



**Negotiating the past  
or on the way in which trauma is approached in the discourse of the former  
deportees to the field of Bărăgan ( 1951 – 1956)**

**Négocier le passé  
ou les modalités pour dire le trauma dans le discours mémoriel des anciens  
déportés au Bărăgan**

Smaranda Vultur©  
[smarandavultur@yahoo.fr](mailto:smarandavultur@yahoo.fr)

**Memory as a process: Remarks on its contexts**

Whoever intends to study the way in which the communist period memory discourse has been functioning in Romania over the last ten years should take into account several aspects of a general nature, which define the framework of its production and reception.

The most visible aspect consists in the liberation of memory from imposed or self-imposed censorship, which has inevitably resulted in the democratisation of the right to have memory. This has found expression in a pressing need to remember and offer testimony, which was activated in a political climate whose insecurity, unrest, and, sometimes, stakes have decisively influenced memory reconstruction. Under these circumstances, the divergence between discourses claiming to reveal the truth, that is, the plurality of perspectives, has been perceived as jamming access to this truth rather than giving more effective means of analysing it.

For those who have become inured to the idea of the existence of just one indisputable truth, the truth imposed by the ideology of a single party, as well as for those accustomed to observing the silence pact and to accepting the beautified official history discourse, exercising their memory meant labour, which was too difficult to go into. Or, if not, it meant an agonising experience: re-examining their past was traumatic in itself, as it pricked their conscience, creating moral or even identity problems.

Strange as this might seem, it has not been an easy situation for those who had actually and directly suffered under the communist regime either. The postponement (a long one for some of them) of the cathartic effect of testimony; the disturbances that have occurred (by hush-up or half-truths) in the functioning of family and community memory; the pushing of the victims to a marginal position in society; their long psychological terrorisation by the insidious mechanism of a stigma permanently attached to them, a stigma that could be inherited, spreading to the whole family group; and last but not least the system's capacity to sometimes establish a perverse dependence of the victimised on their victimisers and complicity between them, are all sufficient elements to gauge the difficulty of recounting the past, though such recollections should have meant the happy sharing of an inheritance. By « the happy sharing of an inheritance » I refer here to the beneficial effects of communicating unknown or only partially known traumatic

experiences to those who have not undergone them. Insofar as a common memory can create a harmonised society, these effects are both individual and collective.

To these almost inevitable problems of memory's labour have been added the political power's often brutal but efficient interventions. By claiming the urgency of other problems, such as those of an economic nature, it has kept goading people into abandoning the memory of the past and focusing on the present and the future (as if time could be dissociated) or, by more or less orthodox methods, it has simply barred access to the archives or other sources of information, which would have given more transparency to the communist past.

Instead of this transparency, and, somehow, against it, a certain form of memory discourse has been systematically and preferentially cultivated, namely the commemorative type. Monuments and ceremonies, in which the old ideological symbols are replaced by others (in accordance with a logic built upon the idea that everything that used to be refused or forbidden should be now exhibited, and everything that used to be cursed or abused should be now automatically eulogised); these monuments and buildings are circumscribed by a memory practice of a ritualistic type lacking in creativity and perfectly moulded into a well-known pattern belonging to the very epoch the ritual is supposed to contest, thus establishing an unhappy element of formal continuity.

In his last years of governing, Ceaușescu had invented terror by means of the imposed festival, reduced to a petrified solemn ritual, emptied of any content, an original form of glorifying nothingness. Anything today recalling this ritual framework, even by opposition, is likely to push into derision and mockery even the most praiseworthy initiatives. The still traumatising recollection of a relatively recent past justifies our mistrust towards, and reticence about, a type of memory discourse meant to petrify the past in forms that encourage oblivion. Beyond its compensatory virtues for those who have suffered, this type of discourse screens reality from its actual meanings, reducing it to general symbols and emotional gesturing, and makes those involved refuse to refer critically to the past or even recognise historical truth.

This does not mean that such a type of discourse is of no interest for the memory anthropologist or that it should not be studied and related to other types of recollections or testimonies about the past. The changes of political regimes usually bring about a real effervescence and competition for occupying or sharing symbolic spaces: new monuments are erected, new inscriptions are written, new important dates appear in the calendar (while others are « forgotten »), street names are changed, city monographs are rewritten, the past is buried in order to discover another past, biographies, lineages, appurtenances are reconstructed, new converts are gained. This apparent amalgam in fact reveals memory spurred into motion, memory on the verge of reconstruction, a memory field being reconstructed in accordance with new priorities and hierarchies.

### **Life stories and field work**

From this point of view, there is nothing more edifying than the study of autobiographic discourse particularly when it is solicited as testimony discourse about the past. For a decade, beginning in 1991, I recorded on audio tape the life stories (over 120 interviewees) of the Banat and Oltenia deportees to Bărăgan (between 1951 and 1956). Part of these memories were published in a book in 1997 (Vultur, 1997). They are accompanied by the explanation of the circumstances under which the interviews were conducted, a thematic index, and a first analysis of their contents at several levels of meaning organisation: narration configuration level (as defined by Paul Ricoeur, 2000), thematic level and interpretative level (relating facts to symbolic

frameworks meant to make them intelligible and memorable). The integration of the testimony about deportation into a life story gives rise to another type of coherence, one resulting from the retrospective « balance sheet » of the story teller, the « subjective totality » discussed by Daniel Bertaux, against whose background a self-portrait is outlined, connections between events are established, depending on the story teller's moral conduct, personal ideology, existential model or other criteria. The life story often shows a tendency to become a kind of founding story, justifying an identity or a « life project », carried out retroactively. The provisional assessment of personal biography made almost half a century after the deportation event had occurred makes it possible for us to see the way in which the trauma suffered is integrated into the life story. In other words, how it is perceived, commented and re-lived at a distance of 45-50 years generally separating the story teller from those moments that have marked his/her life, and that of his/her family, since all the members of the family living in the same house had been deported. The area of deportation, generally a rural area including some small towns (the only city being Turnu-Severin) coincides with the distance of 25 km from the Yugoslavian border since the pretext for deporting was proximity to the over-the-frontier enemy, Tito, who was at that time in disagreement with Stalin about the collectivisation issue (the real reason of this act of political repression).

It goes without saying that most of the deportees were middle or well-to-do farmers considered to be *kulaks* (around 45,000 inhabitants from the Timiș county, the rural areas of the Mehedinți county and from the town Turnu-Severin). The lands and household goods which they had to abandon in great haste (being allowed to take with them only what would fit into a cart or a truck) have not been given back to them on their return, in violation of the provisions of the deportation order. On the lands of the deportees, agricultural associations were first formed by merging, and later by agriculture co-operatives. As a matter of fact, the refusal to join the collective community was often given as a reason for deportation, even in the cases when the deportee owned less than 10 ha of land. For the abandoned goods and animals, the former deportees should have received damages in accordance with inventories, yet these were not always made and no damages have been paid even when inventories were made. On returning home after 5 years of deportation, all they got back were their empty and destroyed houses.

The individual field work I have been doing for a long time has become team work since 1997 within the Cultural Anthropology and Oral History group, which I have been co-ordinating at the Third Europe Foundation. Together, we have compiled an archive of over 500 recorded hours containing the life story of persons belonging to different social categories, of various ethnic origins or religious beliefs, with different life experiences, coming from the Banat rural or urban areas, but all born between 1908 and 1930. The analysis from various perspectives of the corpus of confessions thus built has made me reach the conclusion that the memory of the communist period cannot be dealt with as a global issue. It should be approached according to the type of discourse through which it is materialised. I am referring here not only to the previously mentioned disparities occurring, for instance, between commemoration and direct testimony, or the different positions from which these discourses are expressed (clearly the victims and the privileged few of the communist regime or those directly involved in acts of victimisation cannot have the same perspective or feel the same desire to speak about their past). I also have in mind a differentiation by generations, by the place of origin, the social, ethnic, political background, etc. That is why, the life stories I have in view in order to characterise here a certain type of memory discourse are limited to interviewees from the rural area, mostly farmers, of various ethnic origin

– due to the ethnically diversified composition of Banat – who, at the time of deportation, were heads of the family (the parents' generation of the family deported, usually with children, grandparents and even great-grandparents). At that moment, they bore the greatest responsibility for their family and they were between 20 and 35 years of age. Due to the very nature of their involvement and the advanced age when they accepted to testify about deportation by telling their life story a few decades later, they were placed, on the one hand, in the very core of the events being recalled, and, on the other hand, they distanced themselves from those events enough to be able to evaluate them according to an already possible life assessment. The type of interview recorded was in general not guided by questions, as the interviewees could select what and how much they wanted to say – it is true – at a moment when the desire to tell, to make known what had happened to them was great and stimulated by the changes brought about by the year 1989 and also by the ambiguities and obstacles (either concrete or psychological) still functioning in the period immediately following that year. Therefore, the corpus on which this analysis focuses is limited to the interviews taken until 1996-1997, considering the fact that, meanwhile, a lot of confessions were published in volumes or newspapers, thus re-entering the cycle of memory. The association of former deportees, as well as those founded on ethnic bases, initiated a series of actions in the field of memory « recovery », of a commemorative and also documentary nature, or edited testimonies and documents. Thus, today we witness a history that is about to be born, the very process of memory reconstruction of this event's past.

### **Reconstructions and uses of the past**

Only by correlating these different types of memory can we have access to the full picture of the way in which reference to the communist past has been made in the decade that separates us from 1989, a period marked by a series of events or social and political circumstances that are different and sometimes similar from one country to another.

As to the argument of discourse I have chosen for analysis, we can notice the following aspects:

- Generally considered as a tragedy, an autobiographical disaster, a breach in one's existence and, last but not least, an identity trauma, deportation is recounted and also assessed according to its consequences upon one's personal or family destiny. These consequences refer to the loss of an inheritance resulted from several generations' work. Thus, transmission of goods and symbolic values between these generations was interrupted, and favourite or considered-normal-until-then life routes or projects were changed abruptly. No wonder that, under these circumstances, the emphasis in the story of deportation falls on the moments of departure from, and returning to, the village as two symmetric moments, because they both presuppose somehow enduring it all over again.

The five years spent in Bărağan are recalled in these stories in a way similar to what a memory closer to the events records. The same difficulties are recorded both in a diary partially published in 1994, which was kept during the entire period of deportation by Elena Spijavca, a Bucovinean refugee in Banat (at Cenad), who was later deported to Bărağan (together with all the Bessarabian or Bucovinean refugees who had left the USSR in 1940 or 1944 to flee communism), and in the letters of some Swabians (German ethnics) from several Banat villages deported to Bărağan, which – almost unbelievably – have reached their addressees. They all speak about the shock of settling in the bare field, without a roof above their heads, the famine and the thirst, the desperate dependence – especially in the first years – on the packages received

from relatives or friends left behind (which would arrive halved or not at all), the exhausting labour to make adobe (loam brick, a combination of clay, straw and dung used as a construction material) for building their fragile houses, ready to fall with each torrential rain or abundant snow or to catch fire when strong winds were blowing.

The precariousness of the houses reflects that of existence in general, menaced by the elements, diseases, surveillance of the authorities and reprimand in case of insubordination (those who had their « obligatory domicile » here were, in principle, not allowed to move farther than 15 km). They worked on a farm for a humble salary or they participated in what E.S., in her diary, calls « voluntary-compulsory labour ». Sadness and pain were the prevailing feelings and only from time to time were they interrupted by small joys like celebrations or moments of solidarity and kindness, which surpassed the barriers imposed by the authorities.

Although the pain and sufferings evoked by the story told 40 or 45 years later are more or less the same (obviously the time of deportation « flows faster » in the story told later than in the diaries or letters, and is much more compressed), the emphasis is different. The story is mostly a survival story, an account of the way in which trauma was handled and overcome. Particularly the stories of survival told by the people from Banat, who have an acute feeling of regional identity and its superiority (imagined according to the exceptional model of the Banat Swabian), get transformed into stories meant to prove this superiority according to the principle « man sanctifies place ». The ability of the deportees to progressively make the unfriendly, wild, harsh space of deportation look like home, in other words, their capacity to transform it « into a sort of Banat » (their place of origin) is interpreted as a means of hijacking destiny, of imagining a sort of running without moving, a way of gaining a kind of freedom, unforeseen by the authorities. But it is also a confirmation of their admirable qualities.

- At this point, one can easily see the solidarity between the memory discourse and the identity discourse. By transforming the absurd event of deportation into a story full of sense, as long as one can learn a lesson from it, the storytellers succeed in creating an image of rehabilitation beyond their status of victims. This image is obviously opposed to the one the authorities had intended for them through the act of deportation. Treated as *malefactors*, *thieves*, *bandits*, *exploiters*, « enemies of the people », the deportees proved themselves capable persons who could demonstrate their qualities even in the worst situations. This discourse having a distinct identity stake and polemic tint is supported by a symbolic framework, which moulds it: the myth of the « good coloniser », the one who tames the hostile space, changing it « after its kind ». In the cultural memory of the deportee, this myth is somehow at hand, because it is present in the Banat Swabians' stories about their life in Banat after its colonisation by the Habsburg Empire during the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The history of this colonisation, told in the previously mentioned mythical terms, usually accompanies the life story of the Banat Swabians, as a kind of founding and legitimating history, carried over as such by the other ethnic groups from Banat in their discourse about the Swabian (the German) as an ideal model, as a reference point for a « good identity ».

- We can identify in the underlying discourse, that tends to make the victim a hero for recovery purposes (to transform the victim into a hero in order to give him/her back the dignity stolen through deportation), the even more general need of any memory discourse to make the past exemplary either for teaching a lesson, drawing a moral or making the individual experience of pain understandable to those who have never felt it directly. This is a way of objectifying pain

and giving it the aura of an example, which is, to some extent, a form of oblivion as well, or, anyway, a form of « coming to terms » with the past.

This tendency is also perceptible in the way in which the category of witnesses I have in mind regard the intervention of Justice, as an institution, in estimating the events of the past. It is considered belated and inefficient, either because the institution itself is unaccountable (compromised under communism), or because divine justice has already acted instead, as many witnesses try to convince us by bringing examples to support their statements. There is the belief that through the intervention of this justice, « the good » were rewarded, while « the bad » were punished. The story seems to draw upon the naive moral of fairy-tales and their simplified ethics. In fact, at a more general level, we can notice the witnesses' tendency to discuss the facts from an ethical perspective rather than a political one, especially when they are farmers.

On the other hand, the feeling of injustice done to them on return and the need for justice and truth are striking and most visible in the way in which the events are recounted. The facts are presented like in a trial that attempts to rehabilitate the victim. The story unfolds itself in a strikingly argumentative arrangement, as if its main purpose were to re-establish the « truth », that is, to do justice to those punished without reason. Denied at the level of institutionalised intervention, the need for justice being dispensed is more than obvious in the narration.

We have here a situation in which memory is the battlefield for the justice of those who have not found it elsewhere. Not even was deportation as such dictated by any legal decisions. The criteria according to which one could be included on the list of deportable persons are stated in a directive of the Ministry of Internal Affairs bearing the note « top secret document ». Before enumerating the categories affected by the act of dislocation (which was promulgated by the Decision of the Council of Ministers no. 344/1951), it specifies that there are « some categories of dangerous elements or elements that could become dangerous ». The latter specification indicates as clearly as possible the arbitrary character of this action. This regards past history.

As to the present of their accounts, namely the period « of transition » in which we are living, we all know that a trial of the crimes of communism never took place, even if, in 2006, the institution of the Romanian President and the documented report of the President's Board for the Analysis of Crimes during the Communist Dictatorship, voiced official apologies and condemned the communist regime, which had ordered the deportations. However, when these interviews were taken, nobody had publicly stated the innocence of those who were deported, imprisoned, sent to labour camps, evacuated from their homes, expropriated, harassed by the political police, tortured or murdered. Under these circumstances, the life story tries to do justice, claiming the right to talk about these things, to make what happened known (« to be known and not to be forgotten » – as one of the interviewees said).

Balancing between the need to defend and rehabilitate himself/herself through the act of remembering and the need to integrate the trauma, to recover somehow from its giving the appearance of continuity to the breach in his/her personal biography, the teller of a life story is in the situation of assuming the subtle joining of memory and oblivion. That happens because not even the most personal attempt to remember, like that of reconstructing the thread of their personal biography, lacks the dimension of sociality, the need to convince and to make themselves understood (by themselves in the first place). This presupposes a certain rhetoric of the discourse that should make it efficient. It also includes an internal need for coherence, the mirror of a deeper need of any human being to define oneself in relation to the others, to place oneself in a field of possible options. It has been rightfully noticed that there can be no personal

memory in the absence of reference to a collective memory. And this derives directly from the search of identity that the reconstruction of the past through a memory discourse implies.

## **Conclusions**

Instead of a conclusion, let me tell you how the ceremony of commemorating fifty years since the deportation was held in Timișoara on June 18, 2001.

The Association of the Former Deportees from Banat to Bărăgan founded as early as 1991, built a house that is similar in the exterior to those they were forced to build in Bărăgan. It is a loam brick, straw-roofed house which they installed on the commemoration day in the Village Museum in the Green Forest in Timișoara. This is an ethnographic outdoor museum, having other houses from various zones of Banat, usually wooden houses. This house is however totally different from the houses built in Bărăgan by the deportees, as it looks frail on the outside, but on the inside it was made to last. The solidity of the construction and the materials used were meant for its role of becoming « a house of non-oblivion », as the former deportees named it (see photo). The resistance of those who had lived there once and the persistence of their memories opposed the precariousness of life in Bărăgan. A confrontation between passing and duration. « The house of non-oblivion » contains pictures from Bărăgan, different objects once used there and brought home on the return of deportees in 1956.

The people who came to commemorate the event walked through the narrow space of the two rooms (the houses in Bărăgan had a standard form, as they had to respect a model pre-established by the authorities who guarded the deportees). Some of them looked at the photographs in an attempt to recognise some persons from the deportation period, others said: « It would have been great if we had had such a house in Bărăgan ». They were all speaking in a low voice, with piety, as though in front of a monument, but, at the same time, each one was trying to identify in what they saw, something that was already known, familiar, something connected to the experience evoked by the circumstances and by « the house of non-oblivion ».

The house was blessed by a priest whose parents had been deported as well, then official and less official speeches were held, as many of the former deportees wanted to say a few words.

This is, briefly exposed, the way in which the deportees on the Whit Sunday of 1951 remembered and said goodbye to the past, transposing into a metaphor their searches of memory often hesitating between fidelity towards the facts and the need to immortalise them.

I would not like to make you believe that the life stories to which I referred completely lack critical or polemic notes, rebellion or questions without answers, very correct diagnoses of the present in its relation to the past. On the contrary. But what I was interested in here was, first of all, to decode the deep coherence which is achieved at the level of logical implications, but also of rhetorical articulations that give expression to the search for a meaning that can be shared with others. And this obviously presupposes a subtle negotiation between memory and oblivion.

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A « house of non-oblivion » in Village Museum from Timișoara (lower) and the house the way it looked in Bărăgan county ( upper).

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