultural transformations set in motion by trans/national dislocations” (Gutiérrez Rodríguez and Tate, 2015, p.2). An in-depth analysis of both the Elie Wiesel Memorial House and the Sighet Memorial Museum in connection with local, national, and European discourses about memory, identity, and belonging reveals fractures and tensions, “cacophonies, irritations and discordances” (Gutiérrez Rodríguez and Tate, 2015, p.7) that invite a careful reconsideration of international hierarchies and a troubling of Western discourses of continental unity and coherence.

Eastern European heritage and memory in a decolonial frame

The fall of communism offered an ideological and cultural opportunity to integrate several newly formed and existing nation-states into a European framework

that assumed a cohesive set of moral values. New or prospective members were required to adopt a widely accepted Western European narrative of the twentieth century, which often did not match the official national narratives. Consequently, how could the ideas of common heritage and democratic citizenship, put forward at Delphi, facilitate both a smoother integration of Eastern European states into the European institutional structures and a successful solidification of democratic values at local levels? To understand the complexity of this framework, it is important to recognize the tensions that these concepts encounter within a decolonial reading of Eastern Europe.

In 1998, the Council of Europe proposed heritage, memory, and belonging, or what they called “roots” or citizenship, as key values to counteract a long list of existential problems experienced by Europe after 1989: globalization, the ideological vacuum caused by the fall of communism, “the malaise of post-modern civilisation” (Council of Europe, 2000, p.7), individualism, and social and cultural exclusion. In the report generated after the meeting at Delphi, heritage was discussed as a fluid concept that moves away from the historical and towards community and memory. The perceived rigidity of heritage was replaced with a symbolic fluidity, closely related to the creation of community identity. This view of heritage, both tangible and intangible, as community-based memory heritage, is also reinforced by more recent scholarly works that argue for emotionally driven heritage management policy and practices that draw on the views of local communities and are consolidated by a range of emotions: pride, joy, or pain.⁴ The fluid notion of heritage is closely connected with the concept of memory as a way of accessing significant local and regional aspects of the past.

At Delphi, the Council of Europe considered that to be successful, heritage and memory must be closely connected to the principle of democratic citizenship. It proposed a definition of citizenship that moved beyond the legal and the political, towards “cultural references, such as values, identity and the feeling of belonging” (Council of Europe, 2000, p.40). It was based on the notion of a shared European cultural heritage, solidified in sites of citizenship, “which foster individual freedom and independence and help individuals to use memory for democratic purposes” (Council of Europe, 2000, p.42). These sites of citizenship are an embodiment of memory, places where history has been made, that can help create stronger communities able to coexist with conflicting or contradictory components of histories and memories. As public spaces, these sites of common heritage often struggle to make a meaningful connection between the local and the European. This struggle is sometimes caused by the coexistence of multiple, conflicting sites of memory, some of which are “othered” within the official national narratives of identity. Othering functions as a way of reinforcing a state narrative and responding to what at a local level is perceived as forced, performed memory and commemoration. The Council of Europe report discusses these co-existing sites as “parallel heritages” that mark out communities and divide “those who recognise themselves in [them] and those who do not, those who are accepted from those who are excluded” (Council of Europe, 2000, p.38). Decolonial theory can

aid the elucidation of these complex processes by allowing for a complication of the relationship between memory, identity, and belonging.

Decoloniality invites a re-visioning of Western master narratives and a reconsideration of accepted, official historical accounts. As a fluid condition, much like the contemporary view of heritage, decoloniality “seeks to make visible, open up, and advance radically distinct perspectives and positionalities that displace Western rationality as the only framework and possibility of existence, analysis and thought” (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018, p.17). In this chapter, decolonial practices will be utilized to examine the friction between coexisting examples of contemporary commemoration that can be read as “delinkings” (Mignolo, 2007) from what Anibal Quijano called “the colonial matrix of power” (Quijano and Ennis, 2000), understood as the systematic pressures exerted on narratives of identity. These pressures can be internal, led by an official state narrative, or external, led by international institutions, that clash with localized conceptualizations of identity.

Having in mind the power of contextual narratives of display within heritage sites, these tensions clearly complicate the Council of Europe’s proposed relationship between heritage, memory, and citizenship in connection with European belonging. Successful or not, these “delinkings” constitute actions that interrogate official histories and move towards a heterogeneity of thinking and representation. Nevertheless, when the Eurocentric matrix of power demands heterogeneity as a sign of successful integration, more complications of the relationship between the local and the European ensue.

Romania as a decolonial space

In Romania, the trope of decolonial space can be applied both geographically and ideologically. Geographically, the country is placed at the northern edge of the Balkans and at the eastern edge of the European Union. This position renders it often neither Balkan enough nor European enough. These bordering sensibilities, the constant definition of the country and its people as existing at or within borders, situate Romania within decolonial frameworks. Walter Mignolo notes: “Border thinking and border epistemology emerge among *colonial subjects* who realize that their knowledge has been disavowed and denied. That realization is the starting point of *becoming decolonial subjects*” (italics in the original) (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018, p.207). However, after 1989, the bordering discourse in Romania also highlighted attempts to redefine the country’s pre-communist history as a panacea for all the ills caused by the totalitarian rule.

The period just before the Second World War and until 1944 was one of Romanian territorial expansion, aided by its German allies, incorporating Bessarabia, Bukovina, and Transnistria to the old Romanian “Regat” (Kingdom) of Wallachia and Moldavia.⁵ It was seen as the rebirth of the nation through the force of arms and religious faith. The return to this vision of a powerful Romania both within and without its borders provided a perfect opportunity for the creation

of new right-wing nationalistic narratives after the fall of communism, which were placed on a collision course with Romania's international post-communist ambition: becoming a full member of the framework of European institutions, after officially submitting its application in December 1995.

Consequently, a decolonial exploration of contemporary Romanian commemoration practices in relation to both communism and the Holocaust addresses the various tensions, ruptures, and de-linkings within the process of historical becoming. It also highlights the complexity of decolonial processes in a country where there are constant rearrangements between conflicting memories and traumas. The physical representations of commemoration discussed in this chapter testify to the difficult relationship between the two memorializing processes in the context of both local and European belonging. Both memorials are part of a process that moves beyond the external demands connected to the membership of international organizations. They are witness to a torturous narrative of identity-making within the construction of a new national memory which involves bordering, uneasy fault lines, and victimhood. This is a dynamic process of de-linking and relinking, of distancing and belonging.

The Elie Wiesel Memorial House

Elie Wiesel's credentials as a writer, political activist, Holocaust survivor, and Nobel Peace Prize laureate in 1986, born in Sighetu Marmăției, made him the perfect candidate to represent Holocaust and Jewish remembrance in Romania. Pat Morrison of the *Los Angeles Times* described Wiesel as "history's witness" (Morrison, 2013) and Joseph Berger of the *New York Times* argued that he "became an eloquent witness for the six million Jews slaughtered in World War II and who, more than anyone else, seared the memory of the Holocaust on the world's conscience" (Berger, 2016). In the context of Romania's attempts to join both NATO and the EU in the early 2000s, many Romanian politicians were convinced that Wiesel would represent a great symbol of the country's improved moral ideologies.

Opened in 2002, the Memorial House (Figures 7.1 and 7.2) also hosts the Maramureș County Museum of Jewish Culture. The house belongs to the County Maramureș Ethnographic Museum and represents part of the museum's engagement with Jewish life in the area from the seventeenth century to contemporary times. The private space of the Wiesel family house becomes the public representative of all Jewish communities in the region, connecting contemporary visitors not only to the local Jews who perished during the Holocaust but also creating diachronic links with local Jewish communities as far back as the seventeenth century.

According to the museum narrative both online and on-site, through the objects it displays, the Elie Wiesel Memorial House becomes a witness to and symbol of the cultural heritage of local Jewish communities. The main purpose of the house is "to contribute to the cultural, educational, social and economic unity of the city of Sighet" (my translation) (Elie Wiesel Memorial House), a place where visitors



Figure 7.1 The Elie Wiesel Memorial House, childhood home of Elie Wiesel in Sighet, Romania. Source: Vberger. Available at: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Elie_wiesel_house_in_sighet03.jpg CC BY-SA 4.0 <<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>>, via Wikimedia Commons. This file is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International license.

can understand the past in order to shape a future based on diversity and inclusion that extends beyond the city. When I visited the Elie Wiesel Memorial House in the summer of 2017, the site presented a “synthesis” (Elie Wiesel Memorial House) of objects that belonged to Jewish families in the city, attempting to recreate a glimpse of what Jewish life was like at the beginning of the twentieth century. While the house belonged to the Wiesel family until their placement into the Sighet ghetto and subsequent deportation to Auschwitz in May 1944, there is a clear tension between the private space of the home and the objects displayed within. The museum represents the life of the Jewish communities in Sighet as a moment frozen in time, lacking continuity into the present. However, the gap between past and present is barely addressed through the organization of the space. Wiesel’s career abroad and his support for the museum are highlighted through text and photographs, but no serious questions are asked about the role of local and national institutions in the destruction of Romanian Jewish communities. The Elie Wiesel Memorial House manages to link the performed European narrative of Holocaust commemoration with one that is closer to local politics of belonging: it creates an emotional identification with Wiesel not as a Jew but as a



Figure 7.2 Memorial plaque on the Elie Wiesel Memorial House in Romanian and Hebrew. The plaque says: “In this house was born and spent his childhood the writer and professor Elie Wiesel, Nobel Prize for Peace Laureate in 1986”. Source: Vberger. Available at: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Elie_wiesel_house_in_sighet02.jpg CC BY-SA 4.0 <<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>>, via Wikimedia Commons. This file is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International license.

Romanian immigrant who made it abroad. The memorial house website notes that Elie Wiesel and his family were used as examples of what Jews were like in the city at the beginning of the twentieth century: “through the themes presented in the house, we tried to highlight Elie Wiesel’s personality as a son of Sighet, and a synthesis of Jewish life in the city of Sighet and county of Maramureș” (my translation) (Elie Wiesel Memorial House). The exhibits in the house, which focus on Wiesel as a son of Sighet and not as a Jew, tell a story that fits the national discourse about Romania’s role in the Holocaust and about the suffering of the Jews in the region almost exclusively at the hands of Miklós Horthy’s Hungary, who ruled Northern Transylvania after the Vienna Award in 1940. Through Wiesel’s identification as Romanian, there is an intended separation between perpetrators (Hungarians) and victims (Romanians), without any attempt to complicate this rather schematic binary.

While a historical link to a flourishing Jewish community in Sighet is supported by the local census, which in 1930 showed 10,520 Jewish citizens out of

a total of 27,270 inhabitants, the most recent Romanian census in 2011, showed a total of 64 Jewish citizens in the whole county of Maramureş (INS, 2011). The dwindling Jewish population in the whole country, clearly connected to the events of the Second World War and later to dubious communist practices of displacement,⁶ and the politics of display in the Memorial House reinforce the view of the Holocaust as an imposed narrative, needed for the country's validation as European in values and morals, and not central to the contemporary national narrative of identity.

In Sighet, the Elie Wiesel Memorial House has always been in competition with the Memorial of the Victims of Communism and of the Resistance, just a few streets away. As a physical embodiment of anti-communist memory, the Sighet Memorial Museum is recognized as a symbol of Romanian resistance against communism, a piece of national heritage. In comparison, the Elie Wiesel Memorial House is associated with a memory narrative that is performed and removed from the newly rediscovered national imaginary. Excising the historical presence of Jewish communities from the myth of national identity is also in line with the anti-Semitic discourse voiced by state representatives just before the Second World War and continued by mainstream nationalist parties like the Greater Romania Party after 1989.⁷ At the beginning of the twentieth century, Romanian politicians became increasingly vocal in their attempt to legally curtail the rights of Jewish citizens, stressing their non-Christianity and alleged connections with Bolshevism. The myth of anti-communist memory, Romanian and Orthodox, clashes with a view of Jews as “non-Christian” and foreign. This artificial conflict goes beyond the radical nationalism of populist parties. *Alianța Civică*, a highly regarded Romanian NGO and founder of the Sighet Memorial, took offence at the fact that Elie Wiesel did not respond to an invitation to visit the memorial when he was in Sighet to officially open the Memorial House in July 2002. The *Report on Antisemitism in Romania* (2002) noticed that this reaction furthered the artificial connection between Jews and communism, established by the Iron Guard in the period between the two world wars (Katz and Enache, 2002, p.28).

The museum is organized into five rooms that transform this typical family home into a microcosm of an idyllic past Jewish life. The hallway contains several wall panels that outline Elie Wiesel's life and the story of the house and its transformation into a museum, the troubles faced by the group of writers and scholars who first put forward to the communist regime the idea of a memorial house immediately after Wiesel's Nobel Prize win in 1986. The first exhibition room contains old furniture and paintings that once belonged to and then were left behind by Jews from Maramureş, giving a flavour of “what would have been like for little Elie to live in the house” (my translation) (Elie Wiesel Memorial House). It is a simulation of “authentic” Jewish life in the region with the sombre undertones of an assemblage of objects previously owned by people who were either dead or in exile. The second room focuses on Elie Wiesel's life and work, his books presented in glass cupboards, and posters documenting his meetings

with local and national leaders. The third room is significant in reinforcing the still widely used discourse that all the ills suffered by the local Jews were perpetrated by Horthy's Hungary. Through photographs, documents, personal items, and written testimonies, this room reconstructs the history of the creation of local ghettos, and "the great tragedy of the transportation of all Jews from Sighet and Maramureş to Nazi deathcamps" (my translation) (Elie Wiesel Memorial House). Yet again, Romania's position on its participation in the Holocaust and its aftermath is obscured by a reinforced lack of recognition of guilt and a narrative of victimhood, where, as a nation, Romanians were traumatized by both Hungarians and Germans, and were sharing the martyrdom of the Jews.

Adding to this narrative, the fourth room in the Wiesel house contains a mixture of documents and objects that speak about the richness of Jewish life and experience in the Maramureş region from as early as the seventeenth century. These point towards an idyllic life in the bosom of the local Romanian community, with many Jews becoming pillars of the community and assimilating many aspects of local life. There is a pronounced discrepancy between the positive aspects displayed in this room and the previous one that outlines the extent of Jewish suffering. But what is clear to see is yet again a separation between the foreign perpetrators and the local victims. The memorial house exhibition is completed by a room that discusses other "great Jewish sons" of the region (Hari Maiorovici, Ludovic Bruckstein, Vasile Kazar), and opens up into an interior garden, landscaped for remembrance and reflection, with a large Star of David drawn in stone on the lawn. This outside space has religious connotations, inviting the visitors to rest and reflect on what they have seen in the house. It is emotionally charged as a sacred space that prompts identification with the suffering witnessed inside. However, the emotional connection with the space of the garden is not replicated by the exhibits in the museum. On the contrary, as a visitor, I was struck by the pronounced lack of prompts for emotional engagement from the displays in the house.

In addition, the idyllic acceptance of the Jews by the local community did not translate into the ways in which some responded to the memorial house itself as a space of commemoration. The external walls were often covered in anti-Semitic graffiti, the last example of which was in 2018, when "Nazi Jew lying in hell with Hitler" and "Public toilet, anti-Semite paedophile" were inscribed on the house. The police acted quickly and arrested a 37-year-old man from another county and dismissed the incident as the actions of someone with mental health issues. However, this act of vandalism says much more about the ways in which ordinary Romanians relate to the Holocaust and the fresh debate about the country's role in it. The walls of the house become a public forum where various emotions are expressed. They reflect on the difficult negotiations between past and present to establish an acceptable national identity narrative for the future. The external pressures to comply with certain international standards reveal a split between the outward-facing image of the nation and the struggles of the people to make sense of this new image.

While what happened with the Elie Wiesel Memorial House reinforces Madina Tlostanova's assessment of the stereotypical Eastern European as racist and unhappy about being rejected by the West (Tlostanova, 2018, p.34), the vandalism also exposes what Romanian psychologist Vasile Dem Zamfirescu calls "Balkan neurosis", provoked by the conflict between the rejection of a traumatic communist past and the nostalgia for the same past (Zamfirescu, 2012, p.19). The more discrete trauma of communism, in comparison with the arguably more overt trauma of the Nazi regime, was perpetrated through similar methods, which included a constant process of humiliation through a long, gradual elimination of all basic human rights and liberties (Zamfirescu, 2012, p.27). The Holocaust and anti-communist commemoration coexist in an uneasy space acted upon by various centripetal forces that determine the country's narratives of identity. While anti-communist sentiment was more firmly established through almost half a century of authoritarian rule, the Holocaust triggers national emotions that often prompt defensive reactions of victimhood.

This is the tension between what Aleida Assmann calls "the foundational story of the EU" (Assmann, 2014, p.550), the regulated, institutionalized way to remember and commemorate the Holocaust in Western Europe, and the fragmented and often "aphasic" (Stoler, 2011) way of dealing with the past that is the legacy of decades of communist totalitarianism. Discussing this conflict through the process of decolonial de-linkings allows for a more meaningful conversation between the two, for an awareness of the fragmented and an engagement with both the fragments and the whole. Decolonial praxis acknowledges the existence of fractures within the monolithic matrix of Western European knowledge and invites an in-depth analysis of the place of diversity and multicultural engagement within a national narrative that is still searching for a unified identity. It also provides an insight into the perceived failure of the Elie Wiesel Memorial House to establish itself as a space of belonging. According to Nira Yuval-Davis, belonging "is about an emotional (or even ontological) attachment, about feeling 'at home'" (Yuval-Davis, 2011 p.10), and the Memorial House is certainly fashioned as a domestic, homely space. However, the politics of display, the objects used in the exhibits and the language of engagement with the public, both in the house and online, reinforce a narrative of othering. In this case, the othering is that of the Jewish community, seen as "of the past", and not part of the contemporary memory-making processes in the city, or in the country for that matter. Furthermore, nationally and internationally, the cultural profile of the Memorial House trails behind that of the Sighet Memorial to the Victims of Communism and of the Resistance. In addition to high-profile international donations, the Sighet Memorial receives yearly funding from the Romanian state, which in 1997 officially declared the site one of national importance, and, for more specific projects, like publications and summer schools, from the Council of Europe, which has an information centre within the Memorial Museum. As part of the Maramureş County Ethnographic Museum, the Memorial House receives a limited amount of funding from the state, and otherwise, it has to fight for international funding. As recently as June

2021, the Memorial House managed to secure funding as part of the European Union cross-border collaboration initiative for refurbishment works and to include the house as part of a Jewish Cultural Trail together with the Ukrainian city of Ivano-Frankivsk. While the achievements of the Sighet Memorial are constantly present in the national media, including as part of the long-running documentary *Memorialul Durerii (The Memorial of Suffering)*, which first aired on Romanian National Television in 1991, the Elie Wiesel Memorial House has a much more subdued media presence. This confirms communist commemoration as essential in the process of national belonging, but also reflects Nira Yuval-Davis' observation that state sponsorship of cultural sites "invests them with additional powers" (Yuval-Davis, 2011, p.56) and contributes to the creation and consolidation of official narratives of belonging and not-belonging. The sponsorship of the Sighet Memorial by both national and European agents reaffirms the site as part of what Yuval-Davis calls a process of "constant flagging", "in order to reinforce people's national identities" through ways of selective remembrance and forgetfulness (Yuval-Davis, 2011, p.92). While the Memorial fits neatly within the national narrative, the Elie Wiesel Memorial House exists at the margins, acknowledging the rupture between national and European stories of belonging.

The Sighet Memorial Museum

As a focal point of Romania's commemoration of the victims of communism, the Sighet Memorial plays an important role in the official anti-communist narrative endorsed by the state. Created in 1993 in a former communist prison and officially opened to the public in 2000, the memorial was showcased at the Delphi symposium as an example of good practice in the interaction between heritage and citizenship. It was introduced in the European Heritage Label Sites in 2017, as a space that "brings to life the European narrative and the history behind it" and as a site that promotes "symbolic European values".⁸ The starting point for the European Heritage Label Sites programme was the Council of Europe symposium at Delphi, where it was proposed that various sites of memory should be selected across the continent "to embody our vision of a Europe which is simultaneously a diverse but shared heritage, a geographical and a cultural identity, a place where everyone participates, and a blueprint for the future" (Council of Europe, 2000, p.10). This new European list was seen as an equivalent to UNESCO's World Heritage Sites, a welcome addition to the process of European integration.

The creation of the Sighet Memorial, and the establishment of the Institute for the Investigation of Communist Crimes and the Memory of Romanian Exile in 2005 in Bucharest, signalled attempts to give material form to a national process of memory-making that would reinforce the anti-communist narrative at the basis of Romania's new national identity. However, this identity was shaped through a vocabulary of nationalism and Christianity. Both the Memorial and the Institute often use religious vocabulary within the commemoration process,

associating the victims of communism with Christian martyrs⁹ and thus continuing the uneasy binary definitions of communist/non-Christian/Jewish vs anti-communist/Christian/Orthodox used by Romanian politicians before and during the Second World War. This brings to the fore the troubled relationship between the commemoration of the Holocaust and that of communist atrocities in Eastern European countries. The co-existence of these competitive commemoration processes in Sighet signals the tension between what is deemed authentic, national, anti-communist commemoration and a foreign, “othered” commemoration imposed from outside. While in the case of the Elie Wiesel Memorial House the innocuous domesticity of the home is used to highlight the tolerance of the local Romanian community and the exclusive evil of the foreign perpetrators against a local Jewish minority, the Sighet Memorial Museum speaks for a collective memory experienced at a national and European level.

Due to its identity as a museum, the Sighet Memorial works towards establishing a close connection between the museum as local, national, and European heritage, and democratic citizenship. By becoming the voice of post-communist remembrance and memory making, the memorial complex is considered “a successful public space” (Council of Europe, 2000, p.43) that enhances the feeling of European belonging. Thus, inviting Ana Blandiana as representative of *Alianța Civică* and of the Memorial to the Delphi symposium is not surprising. As early as 1998, the Sighet Memorial was considered an example of good practice in fostering a creative space where meaningful conversations about the past can take place. The Memorial of the Victims of Communism and of the Resistance is a complex made up of the Sighet Memorial Museum and the International Centre for Studies on Communism. While the Centre is focused on research and educational outputs like summer schools, the Museum represents the embodiment of theory in practice. It combines factual knowledge about Eastern European communist atrocities with the emotional impact of displayed objects that belonged to the prison inmates. As the visible, public side of the memorial, the museum is carefully curated to both educate and affect (Figure 7.3).

The private architecture of the prison, the narrow corridors, the cells, and the torture chambers, become a public forum that reveals the dark, hidden aspects of the communist prison. Personal objects of former inmates (boots and uniforms) and objects of torture (chains and spaces of solitary confinement) mix with objects of general use from communist times (room 76, labelled “Everyday Life”, contains old radios, TVs and vacuum cleaners, telephones, and home décor that attempt to give a flavour of the past) creating a microcosm that reflects the history of communist Eastern Europe from 1945 to 1989. However, the history of communism presented in the museum is a history of totalitarianism. It reflects on what Enzo Traverso calls a reduction of communism to “its totalitarian dimension”, “a symbol of alienation and oppression” (Traverso, 2017, pp.2–3) that fits in well with the neoliberal requirements of the Western European narrative. The



Figure 7.3 The Sighet Memorial: displayed prisoner uniforms. Source: Nenea Hartia. Available at: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Memorialul_Victimelor_Comunismului_%C8%99i_al_Rezisten%C8%9Bei_Sighet_07.jpg. CC BY-SA 4.0 <<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>>, via Wikimedia Commons. This file is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International license.

prison building itself acts as material representation of communist oppression. If the prison is the core component of justice in a liberal society,

it tends to be even more central to the openly authoritarian, undemocratic and oppressive systems that have abounded over the past century. In these societies, the prison is an instrument of social and political control, validated as an instrument of state justice to hold political activists, ethnic groups, dissidents of any kind.

(Wilson et al., 2017, p.4)

The Sighet Museum exposes the usually concealed and controlled practices of the communist prison through well-preserved spaces, effective displays of objects that are constant reminders of absent bodies, and traces of everyday life during communism. Through the absence it so powerfully evokes, the museum constructs a master narrative of communist atrocities that speaks beyond the locality of the prison and incorporates voices and narratives from Eastern Europe as a whole.

This layered aspect of local/national/European becomes clear in the spatial organization of the exhibits.¹⁰ The three floors of the museum (ground, first,

and second) contain an eclectic mixture of spaces that illustrate through objects, photographs, and texts the history of communism in Eastern Europe and various examples of resistance to it. There are separate rooms for the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, the history of Polish Solidarity, and the events of the Prague Spring in 1968. On the ground floor, the history of communism in Romania is illustrated through a series of maps on which crosses mark former communist prisons, forced labour camps, and mass graves discovered after 1989. Below the main map that marks all the places of communist detention in the country, the caption by Ana Blandiana reads: “When justice cannot be a form of memory, only memory can be a form of justice”. It reinforces the role of the Sighet Memorial as a way of seeking justice through memory for those who were detained in spaces that invoked a fundamentally flawed and oppressive legal system. Also on the ground floor, in room 23, photographs and archival documents narrate the history of communism in Eastern Europe between 1945 and 1989, while in rooms 25 and 26 the visitor can learn more about the chronology of the Cold War. The impact of communism on the county of Maramureş is presented in two rooms, one focusing on atrocities, the other on anti-communist resistance. These general exhibits coexist with more intimate spaces and objects that constitute case studies for a better understanding of life and death in the prison. Two cells, one on the ground floor and one on the second floor, recreate the spaces where the deaths of politician Iuliu Maniu and historian Gheorghe I. Brătianu took place. The captions on the walls of both cells note that they had been reconstructed “as remembered by those present at the death” of the “great men”. Unlike the narrative present in the Elie Wiesel Memorial House, which clearly states that the objects in the exhibits are used to “simulate” the way in which the family might have lived in Sighet, suggesting that it was such a long time ago that it is impossible to create an “authentic” account, the Sighet Memorial is built on the assumption of authenticity. Surviving cell mates attest to the ways in which the prison’s most well-known inmates died, and the boots and uniforms appear worn and “real”, thus having a strong emotional impact on the visitors. Due to the lack of data about the secret workings of the communist prison, the memory of former inmates is employed as a scaffolding for the unfolding narrative of the museum. Personal stories and memories are combined with historical and archival data to generate “a unifying portrait of the victims as faultless national heroes, smoothing over the complex, sometimes unsavoury politics of the prisoners as well as their actual diversity” (Vătulescu, p.323). As Gabriela Cristea reminds us, “Most of the interwar leaders imprisoned in Sighet were responsible for the glorious unification of Romania, but also for its anti-Semitic laws” (Cristea, 2008, p.66). Through its exclusive focus on commemorating the victims of communist oppression, and by overlooking the complexity and diversity of the prisoners, the Sighet Memorial successfully aligns itself with the national narrative. The complexity of the memorial and the careful consideration of the place of Romanian post-communist memory within the wider memory processes of Eastern Europe create a successful public space

of citizenship and belonging that fits the requirements for common European heritage put forward by the Council of Europe at Delphi.

After the physical and sensorial experience of the prison, very much like the interior garden at the Elie Wiesel Memorial House, the memorial complex opens up towards a space of reflection called the Space of Recollection and Prayer, located in the prison courtyard designed by the architect Radu Mihăilescu. On the walls of the trench that leads to the underground chapel, the names of 8,000 dead inmates from the Romanian “gulag” are engraved in grey andesite, a clear reminder of Maya Lin’s Memorial Wall as part of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC.

The circular chapel (Figure 7.4) contains a central stone round table showing the remains of wax candles that visitors can light in the memory of the dead. In the middle of the roof, there is a cross-shaped opening that allows daylight to illuminate parts of the table. The space is symbolically and undoubtedly Christian, also incorporating elements of Romanian modernist art by reminding the visitor of Constantin Brâncuși’s masterpiece *Table of Silence* exhibited in the Romanian city of Târgu Jiu, as part of his sculptural homage to the Romanian heroes of the First World War. There is a visual assumption that all the visitors, or at least large parts of them, are connected through a shared experience of communism and Christianity. Those are the visitors who “belong” in this space of memory



Figure 7.4 The Sighet Memorial: the underground chapel. Source: GabiS33. Available at: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Masa_tacerii-sighet.JPG, CC BY-SA 4.0 <<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>>, via Wikimedia Commons. This file is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Romania license.

and commemoration, by being able to identify with the victims of the prison and with the past recalled within the prison walls. The memorial ensemble becomes a palimpsest where past, present, and a story for the future are uncovered in the layers of meaning. But the meaning created here is clearly one of both inclusion and exclusion. It is constructed through “a set of symbols and rituals charged with the mission of reinforcing a sense of community” (Guibernau, 2013, p.152) among visitors, a community which is necessarily anti-communist and Christian.

Conclusion

After the revolution in 1989, the new identity narrative in Romania was based on a strong anti-communist standpoint reflected in a new constitution which, on 21 November 1991, replaced the communist constitution of the past 30 years (the previous, communist constitution, was ratified in 1965) (Monitorul Oficial, 1991). The document defined Romania as a presidential republic, democratic, and independent. On 31 October 2003, the Constitution was revised, including articles on the integration into the European Union and the accession to NATO, thus reaffirming Romania’s international ambitions (Monitorul Oficial, 2003). While on the surface the country seemed to have dealt with its communist past through political and economic change, the trauma of communism continued to have a clear impact on all levels of society and on the psychological make-up of the nation.

Enzo Traverso argues that the 1989 revolutions created societies obsessed with the past: “museums and patrimonial institutions devoted to recovering national pasts kidnapped by Soviet communism” (Traverso, 2017, p.4) appeared in every Central and Eastern European country. Thus, memory moves into the public space, by inhabiting and shaping the narratives of museums and cultural institutions. After 1990, when the euphoria of the revolution had passed, and influenced by media coverage from the West, Romanians started to voice a negative opinion about themselves as a nation. Vasile Dem Zamfirescu compares this national state of mind with the one discussed in the 1930s by Romanian philosopher Emil Cioran in his book *Schimbarea la Față a României* ‘The Transfiguration of Romania’ (Cioran, 1992). In times of crisis, the negative self-esteem of Romanians needs a counterpoint, a moment of action that contributes to the creation of a positive myth of national identity (Zamfirescu, 2012, pp.47–48). In the 1930s, it was the national support for Antonescu’s fascist regime and ferocious anti-Semitism noted by historians among the general population (Ioanid, 2000). After 1989, it was emigration and a narrative of victimhood that blamed the West for othering and abandoning the East. According to Svetlana Boym, former communist countries display a form of restorative nostalgia, which “attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home” (Boym, 2001 p.xviii) often based on the return to an impossible, “mythical” time. The problem with recovering this mythical past is the disappearance of utopias, “leaving a present charged with memory but unable to project itself into the future”. History becomes “a landscape of ruins, a living legacy of pain”

(Traverso, 2017, p.7). The two memorial spaces discussed in this chapter confirm Traverso's analysis of Eastern European memorialization, but furthermore allow for an engagement with new theoretical practices that problematize the image of a Europe of constants. Decolonial thought acknowledges the existence of structural links between peripheralization in Eastern Europe and elsewhere in the Global South and challenges the dominant nationalist narratives of Eastern European victimhood. Through its lens, Eastern European commemorative practices can complicate the contemporary European narratives of identity and belonging and encourage a decisive move towards transcultural memorial spaces.

Notes

- 1 Pierre Nora, *Realms of Memory* (Columbia University Press, 1996). For a critique of Nora's concepts, see Etienne Achille, Charles Forsdick, and Lydie Moudileno (eds.), *Postcolonial Realms of Memory: Sites and Symbols in Modern France* (Liverpool University Press, 2020).
- 2 To read about the complexity of Romanian history in relation with the constantly changing European power structures, see Keith Hitchins's comprehensive *A Concise History of Romania* (Cambridge University Press, 2014).
- 3 While the concept of a "Europe with different speeds" is discussed in "Ten issues to watch in 2019", available at: [www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2019/630352/EPRS_IDA\(2019\)630352_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2019/630352/EPRS_IDA(2019)630352_EN.pdf) (accessed on 4 January 2022.), it was introduced as early as 1989 by Michael Mertes and Norbert J. Prill in an article for the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* on 19 July 1989, as a "Europe of concentric circles", reinforced by Wolfgang Schäuble and Karl Lamers in 1994 against the concept of "core Europe", defined as the six founding members of the EU: Belgium, Germany, France, Italy, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands. See Béla Galgóczi, "A 'Europe of multiple speed' in a downward spiral", in *SEER: Journal for Labour and Social Affairs in Eastern Europe*, Vol. 15, No.1, 2012, pp. 27–37.
- 4 For an in-depth discussion of heritage, community, and emotion, see: Divya P. Tolia-Kelly, Emma Waterton, and Steve Watson (eds.), *Heritage, Affect and Emotion* (Routledge, 2018) or Rosy Szymanski and John Schofield (eds.), *Local Heritage, Global Context: Cultural Perspectives on Sense of Place* (Routledge, 2016).
- 5 For more information on this period in Romanian history, see, among others, Radu Ioanid, *The Holocaust in Romania* (Chicago: Ivan Dee Publishing, 2000) or Dennis Deletant, *Hitler's Forgotten Ally: Ion Antonescu and His Regime, Romania 1940–1944* (London: Palgrave, 2006).
- 6 James Koranyi notes in *The Conversation* on 1 March 2017, that Romania's Jews were bargaining chips early on in the Cold War. According to data, over 100,000 Jews were sold at 8,000 Lei (£310) per head between 1948 and 1951 to Israel with the help of the US-based Joint Distribution Committee. Others were sold in exchange for industrial tools and livestock. The decision to leave was often final. This practice continued, albeit at a lower speed, throughout the Cold War under Ceaușescu from 1965. As with the Germans, Romania's Jews were sold at different prices according to their economic "worth". <https://theconversation.com/people-have-been-used-as-bargaining-chips-before-by-romania-nicolae-ceau-escu-73141>.
- 7 For an in-depth analysis of the Romanian far-right, see Radu Cinpoș, "The Extreme Right in Contemporary Romania", Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, *International Policy Analysis*, October 2012, pp. 1–15.

- 8 For the description of the main principles of the European Heritage Label Sites and a list of the sites see <https://ec.europa.eu/culture/cultural-heritage/initiatives-and-success-stories/european-heritage-label-sites>.
- 9 The Institute for the Investigation of Communist Crimes and the Memory of the Romanian Exile spearheaded the creation of an official day of commemoration of “the martyrs of communist prisons”. This was approved by parliament in 2017 and was established as 14 May in memory of those held in communist prisons on that day in 1948.
- 10 For a virtual tour of the museum, see <https://www.memorialsighet.ro/category/ro/muzeul-sighet-ro/vizita-virtuala/>.

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