



## SIGHET MEMORIAL

### Sighetu Marmăției, Romania

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### Executive Summary

The Sighet Memorial is housed in a former Stalinist prison in Sighet that under Communist rule in Romania housed high profile political prisoners. The Memorial provides insight on the repression by communist regimes in Europe throughout the 20th century, including the resultant death and suffering experienced inside and outside the prison walls. This case study explores the memorialization of this period in the post-communist era and how the Memorial seeks to reshape Romanian collective memory.

## Introduction

The Sighet Memorial, interestingly, consists of a number of components: a museum located in the former political prison in Sighet (which itself contains a number of smaller memorials) and the International Centre for the Study of Communism in Bucharest. The main centre, namely the *Memorialul victimelor comunismului și al rezistenței Sighet* (Memorial to the Victims of Communism and Sighet Resistance), was set up in 1993 on the site of Sighet Prison.

Located in the town of Sighetu Marmăției, in Maramureș county in northern Romania, Sighet Prison was used by the Romanian Workers' Party (which in 1965 was renamed the Romanian Communist Party by Nicolae Ceaușescu) to imprison political opponents of the government. Many of those sent to the prison were pre-war elites, including journalists, intellectuals and clergymen, and many of these important figures died in custody, beaten and tortured. The Prison was converted into a memorial site in 1993 with the support of the International Centre for Studies into Communism, where a museum was set up and a bronze statue (pictured above) was installed, often referred to as 'The Convoy of the Sacrificial Victims' (*Convoiul sacriificaților*).

The memorial aims to reconstruct and preserve the memories not only of the prisoners of Sighet but also of the Romanian people in general, who for half a century held the belief that communism in Romania served them well. Indeed, according to opinion polls held in 2010, 63% of Romanians think that their lives were better under communism, and 74% of those older than 60, who lived most of their lives under an oppressive communist regime, still consider communism to be a good idea.<sup>1</sup> According to Ana Blandiana, who helped set up the memorial, '[t]he greatest victory of communism, a victory dramatically revealed only after 1989, was to create people without a memory – a brainwashed new man unable to remember what he was, what he had, or what he did before communism.'<sup>2</sup> The creation of the Memorial to the Victims of Communism and Sighet Resistance is a means of counteracting this victory, a means to resuscitate the collective memory.

## Background

### *Communism in Romania*

The Socialist Republic of Romania (*Republica Socialistă România*, RSR) – known as the Romanian People's Republic before Nicolae Ceaușescu's rise to power – was a Marxist-Leninist communist state that existed from 1947 to 1989. Romania was occupied by the Soviet Union

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<sup>1</sup> Marian Sultanoiu, "Ceaușescu reales – 41 la sută dintre români ar vota cu el dacă ar fi azi alegeri prezidențiale," *Gandul*, April 23, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Sighet Memorial Official Website, "The Memorial of the Victims of Communism and of the Resistance," 2020.

after the Second World War, and, in March 1945, a new, pro-Soviet government was put into place. In December 1947, this government gained full control of the country following the forced abdication of King Michael I, and the People's Republic of Romania came into being. The Romanian government gained more and more independence from the USSR as time went on, to the point where all Soviet troops had been withdrawn from Romania by 1958.<sup>3</sup> Romania was led by General Secretary Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej until his death in 1965, when Nicolae Ceaușescu took over. Ceaușescu was generally well-liked by the Romanian population, partly due to his denunciation of the 1968 Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, giving the impression that Romania was at least in part independent.



**Figure 1:** "The Exterior of the Former Political Prison in Sighet" Image by Richard Mortel CC BY-NC-SA 2.0

The early years of Communist rule in Romania involved a large number of arrests. In February 1948, the Romanian Workers' Party was formed by the merging of the Romanian Communist Party with the Social Democratic Party. Many socialists were opposed to the merger and were subsequently arrested; the leadership of the Independent Social Democratic Party, which was led by Constantin Titel Petrescu, were charged with high treason and sentenced to long periods of hard labour. Iosif Jumanca, Ion Flueraș, George Grigorovici and Ene Filipescu all died in prison. A pattern seemed to be emerging: pre-war elites and political opponents, even ones who were also on the left, were disposed of by being sent to labour camps and prisons like Sighet. From 1949 onwards, thousands of dissidents were sent to labour camps to help build

<sup>3</sup> Sergiu Verona, *The Withdrawal of Soviet Troops from Romania in 1958: An Analysis of the Decision Report to National Council for Soviet and East European Research* (John Hopkins University, 1989)

the Danube-Black Sea Canal. At any given time, up to 20,000 political prisoners were working on its excavation, and some reports estimate the number of workers to have been as high as 100,000 in total.<sup>4</sup>

Romania's secret police force, the *Securitate* or 'General Directorate of People's Security', was proportionally one of the biggest in the Eastern Bloc<sup>5</sup> and gained notoriety for being particularly ruthless in carrying out their duties. People owning typewriters were required to take them to the police station twice a year so that their imprints could be checked against any eventual clandestine manifestos, and if so, they were promptly arrested. In the 1940s and the 1950s, the Romanian intelligentsia was systematically jailed and tortured. Prisoners were routinely beaten, denied medical attention, and sometimes even administered lethal doses of poison. Re-education programmes were introduced shortly after the war, taking place in prisons, in order to crush any form of active or passive resistance. At Pitești Prison, for instance, between December 1949 and September 1951, the *Experimentul Pitești*, or 'Pitești Experiment' was carried out in an attempt to violently 're-educate' the young prisoners.<sup>6</sup> Between 1,000 and 5,000 were re-educated through interrogation,<sup>7</sup> torture (which involved burning and near-drowning) and public humiliation, with Gulag survivor and Nobel Laureate Aleksandr Solzhenistyn calling it the 'most terrible act of barbarism in the contemporary world.'<sup>8</sup>



**Figure 2:** "Interior of Sighet Prison" Image by Irena Dobre CC BY-NC-SA 2.0

## *Sighet Prison*

Sighet Prison, one of the largest in Romania, was built in 1897 when the area was still a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. After 1945, most of the repatriation of Romanians who had

<sup>4</sup> Vladimir Socor, "The Danube-Black Sea Canal: A Graveyard Revisited," *Radio Free Europe*, August 31, 1984.

<sup>5</sup> Craig Smith, "Eastern Europe Struggles to Purge Security Services," *New York Times*, December 12, 2006.

<sup>6</sup> Ilie Popa, "Memoria în prezent," *Memoria*, July 2004.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Agerpres News Agency, "10th edition of international symposium on the Pitesti experiment, re-education through torture," October 1, 2010.

been deportees and prisoners of war in the Soviet Union took place through Sighet. From August 1948, however, Sighet Prison became the designated site for detaining political opponents of the government.

By May 1950, over one hundred high-ranking people (former ministers, academics, economists, military officers, historians, journalists, and politicians)<sup>9</sup> from all over Romania were brought to Sighet, the majority being over 60 years old. This marked the beginning of Sighet's role as a place of extermination. The communist government and *Securitate* imprisoned more than two hundred political prisoners there, silencing any opposition. Most of these prisoners had been ministers in the period between 1919 and 1947, and around fifty were Roman Catholic and Uniate prelates.<sup>10</sup> Sighet lay just two kilometres from the border with the Soviet Union, the site having been chosen deliberately; in the event of an anti-communist uprising, the prisoners could be swiftly moved to a Soviet Gulag by rail using the Russian railway tracks which lay within a short distance of the prison. Of the over two hundred political prisoners, around fifty-four died, most aged between sixty and ninety-three. None of these deaths were recorded and the bodies were buried at night in order to cover up the deaths.<sup>11</sup> Prominent victims included Iuliu Maniu, who was Prime Minister of Romania from 1928-1930. Constantin Argetoianu, Prime Minister of Romania in 1939, bishops Anton Durcovic, Aron Marton and Alexandru Cisar, diplomat Victor I. Rădulescu-Pogoneanu, and many more.<sup>12</sup>

### *From Prison to Memorial*

The former prison became a memorial to the victims of communist regimes in 1993, supported by the activity of the International Centre for Studies into Communism. It gathered oral history as well as documents and photographs for use in the museum rooms, which consist of more than fifty-six cells of the former prison.<sup>13</sup> Each of these rooms displays in chronological order the evolution of communist rule, showing things like prisoners' clothes, diagrams showing how prisoners were tortured, photos of those imprisoned and panels describing movements like Poland's *Solidarność* and the Prague Spring. It also contains a group of statues created by sculptor Aurel Vlad, to remember those imprisoned in Sighet. Eighteen bronze figures (Figure 3) are walking towards a blank wall, directed to do so by the imperious hand of a headless figure. This 'Convoy of the Sacrificial Victims' has since become a symbol of the memorial as a whole.

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<sup>9</sup> Ebrat Museum Official Website, "Sighet Prison," *Ebrat Museum Official Website*, 2020.

<sup>10</sup> Sighet Memorial Official Website, "The Memorial of the Victims of Communism and of the Resistance," 2020.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*



**Figure 3:** "The Eighteen Bronze Figures" Image by Richard Mortel CC BY-NC-SA 2.0

The Museum was set up in 1993 by writers Romulus Rusan, who heads the International Centre for Studies into Communism, and Ana Blandiana. The two founders presented the memorial project to the Council of Europe in 1993, which decided to take it under its aegis.<sup>14</sup> The Civic Academy Foundation, created in 1994 as a non-governmental organisation in Romania, took over the development of the project. It is the legal entity that organises and administers the Memorial to the Victims of Communism and to the Anticommunist Resistance.

Among the goals of the Civic Academy foundation is civic education, especially educating the country's youth, and the provision of good and unbiased knowledge of Romania's past. They aim to restore all of the contemporary Romanian history that was falsified during the period of the communist dictatorship. In line with these goals, one of its most important projects is the Sighet Summer School. The Civic Academy Foundation (in collaboration with Konrad Adenauer Foundation) has organised the Sighet Summer School every year since 1998, with it taking place at the Sighet. It is attended by school students between 14 and 18 years old and, from 2008 onwards, by history teachers, too. Specialists in the history of communism from France, Germany, the United Kingdom, the United States of America, Poland, the Czech Republic, Russia, Hungary and Romania have all been lecturers here, along with dissidents and fighters against communism from all over Eastern Europe.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

A cemetery is also part of the memorial, the former 'Cemetery for the Poor' (Figure 4) in which Sighet prisoners were buried, is located 2.5 kilometres away from the prison, in the direction of Negrești-Oaș.<sup>15</sup> The prisoners who died from 1952 onwards were buried there secretly on the banks of the river Tisza. Since those buried cannot be properly identified, a landscape project has been created to commemorate them. The outline of Romania has been recreated with fir trees and within it is a cenotaph, dominated by a massive Byzantine cross, its position corresponding with the location of Sighet in Romania. On the cenotaph are urns in which visitors can cast handfuls of earth from places of excavation, tombs and mass graves of victims of communism. Outside the symbolic borders created by the trees are plaques with the names of those who perished after having been deported from Romania to Siberia and Donbas.



**Figure 4:** "Cemetery of the Poor" Image by Monica Groza CC BY-SA 3.0

## History of the Contestation

Despite the many atrocities committed by the communist Romanian government, many still think fondly of the post-war era. An ex-soldier, now a taxi driver, is reported to have said 'we had a house, we had a job [back then]... since then everything was stolen.'<sup>16</sup> Some Romanians even struggle to see *any* positives in recent political and social developments, with one man stating, 'we're freer, but the rest is worse.'<sup>17</sup> And although Romania's economy has transformed for the better in the past thirty years, from being at a similar level to Ukraine in 1989 to now having four times its GDP per capita, many are still disappointed.

Following the Revolution, Romania had hoped to reach Western European standards of prosperity, and when this did not happen, many were dissatisfied. Indeed, many young Romanians have left, with the UN International Migrant Report for 2007-2015 showing that

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Joshua Neicho, "Romania - a country fighting for its past," *Article*, January 4, 2020.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

Romania had the fastest emigration growth rate in the world, excluding Syria. Twenty-eight percent of its 18-29-year-olds have left. Economist Cristian Niculescu-Marcu of the Centre for Economics and Business Research stated that 'many Romanians are still disappointed at the speed of economic progress and development', and with Romania having the lowest HDI of all the EU countries (tied with Bulgaria), it is no wonder that much of the population is nostalgic for Ceaușescu and communism in general, where financial security was more guaranteed. Citizens in the Socialist Republic of Romania did not fare much better, however, with Carmen Bugan describing in her memoir how 'the crops if they [didn't] fail, [went] straight to Russia on big freight trains and our electricity [went] there for free. A cold war [was] raging and we [were] feeding the Russians.'<sup>18</sup>

In the early 1990s, with a neo-Communist power in charge of establishing a democracy in Romania, the debate about the legacy of the Communist regime was a crucial yet controversial one, which would have immediate effects on both political and cultural life. This neo-Communist power, however, actively discouraged any drive to uncover the communist past of the country. Vladimir Tismaneanu called this the 'politics of amnesia,'<sup>19</sup> while Ana Blandiana, one of the founders of the Sighet Memorial, stated that the 'greatest victory of communism, a victory dramatically revealed only after 1989, was to create a people without a memory – a brainwashed new man unable to remember what he was, what he had, or what he did before communism.'<sup>20</sup>

Some historians assert a third perspective, however, as outlined by Simina Bădică, a researcher and curator at the Romanian Peasant Museum in Bucharest. She believes that this so-called politics of amnesia led to 'a radicalisation in the position of those who felt the need for such a historical, political and even moral investigation.'<sup>21</sup> Bădică claims that the 'constant denial of access to 'the real story' of Romanian Communism pushed Romanian anti-Communism into a radical realm which focused mainly on Communist crimes and described the whole era as a criminal one.'<sup>22</sup>

Praising the 'crimes' of totalitarian governments and denigrating their victims is now forbidden by law in Romania; crucially, this includes the Ceaușescu era. In 2006, Dinel Staicu was fined 25,000 lei for praising Ceaușescu and displaying his photos on his private television channel,

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<sup>18</sup> Carmen Bugan, *Burying the Typewriter: Childhood Under the Eye of the Secret Police* (London: Pan Macmillan, 2012)

<sup>19</sup> Vladimir Tismaneanu, "Democracy and Memory: Romania Confronts Its Communist Past," *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 617, no. 1 (2008): 170.

<sup>20</sup> Sighet Memorial Official Website, "The Memorial of the Victims of Communism and of the Resistance," 2020.

<sup>21</sup> Simina Bădică, "The Black Hole Paradigm. Exhibiting Communism in Post-Communist Romania," *History of Communism in Europe* 1 (2010): 83-101.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*



3TV Oltenia.<sup>23</sup> The contestation surrounding Romania's past and its legacy has thus been prevalent since the end of the Communist regime and persists to this day.

## Decision-Making Processes

In the case of Sighet, the decision-making and support process happens at a local, national and international level. The Memorial was properly set up in 1993 by Romulus Rusan, who heads the International Centre for Studies into Communism, and Ana Blandiana, who had presented the memorial project to the Council of Europe (Europe's leading human rights organisation) in 1993. As outlined above, the Memorial's management was then taken over by the Civic Academy Foundation, a Romanian legal entity founded in 1994. The same Foundation is responsible for the International Centre for Research into Communism and an exhibition centre in Bucharest.

In 1997, the Memorial to the Victims of Communism and Resistance was declared by the Romanian state an "ensemble of national interest". According to law 95/1997, the Memorial receives a permanent annual grant from the Romanian state.<sup>24</sup> The Memorial to the Victims of Communism and Resistance is, therefore an institution of Romanian civil society. The main financial support came from Romanians exiled in the West. The most significant supporters of the Memorial are lawyer Mișu Carciog from the UK, Vlad Drăgoescu, Sergiu Grossu, Vasile Cosma and Dan Manuilă. Other supporters included Gabriela Carp from Germany, Dr Miron Costin and Vasile Cosma from the US, along with the 'Association pour le Memorial Sighet' founded by Maria Brătianu in Paris.<sup>25</sup> These financial supporters, therefore, have a say in the development of the Memorial.

There are also private donations, coming from local, national and international groups, from the Council of Europe Information Office in Bucharest or the German foundations Konrad Adenauer, Hanns Seidel, Friedrich Ebert, for specific projects, such as publishing books, organising symposia and the Sighet Summer School and supporting the operation of the Memorial.<sup>26</sup>

## Summary and Conclusions

The founders of the Sighet Memorial repeatedly assert that its creation was not an end in itself, but rather a means, specifically a means to counteract the brainwashing operation carried out during the Communist regime, which successfully destroyed social memory. According to Ana Blandiana, without memory, a society is easy to manipulate. The motto of the memorial is

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<sup>23</sup> Servicul Comunicare Si Relatii Publice, "Comunicat de Presa," *Servicul Comunicare Si Relatii Publice*, February 7, 2006.

<sup>24</sup> Sighet Memorial Official Website, "The Memorial of the Victims of Communism and of the Resistance," 2020.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

'when justice fails to be a kind of memory, memory on its own can be a kind of justice.'<sup>27</sup> The memorial has effectively educated and commemorated a contested history, especially through the Sighet Memorial Summer School, aimed at fostering memory amongst students. Pupils read documents, and listen to analyses and eyewitness accounts in order to properly understand the monstrous mechanisms behind Gheorghiu-Dej and Ceaușescu's regimes. Thanks to this, the Memorial has become a living museum and an institution of memory and of passing down information from one generation of students to the next.

Another key element of the Memorial is its 'Space for Recollection and Prayer', located in one of the courtyards of the Prison. There is a chapel, designed by architect Radu Mihăilescu, with a cross cut into the centre of the cupola, and outside, on the courtyard wall are plaques engraved with the names of some of the thousands who died in prisons and camps (to add to the names already engraved in the Cemetery for the Poores. It is for visitors to reflect and pray after having seen the horrors of the communist rule described in the museum. The chapel was the winner of an architectural competition whose theme was the sentence 'I would not have endured if I had not believed in God.'<sup>28</sup>

In 1998, the Council of Europe declared the Museum to be one of the three most important places of European commemoration, alongside the Auschwitz Memorial and the Peace Memorial in France. The Museum now welcomes visitors numbering two times the population of Sighet a year, bringing the number to around 80,000. This Memorial confronts a contested past, parts of which have been ignored or glorified, and presents it to both local communities as well as international ones.

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

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(Figure 4)

## About Contested Histories

Many contestations have been over memorials, street names, and other physical representations of historical legacies in public spaces in recent years. These contestations often reflect deeper societal tensions, whether triggered by political transitions, demographic shifts, inter-ethnic strife, or a growing awareness of unaddressed historical injustices.

Contested Histories is a multi-year initiative designed to identify principles, processes, and best practices for addressing these contestations at the community or municipal level and in the classroom. Conflicts about history, heritage, and memory are a global phenomenon. Although each case is different, comparative cases can indicate lessons learned and reflect best practices.

## About IHJR at EuroClio

The Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation (IHJR) is a research centre at the European Association for History Educators (EuroClio) in The Hague, The Netherlands. The IHJR works with educational and public policy institutions to organise and sponsor historical discourse in pursuit of acknowledgement and the resolution of historical disputes in divided communities and societies.

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