

SHADES OF DARKNESS: POLITICS, OBJECTS AND DISPLAYS IN SIGHET'S DARK HERITAGE SITES

Nuanțe de întuneric: politică, obiecte și expozate în siturile de patrimoniu întunecat din Sighet

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the interpretation and communication of dark heritage in Sighetu Marmăției, focusing on three sites: the Memorial of the Victims of Communism and Anti-Communist Resistance, Pauper's Cemetery, and the Elie Wiesel Memorial House. We argue that these sites convey Romania's dark heritage by being associated with events and histories of troubled pasts, namely the Communist oppression and the Holocaust. The analysis addresses how and to what extent objects, politics, and spatiality contribute to the making of a sense of darkness identified in these sites. The article argues that the darkness of these sites is shaped not only by their histories, but also by the narratives constructed around them through the museum exhibits and curation. The study reveals that while these sites aim to educate and memorialise, they also navigate complex political and social dynamics, influencing how their dark heritage is presented and perceived.

Key-words: dark heritage, Sighet, Communism, Holocaust, memorial museum, objects, exhibits, displays.



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“Sighet remains the pain of the Romanian nation”¹

Introduction

John Lennon and Malcolm Foley define “dark tourism” as the growing interest in sites associated with death, suffering and disaster². In line with this, the term “dark heritage” refers to sites and artefacts defined as “cultural heritage that is associated with real and commodified sites of atrocity, death, disaster, human depravity, tragedy, human suffering, and sites of barbarism and genocide”³. Prominent examples include Chornobyl, the Auschwitz concentration camps, the ruins of New Orleans (after Hurricane Katrina) and the 9/11 Ground Zero Museum, among many others.

As we can notice from the range of dark heritage examples, Stone notes that the term “dark tourism” is too broad to capture the complexity and diversity of these tourism products. He advocates for a more nuanced approach, recognising varying “shades” of dark tourism, ranging from the darkest – sites that directly witnessed historical atrocities – to lighter, interpretive spaces like museums and memorials⁴. Stone further notes that the manipulation of dark heritage can cause a site to slide along the dark tourism spectrum, moving from lighter to darker⁵.

This article builds on Stone’s framework, arguing that the sense of darkness in dark heritage sites is actively constructed through objects, displays, politics, and spatial organisation. It seeks to explore how these elements shape the interpretation and communication of dark histories, raising critical questions about how stories of atrocity and suffering are selected, narrated, and commodified into tourism products. This question is particularly relevant when considering the dark heritage sites of Sighetu Marmăției (Sighet) in North-Western Romania. While the country remains amongst the few in Eastern Europe without a physical museum dedicated solely to its Communist past⁶, the town of Sighet tries to tell this dark history through multiple sites: a former prison and a mass grave. Likewise, the story of the Jewish community in Sighet is told through a memorial house.

In recent years, museums have shifted their focus from being mere custodians of collections to becoming agents of education and opinion-shaping, reaching new audiences through the dissemination of narratives⁷. In light of this, this article aims to discuss the role of objects, politics and the

1 Sabău (1998), p. 7.

2 Lennon and Foley (2002), p. 3.

3 Kuznik (2018).

4 Stone (2006).

5 Stone (2006), p. 158.

6 Muzeul Ororilor Comunismului în România is one of the youngest museums in the country and the only state museum that approaches solely the topic of the communist period in Romania, but it does not currently have a physical collection space outside of an administrative office.

7 Lazar (2022), p. 460.

use of spatiality in interpreting and communicating the sense of darkness in dark heritage sites. This will be illustrated through the case study of three sites in Sighet: the Memorial of the Victims of Communism and Anti-Communist Resistance, Pauper's Cemetery and the Elie Wiesel Memorial House. These sites not only reflect two of Romania's most traumatic histories – Communist oppression and the Holocaust – but also create a microcosm for the study, interpretation, and exhibition of dark heritage in Romania.

By comparing these three case studies, this article offers an analysis of the responses that practitioners give to the physical traces correlated with Sighet's dark histories, raising ethical questions concerning the heritage choices made. Located along the same street, only a few minutes apart, and bearing two of the most critical European periods (The Holocaust and parts of the Communist regime), these sites show a clear distinction between sites associated with troubled pasts and sites that are troubled pasts. Thus, this article will argue that another dimension to this discussion is the influence a site's objects, politics, and spatiality have on determining where its darkness comes from and how dark its shade is. The article will start by describing the three sites and then delve deeper into their analysis.

The Memorial of the Victims of Communism and Anti-Communist Resistance

The prison was built in 1897 by the Austro-Hungarian monarchy and served as a common jail until 1944, when, according to Paul Williams, it was used as a deportation centre for Jews on their way to the concentration camps in Germany and Poland⁸. Beginning in 1948, the prison became one of the most notorious facilities of the totalitarian Communist system of “political purification”, incarcerating political detainees often referred to as the elites – politicians, journalists, academics, and bishops⁹. In 1993, the prison was converted into a memorial museum (Fig. 1). The cells now display objects that recall the prisoners' living conditions and describe the life of ordinary



Fig. 1 – The entrance to the Memorial of the Victims of Communism and Anti-Communist Resistance.
Author: Personal photograph

⁸ Williams (2007), p. 15.

⁹ Bârlea and Dobeş (2017); Sabău (1998).

people under the regime, aiming to emphasise its history. Initially funded by the Council of Europe and hosting the International Centre for the Study of Communism, the memorial later received additional funding from the Romanian government.

Paupers' Cemetery



Fig. 2 – Paupers' Cemetery and the Stairs of Life monument.

Author: Personal photograph

this discovery, in 1999, the Memorial of the Victims of Communism and Anti-Communist Resistance in Sighet also included the Paupers' Cemetery (Fig. 2), where 52 of the prisoners had been secretly buried. While efforts to identify the bodies of the elites failed, an architectural ensemble was developed to mark the site. Trees were planted around the mass grave to form the contour of Romania's map when viewed from above. Below the map is a monument entitled "The Stair of Life", and at the location representing Sighet on the map, there is an Orthodox shrine.

Elie Wiesel Memorial House



Fig. 3 – Entrance to the Elie Wiesel Memorial House.

Author: Personal photograph

The prison functioned continuously until 1955, but between 1950-1955 no death certificates were issued and the families of the detainees were not informed about any of the deaths that occurred. Research has shown that the bodies of the deceased detainees were buried in a mass grave, less than 50 meters from the Ukrainian border, alongside the already existing individual graves of the poor and homeless. As a result of

Elie Wiesel was born in Sighet, in a house built around the end of the nineteenth century, in the Jewish district. Winner of the 1986 Nobel Peace Prize, the Jewish writer Elie Wiesel was born and later deported from this house to the concentration camp of Buchenwald. After his release in 1945, Wiesel moved to France and then to the US. Following Wiesel's Nobel Prize win, local

authorities began planning to develop his birthplace further and open it to the public. In 2000, the Museum of Maramureş received government funding to restore the damaged house, and a year later, then-President Ion Iliescu approved substantial funding to turn the house into a memorial museum. The current exhibition in the house traces Wiesel's life, often called "Sighet's son," and provides a brief description of the Jewish community's life and fate in Sighet and Maramureş.

The Political Narratives

When assessing the origins of darkness in dark heritage sites, an obvious answer is the history associated with a site. In this context, the three case studies – the Memorial of the Victims of Communism and Anti-Communist Resistance, Pauper's Cemetery, and Elie Wiesel's Memorial House – are dark heritage sites because of the histories that shaped them. These sites are linked to Romania's communist oppression, the murder of elites, and the fate of the Jewish community in Transylvania. However, the darkness at these sites is not just historical; it is also shaped by the political narratives that are conceived, selected, and presented. As James Young observed, "the relationship between a state and its memorials is not one-sided"¹⁰. Authorities may shape memory to serve their interests, but memorials can also resist the state's intentions¹¹. This dynamic is particularly evident in the case of Sighet.

Romania experienced a harsh form of totalitarianism until the revolution in 1989 (Fig. 4). Starting with an aggressive nationalist policy, it was not until the 1980s that Nicolae Ceauşescu's decision to pay Romania's foreign debt resulted in the most severe repression and denial of human rights that the country has seen. Ceauşescu was publicly executed in December 1989 and, according to Duncan Light, "Romania has since attempted to draw a line under the years of his dictatorship and rebuild itself as a 'new', post-communist country"¹². It could be argued that the physical remains of the communist rule thus came to represent an unwanted reminder of



*Fig. 4 – Romanian demonstrators sitting on a tank. 22 December 1989. Available at: <https://rarehistoricalphotos.com/romanian-revolution-pictures-1989>
Author: Unknown photographer*

¹⁰ Young (1993), p. 3.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Light (2000), p. 146.



*Fig. 5 – Winning plaque for the “Travellers’ Choice” Award in 2016.
Author: Personal photograph*

a history the country is trying to forget. Moreover, this period and its physical traces seem to be conflicting with Romania’s modern democratic identity. Aspiring to establish a multi-party democracy and a market economy, Romania’s ambition can be best described as a desire to “return to Europe,” which involves rejecting what Ceaușescu’s dictatorship achieved¹³. As Paul Williams argued, the beginnings of the post-communist period were concentrated on the “effort to erase the physical traces of communism”, with very little desire to conserve those material remains¹⁴. Consequently, in the aftermath of the revolution, that heritage became what Carr and Colls named “taboo heritage”: a legacy so sensitive and unwanted that it was, initially, not even allowed to become heritage¹⁵.

In today’s age of mass media, however, the communist past cannot be forgotten or erased. Dark tourism, a product of the modern world, thrives on the spectacle of historical events¹⁶, and Romania’s 1989 revolution – widely broadcast as the “world’s first televised revolution” – became a global spectacle that drew interest from tourists¹⁷. While nothing has been purposefully prepared for tourists, trails of former Securitate buildings or the Revolution Square were temporarily

labelled as communist heritage. While this generated tourist interest, the legacy of communism in Romania cannot be reduced solely to the revolution, which was just a chapter of what the entire regime has represented. Instead, in Sighet, the first signs of critical engagement with the totalitarian regime of Ceaușescu become most evident, through the Memorial of the Victims of Communism and Anti-Communist Resistance (Fig. 5). Now, the prison that held the leaders of Romania’s prewar democratic parties, journalists, academics, priests and bishops, tries to tell a broader story of the communist period.

13 Ibid, p. 154.

14 Williams (2007), p.115.

15 Carr and Colls (2016).

16 Lennon and Foley (2002), p. 3.

17 Light (2000), p. 148.

The reason why the national history of communism is told and exhibited 700 km away from the capital might seem peculiar, but much allied with Young's opinion that there is a clear relationship between the state and its memorials¹⁸. While the monuments in Bucharest are slowly decaying, waiting for the government's notice, the Sighet memorial was supported by the civil society, NGOs and the Council of Europe. According to Williams, the role of NGOs in creating memorials is especially significant in transitional societies like Romania, where the detachment from the state allows for critical engagement with contested histories¹⁹. It is precisely this aspect that made the Memorial of the Victims of Communism and Anti-Communist Resistance alongside Paupers' Cemetery strive in a climate that only predicted the denial and erasure of the communist past.

The historian Tony Judt argued that former Communist countries are confined to "the sense of being on the periphery of someone else's centre, of being a sort of second-class European"²⁰. The communist past, in this sense, does little to strengthen Romania's connection with Western Europe or contribute to the nation's political goal of European integration. On the other hand, I would argue that Romania's role in the Holocaust – particularly its role in the destruction of the Jewish community – has been mobilised as part of its effort to integrate with the European Union. While the communist heritage emphasises Romania's differences from Western Europe, the role played in the Holocaust is a "concession to the country's ambition to join the European Union"²¹.

The Elie Wiesel Memorial House in Sighet symbolises both the tragic fate of Maramureş's Jewish community and the celebrated achievements of its most famous survivor, Elie Wiesel, "Sighet's son"²². As Amir Tanović has noted, memorial museums built away from the original sites of atrocities often have greater freedom in their expression²³. The Elie Wiesel Memorial House, funded by the Romanian government, demonstrates the state's willingness to publicly acknowledge this dark chapter of its history, aligning with



Fig. 6 – Panel exhibiting photographs from the memorial house's opening in the 29th of July 2002. Photographs show Elie Wiesel, local authorities and the president Ion Iliescu. Author: Personal photograph

18 Young (1993).

19 Williams (2007), p. 109.

20 Judt (2010), p. 754.

21 Judt (2010), p. 803.

22 Site-ul Muzeul Maramureşului (2024)

23 Tanović (2019), p. 177.

broader political ambitions of European integration. The house's opening, attended by both Wiesel and then-president Ion Iliescu, further highlights the political significance of this memorial (Fig. 6).

As Paul Williams argues, the decision to “exhume” certain sites for memorialisation is as much a political act as an archaeological one²⁴. As it has been discussed, politics play an important role in evoking the darkness in dark heritage, since the decision to “exhume” a site is linked with the state's wider aspirations and motives. Thus, it might take a bit longer until the memorials in Sighet are able to achieve the degree of freedom necessary for full expression of their dark heritage. But how are they displaying their darkness now?

The Surviving Objects and their Display

On first reflection, one might think that history alone is the element in charge of evoking the darkness in dark heritage, since it represents the force that triggers it. However, as Andreas Huyssen argued, it is through the process of musealisation that memory is inscribed into historiography²⁵. Thus, we came to understand that the objects displayed in memorial museums serve a salient role in displaying tangible proof of memory in the face of history. Writing about memorial museums, Paul Williams said that they are singularly focused on an event, unlike generic history museums that cover a wider variety of topics²⁶. While this may be true of many museums out of the ones analysed in his book, it came as a surprise that both memorial museums from Sighet, the Memorial of the Victims of Communism and Anti-Communist Resistance and Elie Wiesel's memorial house, were curated to present not only a focused display of the

event connected to the site, but an overview of the dark history they subscribe to. And that task was not easy. The institutions from Sighet made conscious decisions about how to present and frame the outputs that their dark histories have generated, and they all did that in different ways.

The former prisons turned into memorial museums analysed by Williams in his book were described for their display of the harsh



Fig. 7 – View of the Memorial of the Victims of Communism and Anti-Communist Resistance.
Author: Personal photograph

24 Williams (2007), p. 80.

25 Huyssen (2000), p. 32.

26 Williams (2007), p. 25.

conditions, claustrophobic space with muffled sounds²⁷. Instead, the Memorial of the Victims of Communism and Anti-Communist Resistance uses the entire prison as an exhibition space, where cheerful sounds of the *Romanian Rhapsody* play continuously, and daylight floods the rooms (Fig. 7). The small and numerous rooms each exhibit photographs, posters, collages, graphs and, sometimes, objects (clothes, uniforms, personal belongings) that speak about the communist period as a whole (Fig. 8). These constitute what Williams describes as “cold” with a functional scope, flattening the story “into a historical book on the wall”²⁸. There are only very few cells curated to present how they would have looked like when the prison was functional, one belonging to the most famous detainee: Iuliu Maniu, the former prime minister of Romania (Fig. 9). While the collage exhibits and their descriptions add to the artistic value of the memorial and try to tell a very general and objective story of the communist period, it is through the very few “hot” objects displayed that the darkness seems to emanate from. According to Williams, “hot” objects pose “a high emotional quotient”, lending themselves to more emotional engagement, “due to their high capacity for personification”²⁹.

The two cells reconstituted to their original shape, the “dark room” where the inmates were chained to the ground in complete darkness and the few



Fig. 8 – Panels and collages exhibited in the cells of the Memorial of the Victims of Communism and Anti-Communist Resistance
Author: Personal photograph



Fig. 9 – The cell where Iuliu Maniu died
Author: Personal photograph

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid, p. 34.

²⁹ Ibid, p. 34.



Fig.10 – A chess board built by an inmate.
Author: Personal photograph



Fig.11 – Photographs exhibited in the Elie Wiesel Memorial House.
Author: Personal photograph

personal objects such as the soap inscribed with “I love you” or an improvised chess board (Fig. 10), are the ones that witnessed the atrocity and speak about its darkness the most. As Cristea and Radu-Bucurenci point out, the displays of the memorial construct a solemn and sanctified space that presents a singular, victim-centred narrative of Romania’s Communist past. This approach, while powerful, is described as radical and combative, potentially lacking the nuance that might arise from a more diverse exploration of the past³⁰.

Conversely, I argue that the memorial’s combination of “hot” and “cold” objects creates a visiting experience that can detach visitors from the memories being presented, rendering them almost oblivious to the historical significance of the space they are in. The carefully curated displays and the variety of objects distract from the reality that visitors are walking through an actual dark heritage site, moving in and out of cells steeped in troubling histories. These displays can create this sense of detachment that diminishes the emotional impact of the memorial, undermining its potential to foster a deeper understanding of the painful legacies of the past.

In the domestic space of Elie Wiesel’s birthplace, the rooms have been converted into a small and intimate memorial museum.

30 Cristea and Radu-Bucurenci (2008).



Fig. 14 – Paupers' Cemetery seen from above forming the map of Romania. Available at: <http://www.memorialsighet.ro/cimitirul-saracilor/>. Author: Unknown photographer

two case studies could easily be remarked as heritage sites, it is the Paupers' Cemetery that needs a bit more context. Constituted of the boundary created by the trees planted in the shape of Romania's map (Fig. 14), the cohesion of all the elements presented (gravestones, crosses, the shrine), and the visibility of both physical and cultural elements, all of these work together to potentially make this site the "darkest" of all three. At Pauper's cemetery, a site of death and a mass grave, the contemporary monumental construction invites the viewers to contemplate its rather abstract meaning.

Young argued that memorials should not call attention to themselves, but to the past events they recreate, to direct one's thought beyond themselves³². Similarly, the tree formation shaped like Romania is meaningful only when viewed from above – a perspective not accessible to most visitors. The absence of plaques, texts, or photographs leaves much unexplained. And still, the experience is powerful. The silence of the unknown, of the unidentified, of the dead, evokes darkness. While compared to the other memorials analysed, little choice has been made about the heritage that is being presented, the cemetery shows the most cohesion, but also often receives the least recognition. Often mentioned only marginally concerning wider discussions about the Memorial of the Victims of Communism and Anti-Communist Resistance, Paupers' Cemetery has the potency to evoke its darkness even outside of this discussion.

Overall, we have noticed that in the first two case studies, the choices of the heritage practitioner are very obvious, with those heritage sites being highly self-conscious about their (be)coming into the dark heritage spectrum. The Memorial of the Victims of Communism and Anti-Communist Resistance (Fig. 15) and Elie Wiesel's memorial house both have an entire section dedicated to their beginnings as heritage sites, as memorials. Therefore, the objects displayed and the choices made "represent identity, canonise official memory and make visible the dominant historical narrative"³³. On one level, these museum objects serve to reassure

32 Young (1993), p. 12.

33 Radonić (2017), p. 271.

visitors that the events they commemorate are in the past; however, they also act as testimonies to a history that, while fixed, remains unresolved and open to interpretation. This duality highlights the complexity of dark heritage, where the past is simultaneously acknowledged as concluded yet remains perpetually alive in memory.



Fig. 15 – The exhibition entitled “The Chronology of the Beginning at the Memorial of the Victims of Communism”.
Author: Personal photograph

Discussion

The complexity of Sighet’s dark heritage sites reveals how memory, history and politics are intertwined, shaping both the narrative and reception of the three case studies explored in this article. “Memory attaches itself to sites, whereas history attaches itself to events”³⁴. Thus, the darkness in dark heritage can be argued to emanate from all: memory, sites, history and events.

While in the case of Sighet, both memorial museums – Memorial of the Victims of Communism and Anti-Communist Resistance and the Elie Wiesel Memorial House – promise to speak of memory and to exhibit it as truthfully, ethically and non-provocatively as possible, the same memorials take on a different role, that of attaching themselves to wider histories. While many heritage sites grapple with the challenge of not normalising violence or desensitising their audience,³⁵ the dark heritage sites in Sighet encounter a different issue: generalisation. Even though every single dark heritage site in Sighet is meant to present a very focused view upon their histories – the communist prison of the elites, Elie Wiesel’s birth house and the mass grave of the detainees – in fact, they also set off to present a wider view of the history of communism and that of the Jewish community.

Gabriela Nicolescu captures this complexity, noting that exhibiting communism in Romania is marked by the complexity where “different layers of history and value co-exist in ambiguous, indecisive relationships, caught between destruction and care.”³⁶ The sites explored here epitomise the social dissonance of contemporary Romanian society, where various perspectives on communism coexist, reinforcing one another in their contradictions. Despite the enduring image of communism as a singular,

34 Nora (1989), p. 22.

35 Ashworth (2012), p. 242.

36 Nicolescu (2023), p. 128.

linear regime, these heritage sites reveal, as Nicolescu notes, a multiplicity of communist pasts and politics that defy simplistic narratives.

Whether it is politics that evoked the darkness in these sites and prompted their opening as heritage sites, or whether their objects and displays speak about their history most efficiently or not, what to present to the public is now a matter of choice. While this article did not attempt to position the Sighet sites on the dark heritage spectrum, it is evident that the presentation of each site either accentuates or diminishes the darkness. According to Williams, the appeal of memorial museums lies in their ability to confront visitors with “the worst and most bleak.”³⁷ Yet, by such standards, the sites analysed in this article are simply not that dark.

And perhaps that is intentional. In a country where people once endured cold, hunger, and oppression for the sake of communist ideals, the darkness may be the very thing Romanians least wish to be reminded of. As these dark heritage sites become spaces of negotiation between past and present, they offer more than historical reflection; they serve as spaces where memory, history, and politics converge, illustrating the complex process of grappling with a painful past.

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