

**In Between Places of Remembrance and Realms of Memory:
The 15-Years Commemoration of the Romanian Revolution in
Timișoara**

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Keywords: Romanian revolution from December 1989, commemoration, realms of memory, monuments, Timisoara, collective memory, coping with the recent past

Abstract

This study is devoted to the commemorative practices and the sites of memory of the 1989 Romanian revolution. It has resulted from a multi-sited fieldwork experience through Timișoara, Bucharest, and Cluj occasioned by the fifteenth public celebration of the founding event of the Romanian post communist democracy. We hereby propose an oral history and cultural anthropology analysis which is methodologically based on participant observation and semi-structured interviews with participants at the commemoration. We have closely followed the itinerary and the pace of this public celebration attempting to a *thick description*, in order to scrutinize the world of meanings that the commemorative gestures and the memory sites of Timișoara spread out. The historical events of December 1989 are seen through the lenses of the current stakes of the end of 2004; a year marked by the particular political context of the recent parliamentary and presidential elections held in November in Romania, by the judicial context of prescription which was going to be applied to some crimes of the revolution, and by the perennial religious context of Christmas Eve. The theoretical hypothesis we subscribe to is, that *spaces of remembering* – which are often traumatic in the case of the Romanian revolution – are converted into *sites of memories* only if there is a political will of memory to erect them, as well as recurrent cultural practices to ritually reactivate their meanings. The paper outlines the manner in which a tensional proximity of these different contexts, political, cultural, social, interfere with the commemorative practices, and with the socially (re)organizing modalities of the collective memories of the revolution. By the fact of “having been there”, in the very tradition of cultural anthropology, we aim at an inner, intimate knowledge of a social reality which would challenge the master narratives on the revolution as simplifying politically charged versions of

the past. We also wish, in the very tradition of oral history, to give voice to those narratives that would yield different untold or less told histories of the revolution, or would reveal hardly visible discourses on the political scene.

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Introduction

Commemorations are recurrent social practices which make remembrance in common possible, articulating thus the collective memory of certain founding historical events. We have chosen to analyze from this perspective the 15th edition of the commemoration of the Romanian revolution.

The literature on commemorations – especially on the jubilees of the French revolution commemorations – proposes a twofold perspective that equally takes into consideration the “symbolic practices” by which the past is celebrated, and the “strategic stakes of the political field” of the present.¹ Commemoration, far from being a mere administration of the past within the present, is also a critical, reflexive approach upon the present, as well as a projection of a common future.

This paper assumes the above perspective, focusing however more closely on the social practices by which the meanings of a recent past are transmitted and reactivated, and the senses of collective memory are negotiated, in the dialectics of that what is memorable and that what is forgotten. We emphasize thus the performative side of commemoration which, in Connerton’s argument, enables the transmission and support of social memory.²

The commemoration takes place in a semantic density configured by the realms of memory and by commemorative gestures. Of the vast, vaguely defined genre of the realms of memory³ as entities

¹ Jean Davallon, Philippe Dujardin, Gérard Sabatier (eds.), *Le Geste commémoratif*, Lyon: CERIEP, 1994, p. 10.

² Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, p. 38.

³ The realms of memory represent a composite genre, laxly defined by the coordinator of the *Les Lieux de mémoire*. These are understood both “in the most material and concrete sense” (as, for instance, monuments of the dead, of national archives), and “in the most abstract and intellectually constructed sense” (e.g., connection, generation, region, “memory-man”). See Pierre Nora, *Les Lieux de mémoire*, Paris: Galimard, 1984, p. VII.

concrete or abstract, constitutive of collective memory, this study will mainly focus on the monuments of the revolution, on their construction and significance.

We attempt to find out how the realms of the memory of the Romanian revolution are constituted, and what kind of social practices consecrate them. Our working hypothesis is that the places of remembrance (often traumatic, like in the case of the Romanian revolution) are converted into realms of memory only if there is a willingness of memory to build them, as well as recurrent social practices to reactivate their meaning.

Such practices are the commemorations, the collective celebrations of the past. We follow the development of commemorative gestures in their sequence, identifying the social actors of the commemoration and revealing the destinies of the revolutionaries, analyzing discursive and non-discursive practices, religious and civil rituals. We outline the space and time of commemoration according to the coordinates of *then* and *there* of the celebrated moments and places, from the perspective of *now* and *here* of the space and time of celebration. As a recurrent practice enacting continuity with the past, commemoration implies a certain historicity, a specific diachronic dimension. The *thick description* of the commemoration of the revolution attempted in this paper occasions thus the connection to the events of December 1989, in the light of the events of the end of 2004. The 15th edition of the commemoration of the revolution happens in the proximity of a particular political context – that of the recent parliamentary and presidential elections held in November 2004 – and a perennial religious one, the Christmas Eve. We will follow the modes by which these proximities interfere with the significance of the commemoration. The perspective that we offer on the commemoration of the revolution in Timișoara is based on the fact of “having been there”, as participant observers. The narration critically and reflectively incorporates social discourses and practices peculiar to this celebration which we have gathered by qualitative methods of research: participant observation, semi-structured interviews, audio and video recordings of the events, or the monitoring of written and audiovisual media of the period. This narration uses the first person in plural, not so much as an emphatic majestic plural, but rather on behalf of a common field experience of a small research team which I have coordinated in the framework of an itinerant project completed in Timișoara, Bucharest, and Cluj in the period of December 15-22, 2004. This paper makes use of the field

research conducted during the Timișoara commemoration between December 16-19, 2004 and its continuation in Bucharest on December 20, 2004.

By the fact of “having been there”, in the very tradition of cultural anthropology, we aim at an inner, intimate knowledge of a social reality which would challenge the master narratives on the revolution as simplifying politically charged versions of the past. We also wish, in the very tradition of oral history, to give voice to those narratives which would yield different, untold or less told histories of the revolution, or would reveal discourses hardly visible on the political scene.

The internal logic of commemoration

“An anniversary-commemorative program”

In Timișoara the events of December 1989 are celebrated during alternative anniversary and commemorative days, by symbolic practices which distinguish between the days of mourning and the days of celebration, between violent death and the victories achieved then by the citizens of Timișoara, facing alone the oppression of Ceaușescu’s regime. The commemorative gestures preserve certain symmetry between *then* and *now*, structuring thus the local collective memory. Repeated year by year, the organization of each day’s events is due to the associations of revolutionaries which comprise the participants of different key-moments and places of the course of events.

Thus, the ceremony on December 16 is organized by the A.L.T.A.R. society (the Association of the Fighters from Timișoara Arrested in the Revolution) and the Mayor’s Office. The people of Timișoara celebrate on this day the joy felt at the beginning of the revolution and the fortunate outcome that the political prisoners of those days finally experienced.¹ December 17, instituted since 1990 as a day of mourning, is a day of funerary rituals, organized by the Mayor’s Office together with the Memorial of the Revolution and the December 17 Association (formed by those who were wounded or the successors of the martyrs of the revolution). Having the same austere tone, the next day in the calendar of the commemorations is the day of the “pilgrimage to the places of martyrdom”², marked by 12 monuments built up by the Memorial during 15 years elapsed since then. The days of December 19

¹ Cf. Interview with Ciupa Vasile (organizer), December 18, 2004, Timișoara, interviewer Grama Sidonia.

² Ibid.

and 20, organized by the Victoria Association (which mainly comprises the revolutionary protagonists who politically performed on the balcony of the Opera House) marks the beginning of the workers' general strike and celebrates the transformation of the uprising into a revolution by the installment of the first non-communist political formation, the Romanian Democratic Front. The commemorative cycle in Timișoara ends on December 20, marking the moment of Timișoara's becoming the first "Free city" with the blast of a siren.

However, the spirit of Timișoara does not remain closed up in its own memory. Almost each year, on the night of 19th to 20th of December, some of the participants (especially the successors of the martyrs) leave for Bucharest on a pilgrimage which discreetly and painfully replays a tragic journey, while others (especially officials) continue the series of national commemorations in the capital on December 21 and 22. What is more, among the social actors of the events of commemoration in Timișoara there are also people coming from other cities in the country, members of various revolutionary associations, who will then also take part in the commemorations in Bucharest and in their home towns, Reșița, Lugoj, Arad, Craiova, etc. There is thus an itinerant aspect to these commemorations, which reflects the ramification of the events of December 1989 in the whole country.

By virtue of our experience as participant observers, our presentation attempts at configuring a universe of meanings of the commemorative gestures and the realms of memory in Timișoara. We do not aim at timeless, structural, generally valid meanings, but rather try to reveal those which came out from the tension of different cultural, political, social contexts in which these practices are immersed.

Commemoration as a survey

"Compared to the expectations from then, the accomplishments today are far too scarce"

The festive opening of the "Anniversary-commemorative program 15 Years of Freedom. December 1989-December 2004" bears the sign of the duty not to forget: "The people of Timișoara are not allowed to forget", "forgetting is the most dangerous thing that can happen to us".¹ Public participation, which becomes more reduced every

¹ These are warnings sententiously professed by the Mayor of Timișoara, Gheorghe Ciuhandu, in an editorial published in the *Monitorul Primăriei*

year, is a worrying symptom of disinterest and the premature exhaustion of the mobilizing energy to celebrate the founding event of post-communist Romanian democracy. Therefore the organizers try to address a larger public this year, also inserting show events in the program which may be attractive to the younger generation. Otherwise, the political sphere presents very few tendencies to transmit and coagulate the generational memory of the Romanian revolution. It continues thus to be fragile, fragmentary, elliptical.

As a jubilee edition, the 15th anniversary of the revolution marks the moment for a survey the results of which the leaders from Timișoara may find to be “very far from our expectations back then”.¹ The agitated political context of the recent change of power, as well as the juridical aspect of the prescription of crimes as it takes effect will lend the commemoration a dramatic touch, in which the need for the truth is reiterated. “(...) The fact that here in Timișoara there is an extremely sensitive problem, that is, the responsibility of those who ordered to shoot the population, the fact that from a juridical point of view the legal actions are stagnating, the fact that we have reached 15 years from this event, when there is this term of prescription (...), I think that many questions are raised (...)”.²

A “strange synchrony between the past, the present, and the future” is part of the temporality of commemoration.³ The commemoration of the 1989 revolution is a time of critical reflection on the present from the perspective of the commemorated event. In its exemplary aura a projective force persists. Compared to the future as it was imagined then, the retrospective image of Romanian society of the past 15 years is discordant. “(...) That what inspired us *then* must keep on *today*, (...), and in the *future*, until we have the certainty that Romania will measure up to our *past expectations*.”⁴

Invoked yearly for the past 15 years, the need for the truth is even more urgent as the application of the term of prescription annuls the effect of the law over all crimes committed during the revolution which have not been put on trial yet. Thus, while penal responsibility is annulled, moral

Municipiului Timișoara (The bulletin of the Mayor’s Office of the city of Timișoara), no. 25/2004, circulated for free in the Local Council Hall.

¹ Recording of the discourse of Mayor Gheorghe Ciuhandu, official opening, 16 December 2004, Timișoara.

² Ibid.

³ Jean Davallon, *op. cit.*, p. 504.

⁴ Recording, *idem*.

responsibility remains evanescent. People need to see the face of those who are responsible for the death of their loved ones. There is a social expectation to publicly expose the criminals as a *sui-generis* ritual of commemoration. "(...) I only wanted this much; his picture shown, himself shown in front of the nation, saying: I publicly apologize to the Romanian nation and the mourning families for the mistake I made in December '89."¹

The opening speeches of the commemoration program circulate around the issue of revolutionary identity. The problem of the constant deterioration of the public image of those who had "the mad courage in '89 to go out in the streets" is the effect, on the one hand, of the internal dissensions between the "true" and "false revolutionaries", and on the other, of the negative discourse of the press.² The participants of the revolution ask for the right to be recognized just like the war veterans or political prisoners,³ and their legitimacy as a social category to be respected and materially rewarded. The subject of revolutionary identity is discursively recurrent; it was there also in 2002, in a previous edition of the commemorations at Timișoara to which we also participated,⁴ and it will be found later on, much more acutely, among the revolutionaries in Bucharest.

For commemoration also implies, each time, an exercise of identity, a construction of "us". Despite the calls to consent that any commemoration imposes, the sign of internal dissensions among the revolutionaries, were visible from the very beginning. Watching a documentary film created by the Memorial of the Revolution from Timișoara generates heavy disputes among the audience who took part in the Revolution. The visual representation offered is controversial. The objections are mainly against certain aspects: mentioning generals Chițac

¹ Recording, press conference, A.L.T.A.R. headquarters, 16 December 2004, Timișoara.

² Cf. Recording of the speech of Costel Bursuc (President of A.L.T.A.R. Association), opening session, 16 December 2004, Timișoara.

³ Ibid.

⁴ On the ways in which the revolutionary identity is constructed, see my study, Grama Sidonia, "Social Interests and Revolutionary Identity in the Romanian Revolution from December 1989", in E. Magyari-Vincze, P. Mândruț (eds.), *Performing Identities, Renegotiating Socio-Cultural Identities in the Post-Socialist Eastern Europe*, Cluj-Napoca: The Publishing House of the Foundation for European Studies, 2004, p. 159-173.

and Stănculescu¹ among those who “made the revolution”, as it is implicitly suggested by the rhetoric of the film, is considered inadmissible by those present; while the name of Ion Iliescu is unconditionally accepted. On the other hand, the fact that no revolutionary from Timișoara is mentioned points to an unbalanced representation of the historical events. Moreover, the public who had also taken part in the events claims that on December 20, 1989 in Timișoara the army did not actually *fraternize*, as the film subtitles, but it actually withdrew, whereas the fraternization happened on December 22, in Bucharest. This is an aspect pointed out also by other people in the interviews we have recorded. The people of Timișoara who participated in the revolution remember the individual instances of fraternization of the army, in the case of the inferior military troops, due to the face-to-face relationship they had with the soldiers during those days: “(...) Fraternization, (...) by that Superior Council of the Army, took place on the twenty-second. But for us this was of no importance any more, because on an individual level... (...), so, you can figure that a hundred and something thousand people were standing *face-to-face* in front of thousands of soldiers. Of course we already *knew them by face*, after so many days we already recognized each other and (...) in this sense I can say it was fraternization.”²

The disputes provoked by the film are significant in themselves, since they illustrate a negotiation process of the meanings of collective memory. To plead for the accuracy of the information circulated on such representations can have as a point not only to correspond to an experienced reality, but also to impose certain group versions which would finally be confirmed by history. What intervenes here is the problem of the complex relationship between film and history, as well as between film and collective memory. It is obvious that, from the evidence of the participants – which are themselves subject to change of accents

¹ On December 17, 1989 Lieutenant General Victor Atanasie Stănculescu, the Under-Secretary of National Defense, and Lieutenant General Mihai Chițac, Home Secretary were sent from Bucharest to reestablish order in Timișoara, together with Ioan Coman, General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Romanian Communist Party and General Ștefan Gușe, Chief of the General Staff of the Army, with the task to repress the people’s revolt. Later on, from December 22, 1989, after the flight of the dictatorial Ceaușescu couple, Stănculescu and Chițac were to play important and controversial roles in the nucleus of the new revolutionary power in the capital.

² Interview with Traian Orban, Ciupa Vasile, December 18, 2004, interviewer: Grama Sidonia.

depending on the configuration of the present, and threatened by disappearance – and visual representations – even if they are inevitably unfaithful to certain experiences – it is the latter ones that get the chance to be engraved more thoroughly as traces of a “memory-history”.¹

Moreover, during those days a series of films, documentary or fiction, on the Romanian revolution were broadcast on national television channels or as newly released movies, turning thus into gestures of commemoration. These can be therefore an adequate support for the transmission of generational memory. This is what the organizers also had in mind when they included documentary films into the program of events, projected on an open air screen in the Opera Square, already several editions before. On each of the 5 days of the commemorations in Timișoara, in the evenings candles are lit in this symbolic place and movies were screened. A cocktail of sounds and images dominate the square invaded by the commercial marks of Christmas’ Eve. While against a sober background music the images illustrate ineffable moments of human, inter-ethnic and inter-confessional solidarity, around the famous balcony of the Opera young people, alone or in small, isolated groups, watch silently the scenes of horror and of exaltation from a recent past, almost incredible, of their own city. The original state of *communitas*² experienced during the revolution by the people of Timișoara, is not found any more in the days of commemoration. We talked with some teenagers who watched the screenings, apparently lacking any reverence for the tragedy of some of the scenes, maybe because of the film language partial failures of representing the unrepresentable absurd deaths. In 1989 they were three or four years old, they have no coherent personal memories from that period, their parents

¹ We refer here to the subtle, but historiographically essential distinction between memory-history versus history-memory which Pierre Nora suggests in the introduction of his famous *Les Lieux...* History-memory is the history of the past, which Nora illustrates by the metaphor of the “tree of memory in the shell of history”, and which is the object of modern historiographic criticism. While memory-history refers to the contemporary phenomenon of recording and archiving memory. See Pierre Nora, *op. cit.*, p. XVII-XXXIV.

² The term belongs to Victor Turner, British social anthropologist, as having a great heuristic value in describing the special, genuine state of human solidarity and fraternity, experienced by individuals during those events which share the characteristics of *social drama*. Revolutions in general, and the Romanian revolution in particular, have caused such experiences. For the definitions of the notion of *communitas* see, for example, Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process*, Chicago: Aldine, 1969.

have not talked to them about those days, and in history classes the subject have been only evasively touched upon. Although they seem to be indifferent, their minds are still pervaded by shocking images connected to the violent death of young people on the streets of the city. Their representations about the revolution mix the elements of the imaginary including the revelation of Virgin Mary, but also the categorical verdicts about the army's guilt of firing shots into the population. During our journey we have noted few moments of teenagers' participation at commemoration. Even if discrete or sparse, these refer to social practices of generational transmission of the memory of the revolution.

The 15th commemoration of the revolution in Timișoara interferes with some rather striking accents of the political context. The media echoes of certain controversial political gestures prove acutely embarrassing for the commemorative gestures. On the very first day the news that the then president, Ion Iliescu, pardoned Miron Cozma – the leader of the “mineriads” which misappropriated by their violence the meaning of Romanian democracy instituted in December 1989 – was overwhelming. This is however part of a series of equally blameworthy gestures: appointing, several months before, General Eugen Bădălan in front of the army – an officer who was involved in the repression of the revolution in Timișoara and Arad – then, later on, in the days of commemoration, the news that the militia officer, Ioan Corpodeanu, – notorious for his implications in the repression and for the infamous operation of stealing the dead bodies from Timișoara hospital – was also pardoned with Miron Cozma. All these highly controversial political decisions lend a cynical, revolting touch. The tensions of the internal political context throw a dark spectrum over the commemoration. However, the bright side of this edition is the carrying of the Holy Light from Bethlehem, which symbolically inscribes the commemoration of the revolution in Timișoara on the orbit of a universal Christian ritual. The prestigious international participation announced (the ambassadors of Germany and France in Romania, and other representatives of foreign consulates) counterbalance the absence of the officials from Bucharest, and lend the events their rightful prestige. What is more, the mediated statement of the ambassador of France in Romania, Phillipe Étienne – “The Brussels Moment is due to the revolution from December 1989”¹ – synthetically expresses the international recognition of the continuity between the revolutionary project of the year 1989 and the present

¹ Article title in the *România Liberă* gazette, Monday, December 20, 2004, Transylvania-Banat edition.

political agenda, between Timișoara and Romania's integration into the European Union.

Commemoration and travail of mourning

“Remus, my dear son, ... everything you could have been”

The day of December 17, 2004 occasions the remembrance in common of the tragic moments when the first people were shot to death, and venerates both religiously and civically all the hero-martyrs of Timișoara. A series of practices of the cult of the dead are performed: *Te Deum* at the Cathedral, offerings for the dead, and coronations at the Cemetery of the Heroes, moments of silence, concerts of sacred music, flags at half-mast as a sign of mourning. The realms of the memory of these days are marked by the pilgrimage to the Church of Martyrs, the Cemetery of the Heroes, and the Cemetery of the Poor. The construction of these speaks about the political willingness of memory. The Church of Martyrs, built in a workers' district where one of the “battles of the people of Timișoara with the dictatorship”¹ took place in 1989, is still in the stage of construction, almost in the same state as we found it two years ago. On its stairs the participants of the requiem stretched the flag with the hole in the middle, with a great question mark sewn in black cloth on the contour of the former communist blazon. In the church, just before the requiem, among the participants of the revolution from Timișoara and other parts of the country, we found a strange character with whom we took a group photo: An elderly man, dressed up in a Santa Claus outfit, with tricolor cockades and medals. We are told that during the revolution he was an ambulance driver, who transported the wounded and the dead to the hospitals. Uncovering the bodies he was transporting, he found the dead bodies of his own wife and child. He turned completely white and has called himself “Arlechinu’, the old man who brings toys for children” ever since. Disguising his voice as a puppeteer, he also offered each of us some trinkets. Meeting him again in Bucharest, on December 21 at the official coronation, he gave me the phone number of his wife, Mrs. Ana, to offer me more details about the revolution. Amusing and tragic at the same time, he is one of the social actors of the commemoration. The legend of his life-story is a sample of destiny of the revolution. Just as, in the same seemingly playful register, the question

¹ Florin Medeleț, Mihai Ziman, *O cronică a revoluției din Timișoara* (A chronicle of the revolution in Timișoara), Timișoara: Muzeul Banatului, 1990, p. 10.

mark sewn on the symbol of the revolution expresses the search, still uncertain, for a meaning.

The next destination of the pilgrimage is the Cemetery of the Heroes. A memorial complex was built here in 1990, consisting of a chapel, a monument of the heroes, and a series of tombstones of black marble, alphabetically ordered, containing the name and the date of birth and death. It is an architectural unit built in a black-and-white chromatic style, which suggests, in the architects' view, the succession of those days and nights of tension, of life and death.¹ The Complex of the Heroes is the place which transfigures the violent deaths of those days, easing thus the travail of mourning. But that is not the place of the dead, these are only empty graves built up together in order to make possible the ritual of common remembrance. "They were together, they died together, we honor them together".² There was an artistic intention that these tombstones should reflect the "ancient practices to build symbolic tombs to the warriors who died in battle far from their home (...), which continued to mark their presence within the community for which they died."³

The graves themselves are scattered somewhere behind the complex, where each family buried their dead then as it could, in those troubled times under the sign of death, when they desperately sought their dead in hospitals or mass graves, and when the funerals were made in haste for fear of terrorists.

The fact that this complex of the Heroes of Timișoara who fought against the communist regime of Ceaușescu was built close to the monument of the Soviet Hero – as it is also in the case of the Cemetery of the Heroes in Cluj – implicitly expresses the potential of cohabitation of contradictory meanings in a symbolic place.

It is a sunny day in the cemetery, the people say "it is exactly as it was then". On the alley in front of the monument the women in mourning place large tables for the memory of the dead covered with fruits, funeral polenta, milk-loafs, and wine for the soul of the dead.

Although the official discourses uttered here explicitly state the religious pre-eminence of this moment of commemoration, the political stakes of the moment were brought back to the forefront after the

¹ Cf. the soundtrack of the film *Miracle*, produced by the Memorial of the Revolution from Timișoara.

² Interview with Traian Orban, December 19, 2004, Timișoara, interviewer: Grama Sidonia.

³ Cf. the soundtrack of the film *Miracle*.

religious mass. There is a symbolic capital of the Romanian revolution of December 1989 which continues to be politically asserted, even if the memory of the founding event has exhausted its mobilizing powers, and the representatives of the government find no spare time to participate in the commemoration events in Timișoara. But the echoes of the political gestures from the capital are reflected here as well. Thus, in the transitory post-electoral state of the old and the new president equally exercising their power, while the ex-president, Ion Iliescu, still maintaining his functions, resorts to blameworthy medals and pardonings, hurting the memory of the victims of the revolution, the newly elected president, Traian Basescu, promises, in the inertia of his electoral discourse, to reveal the truth about the revolution. The latter's message is read in the context of the commemorations from Timișoara as a promise of a political willingness.

Still, beyond the discursive register which favors the political instrumentalization of the commemoration, the way people remember in this place of memory is primarily of a ritual nature. Because, similarly to Connerton's argument in his *How Societies Remember*, social memory is transmitted and supported by ritual interpretations, and these have a bodily dimension.¹ Thus, the reverence toward those who died is expressed by gestures which alternate the register of the religious and the civil ritual. The people light candles on the graves, the officials who place wreaths on the graves uncover their heads in sign of respect, make the sign of the cross, or salute. They sing Christmas carols, or accords of military fanfare. The language and behavior is formal, stiff. By these rituals the threshold of the world *beyond* and the "place of the dead" are culturally constructed, and the "angst in front of finiteness, of temporality and rupture" is elaborated.² In this place of re-remembrance the relationship with the dead is placed in order, at a distance.

Despite all this, informal stories also circulate the idea of transgression of the strict space of beyond, in the intermediary zone of the dream, in which the dead show themselves to their relatives, and sometimes reveal secrets to them.³ Such stories are told us by a

¹ Cf. Connerton, *op. cit.*

² Patrick Baudry, *La Place des morts. Enjeux et rites*. Paris: Armand Colin, 1999. p. 63.

³ I have encountered such spontaneous, intimate stories talking to women in the Cemetery of the Heroes from Sibiu in November 2004, when the "day of the dead" is celebrated in Transylvania. Generally such confessions are difficult to be formally recorded.

respectable teacher, who comes each year to the commemorations wearing the same clothes he was wearing during the days of the revolution. It is a sign that memory makes use of various kinds of supports, and clothes, as objects close to the body, probably mediate the reactivation of the memory of the sensations then experienced. In front of a tombstone he says that the person mentioned there appeared in his mother's dream a long time after he had disappeared without a trace. It was in the time when, after months of searching, the people hopelessly tried to find the bodies of around 40 persons who disappeared from the hospitals during the days of the revolution. He revealed then to his mother in her dream the unconceivable odyssey of the stolen and burnt bodies, and the strange place where their ashes were thrown. The morals of the story, expressed in a Christian sense, without emphasis, but with conviction, was that no crime remains unpunished. Even in the absence of fair trials and in the conditions of the prescription, those who passed the trauma of that period can still turn to the infallible divine judgment.

The relationship of the dead and the living instituted by the ritual of the funeral is re-interpreted on the occasion of the commemoration. We relate to the people who died during the revolution by an attitude of reverence, yet distant, impersonal, usually implied by the expression "they died for...", peculiar to monuments. The places of the memory of the Romanian revolution tend to introduce an even more impersonal formula: "lives were given for...".¹ The cause they died for is in fact our cause, everybody's cause. Because "the meaning of *to die for*..., as it appears on the monuments, is founded on the survivors."²

We define the "place of the dead" of the revolution in the historical continuity of the heroes of the nation, in various lines of descent with these. We call them either heroes, or martyrs, or even hero-martyrs, fusing them with the great family of Christian and historical ancestors. For example, Timișoara cultivates, by plates and commemorative gestures, the lineage of the fighters against communism. This is also the significance of the annual continuation of the memorial masses in the Cemetery of the Poor, the former mass grave of the city meant for the marginal members of society, and also for political insurgents during the totalitarian regime. The collective memory of the people of Timișoara preserves and cultivates the similarity between the

¹ "Here lives were given for freedom"- reads a small plate of commemoration in the University Square in Bucharest.

² Reinhart Koselleck, *L'expérience de l'histoire*, Paris: Gallimard, 1997, p. 136-137.

historical destinies of the fate of “the fighters of anti-communist resistance in the Banat region, who were executed and buried in the Green Forest”,¹ and the dead in the streets of Timișoara, whose bodies were also made to disappear in the same place. The gestures of commemoration performed there circumscribe the senses of the recent past, of a historical memory, and restore the necessary distance in the relationship of the dead and the living. On the other hand, the bereavement of those who lost someone beloved during the revolution has not stopped. Because “mourning is not an episode which ends more or less well, it is not a mere scar”, but a rupture, which “modifies the view on existence”.² Even more, the death they deplore is a violent death committed by an unknown hand which remained unpunished. For some of these people their relationship with the dead is daily expressed in gestures and dialogues, in their daily procession to take care of the graves, in permanently carrying the photograph of the deceased, or in the attention paid to the dreams in which he appears. Looking back in the past, they sometimes imagine the future that the deceased might have had, and go on counting the years of his age. Just like in the groan of the mother who uttered a few words at the Cemetery of the Heroes: “Remus, my child, (...) I think of everything you could have become”.³

The realms of memory

“We erected these monuments also in order to protest”

The pilgrimage of December 18 to the “places of martyrdom” on which the Memorial from Timișoara erected the monuments of the revolution maps the city’s realms of memory. On a pouring rainy day, we join those few pilgrims, successors of the hero-martyrs, high-school students with their civic education teacher, organizers, and some local journalists. In the bus crowded with wreaths I sit down in the front, trying to film, next to an elderly woman who is disabled. She is Remus’ mother. She shows me his picture. “He would have turned 38 this year”.⁴ It is his last photograph. On the back the woman has attached the picture from the

¹ Interview with Traian Orban, Ciupa Vasile, December 18, 2004, Timișoara, interviewer: Grama Sidonia.

² Patrick Baudry, *op. cit.*, p. 74-161.

³ Recording of the speeches at the Cemetery of the Heroes, December 17, 2004, Timișoara.

⁴ Interview with Tășală Vasilica, December 18, 2004, Timișoara, interviewer: Grama Sidonia.

funeral, Remus' face with traces of bullets on his head, and between them an earlier Easter postcard. The double photograph, the material trace of an absence, freezes the image of a life and the signs of an unsolved death, and implicitly confesses the hope of resurrection. Her son was shot on December 17, in the 700 Square, when returning from the Opera Square. It seems that he had also been there in the Maria Square from the beginning of the uprising. The mother later reconstructed her son's last hours with his picture, asking everybody in all the languages spoken in the multicultural space of the Banat. Being wounded in the cervical area, his friends accompanied him in the ambulance for hospital care. There, another friend, a stretcher-bearer, found him dead, "wounded at the neck and shot in the head". He told later to the mother: "he died with these wide open eyes".¹ The stretcher-bearer hid the bodies of Remus and other acquaintances among the dead in the hospital so that they wouldn't be stolen. "So that they wouldn't take him to be burnt also, (...) [says the mother, because, otherwise] now he was also in Bucharest, I wouldn't have had him here in this grave. I wouldn't have Remus here in the grave, I couldn't have seen him even dead."²

In all this while the mother was looking for him at the gates of the hospital with his photograph in hand. She only found him on December 21, and tried everything she could to bury him in a Christian way, although on December 23, "one day before Christmas' Eve (...) they were firing from all sides, (...) and everybody ran away in all directions" from the cemetery.

In February 1990 the friend who had hidden Remus in the hospital also died under suspicious circumstances. "And then, after two months they killed him too, they waited for him one morning at his house where he lived and pushed a stone down his throat to simulate that he choked on it, and they threw him in a sewer so deep, because he was even taller than Remus, he was two meters tall."³

Then, some time later, Remus' girlfriend – whom he could not marry because he had to support his disabled parents – "hanged herself for him." All these deaths in chain make the woman say that "I have lost three lives in the revolution". Ever since, she has gone weekly to the cemetery (she used to go daily until last year, when her precarious health turned even worse), and lights candles and places flowers in the 700

¹ Ibid.

² Interview with Tășală Vasilica, December 18, 2004, Timișoara, interviewer: Grama Sidonia.

³ Ibid.

Square and at the hospital every time she passes there. She has made an intensely symbolic daily personal environment out of these parts of the city which raises painful memories. The County Hospital where she is frequently sent for health problems provokes tormenting experiences. "(...) It is painful (...) that it can't be found out there in the hospital, (...) who shot my child... it's painful..." "It is said that we should forgive, but whom should we forgive if we don't know who killed them?"

Today, as she dreamed with Remus the night before, she has come with a "more relieved heart" to the pilgrimage, sensing that it might be the last one. As we come close to the 700 Square, she shows me the spot where her son was injured, together with other rioters, and the monument built to their remembrance. The bronze statute, entitled "The Target Man", represents in an expressionist manner the tensioned, inarticulate body of a man who loses his power, his knees bend, but as he is falling, he bitterly raises his fists to the sky. The message of the monument is a speechless accusation, and at the same time a begging for divine mercy.¹ Around the chest the statue bears a target and traces of bullets. The artistic representation transfigures the testimonies and life stories of the events which took place in this space, in a vein whose nerves we tried to capture during this pilgrimage. For Remus' mother, this monument consecrates the death of her son. She appropriates the "Target Man" as a personalized representation, as an objectified memory of her son: "[He was] also bent like this, so we had to raise him by the knees, because he didn't fit in the coffin, he was tall, one meter ninety-eight (...)" ; "he had his hands exactly this way. As I said, he was burnt all over his chest with cigarettes... they mocked them ... in an unimaginable way..."²

Paradoxically, the materiality of the monument which offers itself to our sensorial perception de-petrifies the memory and makes recollection palpable. After the pilgrimage, while she was still telling us her story in front of the reproduction of the target man statue exhibited within the Memorial, the woman stroked the representation of the wounds. This is one of the distinct features of the revolution monuments in Timișoara, the fact that the petrified memory of the monuments which aims at eternity exists together with living memories, interwoven with the life-stories of our contemporaries. Far from being expelled in a historical or historicized memory "from which the emotional value of recollection

¹ Cf. the soundtrack of the film "Miracol".

² Interview, idem.

has been extracted”,¹ these monuments concentrate the trauma of our fellows.

Nevertheless, monuments do not speak for themselves. They must be periodically re-invested with meaning by social practices. The pilgrimage to the monuments of revolution aims at reactivating and transmitting to younger generations the meaning and memory of the places it consecrates. Even in the lack of a wider mobilization and audience, the smaller group of people who depose wreaths and lights candles, discretely performs the ritual of remembrance in common and offering. Standing in the front of the bronze statue group entitled *Pietà* (sculpted by Petru Jecza), the pilgrims listen to the didactic, mastered, slightly evasive speech of the organizer made primarily for the school children gathered there. The monument is “a homage brought to all the women who died during the days of the revolution”. The artistic representation which gives up the modern metaphor of the soldier fallen into the arms of mother-homeland, monolithically presents the silhouette of a woman leaning on the shoulder of a man. The first victims were killed in this area, around the Decebal Square, on December 17, 1989, when unarmed women, children, and men were equally shot. Those present at this pilgrimage are tacitly aware of the fact that this monument reproduces a real event happened 15 years ago, and that the man who is now speaking to the children carried his shot wife in his arms.

The monument entitled “Opening” was erected in 1991 on the Martyrs’ Road (the work of the German sculptor Ingo Glass). In a different, non-figurative artistic register, two vertical panels made of steel for marine vessels and placed in front of each other embrace a kind of stone grave. The front panel is compact, and it contains the names of all the 43 persons whose inanimate bodies were stolen from the County Hospital and burnt at the Crematorium in Bucharest engraved on the inner side, between two crosses. The other panel is divided by a vertical slot of light, opened to the west. The massive steel of which the

¹ Sylviane Agacinski, *Philosophies et politiques de l'architecture*, Paris: Éd. Galilée, 1992, p. 200. The argument is developed on the basis of the implicit distinction between *historical* or *historicized memory* versus *spontaneous memory*, used by Pierre Nora when describing the cultural characteristics of time in his *Les Lieux* (see Nora, *op.cit.*, p. XXIII-XXV). Agacinski proposes a conventional definition of historical memory as “representations and traces which do not arouse any emotions in the present, only a kind of scientific interest”, distinguishing it thus from *recollection* or *anamnesic memory*. (Agacinski, *op. cit.*, p. 200).

monument is built is left unpainted to live its own life and receive the tarnish of time. “In the first year it had a sort of a rusty color, brownish-yellowish, then the color matured and weathered to have this dark brown rust, and it looks nice. There’re also some chalk marks now, but they always get cleaned by themselves”.¹

The artistic representation by the slot in the heavy metal sends a political meaning: the breaking of the iron curtain, and the existential opening in which the people, who tried in these places to stop the tanks from advancing to the city, also played an important role. By its manifold meanings the monument is at the same time a symbolic grave with a vertical presentation, for those who do not rest in the ground. Here a small urn contains part of the ashes of those burnt in Bucharest. Another part of the ashes was placed at the Cathedral, after years of attempts of the successors to find the people who were made to disappear by a criminal hand. This is a provisory destination in a tragic odyssey still happening with this urn with ashes. By its placement, the monument is sanctified, the dead without a grave have found themselves a place for the time being. Political and religious meanings, sacred and profane qualities, funerary and civil rituals merge thus in this “Opening”.

The 12 monuments of the revolution, turned over the years into symbolic *topoi* by the Memorial in Timișoara, have formed a unitary and ambitious project which has succeeded in mobilizing community resources. Their varnishing and consecration have been part of the commemorative gestures of the previous editions. The authors of each monument have extracted the exemplary elements from the testimonies about the revolution, and have transfigured them into art. The favorite themes are bodily representations in an expressionist manner of suffering and mutilation (like in the “Target Man”, the “Eroica”, the “Conqueror”), of mass death (the shocking images of the dead bodies thrown into the mass graves were transfigured in the monument “Martyrs” in the courtyard of the Museum of Banat). The Christian topics abound: the fight with the evil (“St. George”, a child killing the dragon of totalitarianism, a monument dedicated to the children who were absurdly killed in the revolution), the last judgment (“The Fountain of Martyrs”, “The Bell of Freedom”), resurrection (even in the vegetal metaphor of the shooting seed suggested by the monument “Evolution” at the Continental Hotel), or the difficult task of Christian forgiveness (“The Weeping Church”). The monuments were raised in order to mark the places where people

¹ Interview with Orban Traian, December 19, 2004, Timișoara, interviewer Grama Sidonia.

died, as a sign in the way of oblivion, but also as a protest. Their erection means the offering of the living made for those who disappeared. They express and catalyze a willingness to remember which transforms them thus into realms of memory. The force of artistic expression has a cathartic function for the trauma that the population of Timișoara experienced. What characterizes them is the persistent questioning of their significance, the search for a transcendental meaning for the violent deaths in the street and all the other accompanying horrors, after all political or existential meanings have failed. Thus, these are inscribed into the tendency marked by Reinhart Koselleck, characteristic of the monuments of the dead (which commemorate a violent death committed by a human hand for political reasons): “to represent death in battle only as an interrogation, and not as an answer; as something which is no more the founder of a meaning, but the meaning of which is still to be found. What stays behind is the identity of the dead with their own selves”.¹

Experience and significance

“Today is the same as then”

The period of commemoration arouses various recollections for the people of Timișoara, whether or not they take part in the commemorative gestures. The narratives about then, even if not provoked by questions, are spontaneously reversed, fragmentary, kaleidoscopic, in a mixture of factual data and imaginary elements, of the history of private experiences and information circulated later.² The people naturally remember that the temperature was high for that period of the year, and the meteorological coincidences now arouse an astonishment filled with satisfaction. “It is exactly how it was then” – is an almost stereotypical sentence which is heard every day all over the city. A less usual meteorological phenomenon which took place then, globular lightning, and the rain which washed away the blood flown on the streets on the night of 17th to 18th of December 1989 retrospectively confirms the extraordinary value of those moments. A man who was wounded then remembers the sensation of the raindrops falling on his wound. It is a

¹ Reinhart Koselleck, *op. cit.*, p. 158.

² The memories about December 1989 related before us largely remind of the spontaneous memory metaphorically described by Pierre Nora in contrast with history: memory is “affective and magic; (...) it feeds on vague, telescopic memories, global or floating, particular or symbolic, sensitive to all transfers, screenings, censures, or projections.” Pierre Nora, *op. cit.*, p. XIX.

long-term sensorial memory which “sediments the past in the body”.¹ The participants’ narratives about the revolution also include the history of their wounds, of the lengthy medical care they needed, or the discomforts still felt. The commemoration reactivates the memory of the battles, of fear, of raindrops, and suffering. The traces of all these are now exposed discretely, with a sort of pride. During these days the revolutionaries bear the physical disabilities gained in those events as decorations, as social identity marks on their own body.

Still, the commemoration is not merely a reactivation, an affective re-experience of those events, but rather a reconstruction, a new significance, a social organization of collective memory, which indissolubly involves forgetting as well. The remembrance in common occasioned by this celebration is focused around certain moments, aspects, places, events considered memorable. The quality of being memorable does not necessarily mean intelligible. The events of that time which now have a claim to be memorable and are still found, after 15 years, in the program of commemoration, are partly significant, integrating into a comprehensive image of the revolution in Timișoara, because they can be explained, analyzed, justified. Others however remain unintelligible, unjustifiable, meaningless, absurd. Among these, the murder of children who were singing Christmas carols on the stairs of the Cathedral on December [18?], 1989. The tragic event, close to diabolic, is yearly remembered by the placement of lit candles in the form of a cross on the stairs of the Cathedral, at the precise hour when the tragedy happened.

“There were years when we covered the stairs with candles, in other years a theater play was performed there, in which (...) that moment was replayed. Yes, that particular moment.” [The children from the orphanage who came to the Cathedral, among other people gathered there] “(...) shouted: “Freedom!”, (...) and ... they had candles (...) they were, in fact, the children who came to the Cathedral, they were rehearsing Christmas carols. And they stopped on the stairs of the Cathedral (...) because the event on the 17th impressed them, probably,

¹ I use here in a literal meaning Paul Connerton’s statement, referring especially to the memory of the concrete traces that a certain past left on the body of the wounded. The English author had in mind primarily the bodily practices which make possible common remembrance. “The past is, as it were, sedimented in the body”. P. Connerton, *op. cit.*, p. 72.

and they stood there with their candles for those who were shot there a day before”.¹

Of all the people who died during those days, these orphanage children have never been found because they had no family to claim their dead bodies in those hectic days.

Thus, similarly to its monuments, the commemorative gestures of the revolution from Timișoara not only express a common sense of the events, as the usual aim of political commemorations, but it first of all records a question and a protest. By commemoration the people of Timișoara try to cope with the traumatic events of their recent past in the collective memory. On the other hand, the days of December 19 and 20 of the program of commemoration festively celebrate the victories and undertake a critical, reflexive analysis of the events of December 1989 and the prospects of the future. For the past 15 years a tradition has formed in Timișoara to question the recent past, by gathering testimonies and documents, by investigating certain still covered aspects, by confronting opinions, producing thus a cumulative effect of knowledge which aims at a scientific treatment. At the same time, it is an exercise of imagining the future by concrete actions, as well as an attempt to coagulate the revolutionary associations as a distinct voice of civil society. The commemoration session “The Romanian National Revolution from December 1989 – Meanings and Implications”, held in the Council Room of the Timiș County Council and organized each year by the Victoria Association, is one of such efforts. In this edition, presented at the very beginning, an action initiated in force by the December 21 Association from Bucharest, to hinder the imminent effects of the prescription, receives the consent of the revolutionary associations from Timișoara. The insistent protests in the streets and the hearing campaign of members of all associations from Bucharest led by General Dan Voinea at the center of this foundation resulted in the initiation of criminal action for the crimes of December 16-28, 1989 beginning with January next year, 2005. As a sign of support the Victoria Association from Timișoara announced this initiative in the solemn meeting on December 20, the anniversary day of the transformation of the uprising into a revolution and the declaration of Timișoara as the first free city. Even more, the representatives from Timișoara radically require that the crimes of the communist period must not be prescribed, with reference to the criterion of the impossibility to exonerate crimes against mankind.

¹ Interview with Ciupa Vasile, Orban Traian, December 18, 2004, Timișoara, interviewer: Grama Sidonia.

The leader of the Victoria Association and one of the acknowledged leaders of the events which took place in Timișoara in 1989, holds a speech in which – overbidding the comparison between the French revolution from 1789 and the Romanian revolution from December 1989, with all the conceptual confusion that the term of revolution might imply in the case of the latter – explains the consequences of the revolution from Timișoara as a “partial failure, meaning that not all the stipulations of the revolutionary program were fulfilled, represented by the Proclamation of the Romanian Democratic Front on December 21, 1989, but announced at the highest level already on the day of the outburst of the revolution in Timișoara, that is, December 20, 1989.”¹ The people of Timișoara consider that these proclamations have the value of revolutionary programs which have transformed the mass movements of the days of December 16 to 20, 1989 in Timișoara into a revolution. In their view, the consequences of this revolution are still happening, and the leaders of the revolutionaries of Timișoara still feel entitled to try to influence their course. The speech held here and mainly centered on the significance of the events rather than on reconstructions and personal identifications was previously presented on the first symposium of the Institute of the Romanian Revolution, newly inaugurated in Bucharest. Similarly in its name with the Institute of the French Revolution, this attempt at institutionalizing the memory of the Romanian revolution cultivates thus a kind of elusive relationship with the founding event of European modernity, making use of a specific rhetoric of the commemorative gestures, which “metaphorically schematizes the relation between events and historical configurations.”²

These are the evaluative and prospective aspects of commemoration. They also outline the institutionalized memory of the Romanian revolution, in contrast with its spontaneous, fluid, affective memory. The commemorative political gesture of decorating certain participants of the revolution is also inscribed into this type of institutionalization of the memory of the Romanian revolution. Along these days, there have been a confusing ferment of political symbolism undertaken by the former president of the country in the last days of his mandate: pardoning blameworthy people, and afterwards, under the

¹ Recording of session of presentations, speaker: Lorin Fortuna, December 18, 2004, Timișoara.

² See the definition of *concatenation* in the glossary of the terms of the commemorative gesture, in J. Davallon, op. cit., 484.

pressure of civil society, revoking the pardoning, while at the same time indistinctly offering medals both to recognized cultural personalities and to people notorious for the anti-democratic values they propagate, provoking thus the serial return of these decorations¹. In this controversial context 115 revolutionaries are also nominated for decorations.

In these anniversary days the revolutionaries from Timișoara, some of them just returning from the festivity of decoration in Bucharest, celebrate on December 20 the victory of the revolution in Timișoara, raising their glasses of champagne in the balcony of the Opera. Then they leave for the official ceremonies in the capital, marking thus the risky way of some of their former colleagues of fight who went to Bucharest in order to bring the news, already on December 19, 1989, of the radical changes taking place in Timișoara. The spreading of the news, vital for taking Timișoara out of its isolation imposed by Ceaușescu's regime, is remembered now also by the urban ritual of sharing bread. Baskets full with bread are brought out on the street and offered to the passers-by. While being an essentially Christian gesture, it also evokes concrete events of 15 years before, when workers from Oltenia, dressed up in uniforms of patriotic guards, tired after the night shift, were embarked in special trains, and brought to suppress what communist propaganda termed as the provocation of foreign agents and hooliganism. These manipulated people were received with bread and food by the people of Timișoara gathered in impressive numbers in the Opera Square. Understanding what was really happening there, they spread further "the truth and the flame of the revolution".²

While Timișoara is preparing for the celebration of victory, another group of participants, made up mainly of the descendents of the martyr-heroes of the revolution, leave for Bucharest during the night in a discreet and tragic pilgrimage, following the path of the bodies stolen from the hospital in the night of December 19, 1989.

¹ The mass media has intensely reflected the degradation of the former president's presidential gestures in the period of the commemoration of the Romanian revolution.

² Florin Medeleț, Mihai Ziman, op. cit., p. 25-26.

Trauma and transfiguration

*“And on the spot where the ashes were thrown,
if we could build a church...”*

The fate of some of the first martyrs of Timișoara, shot on December 17, 1989 and taken to the County Hospital for care was discovered only much later, in the spring of the following year. Until then, the relatives of the disappeared searched their deceased in the mass graves of the cemeteries, where a part of the victims of the repression were buried secretly and in great haste. As over 40 persons could not be found among the bodies exhumed here, the people continued to knock on the doors of state institutions, the Prosecutor’s office, the Militia, and the Institute of Forensic Medicine. Desperate and revolted, the people of Timișoara organized a series of protesting marches on the streets of Bucharest. Inhabitants of the capital, as well as people from other cities joined them in sign of solidarity in discovering the truth about the victims of the revolution. It was only in March 1990 that the devastating news was made public about the bodies of 42 persons from the County Hospital who were secretly transported in a refrigerator van to Bucharest and burnt at the “Cenușa” crematory. From the medical files found at the morgue of the County Hospital, the family members have made a list with the names of those who could have been there among the bodies burnt in Bucharest. The fact that they were eventually tracked down after painful searching was but a step in finding out the truth hidden by complicity. The very process of identification of those disappeared implied an arbitrary reserve in which uncertainty was insidiously persisting. “(...) And then the list was made with those who were brought to Bucharest and burnt. We believed that it was true, but maybe... even in this moment I am not completely convinced that my wife was among them, but I believe this to be true ninety percent. (...) I followed this line and ... my wife is also written among the forty-two martyrs who were shot on the seventeenth, that is, the first ... heroes of Timișoara were shot on the seventeenth and were made to disappear by the order of Elena Ceaușescu so that afterwards, if Ceaușescu still remained in power, they would have been declared to have fled across the border, and the truth would never have been told”.¹

The uncertainty was even greater as it was discovered, still under the effect of the traumatic events of December 1989 in Timișoara,

¹ Interview with Bânciu Ioan, December 19, 2004, on the way to Bucharest, interviewer: Grama Sidonia.

that other victims of the repression, approximately 20 bodies might have been burnt during those days at a fire in Freidorf, started at a nearby C.A.P. (a cooperative of agricultural production).¹

For those who did not find their loved ones killed during the revolution the continuing search for the truth and the ritual of commemoration of their tragic deaths become modes to transcend uncertainty and angst. Even more than finding those who were responsible for these infamous murders, the people still fight to restore in a ritualized way the dignity of a “taunted” death. The need to find them literally, to find their mortal remains and shreds of their ashes dispersed, to finally build them a grave, is crucial. Therefore in the following years they tried to organize themselves into protest groups, and to continue the protest marches to the capital. Their attempt to find out the truth was also joined by the representatives of recently founded revolutionary associations throughout the country. In April 1991, during one of the largest of such manifestations, in a tensed political context, the demonstrators from Timișoara were received by general Voinea, the military prosecutor in charge of the files of the revolution, and who revealed the place where the ashes were thrown. The demonstrators went by two buses to the village Popești-Leordeni, to a sewer where the household discard of Bucharest was reversing into the Dâmbovița river.

“(…) we went there together with prosecutor Dan Voinea, to Popești-Leordeni, and he took us to that sewer; it was ... winter, snow ... but we could clearly see that the snow was covering heaps of garbage. There, at that sewer, as you can imagine, we prayed, and we brought a cross which was ... the cross of the revolution from Timișoara, (...), and that wooden cross we fixed there on the sewer and we *blessed the place* so that later a *monument* could be built *there*.”²

The ashes of the people secretly burnt in Bucharest, gathered in rubbish-carts and thrown out in the sewer on the outskirts of the city is the final link in a chain of politically organized events of a “rational

¹ Miodrag Milin, *Timișoara în revoluție și după* (Timișoara during and after the revolution), Timișoara: Marineasa, 1997, p. 166. This obscure case was investigated by Iosif Costinaș, a journalist from Timișoara, but left unfinished. The journalist died in 2002, in suspicious circumstances.

² Interview with Bânciu Vasile, December 19, 2004, interviewer Grama Sidonia.

criminality”¹. This is as long as persons and institutions of the state were involved all the way from the stealing of the bodies from the hospital to wiping away all their traces, in a complicity which enabled this secret operation.² Its significance reminds us notorious events of mass extermination of the recent history, as unpardonable crimes of totalitarianisms which have constituted the evil of the 20th century.

However, beyond the reprehensible political calculation behind this action which must be submitted to criminal or moral accusation, the practices of exterminating dead bodies mean an unimaginable act of profanation. These dead were refused their very quality of deceased, they were denied the funerary rituals by which they would have been confirmed as dead human beings entitled to a final gesture of respect. In order to annul the effect of this sacrilege – “the mocking of the ashes”³ – their descendants have repeatedly tried to sanctify the place and their mortal remains. An entire odyssey of symbolic practices and actions of protest speak about the efforts of the descendants to regain the material traces of the deceased, integrating them into a religious-commemorative orbit, and at the same time to mark the infamous place where the ashes were thrown by erecting a monument on the very spot. In 1993 another march to the capital, this time a funeral procession with priests and

¹ The difference between “pathological” and “rational” criminality stands in the fact that the latter makes the categories of defunct and deceased disappear. Cf. Patrick Baudry, *op. cit.*, p. 45-46.

² The operation of stealing and burning of the bodies implies the responsibility of people on different levels of political decision, down to the workers who burnt the bodies during the night. That is, from the disposition of Elena Ceaușescu, advised by Bobu Emil and Postelnicu Tudor in order to hide the real proportions of the use of firearms on the night of 17th to 18th of December 1989, which was transmitted to the general of the Militia and the “Securitate” and completed by the officers of these state institutions, with the complicity of the Director of the County Hospital, who permitted the removal of the bodies and their medical files, to those who accompanied the driver of the refrigerator van (who was not aware of what he was transporting, and he was changed at 36 km. from Bucharest), the administrator of the “Cenușa” crematory in Bucharest, and the five workers who burnt the bodies all night long, and who received a financial allowance for keeping the secret. For this account, see the conclusions of the court of law on the stealing of the bodies in the “Trial of the Timișoara case”, published in Marius Mioc, *Curtea Supremă de Justiție. Procesele revoluției din Timișoara (1989)* (The Supreme Court of Justice. The trials of the revolution from Timișoara), Timișoara: Artpress, 2004, p. 34-36.

³ Interview with Ferkel Mihaela, December 20, 2004, Bucharest, interviewer: Grama Sidonia.

officials from Timișoara came to collect in a funeral urn traces of ashes and deposit it in a sacred place. The people tried with a remarkable care to collect shreds of the material from the remains of their loved ones and to consecrate it in a religious ceremony.

“(…) We have gathered from there, from the sewer, the dust outside and inside the sewer, because in some places the water was deep (…), somebody went down into the sewer and gathered dust from the margins from there, and we supposed that, as it was thrown out of the rubbish-carts, those ashes (…) were dispersed on the margins; and even if it is not only ashes in the urn, but there are molecules of the ashes, definitely, *molecules of the ashes of the heroes* are there in that urn”.¹

The procession continued to Timișoara, where local people joined the holy mass for the consecration of the urn with the ashes, temporarily deposited at the Cathedral until a monument is built. And since the erection of the monument on the place of the sewer at Popești-Leordeni was permanently postponed for reasons which betray a lack of political will for memory in Bucharest, the procession of the urn continued.² On one previous edition of the commemorations, at the consecration of the monument “Opening”, a part of the ashes was deposited here; another urn was deposited at the Church of the Martyrs, on the occasion of another commemoration. This continuous journey of the urns is a sign that the dead bodies incinerated at the “Cenușa” have not found their place yet. As a recurrently commemorative gesture, it transmits still existing anxieties, uncertain meanings, and the refusal to accept such a tragic event to be subjected to premature and privy oblivion. The aim of the efforts undertaken by the descendants of the victims secretly burnt in Bucharest is the transformation of these places of painful remembrance into realms of memory. They try to challenge thus the willingness of memory. Though, this is, essentially politically influenced. During Emil Constantinescu’s presidency – the leader of the

¹ Interview with Bânciu Ion, December 19, 2004, interviewer: Grama Sidonia.

² The procession of the urn can be inscribed among the cultural practices of post-communist Europe, connected to the public journeys of the mortal remains of outstanding figures of the recent past, analyzed by the American anthropologist Katherine Verdery in her book *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies. Reburial and Postsocialist Change*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1999. The political symbolism of these practices represents for the author more than just types of a *sui generis* political discourse, but especially “ways of reordering the worlds of meanings”. Katherine Verdery, op. cit., p. 33.

opposition supported by the people of Timișoara also due to the fact that, during the elections campaign in 1996, he used the claim for the truth of the revolution as a symbolic capital – finally a monument was erected at Popești-Leordeni in the memory of these martyrs. The monument, placed along the street, was consecrated in 1999, but the mourning families were never announced in order to take part at the ceremony. However, for these families it is the precise spot where the ashes were thrown which is crucially important.

“There is that sewer at Popești-Leordeni that we consider to be a *holy* place, because it is there that the souls of the first martyrs of the revolution were thrown.”¹

Meanwhile, the area in question has become private property, it is closed down, and access to it is denied. Ever since, the people of Timișoara wished to build here an ecumenical church or monastery. This is the project they are fighting for now, at a time lag of 15 years from the events.

In 2004, the group of pilgrims from Timișoara who arrived on December 20 to Bucharest – revolutionaries, women in mourning, and teenagers over 15 years old – was joined by a few representatives of the December 21 Association from Bucharest, following in advance the official path of commemoration to be held in December 21 and 22. We deposited wreaths and lit candles at the stone cross in the University Square and at the crucifix in the Cemetery of Heroes. Once arriving at the crematory, the place of horrifying events which stir painful memories, the people who lost someone close to them find it hard to step in: “I cannot go in there any more... I’ve had enough”. But the aim of this pilgrimage is also to transmit generational memory. The representatives of the administration, who first banned filming in the crematory, embarrassedly gave up this interdiction when finding out that the visitors were the children, spouses, or brothers of those 42 persons who were secretly burnt there during the revolution. Their names are inscribed on small marble plates in the main hall of the crematory. Some of the adults try to offer certain disparate pieces of information about what happened then for the colleagues and friends of the teenagers whose parents were killed there:

Secretly, on the night of 19th to 20th December 1989, the room of the furnaces was constantly operating. The workers, probably threatened by the “Securitate”, burnt two or three bodies at a time “to go faster”; “they chopped them up like some ... loafs of meat” and threw them into

¹ Ibid.

the furnaces. Then “the ashes were put in heaps (...) in some rubbish-carts which (...) were taken on the 20th to Popești-Leordeni (...) and thrown into a sewer so that (...) no traces were left”. They say that “the workers who had anything to do with the burning of the bodies all died one by one. Last year it was in the newspaper (...) that the last one who was dying wanted to reveal the secret”; “Every worker who worked here ... died in a very mysterious way...”¹

The profanation of the bodies, the contempt towards the dead bodies of human beings and their reduction to the level of meat cannot go unpunished. The people here present want to remind these things. Otherwise, the failure to recognize the humanity of their deceased fellows would mean the abandoning of any intelligibility. The atmosphere is overwhelming. The teenagers watch and are deeply speechless; one of them is constantly filming, the girls are sighing with tears. One of the boys lost his mother, the other his father. On the bus, on the way to the sewer, one of them hides his face in his hands at times, another one is looking out of the window with blank eyes. In the village of Popești-Leordeni we go down an impracticable road, by a simple funeral stone of white marble, built near a waste land. The pillar in front of the fence which circles the sewer is still covered in electoral smiles. A local fellow opens up a wire gate and we all move forward on dry grass towards an ordinary sewer hole, covered by a concrete plate. Some of the men pull over the plate which opens with a dry screech. The candles are difficult to light because of the wind, and are leaned against the stone. A priest and a teacher from the village celebrate a short mass. We all cross ourselves and say “May God forgive them and may they rest in peace”. By the monument on the street women share milk-loaf, wine and funeral polenta to some poor local people who are waiting there, while a man sprinkles wine over the horizontal marble plate which contains the names of the dead without a grave. Finally, we make there a group photograph.

The commemoration in which we took part, limited to a small circle and lacking public visibility, fulfills a Christian duty of remembrance of the dead, and at the same time, a civil duty of memory. It is a difficult exercise against the abuse of forgiveness, as the names of the persons killed, the places and infamous events which happened here are marginalized, if not expelled from the dominant narrative about the Romanian revolution and its official commemorations. The aim of this exercise undertaken mainly by the families in mourning is to give back

¹ Recording of fragments of discussions in the Crematory, December 20, 2004, Bucharest.

the dead their identity of deceased human beings by inscribing their names into stones, and to reestablish their relations with the living, with other significant people, and with the next generations. More than just a monument, the church which is meant to be built there – ecumenical, in order to comprise the confessions of all the deceased – will be the sacred space in which the dark events which happened then could be now transfigured. The long series of symbolic practices and actions of protest which this group has assumed for 15 years could turn this place of painful anamnesis into a realm of memory. What is still left to be added to this alchemy is the political willingness of memory.

Conclusions

If we were to briefly characterize the defining features of the 15 year commemorations of the Romanian revolution in Timișoara, we should first note its twofold aim. On the one hand it represents a method of coping with the traumatic events in the collective memory, functioning as a travail of mourning. On the other hand, it is a celebration of a revolutionary project started in 1989 and which still awaits fulfillment. After 15 years from the events, the recent change of power is perceived as a continuation of this project. All the other features derive from this double orientation. Thus, as a management of the recent past in the present, the monuments and commemorative practices keep raising, as we have seen, the questions and searches, and try to influence the political willingness for memory. At the same time, as an anniversary, the commemoration implies the coexistence of two types of representations of the revolution. Timișoara celebrates in these days both a revolutionary project which was outlined in December 20, 1989, and which imposed a distinct rhythm of local development, and a filiation with the events in Bucharest, which in a second version fulfilled what Timișoara had started in December 16-20, 1989.

In a theoretical approach, this study of the commemorations has occasioned the investigation of local social practices by which the realms of memory in Timișoara are constituted, and by which the collective memory of the Romanian revolution is organized. I have deconstructed thus the vague and problematic concept of collective memory into particular, heterogeneous aspects, and I have tried to grasp the articulations between them. Also, describing the gestures of commemorations, I have revealed the way in which the spaces of remembrance are invested with a will of memory, and the monuments are invested with meaning and transformed thus into realms of memory. By

the “thick description” of the ritual of commemoration I have tried to bridge a theoretical gap in the literature on monuments and realms of memory, which, I believe, does not reveal the precise ways in which the reactivation and transmission of social meanings happen. I have grasped in this study the aspects of the collective memory of the Romanian revolution in the process of its making, and in its dialectics with oblivion.