

## A Glance In The Mirror- A Photo-Documentary Exhibition

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In the spring of 2003, for almost a month, the entrance hall to the "Lucian Blaga" Central University Library was covered with photographs from a strange kind of family album, dated December 1989.

The photographs exhibited in the circular hall could have pictured any one of us on the well known streets of the cities we live in, grasped in the unusual position of *revolutionaries*; protestors or acclaimers, people who going out in the streets face repression defying the bullets, masses who keep coagulating, or spread around temporarily in order to stand together again in front of danger, but also of hope. There were snapshots of Molotov-cocktails as well as memorable gestures of handing flowers to soldiers, people who exulted, but who were also afraid, wounded men fallen on the pavement, and crowded balconies from public squares full of speakers, then, family images of cemeteries and wails mourning their young dead.

While part of these images remind us of the revolutionary spirit in Central and Eastern Europe in the year of 1989, others, however, oppose it by their violence.

These exhibited documentary photos had an inevitable impact over those who, in a way, *inhabit* the library space. Being placed differently from the well delimited area of a conventional exhibition, they were displayed along a busy passage in-between reading rooms (as austere places for thinking), and the library café (a place for escaping and informal communication), so that the strange and at the same time familiar images were unavoidable.

They caught the attention since they reconfigured very familiar urban spaces in unusual situations of fighting. Watching them for long, one began to see his/her own city or other cities of the country with different eyes. The great crossroads, squares, pavements, the more or less Bohemian cafés, the ordinary places, daily crossed, gained back their dramatic dimensions from a recent past. It has been so recent and overwhelming still, that it has not yet entered the *labor of memory*, even less that of history. Despite all this, it marks the founding event of Romanian post-communist democracy.

Such memory-exercises were provoked by the photo-documentary exhibition "The Romanian Revolution in Images",

organized by the Memorial of the 16-22 December 1989 Revolution Association, Timișoara, together with the Institute for Oral History of the Babeș-Bolyai University and the "Lucian Blaga" Central University Library Cluj. It was a traveling exhibition, opened in Timișoara on December 20, 2002, then housed for three weeks in February 2003 at the Partium University in Oradea, and which, after the presence in Cluj, continued its way to other martyr cities of the country. The exhibits were documentary images from the days of the revolution in December 1989 from Timișoara, Arad, Cluj, Sibiu, Bucharest, etc, held in the archives of the Memorial of the Revolution in Timișoara. This Memorial was turned from 1995 into a National Center for Documentation, Research and Public Information, open to anybody interested in studying or commemorating the 1989 historical events in Romania. The Cluj Opening was held in the presence of the Timișoara representatives of the Memorial of the Revolution, the hosts of the exhibition, of special guests, participants to the events in December 1989 in Cluj, members of associations of revolutionaries, and a young public of students and researchers. The event also occasioned the projection of the film *Noi nu murim...* (We won't die...), made in 2002 by the Memorial in Timișoara; a documentary not so much in the academic sense of the word, since it does not fully respect the requirements of the genre, but rather as a general view on the events articulated around certain image-documents of those days in Timișoara and Bucharest, yet also capturing images emblematic for the revolutionary movements in other cities, as well as excerpts from photographic reports published in foreign newspapers of that time.

For the entire period that it was present in the capital of Transylvania, the photo-documentary exhibition "The Romanian Revolution in Images" turned into an invitation, addressed to both young people and adults, to a visual introduction into a lesson of lived, yet unwritten history.

In the Cluj public space, this meant more or *something different* than a commemoration of the December 1989 events, more than the political rituals in which we rather passively participate at every end of year. It was different because, contrary to the politics of memory in the Western cultural context, animated by a cult of the past inclined to slip into obsessions and political uses, there is another threat hovering over our post-communist democracy: that of forgetting prematurely, before understanding or maybe forgiving. Moreover, this tends to happen

generally with everything related to our recent past. In this respect the exhibition has meant to be a *memory exercise*.

It has revived quests and questions, kept alive memories and reflections over what happened then. The documentary photos presented there have configured a universe of highly emotionally charged images of the revolution. They do not explain, do not interpret (as much as this is possible in a world where “everything is interpretation”), but describe in just a few touches, and sketch certain elements of a picture still hard to comprehend. Therefore their emotional impact catalyzes the critical, self-reflexive memory.

They reflect aspects from those days of December 1989 in the big cities of the country, called nowadays “martyr cities”, where “the revolution was made”, and where there were more than 1000 victims.

For some visitors of the exhibition these images might have been rather unknown. The young public has had but a vague representation of the Romanian revolution from 1989, made by putting together randomly images seen then on the television and pieces of information picked out from the extremely evasive presentation which school manuals of the transition period make of this event.

For others, however, a part of these images have still been on their retina and consciousness. They are the witnesses and participants of the revolution, those who went out there into the street (one of the symbolic *topoi* of the revolution), facing the risks on December 21, before Ceaușescu’s fleeing, and also after December 22 (facing the risk of the *terrorists*), and who actually, by their courage and solidarity, made possible the collapse of Ceaușescu’s dictatorial regime and of communism in Romania.

These images pertain thus to *collective memory*. They are the ineffable traces of the past, a recent and experienced past which is to be transformed into history by subsequent approaches of systematic, critical, and lucid reflections upon the past.

Oral history has a central place in this sophisticated process, in the alchemy of transforming collective memory into history. Essentially, it is about extracting the nerves of historical events out of life stories, and stressing their complex effects and influences over individual destinies. Oral history interviews with actors and witnesses of recent history facilitate the verbalization of significant and sometimes hard-to-express life experiences, and the transformation of those images on the retina, of the memories into testimonies, in such a way that these mnemonic traces of the past become sources for history. This is what the Institute for Oral

History of the Babeş-Bolyai University in Cluj is attempting by the campaign it initiated to record and archive the oral testimonies of the participants of the revolution in Cluj.

Still, beyond possible scholarly research of the events of December 1989 in Romania, there is also an individual, strictly personal interest in any effort of critical reflection over those moments, either provoked, as by this exhibition, or un-mediated by public events. Because each one of us, regardless of age, profession, ideological coloring, or value options in general, has the fundamental need to understand the world we live in, to search for the intelligibility of the events contemporary to us, which have affected visibly or insidiously our lives, in order to thus understand (and maybe even reconcile with) ourselves.

Therefore these images, fragments of visual narratives about December 1989 speak, ultimately, to each one of us in an eloquent manner about ourselves; about our courage and essential hopes which were powerfully reactivated then, about the irrepressible taste of freedom, about the miraculous state experienced then and impossible to translate today, the memories of which even embarrass us today, as well as about our fears and impotence, to which we still daily consent. It is a glance in the mirror, between *then* and *now*, through which our own identity crystallizes, hard to perceive, and never to stop.