



National Museums in Romania

Simina Bădică

Summary

The idea of a Romanian National Museum is contemporary to the creation of the Romanian national state and the birth of Romanian museology, yet there are several museums that made claims on representing the Romanian nation at different moments in its history, with no single museum being recognized as ‘the’ national museum. Four major museums are included in this report insofar as they make or made strong statements on the national issue throughout the last two centuries: the National History Museum of Romania, the Romanian Peasant National Museum (with its predecessor the *Carol I* National Museum), the disappeared History Museum of the Romanian Communist Party and the recent Sighet Memorial-Museum to the Victims of Communism and to the Resistance.

The report establishes a tentative time frame for the content and meaning of ‘national museum’ in different moments of time over the last two centuries. Each of the chosen museums more or less exemplifies these tendencies in exhibiting the national idea. Starting with the national “cabinet of curiosities“ of the nineteenth century, the report points to the moment of change towards the ethnographical national museum and exhibiting national folk art in the first half of the twentieth century. The Communist takeover is a major fracture in museum history, as the ‘national’ tag is replaced with the ‘central’. The report analyzes the strong centralisation of Romanian museums during Communism, and the surprising return of nationalism in museums of the 1970s and 1980s. Post-Communist museums are characterized by the dilemmas of establishing an anticommunist national identity and the unexpected success of the first Romanian private (civil society) museum.

Special attention is given to the history of one building, designed to be ‘The’ Romanian National Museum, finally hosting several museums whose history is thus intertwined. This report sheds light not only on the stories museums display but also the hidden stories behind exhibiting and collecting, the personalities that shaped their identity, their silences, traumas and unsolved dilemmas.

Summary table, Romania

Name	Inaugurated	Initiated	Actors	Ownership	Type	Values	Temporal reach	Style Location
National History Museum of Romania	1864 1972	1834	Aristocratic initiative (1864), state initiative (1972)	State	Archaeology, History	Universal turned into territorial values	Pre-History to present	Existing building in classical style, central location, Bucharest.
National Museum, <i>Carol I</i> Romanian Peasant National Museumß	1930 (Carol I) 1993 (RPNM)	1906 (Carol I) 1990 (RPNM)	Personal initiative (1906, Al. Tzigara-Samurcas), state initiative (1990)	State	Ethnography	Territorial, peasant art as national art	Medieval to present	Building designed in national style (neo-Romanian) and in central location, Bucharest.
History Museum of the Romanian Communist Party	1953	1948	Romanian Worker's Party	State	History	History of Communism, National History from 1967	Antiquity to present	Existing building in national style, central location, Bucharest.
Sighet Memorial-Museum to the Victims of Communism and to the Resistance	1997	1993	Civil society	Private, Civil Society	History	Territorial values	1945-1989	Reconstructed former political prison, marginal location outside Bucharest.

Introduction: Making of the Romanian nation state

According to official statistics, Romania currently has 25 national museums (CIMEC, 2010) of very diverse themes, from history to geology, from contemporary art to the oil industry and even fire-fighters' history. Most of these museums acquired the national tag only recently, after 1990, as it became financially more profitable to be a national museum: from increased income for the personnel to better funding for museum activities. The idea, however, of a Romanian National Museum is as old as the Romanian state and museology, as there are several museums that made claims on representing the Romanian nation at different moments in its tormented history.

Both the Romanian state and Romanian nation are young entities. Constructed in the nineteenth century, they were based on the European model and translated the urge to transform Eastern "backwardness" into Western "civilization." The road to Europe included a big, strong nation united in a single nation-state, testifying to a single national history, national identity and national culture (see Hitchins 1996).

Two of the Romanian Principalities were united in 1859 and, already in 1864, a German prince, Carol I Sigmaringen, was proclaimed prince of the United Romanian Principalities. This was meant to induce political legitimacy to the new state and bring about the modernization long sought by Romanian Western-minded aristocracy. Indeed, Carol I lived up to his destiny and his input was crucial in laying the foundational stone for many modern institutions, among them the Romanian National Museum.

After gaining independence in 1871 from the dying Ottoman Empire, Romania became a kingdom and Carol I a king in 1881. New territories were added to the new state in 1913 and, most importantly, in 1918, with Transylvania, Bessarabia and Bukowina collectively making up what became known as Great Romania. Although state propaganda claimed the new territories were merely a reunification of 'Romanian lands', the percentage of minorities in Great Romania reached 25%. Accordingly, the national discourse grew in intensity, bringing about more state support for nation-building institutions.

Great Romania was dismantled in 1940, on the eve of the Second World War and was never to become so 'great' again; the Red Army entered Romanian territory in 1944 and in a few years, the Communist regime was fully established in the country. The symbolic moment of this is December 30th 1947 when the monarchy was abolished and the Romanian Popular Republic proclaimed. The Romanian nation was again under scrutiny, this time from the supposedly internationalist, Soviet perspective. For nearly two decades, the word 'national' became a bad word, only to be redeemed in the last two decades of Romanian Communism, during Ceausescu's national Communism.

The fall of Communism in 1989 required redefining, once again, the Romanian nation. The challenges of this process came, on the one hand from Ceausescu's kitsch but successful nationalism and the desire to depart from that variant of national identity and, on the other hand, from the difficult mission of including the Communist past into a coherent story of the nation. These challenges in redefining the nation can be traced in the story of Romanian museums, especially in the two museums created in the 1990s, the Romanian Peasant Museum and the Sighet Memorial-Museum to the Victims of Communism and to the Resistance.

Historiographical remarks on sources

The subject of Romanian national museums has not gathered the interest of either historians or museographers, except for those periods when national museums were actually built: late nineteenth/ early twentieth century and the last two decades of Romanian Socialism (1970s and 1980s). The texts produced with this concern in mind can only be considered primary sources as they polemically deal with the concept in a specific historical context. This is the case with the texts published by Alexandru Tzigara-Samurcas, the first director of the National Art Museum (Tzigara-Samurcas 1936) or manuals and histories of museography published in Socialist Romania (Florescu 1982, Nicolescu 1979).

In the latter, the story of Romanian museums is generally told in a progressive, positivist manner, as if a straight line connects the first random collections of nineteenth century boyars with, for example, the contemporary National History Museum. The general idea conveyed by this kind of history is that the collections grew organically around a central idea, not necessarily national, no matter the political and historical context. The exhibitions are generally disregarded in these historical accounts, the stress being on the collections and sometimes the building (Cleja Stoicescu 1982, Florescu 1982, Opris 1994). The only historical accepted break in the progressive history of museums is the Communist break, the “black hole” of Romanian history (Popovat 1999, Nicolau 2003).

Texts which are usually considered secondary literature, histories and guides of museums, museography manuals and journals, are thus used in this analysis as primary sources, for they tell more about the museum culture and national discourse of the era when they were written.

National museums and cultural policy in Romania: A tentative time frame

Too many people know museums only by their facades and names, both of which can be misleading. Looking at what lies behind museum facades, especially when the name spells National Museum is illuminating and puzzling, for the content of a national museum is spectacular in its diversity throughout the decades and centuries. I have tried to sketch a tentative time frame of what might a visitor expect when (s)he enters a Romanian national museum, if this where possible, in different moments in time.

A. Nineteenth century: a national ‘cabinet of curiosities’. The National Museum is established (1834/1864) but it has no proper building and it exhibits clusters of collections, not necessarily of national production (see case study no.1).

B. Early twentieth century – up to 1945: the historical-ethnographical national museum. The National Museum is to be structured around national art in a national building (see case study no.1).

C. 1945 – 1968: the republican/ central museum – the national becomes a ‘bad’ word. Symbolically, The National Museum established by King Carol I is replaced with the Lenin-Stalin Museum (see case study no.2).

D. 1968 – 1989: comeback of the national in its historical variant. The History Museum of the Republic is established tracing national history and national greatness back to prehistoric times (see case study no. 3).

E. Post-1989: the national dilemma. Museums close their contemporary sections considered tainted by Communist ideology. Yet, the narrative of other sections and historical periods is

considered still valid. The most important new museum of the 1990s, the Romanian Peasant Museum aims to create a link to the interwar National Museum *Carol I*. As the number of national museums grows, the question of what a national museum actually is does not gain momentum. A visitor entering a post-Communist national museum should expect to find either no reference to the recent past of Romanian nation, or an elaborate victimizing discourse on the sufferings of the nation under Communist rule (see case studies no. 1 and 4).

A. The birth moment of the first national museum, and of Romanian museums in general, is slightly debated. There is almost consensus that its origin is in 1834 when local boyar Mihalache Ghica opened up his collections to the public, under the name of Natural History and Antiquities Museum, in the building of the Saint Sava College. Mihalache Ghica had been displaying his antiquities and natural science collections even before, in his own home, but decided that it was high-time to “illuminate” Romanians and invite other collectors to enrich this museum, “a new era in the history of civilization of the Romanian nation” as contemporary press called this new museum (*Curierul Romanesc* quoted in Paunescu 2007). As Mihalache Ghica was the brother of Prince Alexandru Ghica, ruler of Valachia at the moment, the establishment of the museum actually became a state incentive. The first Romanian museum had only one employee and the effort of making a proper place for the collections inside the Saint Sava College apparently deprived the professors of the College of one month’s salary.

Even though the initial name of the museum did not include the national tag, later on, even official documents will refer to it as the National Museum. The principles behind collecting were still blurred between the national principle, collecting objects that pertain to national history and glory, and the curiosity principle, collecting interesting objects indifferent of their national importance. There were incentives around the museum that stressed the national importance of the institution. For example, the professors of Saint Sava College issued a weekly magazine between 1836 and 1838, entitled *Muzeu National* (National Museum) where articles on Romanian history, natural history, archaeology and culture were published and invitations were issued to enrich the collections of the existing museum with national objects. Another initiative of Mihalache Ghica, again endorsed immediately by his brother, the prince, was the mandatory transfer of all antiquities found on Romanian territory to the collections of the museum.

However, despite these national-minded initiatives, the National Museum also aimed at collecting internationally and many of the donations that were made to the museum also included foreign memorabilia, such as Egyptian mummies, Chinese pottery and stuffed animals of different provenience.

In 1864, the National Museum was divided, as two new museums were established: The Antiquities Museum and the Natural History Museum. The Antiquities Museum has slowly been transformed into a history museum, finally becoming the current National History Museum. However, in 1864, when it was established, Romanian history was only one of the four sections of the museum, along with the curiosities section.

The Antiquities Museum did not have a proper building and it was, for a long time, hosted by Bucharest University, also established in 1864. The exhibits though reminded still of a proper 18th century cabinet of curiosities: old Romanian jewels, contemporary objects, paintings and reproductions of famous paintings, weapons and cult objects from South America, Chinese pottery, Romanian folk costumes and rescued Church frescoes, music instruments and Egyptian

mummies; all these in only one room of the museum, as described by Alexandru Tzigara-Samurcas in 1906. This was the same Alexandru Tzigara-Samurcas who argued, at the beginning of the twentieth century, that Romania deserved a proper National Museum which would host Romanian national art, i.e. peasant art.

B. With Alexandru Tzigara-Samurcas and his National Museum established in 1906, a new meaning of the national museum is brought to the front; the historical-ethnographical national museum. In his argument, The National Museum is to be structured around national art in a national building. Slowly, this view prevailed and gained state support so, up to the end of the Second World War, the Romanian National Museum presented to its visitors an ethnographic/peasant art approach to national identity.

The importance of personal incentive and involvement in the creation of Romanian national museums has by now become apparent and it will prove to be a key point in understanding Romanian museum history. Practically every Romanian national museum has started out as the brainchild of a cultural figure with eventually, some political connections, enough to make the figure's idea gain state funding and support. Besides Mihalache Ghica and Alexandru Tzigara-Samurcas, other names will appear further on in this report: Horia Bernea and his award-winning Romanian Peasant Museum and Ana Blandiana and her Sighet Memorial-Museum to the Victims of Communism and to the Resistance.

C. The Communist regime represents, initially at least, a definite break with bourgeois museums, national tradition and thus national museums. The national tag disappears from museum names, as major museums are called, in the 1950s, central or republican museums or museums of republican importance. This is, for example, the Communist definition of the history museum of republican importance: "History museums of republican importance display the country's history or part of the country's history from oldest times to the present, without disregarding the connections with neighbouring countries" ("Scientific norms for the organization and functioning of history and ethnography museums' *Monumente si muzee* 1, 1958). The change in name is however, misleading, as there has never been a more centralized era in the history of Romanian museums as the Communist era. These central museums were national museums in the sense that they became the source of the official version that every other regional, big or small museum should follow. The story presented in the Museum of the Worker's Party, for example, had to be recreated in all regional museums when mentioning the Communist movement, and they all had to mention it. Actually, Communist censorship trained their censors with visits to the aforementioned museum that became the measure according to which all other museums were analyzed for political mistakes and shortcomings.

The complete circuit is one of the terms of the era that is seminal for understanding the over-centralization of museums during Communist rule, especially during the last two decades. The complete circuit was used in the 70s and 80s in the museum profession as an expression of the obligation of every historical museum to present the history of the Romanian nation from prehistory to the present day. It meant that even an archaeological museum had to add special rooms dedicated to the Communist achievements and also that regional museums should abandon regional history and present Romanian history in the national narrative specific to 1980s national Communism (Pavel 1990: 44-48).

D. Museums were considered an important part of Communist propaganda. In 1973, an account on Romanian cultural policy counted 331 museums and 11 million visitors in 1973 (out of a population of 20 million, this is most probably due to the mandatory visits organised by schools and factories). The ‘national’ seems to have disappeared from museum names. They are called, for example, The Museum of History of the Romanian Socialist Republic, the Museum of Art of the RSR, the Village (and Popular Art) Museum or People’s Technological Museum at Dumbrava Sibiului (Balan 1975: 44-45).

However, it is also the Communist regime that organized the comeback of the national discourse in museums, even if not in museum names. As the Communist ideology is presumably an internationalist one, it is not so strange to find these considerations on national museums in one of the few museology manuals printed in the 1980s by one important name of Romanian museology, Radu Florescu. He writes, in 1982, that national museums are

...an instrument of national politics and of constructing national cultures as these entities were defined in the historical development of the 19th century. In a certain measure, for the majority of Western countries, the idea of national museum is nowadays, if not obsolete, as national museums are still important pieces in a network of museums, than outdated as this network of museum is mainly composed of local and specialized museums. However, the national museum – as institution and idea – is still seminal for those people that are currently nation building – for example the peoples of Africa. (Florescu 1982: 11)

Romania was obviously not one of the peoples of Africa, despite Nicolae Ceausescu’s tightening of relations and intensive mutual state visits with African rulers, yet the establishment of a national museum was considered crucial also in Romania’s case. How else could one account for the inauguration of the History Museum of the Romanian Socialist Republic in 1972? What is now called the National History Museum was inaugurated in 1972 by Communist leader Nicolae Ceausescu under the name of History Museum of the Romanian Socialist Republic; the national was not in the name, yet the newly established museum claimed a longer history, going back to the National Museum of the 19th century and it boldly entitled its short-lived scientific review *Muzeul National* (The National Museum) that only published 4 issues (1974-1978), just as the professors of Saint Sava College entitled their review in 1837.

The Romanian state had never had a national history museum before, i.e. a museum that would tell the national story in a chronological, historical manner, and as strange as it may seem it was during Socialist times that this institution, as a nation-building institution was finally established. This fact is congruent with recent historical research proposing that Romanian nation building has its final act during Ceausescu’s rule and the final elements of Romanian identity where those added by the national-Communist ideology of the 1970s and 1980s (Petrescu 2003). Despite its national and one could say even nationalistic discourse to be further on presented, the national was only added to the history museum’s name immediately after 1989.

E. The post-1989 decades are a time of dilemmas regarding the nation and its identity. The impetus gained with the revolutionary end of 1989 was soon transformed in perplexity in regards to what is to be done with official representations, such as the ones in national museums. Was the national-Communist variant of Romanian identity still valid? Was it enough just to erase the references to Communist ideology? How was the Communist regime to be represented and who

would assume responsibility for the crimes as well as the achievements? One of the most commonly embraced solutions to these questions was a temporary complete silence over the Communist past, as if it had never happened, as if it was a black hole in Romanian history (Bădică 2010b).

Irina Nicolau, ethnographer and one of the creators of the Romanian Peasant Museum, of which this report shall have much more to say in subsequent pages, was writing in the early 90s:

There is in Romania a huge emptiness that one has to fill with one's own body, in order to build upon. Or maybe it is better to build a bridge over it, with one pillar in Samurcaș's times and the other in the place where the future starts. But are we wise enough to make that bridge? Are we working fast enough? (Nicolau 2003: 54)

Foreign informed observers of Romanian reality were puzzled by these manoeuvres of organised amnesia. American anthropologist Katherine Verdery wrote, as early as 1994 "How did it happen that Romania is partly resuscitating the past in this way, seeking to lift out whole chunks of the Communist period as if it had never occurred?" (Verdery 1996: 136)

The desire to simulate forgetting the Communist legacy was also shared by museum professionals. In most cases, the contemporary history sections in museums were simply closed down under heavy locks, and it is essential to note that not even 20 years after the 1989 rupture, has anything been conceived of to replace those empty rooms. The most telling example for this museological silence is the National History Museum that has closed the contemporary section immediately after 1989 and then the entire permanent exhibition (for restoration) in 2002. As I am writing, in 2010, there is no permanent exhibition in the National History Museum.

This report will, however, insist that two museums broke this silence, precisely on the subject that triggered it: the Communist past. The Romanian Peasant Museum, established in 1990 and the Sighet Memorial-Museum to the Victims of Communism and to the Resistance, established in 1993 were the two major museums that made a strong claim on national identity; even if not state-supported at the beginning, at least for the Sighet Memorial, their view on Romanian nation and history became mainstream and endorsed by the state as anti-Communism itself became state policy.¹

The dilemma concerning the Communist past was not the only heavy silence in post-1989 Romanian museums. Although Communist ideology was rejected after 1989, the nationalism that characterized its last decades was somehow preserved. The proud narrative of heroic deeds of the Romanian people over the centuries, a narrative strongly supported and propagated by Ceausescu's national Communism, continued to be the master narrative in Romanian museums. Subjects such as the Romanian Holocaust, the disappearance of Romanian Jewry, the atrocities perpetrated by the Romanian army on the Eastern front during World War Two, the discrimination and slavery of Roma people, the Romanisation policies suffered by Hungarian ethnics are among the issues that no museum attempts to exhibit. For a trained ear, the silences in Romanian museums are sometimes louder than the stories that are voiced.

Case studies in chronological order

The Romanian Peasant National Museum/National Museum Carol I

The Romanian Peasant (National) Museum was established in 1990 in the building whose foundational stone had been laid in 1912 for the National Museum. The National Museum of the early twentieth century, as projected by Alexandru Tzigara-Samurcas and supported by the royal family, was meant to be a national art museum, where national art meant prehistoric and roman vestiges, religious art and peasant objects. This exhibition project was never actually installed in the building (except for the ethnographic section) as the building was not entirely finished when the Communist party took control of state politics after the Second World War and consequently evacuated the National Museum and replaced it with the Lenin-Stalin Museum. The establishment in 1990 of the Romanian Peasant Museum in the same building was understood as “the result of a memory effort.” (Andrei Plesu quoted in Nicolau 2003: 39)

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Romania, a new but vivid state on the European map had almost all the institutions a modern state required: Parliament, Academy of Sciences, University and of course, a National Museum. The National Museum, established in 1834 by Boyar Mihalache Ghica, was to be found in the University building, in a few rooms crowded with “old Romanian jewels, contemporary objects, paintings and reproductions of famous paintings, weapons and cult objects from South America, Chinese pottery, Romanian folk costumes and rescued Church frescoes, music instruments and Egyptian mummies.” (Tzigara-Samurcas 1936: 3) The principle behind the collections of this museum was the already out-of-fashion idea that collecting internationally might be a sign of national greatness.

Alexandru Tzigara-Samurcas was one the successful promoters of a new kind of national museum, a museum that exhibits national greatness with national productions. He wrote extensively on the subject at the turn of the century, in publications and memorandums to those in the position to make the change. In 1906, for example, his memorandum to the ministry of Culture argues:

The lack of a national Museum is a shame of which we are all aware. The establishment of such an institution is urgently needed. Our national pride does not allow us to remain in obvious inferiority in this matter also towards our younger neighbours, even more recently entered among civilized states. Sadly we must acknowledge that Bulgarians have surpassed us in this cultural activity. In less than ten years they put together an admirable antiquities museum and a no less precious museum of ethnography and national art. The Serbs are well ahead us also. Not to speak of Hungarian museums with which we can barely hope of ever catching up. (Tzigara-Samurcas quoted in Popovat 1999: 39)

The examples of Romania’s neighbours were meant to put the problem on the state’s priority list. And he was successful, for in the same year, on October 1st 1906; Alexandru Tzigara-Samurcas became director of what would initially be called the Ethnographic Museum of National Art, Decorative Art and Industrial Art (Popovat 1999: 37). The long and heavy title would finally be shortened in 1915 to the National Museum *Carol I* (Popovat 1999: 66). Apparently, state officials gave up on the first national museum, built around the national antiquities and were striving to

construct a new national museum, which would include the antiquities in a larger concept of national art.

The never realised project for the National Museum *Carol I* was to reunite under the same roof as existing but separated museums, making them sections of the National Museum.

1. Section of prehistoric art and migration period
2. Section of Dacian and Greek-roman art
3. Section of voievodal and religious art (medieval)
4. Section of Romanian peasant art
5. Section of modern and contemporary arts
6. Section of minor arts and donations (Popovat 1999: 96).

This vision of the National Museum never became reality, mainly because of the complicated history of the building that was supposed to host the National Museum. Out of all these projected sections, it was only the Romanian peasant art section that started to gather collections and exhibit them, under the close scrutiny of Tzigara-Samurcas himself.

The building of the museum also has a complicated history of glorious plans that hardly ever reached finality. Architect Nicolae Ghika-Budesti designed, in the neo-Romanian style, the building that nowadays hosts the Romanian Peasant Museum. The neo-Romanian style was born at the end of the nineteenth century out of a desire to include old Romanian architectural elements in imposing, urban buildings; this is the only Romanian national architectural style and it was thus natural that the National Museum should be housed in a national style building.

The foundational stone of the building was laid in 1912 by King Carol I himself in a sumptuous ceremony. The foundational act, signed by the king on the occasion, stated that the building would host the National Museum. In fact, in the initial plans of the edifice, the name NATIONAL MUSEUM was to be carved in stone on the frontispiece of the museum, but this was one architectural detail that was finally omitted. Apparently, Alexandru Tzigara-Samurcas was so involved with the museum he created that he engaged in numerous disputes, even with the architect, (Popovat 1999: 67) finally imposing his will on the architectural plans. Started with enthusiasm in 1912, the construction works were stopped in 1914, leaving the museum as an unfinished building with practically no roof. On October 1st 1930, the south wing of the new building was opened for visitors with the ethnographic exhibition carefully curated by Tzigara-Samurcas. The rest of the building was still under construction, which only resumed in 1934 at a very slow pace on an already damaged edifice that again, suffered a lot from earthquakes (1940) and Allied bombings (1944).

The Communist regime found the National Museum *Carol I* with a beautiful, central but still unfinished building and interesting ethnographic collections whose value was not so much appreciated by the new Communist rulers. The building though, seemed much more appealing as the perfect place to establish a new, Communist museum, such as the V.I. Lenin – I.V. Stalin Museum was.

The first step towards the gradual disappearance of the National Museum *Carol I* was changing its name, in 1948, immediately after the monarchy was abolished, into the National Museum of Art and Archaeology. The name was soon to be changed again to the National Museum of Popular Art, then into Popular Art Museum of the Romanian Socialist Republic. In 1952, it was chased away from its building, making room for two Communist propaganda

museums, the V.I. Lenin – I.V. Stalin Museum and the History Museum of the Romanian Workers' Party. In 1978, the Popular Art Museum was united with the Village Museum; practically, it meant the disappearance of the Popular Art Museum, the former National Museum *Carol I*, and the taking over of its collection by the Village Museum. If not for the 'memory effort' performed in 1990 by Minister of Culture Andrei Plesu, the National Museum *Carol I* would have remained just another piece of museum history.

The Romanian Peasant Museum was re-established in 1990, on February 5th, barely one month after the demise of the Romanian Communist regime. The Romanian Peasant Museum was to construct its identity as a continuator of the interwar National Museum and in sharp contrast with its predecessor, the Communist museum. It was not only a question of institutional succession; the distance to be established was between two eras, two worlds and two regimes. The Peasant Museum was to be the bridge Irina Nicolau talked about, the bridge between the interwar period and present day; under the bridge – Communism.

This idea was present from the first moment of the re-establishment of the museum, in February 1990. Andrei Pleșu, the Minister of Culture at that moment, explained his decision:

The idea of re-establishing a museum of ethnography in the building on the boulevard was not the result of an effort of imagination, but of memory. That building was designed by Ghika-Budești especially to be an ethnography museum.... It seemed symbolically useful to exorcise the ghosts of a fake museum such as the Museum of the Romanian Communist Party with a museum belonging to the local tradition. (Nicolau 2003: 39)

The choice for the director of this both new and old museum would prove spectacular. Horia Bernea, was a painter who had never been anything more than an admirer and keen visitor of museums; however, he managed to make the Peasant Museum his last work of art. He was appointed in 1990 and only left the museum upon his death in 2000.

The story of the Peasant Museum is told by the new staff as the story of a struggle: a physical struggle with the transformations that the building underwent as a Communist museum and with all the objects that had lost any purpose or meaning, and a spiritual struggle with the ghosts of Communism. The physical fight did not take too long: only a few months for dismantling, cleaning the exhibition rooms and transferring the objects to other institutions. Ioana Popescu, head of the research department and a visual anthropologist at the museum, who was part of the museum team since 1990, told me, in an interview, the story of the rediscovery of the exhibition rooms: "On the outside, the building has arches in neo-Romanian style. On the inside, we were surprised to discover no cupolas, no arches. There were long rooms, some square-ish, some like wide halls that you walked through, with straight walls on each side. Then we realized that the walls were not real: they were only fake walls hiding the splendid interior architecture."

The Peasant Museum began to organize temporary exhibitions as early as its first year of existence, 1990. The first one was 'Clay Toys' followed by several displays of icons, painted Easter eggs and an exhibition called 'Chairs', all experimental and daring in terms of exhibiting techniques. Their stated aim was to rehabilitate the Romanian peasant, whose image had been severely abused by Communist propaganda; the claim on national identity was more implicit than clearly stated. Romanians had always considered themselves a rural nation, a nation of peasants,

at least before the Second World War, and thus a statement on the Romanian peasant is always a statement on the Romanian nation (Mihailescu 2006).

The museum began to organize small events and exhibitions, to produce unconventional little booklets, most of them hand-made, to establish its reputation as an innovative museum, which took patrimony objects out in the street and hired traditional music bands (*lăutari*) to play on the streets of Bucharest. They began to think of the permanent exhibition, searching for a theme that would give meaning to the new name of the museum. The outcome would have to be both a 'healing museum' as Irina Nicolau wanted it and a 'testifying museum' as Horia Bernea wished. And it did become, in my view, both a healing and disturbing museum, thought provoking, annoying and beautiful, fundamentalist and delicate. In 1996, it was awarded the European Museum of the Year Award.

The 'healing' component of the museum was obviously aimed at the traumatic memory of the Communist regime. Paradoxically, the initial reaction to this past, as reflected in the first permanent exhibition, was a total indifference to it, a deliberate refusal to make any reference to recent history. The first exhibition, entitled *The Cross*, was inaugurated on April 19, 1993; the French anthropologist Gérard Althabe (1997) observed that the exhibition probably spoke more about the Communist past by its total lack of reference to it. Actually, it rather spoke of how the Communist past was viewed in the early 1990s by Romanian intelligentsia: as a black hole that had to be forgotten, put into brackets, in order to reach more easily back to the interwar period where "real" Romanian history and identity was supposed to be found (Badica 2010b).

After cleaning the museum and removing the traces of the Communist past, it seemed necessary to the new staff to reinstall a sense of normality and truthfulness in the previously abused image of the peasant. And this normality could only be reached by keeping silent, for a time, about everything that had been mystified and altered under Communist rule. As Ioana Popescu remembers,

We started with the idea that the discourse on the cross must not be a vindictive discourse. Horia Bernea did not want, by *The Cross*, either to cover the horrors of Communism, or to use it as a weapon. He simply wanted to try to induce certain normality, a normality that he could not imagine in the Romanian world in the absence of the cross. A cross that he saw as an element of balance and order.... So he started by wanting to make peace. A calm and normal speech. We did not think for a moment that in the exhibition *The Cross* there should be the victory of the cross over Communism. (Popescu 2004)

It seemed more urgent for Horia Bernea's team, in the early 1990s, to bring into the museum what was beautiful and harmonious about the Romanian peasant, what was timeless about him. Only after the permanent display was more or less finished, did the need for a discourse on ugliness become urgent. The museum that they had composed was "a serene museum, a museum of peasant balance, in which you didn't notice that you were in fact walking on bones, walking on dead people, dead peasants who had everything taken away from them." (Popescu 2004) From this point of view, it was itself becoming fake and misleading and it needed, Irina Nicolau thought, a counter-balance to all its serenity. This counter-balance was going to be *The Plague*, a room in the basement dedicated to Communist crimes during collectivization. Inaugurated in 1997, it is, to this day, the only permanent exhibition on Communism in any Bucharest museum.

The story of the Romanian Peasant Museum is one of the rare success stories of Romanian transition; a Romanian miracle as some already put it. If the story is indeed seducing, one must not forget that the experience of the Peasant Museum is quite singular and the situation in the vast majority of Romanian museum was immovability, perplexed silence and low-quality uncontroversial exhibitions, if any. Theories concerning museum practice were practically non-existent in 1990s Romania. One of the rare examples of a polemic text that engages with the challenges and difficulties of Romanian museums in post-Communist times also comes from the team of the Peasant Museum in Bucharest. Irina Nicolau's *Me and the Museums of the World* (1996) was written in 1994 when the Romanian Peasant Museum was in the making and she develops the interesting notion of the antidote museum. The antidote museum responded to the double crisis facing Romanian museums in post-Communist period. "The Romanian museum is in a double crisis, provoked by the consequences of Communist ideology and by the danger of badly appropriated occidental museology." (Nicolau 1996:37) She does not give a clear definition but rather composes a Decalogue of the antidote-museum that she thought necessary in "periods of cultural, social and political convalescence":

- [...] 3. One doesn't go to the antidote-museum as one would go to a church, neither to a school, a tribunal, nor a hospital or a cemetery.
- 4. The antidote-museum is the museum of 'Look at that!' Its exhibitions free the object of any stereotyped interpretations.
- 5. One comes to the antidote-museum to see the objects...
- 8. The antidote-museum shows, but also hides. It is for people willing to invest imagination and time. (Nicolau 1996: 38)

Even if the Romanian Peasant Museum added the 'national' tag to its name only in 2007, Horia Bernea was talking about it as a national museum as early as 1993:

Understandably, a country which takes so much pride in the only civilization which can effectively protect it in the eyes of Europe, must have a museum of anthropology in its capital, a national museum about what this traditional man was and is, while also serving as a testimonial for the future. The museum is a basic landmark for anyone who would try to understand this nation. (Bernea quoted in Mihailescu 2006)

The History Museum of the Romanian Communist Party

Changing museum names on political and ideological grounds seems to be a Romanian custom. Yet, none of the already mentioned museums have changed their name so much and so confusingly as the Party Museum, as everyone called it ever since the 50s, despite its frequent renaming and reorganization. The bases of this museum were formed in July 1948 under the peculiar name, Moments from the People's Struggle Museum. In 1951, this museum was reorganized and renamed The Revolutionary Struggle of the People Museum (shortened to the Revolutionary Museum). Re-baptized again in 1954, it became the History Museum of the Romanian Workers' Party. It was then closed in November 1957 only to be reopened in July 1958 in a more sumptuous location, the Neo-Romanian palace on Kiseleff Boulevard that had been expropriated from the Museum of National Art in 1952 (see the first case study). At the time, it shared the building with another museum of Communism: the V. I. Lenin – I. V. Stalin

Museum (which was later renamed the Marx–Engels–Lenin Museum). In 1966, it acquired its last and longest name during its last major reorganization, the History Museum of the Communist Party, of the Revolutionary and Democratic Movement of Romania (Ilie 2010).

Apparently, the claim on national identity was lacking in these museums. On the contrary, the mere fact that these Communist propaganda museums, the Lenin-Stalin Museum and the Party Museum, replaced the National Museum in Romania's capital was statement enough on the projected melting of Romanian national identity into an internationalist, Soviet rhetoric. The abuse was perceived as such in Romanian society and this explains the suspicious joy with which the return of nationalism has been met after 1968, even if in its socialist variant of national identity.

The narrative of these Communist museums, in the 50s and 60s, was of Soviet inspiration, not only in political discourse but also in museum practice, as the Soviet museum became a sort of master-recipe that each satellite state museum had to respect. One of the most obvious examples of such a recipe-museum was the Lenin-Stalin Museum. Before the grand opening in 1955, numerous discussions and meetings were held in order to ensure that the ingredients of the recipe were all gathered in the right amount and in the right order before the Soviet comrades came to give their approval. Comrade Șoimu, deputy director of the museum complained, “there were indications where to put the objects in the show-cases but some were arranged differently” (Grosu 1954: 242). In order to defend himself, the director, Petre Grosu argued, “Changes were made, but not essential, we strictly kept the graph [...]. For example, there was no place on the wall so we put it in a show case in the same place, or it could not be put in some place, we put it next to it.” (Grosu 1954: 246)

The Lenin-Stalin Museum was considered a branch of the Central Lenin Museum in Moscow and thus had to be a sort of replica of the Moscow museum. The recipe repeated itself locally as other smaller museums had to become replicas of the central museum in Bucharest.

In 1966, the two museums inhabiting the former National Museum building merged under the new and even longer name of History Museum of the Communist Party, of the Revolutionary and Democratic Movement of Romania. The long name was supposed to hide the actual disappearance of the Marx-Engels-Lenin Museum, formerly known as the Lenin-Stalin Museum together with the Party's ambitions towards a Moscow-independent policy. This time, it was not only the name but also the exhibition that changed drastically. If the exhibition in the 1950s started with 1848 and the spread of Marxism in Romania, keeping generally to history proper of the Communist movement, the post-1966 exhibition starts with stone age objects, “reconstructing the far away beginnings of our millenary civilization, standing at the foundation of the grandiose edifice of contemporary Romania.” (Lupescu 1974) The new permanent exhibition, very similar to the one in the History Museum at the same time, was actually a reworking of all Romanian historical mythology into a teleological narrative that necessarily leads, through centuries of struggle, to the formation of Socialist Romania and the “multilateral developed society.”

The Party Museum also added its name to the list of Communist consecration places. It was one of the favourite sites for performing the ritual of becoming a pioneer. It was thus not only a museum of the Party but, as holder of communist holy relics (although some have proved to be forgeries), it became itself a sacred place of Romanian Communism. The story of its dismantling,

as the Peasant Museum was settling in only two months after the 1989 revolution, is equally fascinating and an exemplary story of post-Communism (Bădică 2010b).

The National History Museum

Strangely enough, Romania did not have a national history museum up until 1972 and it was the Communist regime, supposedly international, but already in its nationalist period, that established it. A decision with no practical follow-up had been taken in 1955 to build a national history museum, but it was only the 1968 decision, soon after Nicolae Ceausescu's accession to power and at his initiative, by the Communist Party's Central Committee that turned the National History Museum into reality (Ilie 2011). In 1970, the government endorsed the Party's decision and in only two years, 15000m² representing Romanian national history was available for visiting (for comparison, the History Museum of the Communist Party had, at the same time, only 5000m²).

The opening of the History Museum of the Romanian Socialist Republic was a major event, in the presence of the Ceausescus who cut the ribbon and were the first visitors of the new institution. The director of the museum, Florin Georgescu wrote: "Meant to exhibit the most significant testimonies of our country's history, the newly created museum has the important mission of becoming an efficient means of patriotic, internationalist education for the young generations, for all working people in our country" (Georgescu 1974: 1) Yet, the internationalist rhetoric fades at the end of his Foreword to the main publication of the museum, entitled *Muzeul National (The National Museum)* when he calls the institution, "the most representative museal institution in our socialist country: the NATIONAL MUSEUM" (Georgescu 1974: 2).

As the regime was becoming increasingly nationalistic, the importance of the History Museum also increased compared to the previously symbolically representative museum, the History Museum of the Communist Party. It is not that the Communist Party had become less central to Romanian life; on the contrary, the Communist Party was attempting a symbiosis with the Romanian nation. Thus, the history of the Communist Party started together with the history of the Romanian people, tens of thousands of years ago. As difficult to prove historically, both museums, of Romanian History and Party history, started their visiting tour with the Stone Age and the first testimonies of human life on Romania's territory. For the same reasons, important propaganda exhibitions changed location from the Party Museum to the History Museum. How else would an exhibition entitled *Nicolae Ceausescu and World Peace* find its place, in 1981, at the History Museum? (Bădică 2010a: 280).

The 1977 earthquake seriously damaged the nineteenth century building and led to the reorganization of the permanent exhibition, only four years after its opening. It was just another opportunity for enhancing the political overtones of the exhibit. As a contemporary subjective chronicle of the museum recalls on the museum's site: "This second permanent exhibition of the National History Museum was, even more than the first, the expression of the Communist Party's political will, following a much more insistent intrusion into museological creation." An entire section was a homage-exhibition dedicated to Nicolae Ceausescu and exhibited gifts received by the dictator internally and from abroad.

The core of the National History Museum's collections on Communism, the Ceausescu Collection, is based on this peculiar cluster of artefacts, around 10,000 objects coming from the

socialist camp or third world countries in Africa, Asia and Southern America, gathered for 11 years in this homage-exhibition. The exhibition covered around 30% of the museum's exhibiting space, i.e. 10 big halls and as the Ceausescu couple kept receiving gifts, the exhibition was constantly expanding. Together with the 20% allotted to contemporary history, half of the History Museum of RSR was devoted to the post-1945 history, what the museographers of the era named "the construction of socialism" section.

As many other Romanian museums after the 1989 events, the National History Museum, besides becoming national in some sort of memory appeal to the nineteenth century National Museum, closed the contemporary section of the museum, too tainted by communist ideology and entered major restoration in 2002 which gave them the opportunity to close all the other museum halls, except for the Thesaurus and interact with the public only in temporary exhibitions.

Sighet Memorial-Museum to the Victims of Communism and to the Resistance

The Sighet Memorial-Museum to the Victims of Communism and to the Resistance is probably the only major Romanian museum established by civil society, more precisely the Civic Academy Foundation and, even though it has been recognized as a site of national importance and subsidized accordingly ever since, it is still civil society controlled. It is no wonder that the subject matter of the museum, the Communist regime in Romania, is one that most state museums elegantly avoid dealing with. It is the only museum in this report that is not Bucharest-based; on the contrary, it is situated in the far north of the country, closer to the Ukrainian and Hungarian borders.

The reason for including this museum in the report, despite its 'national importance' tag is the fact that it indeed makes a strong claim on Romanian national identity, providing a narrative of victimhood and sacrifice/resistance. Such a narrative might have seemed marginal in the early 1990s, when the museum was established but it has recently risen to the level of state official narrative on the Communist past, with the official condemnation of Communism in 2006 (see footnote 3). The contribution of the Sighet Museum and the Civic Academy Foundation to this official act of the Romanian state was of great importance; it is probably a unique case of a museum imposing its national narrative on the political, and not the other way around as proved to be the case in the above-mentioned museums.

The Sighet prison was built in 1897 on the anniversary of the Hungarian Millennium; it functioned as a Communist political prison and extermination centre for Romania's political and religious elite between 1950 and 1955. Exhibiting Communism in a prison is part of a deliberate choice that grounds the idea that the whole of Romania was a huge prison during the communist regime. The Sighet Memorial has two distinct phases of existence. The museum, inaugurated in 1997, was mainly a museum of the Sighet prison, a memorial to the victims of Communism with a special focus on the victims who lost their freedom and eventually their lives inside the walls of the Sighet prison. The second stage of the museum's development, the current permanent exhibition, proposes a global discourse on Romanian Communism, a proper museum of Communism and not merely a prison-museum. Starting in 2000, Sighet is no more a fragment of the story of Romanian Communism, a tragic account of the lives lost while establishing the

Communist regime in Romania, Sighet has become Romanian Communism as such, the black hole of Romanian history to be looked at through prison bars.

I only visited the Sighet prison-museum once, in 1997, in the first stage of its development; my analysis is thus fragmented between first-hand impressions from my visit, recent virtual visits on the museum's site and secondary literature. In 1997, the museum was still very connected to the actual history of the building: acquired in 1993 by the Civic Academy Foundation it has undergone serious restoration, its inside walls were painted in white and some of the cells were transformed into museum rooms exhibiting 'prison furniture' and the stories of famous interwar political figures, like Iuliu Maniu and Gheorghe I. Brătianu, who were exterminated in the prison in the 1950s. The effect of the improvised museum, at that time, was devastating, precisely because of the lack of public debate on the legacy of the Communist regime and the museum's simple and straightforward manner of telling stories of resistance and repression. 1997 was not only the year of the official opening of the museum, on June 20th, but also the year when the Romanian state finally recognized the Memorial as a site of national importance and started subsidizing its functioning; up until 1997, the Sighet Memorial had been totally privately financed.

Ever since 1997, the museum has been striving to encompass more and more aspects of the history of Romanian and East-European Communism, with exhibitions halls (actually, cells) on subjects as diverse as everyday life during Communism, the Solidarnosc movement, the Hungarian 1956 revolution or demolitions in the 1980s. Although the initial focus on repression, and especially repression in the Sighet prison, has been kept (with exhibition-cells dedicated to the victims of the prison), the prison has actually become a metaphor, a paradigm for telling the story of European Communism. The official poster of the Sighet Memorial is thus very telling: two children are curiously looking through the window of a prison cell, while the text wonders, *Do you want to understand nowadays Romania?* The reading of the image presupposes two commonly shared assumptions: that one cannot understand nowadays Romania without understanding Communist Romania and that the only valid point of view in understanding the Romanian Communist past is the prison cell window.

Sighet was a Jewish town. It was the hometown of Elie Wiesel, the Nobel laureate and Holocaust survivor. Massive deportations, organised by Hungarian authorities during World War Two, targeted the whole Jewish population of the city and surrounding villages. The 12,849 people in Sighetu Marmatiei ghetto were deported to concentration camps in only four days. (International Commission on the Holocaust in Romania 2004: 331-332). The Jewish history of Sighet is almost forgotten, as it is becoming more and more a symbol of resistance to Communism, of Romanian resistance to Communism.

The Sighet Museum is part of a memorial complex that is supposed to function as a "holy place of the Romanian nation" (Cristea and Radu-Bucurenci 2007: 301). The organisers, of which poet and civic activist Ana Blandiana is the most prominent, proudly announce that their memorial is equally a museum, a (summer) school and a research centre. As part of the museum, but 2,5 kilometres away a landscape memorial is slowly growing. On the place where the victims of the prison are supposed to have been buried, planted trees signify a huge contour of Romania. As the trees grow, the contour will become more and more visible, especially from a distance, as a sort of "vegetal amphitheatre inside which the country will lay as a glade. The idea is that, in this way, the homeland keeps its martyrs in its arms as it weeps through repeated generations of

vegetation.” In all this discourse of victimhood and martyrdom there is no single mentioning of the tens of thousands of Jewish victims whose suffering seemed to bear no importance to ‘the homeland.’

Notes

- ¹ On December 18th 2006, president Traian Basescu officially condemned Communism as a criminal regime: “As head of the Romanian State, I condemn explicitly and categorically the Communist system in Romania, from its establishment, on dictated basis in 1944-1947 to its collapse in December 1989. Taking into account the realities presented in the Report, I state with full responsibility: the Communist regime in Romania was illegitimate and criminal.” (Available at http://www.presidency.ro/?_RID=det&tb=date&id=8288&_PRID accessed December 10th, 2010.)

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