

Prisons into Museums: Fashioning a Post-Communist Place of Memory

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What happened to Communist political prisons and camps in the twenty years following the fall of the Iron Curtain? For years many of my travels through Eastern Europe were driven by this question. This drive to see the material remains of those sites of suffering even outlasted the gradual realization that as they now stand or crumble, these places often have more to say about our present than about their traumatic past. The question posed by Serguei Alex. Oushakine in his contribution to this volume, “When demolition is not feasible, when stylistic gutting or retrofitting of the inherited historical forms is not possible, how, then, can the hardscape of state socialism be incorporated into nonsocialist or even antisocialist discursive frames?” is nowhere more burning than in the case of prisons and camps.¹ Whether they represent, as Tzvetan Todorov argues, “the emblematic,” “quintessential concentrate” of Eastern bloc societies, a postsocialist urban planning nuisance, or a coveted business opportunity, these are ubiquitous material structures that take up significant place in the present.²

As Tomasz Kizny’s haunting collection of Gulag photographs shows, many camps slowly turn into ruins, or disappear altogether, leaving few legible marks of their past: a watchtower severed from the earth by the disappearance of the staircase, a few beams sticking out of the snow, probably not for much longer, in the place of a bustling prisoner barrack.³ Some have returned to their pre-Communist origins, for instance, by being turned

back into monasteries or churches. Others have continued to serve as overcrowded prisons, sometimes seeing entrepreneurs battle to turn them into something profitable—factories, storage houses, or even a theme hotel. But even for those prisons and camps that undergo an attempt at official commemoration through a museum or memorial, those points of commemoration are typically just a small, indeed marginal, part of their afterlife. The rooms turned memorial are often encased in a larger structure; sometimes that larger structure is crumbling into ruin and sometimes it has returned to previous uses or been repurposed for new ones. Sometimes all these scenarios happen at the same time. This is especially true in the case of large sprawling campsites or central prisons, whose sheer size often has a way of surpassing any particular memorial project, and instead spawns multiple, sometimes warring afterlives. The present-day fate of Solovki, arguably the most infamous Russian camp, memorably dubbed by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn “the Gulag’s *alma mater*,” is a striking illustration of this trend.⁴ The monumental remains of the camp have been returned to their original use as a monastery, with a few cramped rooms dedicated to the history of the camp. When I visited the site in 2001, the museum and local entrepreneurs were battling over deserted buildings.

Pierre Nora has influentially traced contemporary society’s preoccupation, if not obsession, with the creation of places of memory as a reaction to the acceleration and ruptures of modern times: “*Lieux de mémoire* originate with the sense that there is no spontaneous memory, that we must deliberately create archives, maintain anniversaries, organize celebrations, pronounce eulogies, and notarize bills.”⁵ Even though in the last twenty years Eastern Europe has epitomized drastic historical rupture, the creation of places of memory out of places of confinement seems to present the opposite picture from the commemoration frenzy described by Nora: few and far between, such Eastern European places of memory are often literally as well as figuratively at the edge of the map, far from the centers perpetually taken over by the bustling amnesiac present or by nostalgic returns to farther removed, safer pasts. This essay focuses on one of the most instructive exceptions to this culture of amnesia, the creation of the Sighet Memorial Museum in Romania.⁶

At a high-level conference titled “Remembrance and Citizenship” the Council of Europe Secretariat cited just two concrete examples of European sites that exemplify Nora’s concept of *lieux de mémoire*: “the concentration camp at Auschwitz/Birkenau and the Sighet Prison.”⁷ More than one audience member must have wondered: “What and where is this Sighet Prison?” Some might have made the connection between Sighet and Auschwitz if

they were familiar with the biography of Elie Wiesel, the native of Sighet and winner of the Nobel Peace Prize who coined the term *Holocaust*. Others might have known that the Sighet Prison was the penitentiary where Romania's pre-Communist political elite was decimated in the 1950s. But nearly everyone present likely wondered about the choice of this over other Eastern European Communist prison and campsites, such as the more famous Solovki or Kresty. After all, this is one area where Eastern Europe and Russia did not experience any of the shortages that plagued most other aspects of life under Communism. But somehow this prison in the remote town of Sighet on Romania's northern border with Ukraine has come to stand for the innumerable places of confinement of the Communist era in Eastern Europe. Indeed, the Council of Europe's appreciation of the memorial goes well beyond the 2010 conference assessment. The council is to this date an active supporter of the project, which it has embraced since the project was conceived in 1992 by the poet and dissident Ana Blandiana, who together with a remarkable team of historians, architects, and designers worked on its creation for over a decade.⁸ Since its inception, the Sighet project has gained an impressive stream of admirers, including Vaclav Havel; Vladimir Bukovski; and Stephane Courtois, the author of *The Black Book of Communism*, who noted that all other similar projects he had visited in his wide-ranging travels in Eastern Europe were far from the "quality and breadth" of the Sighet project and should take the latter as "their model."⁹ This essay investigates how the Sighet Prison, opened in 1897 as a Habsburg penitentiary, then used as a repatriation center for war prisoners in 1944, then a Communist political prison (1948–55), penal prison (1955–77), broom factory, and salt storage facility, and finally abandoned as a disaffected ruin, was turned into a flagship memorial museum.¹⁰ Much has been gained by its transformation into a museum, including the recognition of Sighet as a major place of memory. This essay also ponders what might have been lost in the creation of the museum's master narrative—alternative stories/histories, tension-ridden differences among prisoners as among visitors, and maybe even loss itself, the sense of the irrecoverable absence that the ruined prison used to evoke so powerfully.

From Ruined Prison to Memorial Museum

I had the rare chance of first visiting the ruined prison in 1996, when the museum was still an ambitious paper project and no significant work on the building's structure was visible (WA 1–2).¹¹ Fascinated, I have returned many times since. The first of these returns took place in 1997, soon after the official opening of the museum, when I found the site utterly different from my

recollections of it. Looking for an explanation for this change, I immediately assumed that I must have first taken black-and-white photographs, whose repeated viewings must have replaced in my memory the bright colors and sharp blacks and whites of the museum that I now saw. I checked the previous year's pictures—no colors indeed and no sharp contrasts between glittering black and white paint, just shades of gray. And yet, the film stock had been color, and the images had not faded. It was the museum itself that had dramatically changed, thanks to the clean paint and the striking installations that caught the eye. Noticing my surprise, the museum guard said, "Yes, the museum is almost completed, quite a change." It turned out he was overly optimistic about the completion of the museum, which took quite a few more years. But he was right about the change: "quite a change." During my first visit in 1996, the entrance door—where the young guard now sold postcards and other prison memorabilia—had been locked. On a small piece of paper someone had written in pencil: "If you want to see the prison, call the following number . . . I'll be there in five minutes." A former prisoner, who had become a museum guide, came and unlocked the doors for me, taking me on a mostly silent tour of the building. The walk through the dozens of almost identical empty cells radically undermined the very possibility of articulating a story against the emptiness and uniformity that had replaced those once detained here. The guide's own stories based on his prison experiences were continuously interrupted by pauses and often ended in question marks. His hesitant diction seemed like a fitting mode of representation for the history of this prison, whose most famous victims were shoved in unmarked common graves at uncertain dates and in even more uncertain circumstances. On the door of one particular cell, the former prisoner showed me the name of the leader of the opposition, Iuliu Maniu, next to a question mark (WA 3). He then said: "That *might* have been the cell where he died."

During my first visit in 1996, the initial museum, with its silences, question marks, and shades of gray accumulated through the dusty passage of time rather than through the agency of human hands, seemed to unwittingly approach what Jean-Louis Déotte described as "a museum which would not be narrative, a museum for those victims for whom no judge will ever be able to do justice."¹² Such a museum "questions the possibility of storytelling and even of chronology."¹³ The ruined prison drew attention to the limits of memory often glossed over in institutionalized remembering, in museums that aim to render the past present for the visitor. Sighet in 1996 seemed to prompt the visitor to "feel that which cannot be remembered: [in the sense of both re-collected and re-presented] the immemorial."¹⁴

The chalk question mark next to Maniu's name, querying the absence of a secure version of history, together with the few inches of dirty paint that

accumulated as a remainder between the present and the traumatic past of the prison, were painted over in the larger process of creating the memorial museum. The transformation of the ruined prison into a memorial museum struck me at first as an attempt to erase temporal gaps and impose a master narrative over an entangled, elusive past. Starting in 1997, the visit through the new memorial has been less trying for the visitor. One's gaze, formerly wandering uneasily along the blank walls that made the eyes fumble like hands, is now carefully directed from exhibit to exhibit. An entry from the 1998–99 *Visitors' Book of Impressions* pithily comments on the new museum: "Flowers . . . of mold/evil [*Flori . . . de mucigai*]. Now the visit is pleasant."¹⁵ The succinct comment links the memorial to a whole aesthetic tradition, making a clear reference to Tudor Arghezi's *Flori de mucigai*, the stunning Romanian response to Charles Baudelaire's *Fleurs du mal*. Published in 1931, this collection of poems set out to create poetic beauty out of the poet's actual experience of imprisonment. The visitor's comment not only links the memorial with this classic aestheticization of evil but also shifts the attention to its effect on the present-day visitor, exposing a pleasure that appears to be, to say the least, out of place. Apparently oblivious of this note, another visitor delivers a cliché that nonetheless confirms the former's critique: "We remained *pleasantly* impressed," to which the next comment bristles: "As opposed to the above note, I remain profoundly pained."¹⁶ Profoundly pained, pleasantly impressed, or moved to make subtle aesthetic associations, the memorial's visitors are now prompted, by *The Visitors' Book of Impressions*, as by the whole design of the memorial museum, to articulate their experience. As we have seen, they even enter a dialogue that can become opinionated polemic. We have come a long way from the former prisoner's searching pauses, ellipses, and question marks, and from my (and, I imagine, other early visitors') difficulty in finding the right words in response to a tour of the prison. From a memorial immemorial, we have turned to a memorial museum. For those advocating the first type of memorial, like Déotte, the word *museum* often has dubious connotations, as a site prescribing what should be forgotten as much as what should be remembered. Furthermore, like the reference to the flowers of mold/evil, such critiques also fault memorial museums for covering up irrecoverable absences or traumas with comfortingly intelligible, maybe even aesthetically pleasing, stories.

However, as Eva Hoffman reminds us, asserting that historical trauma—in her discussion, the Holocaust; here, Communist repression—"is both incomparable and incomprehensible has by now become, through sheer reiteration, an encouragement to the sort of automatic response that is itself a kind of forgetting."¹⁷ Dominick LaCapra has also expressed concern over the ways in which "some of the most powerful forms of modern art and writing,

as well as some of the most compelling forms of criticism (including forms of deconstruction) may involve the feeling of keeping faith with trauma in a manner that leads to a compulsive preoccupation with aporia, an endlessly melancholic, impossible mourning.¹⁸ Furthermore, he cautioned that this “impossible mourning that continually loops back into inconsolable melancholy [provides] little room for even limited processes (including political processes) of working through problems.”¹⁹ Instead, LaCapra advocates a “mourning understood not simply as isolated grieving or endless bereavement but as a social process that may be at least partly effective in returning one to the demands and responsibilities of social life.”²⁰ Adding a new dimension to this concern, Giorgio Agamben has also cogently cautioned against the cult of unsayability, shifting the focus instead to the tenuous space of testimony, a space “between the unsayable and the sayable, between the outside and the inside of language.”²¹ For Agamben, testimony is inextricably rooted in language, in words spoken or written in close attendance to what threatens to remain unsayable and which can under certain conditions be conveyed but also betrayed by language. A memorial can only hope to turn that elusive space between the unsayable and the sayable into a literal space. But is this turning literal ever possible, or is it a self-defeating enterprise? If the unsayable can leave its traces in language, can it ever leave traces in a memorial building where unsaid and potentially unsayable traumatic events took place?

Memorials like Sighet often paint over traces and question marks, whether written out in chalk or hovering unarticulated. They often crowd out the space that could potentially host new testimony with what has already been said and has congealed into a particular narrative. However, even when we try to criticize the univocal narrative of the museum, it is still easy to follow this master narrative too closely. In the attempt to make sense of the museum experience, one is tempted to gloss over the interruptions and detours in the visit through the museum that might challenge both the univocal museum narrative and one’s critical argument. As Andreas Huyssen notes, museums “inevitably will construct the past in light of the discourses of the present and terms of present-day interest.”²² However, Huyssen continues, “no matter how much the museum, consciously or unconsciously, produces and affirms the symbolic order, there is always a surplus of meaning that exceeds set ideological boundaries, opening spaces for reflection and counter-hegemonic memory.”²³ While identifying and critiquing the master narrative that structures the Sighet Museum, this paper does not follow it exclusively but rather in conjunction with two more threads guiding us through the museum and sometimes pulling us in different directions: the documentary impulse that fills the exhibition with written exposés, documents, and artifacts, and the strong artistic bent that powerfully shapes

the project. These three threads are spun and woven together by museum curators, historians, artists, workers, and visitors, sometimes in complicity, sometimes in isolation, and sometimes in tense conflict. Despite its symbolic connotations, three is an accidental number: more or fewer threads could be followed. But even limited to three, the threads are sure to get entangled in the course of our visit. I dwell on the intersections, crossovers, conflicts, and knots of the three story lines. And since these places of contact often revolve around the material remains of the former prison, the essay is anchored around close analysis of such objects.

An Illustrated Tour of the Sighet Memorial Museum

Soon after entering the museum, the visitor faces a map of Romania that introduces some of the main questions that will inform our visit through the museum (WA 4). The map marks with black crosses the more than 230 places of confinement in use between 1945 and 1989 in Romania.²⁴ This approximate figure “includes places of interrogation, detention, selection, as well as labor and deportation camps.”²⁵ In the course of the museum’s subsequent remodeling, this map has been moved into a room of its own, at present the first exhibition room, which has been organized around it and called the Map Room. Besides the central map, the Map Room presents “the different categories of places of confinement in detail in six smaller maps, next to images of the main prisons” and a yearly chronology of repression.²⁶

The work of the museum curator consisted of adding the slight relief of the white frame that subtly transforms a piece of the white prison wall into a map of the country, and then painting, directly onto the prison wall, the black crosses that mark the places of confinement. It takes some knowledge of Romanian geography to identify Sighet—the highest cross on the northwestern border of the map—among the many other identical crosses that crowd the map. This is only fitting for a museum that wishes to commemorate not just the Sighet Prison, but the entire country’s experience of Communist repression. As such, particular cells focus on one major aspect of repression: forced labor, collectivization, deportation, torture, solitary confinement, daily life in prison, the history of the Securitate from 1948 to 1989, Yalta, and so on.²⁷ This first image maps the museum visit as a trip onto the national “geography of repression and history of suffering.” In the process, the visitor’s experience of the prison shifts. We are no longer simply considering one particular fragment of the prison wall; we are also considering a sign—a cross—that represents this prison as an entity among many others.²⁸ This exhibit pulls the visitor back and forth between a consideration of the particular material remains of this prison and the stylizing view

of the national cartographer and historian, which has turned the wall into a map of the country. The direction of this stylization is memorializing, putting crosses instead of the sites of repression, and marking the map with the color of mourning. Furthermore, the caption below the map, authored by the founder of the memorial, Ana Blandiana, notes, "When justice cannot be a form of memory, only memory can be a form of justice," thus casting the memorial as a corrective for the many blanks in legal justice. This image already suggests that for barbed wire to be woven into the yarn of a story, and further of history and of legal judgment, it has to be bent in certain decorous ways that bring it closer to writing.

The map sets an agenda for the museum that registers a difference and a refinement from the initial agenda articulated in the museum brochure that the guide gave out to visitors in 1996:

The cells of the old prison at Sighet will be transformed into a museum of the Romanian gulag and of Romanian resistance against Communism. Going through this museum will be equivalent to *a passage through a hell* of the most savage repression and terror. At the end of this road, the authors of the project had the idea to create in the prison's interior court a space of *recollection*, which will be the only entirely new construction of the Memorial, and which aims at providing (with the means of architectural art), the conclusion of this *initiatory experience*. And since the profound conclusion of all prison memoirs can be summarized by the phrase: "*I would have not resisted/survived, had I not believed in God,*" this phrase has become the theme of the architectural contest initiated this year.²⁹

This 1996 brochure projects the visitor's experience as an initiation leading from a substitute hell to a guaranteed Christian salvation. It carefully plans the visitor's literal path as well as the metaphorical meaning that should be derived from it before he or she even enters the museum. The visitor's initiation into "the hell" of a Communist prison and the redemption staged at the end of the visit are explicitly modeled on the experience of the prisoners, or rather, on the museum's take on the experience of the prisoners. Indeed, the museum brochure paints a unified picture of the prisoners who speak in one voice as survivors fortified by Christian faith; the brochure prompts the visitor to identify with this narrative, leaving him or her no other choices. This voice, as well as the whole narrative (of initiation into "the hell" of Communism followed by Christian redemption) that structures the memorial, unjustifiably excludes the prisoners and visitors who may not identify with this redemptive Christian scenario. Indeed this rhetoric comes dangerously close to participating in a "blame the victim" rhetoric. For, is

the underside of “I would have not resisted/survived, had I not believed in God” the implication that the many who did not resist and did not survive perished because they failed to believe (enough) in God? Furthermore, this rhetoric also uncritically excludes the dark sides of the history of many prisoners who were animated by such militant Christian rhetoric. As Gabriela Cristea reminds us, “Most of the interwar leaders imprisoned in Sighet were responsible for the glorious unification of Romania, but also for the anti-Semitic laws. . . . Interwar Romanian politics was very nationalistic and anti-Semitic.”³⁰ Even when it provides otherwise rich information on the biographies of Sighet’s victims, the museum does not address the problematic aspects of their biographies and politics, such as widespread anti-semitism. Instead the museum chooses to paint a unifying portrait of the victims as faultless national heroes, smoothing over the complex, sometimes unsavory politics of the prisoners as well as their actual diversity.

This teleological narrative leading from initiation into “the hell” of Communism straight to Christian redemption was not rigidly adhered to in the actual creation of the museum, where the cornucopia of exhibits and the multitude of contributors challenge such linear trajectories. Visitors, like the museum’s creators, fortunately get sidetracked, experiencing constant contractions and expansions of memory and time as they take in historic overviews spanning fifty years or get stuck on particular objects, some no larger and no less potent than Proust’s madeleine. There is no reference to the initiation-redemption scenario in the exhibits in some of my favorite rooms, such as “Prisoner’s Clothes,” “Deportations to Bărăgan,” and “Everyday Life Under Communism”; indeed, their arrangement follows no teleological narrative. In “Everyday Life Under Communism,” a veneer bookshelf crowds plastic flowers next to Jules Verne volumes and a prized tape deck, while a photomontage of gray figures waiting in line faces a wall of carefully chosen cutouts from official newspapers. Gasoline canisters were stored inside cramped living rooms as some of the most coveted goods during perpetual gasoline crises. In many exhibits, as well as in later museum brochures, only traces of the teleological narrative of initiation and redemption are visible. Thus, while most of the rhetoric of the 1996 brochure (except for the keyword “hell”) survived in the 1997 brochure, subsequent brochures largely replaced the heavy rhetoric of that initial programmatic statement with announcements about current developments related to the museum and related projects.³¹ However, the traces of that original initiation and redemption narrative are persistent enough still to mark a trajectory for the visitor. This master narrative is the first thread that I will follow critically in my essay, paying close attention to the ways it intersects with the museum’s documentary and aesthetic ambitions.

The 1996 brochure thus invited the visitor to become the protagonist of



Figure 31. Prisoners' clothes, Sighet Memorial Museum. Photograph by the author.

a story of initiation into “the hell” of Communism that was modeled on the museum’s totalizing version of the prisoner’s experience. Following the scenario designed by the museum curator, the visitor’s walk is meant to produce a moving picture of the former prison. This moving picture of the museum, with a scenario carefully designed by the curator, is supposed to move the visitor toward identification with the victims’ experience of Communism as a hell of repression. In a former prison, the memorial museum offers model sets for this experience. Many memorials invite such identifications directly, by issuing visitor identity cards in the name of a victim (the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum) or by inviting the visitor or museum guides to take on the role and sometimes the garb of either a prisoner or a guard.³² Following such identification scenarios, the Sighet visitor, having read the brochure that invited her to undergo “the hell” of Communism, could easily interpret one of the first rooms, featuring prison garb, as a costume room (figure 31).³³ But a closer look at the exhibit itself uncovers more ambiguity and self-reflexivity than the brochure would have led us to expect. The arrangement of these clothes imperatively forbid they be touched, let alone worn like costumes; the empty uniforms belie the notion that anyone can fill in the absence that the disappearance of the prisoners has created. The absence of the prisoners is carefully staged. The walls have been painted



Figure 32. Prisoners' shoes, Sighet Memorial Museum. Photograph by the author.

over, the clothes washed and carefully arranged in a *mise-en-scène* of absence. The way the curators of the museum have staged this room suggests self-reflexivity: by hanging the clothes as if to dry, they draw the visitor's attention to the previous cleaning of these clothes, and thus the curatorial techniques of processing the material.

Below the clothes, in the exhibit "Prisoners' Shoes," the initiatory narrative and the *mise-en-scène* of absence again call us in opposite directions (figure 32, WA 6). The question is how these shoes move us. Is this an invitation to step right into the prisoners' shoes and identify with the prisoners, or are these shoes supposed to move us toward an acceptance of the impossibility of filling in the empty spaces? This exhibit recalls other prisoner shoes, most famously the thousands of pairs of shoes found at the Majdanek Nazi camp. First immortalized in the Soviet film made upon the camp's liberation, some of these already iconic Majdanek shoes were later transported to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, where they form one of the most memorable exhibits.³⁴ The first exhibit of the shoes in the Soviet film, like the famous shot of Alain Resnais's *Night and Fog* as the camera pans over hundreds and hundreds of prisoner shoes, and like the Holocaust Memorial Museum exhibit, all draw their power from the juxtaposition of the mass of shoes with the undeniable particularities and materiality of each particular shoe.

The very notion of a pair seems worn out, and with it that of the individual. The Sighet exhibit drastically limits the number of shoes exhibited, thus renouncing the pathos of sheer numbers, so central to the previous iconic representation of prisoner shoes. Instead, the installation draws its pathos from its self-defeating attempt to put the pairs back together. The shoes all look alike, inasmuch as each shoe could at first glance go with any other shoe. Except that upon closer inspection no two shoes quite make a convincing pair. The curators seem to exhibit above all a doomed desire to restore individuality, similar to the attempt to bring together a fragmented body buried in a common grave. Once such reconstruction is made, it can be taken as a last homage always bordering on the impossible. Or it can be taken, by the visitor eager to be initiated into “the hell” of Communism by identifying with its victims, a visitor who generally needs two matched shoes, as a conveniently prepared aid to transportation through the museum. One size fits all.

This passage between the traumatic anonymity and uniformity of the prisoners to the uniformity of the visitors hangs by a thread, here the shoestring that could tie two shoes together into a pair, or the work of the curator. Déotte convincingly shows the complicity between the emergence of the modern museum and the Declaration of the Rights of Man.³⁵ He argues that both the museum and the declaration construct their subject as abstract and uniform by erasing all particularities. At Sighet, the memorial continues the tradition of the modern museum’s construction of its subject inasmuch as the type of exhibits that the museum presents hardly ever return the visitor’s gaze critically upon herself. In a country where much of the repressive system was supported by a large number of informers, the museum hardly broaches the issue. It addresses all visitors in one voice. It sets out to educate, inform, and finally model the visitor without showing much awareness for the inherent differences in the visitors’ profiles. Inasmuch as the museum attempts to provide a symbolic substitute for the trial of Communism, it tends to treat the guilt for these crimes as a separate entity that can be isolated in the exhibits, at a safe distance from the consciousness of the visitors. This is a crafty move for a memorial to those few who uncompromisingly resisted Communist repression: the memorial is always in danger of irrevocably estranging the many who, even if generally opposed to Communism, also compromised and collaborated with the regime. This attempt to isolate the general guilt inside the confines of a memorial museum, while erasing the uncomfortable differences among visitors, deserves criticism for attempting reconciliation without enough self-scrutiny. At the same time, it could be that a more reflexive and divisive attitude would have buried the project before it even got off the ground. As Irina Paperno concluded based on her own work in Russia as well as on Katherine Verdery’s work in other post-Communist countries:

“A legal explanation might be easier to come by, and achieving ‘Nuremberg’ (or ‘Hague’) justice might be easier than erecting a memorial in a local community.”³⁶ This assessment certainly holds for Romania, a country divided down to the individual, many of whom had not one but two types of files with the Securitate—a personal file and an informer file—being informed on and informing even at the same time. It also holds for Sighet in particular, a provincial town where the former prison director and a former prisoner share the everyday space of the same apartment building.³⁷

Museums are often said to kill the objects exhibited there, severing their life links to the rest of reality and putting them into frames.³⁸ In situations of abrupt political change, where the past refuses to be contained in the logic of a before and after and afflicts the present with its lingering presence, museums can be useful. They can be used as a civilized and symbolic way of finishing off and burying the uncomfortable past (albeit sometimes burying it alive). However, “fundamentally dialectical, the museum serves both as burial chamber of the past . . . and as a site of possible resurrections.”³⁹ Chances are that the past, so hastily disposed of, may well come back to haunt the present. But for the time being, the Sighet Memorial and Romanian society at large hardly appear ready to face their past more critically. By carefully ignoring the complicated links between its visitors and the past, the museum protects the visitors from its attack on the tainted past. Given the actual paucity of uncompromised subjects, the museum chooses to recreate its visitors as forward-looking and Communism-abhorring.

Another display shows the contents of a package received by the family of a political prisoner as the only news of his death (WA 7). Here, again, the arrangement of the clothes in the middle of an empty cell can be seen as an act of mourning. Instead of the careless cramming of the package by a prison official, we see a careful arrangement that spells out the meaning of these clothes for the family, as well as their desire to make up for the lack of a proper burial. This exhibit seems to appeal to the museum’s power to provide a burial and act as “family sepulchers” for the objects buried there, while erasing the criticism inherent in Theodor Adorno’s formulation: “Museum and mausoleum are connected by more than phonetic association. Museums are like family sepulchers of works of art.”⁴⁰ While for Adorno the decontextualization inherent in the placing of an art object in a museum severs its links to life, killing it or at least making its death official, this Sighet exhibit decontextualizes death itself. It decontextualizes the prison death that has already happened in criminally unknown circumstances by replacing the careless discarding of an individual’s remains with the acts of touching, handling, and rearranging part of these remains. So rearranged, the clothes preserve the dead man’s living traces, from the skin cells rubbed against the

threadbare soft white of his undershirt, down to the way he impressed his weight unto the world. The uneven wear on his shoes is still molded by the peculiarities of his gait. As such, this exhibit takes advantage of what Nora described as the *lieu de mémoire's* defining hybrid status, "bound intimately with life and death," intent "to immortalize death, to materialize the immaterial," to offer what has again and again been found wanting in postconflict societies—the chance to offer proper mourning and a proper burial to the victims.⁴¹ By turning the museum into a substitute burial site the curators employ their art to perform the kind of mourning that LaCapra commends for having the social and political potential of working through the traumas of the past while opening toward the present.

While we have so far dedicated most of our attention to particular exhibits in the museum, I would like to focus now on the transformation that the architecture of the prison itself—its walls, windows, stairways, and doors—has undergone during the creation of the museum.⁴² In a recollection of his viewing of Second World War footage after the war, Jean-Luc Godard dwells on the documentary effect of black-and-white film versus color film.⁴³ He comments that the black-and-white Soviet films prompted him to take for granted their supposedly unposed authenticity, while the color American films seemed a Hollywood concoction. The Soviet films, he comments, were, like the American ones, carefully staged.

Indeed, the one cell where a careful restoration was attempted, the punishment cell *Neagra*, exhibits special paint complete with cracks and was endowed with a smoky smell. In contrast, all the other cells of the museum display a desire for radical transformation rather than renovation. The transformation of the prison into a memorial museum tries to subvert the former prison and its attempt to annihilate the prisoners together with their memory. As the first image of Romania's map had already suggested, the museum is intent on removing the barbed wire from its initial oppressive function and bending it so as to produce a particular writing of history. The techniques used in this bending and the effects it produces on the visitors ask for reflection. If upon my first visit the scratched dirty walls seemed an unlikely screen for the projections of my stories about the prison, the newly painted walls often invite a process of abstraction. Thus, the peculiar painting of the cell window invited a photographic framing (WA 10) that, to me, divorced it from its referent and opened it to a whole array of interpretations. The picture is taken from inside a cell, looking out of the window toward the corridor where the guard was patrolling, and it faces the window of the opposite cell. This was a particularly dangerous position to be in for a prisoner condemned to solitary confinement, since looking out the window was strictly forbidden.⁴⁴ Taking this photograph from this spot, I was

responding to the peculiar transformation of the window into an abstract image achieved through the complicity of the museum curator and myself. In the process, the black contoured itself against the white like a pupil of an eye. As a projection and as a mirroring pupil tend to do, this image sent back my own reflection and erased the thought of the prisoners' attempt to communicate. As I was thinking of the temptations of this aestheticization I met the gaze of another visitor walking by the window. In contrast to my first walk through the empty prison, the presence of this visitor was very likely linked with the black-and-white window, and the general transformation of the former prison into an elaborate museum. After this transformation, the museum has attracted significantly more visitors, and it has received extended press coverage.⁴⁵

The Afterlives of a Modernist Table: On the Politics of Memorial Art

Our visit ends in the only new architectural structure in the museum: the Space of Recollection and Prayer. Designed by architect Radu Mihăilescu, the structure is positioned in the interior yard of the museum, formerly a desolate piece of arid land where the prisoners were taken for walks. Now the yard is covered with grass, and its center is slightly elevated in a circular mound. Descending a few concrete steps, one enters the space of recollection. Once inside this striking structure that looks like a stylized cell or tomb, the visitor's gaze is directed toward the cross-shaped incision in the middle of the roof (WA 11). For the gaze of those engulfed in the initiatory scenario, this cross-shaped incision opens the way toward greener pastures and the heavens. But this incision was also designed to let drops of rain fall onto the central table and thus provide a screen of water that produces stunning reflections, shifting the emphasis from direct light to the moving beauty of reflected light (WA 12–13).

The appearance of the central table immediately recalled in my mind the most famous table in Romanian memorial art, Constantin Brâncuși's *Table of Silence*. The 1996 museum brochure confirmed this association, mentioning Brâncuși's *Table* as the inspirational model for the Space of Recollection table.⁴⁶ The association proves worthy of attention. In 1938, Brâncuși, by then an established artist in France, returned to his native Romania and built not one table, but at least three.⁴⁷ The first table is little known, as it was designed for the private garden of an acquaintance.⁴⁸ Its middle is decorated with a cross-like incision, just like the one reflected on the middle of the Sighet table. The most famous table that Brâncuși built came to be known as *The Table of Silence*. Brâncuși initially built two versions of this table; dissatisfied with both, he finally took the upper drums from each table and superimposed them. He then threw the rejected lower

drums into the river.⁴⁹ *The Table of Silence* became the first element of the celebrated memorial to First World War heroes that traverses in a straight line the whole city of Târgu Jiu, in Romania. *The Table of Silence* is followed by *The Gate of the Kiss*, and then the *Endless Column*. Brâncuși designed the column as the last element in his complex, which he meant to contain just one table; however, now the walk continues up to another table that resembles *The Table of Silence*. It was created by the superimposition of the two rejected drums that Brâncuși had thrown in the river, and which the locals fished out and added to the complex without Brâncuși's permission.⁵⁰ The interpretation of the complex remains controversial, but most accounts read the *Avenue of the Heroes*, as the axis is sometimes called, as leaving from *The Table of Silence* feast of those parting for war to a moment of passage and leave-taking under *The Gate of the Kiss*. *The Endless Column* is taken to express gratitude for the soldiers' sacrifice. In contrast to *The Table of Silence*, the table salvaged by the locals lacks accompanying chairs and came to be interpreted as standing for the absence of the dead heroes after the war. This accidental afterlife of the table came then to signify the afterlife of the soldiers as heroes.

In a lecture titled "Post-Modernism in Eastern Europe," the Romanian writer Magda Cârneci described the peculiar brand of postmodernism developed in Romania by her generation of artists.⁵¹ She claimed that largely isolated from the overall conditions that defined the arrival of postmodernism in the West, Romanian postmodernism developed as the continuation of a trend in modernism epitomized by Brâncuși's work. This was a modernism of abstraction, a search for essences beyond the multiplicity of details. The postmodern aesthetic inspired by his work was not a seamless continuation of Brâncuși's aesthetic, but in many cases the wayward continuation of forgotten, abandoned, or lost modernist elements. Part of the reason that continuation was not seamless is the sustained censorship of the modernist tradition epitomized by Brâncuși. Indeed, Brâncuși's work was one of the symbolic sites of the dogged attempt to annihilate this aesthetic. *The Endless Column* itself, arguably Brâncuși's most famous work in Romania, "has stood seven degrees off true vertical ever since the early 1950s, when a Stalinist mayor of Târgu Jiu decided the work was a piece of Western formalist junk and tried to pull it down for smelting into industrial machinery. He had guy ropes attached, and for three days horses tried to pull the column over."⁵² In the end, "*The Column* proved immovable, though it was left with a slight lean."⁵³ While listening to Cârneci's talk, the salvaged table that fortuitously concludes *The Avenue of Heroes* immediately came to my mind, as one of those dislodged, violated modernist elements recovered not only by the thrifty locals but also by a whole generation of contempo-

rary artists. Indeed, I would argue that the new Sighet table richly reflects not only the memory of *The Table of Silence* but also more importantly the trajectory of the last table: a table that was dislodged and discarded, and then recast in a new role, in an uncertain afterlife.

The Sighet table's nod to Brâncuși, as well as the museum's overall attachment to the aesthetic realm, its tendency toward minimalism and abstraction, its attachment to the intimate and the individual over the collective, and its strong religious undertones can all be read and maybe better understood against the tenets and censorious practices of socialist realism. In this context, it seems only fitting that a repressed aesthetic like Brâncuși's modernism be revisited in the memorialization of the political resistance to repression. However, the Sighet Museum marks a key moment when a repressed aesthetic, long written between the lines or half-articulated, becomes institutionalized. The initial credo of the museum as it appears in its first brochure shows that, in the absence of the deposed official dogma that it used to undermine, this aesthetic is now in danger of itself becoming dogmatic. And yet, the visitor exits the space of recollection not through the hole in the roof, but through the same door that led her there. To leave the memorial, we have to retrace our steps all the way back through the former prison, in a movement that opens toward nonlinear trajectories and reflection. The rooms described in this essay are the ones I was compelled to step into once again on my way out.

The Sighet Memorial Museum revisits some of the most arresting debates around memory, mourning, and representation that have been articulated in Western theoretical discourse around memorials. Revisiting these questions from the marginal site of an obscure Eastern European border town, somehow turned a representative site of memory, has the potential of reframing these questions and debates from a refreshing angle. Thus this essay has tried to move from an initial consideration of Sighet's inscription within contemporary theoretical debates about memorials toward a reevaluation of these debates through a close-up analysis of the museum's particular exhibits considered in their Eastern European, Romanian, and local context. Against the blanket critique of the dangers of representing and aestheticizing the past, Sighet's complex weaving of memorial art with documentary history reminds us how important it is to consider who does the aestheticization, in what context, and for what purposes. Thus at Sighet, the whitewashed museum walls that have been so often criticized as a high modernist attempt at aestheticizing, erasing context, and killing the exhibited object are part of the museum's politically conscious embrace of a modernist aesthetic that underwent repression at the time the Sighet Prison was in operation.⁵⁴ Similarly, I opened the essay by considering how the

abrupt transformation of the ruined prison into a memorial museum revisits the pivotal debate between the proponents of memorial immemorials and those of memorial museums, as between different types of mourning. While deeply sympathetic to the concerns of the memorial immemorial advocates, I believe that recent Eastern European history is an argument for the creation of memorial museums. This imperfect solution seems preferable in places where former prison sites and camps are either repurposed without much ado for present uses or left to crumble, disintegrate, and disappear unmarked. Marking these places of memory certainly raises thorny ethical, political, and aesthetic questions. But in a place where people have gotten accustomed to walking over unmarked graves and past the prisons and camps that have long fed those graves, marking and memorializing appear as necessary parts of a much needed process of mourning. Sighet's work of mourning roots into its history but also opens up toward the present. At times, this work of mourning shies away from the site's complex history—as when it glosses over issues of complicity, when it paints uncritical prisoner hagiographies, and when it promises facile redemption. Many of the museum's shortcomings appear traceable to its ambition to represent not only its own traumatic history but also the traumatic history of a whole country and of Eastern Europe as a whole. This enormous burden of representation lends credit to but at times also threatens the Sighet project, as this prison's remains are hollowed out of their particular history and made into general symbols. As such, Sighet's status as a representative Eastern European site of memory ultimately appears as a mixed blessing and a call for the creation of other local memorial museums willing to take on some of the enormous burden of representing the region's complicated pasts.

Notes

The full gallery of illustrations for this essay can be found in a Web Appendix at <https://sites.google.com/site/cristinavatulescu/>. Images in this Web Appendix are marked WA 1–13.

1. See Oushakine's essay "Postcolonial Estrangements: Claiming a Space Between Stalin and Hitler" in this volume.

2. Tzvetan Todorov, "Communist Camps and Their Aftermath," *Representations* 49 (Winter 1995): 120.

3. Tomasz Kizny, *Goulag* (Paris: Acropole, 2003).

4. Aleksandr Isaevich Solzhenitsyn, *Arkhipelag Gulag, 1918–1956: opyt khudozhestvennogo issledovaniia*, 3 vols. (Moscow: Novyi Mir, 1989), 2:125.

5. Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*," *Representations* 26, no. 1 (1989): 12.

6. Other notable exceptions are the House of Terror in Hungary and the Perm-36 Museum in Russia. A flash museum, the House of Terror attracts significant num-

bers of tourists without inviting much thorough introspection or reassessment of the past. For a full-blown analysis of the House of Terror in comparison to the Sighet Museum, see Gabriela Nicolescu Cristea, "On Maps, Abused Virgins and Nations: Anti-Communist Memorial Museums in Hungary and Romania," in *NaMU: Comparing National Museums*, <http://www.ep.liu.se/ecp/030/004/ecp0830004.pdf>, 2008. Like the Sighet Museum, the Perm-36 Museum has a longer history, having been conceived in 1992 and opened in 1996. Despite its modest resources, the museum attempts a careful reconstruction of the camp. Having visited the House of Terror and an itinerant exhibit of the Perm Museum, I chose to focus on Sighet because of its unique artistic ambitions as well as because of my long-term knowledge of the site.

7. Council of Europe, *Remembrance and Citizenship: From Projects to Places* (Strasbourg: Council of Europe Publishing, 2000), 8. Nora, "Between Memory and History."

8. The majority of funding for the project has been provided by private donors, mostly Romanians living abroad. "Prezentare generală," http://www.memorialsighet.ro/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=362&Itemid=92&lang=ro.

9. The political prison was turned into a penal prison in 1955 as a consequence of the Geneva Convention. *Ibid.*

10. "Scurt istoric al închisorii Sighet," http://www.memorialsighet.ro/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=51&Itemid=93&lang=ro.

11. All photographs were taken by the author unless otherwise noted. The photographs date from 1996–97 to emphasize the rapid changes undergone by the museum during that year and also because the museum later imposed restrictions on visitor photography.

12. Jean-Louis Déotte, *Oubliez! Les ruines, l'Europe, le musée* (Paris: Harmattan, 1994), 214.

13. *Ibid.*

14. *Ibid.* The idea of the immemorial has been interestingly developed in Jean-François Lyotard, "Mémorial immémorial," in *L'exposition imaginaire: The Art of Exhibiting in the Eighties*, ed. Evelyn Beer and Riet de Leeuw (Gravenhage, Neth.: SDU; Rijksdienst Beeldende Kunst, 1989).

15. Memorial Sighet, *Carte de impresii* (1998–99).

16. *Ibid.*

17. Eva Hoffman, "The Uses of Hell," *New York Review of Books*, March 9, 2000.

18. Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 23.

19. *Ibid.*, 70.

20. *Ibid.*, 22.

21. Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 1999), 158. For Agamben's critique of the unsayability see 31–33, 157–59.

22. Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 15.

23. *Ibid.*

24. "Sala Hărților," Memorialul Victimelor Comunismului si al Rezistenței, *Muzeul de luat acasă* (Bucharest: Academia Civică, 2010).

25. *Ibid.*

26. *Ibid.*

27. The complete map of the museum, including the title of each room and a

wealth of additional information about the project can be found at <http://www.memorialsighet.ro>. The museum also sells a CD-ROM, translated as *Take-Away Museum*, which provides animated visits inside each exhibit room as well as copies of the documents on display. Ibid.

28. Gabriela Cristea notes that “the mourning of the victims of communism in Hungary and Romania stays always under the sign of the cross.” Cristea, “On Maps,” 67. For a further study of this symbolism and a critique of its exclusions, see Simina Badica and Gabriela Cristea, “Raising the Cross: Exorcising Romania’s Communist Past in Museums, Memorials and Monuments,” in *Past for the Eyes: East European Representations of Communism in Cinema and Museums After 1989*, ed. Oksana Sarkisova and Peter Ápor (Budapest: CEU Press, 2007).

29. Fundația Academia Civică, *Memorial Sighet* (1996); emphasis mine.

30. Cristea, “On Maps,” 66.

31. Fundația Academia Civică, *Memorial Sighet Info*, vol. 1 (1997), 3.

32. At the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, visitors are issued an identity card in the name of an actual person who experienced the Nazi camps. The plans for the transformation of the Kresty prison into an interactive museum include the proposal that visitors would be allowed to choose between the roles of a warden and a prisoner. Vitalii Minchenko, “Sledstvennyi izoliator no. 1 ‘Kresty,’” <http://www.petersburg-history.narod.ru/p307.htm>. At the Gulag Museum in Moscow, the guide puts on an actual coat belonging to a camp guard, his own grandfather. Kevin O’Flynn, “A Little House of Horrors on Ulitsa Petrovka,” *St. Petersburg Times*, March 20, 2007.

33. In the meantime, this room has been moved to the second floor, at cell number 72.

34. Aleksander Ford and Irina Setkina, *Majdanek* (Moscow: Central Studio for Documentaries, 1944/5).

35. Déotte, *Oubliez!*, 51–67.

36. Irina Paperno, “Exhuming the Bodies of Soviet Terror,” *Representations* 75 (Summer 2001): 110; Katherine Verdery, *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies: Reburial and Postsocialist Change* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 112.

37. This is literally true: I happened to stay in the same apartment building while in Sighet.

38. Déotte thus writes of the objects exhibited in the museum: “Reduced to the state of corpses, of ruins, [exhibits] all resemble each other.” Déotte, *Oubliez!*, 133.

39. Huyssen, *Twilight Memories*, 15.

40. Theodor W. Adorno, “Valéry Proust Museum,” in *Prisms* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1981), 175.

41. Nora, “Between Memory and History,” 19. Mark Sanders uncovers the insistent return to the theme of mourning in Truth and Reconciliation Commission testimonies, a return that surges as a response to an apartheid that he defines as “a systematic prohibition on mourning and a withholding of condolence.” Mark Sanders, *Ambiguities of Witnessing: Law and Literature in the Time of a Truth Commission* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2007), 49.

42. Figures WA 8 and WA 9 in the Web Appendix show sections of the former prison—the stairway and elevator, a cell door—that had not yet been renovated by the museum at the time I took the pictures in 1996.

43. Samira Gloor-Fadel, *Berlin-Cinema* (Switzerland/France: La Sept-Arte, 1999).

44. “*Scurt istoric.*”

45. For a compilation of the relevant literature, see *Revista Presei*, <http://www>

.memorialsighet.ro/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&id=39&Itemid=91&lang=ro&limitstart=270.

46. Fundația Academia Civică, *Memorial Sighet*.

47. The following account of the Târgu Jiu complex is based on Eric Shanes, "The Avenue of Heroes," in *Constantin Brancusi* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1989).

48. This little-known incised table is documented and reproduced as figure 97, *ibid.*, 88–89.

49. *Ibid.*, 85.

50. *Ibid.*

51. Magda Cârneci, "Post-Modernism in Eastern Europe," Harvard University Humanities Center, 1999.

52. Shanes, "The Avenue of Heroes," 93–94.

53. *Ibid.*, 94.

54. For an eloquent critique of the decontextualizing and depoliticizing effects of the modernist museum's white walls, see Allan Sekula, "Dismantling Modernism, Reinventing Documentary," *Massachusetts Review* 19, no. 4 (1978): 866.