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Children, Heroes, and Foes in a Communist Family Album

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the contribution of the family album—a document that operates in both the public and the private sphere—to the formation of a certain (possibly idealized) view of one's childhood and family members, particularly in the context of the communist dictatorship from Romania. I am using the conceptual frame introduced by American theoretician of cultural memory and photography Marianne Hirsch in order to work on my own family album, with a focus on photographs of myself and my parents as children, dressed identically in communist pioneer outfits, but also on photographs of my maternal grandfather, who was relatively high up in the communist party ranks.

KEYWORDS

adoption, disidentification, memory, photography, communism

”For decades we had to live in a strange mixture of reality and fiction, in a world painted in deeply surreal hues, both real and imaginary. Approaching communism with the limited tools of rationalistic logic would empty and deform the understanding of this phenomenon.

– Lucian Boia

”How can we ever be expected to forgive the communists? I don't know what they are, but they're not Romanian (...). How can they have Romanian blood running through their veins and still show no mercy?

– Elisabeta Rizea¹

rewritten by post-communist administrations and power structures, including the media. One of the effects of this complex process was the manner in which the Romanian population responds to documentary practices that examine the communist regime. It is thus the case that, almost a quarter of a century after communism,² the detention memoirs written by political prisoners of the regime have a relatively low readership, but communist family albums are part of a more popular autobiographical register. This may stem partly from the widely held belief that they carry little or no ideological weight and that they can offer easy or unmediated access to the recent past.

It may also be the case that, with the passage of time, family photographs taken during communism have—like most family photographs, for that matter—become anecdotal pretexts for “funny” stories about food shortage and nationalistic fables of Romanian ingenuity in moments of crisis. Some nostalgia is also displayed on websites and facebook pages that feature not only family photographs, but also photographs of old toys and clothes, none

1) These mottoes are both my translation.

2) It might be useful to add here that, although I will keep using the terms “communism” and “post-communism” in this paper, because of their wide circulation, Romania was never officially a communist country; its full name was The Socialist Republic of Romania. In the official discourse, socialism and the dictatorship of the proletariat, with its “inevitable” violence, was to precede full-fledged communism, which, actually, never took shape (Boia 2001, 115).

.....
Most family albums of communist Romania are repositories of a complicated cultural memory that, after the fall of the Iron Curtain, was negotiated and

3) Since this is not the focus of this paper, I cannot dwell on these particular examples. For those who are interested in exploring this matter further, see one of the most popular such face-book pages, "Generatia cu cheia la gât" (translatable as "The Latchkey Generation," with reference to those children who grew up during the 1980s and whose parents worked, before nannies and afterschool programs became popular).

Fig 1. My mother in her school uniform.



4) I am here referring to the perception of the Eastern European space as "backward," a perspective Larry Wolff has already discussed at length in *Inventing Eastern Europe*. This long-held perception, together with the unfortunate but popular view of Romania as Dracula-land, has enabled the reading of forty years of communism as a particularly Balkan freak accident.

5) The first Romanian communist dictator, less known internationally by comparison to Ceausescu, was Gheorghiu-Dej. He managed to successfully exterminate a staggering percentage of "subversive" citizens by creating the death camp called "The Channel" where many political prisoners succumbed to malnutrition and harsh living and working conditions. Nicolae Ceausescu, who replaced Dej upon the latter's death (1965), was initially, by comparison, considered humane by the West.

of which are observably embedded in the political context that produced them.³ Instead, they seem to have been inscribed in the well-promoted general feeling that there is a certain indecency in dwelling upon a past that is this tiresome and troubling, when the present itself is a constant struggle to make up for lost time, and speedily fit into the EU and NATO.

I think it is important to start including the study of apparently private systems of rep-

resentation (such as family photographs) within the larger conversation about communism and its public systems of visual construction (including architecture, banners, parades etc.). One first step is perhaps to learn to regard Romanian communist family albums as much more than mere pretexts for musing on the absurd in history or embodiments of Balkan⁴ exoticism. Thus, in this paper I am reading a set of my family photographs against the conceptual frame introduced by American theorist of cultural memory and photography Marianne Hirsch (in conversation with Susan Sontag and Roland Barthes), as well as the analysis of counter-hegemonic practices used by queer theorist Jose Esteban Muñoz in *Disidentifications*. More specifically, I will be looking at photographs of myself and my parents as children, the three of us dressed iden-

tically in pioneer outfits, but also at photographs of my maternal grandfather, who was relatively high up in the communist party ranks. My 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.

I am also performing an extension of the traditional familial photographic space by deciding to include two photographs of non-family members within my family album. The first of these figures is Elisabeta Rizea, a political prisoner of the Dej⁵ regime whose voice was only publicly heard after 1989, when she was interviewed on national television, and ethnographer Ioana Nicolau had her memoirs published. The second is a man who died three years before I was born, Cornel Chiriac, a rock'n'roll and jazz broadcaster for Radio Free Europe, whose voice I thought I could hear as a child, so vivid were my father's tales of the man he described as the person who helped open his generation's doors towards freedom.

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Postmemory, Adoption, and Disidentification

In order to better read this visual affiliation created between different generations, I will be using Marianne Hirsch's definition of the familial gaze as a gesture not of recognition, but of adoption. She defines it as "the conventions and ideologies of family" (1999, 1) through which family members see themselves, and argues that it helps fill in the gaps of a personal narrative and provides the subject with wholeness: "Through this familial look I define a boundary between inside and outside, claiming these [people] as part of the story through which I construct myself. This inclusion is an act of adoption and an act of faith determined by an idea, an image of family: it is not an act of recognition" (1997, 83). Hirsch thus removes the burden of recogni-

tion from the mnemonic process, and proposes adoption based on faith, a particularly apt suggestion when it comes to family photographs taken at a time when the subject was not even born, as is the case with some of the images included in this paper.

Hirsch further argues that family photographs—private documents that share a public visual vocabulary—can be read as useful sources of “minor” (as opposed to official/national) narration about the past. In her more recent work, *Ghosts of Home*, an investigation of the life lived in Cernowitz before the Holocaust by her parents, co-written with Leo Spitzer, they propose the introduction of the syntagm “points of memory” to be used for objects and other (not exclusively visual) environments that create an opportunity for personal, not national involvement in a past that goes beyond one’s personal experience,

«We employ official and private contemporary documents, public and family archival materials, letters, memoirs, photographs, newspapers, essays, poetry, fiction, internet

postings, as well as material remnants that we think of as testimonial objects. Central to our approach is the use of oral and video accounts from Old Czernowitzers and their offspring (...). These materials are more than evidentiary sources for us. They focus our narrative around individual anecdotes, images, and objects that serve as ‘points of memory’ opening small windows to the past. (Hirsch and Spitzer 2010, xix)

Hirsch and Spitzer go on to explain that they prefer the use of “points of memory” because Nora’s “places of memory,” although valuable, is “more nationally based” (2010, 320).

To this framework that relies on identification (as adoption) with familial figures through the medium of photography, I would like to add disidentification⁶ as a usable way of seeing familial episodes where a repressive regime becomes involved in the (self-)representation of the family. In his influential work on race and queer performance, *Disidentifications*, José Esteban Muñoz traces the history

6) I would like to thank Laura Wexler for suggesting that I include Muñoz to this reading of my family album.



Fig. 2. Here I am in my school uniform, with a “communist falcon” tie and unreliable headband. I am the first one from the left.

of the term “disidentification” to the French linguist Michel Pécheux, who used Althusser’s theory of interpellation to come up with three types of reaction to dominant ideological practices: identification, counteridentification, and disidentification. He points out the dangers implicit in the identification-counteridentification binary as a mechanism purposefully produced by the state, and suggests disidentification as a desirable counter-hegemonic practice. Muñoz reads the latter as a way of acknowledging the presence of those elements dictated by official power structures in one’s own life narrative, in an attempt to counter them not through utopian effacement, but by producing long-lasting changes in the social fabric that has already assimilated them:

«To disidentify is to read oneself and one’s own life narrative in a moment, object, or subject that is not culturally coded to “connect” with the disidentifying subject. It is not to pick and choose what one takes out of an identification. It is not to willfully evacuate the politically dubious or shameful

components within an identificatory locus. Rather, it is the reworking of those energies that do not elide the “harmful” or contradictory components of any identity. It is an acceptance of the necessary interjection that has occurred in such situations. (1999, 12)

I believe disidentification is a particularly useful tool when the state attempts to overtly control and shape difference into a bland unthreatening uniformity. It is in such cases that nations and families become specifically prone to atomization, with some members condoning and directly sponsoring oppressive practices, while others are painfully affected by them. Disidentification does not promote amnesia, but attempts to rework, in this case, the various collaborations with the communist regime visible in many family albums to a certain extent. Seeing the hand of the regime in the most apparently mundane of photographs implies an understanding of the ramifications of living under a dictatorship, and of the way the latter contaminates the alleged innocence of the by-stander.

I propose that disidentification can be a mode of bearing witness to and speaking about crimes perpetrated by—in this case—the communist dictatorship from Romania not by drawing a clear line of demarcation between perpetrators and victims, but rather by coming to terms with and reworking the long-lasting effects produced by decades of everyday negotiations with the policies of the regime. Here I evidently understand witnessing as not a matter of presence, but as a gesture of responsibility, in the etymological sense of responding to an event, and acknowledging something of oneself as a product of—in this case—practices of intimidation and terror that may have taken place before one was even born.



Children in Uniform and Men in Suits

I remember my childhood in black and white. Color film was very difficult to find,⁷ and so my family album is black and white

Fig. 3. My mother in her pioneer uniform.



7) The entire population was kept visually starved for bright colors, in a sedately grey-brown-dark blue environment. To this day, I marvel at how comparatively colorful Bucharest has become and I am still finding it difficult to throw away brightly colored bubble gum wrap.

until 1989, when I was 11, and then it bursts into color. My country had been black and white, then slowly gained color,⁸ and today it can be difficult for the untrained eye to spot the differences in photographic representation between Romania and the West. Repositories of cultural memory such as household appliances, furniture, items of clothing like the communist pioneer uniform have been replaced by new models, whereas family albums were kept, and sometimes it there that you can still find an old toy or a very important Phillips radio-cassette player that you now wish you had not thrown away.

Adopting my parents when they were children as part of my lineage is the easy part, perhaps mostly because we are all part of the same sartorial language of the communist regime: everyday uniforms made up of white-and-blue checkered shirts, red ties, black apron dresses and preferably white knee-high socks for the girls (and black trousers for the boys). Add to this the relatively unchanged conventions of posing for an official school picture you got to take home as a memento, and affiliation is very easy to construct. The more difficult part is finding a way to disidentify with photographs of my grandfather performing his official duties as part of a repressive regime. In this part of my paper, I shall attempt to perform both adoption and disidentification.

In the late fifties, my parents were communist pioneers, and my mom had just had her picture published in a local paper (Fig. 1). She had gone to the library to borrow a book, and a photographer had thought she looked standard enough for her picture to be taken. He opened a Russian textbook which read “Art in every home”⁹ and asked her to pretend she was reading it, and look thoughtful. To this day, my mother cannot remember any of the Russian she had to study for eight years. What the photographer failed to see, but my mother was quick to notice when she showed me the picture, was that her school uniform was patched at the elbows, and she had differently colored buttons on her cuffs. Also, it is visible that she is wearing at least one sweater under-



8) A very small percentage of family photographs were actually in color, but the bulk was still black and white.

Fig. 4. My father and some classmates, at an end-of-the year festivity.

neath her school uniform, since classrooms were poorly heated. Her various discomforts would later become my own (Fig. 2).

I would also have to wear the uncomfortable uniform, and be unable to relax for years. It is obvious from the way my hands are clutching at the end of my apron, while I am trying to stand up straight, with my feet neatly aligned, that I was doing my best to perform my diligent young pupil bit for the camera. Unfortunately, the gauze flowers attached to my headband, an unnecessary but temporarily fashionable addition that my mother was always plaguing me with, are clearly uneven and clown-like on my tomboy haircut. Like my mother's, my own school uniform also had to miraculously expand in winter, and give way to blouses, sweaters, leggings and even trousers, so that I ended up looking like a refugee, forced to wear everything in my possession. I remember being miserable and tense every day at school, especially when the compulsory white elastic band gave me headaches

9) I would like to thank Elina Bloch for providing the translation.

Fig. 5. My pioneer uniform, complete with cap, metal badge with Romanian coat-of-arms, and "group commander" tassel.



or made my ears swell up. It is for this reason that, when I look at my mother's published picture, I read my own discomforts in her standard-issue smile.

Another costume my parents and I had in common as children

was the communist pioneer uniform. Both my parents and I, separated as we are by some 30 years, were assigned the exact same social roles, found ourselves stamped with the same insignia of the communist state, and learned a similar kind of official doublespeak.¹⁰ In the second grade, everyone had to take an oath to the country and Communist Party, put on a special white-and-dark blue uniform and red scarf and become a communist pioneer (Fig. 3, 4, 5). While both my parents seem somewhat adequate in their respective outfits, the same uniform again looks particularly incongruous on me, perhaps because of my uneven fringe (courtesy of my parents, who insisted on cutting my hair themselves) and pained smile. Or perhaps it is merely the memory of something always being wrong with that uniform, which never really fit because I had to borrow it from older children, since it was as difficult to find in stores as meat, butter, and other staple products. Apart from the white cap with a communist coat-of-arms, which my parents had, but happened not to be wearing in these photographs, the only difference between our uniforms is the red tassel attached to one of my shoulders, which meant that I was a "group commander."¹¹

By looking at these photographs of our family dressed in similar official outfits, I recognize not so much familiar physical traits, as one may generally be tempted to, but familiar control mechanisms and power structures. I understand my parents first and foremost as figures in the same game of official visual con-

trol, and only later as younger versions of the people I grew up with. There is, thus, something beyond adoption and recognition that prompts me to regard these family photographs as part of my narrative. It is, rather, my awareness of our identical social positioning that makes me relate to these children as not my future parents, but as citizens of the same oppressive state. Our pioneer uniforms cancel temporal distance and place us all in the same chronological melting pot, making it difficult to visually differentiate one decade from the next and one generation from the other.

At the same time, it is possible that the visual uniformity that was part of the larger mechanism of social control may have backfired in a small way. Generational gaps were minimized, since we were all subjected to similar discomforts and made into reluctant playthings of a totalitarian regime, marching in the same step and learning the same idiom where the words "Mr.," "Miss" or "Mrs." were replaced by the gender-neutral and non-hierarchical "comrade." The insertion of the state within the family album, the forceful violation of the private space by the public sphere created premises for resistance. Thus, shortly after the fall of communism in 1989, heroes were quick to be discovered, and the official post-revolutionary discourse was neatly discriminating between friends and foes.

In 1964, fourteen years before I was born, a pardon was granted to all political prisoners, in an attempt to demonstrate to the West the lenience of the communist leaders, and Elisabeta Rizea got to go home early. She had been offered a pardon two years before, when a secret police officer had tried to lure her into becoming an informer.¹² Coming as she did from a small village where it took the secret police ten years to destroy the anti-communist resistance, having witnessed many arrests and the killing of some of her closest friends, Elisabeta Rizea, unlike many others, said no. That same year, in 1964, my mother was twelve and at the top of her class, and that summer, on August 23 to be precise, her father, my grandfather, participated in a major national celebration to-

10) Although they lived through not one, but two communist dictatorships, the visual components of the official power structures remained similar, and can also be easily identified outside Romania, in the Eastern European Bloc, China, Vietnam, Cuba, and other communist countries.

11) The military vocabulary worked well with the rhetoric of the many official parades and quasi-military practices we all had to perform.

12) The details about Rizea's anti-communist fight and subsequent persecution that I mention in this paper are based on Irina Nicolau and Theodor Nițu's *Povestea Elisabetei Rizea din Nucșoara* (The Story of Elisabeta Rizea from Nucșoara).

gether with other party leaders (Fig.6).

The anniversary marked 20 years since August 23, 1944, the date when Romania joined forces with the Soviet Army and thus ended its alliance with Nazi Germany. After Romania became part of the Soviet Bloc, August 23 was celebrated every year with endless parades which became even more elaborate after Ceausescu's visit to China and North Korea in 1971. This picture, also part of my family album, might as well have been a newspaper clipping. At first glance, there is nothing familial about it. It is simply a gathering of several powerful comrades about to embark on long tirades in praise of the party. I knew about it, but I had only seen it once, so when I started preparing for this project, I asked my mother to send it to me. It took me quite a while to identify my grandfather among the men standing at the tribune, one of our country's leaders in 1964. It was even more difficult for me to recognize my grandfather as the man speaking with gusto (or perhaps blasé authority) from an outdoor podium (Fig. 7), a huge banner with the picture of the globe behind him, on which were painted flowers and a fragment reading "everywhere" (which must have been part of the slogan "Workers everywhere, unite!").

As a child, I knew that my grandfather was—quite vaguely—a party member, while my parents were not. It did not seem to matter much, since he retired by the time I was eight, and so I was unable to imagine what his job might have been.

At this point, a number of choices present themselves. I could simply counteridentify with this image as not strictly belonging to the family album, as my grandfather is photographed on the job. I could simply choose to focus on his role as a loving grandfather, who has always been proud of me, who misses me when I am away and whose conversations I enjoy when they are not political. I can try to think about the fact that he, like many other young and ignorant country boys, was lured by the promise of a better life, and was grateful to the Party because the latter—as he put

it—sent him to college and gave him a solid position in society. But then, there is the disturbing question of how this country boy may have felt when his own parents' land was confiscated during the brutal nationalization process that cost many Romanian peasants their sanity, life or freedom.¹³ My grandfather, the son of two pious peasants who lost their land, rose rapidly within the ranks of the party, and would often inspect the state of the agriculture in the southern district that he was responsible for (Fig. 8).¹⁴

Considering the background of most prominent party members, one may easily infer that these land inspectors must have all been former country boys proudly marching



on confiscated lands, some of which may as well have belonged to their own families. Their self-satisfied smiles and intent gazes, each and every one pointed at something else, as if trying not to let anything slide by, are those of a proud but somewhat confused conquering army. Their decorations and suits, the identical shape of their shoes, haircuts, ties and proud stride are all part of the official paraphernalia of party leaders at the time. Nobody seems to notice the little boy curiously peering from behind the fence, and the two women staring from the yard, one of them holding a baby. The lack of eye contact between my grandfather and these people is, of course, circumstantial, but I think it can be read as symbolic of the amnesia party leaders performed, choosing to remember only that they were born poor, of good "healthy" working-class

13) Land ownership was liquidated on March 2nd 1949. The various sporadic attempts to resist land confiscation led to the arrest of approximately 80,000 farmers (Deletant 2012, 91-92).

14) My grandfather was for a while president of one of the Regional Unions of Agricultural Cooperatives.

Fig. 6. My maternal grandfather is in the front row, the second person to the speaker's right.



Fig. 7. My grandfather delivering a speech during a public meeting.

15) The blurring of the line between private and collective property can, in fact, be read as one of the effects of fidelity for a totalitarian system: "(...) during totalitarianism, one is not faithful to an idea, but to a collective thought of in homogenous and cohesive terms: the party, the proletariat, the socialist nation. Even loyalty for the leader of the country is seldom purely personal" (Barbu 1998, 177).

16) Many reclaimed their confiscated lands after 1989; my grandfather was one of them, and he did get his parents' land back.

17) See, for instance, Annette Kuhn for a reading of the gendered arm that holds the camera in family photographs: "Of course not all members of the family have the same relationship to the pictures in the album. The father is least visible, for it remains his role to handle the apparatus that controls the image, to point, frame and shoot" (2002, 67).

18) Something actually was. Social unrest had erupted in Timișoara, around December 17, 1989, and my father and mother were working different shifts, and so were able to listen to "the real news" on Radio Free Europe around the clock, and report to each other.

stock, and forgetting that the grand theft of the communist party often left their grieving parents and, by extension, themselves, even poorer.¹⁵ They are here proudly assessing properties that might have belonged to the family of the little boy perched on the fence, and they are walking around in an ideological bubble that separates them from themselves. Their surveillance of the lands replicates the gaze of the former owners whose offspring they are, and produces a bizarre re-enactment of their parents' real and symbolic losses. In theory, these losses belong not only to the previous generation but also to these former country boys through inter-generational transmission and, more practically, because these lost pieces of land are actually their lost inheritance.¹⁶

I recognize the man from these photographs, although I do not know him very well. The family album comes with various neutral stories, so that his own part in the workings of the system is still blurry to me. He also refused to discuss politics at home, and as a result my mother and her sister were bizarrely untouched by his ideology. His work did not make him or us rich, interestingly enough, perhaps because—so the story in the family goes—he did not accept bribes, like most of his colleagues. But there were perks, which sometimes made an important difference. Out of this logical back-and-forth I keep performing, one thing emerges: it is not really important how much we profited from his position, but we did, and this is a good place from which disidentification with these photographs of my grandfather can start.

Thus, deciding to adopt this image into my own family narrative without considering the fact that here, my grandfather was not doing just any job, but one that was part of an oppressive political system, would contaminate adoption with the effacement of the profound human tragedy implicitly condoned by my grandfather's position. It would also encourage a separation between the public and the private sphere that is generally simply not there. It would imply adopting not only a member of the family, but a whole system of values, one that imprisoned more than a million Romanians, had many "enemies of the state" deported, executed and tortured, confiscated most private property and threw people out of their homes, sometimes at gunpoint, changing Romania brutally and inalterably.



Postmemory and Arrested Development

Both my parents were anti-communist (without digging too deeply into the ideological framework of the left), and would probably wince at the thought that I am implicitly suggesting that their ethics were in any way compromised because of their connection with my grandfather. They were never communist party members, and did their best to stay out of contact with the party, which usually offered some advantages to those who joined. As Romanian hippies (a social category so complex that it needs its own monograph), they did not rebel that much against the social roles inherited from their parents, and so my mother's tasks around the house were cooking and cleaning, and my father was in charge of politics and world news. Also, I have hardly ever seen my mother hold a camera,¹⁷ and only once did I see her listening to Radio Free Europe on her own, and then I knew something had to be seriously wrong.¹⁸ It is easy to look with non-political nostalgia at photographs of them (Fig. 9) when they were in their early 20s (this was in the early 70s), my father with his long hair and slender figure, a large white linen shirt embroidered with Romanian folk

patterns, worn-out jeans and hiking-boots, my mother with long hair parted in the middle and very large bell-bottoms.

My father took on the role of photographer, and would have us all pose for him, and as a consequence we have very few pictures of all three of us. He would then quite magically, I thought as a child, transform my room into a dark room, and I would thus temporarily lose access to it, and would only rarely but memorably be allowed to sneak in and take a peek at the small trays where he was making images appear. It was he who took it upon himself to build the family archive with incomparable zeal: when I was six, he recorded his life story on an audio cassette (again, on the Philips cassette recorder); he put together family albums and wrote carefully penned captions so that he may not forget faces he had never seen outside family albums, like his great-grandparents'. It was also my father who kept a box of my things from when I was a baby and young child and wouldn't let me open it for fear that I might damage what was inside. And it was he who bought and religiously read every prison memoir he could get his hands on after 1989. And if I needed to find out anything about the shady past of any of our government members or prominent writers, all I had to do was ask him, and he would come up with incredibly detailed and fascinating stories about each and every one of them.

But this was not merely the case of my own family. Most of my friends tell similar stories, where the fathers played parts that are not very different from my father's, although I find it hard to believe that anyone else was quite as prone to archiving everything as he was. Also, it was some of the fathers who managed to construct and retain a rock star aura they had borrowed from the few foreign magazines that were circulating at the time (Fig. 10), preserved it as we were growing up, in an anti-aging process that itself seemed to promise escape (Fig.11), and projected the same rogue image for their children, whereas most mothers' domestic tasks robbed them of their (pre-

marital) rebel status. Stories of how my father was almost arrested twice for voicing "dangerous" opinions, about how he was chased by the police in the streets of Bucharest because his hair was too long, and about how he knew people from our most famous rock bands, and whose tales of endless hours of listening to music and looking at *Billboards* would keep me riveted for hours.

With these stories, I also ingested implicit notions about the importance of arrested development, since adulthood was the province of compromise with the powers that be, and inevitable slippage into the social role that the Party had cast for you. In more practical terms, for my parents, graduating from university, automatically growing up and getting married meant being unable to stay in the capital, which was then a "closed city," and having to re-locate to some small provincial town and lose contact with their friends.¹⁹ Co-habitation was not permitted by the state, abortion was illegal, and so couples were marrying without

19) Speaking on the telephone to one's friends did not count as an actual conversation or keeping in touch, since the Secret Police had all the wires tapped. Transportation of any sort was rendered painfully difficult, so that actually moving an hour away by car from the capital was like moving abroad.



having lived together first. Houses were becoming scarce in the late seventies, when Ceausescu had already embarked on his mad "reconstruction" binge and whole neighborhoods were erased to make room for poorly constructed unsafe and uncomfortable apartment buildings. Here, the walls had been built thin on purpose, and secret police officers strategically placed, so that privacy was a luxury one learned to live without.

Fig. 8. My paternal grandfather, leading a delegation of party leaders in a rural area. He is the one in the center, up front.

My parents moved into one such strikingly symmetrical building, in a small town where my father stuck out like a sore thumb, before I was born, and a secret police officer was our upstairs neighbor. It was in this environment, on days where we only had two hours of electricity per day, hardly ever any hot water and no central heating from the eternally cold radiators, that my father told me his stories of music and friendship, while my mother was busy keeping the household from slipping into total chaos. Friendship, solidarity²⁰ and eternal adolescence were thus pro-

20) It has been repeatedly shown that the communist dictatorship consolidated its position by annihilating what it perceived as “networks” of resistance, and the solidarity of the alleged or real “conspirators” against the well-being of the regime: “(...) ‘class enemies’ were attributed an essential characteristic: solidarity. Seldom did investigators merely put individuals on trial: an entire group had to be targeted, because only in this manner could guilt be assigned as a result of alleged conspiratorial activities” (Năstasă 1998, 203-4).



Fig. 9. My parents on holiday before they were married.

posed to me as valuable alternatives to kinship and conventional adulthood, at a time when second-wave feminism was not imported together with the music, when members of the same family would be encouraged to turn each other in to the secret police, and when family

members like my grandfather were often already working within the system, unable or unwilling to fight it.

My own stories, to use Hirsch’s terms, have been vacated by my father’s, and his stories are now part of a past that I sometimes confuse for mine. For people of my generation, the cycle was broken. We got to be communist falcons and pioneers, but never hippies quite as significantly subversive as our parents. In a way, the stakes of rebellion and protest never did seem as high. After all, nobody was chasing my friends down the street to shave the middle of their heads and force them to cut off their hair. And none of my girlfriends had their dresses cut off as they were walking down the street. These are also, unfortunately, events that are easy to depoliticize and sigh noncommittally to.



The Farmer and the DJ

Our family album already contains a rift, a certain visual shock one experiences by turning a page and moving from a long-haired man to a besuited gentleman. By placing myself inside my grandfather’s story, I can begin to fill the gutters between him and my parents, but also attempt to place him in dialogue with those invisible others who entered our homes through the carpets they wove and the music they played. In this conversation beyond death and chronology, Elisabeta Rizea (Fig. 12) and Cornel Chiriac (Fig. 13) should not be thought of as mediators whose stories fill the blanks in my family narrative. Rather, I am hoping to play the role of mediator between them and my grandfather, whose official photographs in our family album could not come alone, but brought along others.

I would like to propose that Elisabeta Rizea entered our family album the minute the countryside photograph of my grandfather was taken. She did so alongside many other less publicized country folk (including my great grandparents) whom she metonymically

ended up representing. She lost every piece of property she ever had, and when she came out of prison, the secret police officer who signed her release papers advised her to look the other way when she walked past her own house. After she was first arrested and tortured, when she got out of prison, one of the first things she did was help the guerilla fighters again. The result was another stint in prison, interrupted by the 1964 pardon. She would probably have gone on and on if the guerilla fighters' group had not been annihilated. Her husband and daughter were imprisoned as well, and her whole life was lived in a community deeply changed by communism.

The widely-circulated photograph reproduced here shows an Elisabeta Rizea whose hands are crossed as if in prayer, another reminder of the repressive measures taken against members of the clergy and citizens who attended religious service, but also a chilling reminder of the important Christian component of the Romanian far right. What I find striking about it is how much she looks like my grandfather's mother, not necessarily when it comes to the exact resemblance of physical features, but in her clothes, countenance and attitude. They were both Christian Orthodox women from the countryside, and they wore clothes which to my untrained eye look quite similar.

Rizea gained a lot of public currency after 1989, and my parents were eager to adopt her as a hero of the early fight against communism. During the late fifties, she found herself weaving fashionable Persian rugs in prison,²¹ after having been almost beaten to death, lost most of her teeth and hair, by which she had been hung from the ceiling of a cell (cf. Nicolau and Nițu). After 1989, when part of the media was focusing on unearthing and canonizing anti-communist fighters, Rizea, already in her 80s, became one of the most prominent public figures that my parents were excited to discover. In the early enthusiasm of the first post-communist years, little was said about the extreme right leanings of some (but not all) of the partisans. In my own rush to



Fig. 10. My father and his friend Nicușor, both in their early twenties, presumably on the roof of the latter's house. My father is the one sitting down.

fashion heroes and foes, I adopted Rizea, and only discovered much later that she had also been predictably appropriated by neo-fascist Romanian organizations drawn to the initially blurry but idealized figures of “the partisans.”

It is only reasonable that neo-fascist movements such as the post-1989 *Noua Dreaptă* (The New Right) find the partisans so appealing, since, on the one hand, some of them had been members of the Romanian Iron Guard. Their anti-communist fight started in 1945 and ended in 1962, when the last partisan was shot in the Banat Mountains (Deletant 2012, 103). One cannot refer to the Romanian guerilla warfare as a movement, particularly because the fighters were scattered and hiding in the mountains, sometimes with the help of the local population who risked their own lives and the safety of their families to help those whose protest was an important symbol of the fight against the Dej regime. The partisan groups were small (something between 10 and 40 people), and generally made up of farmers, workers, former officers, lawyers, doctors, and students (Deletant 2012, 104). According to a police report from 1951, out of 804 people that

21) Persian rugs were fashionable and coveted during communism. It was not common knowledge that some of them were woven by political prisoners, nor were they the only items they had to make in prison. I have not been able to research this matter at length, but it seems to me important to point out this symbolic inclusion of objects made and touched by “enemies of the people,” as they were called, in ordinary (or privileged) people's homes.

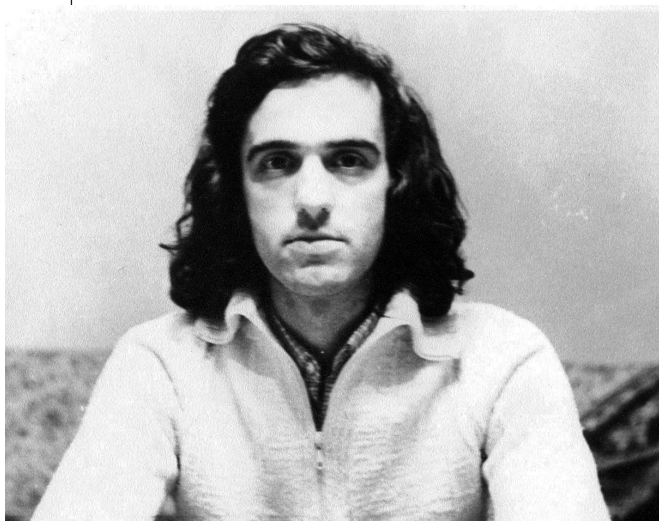


Fig. 11. My father, a self-portrait, here in his early thirties.

22) Ion Gavrilă-Ogoranu was the head of another important group of guerilla fighters. They were active in the Făgăraș Mountains from 1948 to 1957. He was only captured in 1976, and later penned his memoir entitled *Brazil se frâng, dar nu se îndoiesc* (Fir-trees May Bend, But They Will Not Be Broken, my translation). He was an Iron Guard member, and after 1989 became the head of a small neo-fascist political party entitled *Partidul pentru Patrie* (Căpălescu).

23) One can convincingly argue that the film *Portretul luptătorului la tinerețe* (Portrait of the Fighter as a Young Man, my translation), directed by Constantin Popescu (2010), glorifies this particular group of guerilla fighters without properly referencing its neo-fascist persuasion.

had been arrested up to that date, only 73 were former Iron Guard members (Deletant 2012, 104). However, the post-1989 publicity around someone like Ion Gavrilă-Ogoranu, who authored a memoir²² and on whose experiences a controversial film²³ was based, made the memory of the guerilla fighters more complicated than it appeared in the early days of post-communist elation.

Other reasons for which the partisans were easy to adopt by neo-fascist and ultra-nationalist groups after 1989 was also the fact that, even if some of them were not members of the Iron Guard (for instance, Rizea herself was not), there were still visual and ideological markers that most partisans possessed and that made them susceptible to being adopted by this type of political discourse. Among these ideological markers were their Christian Orthodox discourse (for instance, Rizea would always mention her faith in the widely watched televised interviews she gave), the few remaining black-and-white photographs that pictured them dressed in traditional Romanian costumes, the easily manipulated imagery of the lone rangers isolated in the last bastion of Romanianness, the unspoiled mountains.²⁴

I have a much less complicated relationship with Cornel Chiriac, who was brought into our home by my father's affection for him. I cannot remember when my father first told

me about Cornel Chiriac but, in my mind, he will always be associated with a Philips radio cassette-player that my father received as a gift from my grandfather. Until I checked his year of death (1975) for this paper, I lived under the impression that I had actually grown up listening to his radio shows on Radio Free Europe,²⁵ when in fact he died three years before I was born, and it was actually my father's stories that brought him into our house. I grew up listening to stories told by my father about this man who played the latest rock music for them (he also played jazz, but my father did not care for that), and who was, my father was convinced, incredibly generous, warm, brave, and knowledgeable about music.

These stories were partly ushered in by a gift from my grandfather, a brand-new cassette player that gave my father much better sound quality and less trouble than his battered old radio. It is impossible for me to imagine that my grandfather did not know what he was giving my father, at a time when short-wave radios were treasured and almost impossible to buy if one did not have connections in high places.²⁶ Many were arrested and sent to prison for months or years because they had been caught listening to Radio Free Europe. But my grandfather was showing the tell-tale signs of the confused ethics of some of the supporters of the regime, who were capable of endorsing it, while at the same time turning a blind eye towards subversive but ultimately non-threatening family members. And so, after having waited in line for months (but less than others) to get his precious Philips machine, he saw how enchanted his son-in-law was with it, and decided to give it up.²⁷ In my head, it was through my grandfather's generosity and ideological slippage that Cornel Chiriac entered our world, although the facts prove me wrong. Cornel Chiriac was already dead by the time this grand gesture was performed, and the ageing communist gave his long-haired son-in-law an instrument of dissent.

Cornel Chiriac had left Romania in 1969 and started broadcasting a live radio show called *Metronom* from Munich when my fa-

ther was 18 years old, and everyone was starting to grow their hair long, bell-bottoms were in, and girls' skirts were shrinking by the minute. His radio shows became increasingly political, and his death was highly suspicious; there were rumors that it had been orchestrated by the Romanian secret police.²⁸ He was in many ways responsible for stopping the ravaging effects of the forced uniformization of the population, for dispelling the very justified feeling that we were invisible to an inaccessible free West. Cornel Chiriac was also partly responsible for turning many people of my father's age into quasi-mythical figures for my own generation.

Growing up in the shade of these friendly giants was somewhat dwarfing. My generation was made up of children who remembered just enough of communism to be embarrassed by post-communist brattish behavior. It often seemed to me that none of my stories could compare to my parents', and none of the stakes for my various adolescent rebellions were high enough. What some of us experienced was the work of the postmemory, defined by Marianne Hirsch as a process wherein one's own stories are vacated by the unwitnessed stories of another, stories to which one feels bound by affection and family ties: "Postmemory characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation, shaped by traumatic events that can be neither fully understood nor re-created" (Hirsch 1997, 22). It is also in the vacuum created by the secondary role played by my own childhood memories, effaced by those of my parents', that I can attempt to place the odd dialogue between my grandfather, Elisabeta Rizea, and Cornel Chiriac.



Fig. 13. The most widely-circulated photograph of Cornel Chiriac.

24) This paper is not a lengthy study of the anti-communist Romanian guerilla fighters, and hence I shall stop at simply pointing out these brief reasons for the partisans' adoption into the ranks of neo-fascist organizations whose political principles they may not have entirely shared, but where their glorified image served to provide much-needed martyrs for the extreme right.

25) Radio Free Europe was a radio station based in Munich, broadcasting the "real news" for the ghettoized population of Romania.

26) To gain a better idea of how the Party envisaged the role of the mass media, here is an extract from the 1974 Programme of the Romanian Communist Party, whose bombastic rhetoric was commonplace: "A highly important role in ideological, political and educational activities is played by the press, radio and television, which must unflinchingly and permanently promote the advanced outlook of the Party on the world and life, firmly combat alien, idealistic and retrograde concepts, and disseminate scientific knowledge about nature and society" (134).

27) It is very telling that this was a gift from one male "head of the household" to another. It did not occur to my grandfather to hand the radio over to his daughter.

28) There has never been any solid evidence to support this view. At the same time, it is common knowledge that anti-communist Romanian activists were followed by the secret police into Paris and other large cities, in an attempt to intimidate them.

Conclusions

What Hirsch attempts to do in *Family Frames* is break the illusion of referentiality (i.e. the illusion that every photograph has a real-life referent to which it is umbilically, unproblematically connected) on which theoreticians of photography such as Roland Barthes and even Susan Sontag relied up to a certain point. By bringing up the necessity of disrupting the "documentary authority" of family albums, she posits her conversation within the space created between the performative function of the family photograph, dictated by varying family mythologies, and "the lived reality of family life" (Hirsch 1997, 8). However, my own project—while clearly benefiting from Hirsch's terminology and her use of critical, theoretical, and autobiographical registers—is addressing an age where family mythology was so different, that a new vocabulary needs to be found. What she calls "prose pictures" (1997, 8) are differently coded



Fig. 12. The most widely-circulated photograph of Elisabeta Rizea, taken a few years before her death.

29) Here I am paraphrasing Sacvan Bercovitch's famous description of America as "a land of Don Quixotes" (1993, 29).

during the totalitarian regime because of the level of surveillance that the families involved in the production of these narratives were subjected to. Both prose and pictures were dangerous to possess, and not even orality, to which most of the population went back in the absence of confessional scripturality, was without its perils.

Everyday life during communism was openly and violently falsified by the authorities, to such an extent that entire generations grew up learning to possess the adequate translation tools to convert blatant fabrication into some semblance of reality. In this country of Sancho Panzas,²⁹ little one heard or looked at was solidly connected to what was actually happening in the world. For a while, we lived in an Orwellian 1984, where the world map was full of dark spaces we had no access to and for whom we were ourselves terra incognita, where history was successfully rewritten, and where the present was only accessible through storytelling, snapshots and actual physical presence. All these exercises in awareness and distancing were questionable, because a whole system of interpretation was there to provide the compulsory tools for reading events "the right way." Under these circumstances, our family photographs were rarely produced with the blissful illusion that they would be certificates of presence or "real" renditions of life as we lived it, so the illusion of referentiality was in some sense never there.

This uninterrupted state of disbelief was an important mechanism for survival, but it also contributed to the transformation of painful family photos into strange anecdotal anachronisms, indexes of something so steeped in fabrication that it might as well never have taken place. In the present-day Romanian public space, little has been done to create places of memory for the losses of communism. By

granting kinship to Elisabeta Rizea and Cornel Chiriac, who are slowly falling into oblivion and back into invisibility, I am hoping to create the premises for disidentification in the post-communist Romanian state, and give solidarity back its much-feared subversive potential.

At the same time, I cannot help pondering the way in which the under-researched affection for anti-communist fighters can produce ideological confusion and slippage. I can also not help noting that there is little inter-generational and/or post-mortem dialogue outside the space of this paper, where I am forcing a visual association between my grandfather and two public figures he has never had any respect for. I am thus performing a ritual of remembrance and mourning that allows me to identify the mechanisms and effects of my communist childhood within myself as the loving grandchild of one of its sponsors. I am stubbornly proposing my genealogy as a site of encounter between the lost voices of struggle and the now fictionalized acts of betrayal that silenced them, and offering the blank gutters of my family album as haunting grounds for my father and other friendly ghosts of post-communism.

The presence of the official photographs of my grandfather in our family album serve the dubious double purpose of taming both the images and his actions. They normalize his part of the repressive power structures and rewrite them as "a job" or "any job" you had to do to support your family. Also, through the very fact of my family's relative advantages (such as getting an appliance faster than others), we also became part of the normalizing process of the dictatorship. The reading of my family album must thus lie somewhere between adoption and disidentification. Through adoption, I have to accept them all as my own, even if I cannot know or recognize them fully, and thus become to a certain extent an accomplice, inserting myself in the intricate network that gave individuals a double consciousness where two ethically opposed systems of values were able to co-exist peacefully. Through disidentification, I can acknowledge and re-

work the effects of my grandfather's collaboration, which would also become in some manner my own, by placing myself inside a narrative that occurred before my birth and which produced me. This interpretation of my grandfather's photographs would enable me to see the workings of dictatorship not as separate from, but as part of my own story.

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