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Two Introductions

The Exoticism of One's Own Childhood. The Handkerchief.¹

Ioana Popescu

Some people can boast a memory for names, others for dates, some aunt becomes the embodiment of the family memory, others have a visual memory, some others an auditory one or the memories of gestures. But, regardless of the poignancy of memories, there is a trigger that generates the remembrance. Most times, it is a photo album, a flavour or an object that constitutes the pretext for re-visiting a space, moment or event from the past. Each time, the act of remembrance itself engenders a new story: remembering one's childhood - for example - transfers to the present not just events one has truly experienced, but also one's impressions about them, impressions that formed subsequently, in one's adolescence and adulthood. Cesare Pavese suggested that, probably, each period of one's life seems all the more longer as it is further away into the past, simply because it is multiplied due to the reflections of the following periods.

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If childhood moments are situated rather far away in time from the present adulthood, then their remembrance might become a truly exotic journey and the objects that populated that world of the beginning might function as mystery-bearing relics, as triggers of cultural curiosity and surprise. It's enough to choose one piece from the daily universe of childhood (a word, a gesture, an object) to remember and its entire context, along with the following impressions and experiences, are activated in the present.

When I was young, mother didn't think it

fit to teach me the ways of the household. I had to steal the knowledge - later on - from her, my aunts or even from my friends. But even then, more or less consciously, one way or the other, I would try and change gestures or recipes until I reached my own result, which was, actually, the rendition of the childhood model practiced by my family. As a friend has observed, no matter where I went, even for determined periods of time, in lack of an exact replica, I would carefully suggest my family's home, as it had imprinted itself in the memory of the child I once was. I have even surprised myself recently as I was trying various combinations of flavours (lavender, wormwood leaves and Revlon perfume) that, together with the wood furniture and the wool carpet, would reproduce the olfactory sensation I had every time I returned home from school.

I was saying that mother systematically refused to teach me anything about the household by claiming that if I learned it on my own, I might reach superior performances as - truth be told - household chores were not really her cup of tea. Instead, she unremittingly and practically taught me three things that, in her opinion, were paramount and crucial to the woman I would one day become.

1. To artistically mend cotton socks on the wooden stand (in those days, in the '50s - '60s, one wouldn't even think of throwing away solid cotton socks because of a mere hole);
2. To knit booties for newborns (thus, with just one reused ball yarn, I could have the first gift for the newborns of our family and our friends);
3. And finally, to hem handkerchiefs.

At the time, I didn't ask myself why hemming handkerchiefs was on the shortlist of sine qua non female wisdom. I only know that around age 7-8, I learned how to transform little squares of linon² - which, by tear and wear, had acquired the consistency of a veil - mother had cut out of blouses or dresses so worn and washed-out that they couldn't be recycled as a whole, into elegant and soft handkerchiefs,

1) Why the handkerchief and not any other ordinary object from my childhood, considering that, generally, such things have become exotic in our times? Because I had the chance to come across Herta Muller's speech upon receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature (2009). And, in addition to an incredible aesthetic delight and an equal thrill, the story of the daily question Have you got your handkerchief? revealed once again the importance of the small, daily and, thus, unnoticed things. And, for a split second, I had the audacity to feel a handkerchief friend of Herta Muller!

2) Our family would call it linon. In her speech, Herta Muller mentioned that in Romanian, handkerchiefs were made from a fabric called batist, so the fabric is downright the finite object, i.e. the handkerchief ("batistă") - as if all the handkerchiefs in the world were made of this fine batist fabric (Muller, 2009).

edged by a thin hem of no more than a millimetre, sown with an almost invisible, thread of the same colour. In my childhood, it would have been unthinkable not to have a handkerchief with oneself. When I played outside, I would wear organdie double-sided pinafores, knotted on the shoulders, with lap pockets, in which I would always jam one or more handkerchiefs that rarely wiped away mucus or tears, but were, otherwise, multifunctional. By knotting and draping, they would become clothing for dolls, ragbags for treasures (such as rocks or remaining pieces of coloured chalk, leaves of grass or herbs meant to defend us from *verde stop*³), sui generis bandages for elbow or knee bruising, blindfolds for blind man's buff, etc.

At school, the handkerchief was actually indispensable: as we used a fountain pen and ink bottle⁴ to write, the index and the middle finger were permanently dirty - either blue or violet -, thus, they had to be cleaned with the handkerchief so as not to stain the rest of the uniform. If their clothing did not have pockets, all the women in my family, from my grandmother to my youngest cousin, wore the handkerchief inside their left sleeve. In her old age, my grandmother would leave traces wherever she went: she would drop her handkerchief on the carpet or on the kitchen mosaic floor, so she would immediately get another one; therefore, her route around the house could be retraced at any point by using these material signs that reminded us of Hansel and Gretel's story. Usually, knitted jackets or long-sleeved blouses had a somewhat narrower cuff than the rest of the sleeve, which allowed the handkerchief to remain safe in this pouch, thus giving the forearm a certain external relief. What happened during the summer, when sleeves were short or non-existent? I do not know,⁵ and no matter how hard I might try, I can only remember the place where each of us placed our handkerchief at home, at hand. The furniture was sparse and made up of unmatched pieces, inherited from mother to daughter and father to son and then saved Lord knows how on the occasion of every

forced displacement; my mother had inherited from my grandmother a huge armchair - which impertinently filled the only room of the attic where I spent my childhood -; the armchair, called The Elephant, had tapestried arms and a huge down-filled pillow.

Mother would jam her handkerchief at the joint between the right arm and the back of the chair and would take it out and often clasp it in her hands whenever she told some important story. Thus, the handkerchief somehow became the material and expressive equivalent of the actual highlight. I also remember the way the sofa would steal handkerchiefs that we would find only at the next clean-up, when the pillows were taken outside and dusted with a stick. My father's trousers had pockets, so I noticed the importance he gave handkerchiefs only at family gatherings, for Christmas and Easter; on these occasions, he wore the same unique black cloth, white-striped dinner jacket, in whose pocket only he knew how to randomly fold the white silk handkerchief which I had never seen him use to blow his nose. I would forget my handkerchief everywhere around the house, in the bathroom, in the kitchen, on the table, marking my territory like an untrained puppy, to my mother's despair. When I got older, I noticed that in almost all the houses I entered, handkerchiefs had their own designated place.

Now I would like to discuss a bit about the great significance the ever-surprising Irina Nicolau placed on drawers, in the ethnological field research. According to her, one could get to know not only the individual's culture or family customs, but also a part of his life history by going through his drawers.⁶ This small, closed space that hides, but also preserves intact memory fragments for future revelations, a furniture accessory which can hold valuable family items, or in which photographs and letters, whose authors and subjects can no longer be identified, are jammed into oblivion, the drawer speaks volumes about its owner right from first opening it.

For instance, Irina would open a huge drawer inside the Biedermayer wardrobe in

3) Verde stop is a closing line in a children's game.

4) Each student had his own ink bottle he would bring to school every day, in a home-sewn little pouch that was always stained by the ink dripping on the bottle at every movement or rock.

5) But my childhood friend claims that, in summer, the handkerchiefs were worn under the dress cord, like the wedding n'fram' of peasant brides

6) It wouldn't have crossed my mind, in the 1990s, that the drawer experiment would be confirmed 20 years later by Herta Muller's text, stating that The drawer was a family portrait in handkerchief format. (Muller 2009)

her bedroom, out of which burst a plastic, multicoloured, explosion of thread spools and silk skeins, meagre remains of Indian veil and equally tiny bells arranged on a red cotton string, pairs of scissors, silver and brass thimbles, elephant heads she had cut out of some oriental pillows, tassels and unpaired beads, broken rings and crooked teaspoons. Continuing the experiment, the first chance she got, she entered my bedroom and opened the first drawer of the chest-of-drawers located at the bed head. Looked at from above, the drawer seemed to be the aerial photo of a utopian city, its plan divided perfectly geometrically in rectangular batches and lidless square boxes, aligned along some perfectly straight access lines, inter-crossed in 90-degree angles. Until then I had never been so stunned by my own order, inherited from my mother, from the cradle. The *pièce de résistance* was the handkerchief box, upholstered with a precious cashmere weave, located in the most accessible corner of the drawer, together with 3 types of *vieux rose* silk pockets, for pantyhose, gloves and scarves. The rest of the drawer – lined with an old embroidered table cloth – was populated by carefully folded and perfectly aligned undergarments. Following the epiphany and the subsequent moment of suffocation, I agreed with Irina and, for a split second, I asked myself how it was possible for us to be friends... Something, nevertheless, was bringing us closer: both our drawers contained little hand-sewn pouches for dry lavender beans.

Back to my handkerchief box. In it, the square fragments of small dimensions, with the side between 15 and 20 cm, lay overlapped, folded almost exactly. Despite their extremely frail aspect, due to the thinness or even transparency of the material, the handkerchiefs were washed very often, with salt and domestic soap, and, from time to time, mother would literally put them in a plate bucket and boil them on the stove. Normally, after having dried off, they would be ironed, but, since I had proven to be incapable of ironing the straight sides, mother taught me another trick:

carefully lay them on the tile stove. Thus, the handkerchiefs would preserve their shape, and, when they had dried off, they would come off the stove tiles and could be folded. Whenever I think of the tile stove, lined with multicoloured handkerchiefs, I can feel the vapour with the smells of cleanliness and burning in my nostrils.

Regarding the manner in which handkerchiefs instituted relationships within a community of family or friends, I am rather amazed to find out that within a group of acquaintances, gifting away a handkerchief was completely unacceptable; it was considered a poisoned gift that bore the menace of serious disease or death.

Thus, the handkerchief had to be bought; remains and contamination of old magic beliefs required that a metal coin be given in exchange. However, when close relatives or friends, who had fled the country and settled in the West, started to send us packages of worn clothes, we were glad when we would sometimes discover handkerchiefs forgotten in pockets, which we would wash and wear, feeling that this would bring us closer to one another. Moreover, I remember that, in my childhood, an aunt who had settled in France even before the war would send now and then an old issue of Paris Match magazine, because it was the only thing we were allowed to receive by mail. But, inside the magazine, we would sometimes find, pressed between the pages, a vintage lace or exquisitely embroidered handkerchief. In addition to the surprise, the discovery of the hidden handkerchief – which would never have used to blow your nose – represented tactile and olfactory pleasure (usually it had previously been soaked in Chanel 19), but particularly the feeling that that tiny object gave me access to a fragment of the normal world.

Along with the spread of the single-use tissue paper which is only a tiny fragment of the single-use material universe meant to simplify our life and clear away the memories, the true handkerchief has disappeared. And stories are the only solution for the preservation



of things which become obsolete and disappear. That is why we tell stories and our childhood is told to us, that is why memory is so important and that is why the memory of a simple question activates for Herta Muller the memory of her entire childhood: *DO YOU HAVE A HANDKERCHIEF was the question my mother asked me every morning, standing by the gate to our house, before I went out onto the street. I didn't have a handkerchief. And because I didn't, I would go back inside and get one. I never had a handkerchief because I would always wait for her question. The handkerchief was proof that my mother was looking after me in the morning. For the rest of the day I was on my own. The question DO YOU HAVE A HANDKERCHIEF was an indirect display of affection. Anything more direct would have been embarrassing and not something the farmers practiced. Love disguised itself as a question. That was the only way it could be spoken: matter-of-factly, in the tone of a command, or the deft maneuvers used for work. The brusqueness of the voice even emphasized the tenderness. Every morning I went to the gate once without a handkerchief and a second time with a handkerchief. Only then would I go out onto the street, as if having the handkerchief meant having my mother there, too.* (Müller 2009).

There is, however, another solution for the survival of former useful things that have turned into curiosities. For example, Irina Nicolau used her abilities as a curator and collector, as usual, against the current: in full *hygienism*, she decided to collect and use only beautiful, cambric handkerchiefs. First, she received two or three from abroad, then she looked through the stores in Bucharest and couldn't find anything beautiful,⁷ so she started to sew thin hems on patches of Indian cambric which she lovingly kept in all sorts of drawers. Because she couldn't mix handkerchiefs with other clothes in the washing machine, she bought a plate bucket from a village shop and would boil them on the stove. As she hated ironing, she would lay the wet handkerchiefs on the bathroom tiles. At the beginning of the 2000s, Irina was reconstructing in her

own home a fragment of the reality of the previous century.

And, had she lived longer, she would have definitely succeeded in re-vamping the handkerchief as an indispensable accessory to any outfit.



Remembering childhood

Simina Bădică

No handkerchief resembles another as it is used, carried, monogrammed, lost and found; no childhood resembles another as it is remembered, cherished, buried deep, forgotten or constantly brought to mind. This volume is a celebration of the transforming power of childhood memories, of the enormous energies and resources that reside in that special time in everyone's lives.

Our plea for remembering childhood should be understood on a personal, academic and curatorial level. This volume itself oscillates between these dimensions. Some authors have chosen to remember their own childhood by building intricate auto-ethnographies (Dumitru and Precup), others have urged interviewees to remember their childhood (Adam and Galabova) while some remind us of the troubling and traumatic past that childhood can turn into at times (Bezzi and Mihăilescu). Some articles look at the habits and rituals of childhood (Iuga), others at the images they leave behind (Blos-Jáni and Precup), some at the toys they use and produce (Roșu and Iancu). The museology section is concerned with the practice of translating childhood into a curatorial concept. All articles share a deep concern with childhood and argue for a firmer positioning of this subject in anthropological, ethnographic, visual and museological research.

Research on childhood is almost an invitation for auto-ethnography, yet only a fraction of our authors have given in to this temptation that does come with considerable dangers. The past is a foreign country and one

7) Actually, today, cloth handkerchiefs can only be found in shop windows. Most of them, made of rare fabric like the cloth used for straining cheese, but firmly starched, are bought in big quantities by the relatives of the deceased in order to be given to the participants at the burial ceremony.

can never underestimate the shattering power of discovering a different story of one's idyllic childhood. This is probably mostly true for the article that opens this volume. Mihaela Precup's journey into her own childhood and her family's history in Socialist Romania is prompted by her ritualistic visits to the family albums. Her intention is "to explore the influence that the family album has on the formation of a certain (possibly idealized) view of one's childhood and family members, who are often interpreted by children as non-political individuals." The article dwells on the striking presence in the family album of official photographs of her grandfather, "relatively high up in the communist party ranks" and offers a fresh perspective, very much lacking in contemporary discourse on the communist past, on coming to terms with a family genealogy that encompasses both resistance to and support for the communist state. Precup produces an intricate interpretation of these photographs that would enable her "to see the workings of dictatorship not as separate from, but as part of her own story".

Iuliana Dumitru builds a seductive narrative of a subject that has already attracted the attention of anthropologists. The community in the seaside village of 2 Mai, a favorite resort for bohemians, artists and intellectuals in the communist and post-communist era, is, however, analyzed here from a distinctive, insider's perspective. Iuliana Dumitru grew together with this community as a child working with her parents in the village camping facility. Trained as an anthropologist, Dumitru now provides a compelling narrative of how she interacted with the adult world in a Bildungsroman of camping and befriending.

Anamaria Iuga writes about the role of children in the customs performed in the villages she studied ethnographically (mainly from Transylvania and Maramureş). She draws out attention to the interesting fact that "some customs, performed until recently exclusively by young people and adults, or in which children had a secondary role, have lately been taken over also by children, and are

thus simultaneously performed by various age categories". She sees children as seminal to the performance and continuity of popular customs in Romania's villages as she concludes that "regardless of their role (passive or active performers, spectators or beneficiaries) children fully contribute to the social cohesion of a community and to the passing down of values incorporated in traditions".

A different perspective on Romania's rural children is that of Cristina Bezzi who studies transnational families from two Romanian rural areas (the Romanian Moldavia and the small town of Borşa in the Maramureş region), who work in Italy. The already defined category of children "left behind" is contextualized in this article via the attempt to overcome the stigmatization of parents and, particularly, of mothers by showing children as active, not passive subjects of their families. Bezzi advances a new term, the transnational / transmigrant child instead of the derogative "child left behind". She argues that it is not only children, but families who "actually suffer the consequences of a context of structural poverty" as "migration becomes a strategy and a choice, but from a very restricted range of possible choices".

The two subsequent studies depart from the analysis of contemporary childhoods and enter the realm of visual childhoods or, better yet, visual traces of childhood. Melinda Blos-Jáni explores the symbiosis of moving image and everyday life, the changing domestication process of the medium of film and the shifting visual construction of childhood. The article follows the history of the Haáz family of Târgu-Mureş and the history of the local Film Club (and Ervin Schnedarek, its leader). Blos-Jáni tells the story of a family bound together by the use of this medium in a country - socialist Romania - where making home movies never became a widespread practice.

Dana Mihăilescu writes on the visual traces of child survivors of the Holocaust. She argues that "the generations of child survivors and children of survivors share a form of memory which I call erratic memory, one



which is fragmented, limited, evanescent, fleeting, and erring at times.” She focuses on two recent French exhibitions dedicated to Holocaust child survivors and two visual projects by children of Holocaust survivors from Poland and the U.S and analyzes the techniques they use in order to foster the new generations’ questions as important queries that permanently acknowledge and confront the increasingly more distant Holocaust experiences.

Children, at least up to the age when they learn to write, are silent historical characters. They do not leave behind written sources. As oral history was born precisely to give voice to those traditionally silenced by history, it was only natural that at least two oral history studies would find their way into this volume. Simona Adam reconstructs the experience of children growing up in multicultural Banat. She describes the “small world of the family and of the birth place, and a larger world, of the social institutions and of politics. Both worlds are reconstructed, retrospectively, within the narration of the childhood, from a series of images that link the individual memory with the collective memory of Banat’s inhabitants.”

Nadezhda Velinova Galabova collected the school-day memories of Sofia English Language School alumni from the 1970s while trying to answer some broader questions: how did Bulgarian state socialism instrumentalize childhood in its aspirations to create “the new socialist person”? How did socialist Bulgaria – a society so much in love with the concept of equality – legitimize and interpret the foundation of elite schools? What narrative strategies do the alumni resort to nowadays when they have to present the problematic past public image of the school? Galabova looks at the alumni’s school-day memories, using them not so much as sources of “hard facts”, but as narratives through which the respondents present themselves and want to perceive themselves as agents, as active protagonists in the everyday life of the school. Both oral history articles are especially attentive to the ways

childhood is reconstructed through memorial and narrative practices and embedded in one’s current life-story. More broadly, the research articles in this volume argue for children to be seen as active agents in their communities, their families and the societies that sometimes tend to regard them as passive actors in a world ruled by adults.

The museology section of the volume reflects on a two year project (2011-2013) of the Romanian National Peasant Museum entitled *Childhood. Remains and Heritage*. The project, supported by the Culture Program of the European Union, resulted in a virtual Childhood Museum (www.childhoodmuseum360.com) exhibiting 3D reconstructions of a series of real exhibitions organized by the museum and one travelling exhibition. The project was co-organized with the Romanian Cultural Institute, Association pour la Promotion de l’éducation des enfants (Paris, France), Łębok Museum (Poland) and with our partners, the Romanian Ministry of Culture and National Patrimony and Ethnokids Association (Brussels).

This volume presents the travelling exhibition of the Childhood Museum as conceived of by Lila Passima, one of its curators. “How big can a childhood museum be?” she asks. “It might fit into a pocket, it might reach the clouds, cut the world in two, enter a fairytale, hang on a coat hanger, or be whispered in the papelka tongue. One thing is certain: we all carry our own childhood museum, whose doors are always open, from the story of the fates to the angels with clipped wings.”

In the accompanying text, Rodica Marinescu provides insights into the interactive nature of the whole project. At each thematic exhibition, the visitors had the chance and were even invited to leave traces behind; they could bring objects, photographs, texts and any fragments kept over the years that might depict the remains of their own childhood. Furthermore, for each exhibition, a space was provided for the public to leave their own mark: they could stick photos from home on



the boards, they could draw little crosses or write their names on the blackboard, add (old) sayings and memories on a string or write in the guestbook. What are thus the traces that the guestbook records?

The second part of the museological section provides access into the toy collections of two Romanian museums. Georgeta Roșu describes the unique clay toys (almost 2000) in the collections of the National Romanian Peasant Museum, while Bogdan Iancu traces the unexpected history of a collection of children-made toys, gathered in the 1970s at the Székely National Museum of Sfântu Gheorghe (Covasna) by architect and ethnographer Károly Kós. Iancu focuses his narrative on the relationship between childhood and the material world populating it, a still under-researched subject in current anthropological writing.

Not an expert on childhood myself, while imagining and editing this volume, I discovered the amazingly diverse manners in which childhood can be written about, analyzed or remembered. When writing about children, one builds a dialogue between the childhoods presented as case studies and one's own childhood. This is definitely a book written by adults. Nevertheless, I invite you to search for the child that is hidden even behind the most serious academic work. (S)he is there, in the imaginative, unexpected way that an article at some point shifts focus, (s)he is there when words and images complete each other, (s)he is there in the silences and question marks. Enjoy our Childhood issue!

Translated by Alina-Olimpia Miron

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