

## **Florin Gherasim**

"Babes-Bolyai" University of Cluj Napoca, Romania  
gherasim.florin@gmail.com

# **Exhumation and Reburials of Some Anticommunist Partisans in County of Cluj, Romania, 2009–2010**

After the Second World War, Romania entered under the USSR political and military sphere of influence, which led to the installation of the communist government. In years that followed many Romanian citizens who didn't agree with the new regime or its ideology were subjected to terror and repression. Any person suspected of being an enemy of the people would end up in political jails or put to death through collective executions.

*Key words:* exhumation, reburial, communism, politics of memory, Romania

But there were also people who stood up against the regime. Groups of partisans emerged, groups that endured in forests and mountains for many years, standing up to the Securitatea, the repressive instrument of the state. After the fall of the communist regime, the former "enemies of the people", victims of repression, benefited from reconsideration and rehabilitation that transformed them into anticommunist heroes. A series of commemorative actions that initiated a new post-communist tradition constitute part of a process called the politics of memory.

The processes of unearthing and identification of the victims' served to map out the magnitude of the crimes, and inventory evidence against the perpetrators. The factual data gathered will be used as incriminating evidence which will help with convicting the executioners. At the same time, the commemorative actions of a large number of victims may, through the representative voices of the survivors' descendants, symbolically reopen the wounds, cultivate trauma, demonize the Other, identify the Scapegoat.

My research aims to show how these theories and mechanisms remain valid and apply to the case of people who were victims of communist repression through isolated and almost anonymous executions. The murder was committed in silence and the murdered is condemned to being forgotten. The exhumation and reburial also remain events with local reverberations.

**The delayed ritual.** The exhumation and reburial of three anticommunist partisans in a village in Transylvania (Săntejude Vale, county of Cluj, 100 kilometers North from Alba Iulia)

The peasant Simion Muresan, aged 72, sheltered four partisans in his house for two weeks. He was reported by someone to the local authorities. On the 5<sup>th</sup> of October 1949, a Security detachment surrounded this peasant's house. Two partisans were caught. They were tortured, beaten in public and then brought to a court of justice in the town of Gherla. The next day they were brought to the village again, beaten again and in the evening they were shot at the edge of the forest. They were put together in a grave by their families, who were forced to dig the grave at gunpoint.

The same evening, at 11 PM, Simion Muresan, the man who hid them, was taken from home while he was having dinner with his family. He was taken by a Security officer. Without witnesses, he was taken to a field at the edge of the village, where he was killed, being shot in the back. This method was used very often by Security. They could justify their crime saying that the executed man wanted to run away. His son, aged 35, who lived in the same house with his father, was brought the same night to the place of the murder and he was forced to dig the grave. The Security officer pushed the old man's body into the grave with his boot. The grave was covered by the son, but without candles or any funerary ritual. The son was told that he was not allowed to make a cross or any sign at the place.<sup>1</sup> He was also threatened that he would end up like his father if he didn't obey the instructions, which became taboo.

The taboo was obeyed. For 60 years, the three "enemies of the people" rotted in the ground, without being integrated, from a cultural perspective, in the familial and (collective) community rituals for the dead. Not even the papers of deceased were made. The taboo concerning the memory of these three men was absolute.

Only in October 2009, all the conditions necessary for the reparatory act—namely the exhumation and the reburial of the three dead people, which corresponds to the specific ritual for the proper funeral (Verdery, 2005, 15) that they didn't benefit from in 1949, were met.

Being informed about these activities, I decided to study the event as an observer and to be present at the exhumation and at the second funerals.

The research methods I used were direct observation (approval was needed in order for me to participate at the exhumation), the semi-structured interview, the open interview, document analysis and the analysis of visual documentation (photos and videos).

After the first day of fieldwork, I realized that I found myself in front of a complex case in which returning of the real identity to the dead men after 60 years will be done according to the opinions and the interests of the living actors, the living descendants, respectively. This was chance to apply the theory from the famous book written by Katherine Verdery, „The political lives of dead bodies”.

**B1. The national political context.** On the 6<sup>th</sup> of March 1945, in Bucharest, Dr. Petru Groza government started the communist dictatorship in Romania. This process was doubled by sovietization as a mentor and a guarantor of the new system. A series of predictable events succeeded. On the 30th of December 1947, king Mihai I

---

<sup>1</sup> Information provided by Muresan Petru, 62 years old, grandson of the victim.

was forced to abdicate and exiled. Romania became a Popular National Republic. On the 11<sup>th</sup> of June 1948 the communist government decided on the nationalization of the means of production in industry, services, trade and finance. Political purgation took place among the intellectual community (universities, The Romanian Academy, Creation Associations) as well as in the Army. The historical democratic parties were forbidden and their leaders were sent to prisons and killed. In 1949 the process of nationalization in agriculture started, in accordance with the Soviet model. (Dobrincu, Iordachi, 2005, 25)

But not all people accepted to obey this reality. Thus, groups of partisans emerged in the Făgăraș mountains, but also in Apuseni, Rodnei or the Transylvania Plain.

**B2 The religious context in Transylvania.** The religious landscape in Transylvania was different from the other regions of Romania. Besides the traditional Orthodox Church, with the help and the political interest of the Austrian Empire, Greek Catholic Church was also influential around the 18th century. After a long period of competition, tension and even conflict between the two Romanian churches, by mid-20th century, the situation seemed balanced, with some ascendant for Greek Catholics, in Transylvania (Barbulescu, 2000, 278). This was also the case for some villages situated in the Transylvania Plain, as they were in the sphere of influence of the strong Eparchy of Cluj-Gherla, and moreover, located in the territorial and spiritual proximity of the Nicula monastery, famous for the miracle-making icon and also a pilgrimage place.

In 1948, under pressure from Moscow, the Greek Catholic Church was declared illegal. All the churches were given over to the Orthodox Church. The Greek Catholic parishes were transformed overnight into Orthodox ones, together with their congregations. The people were not even asked whether they wanted this change of religious confession. Unfortunately, lots of Greek Catholic leaders, bishops, priests and laymen were sent to jail. This phenomenon generated different forms of opposition. Some people retreated to the mountains or to the woods, creating the partisans' movement. The archive research, as well as oral history evidence proved the existence of this kind of movements in the 50s, for example at Cricau, Alba county (Salagean, 2011, 323) or in the Apuseni mountains (Budeanca, Plesa, 2006, 90).

**B3. The formation of Security Military Corps.** In 1949, the communist state set up the military corps called Securitatea Statului (Security of the State). Its official objective was to serve and defend the interests of the socialist nation. In reality, the collective mind associated this institution with state terror, repression, oppression, fear.

**B4. The political and religious local context, in Sântejude village.** The peasant Simion Muresan lived and died as a Greek Catholic. Moreover, in 1949, all the villagers and the priest were still Greek Catholics (according to Ioan Mocean, 79 years old, former partisan). But the structure of the partisans' movement from this area was more complex. It was called The King Michael's Captains, and it was active in the area Campia Turzii and Gherla-Dej, during 1948 and 1949. The movement was formed especially by Greek Catholic believers and monks who were barred from the monastery of Nicula, people who did not want to embrace the Orthodox Cult. This movement was not well structured and did not imply army conflicts. Its members operated by leaving their homes and retreating to the woods. The movement was quickly eradicated.

A monk's parents had a house located in Sântejude Vale, in a forest clearing where there were only a few establishments (hodai). When the Greek Catholic monks left the Nicula monastery, they took cult objects, but also the famous wooden Icon of Holy Mary, which was believed to be miraculous<sup>2</sup>. The monks hid this wooden Icon and they hid it beneath the plaster in one of the walls of the house situated in the forest, near the Sântejude village, at about only 7 or 8 km from the monastery. There, in that house, near this mysterious place where the Icon was hidden, each partisan took his oath when he was accepted into this secret organization. They would make the oath with their hand on the cross, in front of a partisan monk. Moreover, until the mid-50s, the people who remained faithful in their hearts to the Greek Catholic cult used to secretly baptize their children at that particular place.

In other words, this was an anticommunist movement that also opposed the forced transition to the Orthodox confession.

It was only in January of 1964 that an Orthodox monk from Nicula, now an Orthodox monastery, succeeded in finding the hidden icon and to bringing it back to Nicula.

The Greek Catholics claim that, from their point of view, when they had been banished from the monastery, they were entitled to take the icon, as it belonged to them and could not be possessed by the Orthodox.

The Orthodox monks stated that, from their point of view, the Greek Catholics had stolen the icon from the monastery in 1948 and its recovery was legitimate.

Sixteen years after the event, in the winter of 1964, the Orthodox monk Maciuca found the icon hidden in the wall. In 2009, he stated that he knew exactly where to look for it, as he had been inspired by divinity.<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, another witness who took part in that event has a different opinion. He says that in 1964, the Greek Catholic monk who had brought the icon and hidden it in the house was imprisoned at Gherla for political reasons. Approximately two weeks after the icon's recovery, the Greek Catholic monk was discharged. In February 1964, he returned to his parents' house, where his old and sick father was living. In spring, probably under the Security's observation, he left for Brasov. He settled down there and got a job at an industrial factory, but no one knows what happened to him afterwards. The group of initiates suspected him of betrayal concerning the place where the icon was hidden. The Orthodox monk Maciuca became

---

<sup>2</sup> It is about an average-sized icon painted on wood in 1681 by the Orthodox priest Luca from the village Iclod, near Gherla. The theme of the icon is the Holly Mother with Baby Jesus. The icon was bought by the local nobleman Kornis and given to the Orthodox Church from the village of Nicula. In this church, at the beginning of 1699, a group of Austrian soldiers and later on, tens of people claimed having seen the icon in tears over a period of six weeks. An Imperial Commission constituted by the governor of Transylvania took written testimonies from these persons, confirming the supernatural properties of the icon, which was moved to the orthodox monastery of Nicula. The same year the Greek Catholic church was founded. Several years later, the village of Nicula, including the church and the monastery, will become Greek Catholic. During the XVIII century, the presence of the icon turns Nicula into an important pilgrimage place dedicated to the Holly Mother (the 15th August), the second largest pilgrimage place in Transylvania after Sumuleu-Ciuc. Given the special interest for the icon, a center devoted to glass painted icons developed since the XVIII century in the village of Nicula. This centre is still running today and it has an exceptional importance in developing and spreading this art.

<sup>3</sup> The monk Maciuca's side of the story, publicly stated on 5th October 2012, when the memorial cross was unveiled in the forest glade where the partisans' house was located.

in a short time the abbot of the Nicula monastery. He is still alive (2012) and he sometimes goes to Nicula, where he is very much respected. He recounted to me the story of finding the icon right at that place in the forest.

**B4. Who digs up the dead?** In 2006, the historian Marius Oprea, counselor of Prime Minister Tariceanu, managed, after several hurdles, to create the Institute Of Communism Crimes Investigation in Romania, with the purpose of identifying and revealing the destinies, the suffering and the bodies of those murdered by the agents of communist repression and buried without a cross at their heads, throughout the country.<sup>4</sup> There are a lot of dead waiting for this gesture, some of them still anonymous, some of them very popular (Mircea Vulcanescu, Iuliu Maniu etc.). The procedure is as follows: The family of the victim has to send a request to the Institute, where it is registered. Based on this request an identification and research investigation can be initiated concerning the place where the exhumation should begin. As soon as the research phase is done, the field work begins. After the first successful campaigns, some thousands of requests have been received. As the Institute's logistic capacity is quite limited, responding to all these requests becomes difficult.

**B5. Simion Muresan's exhumation.** In the fall of 2009, the request formulated by Simion Muresan's grandson had to be answered. He was 2 years old when his grandfather died. Now he is 62. Simion Muresan's son had to dig his father's grave. After several days, he made the courage to go one night and thrust a small stake at the head of the grave. Then, in the '70s, since the local mayor didn't object, Simion Muresan's son built a cross out of stone in the place where the stake used to stand. So, unlike other cases, identifying the grave was not a problem. After seven hours of efforts, the specialized archeologists found a skeleton. The priest uttered a prayer. Then it was the coroners' and the military prosecutors' turn to do their jobs.

First of all, the identification was made from a legal point of view. The clues and the funerary inventory provided important evidence regarding the bones (size, position, fractures, and deformations). They confirmed that the buried man was indeed Simion Muresan and they surmised how the crime happened. The Security officer ordered the peasant to go straight on and he shot him from behind. The bullet broke the victim's femur and he fell down. Then, the Security officer approached and shot another bullet at Muresan's head, causing the fracture of his jaw. The corpse was pushed into the grave dug by the son of the victim, where he laid for over 60 years, on his left side. These facts were determined at the disinterment, by the victim's family, as well as by expert analysis by a team comprised of archeologists, coroners and military prosecutors.

### **C. The Reinhumation. The Delayed ritual**

**C1. The natural death, 1949 .** In the case of a natural death, in 1949, at the age of 73, Simion Muresan would have been followed a normal faith. By interviewing some old people (Ciuta Raveca, 78, Lupsea Ana, 82 ) it was revealed the fact that, in those times, the ordinary funeral ritual in Sântejude comprised the dead man inside the

---

<sup>4</sup> My collaboration with ICCR started in 2008, when I was accepted to participate as a volunteer, at these campaigns, by contributing to the photo and video documentation.

house, with his family around him, having his last Eucharist and having a candle at his head. While the deceased was still inside the house, wake took part around him. The grave was dug in the cemetery, next to the other deceased from his ancestry. The funeral service was held by the Greek Catholic priest, with the participation of the community. The charity meal was organized after the funeral. All through the mourning period, memorial services were held.

**C2. The bad death.** Simion Muresan and the two partisans were eliminated with an obvious purpose. Their death and their damned graves, the taboo regarding their memory and cult of death was meant to serve as an example to terrify those who would have dared to oppose the new communist regime. It was the role of a scapegoat. Killing without trial, without papers for the deceased, without the funerary rituals. They were buried at the scenes of the crimes, outside the cemetery, without any funerary ritual, without a wooden cross or any Christian sign to mark their graves. Thus, their tombs were damned to be anonymous. The traditional, periodical rituals for death were forbidden. So these tombs were meant to be places of refused, forbidden memory.

The killing of Simion Mureșan together with the two partisans was not a terminus point of the terror. The subsequent reprisals had the effect anticipated by the Security. Eventually, the peasants agreed to the collectivization, which represented the victory of communism. From a religious perspective, the peasants also accepted the Orthodox confession, given the fact that in 1950 the Greek Catholic priest was arrested. „We will be Muslims if you want, but stop hurting and killing us!” (Ioan Mocean). The trauma was so strong in the collective memory that even in 1990, 20 years after the change of political regime, the creation of a new Greek Catholic parish was impossible. The place of the partisans' house is now a ruin.

**C3 Reburial, in 2009.** Simion Muresan's social status changed several times: till 1949, he was a simple peasant, regular member of the community; then he became “enemy of the people”; he was killed as a scapegoat and warning for others; at the funeral of 2009, he becomes a hero, but how?

The only survivor of Simion Muresan's family from 1949, is a nephew of his son, Muresan Petru, who was two years old at that time. He grew up with the story of the tragedy of the grandfather, told as a family secret. He had good results at school, but his family's bad reputation did not allow him to study at any faculty. So he was permitted to study theology, but at the Orthodox Faculty, at Sibiu. Now he is 62 years old. He is an Orthodox priest and has an important position as the Orthodox protopope of Gherla. He has two sons who also graduated at the Orthodox Theology Faculty. The protopope of Gherla has authority over the Orthodox parish of Sântejude, where the priest is a young graduate from Moldavia, with a limited experience of 4 months.

During public interviews, the religious nature of the King Michael's Captains movement was not mentioned. The reporters were not informed about this fact, and those who knew did not speak or were not questioned. Thus, the fact that Simion Muresan and the two partisans died not only as anticommunist martyrs, but also as Greek Catholics was completely omitted.

**Re-inhumation and the proper funeral.** After the expertise conducted by the coroners and the prosecutors was over, the bones were exhumed from the grave, and given to the family. They were covered in a shroud and put in a coffin. The coffin was taken to the Orthodox Church that used to be Greek Catholic in 1949. Simion Muresan's house doesn't exist anymore; it was demolished a long time ago. In the

morning of the funeral, 16 orthodox priests and the abbot of the Nicula monastery, accompanied by 6 monks arrived in the small village. The monk Maciuca, who had recovered the icon, was also there. Even a bishop belonging to the Cluj Metropolitan Seat was present.

The service took place in two phases. First of all, the priests accompanied by the people, climbed into the forest, to the ruins of the house where the icon used to be kept. During the ceremony that begun at 10 o'clock, a wooden crucifix was hallowed. The monk Maciuca retold the story about the discovery of the icon, in 1964. He said that he would like to live the rest of his life in isolation, right in that forest. All those present, including the bishop, proposed the building of a monastery belonging to Nicula. Father Maciuca was supposed to be one of the monks living there. The second phase of the ceremony began at 12 o'clock at the church, where the coffin was put. The funeral ceremony was very pompous and all the priests have participated. The character of the ceremony was Orthodox. No Greek Catholic priests were present. No one mentioned the fact that, at the moment of his death, Simion Muresan was Greek Catholic. When evoking the events, no one mentioned about the Greek Catholic character of the partisan movement. So, a man who died because he was against the communist regime and didn't belong to Orthodoxy was buried as a very faithful Orthodox. The purpose of the funeral, namely moral compensation and identity restoration was, as at least from a confessional point of view, deviated.

Simion Muresan's coffin was covered by the Romanian flag, signifying the honoring of a national hero. There were also a lot of wreaths decorated with ribbons in the national colors. At the funeral, the mayor, several counselors and even a member of the Romanian Parliament were present. At the end of the funeral, everybody received a loaf of knot-shaped bread as alms for the dead man. The coffin was carried by some young men from the village. The traditional stops were made. The inhumation took place in the cemetery, in an honorable place, near the entrance. After the funeral, the family, represented by the grandson who became an Orthodox rector, organized a meal, which didn't take place in the village, with the community, but in the city of Gherla. Not everybody was invited, only certain persons.

**D1. Exhumation 2010.** The two partisans' (Năhălean Gheorghe and Moldovan Traian) exhumations took place exactly one year later, in September 2010. Although the place was in the forest, the operation went smoothly due to a key source. A man from the village, aged 69, was a partisan's nephew (Năhălean). In 1949, he was 9 and he was one of those who were obliged to dig the partisans' grave. Although there were no signs leading to the grave, he remembered exactly the trees where the grave was dug. The information he offered was exact, even after 61 years. The bones of the two partisans were discovered by the Institute crew led by Marius Oprea, assisted by the coroners and the military prosecutors. After identification and analysis, the bones were given to the families.

**D2. Re-inhumation 2010.** The two partisans' coffins were put in the Orthodox Church located in the center of Sântejude. The ceremony was Orthodox in character and was common for both. Three priests participated: the rector from Gherla, the priest from the village and a young priest, the rector's secretary. The audience was not so impressive. No officials participated. Some descendants of the two partisans were present, represented by some nephews. Năhălean's relatives are middle-class teachers

who live in Cluj. Moldovan's relatives are very poor people living in the same village. After the common ceremony that took place in the church, the coffins took separate ways:

a) Năhălean Gheorghe was carried to the cemetery of Sântejude, accompanied by a lot of people and two priests: the rector and the local priest. All the traditional procedure, including the stops, was followed. After the funeral, the family organized a meal for everyone at the local cultural center.

b) The coffin of Moldovan Petru was transported by a Dacia car. The only persons who accompanied the coffin were the young priest from Gherla, the driver and other 5 persons representing Moldovan's family. On the 3-kilometer way to the Sântejude Vale cemetery there were no stops. The inhumation procedure was very quick and the coffin was put in the grave. At the end, the young priest hurried to arrive at the meal organized in the memory of Năhălean. The relatives of Petru Moldovan did not have the financial resources to organize a meal, neither were they invited to participate to the meal in the honor of the other partisan.

**D3. Conclusions.** The funerals that I took part at, did not reflect the tragic and common destiny of the three martyrs, but the interests and the social condition of their descendants at that instant (2009-2010). As described in the book written by Katherine Verdery (the case of the bishop Inochentie Micu Klein), from a confessional perspective, we may notice how the symbolic competition and the power relations between the Orthodox Church and the Greek Catholic Church take place. The manipulation with the defunct's identity is not made according to his own interest, but to his descendants' and actual social and political interest. By comparing the three funerals, one may notice that although these three people died as equals, for the same reason and they shared the same damned soil damnation earth for 60 years, it was these ceremonies which divided and differentiated them. These ceremonies did not reflect, after all, their equality in front of the death, but their descendants' present social hierarchy, on the life scene.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bernea, Ernest, 1977, Spațiu, timp și cauzalitate la poporul român, Editura Humanitas, București
- Blumer, Herbert, 1986, Symbolic interactionism – perspective and method, University of California Press, Los Angeles
- Both, Nicolae, 1986, Contribuții la Cântecul Zorilor, Anuarul Muzeului Etnografic al Transilvaniei Cluj-Napoca
- Bran, Mirel, 2012, Vânătorul de securiști, Editura Grinta, Cluj Napoca
- Chevalier, Maurice (coord), 2006, Dicționar de simboluri, vol. I – III, Editura Herald, București
- Constantinescu, Nicolae, 1999, Romanian Folk-Culture. An introduction, Editura Fundației Culturale Române, București
- Dobre, Florica, (coord), 2004, Trupele de Securitate (1949-1990), Editura Nemira, București
- Dobrincu, Dorin (coord.), 2005, Țărâtimea și puterea. Procesul de colectivizare a agriculturii în România 1949-1962, Ed. Polirom, Iași

- Dorondel, Ștefan, 2004, Moartea și apa: ritualuri funerare, simbolism acvativ și structura lumii de dincolo în imaginarul țărănesc, Editura Paideia, București
- Geertz, Clifford, 1973, *The interpretation of cultures*, Printed by Basic Books, USA
- Ghinoiu, Ion, 1994, *Vârstele timpului*, Editura Știința, Chișinău
- Ghinoiu, Ion, 1999, *Lumea de aici, lumea de dincolo – ipostaze românești ale nemuririi*, Editura Fundației Culturale Române, București
- Kligman, Gail, 1997, *Nunta mortului. Ritual și cultură tradițională în Transilvania*, Editura Polirom, Iași Marian.
- Simion Florea, 2008, *Inmormantarea la români*, Editura Saeculum Vizual, București
- Mesnil, Marianne, 1997, *Etnologul între șarpe și balaur*, Editura Paideia, București
- Olinescu, Marcel, 1944, *Mitologie românească*, Editura Casa Școalelor, București
- Sălăgean, Tudor, 2011, *Memoria comunităților. Rezistența anticomunistă la Cricău și Tibru, județul Alba, în Anuarul Muzeului Etnografic al Transilvaniei*, cluj Napoca, pg. 322-333
- Șeuleanu, Ion, 1995, *Dincoace de sacru, dincolo de profan (studii și eseuri de folclor)* Editura Tipomur, Tg.Mureș
- Turner, Victor, 1977, *The ritual process – structure and anti-structure*, Cornell University Press, USA.
- Van Gennep Arnold, 1996, *Riturile de trecere*, Editura Polirom, Iași
- Verdery, Katherine, 2006, *Viața politică a corpurilor moarte*, Editura Polirom, Iași