Linköping University

On Maps, Abused Virgins and Nations: Anti-Communist Memorial Museums in Hungary and Romania

Gabriela Nicolescu Cristea

cristea.gabriela@gmail.com

In this paper I compare two museums in Hungary and Romania which exhibit communism or better say, anti-communism, a subject with a strong importance for defining national identity in Eastern European countries. *House of Terror Museum* in Budapest, Hungary and *The Memorial of The Victims of Communism and of the Resistance in Sighetul Marmatiei*, Romania are two memorial museums which "represent" the victimized and suffering nations –presented to the nowadays young generation as being abused virgins of their political past context- during communist times. Under this victimizatory discourse one can difficultly grab an essentialized fascist version of the past: same spots of terror and death for both terror regimes, fascism and communism became places of commemoration only for the victims of one: namely communism.

This work in-progress focuses mainly on a material-cultural analysis of maps and objects in exhibition rooms, images and texts presented on museums' web-sites. Since in the last hundred years, these two neighbour countries debated a lot on territories, population and history, the comparison between the two strong narrations on the recent pasts inside these two memorial-museums, is revelatory on the way "illusionary" national identities are discursively staged and narrativized. Underneath the anti-communist victimizatory narrative in these two eastern European Countries one can discover fragmented parts of the Holocaust.

Eighteen years ago, in 1989, Eastern European countries confronted themselves with a revolution: from communism to post-communism. The change was perceived as a total rupture, even if later writers tried to call it 'transition' or 'transformation' (Burawoy, 4) to imply a certain kind of continuity between 'before' and 'after' ('89). Laurent Theis affirms in "Guizot et les institutions de mémoire" (Nora, 575) that more than ever the knowledge of the past seems to reinforce the uncertain present in the times of revolutions. What a community chooses to remember decides on its present order, or to put it in Paul Connerton terms, "our images of the past commonly serve to legitimate the present social order. (…)" (Connerton, 3)

In my presentation I will analyze how the memory of the recent communist past is constructed in two countries (Romania and Hungary) by focusing on museums about the communist past, opened after '89.) I am also interested to see what kind of present social order these images of the past imply. My comparative study will include *The Memorial of the Victims of Communism and Resistance* in Sighetul Marmatiei and *The House of Terror* memorial museum in Budapest.

Museums that exhibit communism in Eastern European countries are sites who not necessarily have been produced because of a collective memory, but mostly are the producers of certain organizations in the creation of such a memory or "collective self consciousness" to be formed. (Shils apud Ames, 111) The museums, in general, play a very important role in the "construction of consciousness" (Bourdieu & Haacke, 98), because they are conceptualized as public services and "educational" centers (Ames, 26). In the case I am presenting now, their role is also increased by the fact that they are the most important institutions to deal with this rupture/ from Communism to post-communism in these two countries. Considering them formatters rather than simply representations of public opinion about a controversial past makes the discourses inside them enter the political arena.

As I mentioned in the printed materials, and as it can be obvious from the names: "House of Terror" in Budapest and "The Memorial of the Victims of Communism and of the Resistance" in Sighetul Marmației, are memorial-museums of the victims of communism, and consequently exhibit **anti**-communist discourses.

"House of Terror" (photo 1, next page) is located in Budapest in a three storey painted in grey building, where **Fascist** and Communist regimes had their headquarters. The visitor can see a huge black metal frame that isolate the house from the adjacent palaces. When the sun is at noon its light forms the shadow of the word TERROR on the façade. He or her has to push a button and only afterwards open a load iron huge door and enter a corridor painted in black and red (slide). The music terrifies senses. He/her has to climb two floors surrounded by huge communist and fascist statues. If one looks down can see an inner court painted with black and white faces of victims. Down on earth a huge Soviet tank lies. A strong smell of burden oil can be felt. The first exhibition room is the "Double Occupation Room." Here, **on a big screen is projected the map of Greater Hungary** (in its glorious times, part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire) **conquered and abused by Fascist and Soviet troops.**

The introductory text on House of Terror web-site explains: "Hungary emerged from World War I on **a losing side**. Once part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire (slide), she had possessed a territory larger than Italy or England. However, under the terms of the Treaty of Trianon which settled the war, the empire was carved up, reducing its territory by two-thirds… At that time the focus of politics was the implementation of a peaceful territorial revision… In the mid 1930s, Hungary found itself in the cross fire of an increasingly aggressive Nazi regime in Germany as well as a menacing and powerful Soviet Union. First allies then enemies, The Nazi and Soviet dictatorship began a life-and-death fight to create a new European system of client and subordinated states. **There was no room for an independent Hungary**." (Rev, 285)
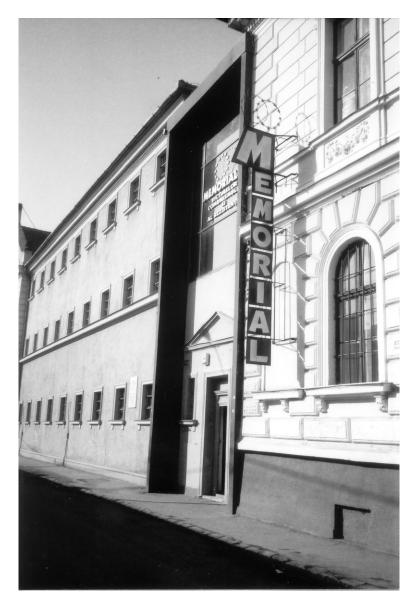
I will make a text-analysis because I consider that museums' web sites can be very important tools for understanding the discourse inside the museums. One can see more easily when something is implied/hidden/unclear in a text, rather than in a museums-exhibition.

"After the outbreak of WW II, Hungary made desperate attempts to maintain its fragile independence and democracy and maneuvered to prevent the worst: Nazi (sic!) occupation. (…) "The text does not say that between the 1940 and 1946 parts of the lost territories were re conquered because of the political and military alliance that Hungary signed with German Arrow Cross regime. North Transilvania and parts of Ukraina became again components of Hungary[1].

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1   During the Second World War, the government of Hungary allied itself with Nazi Germany in exchange for assurances that Greater Hungary's borders would be restored. This goal was partially achieved when Hungary expanded its borders into Czechoslovakia, Romania and Yugoslavia at the outset of the war. However, after 1947 the same territories were given back to the same countries, because of the interests and intervention of the Communist Russian Party.

The building (photo 2) where the most important Romanian museum that deals with Communism / Anti-Communism is located as well in a place of suffering. It used to be a major political prison but not in the center of Bucharest/ as the other one is in the centre of Budapest, but in Sighetul Marmației – a little town in Maramures, in the very north of the country, 2 kilometers from the northern border with Ukraine, the previous USSR border and also very closed to the actual Hungarian border.

The web site explains: "**The building was constructed in 1897 [while Sighet was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire]**, as a common prison. **After 1945** the repatriation of former prisoners and **deported persons** from the Soviet Union was done through Sighet. In August 1948 it became a place of imprisonment for a group of students, pupils and peasants from Maramures. On 5 and 6 may 1950 over one hundred dignitaries from the whole country were brought to the Sighet penitentiary some of them convicted to heavy punishments, others not even judged."[2]

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2   Official museum site: http://www.memorialsighet.ro/en/istoric_cladire_sighet.asp, accessed 8th of January 2008.

The prison operated between May 1950 and July 1955 as an extermination centre for the political, military, intellectual, religious, economic and administrative **leaders of interwar Romania.** After 1955 it was transformed again into a common prison. all the political prisoners alive being transferred to other places of detention in the country: Pitesti, Aiud, Gherla (harta).. In 1970s it was entirely emptied.

One could wonder why the curators of the museum chose the most impossible/far away place to exhibit anti-communism. Who are the visitors of this museum? The first shred of explanation can be found out in the very first room of the museum: the Maps Room. Here one can see seven maps of nowadays boundaries of Romanian[3] state, with Transylvania as a gained territory after Greater Hungary was defeated, but also without Bessarabia, and north of Bucovina that were lost. On the walls, over 230 places of imprisonment, forced labor as well as psychiatric institutions with a political character, places where fights and executions took place, and common graves are marked by crosses on a large map of the country. Six smaller maps present in detail each of these categories. On the ground, under the big map, there is a cluster of the barbed wire used in constructing prison fences. People who were imprisoned, suffered and some of them died were the leaders of National Liberal Party and National Peasant Party of Interwar Romania (Gheorghe Bratianu and Iuliu Maniu are the most well known names). They are considered the "fathers" of Romanian national state, because they fought for the unification of Walachia, Moldavia and Transylvania under the same name, and under their rule Greater Romania including Bessarabia became a political reality. That is why the "Maps Room" constitute a symbol of the success (Transylvania is nowadays under the rule of Romanian state) but also a symbol of lost (Bessarabia and north Bucovina are not any more Romanian territories – and this is because of the Soviet policy, is believed).

Siget is in the centre of Europe it is said on the museum site. Sighet is a Roumanian site because heroes of Romanian Nations died. And it affirms national ideas and values in a symbolical site, at only two kilometers from the Ukrainian border and five from Hungarian one.

On the front page of the museum site it is said that the "memorial" is formed from the Museum and…the International Center for Studies about Communism. This center organizes summer schools for "teenagers." "Fortunately [says the site] it was also possible for pupils from outside the borders of Romania to participate: The newspapers from Chisinau [Republic of Moldavia] and Cernauti [Ukraine] published the announcement (…) The meeting of the teenagers from three countries (Romania, Moldova and Ukraina) was a living image of Romania in its ethnical integrity, as Adrian Marino will be writing lately."[4]

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The website of House of Terror says: "Whoever has visited Budapest before, knows that one of the most beautiful boulevards in the capital is Andrassy Boulevard. (…) The Neo-Renaissance building at 60 Andrassy Boulevard was designed by Adolf Feszty in 1880. It is also notable that the twentieth-century terror regimes, the Nazis and Communists, both decided on a villa located on this boulevard for their executioners' headquarters. The fact that

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3   Nowadays Romania was formed from the unification of Walachia, Moldavia and Transylvania in 1918. Greater Romania was the way Romanian state was named in-between the two World Wars. In that moment it had the nowadays territories plus the north of Bucovina (now Ukrainian territory), the south of Cadrilater (now part of Bulgaria) and Bessarabia (now the independent Republic of Moldavia), which in 1946 became part of USSR.

4   Official museum site: http://www.memorialsighet.ro/en/scoala_de_vara.asp, accessed 15th of February 2008

both regimes chose 60 Andrassy Boulevard as the scene of torture and interrogation, speaks for itself." This was the first paragraph of the introduction to "House of Terror" on the web on January 2002, before its opening.

The building does not speak for itself. Only people know to tell one or another story. The site does not mention that the building was owned by a Jewish family, which, in 1931, "decided to bequeath the family properties, including this building, to the Jewish Community of Budapest, ironically, with the aim of using parts of the proceedings for a Jewish Museum." (Keresztessy 2002) The site continues: "During World War II **Hungary found itself in the middle of the crossfire between the Nazi and Communist dictatorships**. On March 19, 1944, the Nazis occupied Hungary and raised the representatives of the extreme-right, unconditionally faithful to them, into power. The new, collaborating Hungarian government **did not guard the life of its citizens with Jewish origin any more."**

"In fifty-six days, beginning with May 15, according to German documents – 437,402 Jews were deported by 147 trains, with the exeption of fifteen thousand, to Auschwitz."

Historical statements says Istvan Rev, paraphrasing Ian Hacking, "are words in their sites. Sites include sentences, uttered or transcribed, always in a larger site of neighborhood, institution, authority, language." (Rev apud Hacking, p278). "Linguistically it would have been possible for Hungary to fight against both the Nazis and the Communists; it would have been imaginable – in a linguistic sense, outside the frame of Hungarian history – for Hungary not to have been Germany's last and one of its first allies." (Rev, 284) It is impossible, says Istvan Rev that less than 200 German occupiers to manage to grab so many people in such a short period of time. The site does not mention that anti-Jewish legislation existed in Hungary from the early 1920s onward and that Hungary was not necessarily a victim of the German occupation but one of its firs and last allies.

"After the German invasion, the short and blood-thirsty Arrow-Cross rule began… In 1945 Hungary was brought under the sway of the new conqueror, The Soviet Union. The Hungarian Communists who arrived in the Soviet tanks, in contrast to the short-lived Arrow-Cross rule, settled down for the long run. One of their first acts was to take over 60 Andrassy Boulevard, in order to signal to everybody that the moment of revenge has arrived. But that moment lasted but for very long painful years… The museum wants to become a memorial dedicated to all those people who fell victim either to Arrow-Cross terror, which lasted for a few months, or to the decades long Communist rule."

Because the fascist regime was short, and the communist one, very long, the House of Terror web site explains why only two and a half rooms are dedicated to fascism and all the others 25, dedicated to communist terror. That is why many of the visitors consider that this museum deals only with communist terror and that the comparison with fascism is used only to potentate the atrocities of communism. ("Changing clothes," "Resettlement and deportation," "Every day life," "Galery of victimizers," "Hall of tears" - the description of all the others rooms in the museum).

At the end of the second floor is a room dedicated to religion and its forms of resistance. A huge white cross is painted on the ground. From here, from the Heaven, the visitor is forced to wait a lift/ an elevator with glass walls which descends/ goes down, to continue its visit into the under-ground floor. Four to six people can enter inside of it and listen to an old police officer describing for three entire minutes how man can be killed. Three minutes of minute description are enough to begin and to end this process. At the end of this trajectory, the underground rooms open in front of the visitor. One can fell the smell of the burden oil again. It bleeds from the Soviet tank.

One interviewee: "Going downstairs, going into the cellars, and the cave I mean the cellars and the prison where they tortured people in different ways: electric shocks, beating them, hanging them just killing them… it was awful"

Second interviewee: "You carry with you certain images, and you do not know any more which is Communist and which is Nazi."

Third interviewee: "G-There was something that you did not like? A-I missed something (…) it didn't take me with it, it was like a weight…*I wanted to be more horrified, more impressed*. (…)….I wanted a reality…G-…to be more interactive…?!A-*downstairs it was horrible, yes, but upstairs I wanted more*. Maybe because I visited it for the first time and I didn't read everything *and I was shocked but not so shocked as I thought to be…*"

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The prisons and the cells under the ground are the most impressive spot of the museum. Because they are horrible (as a terror can be) are conceived to be the expected reality. It is nociable that exactly these rooms are a huge muzeographical invention, based on an entire mythology of the underground tunnels under the city[5]. On a small peace of plastic is written that these underground cells are "reconstituted." Paradoxically, the web site says that the basements were turned into clubs for the Communist Youth Organization. The communist secret service left the building in 1956. So the terror did not last up to the last Soviet soldier…

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After the Maps Room, in Sighet Memorial Museum the first exhibition-cell is called Faked Elections. It exhibits a double-bottomed wooden box where votes are thrown. It is not an original artifact, but it speaks about how elections were faked. After it, the "re in acted" cell where Iuliu Maniu died. In this rooms only those objects that were "originally" found were exhibited (the iron beds, the heating installation, sometimes the bed-cover, some iron pot where the prisoner received water).

In the room Repression against the Church, among documents testifying to the repression of Orthodox, Greek and Roman Catholic Churches, a big white cross is painted on the floor, with handcuffs and some prison-like stripped clothes thrown on it. The room Collectivization: Repression and Resistance exhibits the terror and impoverishment that peasants suffered during the thirteen years of the collectivization process. It is stated here that 96% of the agricultural area of the country and 3,201,000 families were brought into collectivist farms. On the front wall there is a map of Romania and in the middle of the room a permanently green piece of turf. This last installation "stands for both the land, alive and free, and for the grave of those who sacrificed themselves for it."[6]

Thick plastic panels with texts and images are on the walls of other rooms (e.g. Workers' Movements in the Jiu Valley and Brasov). In the room "Golden Era or Communist Kitsch" the viewer will find two statues representing Nicolae Ceauşescu and his wife. Other objects represent Ceauşescu's cult of personality: portraits and clothes which Ceauşescu used to wear on specific special occasions. In 2004 the voice of Ceausescu giving speeches could be heard throughout the prison: as soon as the visitor entered the room, the sensors started the audiotape. The second soundtrack in the museum was played in the *Securitate* room evoking

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5   Beginning with 1950s in Budapest an entire mythology of hidden underground tunnels flourished. It was many years believed that in these tunnels revolutionaries were hidden. The communist state sustained this mythology for many years. When The House of Terror Museum opened in 2002, visitors were pleased to knee and listen to the message of the people that lived in the underground. See "Underground" in retroactive Justice, Istvan Rev.

6   http://www.memorialsighet.ro/en/sala.asp?id, accessed 10th of January 2007.

sounds and voices during the interrogations.[7] **The museum exhibits a teleological understanding of the communist regime: from the original sin, namely the forged elections, the subsequent crimes of repression and terror followed logically up to Ceasusescu's eventual conceited cult of power, ending in the emergence of resistance and victory of anti-communism.** The Museum has special exhibition rooms dedicated to anti-communist movements in Eastern Europe: the revolution in 1956 in Hungary, the Prague Spring, Charta 77, Solidarity, the Velvet Revolution (photo 3).

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Few people know that Sighet was one of the most important cities in Eastern Europe before 1944 where the majority of population was Jewish. Elie Wiesel, the famous writer who wan the Nobel prize was born here. In 1944, the Hungarian Fascist Troupes helped by the Arrow Cross officers took 12.000 people, in the first day of Jewish Easter, and put them in two ghettoes in the city. Two months after, four trains, took them to Auschwitz. If in 1944 here were 18 synagogues, nowadays only one remained.

   The interwar Romanian politics was very nationalistic and anti-semite, as the Hungarian one. Most of the interwar leaders imprisoned in Sighet were responsible for the glorious unification of Romania, but also for the anti-semite laws. Leon Volovici in "Nationalist Ideology and Anti-Semitism. The case of Romanian Intellectuals in the 30s" writes: "National Liberal Party which had remained the most powerful Romanian political party advocated and applied a nationalist policy of economic protectionism that contained an element of moderate anti-Semitism." (Volovici, 52) "Even more profascist and anti-Semitic was the National Christian Party. "Romania had to be totally or partially "disburdened" or "disinfected" of Jews. Romanian Jews should be colonized in Palestine or anywhere else in the world." Supporters of this thesis included also professor Gheorge Bratianu, the president of the

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7   We do not know if the voices were authentic or just "mise en scene."

national Liberal Party. The most ardent anti semit Romanian political movement in the interwar period was Iron Guard. They promoted an anti-semit new idea: that the new threat of Jewish threat was Bolshevism. "When I say communist, I mean yid." (Volovici apud Codreanu, 64)

"In an effort to present a more indigenous image, some Jewish party members took Romanian cover names, among them Ion Roitman (Chisinevschi), Leonte rautu (Lev Oigenstein) and Valter Roman (Ernst Neulander)" (Deletant, 20)

Why does the web site of the Sighet museum presents the history of the prison jumping from 1897 to 1945. What happened in-between?

On the official site of the Sighet city one can enter and read the history of the town. Absolutely nothing is mentioned about the Jewish community who lived here for several hundred years and was deported from here directly to Auschvitz. The deportation of Jews from Transylvania is not the Romania's problem, but Hungary's, because north Transylvania was part of the Hungarian state for those 6 years. And the deportation of Jews from Bessarabia, is not Romania's problem, because after the WWII, Soviet Troupes occupied Bessarabia, and nowadays it is not any more Romanian territory.

One plays the maps and the stories of history as he/she desires.

Part of the Memorial Museum is also the Cemetery of the Memorial, which is called the Cemetery of the Poor. It is situated outside the city, two and a half kilometers away, towards the border (see map). Since the prisoners' graves could not be identified among the thousands of graves prior and subsequent to the 1950s, a landscape project was developed. On the 14,000 m2 area of the cemetery, **the outline of the whole country was drawn by planting mainly coniferous trees. "The idea is that, in this way, the country keeps its martyrs in its arms and mourns them through the repeated generations of vegetation.** From a viewing point which will be placed on a raised area, actually on the bank of Tisza (the current frontier with Ukraine) visitors to the Memorial will be able to see this symbolic drawing more and more distinctly as nature perfects the project."[8]

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The mourning of the victims of communism in Hungary and Romania stays always under the sign of the cross[9]. When the room of Tears was opened in House of Terror only crosses with candles were presented. After some critics, some Moses stars appeared on some crosses. The memorial, and the Space of Meditation and Prayer in Sighet Memorial Museum were erected in the yard of the famous political prison. [10] Anti-semmitism in interwar Romania was always related with Christianity.

A true museum is a coercive mseum says Donna Haraway.

"Having survived two terror regimes, it was felt that the time had come for Hungary to

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8   http://www.memorialsighet.ro/en/istoric_muzeu_memorial.asp, accessed 20th of December 2006.

9   About the symbolism of the cross in Romanian anti-communist museums, see "Raising the Cross. Exorcising Romania's Communist Past in Museums, Memorials and Monuments" (co-authored) in "*Past for the eyes*", ed. Sarkisova, Oksana and Peter Apor. Central European University Press, Budapest, 2007.

10   The Space of Meditation and Prayer was built by the architect Radu Mihailescu, in a modernized antique style (referring to the Greek *tholos* and the Christian catacomb). On the walls there were engraved in smoky andesite the names of almost 8,000 people who died in prisons, camps and deportation places throughout Romania. Extremely meticulous, the operation of gathering the names of the dead took ten years of work within the International Center for Studies about Communism, yet the figure is far lower than the total number of victims of communist repression. Most of the names were established by Cicerone Ionitoiu and the late Eugen Sahan, both historians by vocation and former political prisoners.

erect a fitting memorial to the victims, and at the same time to present a picture of what life was like for Hungarians in those times,"

"When justice does not succeed in being a form of memory, memory itself can be a form of justice"ii Ana Blandiana, the president of Civic Alliance sustains, on the front page of the Sighet's museum site.

The restoration process of the Sighet prison began in 1994. Private funds helped this process[11]. The creation of what was called *The Memorial-Museum of the Victims of Communism and of Resistance* was the most important enterprise of the *Civic Academy Foundation. Civic Academy* took birth in June 1990, at the anticommunist manifestation in Piata Univeristatii, to contest the post communist elections of 1990. Their position remained the same, years after. was involved was the march against Ion Iliescu and FSN in june 1990. Since then it founded a party in 1991, and entered in a coalition with the so called "historical parties" PNTCD, PNL who ruled before the instauration of Communism in Romania, and who fought for involving Transylvania in the Romanian borders, after 1918. This coalition managed to gain the elections in 1996.

In 1997 the Government funded the final stages of the restoration process - the roof was repaired, the interior painted white - and "in 1998, the Council of Europe designated the Sighet Memorial as one of the main memorial sites of the continent, alongside the Auschwitz Museum and the Peace Memorial in Normandy."[12] Consequently, the Sighet Memorial, was funded from Governmental founds in 1997. In 2006, some of Civic Academy Foundation's members became important contributors to the Report of the Presidential Commission for the Analysis of Communist Dictatorship in Romania. It is only recently that the Civic Academy Foundation's effort has become part of the mainstream discourse in Romanian public life, since before 2006 its visual discourse was totally alien to Romanian society at large.[13] Immediately after this moment, Traian Basescu the actual president of Romania, visited the museum.

"With the intention of turning it into a museum, the building in Andrassy avenue was bought by the *Foundation for the Research of History and Society in Central and Eastern Europe* in 2000. The museum opened on February 24, 2002, the official day of commemoration of the victims of communism. Not at all incidentally, it was also the time of the campaign for the general elections of 2002.

(…)The opening of the House of Terror can be seen as part of the election campaign of the then in power conservative party, FIDESZ. This argument can be supported by the fact that the museum's opening ceremony was turned into a political rally with not very subtle party political references in Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's opening speech. Furthermore, the crowd gathering for the opening ceremony was joined by members of the extreme right MIÉP (Hungarian Justice and Life Party), arriving from a demonstration against the socialist party. The opening ceremony was, thus, a thoroughly political event, and this, irrespective of the museum's quality, turned visiting the museum

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11   An English businessman of Romanian origin, Mr. Misu Carciog, paid all the costs of the restoration and the architectural plans.

12   Official museum site: http://www.memorialsighet.ro/en/istoric_muzeu_memorial.asp, accessed 20th of December 2006.

13   On January 14 th2007, one month after Romania's president, Traian Băsescu pronounced his discourse in the Parliament on the crimes of the Romanian Communist regime, he visited for the first time the Sighet Memorial Museum. He declared for television that, now he visited this Memorial he is more convinced he is right in sustaining the efforts for an encyclopedia and a manual about communism to be published in Romania. Retrieved from Realitatea TV, 9. p.m news journal, ,14th of January 2007.

into a political statement, too, for many Hungarians." (Szakács)

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