

Between Trauma and Nostalgia:

The Intellectual Ethos and Generational Dynamics of Memory in Postsocialist Romania

In Romania, as elsewhere in Eastern Europe, the collapse of communism triggered a testimonial drive that was understandably dominated by victims of communist oppression and concerns with justice and retribution. Coming in the wake of decades of state dominated public discourse, the flood of testimonies documenting state repression aimed to counter the official “falsification” of communist history, revealing the violence of the Stalinist decades. Memories of early postwar violence thus converged with fresh recollections of the economic deprivations and indignities of the 1980s to strengthen the authority of personal experience, particularly the experience of suffering and victimization, in bearing witness to the recent past. The testimonial drive fed into an emerging public discourse which, in its most forceful articulation by intellectuals and politicians, cast the communist past as a traumatic national experience.

By comparison, the past decade witnessed a gradual shift from early concerns with political repression, justice, and retribution to revivals of the social, cultural, and everyday experiences of late socialism. If the scope of social memory has widened to include everyday life, so has the chorus of public voices, which features artists, movie directors, or bloggers alongside a cohort of aspiring writers, who spent their childhood and youth in Ceaușescu’s Romania (1965-1989) and came of age after the collapse of the regime. Not unlike the public intellectuals of the 1990s, this young generation draws on the authority of personal experience to join the public debate with collectively authored memoirs of childhood, youth, and family under socialism. How has this new generation of intellectuals changed the parameters of the debate on the socialist past? Who are their readerships and what do they tell us about the impact of intellectual discourse on social memory? How can an analysis of the production, promotion, and public consumption of their memoirs illuminate the wider processes of democratization, diversification, and commodification of social memory in post-socialist Romania and Eastern Europe?

In addressing these questions, this article approaches the remembrance of communism as “an ongoing process of understanding, negotiation, and contestation,” on which the dynamics of

the “transitional” present bear as much as, if not more than, the past.¹ It argues that, although ostensibly focused on the socialist past, memoirs of socialist childhood are distinctive products of current political and economic dynamics as well as social aspirations. Published memoirs reflect not only their authors’ competing ideological orientations and visions of the post-socialist present, but also wider concerns with marketability. Most importantly, they have concrete effects in the present, enabling the socialization of aspiring writers into the ethos of the post-socialist intelligentsia, an ethos that ascribes public intellectuals tremendous powers of moral leadership and civic responsibility in teaching Romanian society how “to master” the communist past.

Public debates around this recent autobiographical wave were framed by pervasive representations of communism as collective “trauma” or fears of its retrospective idealization in popular manifestations of “nostalgia.” Examining the political and cultural role of these representations, I approach “trauma” and “nostalgia” as “categories of practice,” i.e. as politically charged conceptions about memory deployed by social actors, rather than “categories of analysis” that could effectively illuminate the processes of post-socialist remembrance.² To understand how “trauma” and “nostalgia” emerged as the poles of a discursive field on the function of memory, I also consider the transnational dynamics – whether the translatable German model of mastering the past or the impact of regional phenomena such as *Ostalgie* – that enhanced their symbolic power in national debates. My analysis will begin by examining the emergence of a hegemonic framework of remembrance of the socialist past in the contentious climate of political struggles of the 1990s.

Public Intellectuals and the Pedagogy of Collective Memory

Riding a wave of testimonies on communist oppression, violence, and victimization, public intellectuals and representatives of the political “opposition” were prominent in articulating the main tenets of the hegemonic framework of remembering communism in post-

¹ Daphne Berdahl, “(N)Ostalgie” for the Present: Memory, Longing, and East German Things, *Ethnos* 64 (1999), 205.

² On the distinction between practical and analytical categories, see Rogers Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed: Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

socialist Romania in the 1990s.³ The post-socialist intelligentsia revived the totalitarian paradigm that had dominated Western Cold War scholarship into the 1980s, and argued that the communist regime's totalitarian grip on Romanian society engendered an essentially "sick society" and "traumatized nation" that suffered from a series of social ills.⁴ Their discourse relied on a heavily pathologizing language, conceptualizing socialist subjects as atomized and polarized selves (divided between a private core and a compliant public persona), brainwashed automatons lacking initiative, or duplicitous personalities.⁵ Similarly, socialist societies were either portrayed as homogenized and undifferentiated masses or infantilized citizenries dominated by paternalist states.⁶

While providing a reassessment of the past, the dominant memory discourse was equally concerned with the post-revolutionary present. In particular, it legitimized the self-description of intellectuals as an elite whose unique cultural competencies and moral standing put it in a privileged position to rehabilitate the society and individual traumatized by communism, thus making it essential to democratic public life. The process of national healing entailed the self-constitution of this post-communist elite into a strong "civil society" that would derive its "moral capital - a capital rooted in defining certain values as correct and upholding them" from a critique of the communist past.⁷ Whether derived from defending the ideals of "civil society" or "nation" against the party, resistance to the regime, or suffering under communism, moral authority legitimized public intellectuals as they systematically migrated between cultural and political life in the postcommunist period.⁸

³ Emerging around the first free elections in 1990, the term "opposition" referred to political parties that shared a criticism of the ruling coalition of former communist bureaucrats and a declaredly "anti-communist" legitimating rhetoric.

⁴ For an analysis of totalitarianism in Western Cold War literature, see Abbott Gleason, *Totalitarianism: The Inner History of the Cold War*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1995, 121-142, 211-216.

⁵ For a critical overview of this widespread discourse, see Daniel Barbu, *Destinul colectiv, servitutea involuntară, nefericirea totalitară: trei mituri ale comunismului românesc*, in: Lucian Boia, ed, *Miturile comunismului românesc*, Bucharest: Nemira, 1998, 175-197.

⁶ Barbu, *Destinul colectiv*, 175-197.

⁷ On "moral capital," see Katherine Verdery, *Civil Society or Nation? "Europe" in the Symbolism of Postsocialist Politics*, in: *What Was Socialism, and What Comes Next*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996, 106-107.

⁸ For an account of how Romanian elites routinely crossed the border between intellectual and political work both before the Second World War and the during socialism, see Katherine

My choice to approach the intelligentsia as a social category defined by the nature of its claims to power and status is not intended to minimize its critical role in postcommunist societies or doubt its genuine commitment to values such as “civil society” or “anticommunism.” It is to insist, in the tradition of Bourdieu, on the inherently political nature of knowledge about the social world and of intellectuals’ participation in the articulation of values and categories through which the social world is perceived and hence reproduced or transformed.⁹ This approach is also inspired by Bauman’s observation that “Any attempt to define intellectuals is an attempt at self-definition.”¹⁰ While public intellectuals’ own self-descriptions typically invoke critical vocation or ability to transcend narrow political interests, my analysis would be better served by conceptualizing cultural elites as a category defined by its strategies of self-legitimation.

Invoking the necessity of a so-called “pedagogy of collective memory,” post-communist elites assigned themselves the roles of leaders in teaching a traumatized nation how to become a democratic society. Like other Eastern European elites, they drew on the German model to propose a Romanian version of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, the untranslatable German term that involves both the reassessment of the past and a sense of retribution.¹¹ Repeatedly invoked by Romanian intellectuals in public debates or institutional manifestos, the paradigmatic German model of mastering the historical traumas of the Nazi and communist pasts not only legitimized domestic institutions and practices, but also sanctioned a representation of the totalitarian past as a “collective trauma” and an ethical conception of memory as a form of social justice. As evidenced by its psychoanalytical terminology, this model is rooted in a Freudian conception of psychic trauma and post-traumatic latency, according to which it is not the original experience

Verdery, *National Ideology Under Socialism: Identity and Cultural Politics in Ceausescu’s Romania*, Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991.

⁹ Pierre Bourdieu, The Social Space and the Genesis of Groups, *Theory and Society* 14, No. 6 (Nov 1985): 729.

¹⁰ Zygmunt Bauman, Love in Adversity: On the State and the Intellectuals, and the State of the Intellectuals, *Thesis Eleven* 31 (1992), 81.

¹¹ For an account of how *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* functions as a normative framework of remembrance in post-communist Eastern Europe, see Maria Todorova, Introduction: The Process of Remembering Communism, in: *Remembering Communism: Genres of Representation*, New York: Social Science Research Council, 2010, 11.

that acts traumatically, but its delayed revival as a memory.¹² Projecting individual psychology on social dynamics, the model implies that collective traumas operate analogously, i.e. traumatized societies are doomed to repeat totalitarian pasts unless they “work through” shameful experiences, bringing them into the realm of consciousness by means of testimony and acts of justice and retribution. While attempts to seek retribution for victims and accountability for perpetrators are both understandable and welcome, the model of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* perpetuates a problematic assumption that “the past must and can be mastered,” one that ignores the ongoing processes of negotiation and contestation informing social memory.¹³ These processes are consequently pathologized as postsocialist maladies of memory, ranging from so-called “social amnesia” – a refusal to remember and assume responsibility for the past – to “nostalgia” – a reactionary longing for an idealized past.

The dominant discourse about the socialist past was not the result of a top-bottom imposition by a politically powerful intellectual elite as the term “hegemony” might suggest. On the contrary, the hegemony of representation was the outcome of struggles for symbolic power and institutional resources waged by intellectual elites occupying the political margins of an increasingly divided Romanian society. Although they enjoyed moral capital and social prestige, these forces faced an uphill battle against a politically victorious party composed chiefly of former communist bureaucrats. For much of the early 1990s and 2000s, they lacked the political power and financial or institutional resources to popularize their national pedagogy beyond urban centers. Moreover, oppositional groups were not monolithic, branching off into competing factions that agreed on the position of anti-communism and its goal of “decommunization” (i.e. the eradication of individual and institutional remnants of communism), but disagreed on how best to accomplish this goal.

The fact that political resistance to the process of lustration prevented civil society organizations and research institutes from accomplishing their ambitious agendas helped radicalize the anti-communist discourse. Furthermore, politicians of communist extraction left

¹² Ruth Leys, *Trauma: A Genealogy*, University of Chicago Press, 2000, 18-24; Geoffrey Hartmann, *The Longest Shadow: In the Aftermath of the Holocaust*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996, 159-60.

¹³ On the limitations of this discourse, see Berdhal, (N)Ostalgie, 205; Alon Confino and Peter Fritzsche, Introduction: Noises of the Past, in: *The Work of Memory: New Directions in the Study of German Society and Culture*, University of Illinois Press, 2002, 1-24.

the dominant view of the traumatic past largely unchallenged because they did not deem it politically expedient to reclaim socialism at a time when Ceaușescu's regime was so widely reviled. The intellectual representation of the past as a national trauma dovetailed, in the early 1990s, with a widespread resentment of communism rooted in the recent experiences of generalized economic scarcity and political repression of the 1980s. The broad social base of this perception of communism began to thin out by the late 1990s, when the economic recession and rampant unemployment plaguing the rule of the liberal-conservative alliance triggered a shift in the perception of the "transition" from "a temporary inconvenience on the road to capitalism to a seemingly permanent discomfort."¹⁴

Even as it lost its social appeal, the dominant narrative of the socialist past became gradually institutionalized. Starting with the early 2000s, it received growing institutional and financial support, being reproduced by a host of research institutions, museum exhibitions, and educational projects including school curricula and textbooks. The emergence of research institutes funded by various sources - whether the Romanian state, the European Commission, or the U.S. and Dutch Embassies - not only encouraged research on the recent past and archival openness, but also continued to subordinate research to understandable concerns with the condemnation and criminalization of the communist regime. Major research centers such as the Institute for the Investigation of the Crimes of Communism (IICCMR), the National Council for the Study of the Secret Police Archives (founded after the model of the federal German authority for Stasi archives), or the Romanian Institute of Recent History were designed to aid in the processes of political lustration and social catharsis. The normative memory discourse was further enforced by the creation of a presidential commission for the study of the communist dictatorship which brought together renowned Romanian and foreign scholars to produce a report that served as the evidentiary basis for the president's official condemnation of the communist regime as "illegitimate and criminal" in the Romanian Parliament in December 2006, just weeks before Romania's accession to the European Union.¹⁵

¹⁴ Gerald Creed, *Deconstructing Socialism in Bulgaria*, in: Michael Burawoy/Katherine Verdery, eds., *Uncertain Transition: Ethnographies of Change in the Postsocialist World*, Lanham/Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1999, 224.

¹⁵ Raport final, *archive.org*, 22 January 2012

<https://archive.org/details/ComisiaPrezidentialaPentruAnalizaDictaturiiComunisteDinRomania-Raport>

Seeking to overcome both political opposition and “social amnesia,” the authoritative discourse about the past crystallized into morally appropriate frameworks of remembrance. No longer open to revision and contestation, the collective frameworks of remembrance acquired a primarily normative function as evidenced by the fact that they now provide the blueprints for the intergenerational transmission of historical memory, teaching post-socialist generations how to appropriately remember the communist past of their parents and grandparents. Despite these efforts, opinion polls commissioned and popularized by research institutes like IICCMR have lately warned that a large percentage of Romanians, young people especially, are entertaining positive views of communism.¹⁶ Anxious over the gap between social and institutional memory, public intellectuals attribute it to a deficit of knowledge about the communist past (be this the result of ignorance, indifference, or “distorted” memories transmitted *via* the family) that can presumably only be redressed by intensified civic action. This approach not only reinforces the privileged role of intellectuals as interpreters of the past and teachers of the nation, but it leaves unquestioned the prescriptive character of hegemonic narratives of communism. Opinion polls that essentially question the possibility of a unified perspective of the past are consequently deployed to reinforce the urgency of a national pedagogy of collective memory.¹⁷

Pioneers into Public Intellectuals: The Second Memorial Wave

Attempts to institutionalize dominant discourses about the past have coexisted, over the past decade, with practices of democratization and commodification of social memory that echo broader Eastern European and global trends.¹⁸ By comparison to the prominent manifestations of *Ostalgie* in post-Wall Germany or *Yugo-nostalgia* in former Yugoslavia, the positive reclamation and commercialization of the socialist past were significantly more modest and occurred comparatively late in Romania.¹⁹ Partly galvanized by regional precedents and assessed by

¹⁶ Adrian Cioflânca, Nostalgia pentru communism, *Revista 22*, 28 September 2010.

¹⁷ See, for example, Bogdan Cristian Iacob, Avem nevoie de o pedagogie a memoriei colective a trecutului communist, *Evenimentul Zilei*, 23 September 2010.

¹⁸ See Pierre Nora, Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*, *Representations* 26 (1989), 7-25; Pierre Nora, The Reasons for the Current Upsurge in History, *Tr@nsit online* 22, 2002. See also Andreas Huyssen, Present Pasts, Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003, 14.

¹⁹ This is not to suggest that *Ostalgie* and *Yugonostalgia* are not also highly contested and diverse phenomena. On the popular appropriation of memory and revalorization of material

domestic commentators in comparison to them, practices of memorialization and musealization of socialist material culture and everyday life proliferated in a diversity of sites, be these blogs and websites that catalogue socialist goods and practices, advertising campaigns that revamp socialist products, retro restaurants and parties that capitalize on socialist aesthetics, films and documentaries, museum exhibits, or oral history projects.

If the memorial wave of the 1990s pursued a unified national vision of the communist past, the last decade exposed its limits, recovering memories divided along generational, gender, ethnic, or class lines.²⁰ Although many of these memory practices continued to be carried out in state institutions (research centers, universities, or museums), the landscape of memory sites diversified significantly to include films, theatre plays, musical performances, commercials, or the Internet. While it did not disappear, the moral urgency of denouncing communist crimes gave way to a commemorative and even marketing zeal that is more polyphonic, accommodating various social voices or economic and political interests.

Recollections of late socialist childhood and youth featured prominently in this memorial wave, opening the debate on the socialist past to an emerging generation of public intellectuals. Building on the valorization of “experience” as the most credible form of historical evidence, young writers, journalists, researchers, and academics drew on their experiences of childhood and youth in 1970s and 1980s Romania to engage in a range of experimental autobiographical projects. Invoking their strategic location at “the dramatic crossroads of history,” i.e. a location that straddles two political worlds - a communist people’s republic and a capitalist democracy - the authors claimed to contribute a distinctively transitional perspective that enabled them to assess these competing political regimes comparatively.²¹ Because most projects emerged in informal circles of intellectual friends and appeared in collective volumes, they also facilitated the articulation of a sense of generational commonality.

culture in Germany, see Paul Betts, *The Twilight of the Idols: East German Memory and Material Culture*, *Journal of Modern History* 72 (2000), 731-65. On the diverse positioning towards the Yugoslav past in former Yugoslav republics, see, for example, Radmila Gorup, ed., *After Yugoslavia: the Cultural Spaces of a Vanished Land*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013.

²⁰ For gendered experiences, see Radu Pavel Gheo/Dan Lungu, eds, *Tovarășe de drum: experiența feminină în comunism*, București: Polirom, 2008; Zoltan Rostas/Theodora Eliza-Vacarescu, eds, *Cealaltă jumătate a istoriei: femeii povestind*, București: Curtea Veche, 2008.

²¹ Paul Cernat et al., *O lume dispărută: patru istorii personale*, Bucharest: Polirom, 2004, 7-8.

Initiated in informal circles of friends, the autobiographical trend was further popularized by prestigious publishing houses with nationwide distribution such as Polirom, which saw a market opportunity in the promotion of young authors and the publication of autobiographical genres. One of the first market hits in Polirom's "ego-documents" collection was *The Lost World. Four Personal Histories* (2004), a poignant volume that weaved together the childhood recollections of a talented group of young Romanian writers - Paul Cernat, Ion Manolescu, Angelo Mitchievici, and Ioan Stanomir - effectively spearheading their academic careers.²² *The Pink Book of Communism* (2004), which featured a similar collection of stories of socialist childhood and youth, was conceived as a collective project by a group of writers and journalists from Jassy during the same period.²³ Not least because it came out at a small publishing house, Versus, and trailed *The Lost World* by a few months, it received less attention in the press. In 2005, another consecrated publisher, Curtea veche, brought to the public *The Book of Selves*, an experimental collection by a group of young anthropologists at the Museum of the Romanian Peasant in Bucharest, who employed a variety of autobiographical and archival sources as venues into socialist childhood.²⁴ In 2007, Polirom added an atypical memoir of socialist childhood to its autobiographical collections with the work of a young journalist famous for his poignant social commentary and collections of interviews with marginal social groups. Drawing on skillfully conducted interviews with relatives and former neighbors, Eugen Istodor's *The Book of My Life* is an autobiography nested in a family and community history. The book launch replicated the informality of Istodor's style, bringing together journalists and comedians for a conversation over socialist staples such as grilled meat, beer, and retro music.²⁵

By far the most successful autobiography of this generation was Vasile Ernu's debut volume, *Born in the USSR (Born)*, which was published by Polirom in 2006, reedited three times, and translated in nine countries.²⁶ Born in Odessa in 1971, Ernu studied Philosophy at the

²² Cernat et al., *O lume dispărută*. While the authors were by no means novices, they had only published one collaborative volume before their Polirom debut: Cernat et al., *În căutarea comunismului pierdut*, Editura paralela, 2001.

²³ Gabriel Decuble, ed, *Cartea roz a comunismului*, Iași: Versus, 2004.

²⁴ Sorin Stoica, Călin Torsan, Cosmin Manolache, Roxana Moroșanu, Ciprian Voicilă, *Cartea cu EURI*, Curtea Veche, 2005.

²⁵ Eugen Istodor, *Cartea vieții mele: Șulea 31, N3, sc.2. Cu ocazia comunismului*, Bucharest: Polirom, 2007.

²⁶ Vasile Ernu, *Născut in URSS*, Polirom, 2006.

University of Jassy, joining the first cohort of students to come to Romania from the Republic of Moldova in 1990. Although his generation's arrival in Romania was framed by patriotic discourses, Ernu forewent this regional identity, debuting with a memoir that aligned his intellectual biography with the USSR, "the most significant modern project."²⁷ He is now a writer, freelancer, and, after a stint at Polirom, the co-founder and co-manager of CriticAtac, an online platform of leftwing social and political critique. Aside from illustrating the translatability of socialist experiences across national borders within the former Soviet Bloc, Ernu's autobiographical experiment is central to my discussion because, despite its focus on the Soviet experience, it emerged in the distinctive Romanian context, which it also significantly shaped and challenged.

To understand this context, it is important to note the significant cross-pollination that occurred as authors discussed, reviewed, and interpreted each other's works in shared cultural sites that included magazines, TV shows, universities, museums, and research centers. The spirit of dialogue also encouraged the authors to articulate a self-reflexive discourse on the nature of history and memory. If traditional histories of communism invoked the imperatives of objectivity, archival evidence, and high politics, young authors proposed fragmentary and plural microhistories retrieved through the deeply subjective and even "self-fictionalizing" lens of personal memory.²⁸ If previous testimonies pursued justice and retribution, young memoirists claimed to prioritize understanding. To ward off potential criticisms, they also engaged the phenomenon of "nostalgia," distinguishing their endeavors both from the "selective amnesia" of older generations and the "fashion" of *Ostalgie* afflicting (mostly German) youth with no direct experience of communism.²⁹

While novel in its popularization of young writers, Polirom's editorial policy continued a testimonial trend inaugurated by a major publisher of the 1990s, Humanitas, whose first collections brought previously banned books, particularly autobiographical genres, to the public in addition to disseminating the intelligentsia's ideological frameworks. Unlike the privatization of large-scale enterprises, which privileged former communist bureaucrats, the privatization of publishing houses such as Humanitas benefitted prominent intellectuals, who deployed these

²⁷ Ovidiu Șimonca, Interview with Vasile Ernu, *Liternet*, 30 June 2006.

<http://atelier.liternet.ro/articol.php?art=3587>

²⁸ Cernat et al., *O lume dispărută*, 7-8.

²⁹ Decuble, *Cartea roz*, 9, 10.

assets to shape public opinion.³⁰ Having largely avoided the take-over by multinational publishing corporations that characterized other former socialist countries after 1989, the Romanian book market has been dominated by local capital. With a modest annual revenue, estimated at 100 million euros at the peak of its economic boom in 2007/2008, it caters to one of the poorest populations and smallest readerships in Europe, ranking below both prosperous industries in the West and regional counterparts in Hungary, Poland, or the Czech Republic.³¹

The dynamics of the Romanian book market - who and what gets published, promoted, and sold - are thus driven by both intellectual agendas and profit-making calculations. To some extent, Humanitas and Polirom seem to exemplify these two poles. If Humanitas fancies itself a highly selective, if risk-averse, publisher that prioritizes consecrated value (classics of high culture) over financial gain, Polirom prides itself on business acumen and the mission to democratize the book market by facilitating the debut of young Romanian authors.³² Hailed as “the Hollywood of the Romanian book market,” Polirom seems to owe its success to “an aggressive editorial policy” described as “a predatory American style: (...) continuously teasing the market, never letting it fall asleep, and thus extending its absorptive capacity.”³³

Polirom inaugurated the new millennium with an ambitious editorial policy of “niche,” seeking to identify unexploited market niches. One of the emerging reading publics Polirom aimed to cultivate was the so-called “generation without nostalgia,” a postsocialist readership expected to prefer a fresh perspective on the communist past.³⁴ This policy dovetailed with the attempt to attract promising young authors - branded “the Polirom generation” - to revive the field of domestic literature and scholarship.³⁵ Following a “western recipe” of “wooing readers,” the works of promising authors were launched by a marketing campaign run under the banner “Vote for Young Literature,” featuring promotions at the Bookarest book fair in 2004 and various “happenings” at trendy venues in Bucharest.³⁶ *The Lost World* was launched with a show

³⁰ Florin Poenaru, “Contesting Illusions: History and Intellectual Class Struggle in Post-Communist Romania” (PhD diss., Central European University, 2013), 156-161.

³¹ Eliza Maier, Piata editorială din Romania, *Biblio Rev*, *bclucluj.ro*, 2009.
<http://www.bclucluj.ro/bibliorev/arhiva/nr18/info6.html>

³² Emilia Chiscop, Polirom, cartea pe care a pariat Silviu Lupescu, *Ziarul de Iași*, 16 May 2005.

³³ Mimi Noel, Ce se intamplă cu cartea românească?, *Money Express*, 18 April 2011.

³⁴ Silviu Lupescu, Polirom joaca la risc, *Cotidianul*, 7 January 2006.

³⁵ Lupescu, Polirom.

³⁶ Lupescu, Polirom.

put up by drama students in a pub in downtown Bucharest, followed by a conversation with the authors. Similarly, the marketing strategies for Vasile Ernu's *Born* included a promotional website that registered 4000 visitors in the first month and a book launch that featured Soviet music and iconography, live music by Moldovan artists, and debates with guest writers at a student club in Bucharest.

Selling the "Polirom generation" to urban educated youth proved a successful business strategy as the latter "consumed over three hundred Polirom titles."³⁷ Because it operates in an industry that lacks solid studies of the profile of the reading public, Polirom could not, however, afford to ignore the prominent intellectual agendas of the day. Young authors, for example, often sought to secure the endorsement of consecrated intellectuals – who attended book launches or prefaced the memoirs - to increase their expectations of sellability.

The post-socialist context of the production and consumption of childhood memoirs indicates that young authors participated not only in an intellectual debate on the past, but also in a common market of ideas and social prestige mediated by academic networks and the book industry. Serving as a conduit of their competition for status, visibility, and resources, memoirs cultivated not only generational commonalities, but also intellectual and ideological differences that reflected in the diverse and often diverging views of the socialist past.

Communism as Trauma: Childhood and Identity in Ceaușescu's Romania

Most autobiographical projects focus, unexpectedly, on the daily experiences and practices of childhood and youth in late socialist Romania. Framed as a moral duty of individual and collective significance, the memoirs center on the developing personality of the child to explore the tenuous process of growing into a socialist citizen at the intersection of subjective experiences, family relations, and regime pressures. Echoing totalitarian theories of socialist subjectivity and Freudian conceptions of trauma and identity development, these autobiographical narratives can be seen as responses to the ethical injunction to "work through" the communist past. The co-authors of *The Lost World* attribute the incentive to write their memoirs to the political anxieties of the turn of the millennium, when liberal-conservative forces lost to social democrats in a climate of economic crisis in Romania. Marking the return to power of former communist bureaucrats in 2000, the electoral loss symbolized a failure of political anti-

³⁷ Noel, "Ce se intampla?"

communism that left the writers looking for “a renewed sense of purpose to our anti-communism.”³⁸

The result was an autobiographical quest for the existential roots of anti-communism, which were to be found in the repressed past of their childhoods. Socialist childhood and adolescence emerge in these memoirs as traumatic experiences of “de-formation.”³⁹ In his “Survival under a Glass Bell,” Paul Cernat uses the metaphor of autistic childhood to tell a grim story of individual survival in a political universe that turns children of kindergarten age into obedient informants of the regime. Ioan Stanomir’s “The Mornings of a Good Boy” paints the picture of a childhood that remains happy and carefree only as long as it is sheltered from the outside world of the socialist regime. Eugen Istodor’s *The Book of My Life* is simultaneously a family history and an adopted child’s autobiography of orphaned childhood.

These distorted child-figures – *the autistic, sheltered, and orphan child* - emerge as progenies of the distinctive economic, social and political developments of the socialist regime. In both Stanomir’s and Cernat’s autobiographies, for example, the child’s experience of growing into a socialist subject is illustrated by a spatial contrast, the contrast between an idyllic *old* world and the intrusive *new* world of socialist modernity ushered in by fast paced urbanization and industrialization:

I lived the first three years of my life in total “wilderness” in my “grandparents’ house,” spitting, biting and swearing at other children or guests who wandered into the paradisiacal garden. At three, my parents took me back to our apartment building in Bucharest. The autistic paradise was brutally destroyed, making room for a new world, from which I could find no escape. Scared of the concrete buildings, I tried to run away, but I was slowly domesticated.⁴⁰

The pre-communist past is recurrently evoked by the endurance of intergenerational bonding, the attachment to fin-de-siècle neighborhoods, and the predilection for the prewar literature of country estates and old *boyars*.⁴¹ The object of childhood nostalgia in *The Lost*

³⁸ Dezbaterile Phantasma, Comunismul în (de)constructive, *ubbcluj.ro*, March 2006, <http://phantasma.lett.ubbcluj.ro/?p=3368>

³⁹ Cernat et al., *O lume dispărută*, 8.

⁴⁰ Cernat et al., *O lume dispărută*, 13-4.

⁴¹ The landowning elite of the nineteenth century Old Kingdom.

World is decidedly *not* the socialist regime, but the pre-communist past that grandsons intimate in their aging grandparents or literary representations of a differentiated social life that preceded the social homogenization under socialism. The memorial return to early childhood reestablishes a historical and political symbiosis with grandparents, who are survivors of a world untainted by communism. If child-protagonists are in a symbiotic relation with the old world, living in a natural state of “wilderness” - biting, spitting, and swearing - they experience the socialist process of socialization as an “unnatural” act of domestication.

Socialist socialization begins for Cernat’s protagonist when he is ousted from his grandparents’ paradisiacal garden into the new world. Defined by an alienating urban landscape of standardized apartment buildings and by socialist rituals of socialization, the new world threatens to dissolve the child’s personality into the collective. Assaulted by propagandistic attempts to control his thoughts and loyalties in kindergarten and primary school, the child self-defensive mechanisms produced a schizoid identity polarized between a public persona, who dissimulates loyalty, and an authentic self:

As a result of my pathological fear of the Party and the Secret Services, I developed a hypertrophied inner life. This sense of fear inhibited my spirit of initiative, prevented me from truly expressing myself, turned me into a fearful, secretive and suspicious child, and made me dependent on an authority which I preferred to obey formally in order to conserve my inner freedom and contemplative comfort.⁴²

By comparison, the child’s initial isolation in the old world survives the transition to the city in Ioan Stanomir’s narrative. Sheltered by his family, an intergenerational chain of parents and grandparents to whom he has reserved all his loyalties, the protagonist does not fully integrate in socialist society. Never completely outside its reach, the child fails to internalize the regime’s inextricably mixed socialist and nationalist propaganda:

Like any good child and proper young man, I became first a Fatherland’s Falcon, then a Pioneer, and, finally, a member of the Youth Union. I was a child of socialist Romania, who never loved the country in his school textbooks. (...) The only “motherland” I ever

⁴² Cernat et al., *O lume dispărută*, 46-47.

truly loved, with a mystic devotion, was my grandparents' street in the town where I was born.⁴³

Besides the protective role of the family, the early immersion into reading also sheltered the protagonist from the regular mechanisms of social integration. Books and the passion for reading are central to the creation of a sense of identity in *The Lost World*, drawing a tentative profile of the socialist nerd, an identity exploited for its potentially asocial and subversive nature. Memoirists recall the transformative power of literature, which was more immediate, indeed more real, than the protagonists' everyday existence. They recollect "childhoods lived bookishly through the magic lens of literature," exploring how "the world came to resemble [their] readings" and how "fiction became self-sufficient, colonizing [their] world."⁴⁴ The act of reading is invested with the urgency of a survival strategy: "I read chaotically, indiscriminately, I read whatever I could get my hands on."⁴⁵ The protagonists' escapism found satisfaction in fairy tales and adventure/travel novels, among which Jules Verne, Alexandre Dumas, Mark Twain, and Jack London held pride of place, but other genres, whether Greek mythology, detective or historical novels, romance literature, or science fiction, also served the desire to evade. What was important was the subversive power of reading, the realization that "fantasy worked in ways the Party could not fathom."⁴⁶

With these arguments, young memoirists echo the anti-communist agenda of the post-socialist intelligentsia of the 1990s. The ideological affinity is often illustrated by intergenerational dialogues, which are conducted at book launches or published in the pages of the memoirs. *The Lost World*, for example, concludes with a dialogue between the four authors and Horia-Roman Patapievi, a prominent public figure widely known for his rallying calls for intellectual leadership in mastering the communist past. Indicative of the discursive affinity between aspiring and consecrated public intellectuals, both of whom invoke the communist

⁴³ Cernat et al., *O lume dispărută*, 46-47. The Fatherland's Falcons, Pioneers, and Youth Union were the party's mass organizations for children, adolescents, and youth.

⁴⁴ Cernat et al., *O lume dispărută*, 14, 35, 352-3.

⁴⁵ Cernat et al., *O lume dispărută*, 36.

⁴⁶ Cernat et al., *O lume dispărută*, 353.

regime's successful strategies of social engineering - "infantilization," "brainwashing," and "mental slavery" – the dialogue serves as an interpretive framework for the memoir.⁴⁷

Echoing Cernat's exploration of the encounters between the child and disciplining authorities, Eugen Istodor's *The Book of My Life* represents the process of growing up in terms that are reminiscent of Freud's structural model of personality development, focusing on the clashes between the *id* and the *superego*, between primitive impulses and ethical constraints. Cernat's model of autistic childhood is essentially a victory of the *id* over the *superego* since the child's most primitive impulse of survival wins over the ethical and political imperatives of the communist regime. By contrast, Istodor's narrative of childhood is a complete victory of the *superego* that begins with the child's internalization of norms and ends in the total loss of identity. With the gradual repression of the *id*, valorized here as the source of authenticity and genuine desires, individuals turn into automatons inhabited by the regime and its laws:

Since I was very little, I struggled to forget the trespassing that violated the rules of the system. This game turned me into a little boy without memories. When I was not disobeying my mother, I was disobeyed my schoolteachers, and I lived with a permanent sense of guilt. I was the child of the authorities. I was a child nobody talked to or listened to, I was born into the system and I had to keep growing with it.⁴⁸

By comparison to the valorization of a sheltered world in *The Lost World*, however, Istodor's oral history locates childhood in the quintessential spaces of socialist modernity: the apartment building and the kitchen. Dominated by his mother's presence, the red kitchen of Istodor's childhood memories functioned as a threshold between the intimate world of the family and the larger community of neighbors. Opened to neighbors willing to chat over coffee and cigarettes, the kitchen enabled the communication between the private and the public, eventually becoming a metaphor of the impossibility of intimacy and privacy in a totalitarian society. For the child-protagonist, the kitchen is the site of maternal betrayal, the place where the secret of his adoption was shared casually during a "gossip session" with neighbors.

Unlike the socialist society depicted in *The Lost World*, the social world portrayed by Istodor is not the result of an imposition of totalitarian power from above, but an elaborate

⁴⁷ Cernat et al., *O lume dispărută*, 383-462.

⁴⁸ Istodor, *Cartea*, 13-4.

network of dependencies, loyalties, and betrayals reproduced in everyday interactions, be these exchanges of products and services or gossip and rumor. The communism recovered through communal memories is a disturbingly intimate communism that cannot be confined outside the safe borders of the family. Istodor's oral history revisits a pervasive dichotomy deployed to rationalize social life under socialism: the distinction between the private sphere of the family, where individuals allegedly expressed themselves freely and authentically, and the state-controlled public arena.

Challenging this entrenched representation, the volume joins a small number of childhood memoirs that read like family dramas, positioning the family at the ambiguous juncture between the private and the public, and representing it as the first incarnation of the system or the first manifestation of disciplining authority in the child's life. One of the most poignant pieces in *The Pink Book*, Gabriel Decuble's "Parents Made the Mistakes, And Children Suffered the Consequences," for example, depicts personal growth as a two-fold act of resistance against the father, "a true Communist," and the logic of the communist regime that the father insinuated daily into his son's life.⁴⁹ Much in the same way, the parallels between the domineering mother and the paternalist socialist state abound in Istodor's text. Before the socialist state could demand his loyalty as a member of its youth organizations or informant of the Secret Police, it was the boy's family who claimed his loyalty and obedience.

In Istodor's memoir, which repeatedly encourages the audience to read collective destiny in the coordinates of personal biography, the boy's relation to his mother replicates that of an infantilized citizenry to a paternalist state. On a personal level, the process of growing into one's person is only achieved in the violent separation from the mother, a process that begins with the retrieval of repressed memories, including the protagonist's recognition that he was an adopted child, and is completed with the incineration of his dead mother, a mirror metaphor of the execution of the presidential couple in 1989. Much like the protagonist of Istodor's autobiography, who discovers the long held secret of his adoption in the process of writing his life story, Romanian society is incited to undergo a similar process of demystification of origins, a separation from the political father figure in order to reach social and historical maturity.

⁴⁹ Decuble, *Cartea roz*, 196-225.

Communism as Utopia: Childhood and Community in the USSR

Initially envisioned as a collective project to produce a dictionary of Soviet life, Vasile Ernu's *Born* was described as a "hybrid" genre that integrates autobiography with historical analysis and cultural criticism.⁵⁰ With its provocatively nostalgic reclamation of revolutionary Soviet ideals, critique of the post-socialist embrace of capitalism, and ambiguous mixture of nostalgic and ironic registers, the book made a distinctive contribution to intellectual debates in Romania, a distinctiveness that was acknowledged by both major literary awards and countless reviews. If memoirs of Ceaușescu's Romania documented a regime Ernu dismissed as "banal" or "boring," the author's purpose was to explore "the matrix of communism" and recover the original revolutionary experience.⁵¹

Ernu's exploration draws both on "the direct experience of a Soviet citizen" and "a culturally mediated experience derived from books," using autobiographical recollections of the author's childhood and youth in the 1970s and 1980s as a springboard for analyses of the Soviet project from the Bolshevik revolution to the regime's dissolution in the 1990s.⁵² The autobiographical serves as a pretext to write the history of "the most grandiose utopian project" of the twentieth century, ushering in the constitutive events, heroes, and experiences of *homo sovieticus*, be these the Bolshevik revolution, the *komunalka*, the Second World War, the May Day parades, the conquest of space, the creative culture of drinking, or the local rock scene.⁵³ Soviet history is effectively narrated from the first-person perspective of a generic *homunculus*, Ernu's term of choice for the new Soviet person born out of the intersection of official policies with unofficial practices. Figured as a politically innocent child-protagonist, the *homunculus* is either doubled by a critical adult-narrator or featured in positions of "overidentification" with the regime, two strategies that allow Ernu to evoke the Soviet experience in a simultaneously "nostalgic" and "ironic" register. This narrative strategy aims to convey both the genuine appeal of Soviet ideology and its resulting failures, paradoxes, and brutality. Because the interplay cultivates ambiguity, the line between the positive reclamation of Soviet ideals and their critique can never be clearly drawn, leaving both reviewers and the author significant room for maneuver in public debates over meaning.

⁵⁰ Claudiu Groza, Interviu cu Vasile Ernu, *Ziarul Clujeanului* 9, 8 June 2006.

⁵¹ Florina Pirjol, Interviu cu Vasile Ernu, *Time Out București* 13, September 2006.

⁵² Ernu, *Născut*, 8.

⁵³ Șimonca, Interviu.

The earliest critique of Ernu's memoir was published as an afterword to the book. Following the tradition of securing the support of consecrated intellectuals, Vasile Ernu invited historian Sorin Antohi, "a domestically and internationally reputed scholar," to contribute concluding remarks to his memoir.⁵⁴ Although he praised Ernu's dark humor, Antohi essentially read the memoir as a case of "imperial nostalgia," as a self-defeating reclamation of a Soviet world "with a human face."⁵⁵ While some reviewers followed Antohi's lead and critiqued *Born* for encouraging a nostalgic longing for communism or marketing an unabashedly leftist ideology under the cover of autobiography, the reception was predominantly positive.⁵⁶ Many commentators praised *Born*'s spirit of novelty, welcoming it as a belated local version of *Ostalgie*.⁵⁷ Even vocal critics were seduced by the spirit of cultural "difference," appreciating the author's skillful deployment of dark humor in the consecrated literary Russian tradition of Ilf and Petrov.⁵⁸ There were also reviewers who observed astutely that the ambivalently nostalgic-ironic tone weakened the author's projected reclamation of leftist politics, which, as we will see, was carried out "under the cover of an infantile perspective," being attributed to the politically naïve child-protagonist rather than the adult-narrator.⁵⁹

Reflecting a similar structural dichotomy, the relation between the autobiographical and the historical is captured by a narrative voice that shifts seamlessly between the "I" of personal experience and the "we" of collective Soviet history, claiming the authority to speak for both. The ease with which the narrator-protagonist travels beyond strictly biographical time to the origins of the Bolshevik revolution, Lenin's struggle, Stalin's rule, Khrushchev's thaw, or Brezhnev's stagnation is justified by the utopian character of the Soviet experiment, which abolished not only historical determinations, but also distinctions between real life and its ideal representation:

In the USSR, I could never understand where story-telling ended and life began, where life ended and story-telling began. We were perpetually living among our heroes, among our enemies. That is why, in the USSR, you did not have to be born at the beginning of

⁵⁴ Mihail Vakulovski, *Interviu cu Vasile Ernu*, *Tiuk 13*, 2006.

⁵⁵ Sorin Antohi, *Născut*, 237-45.

⁵⁶ See, Alex Goldis, *Copilăria bate ideologia*, *Steaua 9*, September 2006; Simona Șora, *Marea ignoranță*, *Dilema Veche* 127, 2006.

⁵⁷ Modreanu, "Nostalgia."

⁵⁸ Daniel Cristea-Enache, *CCCP*, *Ziarul de duminică*, September 2006.

⁵⁹ Goldis, *Copilăria*.

the twentieth century to be contemporary with Lenin. Those of us born in the 1970s were also contemporary with him.⁶⁰

Evoked by the symbolic timelessness and idealism of childhood, the notion of utopia, as an ideal community that transcends spatial and temporal determinations, is central to Ernu's reclamation of the Soviet project. Irreducible to a historical time and space, Ernu's *USSR* is essentially a universe of ideals and aspirations. It is the child figure who serves as the embodiment of unspoiled Soviet idealism, being genuinely seduced by noble revolutionary goals and heroes, and inhabiting a universe populated in equal measure by fictional and real-life heroes. From Lenin, who speaks to the young protagonist through his pioneer insignia and the pages of his ABC book, the child absorbs a romantic attachment to grand ideals: "I loved and respected Vladimir Illici Lenin. So alive, dynamic, and animated by grand principles and goals. What a pity he was replaced by Stalin, whom I kept at a safe distance. Neither love, nor hatred."⁶¹ From Pavlik Morozov, the child-hero who turned his father in to the authorities, the young protagonist learned the importance of sacrificing one's interest for the larger Soviet good.

The respect for official revolutionary heroes coexisted with fascination for an array of anti-heroes, ranging from Ostap Bender, Ilf and Petrov's famous fictional con man, to characters created by Soviet writers who found refuge from censorship in children's literature. Alexei Tolstoi's Buratino is a subversive hero who teaches young readers how "to question rules and fight stereotypes or stupidity," making up for what he lacks in intelligence with everyday courage and creativity.⁶² More concerned with dressing fashionably than working hard or defending noble ideals, Nikolai Nosov's Dunno is a similarly unconventional character whose unpredictability appeals to child-readers. Interpreting Dunno's constant fights with his *alter ego*, Know-It-All, as a dramatization of "the struggle between the official and unofficial" in Soviet culture, Ernu suggests that the fictional couples of children's literature transcended conflict, reinforcing the ideal of friendship and camaraderie.⁶³

The ideal of friendship practiced by the young protagonist in Soviet institutions such as pioneer camps, clubs, or team competitions points to another essential element of Soviet utopia:

⁶⁰ Ernu, *Născut*, 50.

⁶¹ Ernu, *Născut*, 40-1.

⁶² Ernu, *Născut*, 27.

⁶³ Ernu, *Născut*, 31.

communal life. It is no accident that Ernu chooses the *komunalka* to stand as “a micro-urss, the synthesis of Soviet civilization.”⁶⁴ Revealing his qualities of cultural essayist, Ernu ranks the Soviet experience of communal living far above the arcadias envisioned by a long tradition of utopian thinking, from Morus and Campanella, to Owen and Fourier, to Bacon and Huxley. Much of Ernu’s ironic-nostalgic celebration of communality focuses on the kitchen and the toilet, both of which are seen as cradles of Soviet identity. In his provocatively ironic style, Ernu locates the protagonist’s reading practices and thus, the seeds of his intellectual genealogy, in the communal Soviet toilet, not the secluded reading room:

The [communal] toilet is the quintessence of collective intimacy. (...) It is the ideal reading hall and the place that produced the most remarkable Soviet intellectuals. Do not make the mistake of thinking that the Soviet school, libraries, or universities deserve the greatest credit for our education.⁶⁵

In the author’s view, communal spaces such as the kitchen or the toilet cultivated a deeply communitarian identity that stands in contrast with Western individualism and materialism.

To reconstitute the distinctiveness of the Soviet project, Ernu sets the USSR in contrast with its archenemy and constitutive other, the West. Seconding the author’s claim that he structured the book as a dialogue between “us” and “them,” “the Soviets” and “the Americans,” a number of chapters address an imaginary “Western” reader, who seems existentially unable to comprehend distinctive Soviet experiences.⁶⁶ This essentializing, even self-exoticizing, difference meant to appeal to Western readers is also an indication of Ernu’s ambition to reach out beyond the Romanian market to a broader readership. Contemplating the publication of his memoir in Germany, the author noted in an interview that “difference” is a precondition of sellability: “The West expects difference from us. Cultural production today is based on difference not repetition.”⁶⁷ The often-heated debates around *Born* were in fact instrumental to Ernu’s programmatic cultivation of ideological and intellectual difference. While Ernu suggested that his strategy of difference and provocation should be understood in terms of critical

⁶⁴ Ernu, *Născut*, 43.

⁶⁵ Ernu, *Născut*, 165-6.

⁶⁶ Șimonca, *Interviu*.

⁶⁷ Iulia Popovici, *Interviu cu Vasile Ernu*, *Ziua*, 18 May 2007.

positionality - “I like to make contradictory, even shocking, statements, to make people ask questions” – it is also one of public visibility and marketability.⁶⁸ If journalists can claim that “Vasile Ernu is himself a brand,” it is because the writer proved uniquely adept at performing his ideological difference with characteristic provocation, sense of humor, affability, and even a (self)-described “proletarian” hat in both public and published appearances.⁶⁹

Featuring a protagonist who is fully immersed in Soviet life through integration in school and pioneer rituals, participation in official and unofficial practices, and consumption of Soviet cultural productions, *Born* articulates an alternative to memoirs of Ceaușescu’s Romania that center on the traumatic experiences of social homogenization and individual alienation. If autobiographical recollections of the collapse of Ceaușescu’s regime emphasize the sense of dramatic rupture that made possible new democratic ideals, Ernu’s account of the silent dissolution of the Soviet regime in the wake of *perestroika* is decidedly nondramatic and anticlimatic, inspiring reflections on historical continuities rather than historic breaks: “If the world we experienced was centered on *political repression*, the world we just commenced is based on *economic repression*.”⁷⁰ Indeed, Ernu has repeatedly described his reconstruction of the Soviet system as a critique of the post-socialist present, characterized by the indiscriminate embrace of neoliberal values by Romanian politicians and intellectuals.

Conclusions: Childhood Memoirs as Ideological Genealogies and Intellectual Biographies

Audiences - journalists, literary reviewers, or regular readers – welcomed memoirs of socialist childhood for expanding the scope of social memory and inaugurating a novel approach to the past that overcame feelings of resentment, revenge, or guilt. If the project of “mastering” the past strove to approximate the German model, the memorialization of childhood seemed to find a precedent in *Ostalgie*. Because these autobiographical projects appeared in a climate of revalorization of socialist everyday life - coming out shortly after the successful showing of Wolfgang Becker’s “Goodbye, Lenin!” in Romanian cinemas in 2003, and overlapping with the emergence of social media projects to memorialize socialist childhood - they were perceived to

⁶⁸ Popovici, Interview.

⁶⁹ Ioana Calen, Unora le place in URSS, *Tiuk* http://www.tiuk.reea.net/13/ernu_calen.html

⁷⁰ Ernu, *Născut*, 236.

pioneer a similarly “warm,” “detached,” and “ironic” view of communism.⁷¹ Emphasizing the memoirs’ spirit of novelty, marketization strategies further reinforced the view that this autobiographical wave represented a welcome synchronization with broader Central European trends. While *Ostalgie* was occasionally dismissed as a consumerist fad posing for leftism, many Romanian commentators, the memoirists included, typically envisioned it as a sign of social maturity, as a symptom of post-traumatic closure made possible by a successful mastery of the past. If Germans could return to their traumatic communist past with detachment or humor, it was because they had successfully settled questions of accountability and responsibility.⁷²

But could Romanians accomplish the same feat? With their focus on the banality of quotidian life rather than the exceptionality of suffering under communism, childhood memoirs contributed to the diversification of social memory and questioned totalizing and morally unambiguous claims to historical truth. In their interpretive framework, however, autobiographical evocations of Ceaușescu’s Romania remained surprisingly consistent with the institutionalized representation of the past. While childhood memoirs complicate this picture, giving insights into the ways in which ordinary Romanians were implicated in the reproduction of the regime, their emphasis on the distortion of individual and collective identity reinforces the totalitarian view of an atomized society and polarized individual. The only alternative to this dominant representation was formulated by Vasile Ernu, an ideological outlier whose autobiographical project focused on the original Soviet model rather than the Romanian experience. By comparison to his generational colleagues, Ernu surprised readers with an exuberant Soviet world populated by idealist, deeply communitarian, and creative individuals who moved nonchalantly between official and unofficial spheres.

Whether they engaged with the hegemonic memory discourse through affirmation or contestation, memoirs of socialist childhood testified to the authors’ formative experiences under communism, offering them a platform to articulate their intellectual biographies and ideological genealogies. Cast as stories of a “prematurely lost political innocence,” memoirs of Ceaușescu’s Romania were instrumental in locating the seeds of an oppositional identity in childhood.⁷³ As children of urban intellectuals, the protagonists devoured an eclectic array of literature in an

⁷¹ Luminita Marcu, Altfel de marturie despre comunism, *Observatorul cultural* 212, March 2004; Cristina Modreanu, Nostalgia e la modă, *Gândul*, 13 July 2006.

⁷² Șimonca, Interviu.

⁷³ Cernat et al., *O lume dispărută*, 8.

attempt to conjure up fictional universes that could compensate for the stifling socialist reality and counter the brainwashing effect of collective state education. While eclectic, the readings were neither selected from the socialist cannon nor read in ideologically appropriate ways, drawing an intellectual genealogy that was not indebted to socialist ideas but to traditional liberal values of pre-socialist and European provenance. The child's voracious reading habits became metaphors of a precocious critical spirit that carried the promise of oppositional intellectuality waiting to be reclaimed by adult memoirists.

Although it articulates a competing, leftist ideological position, *Born* is similarly instrumental in drawing the profile of a critical intellectual-citizen. It accomplishes this by featuring reading as a means of immersion into, rather than escape from, a rich Soviet culture. Although decidedly Soviet, the protagonist's reading choices suggest an ideological genealogy indebted as much to the ideals of official heroes – whether party leaders like Lenin and Bukharin or mythologized child figures such as Pavel Morozov – as to the subversive and questioning attitude of anti-heroes. Concluding his memoir by challenging the neoliberal regime of post-socialism with the quintessential revolutionary question – Lenin's "What is to be done?" – Ernu defines himself as a critical intellectual of leftist persuasion.⁷⁴

If memoirs served to reclaim oppositional intellectuality, the metanarrative context of their promotion and consumption further facilitated the authors' entry into the intellectual elite. The public space generated by promotional book launches, published reviews, or debates at major academic centers in Bucharest, Cluj, Timisoara, and Jassy expanded both intellectual networks and the boundaries of intellectual sociality. Whether they responded to reviews, gave interviews, or participated in round tables, young authors enjoyed a significant amount of public visibility, engaging actively in the process of interpreting their autobiographies and biographies as well as the communist past. Organized at book launches and published as prefaces or concluding remarks to childhood memoirs, intergenerational conversations with consecrated public intellectuals were also an integral part of the process of socialization.

The dynamics of the Romanian book market can explain why autobiographical productions fulfill a primarily socializing function. Although most of the memoirs analyzed in this article were advertised as best sellers, it bears remembering that the number of copies they sold was likely in the range of one to two thousand and that, with the exception of Ernu's

⁷⁴ Cernat et al., *O lume dispărută*, 232.

memoir, none were either reprinted or translated.⁷⁵ With this modest audience, most memoirs of socialist childhood likely stayed in the family, being read by fellow writers, journalists, academics, students, and the urban educated youth targeted by Polirom's campaigns. These market dynamics make writing, even the writing of a best seller, an unprofitable business that can barely earn authors a livelihood. What publication can offer young authors, especially when doubled by promotion with major publishers like Polirom, is public visibility and enhanced intellectual prestige.

Claiming that the communist past was central to political contests and cultural debates in the post-socialist period, this article explored how a generation of aspiring writers accessed the public sphere with their most valuable symbolic currency, their personal experience of communism. Compelled by perceived contemporary challenges - whether the failure of political anti-communism or the unchallenged victory of neoliberalism - young authors mobilized their memories of childhood to articulate ideological and intellectual biographies. Although shaped by concerns with profit and marketability, published memoirs have largely escaped the logic of the market. Due to the modest Romanian readership, intellectual memoirs remained a largely family affair, addressing an audience of intellectual peers and mentors and thus, socializing aspiring writers into the ethos of the post-communist intelligentsia. These dynamics can explain why, despite isolated attempts at ideological contestation, this generational cohort failed to articulate a compelling alternative to the hegemonic framework of remembrance. At the same time, they suggest the limits of this hegemony of representation. To the extent that it functions as the preferred idiom of intellectual sociability, the dominant representation of the past as a collective trauma remains effectively divorced from social memory, which has registered a tendency towards the positive reclamation of the past. As opinion polls seem to indicate, the pedagogy of "working through" the traumatic past has largely failed to align public opinion with institutionalized memory, remaining a public intellectuals' conceit.

⁷⁵ Poenaru, "Contesting Illusions," 159.