THE RETRIEVAL OF MEMORY AND IDENTITY – DESIDERATA OF A COMMUNITY AND RESEARCH PROJECT


The latest volumes edited by Smaranda Vultur1 are the result of two years’ intensive work at the “Third Europe” Foundation of Timișoara, Romania, a research group concerned with the interdisciplinary analysis of Central Europe (as a geographical, historical, cultural and socio-political entity) and the identity formulae this area is proposing. In the era of globalisation, of the democratic leveling of all differences in the name of non-discrimination, identity is at stake. The current trend of political correctness, with the new perspective on gender, age, race, nationality or social category, the blurring of distinctions during the passage from the end of one history to the beginning of another one are all reasons why the very idea of identity must be looked into from a new angle. The group is conducting its research accordingly.

The Anthropology – Oral History Group of the “Third Europe” Foundation studies the Banat (Romania’s westernmost province) as a specific locus of permanent exchange, a region of contact between the Balkans and the center of Europe, a space of cultural transfers. The ideal illustration of the type of rela-

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1 Dr. Smaranda Vultur is associate professor at the Faculty of Letters, Philosophy and History of the West University, Timișoara, Romania, and coordinator of the Anthropology – Oral History Group of the “Third Europe” Foundation in the same city.
tionships established along history between the center (the Austrian Empire since the 18th century and the Romanian state since 1918) and the periphery (the area being, at times, the easternmost and the westernmost province of two political territories), the Banat is a place where the observation of identity formation, negotiation and reconstruction can be rewarding. The group decided to include a larger public among the witnesses of the history recreated by the rich archive of individual life story interviews, field research, documents and photos they have created in the past two years, offering a selection of materials in book form. Continuing the tradition initiated by a volume published before the group developed and joined “The Third Europe,” Istorie trăită, istorie povestită. Deportarea în Bărăgan 1951–1956 (History Lived, History Retold. The Deportation to Bărăgan 1951–1956), the books coordinated and edited by Smaranda Vultur – Lumi in destine (Worlds in Destinies) and Germanii din Banat (The Germans of Banat) – take over the role of preserving memory not as a static exhibit of museums, but as a living organism. In order to be saved, memory is not supposed to be only stored; it has to be communicated, transposed and transmitted. Preserved time is not only a sheer past, but the time of contemporary history, relevant through the individual destinies and the values displayed.

A life story is a way of escaping the tyranny of Time, and speaking, as Mircea Eliade argued, is a way of survival. The books reviewed here, dually directed towards the story-teller/interviewed character and the external reader trying to retrieve the other’s past for himself aim at this audacious project. The texts and the images reconstructing identities offer retrospectively a topographical and chronological frame, obscure and, yet, familiar to the Romanian readership of the year 2000, a possible way of rebelling against obsolescence and oblivion. The big, objective time and space is subordinated, in the pieces of oral history proposed by the Anthropology Group, to the small, subjective ones of the individual reliving his/her own existence or that of his/her parents and grandparents. The characters and, at the same time, authors of the texts share one culture and tradition and are in solidarity in the attempt to preserve their memories. The direct contact with the subjects, the dialogue that flows freely, unaltered as a result of its transcription, turn the books into loci of concrete, actual living, not only of remembering. The coordinator of the series chose not to interfere with the subjects’ discourse in order to preserve authenticity and be as faithful as possible to the type of oral history the group announced to practice from the very beginning.

Both Worlds in Destinies and The Germans of Banat are dealing with the retrieval of the memory of the same specific geographical and cultural area. The