Memories in Dialogue: Transnational Stories About Socialist Childhoods

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In recent years, archival, testimonial, and artistic engagements with socialist and post-socialist times have come to the fore in both national and international contexts. As the immediate memory of 1989 receded and the former guardians of power gradually lost leverage on the dissemination of knowledge, sources and discourses about the past have multiplied exponentially. A part of this memory work involves artistic projects such as feature films, literary portrayals, documentaries, diaries, exhibits, and so on; another important component is the scholarly and archival work, which is facilitated by the increasing access to a wide variety of archives and the foundation of new ones. Outside Eastern Europe, transnational and exiled writers who translated their experiences into global contexts have nuanced Western audiences' fascination with "The Other Europe."[1] Similarly, writers from the Eastern Bloc who reached large-scale international circulation, like the Nobel Prize-winning Herta Müller (2009) or Svetlana Alexievich (2015), have contributed to bridging the real and imagined divides.

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The present chapter is a collaborative exchange across continents, between two Eastern Europeans, brought up in the late 1970s and 1980s in Hungary and Romania respectively, who currently work as literary scholars in the USA and Taiwan. Our experimental piece is the result of an exercise in auto/duo/ethnography, in which we co-constructed our common and differing experiences of socialist education through a series of dialogues. We started the project from a genuine interest in each other's educational experiences. The primary purpose of our endeavor was to highlight the double-edged and ambivalent effects that socialist education had upon us. While all autobiographical narratives can claim an alternative epistemology by acting as sites of counter-memorialization, we focused more on the rhetorical and performative aspects of our narrative exchange. Our aim was to explore how our personal narratives reveal and conceal the very process of witnessing while also pointing to the pitfalls of recounting children's firsthand experiences under socialism.

The first section draws on life-writing scholarship and memory studies in order to present the mnemonic landscape of post-socialist representations of childhood, as well as the methodological challenges that accompany such narratives. The short personal narratives that follow are evocative rather than argumentative in nature, but they are informed both by our knowledge of other Eastern European life stories and by our engagement with theories of life-writing. In the concluding section, we return to these theories to suggest a few possible avenues for further research.

(Post)Socialist Life Narratives in Critical Context

Autobiographical literature constitutes a special subset of (post)socialist memorial practices. While debates about certain forms of public memorialization continue to be politically charged, it is interesting to note that individual mnemonic practices (such as memoirs, diaries, and letters) seem to enjoy a less politicized reception. Some historians posit that in opposition to historical national revisionism, which remains highly problematic and "excitedly rejected," "autobiographical revisionism" has been "tacitly accepted" (Antohi, 2007, p. xiv). A sign of this can be seen in the special portfolios dedicated to memoir literature at major publishing houses across the region, which continue to enjoy large and appreciative audiences.

Questions about childhood under socialism—including those regarding the impact of multiple forms of repression, control and censorship, the effects of promised utopia on its young members, and the factors

shaping the long-term development of socialist youth—do not figure much in these debates yet.[2] An important exception is the abundance of studies within the field of education, where questions regarding state education under totalitarian regimes have triggered significant scholarly interest. Studies by researchers in education, sociology, and anthropology that focus on textbooks, school records, and teachers' engagement with the curriculum often question the assumptions regarding the unifying effects of a national curriculum in totalitarian states. Their work also contributes significantly to the reevaluation of the child's position as a witness, agent, and epistemological subject (Griffiths & Millei, 2012, 2013; Kirschenbaum, 2000; Mead & Silova, 2013; Mihalache, 2014; Pilbrow, 2010; Silova & Brehm, 2013). As a result of this burgeoning research, the stereotypical images of the child as an icon of socialist utopia, or the child as a traumatized victim of a repressive regime, give way to more ambivalent depictions, layered forms of knowledge, and deeper understanding of institutional settings and their effects on the former young subjects in the Eastern European countries.

This rising critical interest reflects the increasing diversification of mnemonic objects and strategies related to this era. Childhood memorabilia from the socialist era are often exhibited and exchanged in the digital world as part of both individual and institutionalized recuperative projects. Former children of these regimes dedicate personal blogs, Facebook pages, and file sharing websites to their memories and memorabilia. Toys, school objects, badges, textbooks, children's books, and socialist games are easily available in these online venues, most of which serve as sites of com-memorialization. These virtual locales are mostly characterized by what critics call "restorative nostalgia," an act of reconstructing "truth" and tradition, a determined rebuilding (Boym, 2001, p. xviii, pp. 41–9), or "post-communist nostalgia," "a special memory case" (Todorova & Gille, 2010). Artistic projects tend to offer more nuanced and even humorous readings of the past. Many installations, exhibitions, and literary recreations do not pretend to "just archive" the past, but they are conscious of their "archiving" gesture and the ways in which they shape contemporary perceptions. These creative representations are a welcome change in today's mnemonic landscape, where most personal blogs and nostalgic pages still rely heavily on binary paradigms inherited from the Cold War. Overall, every archival and imaginative interpretation is useful in that it adds to the multiplicity of voices representing "the socialist child."

In the humanities, the disclosure of autobiographical detail in scholarly work has become the norm rather than the exception. The last 25 years have witnessed a significant shift in the role of the personal, including an engaged "movement to recognize the autobiographical voice as a legitimate way of speaking in the academe" (Behar, 1994, B1).[3] As a result, memoirs by academics have proliferated, and they have often been enthusiastically welcomed by critics. Similarly, in the social sciences, the genre of autoethnography has gained growing prominence, although autoethnographers are constantly criticized for their hybrid methodology, insufficient rigor, and autobiographical bias (Ellis, Tony, & Arthur, 2011; Wambura, Hernandez, & Heewon, 2016). Finally, since our case involves personal reflections by two scholars of autobiography, we also need to acknowledge the so-called danger of "theoretical nepotism" (Smith, 1995, p. 52), which is particularly pronounced in the case of life-writing theorists. This nepotism "makes the critic's job of writing about autobiography dangerously like writing autobiography" (Burt, 1982, pp. 18–19). Admittedly, our theoretical background contaminates its object in our piece as much as the autobiographer corrupts the theorist.

What can the present chapter contribute to the existing representations of education under socialism, and what theoretical debates informed our narratives? Given that this volume was conceived as a collection of testimonial evidence, it may be helpful to first clarify our roles as co-witnesses. Although we did conduct oral interviews with each other through Skype, we resisted privileging orality over composed and edited narratives partly to avoid the seemingly non-rhetorical nature of testimony. Joining critics who warn against the idealization of testimonial narratives, we prefer to read the "poetic aspects of reparative practices against the grain of the political containment of their meaning" (Emberley, 2014, p. 6). Consequently, our primary focus is not on how our narratives arbitrate historical truths about childhood under socialism. It is clear that as sites of meaning-production, all such autobiographical narratives elicit new knowledge about historical events, and that they often act as means of counter-memorialization. However, instead of wishing to claim an alternative epistemology, we also want to explore how our narratives reveal and simultaneously conceal the very process of witnessing. For this we need to focus on the performative aspects of our exchange. The concept of performativity—implying that our words do not just "say" things but perform actions, and that as a correlation, our identities are never just described but performed—is paramount to our understanding of this auto/duo/ethnographic exercise.

Life-writing critics first used the notion of performativity to explain rhetorical strategies characterizing certain subgenres of life-writing, such as *testimonio*, letters, and family memoirs. They soon realized that "performative dialogism" applies to all forms of life narration (Smith & Watson, 2010, p. 164). Consequently, the focus of life-writing studies has gradually shifted away from the genre's truth-value or the self's struggle with identity towards "a new emphasis on *graphia*" (Smith & Watson, 2010, pp. 129–137) and its multimodal forms of discourses. Acknowledging the complex terrain of life narration and criticism in contemporary culture, critics foreground such terms as "performativity," "positionality," and "heteroglossic dialogism" (the multiplicity of "tongues" through which subjectivity is enunciated) as instruments of mapping the complex terrain of autobiographical acts (Smith & Watson, 2010, pp. 143–147). Our own emphasis on the performative nature of our memory-exercise can thus be seen as a reflection of this shift within auto/biography studies.

Performativity permeates the collaborative aspects of our dialogue, the relational nature of our act of remembering, as well as our active engagement with cultural forms of knowledge. In our performative act of remembering, as each other's first readers and first editors, we became co-witnesses in the sense that by bearing witness together we co-constructed each other as witnesses, while co-constructing each other's narrative (Emberley, 2014, p. 7). For instance, by bringing us together in time (literally co-writing this piece simultaneously), our memorial exercise both reenacted and reinvented the co-temporality that brought us together, presumably, as contemporary witnesses of a shared historical period. If oral histories and collaborative autobiographies are often characterized by an unequal power structure, contamination, and corroboration,[4] sharing our memories about schooling implied scholarly contestation at every stage. The interest and curiosity which initiated this project soon turned into constant requirements for clarification ("explain," "inside knowledge, further clarify," "are you sure?" "who are you writing to?" "how is this possible?"). In a way, these amiable challenges reenacted the censorship that we were born into: they made us continuously wonder to what extent we are performing older or more recent scripted conventions and ideologies through what we think are private recollections.

In terms of methodology, we first set a number of questions we both answered in writing, then we exchanged answers, then another set of questions via Skype, writing, and exchanges. Our process raised a host of questions both regarding the limits and the nature of our exercise. As

scholars of autobiography correctly emphasize, childhood memories are subject to constant revisions and creative imaginings as they are told and retold, both to the adult self and to others (Coe, 1984). This implies two things: first, that childhood memories reveal significant aspects about the narrating adult and the remembered childhood (Gullestad, 1996), and their autobiographical rendering is a synthesis between the author's child and adult selves (Douglas, 2010); second, that childhood memories are always mediated by the cultural texts and discourses that invite us to remember (Davis, 2007; Douglas, 2010). Our individual narratives are perfect illustrations of these theoretical insights and we readily acknowledge all these potential pitfalls. We considered, for example, the risks involved in co-witness contamination and the desire for factual corroboration. We concluded that neither co-witness contamination nor corroboration was an issue in our case, even though some similarities in our narratives may hint at this possibility.

It is known that children under socialist regimes were both objects of state efforts to raise future ideal citizens for a utopian society and agents in their own rights, caught within a multiplicity of repressive or enabling regimes. Our main challenge in this exercise was to acknowledge this dual position without falling into binary paradigms. It seems particularly tempting to use the child-self as an agent who can claim—through its unique power to point out the nakedness of the Emperor—a private and unadulterated domain that remains immune to political pressures. The child with her own sovereign world seems like a perfect candidate to challenge the common adage according to which "the Communist morality left no room for the Western notion of the conscience as a private dialogue with the self" (Figes, 2007). In claiming this independent space for our child selves, by reenacting this "private dialogue with the self," we both faced the same question, namely, how can we recognize the subjectivity of the child under totalitarian pressures while also acknowledging the fact that the very separation of private and public, or personal and political (no matter how real it felt at the time), is only a fiction designed to perpetuate a certain status quo? Another challenge we faced was the reconciliation of our highly divergent narratives. In spite of having the same age, similar family background, and comparable professional trajectory, we realized that as children in the 1980s, we inhabited rather disparate worlds. There is, of course, nothing surprising about this, given that we grew up in two different countries with distinct ideologies. Still, just as most similarities in

our narratives were not due to our cohabitation of the same space and time, most differences in our readings of the past were not due to the variances between our contexts. We therefore tried to allow the paradoxes and oppositions—experiential, mnemonic, and interpretative—to coexist without distorting them for the sake of effect.

Panda Bear Pens: Remembrance of a Romanian Pioneer's Things Past (by Ioana Luca)

The first thing I recall as school objects are Chinese pens or pencil cases—small colorful pens with a panda bear drawing at one end, and nicely compartmentalized pencil cases, with mirrors inside and beautiful patterning. These were stationery objects I always liked, but they were always hard to get. Their Chinese origin spoke of other realms, more beautiful than ours.

The way I experienced socialism as a school girl has had a lasting influence on me: it implied an entire way of thinking marked by authoritarianism, control, censorship, and implicit self-censorship, and I grew up with it. It meant inhabiting multiple realities, and there always was a double-sided dimension to our lives. The distinction between the personal and the political, the private and the public, is part of my growth history. As a child, it seemed possible to separate the political part of one's life and stay away from it.

There was little doubt about the political significance of our various forms of belonging to the grand system of utopian communism[5]: in kindergarten, we were "falcons of the nation" (*șoimi ai patriei*), in primary school we were "pioneers" (*pionieri*), and in high school we became members of the "communist youth" (*Uniunea Tineretului Comunist*). The accompanying rites of passage to "real communist" status were part of my growth experience: with every step I acquired one more uniform, a new badge, or a red scarf. These were all stages associated with my growing up: there were new activities to be involved in and school trips to do. No matter how ideologized they were (a visit to a famous jail where communist heroes had been imprisoned, or trips to nationally relevant historic sites), these events were enjoyable and I never internalized their political dimension. Patriotic poems or songs were associated with each such event: "I've got my red scarf/I'm now a pioneer…" (*Am cravata mea/Sunt pionier*)—I can still hum the lively tune and remember its verses, which we of course learned by heart.

The gap between the official discourse about the country's proclaimed terrific achievements and the reality around us was so glaring that the possibility of ever believing or taking seriously the official discourse was always almost null in the 1980s Bucharest. The symbolism of the red pioneer scarf (the blood of our ancestors and communist heroes), which served as a token of national socialist pride, never meant much to me. The intensely red triangular piece of cloth, bordered by the national tricolor flag, was made of poor-quality material; any carelessness while ironing it, which I enjoyed doing, would easily lead to its ruin, thus making me intuitively aware of the impoverished reality around. With the dearth of products and merchandise in 1980s Romania, the falcon of the country or pioneer paraphernalia had, however, its glamour. When new, these products were attractive, like the pioneer belt with the colorful country emblem as a buckle, or the tresses one acquired when becoming the leader of a group, class, or school in the colors of the national flag. However, such connotations failed to impress me.

At the same time, I always knew that communists forcefully took over in 1945, with support from the Soviet Union, that we were on the wrong side of a dividing line, and that everything we were officially told was shallow. A clear distinction between how things "happened" and what we "were officially told" was part of my upbringing. The stories that my parents and grandparents shared with me, as well as the few glimpses I had about the pre-socialist pasts and of the other countries (I collected anything foreign that fell into my hands, from the Haribo gummy bears logo to chocolate wrappings, as they were colorful, beautiful, and lasting), made it impossible for me to ever believe in the official speeches at school, on TV, or the radio. As a young child I knew well that a sound education was the only key to a better future, and so school meant rigorous learning. My parents often told me that unless I study hard, I would end up digging ditches or working the fields. The socialist songs celebrated workers, but such a possibility never looked really appealing.

In the school I attended, at the very heart of old Bucharest, teachers never enforced the official discourse and rarely rehearsed party propaganda. We knew which professor was a high-ranking party member, but except for the Monday school gatherings or public speeches,[6] the classes proper were rarely politicized. The literary and the history canons were of course highly "selective." It may sound paradoxical to say that classes were not politicized when the curriculum was highly "selective," but the point is that my teachers never indoctrinated us, they never made us "buy"

the glory of socialism. By way of explanation, it is important to note that critical thinking, asking questions, or group projects did not feature in my school years until after 1989. Learning was a relatively straightforward enterprise, not necessarily exciting but very serious: we needed to know the lesson in the textbook well, read as much as possible in connection to it, do as much extra work as possible, and comply with all (and very numerous) requirements. Consequently, simply sticking to the lessons was a good way to avoid direct political indoctrination.

When I think back to my literature and history textbooks, I feel there are a good number of aspects to be questioned, but at that moment it was exciting to learn new things. Learning was important, questioning what we had to learn was never an issue, and in the few instances when I could detect red flags (workers or peasants fighting the "evil bourgeoisie" was a constant pattern), I simply took matters as school material rather than historical fact. During secondary school, we mostly learned ancient and medieval world history, which offered a wealth of knowledge about other places and other times (pharaohs, pyramids, knights, etc.). Early Romanian history provided a large number of exciting twists and turns so as to make class or ideology conflicts irrelevant for a secondary school pupil. Browsing the old history books now, I would say it was the nationalist character of Romanian communism that featured most prominently (the greatness of our people, the heroic voivodes, the national martyrs) rather than an overtly political dimension, which *a young child*—constantly surrounded by blatant state propaganda on radio, TV, newspapers, or magazines—could easily detect. Whatever I learned about our past, no matter how distorted it might have been, was often way more exciting than the official present, which in 1980s Romania meant a couple of hours of TV celebrating the presidential couple, the achievements of the party, the five-year plans, and other obvious propaganda.[7]

My world was so manifestly celebratory of the "golden era" we were living in that one needed a terrible and very literal myopia, combined with strongly dulled senses, in order to ever believe what we were told, the slogan banners we were seeing, the historical connections the "people" parades taught us, the poems we were reciting, or the songs we were singing. It was common knowledge (from family, jokes, etc.) that Ceauşescu and his wife had barely finished elementary school and that all the current achievements were due to a very strong repressive system. Whatever the school textbooks included, they did offer a window, no matter how opaque, to other times and other worlds.

The five-year plan of socialist achievements trickled down to us and we all had to contribute to it and meet particular targets. We had to recycle paper and bring to school used bottles and jars, but I never had a sense of actually making a contribution to or actively participating in anything. The very terms acquired a clear connotation, which seems lost in translation: collecting recycled paper, bottles, and jars (*colectarea maculaturii*, *sticle și borcane*) was a meaningless undertaking for both pupils and teachers, and thus we all just went through the motions. "Voluntary community work" (*muncă voluntară*) was another school activity that supposedly enhanced our "socialist achievements." It was anything but voluntary—it meant that we had to go to school on Sundays, clean the schoolyard, rake the leaves, or dig and delve in the neighborhood parks. I don't remember the schoolyard or the parks looking much different afterwards—the brooms were usually inefficient, the rakes broken, and none of us worked really hard. However, we all did go to school on such occasions. My teachers were very strict when it came to how we behaved during "voluntary work." Even if working hard or actually accomplishing something was not an issue, we did have to behave (we were not allowed to talk loudly or run, and we had to be very polite with the passersby) as the prestige of the school was in question. There was an unspoken mutual understanding that activities were imposed upon all of us—it was both routine and ritual, which we all conscientiously performed.

On the other hand, I greatly enjoyed a wide range of extracurricular activities my parents arranged; swimming and tennis classes, painting or pottery pioneer clubs, as well as lots of DIYs we devised *ourselves*, amateur art projects, or handmade puppet shows made my school days anything but bleak. The music teacher always encouraged us to go to the opera house, which happened to be very close to our school and which, with its beautiful costumes and distinct stories, was another type of fantastic time travel. I also remember how my Romanian teacher redecorated the classroom, and during one whole spring vacation, I helped her with clipping portraits of writers, creating various literary maps and collages in order to turn an indistinct classroom into a Romanian literature one.

There was a wealth of school materials available for nation-wide competitions: math exercises, mind twisters, grammar books, suggested readings for all subjects, and I personally never ran short of them. No matter how hard it was at times to acquire the extra materials, my parents made sure I had them all. They all were "safe" learning resources, which only helped in learning more along the pre-established paths.

While the party assured us of the glorious communist future, my family staunchly believed in better times to come and tried to prepare us for the future. My children sometimes ask me questions such as, "Where exactly was I in this picture?" and "What exactly did I do when not learning or doing school-related activities?" I tell them that I avidly read adventure books (Karl May, Jules Verne, Romain Rolland, Victor Hugo, Alexandre Dumas, together with a large array of Romanian children classics, ranked high in my young preferences). I often dreamt about a new outfit that my parents might manage to "procure" or my grandmothers might sew. I climbed trees and ate cherries from annoyed neighbors' gardens, played street games with friends in the neighborhood, sleighed on a piece of plastic on my way back from school, and ruined a newly and difficultly "acquired" winter coat. I produced handmade Christmas cards while turning to pieces beautiful Christmas decoration so as to have glitzy margins for my cards. Or I eavesdropped on adults' gossip and (informal) political updates when standing in long queues.

Together with the Chinese pencil cases and panda bear pens, these activities are the ones I remember most vividly. They come to mind easily, without invoking Mnemosyne, without having to do Google searches or double checking the accuracy of my school memories. While these moments of universal childhood experience are the ones that would come to my mind when speaking about my upbringing, I join scholars from the region in the belief that we "drank deconstruction with [our] mother's milk" (Zaborowska, Sibelan, & Elena, 2004, p. x). Traces of the past are always translated to the present in ways of thinking, dreaming, or simply shopping. Trying to untangle the impact of the socialist childhood on my adult self seems like one of the impossible tasks, which requires help from the magic helpers of my childhood tales or a dissection on a living body, painful and impossible. The "socialist" part of my childhood—its numerous forms of regimentation—has become internalized (as it grew on me as I was growing up), and I'll leave further examination for my (even) older years.

Squirrels and Gas Masks: Navigating the Swampy Ideological Terrain of Late Socialism in Hungary (by Helga Lenart-Cheng)

There is no need for me to try to recall my socialist childhood. Its marks are omnipresent in my daily actions, instincts, and even my body. As I sit at my desk, typing these reflections, I see the cut mark on my lower arm

caused by a grape shear during a school-organized harvest: a sixth grader's contribution to her country's five-year plan. How do I explain to strangers asking about the mark that the so-called communist "construction camps" (*építőtábor*), the ones involving school children and community service, were actually fun, that we spent the whole year looking forward to the next one? Instincts and automatisms are even harder to explain. Driving home from work, I like to sing all kinds of songs to myself: rock songs, folk songs, and Soviet songs. One of my favorites is the Soviet national anthem, which we always sang at school assemblies. I still sing it in Russian, with the sparkly eyes of a little choirgirl. But as my voice picks up the distinctive tone of propaganda songs, I catch myself rolling up the windows. After all, I live in the USA, and who knows what the people in the cars next to mine might think.

My early school years in 1980s Hungary were marked by the optimism of these songs. What was there not to like about "happy little squirrels jumping around smiling pioneers" (*Mint a mókus fenn a fán*) or singing about the "heroes liberating us from the oppressors of the past" (*Felszabadulás éneke*)? I had no reason to doubt the tales about the Bolshevik Revolution or the glory of our victory. And it wasn't just the kids. Some adults, too, seemed genuinely excited about our rosy future without imperialists. We lived under the so-called Goulash-communism, which was built on make-believe.[8] People pretended that we still adhered to Marxist ideology while most sectors were quietly adopting the rules of a free market economy. The highest-ranking pioneer leader of my school was a beautiful, young teacher, and she was a role model to all of us in her impeccably ironed uniform. Of course, I did not like the looks of the old and bald socialist veterans, but somehow the shiny medals on their coats made up for their lack of physical attraction. And there was the warm smile of the lady at the post office, who looked just like the woman on the realist socialist painting behind her, except that she was sitting in an office chair instead of driving a tractor in a cornfield. As a child, I breathed in the air of political optimism. I knew that our neighbor was a successful communist official because he was chauffeured around in a black *Volga*. Yet, the final evidence of our victory came not from him but from his daughter, who one day confided to me that she owned *twelve pieces* of underwear. To me, this unheard-of luxury was the ultimate proof of the triumph of socialism, and I felt proud to be a part of it.

My awakening was not a gradual process but a series of powerful revelations, the first of which came on a chilly March day in fourth grade. The little group of pioneers I belonged to was gathering at our house, boys and

girls mixed, chattering about our plans for the afternoon. As in previous years, our task was to visit all the parents in our class who were members of the Communist Party and to greet them with a bouquet and a little congratulatory poem. What a noble mission!—I thought. Sitting on the steps of our entryway, we were wrapping our bouquets in cellophane when my father appeared behind the glass door. He had just gotten home from work, and taking off his shoes, he glanced at us, wondering what we were up to. "We are going to honor the communist parents in our class!" I declared, pompously. "No, you are not," he rebuffed, without further explanation. I stood there speechless, stupefied. I did not understand his reaction, and yet, somehow, I suddenly understood everything. It was like that first moment when you peek in through the keyhole and see your parents prepare Christmas presents in secret, and you realize instantaneously that it was all just a dream, or maybe a deception. All of a sudden, I realized that we did not all belong to the same reality, that my world had a backside, a parallel universe where people did and thought different things.

I still do not understand why it was that particular moment that triggered my father. Looking back, our innocent little celebration of communist parents certainly was not the worst form of collaboration. Perhaps it was his sense of personal pride that ignited his quiet anger. Maybe there was something personal about comparing him to other parents, something absurd about honoring those who conformed. Still, why did he not say anything earlier, when I volunteered to be the leader of our pioneer troop, or when I proudly interviewed communist militants (*munkásőr*) for our school's oral history archive, or when I danced in our school's mass formations, or before any of the other daily socialist rituals? There was only one kid in our school who did not join the pioneers, a quiet girl in fifth grade who my classmates sometimes whispered about. She never came to any of our school events, dances, or camps because only pioneers were allowed to, and I felt bad for her because she never had a chance to try the Soviet gas masks and grenades that we played with on our field trips. I understood as a child that she was an outsider, but I was convinced that I was not, and my parents were not either…. or were they?

On that day in March, I had an immediate realization of my father's belonging to a world apart, even if I did not yet understand the consequences and the ethics of independence. My father's simple act of resistance did not suddenly make him a hero in my eyes. Of course, I did eventually learn to separate propaganda from reality, and his truncated "No, you are not" certainly played a key role in this process. But somehow

my father's enigmatic words had the opposite effect of what one might expect. Instead of acknowledging the power of resistance and autonomy, I began to focus on moments of weakness. I wondered about all those other moments when he did not say anything. I developed a strange fascination with cowardice, with those moments when we simply lack the courage or the willingness to fight, when we are a bit too ready to compromise, a bit too quiet to say the truth. And I began to listen to my surroundings, to the words of the adults around me, tuned in for these delicate moments of feebleness.

My school life in the late 1980s was a rather swampy ideological terrain to navigate, especially as a teenager. A couple of incidents stand out as memorable moments of dilemmas. One was my nomination for a camp in eighth grade. Camp Zánka was the most prestigious pioneer park in the country, close to the Lake Balaton, with all the amenities that socialism could ever offer. During the school year, Zánka had a special month-long camp designed to train future youth leaders, and we had to compete for the much-coveted spaces. I was thrilled to find out that I was accepted, but my excitement did not last. Our principal asked me into her office and explained in a gentle tone that I would have to cede this place to someone whose parents belonged to the working class. "They have fewer chances than you do," she explained. I was angry. I did not know how to explain to her that in a country guided by the motto "Workers of the world unite!" if anyone had privileges, it was not I. At home, my parents did not say anything either. But a week later the principal called me back into her office, annoyed, and said that my parents had complained and that she would let me keep my place. The absurdity of my parents' act did not dawn on me until I came home from Zánka. My head full of pol-beat songs,[9] having learned more about the Soviet Union than I would ever want to know, I wondered: why would someone opposed to a regime have their children train to be leaders in that system? Was this a moment of weakness on their part, or at age 14 was I the one to blame? Had I become an accomplice?

This nagging sense of responsibility tortured me quite a bit in junior high and high school. I remember another awkward moment in eighth grade. My history teacher pulled me aside one day. He and I were the only ones left in the classroom, so at first I did not understand why he whispered. "What did your parents tell you about 1956?" he asked so quietly that I could barely hear him. This was 1987. We were still two years away from the day when a member of the Central Committee of the Communist

Party would raise a scandal by calling 1956 a "popular revolt" instead of a "counter-revolution" (the latter was the official term used by those who crushed the revolution, while the first term raised the possibility of the legitimacy of the revolt). I was only 14, but I was already quite conscious of the political implications of his simple question. And I had a vague inkling that I could trust my teacher because I had heard rumors that he was recently arrested for distributing *samizdat* literature. Still, I struggled: how do I *know* whether I can trust him or not? Do I tell him what I know about 1956? I suspected that he suspected that my parents had already explained it to me. That is why he asked. He wanted a confirmation, a secret sign from an accomplice, a wink from a fellow doubter. I also knew that he would like me more if I revealed what I knew. And yet all I said was: "I don't know," and I walked out of the classroom.

Two years later in high school, I took my first trip to the West, to Germany, and I marveled at the world I did not even know existed: bananas and oranges without having to stand in line, people wearing cashmere sweaters and sparkling white tennis socks, housewives filling huge carts in giant supermarkets. Soon enough Hungary, too, was inundated with the wonders of a capitalist market, and which teenager could resist the rows and rows of hairsprays and deodorants in a country where everyone smelled the same? The revelation of all that existed outside my world was powerful, but it did not stop me from wondering about all the things that remained hidden. In school, we still used the old history books because it takes a while to rewrite history. But I found in the basement of our library a Western history book, a German one that I could read. Our own history book, with its ugly brown cover and heavily censured content, was as unattractive as a history textbook could ever be. This other one had a multicolored layout, shiny paper, and real photos, winning the comparison by its sheer appearance. As I lifted it off the shelf, I glanced around with guilt, as if I had found a porn magazine. What? The Red Army had raped women? Communists were persecuting members of the opposition? Elections with more than one candidate actually existed? Needless to say, I was shocked to read about the Vietnam War, the Korean War, and all the other post-1945 conflicts from the other side's perspective. But again, I was more fascinated with what remained hidden. I continued asking questions about all the stories that remained untold, about all the secrets that my parents kept from us, and about my own responsibility in concealing and revealing things. Today, as a scholar specializing in life stories, I still wonder about all the stories about communism that remain untold.

Co-witnessing (or With-nessing): A Temporary Conclusion

The current piece contributes to existing accounts of (post)socialist childhood and schooling not simply by providing more "insider information," but by highlighting three crucial aspects of this memory-exchange: first, the importance of allowing contradictions and ambiguities to inhabit such narratives; second, the heterogeneity of experiencing socialism (even when one belongs to the same generation, family background, and/or economic situation); and third, the importance of probing into the limits of co-witnessing in the case of accounts about totalitarian regimes focusing on child protagonists.

Halfway through our conversations, one of us posed the questions: "Why do we want to write this as a collaborative piece?" "Why not alone?" "Why the *duo* in our auto-duo-ethnography?" This forced us to think through not only our roles as individual witnesses, but also the meaning of co-witnessing. Moreover, the fact that this volume was conceived as a collection of testimonial evidence lends further urgency to our questions about co-witnessing. No matter how we interpret the social functions of witnessing, witnessing is always about someone relating *knowledge*.

Our two stories present the child as an epistemological subject, as a knower or not-knower. However, the two narratives approach the limits of the child's knowledge very differently. While the first narrator occupies the position of "I always knew," the protagonist of the second account seems to gradually acquire knowledge through a "series of powerful revelations." The confidence of the first narrator's "I always knew" seems further bolstered by the child's environment, in which everyone seems to know everything, including the fact that nobody knows anything. Relying on the authority of this "common knowledge" could, of course, be read as the author's reflexive repetition of the self-censuring measure practiced by all citizens of repressive regimes. However, the author herself undermines this reading by pointing out that this illusion of a private sphere free of political contamination was itself a product of the socialist ideological discourse. The second account seems to be structured very differently, like a *Bildungsroman* in which the child slowly acquires the knowledge necessary to join adult society. Yet, here too, the knowledge itself turns out to be compromised so that each new discovery only leads to greater insecurity, both in an epistemological and in an ethical sense.

While our two narratives are ethnographic rather than literary in nature, certain concepts developed by literary scholars are useful for attempting to draw more widely applicable conclusions about how to read such child-focused accounts about totalitarian regimes. In our view, the most intriguing aspect of these narratives is the reader's active involvement in "supplementing" the child witness's perspective. This phenomenon has already been studied by narratologists with reference to fictional writing (Zsadányi, 2015); however, given the complexity of the performative aspects of autobiographical writing, it would be beneficial to extend these studies to non-fictional narratives as well.

In this brief conclusion, we can only point to two authors whose work could be further developed in this direction. First, Julia Emberley (2014) puts forth the idea of "witnessing the witness," which implies "questions of how, in the process of constructing the witness, the reader or viewer comes into play as a witness and whether an individual can 'witness' her- or himself without the presence of another, who, willingly or not, comes to participate in the making of a community of people 'bearing witness' and, thus, carrying the knowledge of historical or personal events" (p. 7). This notion of co-witnessing seems particularly relevant to memory exchanges like ours, where willingly or unwillingly we become each other's first witnesses, whose reactions and feedback shape the accounts even before publication. Given dominant preconceptions about the supposedly unreflected perspective of the involuntary child witness who often appears in such narratives as an unreliable narrator, it could be tempting to reduce the role of this co-witness to establishing the authority of the witness. Instead, it might be more fruitful to think about the role of this co-witness as developing alternative forms of knowledge distinct from those we gain from unveiling secrets. Regarding our roles as co-witnesses, we could then ask with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick: What is it that remains invisible not because of the never-ending task of unveiling the secrets of communism, but precisely due to our paranoid optic as experienced readers? (Sedgwick, 2003, pp. 123–153).[10]

Second, in examining the process of how we co-construct each other as witnesses in such autoethnographic accounts, we could build on Jean-Luc Nancy's interpretation of community. Nancy (1991) radically reinterpreted the *co-* of community, and insisted that community is not a communion or a product to be completed or achieved. "Being-in-common does not mean a higher form of substance or subject taking charge of the

limits of separate individualities" (p. 27). What community does is simply *expose* individuals to their own finitude by revealing their existence outside themselves. According to Nancy, the ontological condition of being-in-common disrupts all attempts to figure identity as an immanent totality: both individual and community are only exposed in the *with* of the "being with." As Nancy put it: "I therefore preferred to concentrate my work around the 'with': almost indistinguishable from the co- of community, yet it carries with it a clearer indication of the spacing at the heart of proximity and intimacy. 'With' is plain and neutral: neither communion nor atomization; just the sharing/dividing [partage] of a place, at the most, contact: a being-together without assemblage" (quoted in Nichols, 2013, p. 51).

Extending Nancy's concept of community to the community of witnesses involved in such autoethnographic explorations, we would like to suggest that Nancy's reconceptualization of the co- as *spacing* has consequences for our understanding of co-witnessing as well, since the assumed power of co-witnessing depends on the assumed co-presence of the two witnesses. Yet, following Nancy's logic, our co-construction of each other as witnesses can never be about confirmation but only the articulation of our mutual co-exposure. In short, the most we can do in this community of two is *with*-ness each other.

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Notes

1. See, for instance, Dubravka Ugrešić, Slavenka Drakulić, Aleksander Hemon, and Gary Shteyngart.
2. Exceptions include Georgescu *Ceaușescu's Children* (2015), Bădică & Popescu *Remembering Childhood* (2013), Alexandra Lloyd & Ute Wölfel *Childhood in German Film after 1989* (2015). Publications in national languages also exist as evidenced in volumes such as *Childhood under Socialism* in Bulgarian edited by Ivan Elenkov and Daniela Koleva (Sofia: Centre for Advanced Study/Riva, 2010), *In Search of the Lost World of Communism* (2005) by Paul Cernat et al., or *The Book of Childhoods* (2016) edited by

Dan Lungu and Amelia Gheorghiţmă in Romanian, but they tend to either "document" or judge the past rather than problematize the socialist times, and in so doing they look like a published extension of the online archives or blogs.

3. Impressive studies have been dedicated to the "impact of autobiography and subjectivity in the work of scholars across the disciplines" (Freedman & Frey, 2003, p. 1), and important work has been published on the autobiographies by scholars from various fields.
4. See Eakin's (2004) edited collection about ethics in life-writing and Couser (2004) for different forms of vulnerability in collaborative life-writing.
5. Romania was a socialist state which promoted a communist ideology, and communism was perceived as an ideal stage our country should reach. The very name of the country was changed by Ceauşescu from People's Republic to the Socialist Republic of Romania; he also reversed the name of the party from Romanian Workers' Party to Romanian Communist Party. In employing the terms "socialism" or "communism" throughout the autobiographical essay, I have this understanding in mind, and communism refers to specific ideological instances of my socialist upbringing.
6. The political propaganda which reached us in school was basically "wooden language" as it was called even then and just discourse. We all knew we had to put up with it: we listened patiently to the school director's speeches, we recited poems, and so on, as part of school duties.
7. Due to the strong focus on communist nationalism and the nonaligned foreign policy in Ceauşescu's Romania, there was no Sovietization of literary and historical canons in the 1970s and 1980s; thus, the focus was on "national heroes," with the communist pantheon alongside the early voivodes. The propaganda about the present was too blatant for us to believe, and earlier Romanian or world history was fascinating, irrespective of the wooden language and communist jargon.
8. The term—a semi-humorous reference to the Hungarian dish "goulash"—refers to a special variety of communism practiced in Hungary from 1962 to 1989, which was characterized by a unusual mix of Marxist ideology and elements of free market economy.
9. A special type of political beat music focusing on social and political issues.
10. Kosofsky Sedgwick cautions that our faith in knowledge as exposure may lead us down an epistemological tunnel where any conclusion that is *not* a rehearsal of the paranoia of oppression seems like a dangerous denial of the gravity of oppression. See "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or You are So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay is About You" in *Touching, Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity.*

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