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Haunted Generations: Postmemory, Repression, and Communist Trauma¹

Abstract: *The descendants of individuals persecuted during communism in Romania do not constitute a generation in a sociological sense but rather a “category of memory”. Their engagement with the legacy of repression varies according to age and temporal proximity to the events. Drawing on research into the memory of communist repression among the offspring of former political detainees, this study argues that those who were children or adolescents during their parents’ persecution are generally more inclined to testimony and remembrance. They often assume the position of quasi-witnesses and align their narratives closely with those of their parents. In contrast, descendants born after the period of repression encounter this past through mediated forms – such as family narratives, silences, and written sources – and are less inclined to publicly articulate or transmit inherited trauma. An analysis of testimonies published in “Memoria. Revista gândirii arestate”, particularly in the section “The Second Circle of Suffering”, reveals their distinct memorial tropes. For direct witnesses of their parents’ persecution, the obligation to remember and transmit ancestral experiences and values is closely linked to the expression of personal suffering and loss. For those born long after repression ended, the memory of communist persecutions is shaped primarily by social frameworks of memory, identity formation, and cultural memory.*

Keywords: *Repression; Mnemonic laws; Traumatic Memories; Narratives; Anti-communism.*

Introduction

In July 2020, the Romanian state enacted legislation that constituted the descendants of individuals politically persecuted under the communist regime as a legally and symbolically recognized social group. By translating inherited suffering from the private sphere into a

¹ This work was supported by a grant of the Ministry of Education and Research, CCCDI-UEFISCDI, project number PN-IV-PCB-RO-MD-2024-0039, within PNCDI IV.

state-sanctioned framework of recognition, the law repositioned descendants as legitimate carriers of historical trauma, enabling their voices to enter the public and political field as part of an ongoing negotiation over the memory of communism in Romania.

Law no. 130/2020, which amended Decree-Law no. 118/1990 on granting rights to persons persecuted for political reasons after March 6, 1945, was proposed by a deputy from the national minorities group in Parliament and promulgated by President Klaus Werner Iohannis on July 15, 2020. The law stipulated that children of persons killed, disappeared, or exterminated as a result of communist repression – including those subjected to detention, forced psychiatric hospitalization, deportation, displacement, imprisonment, or compulsory residence – are entitled to a monthly allowance of 500 lei (Law no. 130, 2020).

Prior to this amendment, descendants of politically persecuted persons had already benefited from reparative measures under legislation adopted after 1990, beginning with Decree-Law no. 118/1990. Article 3 of this decree provided that, in the case of deceased victims, their descendants were entitled to survivor pensions, calculated based on the seniority established by the law (Decree-law no. 118, 1990).

Subsequent amendments introduced exclusions from these benefits. A 2009 amendment to Article 13 of Decree-Law no. 118/1990 barred individuals convicted of crimes against humanity or proven to have engaged in „legionnaire” (i.e. the Romanian fascist-like movement, The Iron Guard-The Legionnaires) activities from receiving the monthly allowance and other benefits (Decret-lege nr. 118). Similar restrictions were included in Government Emergency Ordinance (OUG) no. 214/1999, which regulated the recognition of anti-communist resistance fighters (OUG no. 214, 1999).

Another piece of legislation, Law no. 221/2009, allowed descendants to claim compensation for moral damages and material losses, taking into account prior reparations granted under earlier legislation, as well as restitution or equivalent compensation for confiscated property and the reinstatement of lost rights. The law excluded from compensation those convicted of crimes against humanity or of promoting racist, xenophobic, or antisemitic ideologies (Law no. 221, 2009).

However, the financial compensation introduced by Law 221/2009 was subject to judicial proceedings, which significantly complicated the compensation process. By September 2010, only 174 individuals had obtained final court decisions establishing compensation amounts ranging from 300 to 1 million euros. In response to these high

awards, the government introduced statutory caps in 2010, limiting compensation to €10,000 for former detainees, €5,000 for first-degree descendants, and €2,500 for second-degree descendants (Jinga, 2017, p. 33-34).

According to the Association of Former Political Detainees and Victims of Communism (AFDPR), by 2014 approximately 3,000 former detainees, 20,000 former deportees, and 30,000 spouses and other descendants of political prisoners were eligible to claim compensation. Nevertheless, the Constitutional Court of Romania's declaration of the law as unconstitutional in November 2010 effectively prevented these claims, and the law's practical effects remain limited (Jinga, 2017, p. 35).

Over time, the descendants of individuals politically persecuted, deported, displaced, or imprisoned after August 23, 1944 have become the primary beneficiaries of the post-communist mnemonic and compensatory legislation. They have also played a central role in establishing associations and foundations dedicated to preserving the memory of communist repression. In addition, descendants have become increasingly active within the AFDPR, where they occupy leadership positions after the election of a new board by the National Assembly of AFDPR in September 2023. This new leadership emphasizes a commitment to carrying forward the trauma discourse developed by the first generation of leaders (Dobre, 2024, p. 14).

Theoretical background and methodology

This study explores the stories told by the descendants of those who suffered under communist repression and traces their efforts to carry this memory forward as a form of cultural trauma. Through their public narratives as well as through the creation of associations and foundations, these descendants have sought to preserve, articulate, and publicly share experiences that were long silenced. Drawing on memoirs published in *Memoria. Revista gândirii arestate* between 1990 and 2020, my analysis follows the contours of their memorial discourse, highlighting recurring themes as well as the concrete actions through which they promote particular cultural, political, and social figures, alongside specific facts, symbols, and values. The study is grounded in Marianne Hirsch's concept of "post-memory", which provides a framework for understanding how inherited trauma is remembered, re-worked, and transmitted across generations.

Inspired by the memory of Holocaust, Marianne Hirsch coined the term of “post-memory” in order to describe “the relationship that the ‘generation after’ bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before – to experiences they ‘remember’ only by means of the stories, images and behaviors among which they grew up.... Postmemory’s connection to the past is thus actually mediated not by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation” (Hirsch, 2012, p. 5).

“Post-memory” gives a new dimension to the concept of generation, which is no longer understood in this case as the same age class, but rather as a “category of memory” (Weigel, 2002, p. 269), which participates in the “collective becoming” influenced by a series of events and experiences that have marked a certain historical context and that create social bonds and solidarities (Mannheim, 2011, p. 77). As in the case of the descendants of Holocaust victims, the descendants of the politically persecuted people during communism in Romania constitute a “category of memory” rather than a generational unit, especially since their age is very different, ranging from children to adults in their eighties.

In Marianne Hirsch’s analysis, the “post-memorial” generation is marked, influenced and shaped by cultural trauma. Cultural trauma is defined by the reactions that a society as a whole manifests towards a traumatic event that has affected a group of society. Kai Erikson believes that one can speak of a cultural trauma when there is “a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality” (Erikson, 1976, p. 154).

According to Jeffrey C. Alexander, the suffering of a group becomes a collective trauma only as a result of a cultural process that depends on rituals, public discourse, historiography, films, as well as any other type of narrative with public impact (Alexander, 2012, p. 3-4). Cultural trauma differs from individual trauma in that it persists beyond the lives of those who experienced it, being remembered by group members long after it has occurred (Alexander, 2012, p. 6-7). However, the “post-memorial” generations may choose to remember cultural trauma differently from their ancestors, thus giving rise to a trauma dynamic that differently links collective memory to traumatic events and to the needs of the descendant group for security (Hirschberger, 2018, p. 1). Therefore, cultural trauma does not only represent a destructive, abrupt event with an impact on the group and the community, but is

mainly intended to give meaning and coherence to the carrier group in a permanent dynamic according to the group's identification and representation interests (Hirschberger, 2018, p. 2).

The state-of-the-art

The topics of “post-memory” and “cultural trauma” have received limited attention in Romanian historiography. Only recently has a volume edited by Monica Ciobanu and Mihaela Șerban addressed these issues from a broader perspective. The book brings together eleven chapters that explore the „processes, gaps, agents, and contradictions of post-memory” (Ciobanu & Șerban, 2025, p. 3). Spanning multiple disciplines, the volume examines a wide range of topics, including museums and musealization, the relationship between political trials and transitional justice, the articulation of post-memory in digital contexts, etc. It also foregrounds marginalized and often forgotten voices, such as those of the Roma population and abandoned children (Ciobanu & Șerban, 2025, p. 3). Taken together, the contributions argue that the intertwining of nostalgia and cultural trauma may play a significant role in shaping Romania's future cultural and political landscape (Ciobanu & Șerban, 2025, p. 9).

Previous studies address these topics as represented in literature (Ursa, 2019; Mironescu, 2018) and film (Popescu Sandu, 2010), as well as through generational approaches focusing on people born after 1989 (Rusu & Croitoru), or through analyses centered on places, objects, and landscapes as vehicles of intergenerational memory (Crețan & Veran, 2018; Crețan & Doiciar, 2023).

In her study, “Musophobia and Totalitarianism. Herta Müller and Art Spiegelman on Mice and Men”, Mihaela Ursa examines communism and Nazism as cultural traumas with lasting effects on writers. She emphasizes post-memory as a process of interpretation and symbolic valorization of memories transmitted across generations (Ursa, 2019, p. 249).

Oana Popescu Sandu similarly conceptualizes communism as a cultural trauma, particularly for younger generations who construct their identities in relation to their parents' past and, by extension, national history. Analyzing the Romanian film “Afternoon of a Torturer”, directed by Lucian Pintilie, in 2001, and the Bulgarian “Canary Season” directed by Evgeni Mikhailov, in 1993, she highlights the need for descendants to assign meaning to the past in order to understand their present (Popescu Sandu, 2010, p. 117-129).

Remus Crețan and Claudia Doiciar propose an expanded understanding of “post-memory” as characteristic of individuals who did not experience communism directly and whose memory is shaped at the intersection of communicative and cultural memory. This process operates through cultural tourism and engagement with everyday objects from the communist period (Crețan & Doiciar, 2023).

Mihai Rusu and Alin Croitoru also define “post-memory” as a feature of generations born after 1989, whose relationship to the communist past is mediated by political and generational change. Based on an online survey, they identify an ambivalent attitude toward communism and a clear distinction between those who experienced the regime – characterized by stronger anti-communist positions – and the “post-memorial” generation, which exhibits weaker anti-communist attitudes (Rusu & Croitoru, 2022).

With regard to the descendants of politically persecuted individuals, existing research has focused primarily on their survival strategies, as reflected in memoirs, interviews, and public engagement as actors of memory. A significant contribution to this field is the book edited by Cosmin Budeancă and Delia Báthory, *Histories (Un)Spoken. Strategies of Survival and Social-Professional Integration in Political Prisoners' Families in Communist Central and Eastern Europe in the '50s and '60s*, published in English in 2018 and in Romanian in 2019 (Budeancă & Báthory, 2018, 2019). This volume brings together studies examining the trajectories and survival strategies of descendants of political prisoners in Romania and other former communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe. The contributions generally trace the life courses and hardships of these descendants, combining archival documents produced by communist authorities with personal testimonies left by those affected.

My study deals with the ways in which the political persecution of former political detainees is represented through the discourse and actions of their descendants. By drawing on a specific corpus of published sources – personal testimonies, published in *Memoria* magazine – this research seeks to illuminate the recurring themes and motifs that shape their memorial discourse. Furthermore, it highlights not only the articulation of individual experiences of trauma but also the broader process by which these personal memories are preserved, enhanced and transmitted through specific activities and actions carried on by private institutions such as associations and foundations.

Analysis and Discussion: Narrating the Communist Trauma

Kai Erikson defined individual trauma as “a blow to the psyche that breaks through one’s defenses so suddenly and with such brutal force that one cannot react to it effectively” (Erikson, 1976, p. 153). Giving the example of Buffalo Creek flood, he argued that the traumatic event affected deeply the survivors who were unable to cope with the shock provoked by this natural and social catastrophe. Gabriele Schwab further noticed in her book, *Haunting Legacies: Violent Histories and Transgenerational Trauma*, that a traumatic event have effects also on the transgenerational memory of the descendants of victims, as well as of “executioners”. They can be “haunted” by the past in subtle and unexpected ways because they have inherited a burden that can affect their entire lives (Schwab, 2010). And not only their personal lives can be affected by a post-traumatic stress syndrome, but even the life of society, if the survivors chose to organize themselves socially in groups with their own political, economic, and cultural agenda (Dobre, 2024, p. 10).

Post-traumatic stress disorder has been defined by the American Psychiatric Association as a psychological condition of an individual caused by a traumatic event as a subject or witness, with implications for their mental health, who feels dominated by uncontrollable symptoms, such as nightmares, flashbacks, hallucinations, but also amnesia, avoidance of stressful situations, apathy (Caruth, 2023, p. 20-25). At a societal level, post-traumatic stress syndrome, as defined by Maria Brave Heart, can manifest itself through generalized anxiety, social unrest, aggression, disorganization, distrust of authorities, lack of interest in the community (Brave Heart, 2003, p. 7).

Post-traumatic stress, at both the individual and collective levels, may be addressed through processes of public recognition, acknowledgment, and shared narratives, sustained by ongoing acts of remembrance and by an intentional commitment to working through the trauma. Within these private and public practices, memory plays a central role as a present-oriented representation of an absent past (Lavabre, 2000, p. 54). When traumatic experiences are recalled and reframed within constructive interpretive frameworks, remembrance can assume a reparative function, contributing to the healing of historical wounds at both personal and communal levels, as Freud suggests (Kristeva, 1998, p. 125).

Freud and his followers regarded the act of bearing witness as a fundamental mechanism through which traumatized subjects may symbolically internalize traumatic experiences and gradually work through their enduring effects (Kristeva, 1998, p. 126). In the context of historical trauma, such testimonies exceed the boundaries of individual experience, functioning as vehicles of memory that legitimize traumatic events and contribute significantly to their later reconstruction and transmission at the collective and communal levels.

In communist Romania, those persecuted were unable, unwilling, or afraid to share their traumatic experiences with their descendants, friends, colleagues, etc. Beyond the trauma itself, which was difficult to manage, other feelings prevented the repressed from speaking openly about these things: fear, humiliation, the desire to forget, to adapt, and eventually to move on with their life (Dobre, 2021, p. 223-225). Moreover, certain experiences resisted verbalization insofar as the extremity of persecution demanded a specialized expressive register that was largely absent from the Romanian language (Dobre, 2019, p. 201). In this regard, Crina Coșoveanu (born in 1928) recalled that whenever she questioned her father about his imprisonment, he consistently responded that “there are no words to match the facts”:

“Undoubtedly, a subliminal defense, an obvious refusal to relive those moments of terrible humiliation, and perhaps also an unspoken desire not to add to the burden, borne by us – his family – throughout those years...” (Coșoveanu, 2005, p. 51).

Corneliu Coposu (1914-1995), a former political prisoner and the post-communist leader of the National Peasant Party christian-democrat, also underlined that he refrained from recounting his experience of imprisonment to his family, as the events he endured appeared scarcely credible, at times even to himself:

“And then, no matter how much talent you have, no matter how much imagination, it is impossible to make someone outside of all this believe or understand. Sometimes, I hesitated to say certain things so incredible, because I realized that a normal person, unfamiliar with the Asian manners applied by the communists, might not have believed you. Sometimes, I realize that I would not have believed my own story if someone else had told it to me. Besides, although I have not forgotten them, they no longer cause me even resentment” (Badralex, 1998).

Even after the collapse of the communist regime, the public articulation of the suffering, humiliation, violence, and systemic evil endured in prisons, labor camps, deportations, forced displacement, and

sites of confinement often remained hidden and unspoken. Many former political prisoners and persecuted individuals refrained from narrating these experiences, motivated both by a reluctance to burden their children with the weight of inherited pain and by a desire to protect themselves from renewed exposure and vulnerability (Dobre, 2021, p. 224-225). At the same time, the descendants of those who were incarcerated, deported, or institutionalized were themselves subjected to indirect, yet persistent forms of persecution. As Crina Coșoveanu testimony underscores, “we, those who stayed ‘free’, we could not simply ‘mind our business’ during that time. The Securitate kept us under surveillance, interrogate us, push us to the limits of professional and social life” (Coșoveanu, 2005, p. 51).

As trauma studies have demonstrated, the effects of traumatic experience do not dissipate with the generation that directly endured them, but continue to reverberate among descendants in unpredictable and often indirect forms. In this context, acts of re-memorization situated within supportive and ethically framed settings—along with efforts to interpret the deeper significance of both ancestral trauma and one’s own life trajectories, frequently shaped by latent forms of transmission—assume a reparative function. Participation in memorial communities that share comparable histories of suffering further facilitates these processes, proving beneficial at both the individual and collective levels (Torok, Abraham, 1994).

The “generations of memory” and their representations of cultural trauma

The descendants of the persecuted can be seen as a “category of memory”, given the significant age span they encompass. This temporal heterogeneity produces differentiated modes of relating to, articulating, and transmitting traumatic memory. Those who were direct witnesses to repression – having been children or adolescents at the time of their parents’ persecution – tend to display a greater openness toward testimony and a pronounced willingness to share their experiences. Their narratives are often structured through identificatory logics that align them closely with their parents’ position, situating them as quasi-direct witnesses to political violence. By contrast, descendants born long after the period of political persecution are generally less inclined to verbalize, transmit, or publicly assume this inherited trauma. This reticence is partly attributable to their life stage, marked by priorities related to professional development and family formation, as well as a comparatively

reduced engagement with the patrimonialization and public dissemination of their ancestors' experiences of repression.

For those who directly witnessed the mechanisms of repression, remembrance operates according to distinct mnemonic coordinates. An analysis of thirty-three articles published during the 1990s and 2000s in *Memoria. Revista gândirii arestate*, under the rubric "The Second Circle of Suffering", which features testimonies by descendants of the persecuted, reveals several recurring themes that characterize this discursive corpus.

Primarily, the testimonies of descendants serve not only to evoke the persecutions endured by their ancestors but also to articulate the personal suffering these experiences engendered. Indeed, all contributors to the magazine whose writings I have analyzed consistently begin their narratives by recounting the repressive experiences of their relatives, subsequently reflecting on the ways in which these events impacted their own lives and those of their extended family. Thus, Vladimir D. Cantaragiu (born 1929) stated that:

"The tragedy that befell us, the family, with the arrest of my maternal grandfather, deeply hurt me. And it marked me for the rest of my life. I would even say that the unfortunate events of that time changed the course of my life". (Cantaragiu, 1994, p. 30)

Another motivation for descendants who choose to testify is a sense of moral or ethical obligation. As Nicolae I. Gaftoi (born 1939) expressed:

"I feel that I must fulfill this final duty of conscience, by recounting in detail in this letter what happened to the one who died with his two children in mind". (Gaftoi, 2001, p. 102)

The desire to raise public awareness of the suffering endured by their ancestors, often framed as an expression of love for their country, is yet another theme of their memorial discourse. Cornel Pană (born 1920) highlighted this sense of mission assumed by the descendants of the persecuted:

"By bringing this case before the reader, I do it not only to remember it, but especially so that they can see how the communists rewarded a good Romanian who did something for his country by taking his life". (Pană, 1996, p. 62)

Many descendants choose to provide testimony not only to commemorate the oppressed and the suffering endured by them and their families, but also to honor the enduring example set by those persecuted

by the communist regime. In their view, these individuals embodied genuine role models through the beliefs they upheld, the values they promoted, and the example they offered to subsequent generations – principles that descendants often internalized and carried forward. Alexandru Nicolae Popp (born 1938), son of engineer Alexandru Popp (tried in 1948 in the “National Resistance Movement” case for his connections to the British Legation, released in 1964, and deceased in 1988), reflected this perspective:

“This is my testimony about the one who was a beloved and loving father and whose life represented a guide in the life of my mother, in my life, that of my wife and our son, the greatest gift sent to us by God”. (Popp, 2001, p. 88)

Lia Munteanu-Drăgănescu (born 1936) also regarded her father, the theologian, Orthodox priest, and rector of the Theological Institute of Cluj (1938–1952), Liviu-Galaction Munteanu (arrested in 1958 who died in Aiud prison in 1961), as a paradigm of moral and intellectual integrity – “of order and balance, sobriety and fairness, ... a great lover of nature, a man who lived to leave something lasting behind him”. She described him as a model that she and her siblings were “destined to follow”, highlighting the formative influence of his life and values on subsequent generations (Munteanu-Drăgănescu, 1998, p. 86).

Descendants frequently express a sense of pride in their parents, who, despite enduring extreme hardship, remained steadfast in their humanity, refused to compromise their deeply held values, and did not betray their ideals or those around them. Anamaria Ciuhandu (born 1951), for instance, expressed her admiration for her father, praising him “for not letting himself be defeated” despite the horrors of torture, cold, hunger, and inhuman labor in the extermination camps along the Danube-Black Sea Canal, even managing to assist those more severely affected by the boundless repression imposed by communist torturers (Ciuhandu, 2004, p. 60-64).

Descendants bear witness to the lives and suffering of their persecuted ancestors, also because the memory of these experiences continues to disturb them, they are compelled to externalize their own inherited trauma, engaging in what psychoanalysts describe as the “labor of mourning” (*travail de deuil*). Nicolae I. Gaftoi, reflecting on his father’s persecution, noted that the tragedy continues to haunt him even after forty years. (Gaftoi, 2001, p. 102)

These sufferings, however, also represented a motivation for the descendants to overcome all the obstacles. The director Nicolae Mărgineanu (born 1938) confessed that the struggle of his father, university professor Nicolae Mărgineanu (1905–1980), imprisoned between 1948 and 1964, to survive the political prison led him and his sister to keep on fighting for surviving, for their success in life and eventually for bearing witness through their works:

“We faced many hardships, both me and my sister This situation we found ourselves in taught us to fight. We were young and seemed ready to overcome any difficulty. That’s how we formed our character”. (Petcu, 2017, p. 117)

This struggle and these sufferings also constituted the raw material and the inspiration for some of his films that deal with the issue of communist repression, the most well-known and awarded being the film, “Blessed be you, prison” (2002), an adaptation of the memoirs of Nicole Valéry Grossu, a former political prisoner and Romanian exile who published her memoirs in France (Grossu, 1976). Nicolae Mărgineanu directed several other films and documentaries pertaining to the issue of political persecutions such as: “Privește înainte cu mânie” (Look ahead with anger) (1993); “Amfiteatre și închisori: un psiholog în temnițele comuniste” (Amphitheaters and prisons: a psychologist in communist prisons) (2010); “Demascarea” (2011) (De-bunking); “Poarta Albă” (2014); “Cardinalul” (2019).

Another motivation for descendants to testify is the desire to prevent the recurrence of such traumatic events as those perpetrated by the communist regime. As Delia Hărduțiu reflected, she wishes that “the fear and terror experienced by me and my family... never happen again”. (Hărduțiu, 2002, p. 59) This imperative to bear witness as a safeguard against the repetition of suffering emerges as a recurring motif across the testimonies of both former political prisoners and their descendants (Dobre, 2019, p. 105).

The testimonies published in the cultural magazine, *Memoria. Revista gândirii arestate*, and analyzed in my study underscore a mode of remembering trauma guided by a sense of moral and ethical obligation. Descendants testify not only to convey the profound suffering endured by their ancestors but also to fulfill what they perceive as a duty of memory (*devoir de mémoire*) toward their families, their immediate social environments, their communities, and the nation at large. This act of remembrance is often framed by the desire to transmit values, atti-

tudes, and beliefs deemed superior to those promoted under the communist regime, and which they consider worthy of recognition and perpetuation (Dobre, 2021, p. 216).

For many descendants whose memoirs I have analysed, the act of testimony primarily consists in transmitting the experiences of their predecessors, the values that sustained them, and the consequences of their belonging to specific social groups. These narratives generally do not involve a creative or transformative engagement with memory; they are not reinterpreted or integrated into a broader, universally resonant discourse of trauma. An exception is the work of director Nicolae Mărgineanu, who, through the artistic rendering of repressive experiences, not only promotes this memory but also reinterprets it, thereby imparting a post-memorial dimension, in the sense conceptualized by Marianne Hirsch (Hirsch, 2012, p. 5).

Vectors of Memory and the Cultural Trauma of Communism

Although the number of descendants of former political prisoners and repressed individuals totals several hundred thousand, only a few of them have chosen to provide testimony or speak publicly about the persecutions endured by their parents, grandparents, or siblings. An even smaller subset has undertaken activities dedicated to preserving, promoting, or advancing the collective memory of communist repression.

Among the few who have embraced the preservation and transmission of their ancestors' memory as a conscious mission, I have selected two case studies for detailed description and analysis. This selection was guided by several factors: the public visibility and objectives pursued by these groups, the historical significance of the persecuted figures whose memory they carry forward, and the ongoing mission of these NGOs, which is directed not only toward the present but also toward shaping future remembrance.

Corneliu Coposu Foundation

Corneliu Coposu was born on May 20, 1914, in the village of Bobota, Sălaj County, into a family deeply rooted in the national life of Romania. He was the son of Valentin Coposu, a Greek Catholic priest who later became archpriest and a signatory of the Act of Union of December 1, 1918. Corneliu Coposu completed his primary education in his native village before continuing his studies at the "Sfântul Vasile

cel Mare” High School in Blaj. At just sixteen, he enrolled in the Faculty of Law in Cluj, graduating in 1934 and later pursuing doctoral studies. He earned his doctorate in law in 1937.

Alongside his academic achievements, Coposu was actively engaged in public life. He distinguished himself as a weightlifting champion and became involved in politics at a young age, founding the Cluj branch of the National Peasant Party (PNT) in 1933. Two years later, in 1935, he was elected president of the PNT Youth Union.

His political and professional career ended on July 14, 1947, when he was arrested. Sentenced to life imprisonment, Coposu endured a long ordeal through some of the most notorious prisons and labor camps of the communist regime, including Malmaison, Văcărești, Jilava, Craiova, Pitești, Ocnele Mari, Sighet, Râmnicu Sărat, Gherla, Aiud, Poarta Albă, and Capu Midia.

Released from prison in July 1962, he was immediately placed under compulsory residence in the Bărăgan Plain, in the village of Rubla, where he remained until April 1964. After his final release, Coposu lived under constant surveillance and worked in modest positions as a laborer and technician. (Corneliu Coposu, Wikipedia)

After the fall of communism, Corneliu Coposu returned to public life and re-founded the The National Peasant Party christian-democrat (PNT c.-d.), serving as its president until his death on November 11, 1995. In the post-communist period, he became a central moral and political figure, consistently promoting the memory of communist political violence and encouraging initiatives dedicated to former political prisoners, including his active support for the AFDPR. At the same time, he played a key role in consolidating Romania’s democratic system, striving to carry forward the democratic and Christian values he had inherited from his mentor, Iuliu Maniu – one of the founding fathers of Greater Romania, a multiple-term prime minister, and a leading democratic statesman – who died in 1953 in the political prison of Sighet. Through a life marked by integrity, endurance, and unwavering democratic conviction, Corneliu Coposu earned profound respect and lasting prestige among both political elites and the Romanian people.

The Corneliu Coposu Foundation was established on July 17, 1996 by Corneliu Coposu’s sisters, Rodica Coposu (1932–2025) and Flavia Bălescu Coposu (1924–2021). From its inception, the Foundation’s mission has been guided by Christian-democratic values and encompasses a range of objectives: “attracting young people (pupils and students) to the educational process of understanding communism in

Romania”; promoting a culture of memory and truth concerning the life and work of Corneliu Coposu; fostering the cultural, technical, scientific, political, and managerial development of youth (pupils, students, or recent graduates) through short- or medium-term scholarships; organizing symposia, conferences, debates, etc.; providing humanitarian aid; supporting the publication of books. Headquartered in Bucharest, the Foundation maintains regional branches in Aiud, Buzău, Oradea, and Zalău (Despre Fundație).

The Foundation’s principal activities include the organization of the “Senior Juniors” (the name is a reference to the nickname of Corneliu Coposu, the Senior) contest, essay competitions, charity galas and other philanthropic initiatives, debates, book launches, participation in exhibitions, and presentations delivered by members and supporters of the Foundation, as well as the restoration of historical and memorial monuments. Its efforts are supported by individuals and private associations, and the Foundation collaborates with a range of institutional and civic partners, including the Ministry of Culture, the Ministry of National Education, the University of Bucharest, the Institute for the Investigation of the Communist Crimes and the Memory of the Romanian Exile, the Civic Academy Foundation, the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, the Memoria Cultural Foundation, the 21 December Association, and the Hanns Seidel Foundation.

Members of the Foundation are actively engaged in promoting the memory of Corneliu Coposu and Christian-democratic values. Among them, Ion Andrei Gherasim has emerged as the most active, serving as executive president since 2016 and full president since 2025. He frames his commitment as a moral obligation to continue the Senior’s struggle for “the defense of the values and principles discovered by Maniu and relaunched by Corneliu Coposu”. (Gherasim, 2025, p. 48)

Ion Andrei Gherasim is not only a successor in terms of ethical and civic values but also a direct descendant of former political prisoners. Born in 1970 to Ileana Lia Lazăr Gherasim (1929–1998) and Ioan Gherasim (1921–1995), both imprisoned for political reasons, he is the grandson of Ilie Lazăr (1895–1976), a prominent political figure, a founding father of Greater Romania, and close associate of Corneliu Coposu, who endured seventeen years of communist incarceration. Gherasim’s life and work thus exemplify the convergence of familial memory, ethical inheritance, and organized preservation of historical trauma.

Elisabeta Rizea Association

The Elisabeta Rizea Association was founded in 2014 by her great-grandson, Bogdan Vârvoreanu, with the purpose of preserving and transmitting the memory of the woman whom Lucia Hossu Longin aptly described as “Viteaza din Nucșoara” (The Brave of Nucșoara) (Hossu Longin, 2012, p. 271). Described by Vârvoreanu as a “heartfelt project”, the initiative has been developed gradually through his personal efforts and with the support of a few friends. The association receives backing only from the mayor of Nucșoara and a handful of private organizations and generous individuals committed to truth and justice (Interview with Bogdan Vârvoreanu, 2023).

The principal mission of the association is the restoration of Elisabeta Rizea’s house and its transformation into a local museum and, eventually, a local cultural center. The site has already been incorporated into a memorial tourist circuit, promoted both online and offline, including information boards in the surrounding mountains and within the village (Interview with Bogdan Vârvoreanu, 2023). Nevertheless, the efforts of Rizea’s great-grandson confront persistent challenges that reflect broader issues in the public memory of repression: insufficient promotion, marginalization, and widespread ignorance.

Paradoxically, it was precisely the figure of Elisabeta Rizea from Nucșoara that brought broader attention to both the anti-communist resistance and the realities of communist repression, while simultaneously putting her village on the public map. Rizea became widely known through episode 13 of “Memorialul Durerii” (Memorial of Sorrow), a documentary about the political persecutions in Romania, broadcasted by the main public channel TVR1, which was dedicated to women in communist prisons. The program’s director, Lucia Hossu Longin, discovered this remarkable peasant woman from Nucșoara during a meeting with former political prisoners, who told her about women who had participated in the anti-communist armed resistance in the Făgăraș Mountains. Hossu Longin subsequently traced and interviewed Elisabeta Rizea, producing an episode of her documentary that was broadcast on July 29, 1992. The episode immediately brought Rizea into the public eye, prompting an outpouring of letters of support and encouragement from across the country and around the world, addressed both to TVR and directly to the village of Nucșoara (Dobre, 2006).

The *Memorialul Durerii* brought Elisabeta Rizea unexpected recognition. A year later, a book recounting her life story was published. In 1993, *Povestea Elisabeta Rizea din Nucșoara* was released by Humanitas publishing house and launched in the heroine's own village, Nucșoara (Nicolau, Nițu, 1993).

Elisabeta Rizea was born on June 28, 1912, in the commune of Domnești, Muscel County. At the age of eighteen, she married Gheorghe Rizea, a peasant from Nucșoara, where they subsequently settled. The establishment of the communist regime abruptly disrupted the Rizea family's peaceful and industrious life, dispossessing them of their land and property. Yet, what most profoundly fueled Elisabeta Rizea's opposition to communism was not the expropriation of material assets, but the violent death of her uncle, Gheorghe Șuța. He embodied the figure of the small-scale entrepreneur and intellectual within the Romanian village. When the communists took power, many others whose positions within the villages were similar faced analogous persecution. Targeted, humiliated, and even assassinated, some chose to resist by taking to the mountains where they organized an anti-communist armed resistance. One such resistance group emerged in Nucșoara in 1949, "The Haiduks of Muscel", which was actively supported by Elisabeta Rizea and her husband, Gheorghe Rizea (Dobre, 2006, p. 247).

Gheorghe Rizea was eventually arrested by local Militia, beaten up but released. Fearing surveillance and imprisonment, he also sought refuge in the mountains. Elisabeta Rizea remained in the village, assisting, alongside other women, those in hiding. In 1950, she was arrested by the Securitate and subjected to severe torture in an effort to force her to reveal the hiding places of the anti-communist fighters. Demonstrating remarkable resilience, she refused to disclose any information, and was subsequently imprisoned in Pitești penitentiary. The Bucharest Military Tribunal sentenced her to six years' detention, which she served in Jilava and Mislea. Upon her release in 1956, she returned to Nucșoara and continued aiding the resistance fighters for two more years, until the group was betrayed and apprehended in May 1958. She was arrested again, interrogated, tortured, and ultimately sentenced to twenty-five years of hard labor (Dobre, 2023, p. 190).

After her and her husband's release in 1964, when all the political prisoners were set free, they returned to Nucșoara, where they lived until the fall of Communism in december 1989. After the fall of the regime, Elisabeta Rizea remained publicly engaged in opposing the legacy of communism and its political successors.

The disclosure of her heroism brought both admiration and support, as well as hostility and envy from some of her neighbours. She welcomed into her home both the last King of Romania, Mihai I (1921–2017), and the then president of Romania, Emil Constantinescu (born 1939). She also took part in various electoral meetings of opposition forces in 1992 and 1996 and gave numerous interviews to the press. Until the end of her life, she remained a widely respected yet controversial figure (Dobre, 2004, p. 80).

Her death on October 5, 2003, brought Elisabeta Rizea once again to national attention. Although only representatives of the royal household and former political prisoners attended her funeral, with the neo-communist government of Romania largely ignoring her passing, she nevertheless received notable recognition, with all major Romanian newspapers dedicating at least brief coverage to her life and legacy (Dobre, 2023, p. 191).

Over time, the memory of Elisabeta Rizea's faded away. Although her presence in history textbooks since 1999 represents an institutionalized form of remembrance, this inclusion functions primarily as a symbolic marker rather than an engaging realm of memory (*lieu de mémoire*). In the absence of sustained social practices that would continually renew her symbolism, her memory seems to become detached from contemporary public interest. Against this backdrop, the initiatives undertaken by her grandson through the Association can be understood as an attempt to transform her legacy into an active *lieu de mémoire*, re-embedding it within commemorative practices meant to counteract the gradual erosion of collective remembrance.

Conclusions

Communism constitutes a trauma for those who were directly persecuted and for their descendants. For these individuals, the legacy of repression manifests in forms of post-traumatic stress, as this study demonstrates, with the majority of descendants refraining from speaking about experiences that profoundly shaped and disrupted their families. Among the descendants, those most willing to testify were either direct witnesses of persecution, who suffered personally from it, or individuals actively engaged in efforts to preserve and transmit the memory of repression.

The testimonies of descendants published in the magazine, *Memoria. Revista gândirii arestate*, reveal multiple overlapping motivations. Many speak out of a sense of moral obligation, fulfilling what

psychoanalysts term the “labor of mourning” (*travail de deuil*), externalizing trauma that continues to haunt them decades after the events. Others are driven by a desire to prevent the recurrence of such suffering, framing their testimony as a safeguard against the repetition of fear and terror. Some aim to raise public awareness and honor their ancestors’ sacrifices as acts of patriotic and ethical commitment, emphasizing the enduring relevance of the values and principles upheld by those persecuted. These narratives highlight the pride descendants feel in parents who, even under extreme hardship, retained their humanity, resisted compromise, and assisted others subjected to repression.

Yet, most descendants’ testimony is primarily a transmission of inherited experience rather than a creative or transformative engagement with memory. Their narratives recount the persecution endured by their ancestors, the values that sustained them, and the consequences of belonging to specific social groups. These memories are largely descriptive, aiming to preserve the factual and ethical dimensions of ancestral experience rather than integrating them into a broader, interpretive discourse of trauma.

These descendants do not constitute a post-memorial generation in the sense articulated by Marianne Hirsch. Their generally limited affective, creative, and emotional engagement in the transmission of traumatic memory precludes their classification in such strict terms. Yet they do form a distinct “generation of memory”, whose testimony and commemorative activity play an important role in processes of memorializing communism within the Romanian public sphere.

Although several hundred thousand descendants of former political prisoners survived communism, only a few hundred have provided testimony or spoken publicly about the persecutions of their parents, grandparents, or siblings. An even smaller number have undertaken activities aimed at preserving, promoting, or transmitting the collective memory of communist repression. This limited engagement can be attributed to factors including post-traumatic stress, the lack of acknowledgment of the communist repression as a cultural trauma, the underdevelopment of civic consciousness as regards the communist political violence, and the increasing focus on technological and professional life in contemporary society.

Among the descendants who have actively embraced the preservation of memory as a conscious mission, some have institutionalized their efforts through foundations and associations. The Foundation ded-

icated to Corneliu Coposu, for instance, pursues a broad mission: attracting youth to the study of communism in Romania, promoting a culture of memory and truth regarding Coposu's life and work, and fostering the educational and professional development of young people. By contrast, the Elisabeta Rizea Association has adopted a more focused objective, aiming primarily to preserve the memory of this heroic figure of the anti-communist resistance while also transforming her legacy into a local cultural and memorial attraction.

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