

Mythbiography between Propaganda and Memory

Ionuț Costea

*Faculty of History and Philosophy,
Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca*

Keywords: communism, post-socialism, heroization, propaganda, memory

Abstract

The aim of this study is to outline how the cultural model of the hero-traitor functioned in the second half of the 20th century. The investigation focuses on the case study of the communist martyr hero, Lazăr of Rusca's figure, heroized in the context of the political show trial of Timișoara held in the summer of 1949 and diffused by the propaganda machinery of the communist regime from Bucharest (party press, literature, monuments, denominations); on another level, we take into consideration the two modalities of representing Lazăr of Rusca in the rural community he came from: a) the way in which he was depicted by the anticommunist partisans and b) the image outlined by the narrative of the family members, which applies strategies for preserving the social prestige of the family in the post-socialist period.

E-mail: costea78@yahoo.co.uk

*

The condemnation of communism can be regarded a fashion in contemporary Romania, which generates research topics for historians and governmental institutions meant to “unmask” the former regime. In these conditions, communism is connected to a history of demonology. To prefigure the interrogations on the basis of the view on communism as history-reality, to limit and to confine research to a closed space is a trap, as Daniel Barbu has already observed, which must be avoided by means of coming closer to the life stories of those who lived in that epoch; leaving behind the official terrain of political and event history and discovering the private, intimate space hidden from the indiscrete eye, can offer a convincing picture of what communism means, of the

way in which on the one hand it overturned biographies, or, on the other hand it fashioned them. The attempt we are going to make on these pages does not elude contingencies, but develops in a comprising and comprehensive form a problem of political history, the Romanian communists' symbolic legitimization in the 1950s; therefore we do not focus on the repressive character of the regime, but on the strategies used for constructing political myths and symbols and on the way in which these were diffused, received and adapted to social memory. Under such circumstances, the political history we have resorted to, though it concentrates on an event, Lazăr Cernescu's assassination, and on his transformation into a martyr, makes necessary to place this event into a temporary conjuncture the limits of which are marked by the institutionalization of the communist regime in Romania and the beginning of the 21st century which brought the disintegration of this political regime. Both the rise and the fall of communism are significant for the birth of the heroic biography and its adaptation to a discourse which had as an aim to preserve the prestige of the family in the rural community of Banat.

The present history tries to traverse the rigid confines of the documents left behind by the former regime. Nevertheless, it has analyzed these as well carefully. Unlike the past research routine which used prevalently written sources – which give the impression of a safe and stable world, of a past which can be reconstructed *in integrum* – we chose to resort to memoirs and oral history. There is also a reaction against this artificiality of history in the contemporary world in which the historian, by communicating with other disciplines, is provoked to find the “natural”, protean dimension, placed outside the technical innovations, a primary world, populated by myths and stories; from here originates the tendency to write a (hi)story liberated from the shackles of technicism identified in historiography by quantitative or structural experience. In this state the vitality of history lies in the fact that it is a discipline “in march”, a history in “ebbing”. Marked by this anxiety, in consequence of the debates inside the discipline and of the interest in presenting the past as social memory, history is detached from the empiric presupposition that language reflects the objects and that, in this way, it represents the past reality faithfully.¹ From a process of study-

¹ See the presentation of these theories in Călin Morar-Vulcu, *Republica își făurește oamenii. Construcția identităților politice în discursul oficial în România, 1948–1965* (The Republic Creates Its Men. Constructing Political

knowledge integrated to a cultural paradigm history obtained *self-awareness* and epistemological and historiographic *self-reflection*. It is to be applied the perspective stated by M. Foucault according to which history is a cultural discourse of knowledge, involving the social structures and cultural conventions alike. Understanding knowledge as a product created/distorted by language, history becomes the fruit of our knowledge of the past; as Derrida observed, it does not only depend on concepts and text (in the sense of praxis), but mainly on the relationship with the form of recording the past, on ideology, power and its social and institutional manifestations. Thus, history is understood as a series of discourses about the world, which do not create this world, but, approaching it, they confer to it the entire signification it has.¹

Under these auspices I have followed the tracks of the past in different aspects, either by using memoirs or other written documents, “the traditional province of historians”, or I resorted to the interviews of oral history. The oral source is born as a space of tensions and adaptations between personal and institutional memory, questioning the place of the individual in history and the role of history in private life. On the other hand, I have followed the visual signs of the past: photographs, funeral monuments, statues, medals, the symbolic organization and ornamentation of the public space, elements which illustrate and diffuse history. The discussion also required to observe some actions and habits which did not leave any material mark which the historian might study, but these rituals were recorded as commemorations – attempts to impose an interpretation upon the past – as formulas of “collective representations”.

Grasping the past by means of these *tracks* outlines at the level of the historiographic discourse a type of representation belonging to two registers. In the first one, exploring the commemoration of the communist martyr-hero, we can observe the institutionalization of this type through the show trial of Timișoara held in the summer of the year 1949, a context for celebrating the victory of socialism against the “enemies of the people”. We can also observe how the *poor peasant* was transformed into an exemplary literary character, *Lazăr of Rusca* (the creation and diffusion of the mythbiography) and this hero was “fixed” into a symbolic order of the “new world” as an exercise of *historical political science*. In the second register, as an investigation of the

Identities in the Official Discourse in Romania, 1948–1965), Cluj-Napoca, 2007, pp. 17–23.

¹ K. Jenkins, *Re-thinking History*, London, New York, 1991, p. 5.

rememoration process where the partisans' tale (a form of *counter-memory* which in the post-totalitarian societies is transformed into history) and the family members' story (a form of *post-memory*) are combined, we can find rival rememoration excursions, the partisans picturing Lazăr a notorious communist, a threat to security and the traitor of the community, while the family's rememorative narration was meant to preserve the social prestige of both Lazăr and his descendents. In the first case, that of the rememoration of the hero as a topos of the communist celebration process, we encounter a representation of the past *through itself*, and in the second case the representation of the past becomes relevant through its significations given by the witness-narrator. The two registers separated in a conventional way, are not independent, they coexist and overlap.

By taking thus the past as representation we place the present investigation within the confines of cultural history. Human behaviour, in this context, as the historian's object can be interpreted through the study and analysis of language understood as graphic form, but also as attitude and behaviour, more precisely through the linguistic significations we use in the communication process: "The aim of cultural history is to analyze these significations and to find a way in which they create social, intellectual or ideological motivations, value criteria and power relations."¹ In this perspective the proposed investigation is not convenient for its author. The language of communication is notoriously ambiguous, it opens at the same time several possibilities of interpretation which can be concurrent. The cultural environments in which the protagonists evolve are various, society presupposes the coexistence of cultures and subcultures at a synchronic level, and this amplifies the risks of a cultural historical research, the risk of simplification and of losing sight of nuances, of creating clichés and

¹ Paul Klebere Monod, *The Power of Kings*, New Haven, London, Yale University Press, 1999, p. 5, see also pp. 4–6; Roger Chartier, *Cultural History: Between Practices and Representations*, Ithaca, 1988; Peter Burke, *Unity and Variety in Cultural History*, in: *Varieties of Cultural History*, London, 1997, pp. 183–212; Toader Nicoară, Între istoria reprezentărilor și istoria culturală: istoria mentalităților astăzi (Between the History of Representations and Cultural History: the History of Mentalities Today), in: *Tentația istoriei. În memoria profesorului Pompiliu Teodor* (The Temptation of History. In Memory of Professor Pompiliu Teodor), coordinated by N. Bocșan, O. Ghitta, D. Radosav, Cluj-Napoca, 2003, pp. 471–497.

generalizing paradigms in turn and of sacrificing the unity of peoples' life.

In this environment we find the interview given by the historian Miodrag Milin for Radio Timișoara in the year 1999 and published as the introduction of a volume of documents originating from the archives of the Military Court and of the Securitate referring to the armed resistance groups from the Banat Mountains active in the years 1948–1962. Miodrag Milin, questioned by the reporter about Lazăr of Rusca, made the following statement: “Lazăr of Rusca was a musician, he was the member of an orchestra which played at weddings and there he collected information; someone told me the circumstance by which he made himself useful to the security organs. A major from Caransebeș, Kling [Zoltán Kling, the head of the Severin County Security Service – our note, I. C.] had extremely negative reputation. This major organized all kind of actions of pursuing the respective ‘bandits’, as he called them. These decided to liquidate him and he was lucky, I understood that they organized a kind of barrage, a tree was felled, because they knew he had to come with his car, they made him get out of the car, the respective car was fired on, its tyres were shot out, he escaped, it was dark, but he lost his cap. Lazăr Cernescu was the one to bring to Caransebeș the cap of the said officer, and this was the beginning of a deliberate wish to be in good terms with the authorities, to make himself useful, such men are to be found everywhere.”¹

The fact that the reporter insisted especially on a question referring to the communist hero Lazăr Cernescu is the token of his presence in public consciousness, an impregnation of social memory reflected as interrogation, explicitation of the fabulous and miraculous in a moment in which the ideological reference points were evacuated. In the lack of these guide marks, the signification and symbolic power of the personage Lazăr of Rusca is diluted, becomes vague and unstable, outlined in the sphere of curiosity and interrogation: “Who was Lazăr of Rusca?”

Miodrag Milin's answer implies an extensive and intensive, classical and innovative research at the same time, being based on the editing of a documentary volume,² but also of another book of

¹ Miodrag Milin, *În loc de introducere* (Instead of an Introduction), in: *Rezistența anticomunistă din Munții Banatului în documente* (The Anticommunist Resistance in the Banat Mountains in Documents), Bucharest, Fundația Academia Civică, 2000, p. 16.

² *Ibid.*

testimonies and evocations.¹ From this perspective, the personage described by the professor of Timișoara only uses a single voice in opposition with the myth of the communist propaganda symbolized by Lazăr of Rusca. Is this provoked simplification adequate in the presentation of Lazăr, or is it too a cliché?

There are also other discussions on Lazăr of Rusca in the post-socialist public space. One of them implies an extremely interesting and modern formulation, the exploration through oral investigation of the representations present in the memory of the community. In fact, we are presented some fragments of interviews made by the authors with Lazăr Cernescu's brother and daughter or with a less important witness identified as "a peasant from Rusca".² In another case, a recent book formulates the desire to find out *the truth about Lazăr Cernescu*.³ The author's evident ideological position and his allusion-like affirmations postpone the announced denouement. The book offers a great amount of information, it has a comprehensive vision, but the author's approach lacks the historian's critical spirit and method. In the establishment of the "moral order", in the moment when the communist regime in Romania was disintegrated and the "socialist ethical code and justice" denounced, we witness a "responsibilization" which is meant to discover and popularize the "historical truth", falsified, in some peoples' opinion, during the old regime.⁴ I. Gheorgheosu's effort also belongs to this paradigm. The re-memoration becomes a ritual through which the instauration of the "moral order" is attempted. The tragic history of a group of people is made actual as a testimony on the obliterated past; the partisans receive heroic privileges while the communists – in the present case Lazăr Cernescu – outline the territory of demonology.

Some lines from a recent study by Doru Radosav offer us a relevant approach to the personage Lazăr Cernescu, although the author

¹ *Rezistența anticomunistă din Munții Banatului (Zona Domașnea-Teregova). Interviu și evocări* [The Anticommunist Resistance in the Banat Mountains (the Domașnea-Teregova Area). Interviews and Evocations], Miodrag Milin (ed.), Timișoara, 1998.

² Daniela Ghica, „La rădăcinile unei Miorițe târzii: Lazăr de la Rusca, de Dan Deșliu” (At the Roots of a Late *Miorița*: Lazăr of Rusca, by Dan Deșliu), in *Ariergarda*, no. 2(2000), pp. 103–109.

³ Ion Gheorgheosu, *Nu tulburați liniștea codrilor mei* (Don't Disturb the Peace of My Forests), Caransebeș, 2006, pp. 186–201.

⁴ Katherine Verdery, *Viața politică a trupurilor moarte* (The Political Life of Dead Bodies), Bucharest, 2006, pp. 72–73.

does not analyze this character in detail. Taking an account of the literary representations of the anticommunist resistance from the years of communism Radosav underlines that “the hero Lazăr Cernescu is promoted in textbooks as a victim and martyr of the fight against the anticommunist partisans in the Banat Mountains. This personage made a long and pregnant career in communist martyrology and hagiography, besides other heroes who participated in the struggles of the communist party in the era of illegality.”¹ Doru Radosav’s approach, presented in concise terms, opens for the first time a proper historiographic analysis dedicated to the integration of the personage Lazăr Cernescu into the context of the propagandistic representations of the communist regime, even if he draws attention only to “hired” literature as a modality for the social dissemination of this. The interpretation suggested by Professor Doru Radosav constituted the ferment of a research direction I undertook and the results of which are presented in the following pages.

The questions we try to clarify are the following: Through what means did the communist propaganda manipulated Lazăr’s biography? How did he become a communist hero under the name Lazăr of Rusca? How was he regarded by the rural community of Banat? What echo did the events raise in the life story of his family members?

After the elections of November 1946, when the communists’ spirit and the intentions were really outlined, an underground organization of resistance was initiated. Several factors contributed to this: the presence of anticommunist sentiments in the area since the interwar period, the experience of the effects of communism in the Soviet Union during the war, the threat to the stability of the rural life in Banat.² The decisive moment, which made all these motivations actual in an effervescent spirit, was the election of November 1946. To these alluviums, which had been deposited in peoples’ minds along the ages,

¹ Doru Radosav, *Rezistența anticomunistă armată din România între istorie și memorie* (Armed Anticommunist Resistance in Romania between History and Memory), in: *Comunism și represiune în România* (Communism and Repression in Romania), Ruxandra Cesereanu (ed.), Iași, Polirom, 2006, p. 104.

² Gabriela Bica, *Mișcarea de rezistență* (The Resistance Movement), pp. 152/207; Ioan Munteanu, *Satul românesc bănățean în primul deceniu al regimului comunist totalitar* (The Romanian Village in Banat in the First Decade of the Totalitarian Communist Regime), in: *Identitate și alteritate. Studii de istorie politică și culturală* (Identity and Alterity. Studies in Political and Cultural History), IV, C. Bărbulescu, Luminiță Dumănescu, S. Mitu, V. Popovici (ed.), Cluj-Napoca, Argonaut, 2007, pp. 227–240.

were added daily events, quarrels, fears. In the sediments deposited during the ages these daily events represented by personal engagements, shine for the historian like golden threads.

The resistance group had a “hard core” which was joined in the phase of the refuge by a series of socially marginal elements. In the Teregovă-Domaşnea area the anticommunist resistance at the end of the 1950s had two stages.¹ The first consisted of the meetings convoked by the notary Gheorghe Ionescu and the village priest and of the organization of a resistance group meant to prepare the villages, the community for an action against the communists, a national insurrection, a future war should a favourable context arise. The establishment of an informal network between the villagers of Teregovă constituted the beginning of a subversive action. Moreover, this network was organization-like, the would-be members having the obligation to take an oath, to obey the orders and to keep the secrets.² Such an oath was preserved in the testimony of those who were arrested and investigated in the Military Court. It is also mentioned by the survivors in the oral history interviews.³ Therefore, we ask ourselves whether the organization and the oath were not stereotypes of the investigation/prosecution inoculated into the witnesses’ mind. Two specifications are necessary from this point of view. The oath recorded in the testimonies could have been a standard formula, dictated, unrelated to what had happened in the world of the village, a convention of the investigation meant to create evidence for the charges. Likewise, the term organisation could have been a device of the prosecution. On the other hand, the presence of the oath in the discourse of the memoir literature associated to sacred tokens, as oath on the Bible, makes us believe that the form of the oath could have been made up, but the oath itself actually existed. We have to do with a group of men who had war experience and, moreover, were regrouped at the initiative of the notary and the priest of Teregovă. In fact, the transformation of the informal, passive group into an active and military one strengthens these coordinates. The arrest of two group members by the Securitate in the winter of 1948–49 gave the alarm signal to enter into action. It was suspected and feared that those arrested, submitted to investigation and torture, would divulge the entire network. For this reason the armed attack upon the village hall and the

¹ D. Radosav, *op. cit.*, pp. 86–90; Gabriela Bica, *op. cit.*, pp. 208–380.

² M. Milin, *Rezistența*, *op. cit.*, no. 32, pp. 146–152; no. 33, pp. 153–155; no. 34, pp. 156–159.

³ D. Radosav, *op. cit.*, pp. 98–99.

gendarmerie in Teregova was decided.¹ With this began the second stage of the anticommunist resistance in the Teregova-Domaşnea area, the phase of armed resistance, of partisan fight.

Confronted with the “event” in Teregova, the communist authorities answered with severity, rendering the repression measures stricter. A command post of the Securitate was established in the village; the village was closed, besieged; those who entered or left it were checked; the villagers – mainly the members of those families which were suspected to support the partisans – were brought to interrogation and tortured. The Securitate recruited informers, collaborated with party activists in order to trace and capture “those who run away to the woods”. In turn, the partisans answered with the same measures. They made ambushes in order to shoot down Securitate officers, they threatened the Securitate collaborators and informers. When their situation worsened, they became more intransigents. Thus, they planned the exemplary punishment of the communists from the village who had been engaged by the Securitate to find them: two communists from Teregova were captured and shot. This would also be the fate of Lazăr Cernescu, peasant of Rusca, born in 1918, who moved from Cornereva to Rusca around the year 1930.² Having joined the party in 1946, when he was a soldier in Caransebeş, he became district activist. It seems that his joining the party was not disinterested. Lazăr wished to become a forester;³ therefore, by joining the party and collaborating with the Securitate, he tried to smooth his path. He had already distinguished himself negatively in the rural world during the collection of the arms possessed by those who returned from the front. Of course, he was obliged by the orders received from the party and the Securitate to search for information with the aim of divulging the partisans. Lazăr’s zeal, the partisans’ wish to punish exemplarily the communists and the collaborators with the Securitate, the context of the guerrilla fights between the partisans and the Securitate led to Lazăr Cernescu’s entrapping. With the partisans’ consent he was hired to play with his band at a wedding in Domaşnea. The second day in the morning, when he was returning to Rusca, the partisans waited for him, captured and

¹ Gabriela Bica, *op. cit.*, pp. 240–242.; M. Milin, *Rezistența*, *op. cit.*, no. 35, pp. 160–170.

² *Eadem*, pp. 282–283.

³ The Archives of the Institute of Oral History in Cluj-Napoca, Teregova Fond, tape no. 153a, interview with Petre Cernescu, 1998, made by Gabriela Bica and Doru Radosav.

“arrested” him. Having been “investigated”, he was shot after he suffered torture and pains hard to imagine. The thirst for vengeance, the torturing of the partisans’ families by the Securitate, the wilderness of the woods together contributed to the circumstances of the crime.

Lazăr’s disappearance gave rise to suspicion even in the Securitate. Initially, it was believed that Lazăr joined the partisans in the woods. This rumour was started in order to increase the Securitate’s doubts regarding the story of Iconia Cernescu, Lazăr’s mother. The spies of the Securitate visited the family and searched for proof to this effect.¹ In order to test Lazăr’s disappearance he was sent the dossier with the confirmation of his nomination as a forester. The party and the Securitate hoped to regain him by offering the fulfilment of the promised “dream”. But in vain. Finally, his family was investigated, taken to the Securitate and arrested. Only five months later, in March 1949, when some partisans were arrested, the troops of the Securitate discovered Lazăr Cernescu’s body. Thus, from a “suspected enemy” he could become a hero, a soldier of the party murdered bestially by the “enemies of the people”.

Situated in the proximity of this historiographic “marginalization”, we wish to investigate more thoroughly a personal destiny constructed and delivered from the propagandistic perspective of the communist regime as exemplary, namely Lazăr Cernescu’s biography, which became a commonplace of the communist era under the name “Lazăr of Rusca”, after the title of the propagandistic poem signed by Dan Deşliu. The exemplarity of Lazăr Cernescu’s biography can be observed in a double sense: on the one hand as a propagandistic material used in the fight for the eradication of the “enemies of the people” and the instauration of the “golden dream” of the socialist and communist society; on the other hand as the foreordained destiny of the party activist – in a narrow sense –, or of the communist – in a larger sense –, fighting against and intransigent towards the conservative and decadent elements connected to the regime favouring the bourgeoisie and the landowning class, fighting for the realization of the egalitarian and just society of communism.

In this context Lazăr Cernescu’s biography confronts us with a symbolic space used by the political power in a propagandistic

¹ *Ibid.*, tape no. 153b, interview with Maria Scânteie, 1998, made by Gabriela Bica and Doru Radosav.

commemorative discourse¹ to consecrate and legitimize its authority. A tragic tale which was transferred to the public space by means of the local and central press² (the trial of the “bands”, the testimony of the family), the manifestations and commemorations (worker assemblies, adhesions, young pioneers, memorial house), the symbolic transfer in street and institution names (streets, cinema, folk music and dance ensemble), textbooks (literature, history), journalistic and literary creations (report and short story, Petru Dumitru; poem, Dan Deșliu; novel, Radu Theodoru), and non-verbal expressions (monuments, photographs). This “loading” of Lazăr Cernescu’s biography also arouses interest through the strategies used by his relations in the construction of their own autobiographies, in an evaluation when its symbolic power no longer existed; we are referring to the life stories of his brother, Petru Cernescu and his daughter, Maria Scânteie, based on some interviews made in the summer of 1998 and 2007. The impact on the community in the Teregoava area, where the armed anticommunist resistance group acted is completed with the testimony of those who were directly involved in the armed anticommunist resistance movement or of the persons who only supported them.³

¹ We define discourse, starting from Michel Foucault, as the place where the social senses are formed. These senses arise from the exercise of power by a centre, in the case of the communist regime, the party, which emits the propagandistic discourse, while in the post-socialist period, the concurrent power centres, which emit discourses – in our case memoirs – ruled by their own orders, are defined at the level of the community. Cf. Michel Foucault, *L’Ordre du discours*, Paris, 1971.

² For the role of the central and local press in the totalitarian communist regime see the case of the Soviet Union in Jeffrey Brooks, *Thank You, Comrade Stalin! Soviet Public Culture from Revolution to Cold War*, Princeton, 1999, pp. 5–11.

³ Lucian Boia, Cuvânt înainte (Foreword), in: *Miturile comunismului românesc* (The Myths of the Romanian Communism), I, Bucharest, Editura Universităţii Bucureşti, 1995–1997, p. 6: “As it deciphers the mythological content of the political and historiographic discourse, of literary texts or artistic images (all available) it is nearer to the essence of the totalitarian phenomenon than any other source.” See also Peter Burke, *Eyewitnessing. The Uses of Images as Historical Evidence*, London, 2001, p. 13: “Traditionally historians refer to the documents they use as ‘sources’, which gathered constitute a bunch of Reality, and their stories become all the more pure the closest they are to the moment when the event took place. The metaphor used is active, but also presupposes an ambiguity, in the sense in which an evidence of the past is perceived as uncontaminated by intermediaries. It is impossible to study the past without taking into consideration the chain of intermediaries, not only the first historians,

The research we propose is integrated into the context of biography researches.¹ The projection is observed from a double perspective. Firstly, we survey the mechanisms and topoi used for elaborating and displaying the exemplary biography as a means of legitimization and propaganda of the communist regime in Romania in the 1950s. Secondly, we explore the relationship between the exemplary biography and collective memory, the impact and the consequences of the reception by the rural community in Banat of the events related with Lazăr Cernescu, the way in which the “demythitized” biography was constructed at the level of memory, a biography whose symbolic content disappeared due to the change of the political regime at the end of the 1990s. It is a research which locates on the horizontal the functions of biography in an ideological network, of biography as hagiography; it is also taken into account the dynamics of memory in the construction of biography in the proximity of the personage. We have, on the one hand, a biography filled with ideological symbols, having significations at the level of big history, and, on the other hand, a reconstruction of the biography in the light of the everyday life, through the memory of those who were close to the protagonist. In neither case does Lazăr Cernescu’s biography lack significations and conditionings.

In both perspectives the biography requires the researcher’s involvement in the sense outlined by Jean Peneff: “We must be aware of the fact that there is a frame of inventions, approximations or fantasy which surrounds any life story. Researchers who collect these stories cannot demand from us to believe the acts related word by word. Researchers must offer us a key which would transform the ‘crude’ document in a historic source and they must convince us that the mechanism of refraction operated here in a certain way and there in another mode. Researchers must give us reasons related to the plausibility attributed to some parts of the story and doubts over others and they must explain the ability of detachment connected with the

but also the archivists who organized the documents, those who conceived and formulated them and the witnesses whose words were recorded. As the Dutch historian Gustaaf Renier (1892-1962) suggested half a century ago, it may be useful to replace the source idea with the “trace” idea of the past in the present. The term “trace” refers to manuscripts, books, prints, constructions, furniture, scenery (modified by human exploiting), similar with other different types of images: pictures, statues, photographs.”

¹ For the genre of biography cf. *Mapping Lives. The Use of Biography*, edited by Peter France, William St Clair, Oxford University Press, 2002.

speaker's past. I tried to highlight some of the most often find myths – *self-made man*, unhappy childhood, modest social origins, and the success of a militant life; but there are countless others.”¹ These precautions can be registered as the *element of uncertainty* in the sense that “the data and details grow blurred, interferences, associations, confabulation appear”, which make impossible “to try to separate the literary from the strict document”.² If the researcher goes beyond certain social frameworks of distinct referential types (ante '89 and post '89), he discovers *ambiguous* or mythologized perspectives and positions: “It is good to know that before 1989 the dictatorial system had imposed an official variant of the reality – a variant which later proved to be falsified, distorted –, creating a series of myths characteristic to the ideology, positive myths (the myth of the heroine woman, the myth of the proletarian etc.) and negative myths (the myth of the exploiting bourgeois etc.) alike. After the Revolution of December 1989, everything or almost everything which had been associated with negative value before '89, the opponent in the communist regime, those who belonged to unofficial religious cults, after '90, received a positive value, being transformed, in our examples, into the politically persecuted, the religiously persecuted and so an and so forth.”³

Approaching Lazăr Cernescu's biography we become familiar with the methods of the communist regime in the period when it eradicated the armed anticommunist resistance groups which had

¹ Jean Peneff, *Myths in Life Stories*, in: Raphael Samuel, Paul Thomson (eds.), *The Myths We Live By*, London, New York, 1993, p. 45. In the same volume see also the studies: Luisa Passerini, *Mythography in Oral History*, pp. 49–60; Rosanna Basso, *Myths in Contemporary Oral Transmission*, pp. 61–69; Lucian Boia, *Cuvânt înainte*, pp. 5–6: „The question of the documentary collection presents, of course, many complications. Many documents, indeed, are not available. But history is not made only with archival documents. There is, for example, an oral history which Romanian historians have no right to scorn. A living man with his memories does not mean less than an archival document; he can mean even more. Any Hellenist would like to have a conversation with a contemporary of Pericles. But he is denied this method. But the historian of the contemporary age benefits by it: a chance which he must not let slip.”

² S. Iosifescu, *Literatura de frontieră* (The Frontier Literature), 2nd revised edition, Bucharest, Editura Enciclopedică română, 1971, pp. 87–89.

³ Maria Aldea, “Istoria orală și miturile” (Oral History and the Myths), in *Anuarul Institutului de Istorie Orală din Cluj-Napoca, AIO* (The Yearbook of the Oral History Institute of Cluj-Napoca, AIO), V (2004), p. 50.

appeared in the mountain regions of Romania.¹ In another order of ideas, it confronts us with some tragic events, having significance, apart from the referential ideological framework of the reproduction of the event, by resorting to the memory of the rural community, of the partisans and Lazăr Cernescu's direct descendants. By resorting to the partisans' and the family members' memories we wish to go beyond the bounds of the history of Romanian communism, to leave the discursive play of ideology and to situate ourselves into a "secondary play" of the people who lived in the age in the sense specified by Daniel Barbu "before being a political regime, communism was a life influencing power".²

In order to observe all these aspects of the biography we resort to a series of different tracks/sources: we confront the biography, elaborated under the influence of the report and the heroic poem, with the activity code of the party activist/agitator; the accounts/testimonies given during the bandits/partisans' trial held in June 1949 in Timișoara with the narrations of the family Iconia Cernescu (the mother) or Călina Cernescu (the wife); the context of celebration with the defining of the topos of the hero's commemoration; the remembrance of the events as an oral history exercise in the years 1998 and 2007 by the descendants of those who participated in the fights of the years 1945–1950. To discover the mechanisms of propaganda, of the ideological-political orchestration of Lazăr Cernescu's biography we analyze the central [*Scânteia* (The Spark)] and local [*Luptătorul Bănățean* (The Fighter from Banat)], the literature and history textbooks, which reproduce the episode and give to

¹ See also Daniel Barbu's observations: Daniel Barbu, *Un mit al totalitarismului: colectivismul* (A Totalitarian Myth: Collectivism), in: *Miturile comunismului românesc*, II, op. cit., p. 82: "Therefore, in spite of the official ideology which required that the general interests should be placed above the personal, ideology which tried systematically to isolate in any historical, economic or social process an objective dimension, independent of the individuals' natural will, endowed with a regularity and sense which were not conferred by the actors who occupied the stage of history at a given moment, and despite the persevering belief in this myth shared by numerous analysts of the post-totalitarian period, the history of Romanian communism must be regarded less as a big global and totalizing history of the party leaders, of industrialization, collectivization, repression, doctrinal and ideological elaborations, but rather as a chain reaction with immediate effect of the concrete, multiple, incoherent, interested and conflictual histories of some real people, some specific interests, some individual careers, in a word, of the way in which the Romanians got on, more or less well, but each one separately and each for himself and for his family."

² *Ibid.*, p. 83.

it a sentential, didactic-educative note. The symbolic presentation of the communist hero is another aim of the present research. Beyond being “immortalized” and by this mythologized with the help of the Muses, Lazăr Cernescu was directly present in the midst of the community. The trajectory which can be ascribed to Lazăr Cernescu’s figure is a typical one: having been transferred from reality to mythbiography and laden with the significance of ideological sacrality, he returned from the myth to everyday life. The symbolic re-personification of the myth took place in the course of the ceremonies meant to legitimize and strengthen the communist regime in the spirit of the socialist ethics and moral and by naming public spaces, streets and institutions, after the hero, this communicating the message of the political power.

The revival of biography as a genre in the historiographic research lately also meant a detachment from the positivist historiography, either by the discovery of the *common man* or the *complex man*, due to the studies regarding popular culture, to oral history or gender history. The new conceptual perspective and the expansion of the thematic area of historiography was inaugurated by Edward P. Thompson’s polemic with the Marxism and structuralism of the ‘60s, polemic in which he restored the individual’s dignity, as *the victim of the past*. Giving up the interest for writing the history of the *people who make history* (Menschen die Geschichte machen) and assuming by the historian of the question “who built the seven gates of Thebes?” means a shifting from the space of the heroic and the monumental, the positivist historical fact towards deep history.¹ Without remaining within the confines of *synthesizing* views, collective structures, collective personage and long duration, the biographical challenge attaches itself to the profound knowledge of the event or of the age by means of an individual destiny. The historian’s focusing on the individual, the event highlights the exceptionality of the historical act, a singular and unrepeatable one. The approach to an individual or an event gives us the chance to get to know the society, the social, economic and cultural context which produced the individual/the event. In Françoise Zonabend’s words: “No biography knows its veritable sense, unless placed in the social, economic and historical context it originated from. In other words, an isolated life story, lacking the support of the ethnographic investigation seems an empty shell. Illuminated by other interviews, included into the

¹ Sabina Loriga, La biografia come problema, in: *Giochi di scala. La microstoria alla prova dell’esperienza*, Jacques Revel (ed.), Roma, 2006, pp. 201–226.

economic and social history of the group, biography becomes an instrument to know society.”¹

In this context, the biographical investigations penetrated the field of cultural history as well, where mythbiography was outlined as a theme.² The relationship between biography and mythbiography from the perspective of the historian transfers the discussion to the field of the history–myth connections. Thus, the myth is not used in the positivist sense of *untrue history*, but it has a symbolic signification, as an archetype for describing heroes and traitors. The stories discussed in this way consist of stereotypical elements, known as *narrative themes*. Such an approach to myth is connected to Bronislaw Malinowski’s view according to which the myth functions as a *document* with the aim of legitimizing the present.³

The commemoration of the communist hero and the construction of Lazăr Cernescu’s mythbiography imply an ampler process of the communist celebration, a means through which state propaganda manifests itself before the citizens. In the context of the celebration of the victory of socialism in Romania in the fundamentalist epoch when the violent actions had to have the appearance of legitimacy and popular legitimization, the proceedings instituted against the “class enemies” became festive moments. In this sense, celebration has a wide content, in Karen Petrone’s definition meaning a cultural form of communication which implies both verbal and non-verbal language and practices and rites of the regime.⁴ The commemoration¹ of the martyr-

¹ Françoise Zonabend, *La mémoire longue. Temps et histoires au village*, Paris, 1980, p. 7.

² Luisa Passerini, *op. cit.*, pp. 49–60.

³ Peter Burke, *History as Social Memory*, ?, p. 58; see also Gilbert Durand, *Introdúcere în mitologie* (Introduction to Mythology), translated by Corin Braga, Cluj-Napoca, 2004 and Luc Benoist, *Semne, simboluri și mituri* (Signs, Symbols and Myths), Bucharest, 1995.

⁴ Karen Petrone, *Life Has Become More Joyous, Comrades. Celebrations in the Time of Stalin*, Bloomington, 2000, pp. 7–8: “By the discourse of celebration I understand all the communication forms of celebration both the verbal and the printed ones, and also visual images and musical compositions. This study of celebrations includes both social and discursive practices implicated in the communication of the celebration’s message. The administrative and cultural practices associated with the thorough organization of celebrations influence the modalities in which the discourse of celebration was transmitted and received. The population’s practices of celebration also play a determinant role in the

hero represents one of the commonplaces used by the communist celebration within which the mythbiography is developed.

In Lazăr Cernescu's case this functionality of the myth indicated on a social level can be seen in every situation. The communist propaganda uses him as a symbol in the ideological discourse for the construction of the working class' martyr-hero; in the story of the bandits-partisans he is identified with the communist and traitor; similarly, the tale of the family is composed as a discourse rival to the one told by the partisans, Lazăr being projected in a defensive perspective, meant to conserve and defend his and his family's prestige at the level of the rural community. Integrated into some cultural discourses, the communist one and the post-socialist one, from the perspective of the official propaganda in the first case, and of the collective and family memory in the second, Lazăr Cernescu's biography is given a meaning in each case from the point of view of the affirmed social identities. The communist propagandistic discourse is exclusivist, creates and uses at the same time the mythbiography of the martyr-hero Lazăr of Rusca to legitimize the class struggle as the expression of the popular democracy's ideological identity. The approach to Lazăr of Rusca proposed from this positions is mainly in accord with Katherine Verdery's observation, "the corpses harmonize very well with politics in ages of major changes".²

The multiplication of social identities confirms in post-totalitarian period the coexistence of rival memories (family memory, social memory), the pluralistic views on the functions of memory, existing different perspectives with regard to what is significant and what "value" memory has.³ The differences and rivalries originating from these alternative memories are connected to the so-called *interpretative communities*, in Stanley Fish's terms, which reflect deep and lasting

success or failure of the official holiday's message and in the formation of the possible answer of the Soviet ideology."

¹ Jean Davallon, *Lecture stratégique, lecture symbolique du fait social: enjeu d'une politologie historique*, in: *Le geste commémoratif*, Jean Davallon, Philippe Dujardin, Gérard Sabatier (eds.), Lyon, 1994, pp. 7–29, pp. 8–9: commemoration is a socio-political practice, a strategy and a symbolic ritual by means of which a social group offers elements for its positioning and recognition.

² Katherine Verdery, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

³ Peter Burke, *op. cit.*, p. 55.

social conflicts.¹ Analyzing the discourses of memory we resort to a series of historiographic contributions which focused on the modality in which the past is codified, highlighting the social practices such as the language, gestures, rituals or monuments and the organization of space.² Thus, it is suggested that memory is more important in its social variant than as an individual phenomenon. By becoming the member of a community/social group, family, kindred, by showing religious or political affinities the individuals assimilate or form the frame for the exercising of memory or the *frameworks* of memory. Each social group has a collective memory which is transmitted and reproduced between its members from a generation to the other.³ On the other hand, within these patterns used for defining the social memory, the position of the individual and the way in which he “takes possession” of the social reality as a subjective exercise require special attention. Through the discourse of memory brought about by the historian, *lived history* is assimilated as a form of history-knowledge.⁴ From a diachronic point of view, historians distinguish between two types of society which position the relationship between memory and history. The positions Pierre Nora and Paul Connerton operate with are quasi identical. Both scientists distinguish between a *primitive*, *archaic* or *agrarian* society, where memory constitutes the singular modality for defining identity, the “reservoir of memory” being inexhaustible and the “historic capital” reduced or completely absent, and modern society, a historic society characterized by the systematic and conscious organization of the past. Thus, industrialization and democratization, the modernization of society dislocated the role and the functions of memory producing a “fundamental collapse of memory”.⁵ For this reason the mode of

¹ Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretative Communities*, Cambridge, 1980.

² Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, edited, translated and with introduction by Lewis A. Coser, Chicago, 1992; Frances Yates, *Art of Memory*, Chicago, 1966; Pierre Nora, *Les Lieux de mémoire*, Paris, 1989; Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember*, London, 1989.

³ Maurice Halbwachs, *op. cit.*

⁴ Paul Connerton, *op. cit.*, pp. 18–19.

⁵ Pierre Nora, *op. cit.*, pp. 7–8. The author distinguishes between memory as a form of “life”, a process “in a permanent evolution, open to the dialectic phenomenon of recollection and oblivion, marked by successive unconscious deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and instrumentation, susceptible to getting neglected for a long period and to reviving periodically” and history as an “always problematic and incomplete reconstruction.”

transmitting memory in the family or the social group represents a part of social memory consisting of the totality of rituals, commemorative festivities and cultural practices, the means for transmitting social memory.¹ In other words, “the sites of memory, as archives, monuments and museums are identified and constructed when memory becomes itself reified as history.”² In this context, in post-totalitarian societies the remembrance process is aggregated as phenomena of the *counter-memory* or as *postmemory*; by resorting to remembrance a narrative discourse is released which was evacuated in the years of communism from the public horizon where a hegemonic form of presenting the past, an official history was established. Thus, the memory of those oppressed and “silenced” constructed in opposition to the official communist history can be considered a *counter-memory* which is completely identified with history in the post-totalitarian society. Similarly, *postmemory* can be perceived as accommodation to the frameworks of history as a conjuncture of the events which generate individual and communitarian prestige.³

As regards Lazăr Cernescu’s story the remark of the American historian and anthropologist, Katherin Verdery seems suggestive: “The different people can invoke the corpses as symbols, considering that they mean the same thing for all those present, when in fact they can mean different things for each one. What is common to all is the *acknowledging* of that person as being somehow important.”⁴ Mythogenesis in the case of Lazăr of Rusca was brought about by the inclusion of his biography into the discourse of communist propaganda, by his being connected to the stereotype of the martyr-hero. Brought about from the positions of the myth with politico-ideological resources it gave birth in post-socialism to the confirmation of concurrent memories. Created in the laboratories of the communist state propaganda it can be found in different forms at the level of the rural community. In fact, Lazăr of Rusca’s mythbiography is integrated into a cultural circuit defined in the terms belonging to the intellectual theory of the genesis of the folklore. Thus, the popular motifs had received a scholarly shaping, then they were disseminated in society to draw later the scholars’ attention as facts of the popular culture. Similarly, Lazăr of Rusca was a

¹ Paul Connerton, *op. cit.*, pp. 38–39.

² Frances Pine, Deema Kaneff and Haldis Haukanes, p. 14.

³ Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory*, Cambridge, 1997.

⁴ Katherin Verdery, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

construction of the communist propaganda machine, diffused in society by means of the press, literature, textbooks, monuments, and apprehended by oral history in the situation of the resistance movement in the mountain regions of the Banat. Lazăr of Rusca as a “dead body” was given signification by the introduction of his history into different cultural fields, giving birth to different biographies or *curricula vitae*: “The dead are accompanied by one or even by more *curricula vitae*, depending on the aspect of their life which is discussed. The dead lend themselves to analogies with *other peoples’ curriculum vitae*. In other words, they encourage the identification with their life story from several perspectives. Their complexity makes possible to discern several nuances, to derive several stories, and, consequently, to rewrite history. Corpses have another great advantage as symbols: they do not speak alone (though once they did). The words can be put into their mouth – often ambiguous words – or they real words can be made ambiguous when torn from their context. It is, therefore, easier to rewrite history with dead people than with symbols which ‘do not speak’.”¹

Eternal glory to the heroes of the working class! Heroization and mythbiography in communism. The martyr-hero’s representation between the limits of communist ideology as a propagandistic exposition, in Romania of the 1950s, defines a mythbiography transferred to the official history, the shaping of the history-reality in conformity with the immediate objectives of the political power. We assist, in fact, at a process of celebration and commemoration in which the verbal and non-verbal language is associated with the power.²

In the years of communism we can distinguish several levels in the representation of Lazăr Cernescu’s biography under the influence of official ideology. There was a public and a “quasi-public” biography, emphasized among the materials for “internal use” elaborated for the workers of the Ministry of Interior. As regards the official public biography, two variants can be distinguished, one general issued by *Scânteia* and the literature of the age and another spread in the local community by means of the wall newspaper.

The hero type valorised by the communist propaganda, by the instructional and educational structures, by the continuous shaping of the

¹ *Ibid.*

² Delia Șepeștean-Vasilu, „Despre puterea limbajului și utopia literară” (On the Power of Language and Literary Utopia), in *Secolul XX* (The 20th Century), 7-8-9 (1988), pp. 125–127; Pierre Bourdieu, *Langage et pouvoir symbolique*, Paris, 2001.

minds in order to “edify the socialist society” had known a vertical dynamics connected with the general evolution of the fight for power within the party.¹ The leading Leninist principle, the *democratic centralism*, is shown in this systematic perspective to be subjected to modification when the orientation of the “party line” changed. This dynamics implies several times, having in view structural or essential modifications or conjectural reorientations. The changes could take place during long chronological intervals, a decade and a half, or they happened in a year or two. Thus, the communist period has been divided by the analysts and researchers into two general divisions, having for a reference point the party leaders, the Gheorghiu-Dej era and the Ceaușescu era. Each era was nuanced, different currents followed one another determined by the political manoeuvres and the regrouping of the factions inside the party. Similarly, the period which became known under the name of the “obsessing decade” was far from being uniform and homogeneous. Events which occurred during this chronological interval constituted significant turns in the political orientation: Stalin’s death (1953), the 20th Congress of the CPSU (1956), the Hungarian revolution (1956), the withdrawal of the Red Army (1958), the growth of tension in the Chinese-Soviet relationship (1960). From this perspective, one can observe that the communist made continuously efforts to take over the control of the Romanian society. The dissolution of the democratic political parties, the proclamation of the republic and nationalization represented the takeover of the institutional structures which permitted the communists to exercise state power. In exchange, the profound control of the society began by the proclaiming of the “new cultural revolution”, by the new organization of education and of coercive instruments, the organization of the militia (police) and the

¹ Alexandru Zub, Mituri istoriografice în România ultimei jumătăți de secol (Historiographic Myths in Romania in the Last Half Century), in: *Miturile comunismului românesc* (The Myths of the Romanian Communism), p. 16: “The liberator, the pacificator, the justiciary, the builder of the ideal society are myths which are constructed parallel with the destruction of the old regime, either of structures, institutions, spiritual values or men; parallel and almost without the possibility of retort, the representatives of the old regime having been already removed. Other characters (the illegal communist, the Stakhanovite, the omnipotent activist etc.) were summoned to the stage. The unique party constituted after all the supreme myth, embodied in a leader synthesizing all the qualities which the new regime wanted to make acknowledged and produced.”

Securitate.¹ The eradication of the exploiting regime of bourgeois and landowners meant the introduction of some convergent measures for taking over the institutional control of society, but also the liquidation of those who represented that world, considered obsolete, decadent.² Consequently, we witnessed massive waves of arrests and deportations, the surrounding of the last “redoubts” of the manifest anticommunist resistance, of the partisan groups that had yet survived in the mountain area. This armed anticommunist resistance had initially been structured as an integral National Resistance Movement, decapitated prematurely by the communists, and in the ‘50s the constituted groups were one by one surrounded and their members killed in the fights or caught through complicity, arrested and sentenced to long years of prison.³

Thus, the period between the years 1948 and 1954 can be considered as one of transition, in which the *dictatorship of the proletariat* and the *regime of popular democracy* were consolidated as a consequence, on the one hand, “of the liquidation of the last remnants of the of the exploiting bourgeois and landowners’ regime” and, on the other hand, of the elimination of the factions and of the “opportunistic elements” inside the communist party.⁴ Therefore, the communist hero

¹ Marius Oprea, *Banalitatea Răului. O istorie a Securității în documente (1949–1989)* (The Banality of Evil. A History of the Securitate in Documents), Iași, Polirom, 2002.

² Alexandru Zub, *op. cit.*, p. 11: “The new regime imposed forcibly by the Soviets constructed rapidly a series of myths meant to ensure its stability, to recommend it as a step forward on the path of progress, the guarantee of collective felicity etc. Imported myths, of course, since they had been already functioning in the Soviet Union, beginning even with the myth of progress ensured by the ‘working class’, the myth of the ‘new man’, for whom it forged a new pedagogy, the myth of the liberator accompanied by the myths of peace, welfare, justice etc., ‘wonders’ descended as if from a cornucopia to a world which had only to accept them. From the myth of the light which comes from the east would originate others regarding Soviet science, culture, technique, intangible domains, defended even by the law. (...) Other exorbitant promises are added to these, corresponding to as many myths, on which the communist system relied in its wish to legitimize itself: world peace, everybody’s happiness, proletarian internationalism, human communism etc.”

³ Ghiță Ionescu, *Comunismul în România* (The Communism in Romania), Bucharest, Litera, 1994; Vlad Georgescu, *Istoria românilor* (Romanian History), Bucharest, Humanitas, 1992; M. Bărbulescu, D. Deletent, Ș. Papacostea, K. Hitchins, *Istoria României* (The History of Romania), Bucharest, 1998.

⁴ V. Tismăneanu, *Fantoma lui Gheorghiu-Dej* (Gheorghiu-Dej’s Phantom), Bucharest, 1995.

was situated in the class struggle against the “bandits”, saboteurs and spies, being often placed in the position of the martyr-hero/of “the sacred knight”, of the founding sacrifice. The mythbiography of Lazăr of Rusca, the martyr of the struggle for the fulfilment of the socialist ideals, was situated in this conjuncture as well.¹ Of course, the martyr was not the only type described in the horizon of communist exemplarity in the mentioned period, but he had the central role exactly because the yet open confrontation with “reactionaries”. The martyrization instrumented by the regime through the exemplary public trials, his commemoration on the occasion of the manifestations held by the workers to express their solidarity and sympathy with the family, the construction of a model meant to contribute to the education of the young generations, the symbolization of the public space with the motif of the hero confirm the central role of the martyr-hero’s mythbiography in the symbolic economy of the Romanian communism at the beginning of the sixth decade.

In the following period, post 1954, it can be observed that the epicentre of the hero symbolic for Romanian communism shifted towards the constructor, the one who built the socialist society by erecting factories and plants, as well as helps agricultural collectivisation. This hero is no longer directly involved in a violent class struggle for the physical annihilation of enemies, but rather in a “struggle against inertia”, in an era when relative social peace was established. The Stakhanovite, the worker hero from the factories and fields, the mother hero are the exemplary effigies, the heroes of novels, movies, reports and wall newspapers: “by the continuous repetition of themes and mechanical reiteration of subjects as in a daily devotional exercise which implies thousands of genuflexions and the uttering of the same formula of praise – *the cult of the sacred martyrs* (the Soviet soldier, the civilizing hero, the communist who sacrificed himself for our happiness), *the cult of the apostles of the faith* (Lenin, Stalin, Gheorghiu-Dej), *the cult of the protective church* (the party), *the cult of the heavenly kingdom-the paradise of the just* (the Soviet Union), *the cult of the new man*, exorcized, redeemed through faith, vigilant, defying pagan temptations, the shameful past, the cunning embodiments of the Enemy, enjoying his awakening to the *new life* (‘in towns and villages’) and aspiring to

¹ Doru Radosav, *op. cit.*, p. 104.

beatitude, to the promised and eternal bliss of true believers (the communist heaven).”¹

This quasi religious view proposed by E. Negrici marks a general tendency present in the modern world, the “sacralization” of laic forms, an adaptation of the religious paradigm to laic reality, a *re-enchantment* of the secularized world. The laicization of the power and society freed by the rationalism of the 17th century, the *disenchantment* in Max Weber’s terms, released power from the institutional guardianship of churches. Nevertheless, as a way of thinking, as *Weltanschauung*, the modern world continued to promote a religious *plan*. The elimination of symbols from the public discourse shaped by religious themes, the renewed language did not mean a profound transformation of the grammar of thinking as well. The symbolic expressivity of the communist authority is articulated on this ancestral and immobile basis of the human project in long duration. From the start, one can see that communism proposes a teleological view, implying that communist society has a certain aim to attain on the road of progress, *the earthly paradise* or the *kingdom of the just*. The supreme value on which progress, the evolution and the transformation of the world, of spatiality and temporality are based is work. Therefore, communism may be considered the theology of work. The individuals’ self-realization in socialist societies, *redemption* as a transcendental form of reconciliation with the divinity, with the implacable destiny can be obtained as a recompense of work, the *new man* is the embodiment of a new system of values in which work has the primordial role: “He who does not work, neither shall he eat” is the favourite slogan of the communist propaganda. From this perspective the human ideal promoted by communism, the *new man*, was represented as a *Knight of Work*.² In this context, *earthly paradise* as *social copy* in the ‘50s is described by the presentation of the model, the USSR, (the country with the highest culture, where people build communism with the most advanced technique etc.), and by the transformation of space, its remodelling by “elevating and ennobling work” of the people “in the towns and villages”. The year 1949 marks this transformation of the space, “The People’s Republic of Romania develops and flourishes”,³ presenting the

¹ Eugen Negrici, *Scurt istoric al propagandei* (The Short History of Propaganda), p. 350.

² Angelo Mitchievici, *Cifra, litera și Cavalerul Muncii*, (The Number, the Letter and the Knight of Work).

³ *Scânteia*, 1949, no. 1617, p. 3.

realizations of the major project, the Danube–Black Sea Canal (“We shall build the Danube–Black Sea Canal despite the winter, the cold and the snow!”¹) and Casa Scânteii (“Let us subscribe for the Casa Scânteii, the house of all of us who work.”²), the Salva–Vișeu railway (“On the Salva–Vișeu line will pass the first train”³). The rural world was, at its turn, dislocated by the impact of profound transformation of the socialist space, which meant the collectivization of agriculture and with this “the peasant workers take a step towards a new life”.⁴ The transformation of the macrocosm, of the entire country, due to the construction of the *cathedrals of work*, had its precedents at the level of the microcosm too, the urban landscape and the worker’s habitat had changed, “from a hut into a civilized house”.⁵

The prefiguration of the theology of work also implies a specific temporal cadence. The communist *feast days*⁶ were holidays legitimizing the political power, which appealed to public consciousness from the perspective of the revolutionary holiday or of the traditional workers’ holiday. From the first category we can mention the celebration of the Bolshevik Revolution, November 7, and the liberation of Romania by the Soviet army, August 23 and December 30 (the proclamation of the republic); the second group of holidays containing the festivities of May 1 (“Long live May 1, the day when the forces of the working class are surveyed and all who work manifest international solidarity!”⁷). In each case, however, one can discern a ritual of the *feast days* consisting of certain topoi: a) the socialist competition of work (“The competition in honour of November 7 extends all over the country”,⁸ “Let us participate

¹ *Ibid.*, no. 1551, p. 3; see also no. 1574, p. 5: Petre Dumitriu, *Printre constructorii Canalului* (Among the Builders of the Canal).

² *Ibid.*, no. 1558, p. 1.

³ *Ibid.*, no. 1608, p. 3.

⁴ *Ibid.*, no. 1618, p. 3.

⁵ *Ibid.*, no. 1665, p. 1.

⁶ Cf. Mihai Toader Nicoară, “Sărbătorile comuniste de la comemorare și celebrare la îndoctrinare” (Communist Holidays from Commemoration and Celebration to Indoctrination), in *Caiete de antropologie istorică* (Journal of Historical Anthropology), VII (2005), 1, pp. 245–265; Virgiliu Țărău, “9 sau 10 mai? Sărbătorirea independenței de stat a României în tranziția de la democrație la democrația populară” (May 9 or 10? The Celebration of Romania’s Independence as a State in the Transition from Democracy to People’s Democracy), in *Caiete de antropologie istorică*, VII (2005), 1, pp. 229–244.

⁷ *Scânteia*, 1949, no. 1414, p. 1.

⁸ *Ibid.*, no. 1546, p. 2.

with enthusiasm in the socialist competition held in honour of August 23!”,¹ “In honour of May 1 the workers from many factories made concrete engagements to exceed the plan of production”²; b) the solemn meeting of the National Assembly and of the Academy (“The solemn meeting of the Academy of the RPR dedicated to the anniversary of the Great Socialist October Revolution”,³ “the festive meeting in honour of the second anniversary of the RPR”,⁴ “August 23 is a national holiday”⁵); c) rewarding the “heroes” (medals are awarded such as the Order of the “Defence of Homeland”, the “RPR Star”, the “Order of Work” or the “Medal of Work”⁶); d) people’s meeting, military parade (“The great meeting and demonstration of the working people on November 7 in the capital”,⁷ the military parade of August 23,⁸ “The magnificent demonstration of the working people”⁹).

The enumeration of the communist holidays draws our attention to a process of heroization configured as a commemoration of the *martyrs of the faith* and a display of the communist prototype, the *new man*. The commemoration of the martyr-heroes as a political holiday highlights not only a view “with a religious character”, but also a real religious practice. The victims of the workers’ strikes from the workshops of Grivița (February 1933) or Lupeni (1929), which outline as a hero a collective personage, the *working class*, were added to the heroic effigies of the illegal communists, Ilie Pintilie, Ion C. Frimu, Vasile Roaită, Donca Simo, Maria Lifschitz etc. In some cases the commemoration also identified the *sacred places* of the workers’

¹ *Ibid.*, no. 1490, p. 1; see also Florin Anghel, „O evoluție a mistificării evenimentelor de la 23 august 1944 în discursul oficial comunist” (An Evolution of the Mystification Regarding the Events of August 23, 1944 in the Official Communist Discourse), in *Revista Istorică* (Historical Review), New Series, V (1994), no. 9–10, pp. 951–963.

² *Scântea*, 1949, no. 1395, p. 1.

³ *Ibid.*, no. 1574, p. 1.

⁴ *Ibid.*, no. 1620, p. 1.

⁵ *Ibid.*, no. 1509, p. 1.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 1511, p. 2; no. 1417, p. 1: The *Medal of Work* had been created “with which hundreds of manual and intellectual workers were honoured with the occasion of May 1 who distinguished themselves by obtaining success in production and on the field of scientific, cultural and artistic activity.”

⁷ *Ibid.*, no. 1577, p. 1; on p. 2 it gives a report about great manifestations all over the country.

⁸ *Ibid.*, no. 1512, p. 1.

⁹ *Ibid.*, no. 1415, p. 1.

struggle, for example Doftana prison where “nine years after its fall” the new museum was inaugurated;¹ in other cases the representation of space was changed by the application of the new symbols, Washington Street in Bucharest was renamed after the antifascist fighter Maria Lifschitz, former secretary of the Central Committee of the Union of Communist Youth.² The commemoration implied a ritual consisting of the following significant moments: a) pilgrimage to the tombs of the working class heroes (garlands of flowers and wreaths were laid on the grave; the funeral march and the Internationale were played and sung); b) public lecture, commemorative assembly, workers’ assemblies and a festive programme (lectures in the Arts Centre, trade union meetings in the factories, the publication of some poems and artistic performances).

The new man belonged to the paradigm of the *Knight of Work*, shaped by the recurrence of the worker engaged to fulfil the Plan (*the letter*) and its to surpass this (*the number*):³ “Comrades, come, I invite you to the world of numbers,/ You great masters of the great poem.” („Tovarăși, hai, în lumea cifrelor vă chem,/ Voi meșteri mari ai marelui poem.”) *The letter* and *the number*, as metaphorical expressions, introduced to the picture of the *Knight of Work* some exceptional deeds too. These gave colour to a selenian landscape consisting of percentages and economic projects.⁴ Work defined both the proletarians¹ and the

¹ *Ibid.*, no. 1578, p. 5.

² *Ibid.*, no. 1507, p. 3.

³ A. Mitchievici, *Cifra, litera și Cavalerul Muncii*; see also the Eugen Frunză’s poem, *98,84 la sută* (98,84 Per Cent), in E. Negrici, *Patru decenii* (Four Decades), pp. 176–178.

⁴ We pick only a few titles from the *Scânteia* of the year 1949, the examples are far more numerous, the newspaper reports such cases daily: “How Does Luigi Strenati’s Team Work According to the Soviet Method of Masonry” (no. 1547, p. 2); “The Workers and the Technicians of the Factories *The Red Steel* Exceeded the Production Programme for the First Three Trimesters of the State Plan” (no. 1551, p. 1); “The Collective Agricultural Farms Ilie Pintilie in Roma-Botoșani and «August 23» in Pribești-Vaslui Fulfilled the Sowing Plan” (*Ibid.*); “Marton Dionisie’s Team in Lupeni Set up a Spiral Scraper of 74 m in 3 and a half hours instead of 8 hours” (*Ibid.*, p. 2); “The Welderess Constanța Staicu Will Go to Training School” (no. 1554, p. 2); “Leading Masons Awarded the Order of Work: Luigi Strenati, Uivaroși Iosif and Popescu Gheorghe” (no. 1557, p. 2); “First Smelter Focht Eugelberg of *The Red Steel* Explains to the Steelworkers Which Are the Technico-Economic Indications” (no. 1569, p. 2); “The Miners of Sector III Petrila Extract Coal on the Account of the Next Year” (no. 1570, p. 2); “Chief Master Nicolai Rossiski, the Initiator of the Collective Stakhanovite

peasants² or party activists.³ The *Knight of Work*, with some particularities, had no differences of gender or age (“I am a pioneer girl from a family of workers.”⁴) we meet him in all these states. The men

Movement, Imparts His Work Experience with the Workers of the Factories August 23” (no. 1572, p. 1,4); “Comrades Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej and Teohari Georgescu Conversing with Some Decorated Outstanding Workers” (no. 1315, p. 1); “You Can Be an Outstanding Worker too!” (no. 1401, p. 3); “The Competition between Cosma Vasile and Lup Ioachim” (no. 1414, p. 2).

¹ Mainly the workers in heavy industry, steelworkers, miners, or in constructions are selected. Women are to be found most often in textile industry. In the *Scântea*, 1949, no. 1383, p. 5 is presented the case of Maria Feițan, a young worker of the “Red Thread” in Tâlmăciu: “A Young Innovative Textile Worker”, who “even in her sleep speaks of the factory”.

² *Ibid.*, no. 1355, p. 1: “Ileana Mitrocica Becomes a Tractor-Driver”. Ileana during her childhood worked “hard, without laughter and playing” on the estates of the Count Károlyi around Carei. Her decision to become a tractor-driver is an organic one, “she always wished to become some day a tractor-driver herself.” See also Zoe Petre, *Promovarea femeii sau despre destructurarea sexului feminine* (The Promotion of Women or on the Disintegration of the Female Sex), in: *Miturile comunismului românesc*, pp. 22–38; The enumeration of the themes regarding women in the communist discourse see Călin Morar-Vulcu, *Republica își făurește oamenii*, pp. 389–443.

³ *Ibid.*, no. 1341, p. 3: Mihai Dumitru, *Primăriță peste cinci sate* (Mayoress of Five Villages). The mayoress was Maria Jurcuț from Topa de Jos (Bihor). She came from a family “of poor peasants owning a single jugerum of land”. Her physical and moral portrait is exemplary: “I then beheld her full lighted face, with blond hair gathered in long braids, with keen hazel eyes” and “Maria had been since her childhood diligent, skilful in study and in work.” A period of communist catechisation followed in her life, having for an instructor an uncle from town, who “instructed his niece” and thus “she began to replace her old books with new ones which spoke of revolution, proletarians, socialism and a series of other things which were difficult or impossible to her to understand completely.” In the following stage she joined the party “to attend the meetings” where she benefited from the comradely help: “She more than once doubted her powers and if it had not been for the comrades to encourage her and make her trust her powers, she would have given up the office of mayor.” But the communists cannot be hindered in their noble mission; the image of the mayoress is animating and positive: “She is all heart and desirous for work and learning.”

⁴ *Ibid.*, no. 1466. *Hai să curățim arăturile!...* Cum a făcut de râs un grup de pioniere din Brașov înșelătoriile unor dușmani ai poporului muncitor (Let us Wipe Out Simulation!... How a group of pioneers ridiculed the deceitfulness of some enemies of the working people in Brașov). See also Paul Cernat, Ion

were mostly steelworkers, miners and constructors, while the women worked in the textile industry; there were also some exceptions to this gender based division of work, some women had profession which had been considered exclusively masculine until that time, such as tractor-driving or masonry.

The struggle to transform the obsolete reality of the bourgeois-landowner society and to build the socialist homeland, which was the task of the *Knight of Work*, acquired a fundamentalist, violent dimension as well at the end of the '40s, meant to eradicate the "remains" of the old regime. Under these circumstances the *Knight of Work* embodied the martyr-hero, who fell in the fights against the enemy, saboteurs and bandits, the mortal foes "of the working men in towns and villages". Under these circumstances the peoples' army and the visionary communist are glorified. Lazăr Cernescu belongs to this pattern of the communist martyr-hero.

The affirmation of these discontinuities and fractures, diachronic in the evolution of the "obsessing decade", is correlated with the accentuation of some synchronic nuances and differences, which can be illustrated, among others, by comparing and analyzing a "catechetic"¹ of the communist regime, *Agenda agitatorului* (The Agitator's Agenda), in the 1954 and 1956 editions.² The publication of the two editions at a

Manolescu, Angelo Mitchievici, Ioan Stanomir, *Explorări* (Explorations), I, pp. 215–310.

¹ This category was introduced in the analysis of mass mobilization in the Soviet Union of the 1920s by Peter Kenez, *The Birth of the Propaganda State: Soviet Methods of Mass Mobilization, 1917–1929*, Cambridge, 1985.

² Eugen Negrici, *op. cit.*, pp. 96–97. We find here a similar opinion, but applied to the political vocabulary. Doru Radosav introduced a larger periodization, stating that this demonization and maintaining of "warlike vigilance" corresponds to the period 1947–1962, when the resistance movement is fully affirmed. Only after the eradication of this the discourse becomes constative, summarizing, in which the enemy receives a new projection. In our perspective, we consider that the characteristics of this discourse had already appeared in the "obsessing decade", but they became dominant only, as Doru Radosav also observed, after the partisans and the armed resistance groups in the mountains had been eradicated. Illustrating the main themes of the propaganda poem in communist Romania, Eugen Negrici distinguished with regard to the measure of the ideological commitment two phases, a fundamentalist and a routinary one: "There would be therefore a political religion in two typical phases (a fundamentalist and a routinary), but also with as many typical endeavours to fortify the weakened sentiments through imposing gestures, tricks and

very short interval can be considered symptomatic for the changes that took place. From their beginning one can observe differences regarding the definition of the Romanian Labour Party: "The party is the invincible instrument of the proletarian dictatorship. / The RLP is a unity of will incompatible with the existence of factions and it is strengthened by being purified from the opportunist elements";¹ "The Romanian Labour Party expresses the workers' interests in towns and villages. The fundamental task of the Romanian Labour Party in the actual phase is to eliminate completely the exploitation of man by another man and to build the socialist society in the Romanian People's Republic."²

The symbolic calendars proposed in both cases stopped at the year 1953 and respectively 1955, in the first edition being mentioned Stalin's death, in the second edition the ratification of the Warsaw Pact.

The calendar of the party "holidays" arranged vertically and horizontally the articulations of the communist symbolic universe. In general, the calendar of "important"/memorable "dates" retrieved the horizon of the two "fronts" in which the workers' movement was workers' movement was engaged, *the proletarian internationalism* and *the socialist patriotism*.

The comparison of the calendar from the agenda of 1954 with that from the second edition results in a series of observations. At first sight, it can be observed that the 1956 edition has a much more elaborated character. A thorough analysis of this calendar reveals several registers of data selection: a legitimizing-historical, one of the institutionalization of the communist power and one of the edification of communism. The weight of this latter register, of the edification of socialism is accentuated, marking the relative social pacification and the passage into a new stage, the construction of the socialist homeland. In this context, the communist hero is transformed from an undaunted warrior with a weapon in his hand into the builder of socialism, of the "golden future". Simultaneously, we witness the reinterpretation of the

diversions." The two phases correspond to the two leaders of the communist party, the Gheorghiu-Dej period and the Ceaușescu era. Cf. Eugen, *op. cit.*, p. 7. Analyzing the communist elite and the relationships with the Romanian society Stelian Tănase observed three major fractures: *a new world* (1948–1953), *Five Troubled Years* (1953–1958) and *Submission and Emancipation* (1958–1965). Cf. Stelian Tănase, *Elite și societate* (Elite and Society).

¹ *Agenda agitatorului*, Bucharest, 1954, p. 17.

² *Agenda agitatorului*, 2nd edition, Bucharest, 1956, p. 63.

“enemies of the people”, the bandits, spies, saboteurs being replaced by conformists and conservatives.

The rediscovery of the homeland as a potential propaganda theme can be discerned in the elaboration of a *bibliotheca selecta* which serves as a frame for the formation of the agitator, the party activist. The recommended reading was formally grouped according to the typical scheme: of the Soviet model (classical Russian literature and Soviet literature), of the Romanian achievements (Romanian literature) and of the general revolutionary front (universal literature).¹ In the second edition this arrangement was modified, the first place is occupied by the “classical and contemporary Romanian literature”, followed by the “Russian and Soviet literature” and, finally, universal literature.²

“The visionary communist killed treacherously by the class enemy” was replaced by a generic, abstract and attributive one. The situational translation, from the armed confrontation with the class enemies to the construction of the socialist homeland determined the process of hero selection too. The direct symbolic reference points embodied in the characters of the socialist-realist literature give way to the configuration of some symbolic spaces open to personification. The antithetical Manichaean conflict communist – enemy of the people lost its actuality, Romania had become a homeland of socialism where the victory of the working class could no longer be contested. The period of edification and construction began. This required the adhesion of the workers becoming aware of their social role, involved in the definition of the “new man” on the basis of the communist ethics and moral. The abstraction of the hero, of the communist coincides with the “transgression of the present” towards the construction of “the golden age”, of communism, the invocation of the future as the universe of reconciliation and the fulfilment of the personality. Such a judgement postulated rather conformity to a standard, than identification with a model personage. This shift inside the socialist realist literature can be illustrated by associating the educational functions attributed to Dan Deşliu’s poem, *Lazăr of Rusca* to one period, and Nicolae Labiş’s poem, *The Communist*, to the following. The event as an act generating and illustrating creation is replaced by abstract and impersonal synthesis. Lazăr of Rusca lost his actuality, self-reflexivity and adhesion to the values of communism being from this moment on the basic reference

¹ *Agenda 1954*, pp. 322–323.

² *Agenda 1956*, pp. 433–439: For a comparison with Soviet Union see Jeffrey Brooks, *Thank You, Comrade Stalin!*, pp. 11–18.

points in the mysterious meetings between the writer and his muse. The communist writer's mission in this sense was a social legacy: "Și bătrânii din sat când muriră, / Toate iubirile moștenire mi-au dat." (And the elders of the village when they died left me all the loves as a legacy.)¹

Face to face with history. In the post-socialist period, mythbiography (elaborated as a rememoration of the martyr-hero) became detached from the vision of propagandistic ubiquity and it dedicated a series of concurrent representations about Lazăr Cernescu associated to the reference point of sociability by means of the rememoration exercises.² Oral history and the theoretical repositionings inside the discipline of history in the last decades accentuated the scientists' diminishing faith in the possibility of finding objective "facts" and the growing interest in the symbolical aspects of the narration. As written documents or memoirs, what we often name "the historians' traditional province", "are not innocent papers",³ but attempts of persuasion which imply the transformation of memory by recording it, oral tradition has its own way of stylization. In this case we have to deal with a phenomenon perceived by Pierre Nora which differentiates between spontaneous memory and modern deliberate representation. The narrated experience is comprised by a narrative "conspiracy", is signified, and consequently the border between history-reality and imaginary becomes ambiguous. More exactly we witness the "placement" of the past into an order advantageous from the point of view of the present.⁴

The discourses of memory, either in the partisans' or the family members' case brings up to date the Lazăr of Rusca event on the basis of the traditional cultural representation of the traitor–hero binomial. In this traditional moral order established and acknowledged by everyone, the supreme authority is transcendental, a *just God*, who punishes "crime", but also a *protective God*, who guards and protects in extreme situations. Both discourses, that of the partisans and that of the family, appeal to the just God/protective God as a proof of the incontestable truth of that

¹ Nicolae Labiș, *Poezii* (Poems), Paul Dugneanu (ed.), Bucharest, 1987, p. 9.

² This perspective is present in Mona Ozouf's writing, *Arc peste timp* (Arch across the Time), pp. 148–151, where she states that rememoration and commemoration are "two memories turning their back on one another".

³ Peter Burke, *History as Social Memory*, op. cit., pp. 47–52.

⁴ Mark Freeman, *Rewriting the Self: History, Memory, Narrative*, London and New York, 1993, pp. 52–53.

which happened and of the authenticity of the narration. Maria Scânteie acknowledged that she often appealed to the justice of God: *"how many times I said, Lord, don't let them thrive who killed my father"* ("io de câte ori tot ziceam, Doamne să nu-i mai lași să aibă bine în viață [cei] care o omorât pe tata").¹ And the divinity soon intervened *"God didn't help them [the partisans] for he killed them without having anything to do with them [the communists]."* (Dumnezeu nu i-o ajutat [pe partizani] că i-o omorât fără ca să aibă ceva cu ei [cu comuniștii]).² The deity imposed himself on people's justice completing it, "those bandit partisans" (bandiții ăia de partizani) being aimed at in a general: *"then during that trial they were no longer asked why and how. They were tried in Timișoara too and when they were tried this was given 25 years, but he spent only 15 years in prison and was set free and when he was set free, he had a car crash and nothing was left to them who murdered him, for they had committed murder before... Nothing was left on the world at that number, to them as they had been gone."* ("apăi și la judecata aia nu i-o mai întrebat nimenia că de ce și cum. Tot la Timișoara s-or judecat și când s-or judecat pe iesta 25 de ani i-o dat, da' numa 15 o făcut și o scăpat și când o scăpat o făcut un accident de mașină și n-o mai rămas nima nima la ăștia care o fost de o omorât, că ei mai omorâseră ... N-o mai ramas nima pe lume la numaru' ăla, la ăștia de o fost plecați.")³ The divine anger was unleashed also on those who did not respect the memory of the victims, mocking the good memory, violating thus the moral order (speak well of the dead or not at all): *"my mother and my grandma made some cakes and they went to the dance and they gave it as alms. When she gave the alms, this woman who died in gaol, she did not see that my mother was behind her and she said: To be, she said, as alms for Lazăr, if he is dead and if he is alive let it be to his health. He was not caught alive to know about him. The woman before her said (excuse me), she said: Give a shit to be alms for him... Then my grandma said: Lina, you also have a living child, may the Almighty God give you a daughter since you have never had one, and let her have children, but you have another child; if Lazăr is dead and your child may he be fortunate and if Lazăr were dead, as... without a son so may God take away yours too and may you remain without this. She, when she saw her, did not remain indifferent, when she heard what my grandma said. Once it remained so and the next year her child died for God had not left her*

¹ AIIO, tape no. 153b.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

unpunished. ” (“o facut mama mea cu buna mea niște pomișori și s-or dus la horă și or dat de pomană. Când o dat de pomană, muierea asta care o murit la pușcărie, ea nu o văzut-o pe maicămea că-i în spatele ei, și o zâs: De, o zâs, să fie de pomană lui Lazăr dacă-i mort și dacă-i viu să-i fie sănătate. Nu era prins ăla viu ca să știe de el. Aia, muierea din fața ei, o zâs (mă scuzați), o zâs: Dă un căcat să-i fie de pomană ... Atuncea, buna mea, o zâs: Lina, ai și tu un copil viu, să-ți deie Dumnezeu Sfântu’ o fată n-ai avut parte de ea, și pă asta o ai cu nepoti, dar mai ai un copil; dacă Lazăr îi mort și copilu’ tău să ai noroc de el și dacă Lazăr o fi mort, cum ... fără un ficior așa să ți-l ie Dumnezeu să rămâi și fără iestalalt. Ea, atunci cand o văzut, nu i-o fost tot una, că o auzât cum o zâs bunămea. O dată o rămas așa și la anu’ i-o și murit copilu ei, pentru că Dumnezeu nu o lăsat-o nici pă ea.”)¹ The discourse of the partisans’ memory was developed within the same limits. This time the communists and the informers’ of the Securitate were those who undermined through their treason the traditional moral order, and God’s justice aimed them directly: “*God punished them until our own men came, they families came to nothing, they were destroyed, they are nobodies.*” (Dumnezeu i-o pedepsit pe ei pân n-or venit ai noștri, nu s-or ales de familiile lor absolut nimic, s-or distrus, îs oameni de nimic.)² We can see the same thing in Nicolae Ciurcă’s testimony when he refers to Major Kling of the Securitate: “*he frightened the people of Banat, he killed and tortured as nobody else and God punished him too, he died mad, eating his excrement as none in this world*” („a băgat spaima în bănățeni, a omorât și a schiunguiut ca nimeni altul și Dumnezeu l-a pedepsit și pe el, a murit nebun, mâncându-și fecalele ca nima pe lume”).³ For Ciurcă God was also a protector, the Bible he carried in his bag stopping the bullet of the Securitate or “*probably because I took no part in this business [killing the traitors] God helped me, you see, I have come home, I have got married, I have two children*” („probabil și pentru că nu am luat parte la treaba asta [omorărea trădătorilor] Dumnezeu m-o ajutat, uite, am venit acasă, m-am căsătorit, am doi copii”).⁴

The partisans, the anticommunist fighters, the “bandits” of the official communist discourse considered Lazăr a traitor, an opportunist marginal: “The communist were situated on the periphery of Romanian

¹ *Ibid.*

² Milin, *Interviuri și evocări*, op. cit., pp. 110–111.

³ AHO, tape no.?

⁴ *Ibid.*

society, never integrated to the national and political community.”¹ To this effect, we witness a demonization of Lazăr, associated with the communists and the Securitate.² The discourse of memory configured by the testimonies of the former “enemies of the people, absorbed to history outlines an alternative and complementary representation of the communist past, an up side down image, in which the roles have been exchanged. The modification of the referential social context (ante ’89 – post ’89), transfers the heroic significations from the one side to the other: those who the other day were considered the enemies of the people with the fall of communism have become ‘anticommunist fighters’ venerated and heroized; there are processions and festivities to honour them, they are listened to with piety, monuments have been consecrated to their memory”, they have formed associations and enjoy benefits, they have become the subject of historiographic colloquia and of the Romanian historiographic discourse. On the other hand, the communists have been demonized in the projection of the past events; moreover, the defects and failures of the “transition” period of the Romanian society have been attributed to them. The mechanism of Manichean social segregation, discerned during the people’s democracy, functioned impeccably in the public discourse of the post ’89 Romania.³ Thus, we witness the fictionalization of communism in Romania in the form of the negative collective hero, which led to a massive dissociation at the social level from a certain identity,⁴ a stigmatization of communism. Although we identify a strong wave of anticommunist opinion, paradoxically, we have no communists. It is an escape from social responsibility and a post-Decembrist withdrawal towards prestigious areas (politics, economy etc.). On the other hand, at the level of ordinary people, of “the small one” forgotten by history, it can be observed a nostalgic evocation of the

¹ Stelian Tănase, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

² See Ruxandra Cesereanu, *Imaginea Securității în literatura română în comunism și postcomunism* (The Image of the Securitate in the Romanian Communism during Communism and Post-communism), in: *Caietele Echinox* (Echinox Series), I (2001), pp. 157–172.

³ Paul Connerton (*op. cit.*, p. 1) states that the great subjects of history do not disappear from the narrations, they rather function at a subconscious level as ways of thinking and acting in present situations, they persist, in other words, as a subconscious collective memory.

⁴ Katherine Verdery, *op. cit.*, p. 76: “They remain prominent in the post-socialist period, since, the obligatory identities of the ‘communist man’ having been abandoned, the groups try to reorganize their relationships in the favour of the ‘anticommunist man’.”

past time, once the paternalistic state has disappeared. The uncertainty of everyday life transmits a state of anxiety and incertitude, marked in the case of Maria Scânteie in the motifs which dominate the public discourse: "for it was very well while Ceaușescu was in power, it was very well, but in the last period he started the demolitions, we started to have money but we did not have where and what to buy, because he gave the sugar in rations, this is how it was... Well, but afterwards... Everybody has told me that it is all well, but now it is worse than ever." ("că o fost forte bine cât o fost Ceaușescu, o fost forte bine, da' la ultimu' timp începuse cu demolările, începuse să nu mai aveam curent, începuse să avem bani da' n-veam de unde ce să luăm, că ne dădea zahărul la rație, așa era ... Ei, da' pe urmă ... Toată lumea mi-a zis că-i bine, dar acuma îi mai rău ca-ntotdeauna.")¹

The communist is represented as a marginal in the memory of the people who fell victims to the repression of the '40s and '50s in the Banat region. They were "the scum" of the village, socially marginal individuals, or Gypsies, ethnically marginal persons. Eccentrics from the point of view of the community they were situated in the story surrounded by the destructive forces. They committed abuses, they intimidated and humiliated people, they were faithless (*two-faced men*²). Their power and "manliness" was built in an exercise which brought before them persons without the possibility to fight back. These were women whose husbands had been arrested or they had run away to the woods; women, twice weak, being women and being without their husbands' protection. In female memory these communists were fixed as "wretched": *"He came, knocked at the window, I was pregnant and with the two years old girl, and I went to the window and he said: Get up, fuck your God, and come to the hayfield. I said I could not come to deliver there, he said: Fuck your God, we don't need the bandits' children, we shall impale you, so we shall put you to the sword. (...) One day there comes that man from the council: the mayor, Jura was in that time and with Sabin, the gipsy, they, the scum of the village led us. They came to the priest's wife and they said to her, they didn't even talked to me; they wanted to turn us out from our houses, for the two houses were joined, but she, however, was learned and it wasn't that easy for them to deal with her, she knew the laws. None asked me, they would have done what they liked. (...) God punished them until our men came, they families*

¹ AHO, tape no. 153b.

² *Ibid.*: the communist mayor Iosif Davidescu characterized by Maria Scânteie.

came to nothing, they were destroyed, they are scum.” (“Venea, bătea la fereastră, eram gravidă și cu fata aia de 2 ani, și ieșeam la fereastră și zice: Scoală-te futu-ți Dumnezeuul tău și hai la fân. Ziceam că nu pot să merg să nasc pe-acolo, zicea: Futu-ți Dumnezeuul tău, noi n-avem nevoie de copiii bandiților, vă tragem în șață, așa te luăm pe sabie. (...) Într-o zi vine ăla de la sfat: primaru’, Jura o fost atuncea și cu Sabin țiganul, ăștia n-or condus ăi mai ultimi oameni din comună. Vine la preoteasă și zice către ea, cu mine nici n-o discutat; ei or vrut să ne scoată din căși, că era prinsă casa una cu alta, dar ea tot o fost cu școală și nu le era așa ușor, cunoștea și legile. Pe mine nu mă întreba nima, ar fi făcut ei ce ar fi vrut. (...) Dumnezeu i-o pedepsit pe ei pân n-or venit ai noștri, nu s-or ales de familiile lor absolut nimic, s-or distrus, is oameni de nimic.”)¹ In the same register of female memory they are catalogued as “miserable” or “scamp” with violent behaviour, “he knocked me down and tread on me” (“m-a trântit jos și s-a pus cu picioarele pe mine”).² The characterizations made by women can be inscribed to the register of humanism, of moral values, while men refer to the communists’ social position. These, the communists, “took the goods of wealthy people” (“se atingeau de bunurile oamenilor mai înstăriți”), “did the worst things” (“făceau tot ce era mai rău”), “the most dangerous things” (“era mai periculos”).³ The communists’ moral precariousness was illustrated in their physical portrait too; informers and traitors, mostly acting against innocent people, they suffered from “shameful” diseases: “*In the same night when we wanted to waylay Kling and we didn’t catch him and we were a little angry, Isfănuț told me: ‘Hey, Ciurică, there is a great, great communist in this house.’ He said that many had died in gaol because of him. He said: ‘Let’s take this.’ I said: ‘Is this worth the time?’ This communist was called Miroslav Juca. At night we saw a light in Juca’s house. I stood on the highway and Isfănuț Dumitru went round the cabin and coming back he said he could see only the 7–8 years old girl. We directed our steps toward the village of Teregova. We were marching toward Teregova one after the other keeping some distance. When someone came, I hid away. Having passed me, he passed by Sfârloagă, but he recognized him that he was Miroslav. Sfârloagă said: Stop! and*

¹ Milin, *Interviuri și evocări*, op. cit., pp. 110–111.

² *Ibid.*, p. 64.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 76–77; see also p. 104: “In 1948, when the communists came, people hated them, they caused us problems, they took our wheat from the thresher, they made us to give cows for the armistice, but how was I to know where they took them. They started to arrest people, from among the wealthy...”.

pointed his gun at him. He turned round and took hold of Sfârloagă's gun. I went there, I took out the pistol from my pocket, I put the pistol to the back of his head and we went to a house and there was the trial. Sfârloagă was with the lantern and I with the investigations. I asked for his papers and his gun. Among the papers I found that red card with rather thick covers. I told him to eat it and he ate it. He soiled his trousers out of fear. He had some red rashes on him. I asked him about them and he said he had syphilis. I started to question him. I said that if he acknowledged that he had done grave things and that he had given false declarations, he acknowledged, but he said he hadn't realized what he was doing. He was the director of the mine in Teregovă. He acknowledged all he had done. I realized that it was not worth killing him." ("Tot în noaptea când am vrut să ținem calea lui Kling și nu l-am prins și eram puțin supărat, Ișfănuț îmi spune mie: „Mă Ciurică, aici la sălaș este un mare, mare comunist." Zicea că mulți or murit în pușcărie din cauza lui. Zice: "Haida să-l luăm pe ăsta." Zic: „Merită să ne pierdem timpul cu el?" Pe comunistul ăsta îl chema Miroslav Juca. Noaptea vedem o lampă la sălașul lui Juca. Eu stau la șosea și Ișfănuț Dumitru se duce, dă târcoale pe la colibă și vine și zăce că numa' fata de 7-8 ani se vede. O luarăm spre sat spre Teregovă. Mergeam unul după altul la o oarecare distanță spre Teregovă. Când vine cineva, m-am pitit. Când trece pe lângă mine, trece pe lângă Sfârloagă, dar el l-a recunoscut că ăsta era Miroslav. Sfârloagă spune: Stai! și îndreaptă arma spre el. El se întoarce și-l ia de pușcă pe Sfârloagă. M-am dus acolo, luai pistolul din buzunar, îi pun mâna după cap și pistolul și ne-am dus până la un sălaș și acolo o fost procesul. Sfârloagă era cu lanterna, iar eu cu cercetările. Am cerut actele, pistolul. Între acte am găsit carnetul ăla roșu, cu niște coperti cam groase. I-am zâs să-l mănânce și l-o mâncat. Făcuse pe el de frică. Pe el avea niște blânde roșii. L-am întrebat ce-s cu alea și mi-o zâs că îi bolnav de sifilis. Am început să-l întreb. I-am zâs că dacă recunoaște că o făcut lucruri grave și o dat declarații false, o recunoscut, da o zâs el nu ș-o dat seama ce face. El era directorul minei de la Teregovă. A recunoscut tot ce o făcut. Mi-am dat seama că omul nu merită să-l omoare.")¹

Cunning and lack of courage shows that the communists were opportunists and timeservers, "a certain party activist, who before was the member of the Legionary Party" ("un anumit activist de partid, care înainte făcuse parte din partidul legionar"),² or "they ruled here in the

¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 97–98.

² *Ibid.*, p. 65.

village, because we had already had these wretched mayors, a former gaolbird, a common criminal, all good-for-nothings”.¹ The time-serving of these men without principles and values, border on the unimaginable: “*there was a captain, Duță Gheorghe, who after the revolution, when I went to our association of political prisoners I met him and he told me: Hey, Ciurică, you know that I was a member of the militia, I was a gendarme, I was taken prisoner in Russia, I came with the ‘Tudor Vladimirescu’ Division and coming back I infiltrated into the militia, in the Securitate and I attained the rank of captain... And he started to tell me about Duicu’s arrest. (...) and he was the vice-president of our association when he told me about this. It is a shame that the captain who fired in us should be the vice-president!*” (“era un căpitan, Duță Gheorghe, care după revoluție, când m-am dus pe la asociația noastră de deținuți politici mă pomenii cu el și mi-o zâs: Mă, Ciurică, tu știi că eu am fost milițian, am fost jandarm, am căzut prizonier în Rusia, am venit cu „Tudor Vladimirescu” și venind m-am încadrat în miliție, în securitate și am ajuns la gradul de căpitan ... Și începe să-mi povestească prinderea lui Duicu. (...) și el când îmi povestea treaba asta era vicepreședinte al asociației noastre. Rușine, vicepreședinte să fie căpitanul care o tras în noi!”)²

In this spectrum, for the anticommunist fighters in the Banat Mountains, Lazăr remained a *tragic* event, hard to reconcile and justify with Christian morality, divine justice being the forum of appeal in their discourse. They had experienced the justice of men, therefore they seemed reserved at the beginning of the oral history interviews and only later on regained their confidence completely. Then, we must take into consideration the age of the witnesses, who were near to the implacable end. This, according to the view of the traditional rural culture, approaches the individual to the divinity. In this discourse of memory reconstructing the events of anticommunist resistance, of lived history, we can observe an autobiographic approach: the main character is the narrator (what I saw, what I did, what I heard); the actions which cannot be integrated into this main line of the story are obliterated; the simply historical acts are glossed in the margin of the events. There is a tendency to heroize and exalt in some testimonies, but they reproduce the Lazăr Cernescu event based on other reports, not as direct participants and they fictionalize him in accordance with the topoi consecrated in the public

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 95–96.

discourse on communism. In the case of those who in some way of other can be found guilty from the point of view of social morality, the event had been obliterated, only the interviewer's intervention revived it. Therefore, the story implies also justification, Lazăr being considered a traitor, he tried to arrest them with the Securitate, he tortured their family, while his family benefited by recompenses. In this way the themes of the public discourse on communists are shaped.

The partisans' testimony shows, on the other hand, that there was a story at the level of the community regarding Lazăr Cernescu's assassination. The story borrowed the Manichean position of the communist propaganda, but with changed sense, Lazăr and the communists being the evil ones. At this level we witness the deconstruction of communist mythology, but the critical exercise shaped in this way uses a new series of myths, the hero-communist has become the torturer-beast while the partisan-bandit has been transformed into the hero of the anticommunist resistance.¹

The testimonies made by the martyr-hero's relatives, Lazăr Cernescu's brother and daughter have also a polemic character. The paradigm in which these testimonies were defined after '89 is connected with the anticommunist atmosphere the story being influenced by the motif of "the ages which are above men", and also by the wish to preserve Lazăr's and his whole family's prestige in the community. The aim of the family members' testimony was to refute the arguments of an unspoken, but always supposed tale which accused Lazăr. This time the testimonies were shaped on the basis of experiences which greatly depend on the degree of familiarity with the past,² we refer to affective experiences such as the relationship between brother and brother or father and daughter. The differences in Lazăr's representations in the context of the testimonies originate in the differences of potential between the individual memory and social memory. On the other hand, there is also a circumscribed representation of family values. Lazăr appears as a loving father and husband. The memory is inscribed in the

¹ A decade has already passed since Daniel Barbu drew attention to this trap: "... are we not entrapped by the myths which were fabricated by communism and which, changing only the terms and the direction of the demonstration, we continue to use candidly, in perfect good faith and believing that we destroy the mythological veil covering our past?" Cf. Daniel Barbu, *op. cit.*, p. 78.

² Paul Connerton, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

paradigm of an “interpretative community” where “images of the past usually legitimize the present social order”.¹

Regarded from the perspective of the event, the fights between the partisans and the troops of the Securitate, and Lazăr Cernescu’s murder, his biography uses a series of stereotypes assimilated by on or the other side participating in the dispute. Therefore, we can state that both in the communist era and in the post-socialist period Lazăr Cernescu’s biography has been manipulated on the one hand, in order to heroize him (the martyr-hero Lazăr of Rusca), on the other hand, to present him as a traitor/communist/informer of the Securitate. The manipulation of the biography meant its fictionalization by including some characteristic myths (the hero, the traitor) which we have tried to discover in these pages.

Translated by Ágnes Korondi

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 3.