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Encountering the Victims of Romanian Communism: Young People and Empathy in a Memorial Museum

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Abstract

Throughout post-communist East-Central Europe one part of the process of coming to terms with the communist past has been the establishment of memorial museums. These aim to tell the story - to both domestic citizens and foreign visitors - of suffering under the communist regime. They also seek to encourage visitors to identify with, and develop empathy for, the victims of communist repression. This paper explores the responses of a group of young people who have not lived through communism to a memorial museum in Romania (Sighet Memorial Museum). In particular it focuses on how these visitors experienced empathy for the victims of communist-era violence. Data were collected using focus groups involving 43 university students. The data revealed that most participants showed a degree of empathy for the victims of suffering but this was usually shallow in nature. However some visitors displayed more "active" empathy (characterized by deeper imaginative and cognitive engagement). The paper explores how both the design and environment of the museum and the background experiences of visitors influenced the development of empathy. It argues that empathy is not an automatic response to suffering and instead can be considered as an interaction between the design of the museum and the background knowledge of visitors. The paper argues that empathy is an important means through which young people participate in remembering the communist period and is a means to make "prosthetic" memories of an authoritarian past which they have not experienced first-hand.

Keywords: Memorial Museum, Empathy; Prosthetic Memory; Romania, Communism

Introduction

Throughout post-communist East-Central Europe, an important component of the process of coming to terms with the communist past has been the establishment of museums which interpret the repression and abuses of the communist era (Zombory 2017; Sodaro 2018). Such museums represent what Sodaro (2018) identifies as a new commemorative form: the memorial museum. Such museums are frequently established as a means of dealing with a period of conflict, political violence, repression or human rights abuses. As Sodaro argues: "Out of the detritus of the violent twentieth century have emerged a new set of memorials that regretfully acknowledge what is negative and abhorrent in the past" (2018, 27). Memorial museums directly confront (rather than sidestep or shy away from) a violent past. They aim to inform a wider public about "what happened" and through providing shocking and challenging experiences for their visitors they seek to contribute to preventing the repetition of such violence (Sodaro 2018).

In the context of the recent growth of interest in geographies of memory (Hoelscher and Alderman 2004; Foote and Azaryahu 2007; Alderman and Inwood 2013; Till and Kuusisto-Arponen 2015) there has been considerable scrutiny by geographers of monuments and memorials in post-communist contexts (e.g. Czepczyński 2008; Forest and Johnson 2011; Light and Young 2011, 2015; Foxall 2013; Kabachnikj, Gugushvili and Kirvalidze 2018). At the same time, museums in post-communist contexts have, with a few exceptions, (for example see Charlesworth 1994; Forest, Johnson and Till 2004; Till 2005) received less attention. However, within other disciplines there is growing interest in the role of memorial museums in post-communist contexts (e.g. Wight and Lennon 2007; Burch and Zander 2010; Jones 2011, 2013; Dobre 2013; Wight 2016; Byrne 2017; Clarke 2017; Zombory 2017;

Sodaro 2018). These analyses have tended to focus on the specific circumstances behind the decision to establish a memorial museum, or the broader implications of what post-communist societies want to remember (or not remember). Furthermore, the emphasis has predominantly been on elite processes of remembering within such museums, and the key actors involved in the memorialization process. Such analysis is useful for better understanding how post-communist societies remember the communist past but gives little insight into the experiences of the "users" of such museums and the memory work they undertake through their encounters with the communist past. Yet it is only through engaging more fully with visitors themselves that it is possible to better understand how memorial museums "work" in remembering the political violence of the communist era.

This paper seeks to move forward the debate about the role of memorial museums by focusing on the experiences of visitors to such places. In particular it examines the importance of empathy within visits to memorial museums. Encouraging visitors to identify and empathize with the victims of human rights abuses is a key part of the work of memorial museums (Sodaro 2018). It is also central to performances of remembering. Yet, despite the recent surge of attention within human geography to emotions (Smith, Davidson, Cameron and Bondi 2009; Pile 2010) there has been surprisingly limited attention to empathy (although see Pedwell 2013; Angeles and Pratt 2017; Donald 2018). Similarly, with a few exceptions (Modlin, Alderman and Gentry 2011; Alderman, Kingsbury and Dwyer 2013; Cook 2016), the extensive recent debate about geographies of memory and remembering has largely neglected empathy. Within other disciplines and fields, however, empathy has a higher profile. Of particular relevance to this study is recent work on empathy within museum/heritage studies (for example, Smith 2011; Witcomb 2013; Savenije and de Bruijn 2017; Markham 2019; Mason *et al* 2018). This research posits that empathy is a complex

entanglement of emotion, affect, and cognition within heritage environments that is a key part of meaning-making among visitors. In the case of memorial museums, empathy is a central component of the encounter with a traumatic past and a way of making a connection with that past.

Our focus is the experiences of young adults during a visit to a museum – Sighet Memorial Museum - in Romania which interprets the human rights abuses of the communist era. These visitors are part of a generation who has not lived through the communist period and who have little understanding about the political violence of the communist era. Sighet Museum was selected as a case study because it was among the first museums to be established in post-communist East-Central Europe which dealt with the human rights abuses of the communist era (Zombory 2017). It is also the best-known (and most-visited) museum of communism in Romania. We focus on three issues relating to empathy within the visit experience: first the nature of empathy developed with the victims of communist repression; second, the depth of empathy with particular attention to those individuals who displayed deeper or more "active" empathy; and third, the influences on empathetic engagement, both the background and positionality of visitors, and the characteristics of the museum itself.

Museums and the Memorialization of Political Violence

Societies emerging from a period of conflict, repression, or human rights abuses have adopted a range of strategies for coming to terms with a problematic past. Memorialization is a fundamental component of these strategies (Mégret 2010). Following a period of political violence or repression, commemoration can provide symbolic justice and reparation for victims and survivors (Moore 2009) through ensuring that their suffering is not forgotten. It

can also contribute to reconciliation and social rebuilding (Mégret 2010) by reaffirming collective senses of belonging and identity that are rooted in a traumatic past (Moore 2009). Memorialization also has a didactic role in informing a wider public about "what happened" and about the importance of preventing its repetition (Sodaro 2018). Clearly, then, while memorialization is about the past, it serves the needs of the present (Zombory 2017).

Museums are one of the most common memorialization projects following conflict, repression or human rights abuse. The early models were the Nazi concentration camps (most notably Auschwitz-Birkenau) that were preserved as memorial museums after the Second World War. They were intended to ensure that past suffering was not forgotten and that future generations could learn from what happened (Sodaro 2018). Subsequently numerous other memorial museums have been established throughout the world. Among the best-known examples are Tuol Sleng in Cambodia; Kigali Genocide Memorial Centre in Rwanda; the Apartheid Museum and District Six Museum in South Africa; the Museum of Memory and Human Rights in Chile; the Navy Mechanic School (Space for Memory and the Promotion and Defence of Human Rights) in Argentina. In some cases memorial museums are established and actively supported by state authorities and reflect official attempts at reckoning with recent political violence. In other cases, non-state actors (such as civil society organizations, local community groups, or survivors groups) have taken the lead role, sometimes in the face of indifference from state authorities.

Memorial museums have three roles (Sodaro 2018). First, like many contemporary museums, they tell a story, but the story is centered on recent political violence. In this sense, they are safe spaces where difficult issues can be brought into the open, in the hope of achieving some form of resolution (Dean 2013). Second, such museums are sites of remembrance which

recognize and acknowledge the victims of violence and repression. They are emphatically victim-centered institutions that aim to provide a form of symbolic justice and redress for victims and survivors (Moore 2009) through ensuring that their suffering is not forgotten. Third, many memorial museums are intended to be visited by diverse publics (that go beyond victims and survivors to include domestic and international tourists) and they seek to offer transformative experiences. In particular, these museums seek to morally educate their visitors, so that they leave with a renewed respect for human rights and a determination to avoid repeating the mistakes of the past. Memorial museums are frequently located at sites (such as prisons, places of torture, and sites of mass death) directly associated with state-sponsored violence (Zombory 2017). By giving visitors the experience of proximity – of "being there" (Tucker 2016) – such sites have the potential to engender identification with, and empathy for, victims of suffering.

Memorial museums have adopted a distinctive approach to the display and interpretation of violent pasts. In particular, they make use of "experiential, interactive, and affective strategies to give visitors an impactful encounter with the past" (Sodaro 2018, 5). The adoption of the experiential as a "mode of knowledge" (Landsberg 2004, 130) is not unique to memorial museums. However, memorial museums have adopted experiential approaches for a specific purpose. They aim to provide experiences which are emotionally challenging and shocking for visitors. In this way they are underpinned by unsettlement as a presentation strategy (see Witcomb 2013). Such a strategy is a means to a particular end: by touching visitors emotionally memorial museums seek to transform their visitors so that they embrace the message of "never again" (Moore 2009; Hamber 2012; Sodaro 2018, 10) and leave with a determination to prevent future violence.

Central to the "work" of memorial museums is the issue of empathy: visitors are encouraged to connect and identify with the victims of political violence (Violi 2012; Sodaro 2018). Empathy can be defined as "a complex, imaginative process through which an observer simulates another person's situated psychological states while maintaining clear self-other differentiation" (Coplan 2011, 40). It is essentially a form of emotional and imaginative engagement in which an individual feels (or tries to feel) the situation and perspectives of another person (Tucker 2016; Zembylas 2018). In a museum context empathy is about an encounter or meeting with the other (Mason *et* al 2018) but in circumstances in which the positions of visitor and other are clearly different (Landsberg 2004). However a common criticism of empathy is that there will always be limits to the extent that an individual can empathize with another whose circumstances are completely different from his or her own (Tucker 2016; Delgado and Stefancic 2017). While feeling is central to empathy, recent debate emphasizes that empathy is more than an emotional experience and also involves significant cognitive engagement (Landsberg 2004; Coplan 2011; Endacott and Brooks 2013; Savenije and de Bruijn 2017). In particular, developing empathy requires cognitive processes of understanding and imagination: as such memorial museums demand both emotional and cognitive labor on the part of visitors (Landsberg 2004; Witcomb 2013).

Memorial museums also design their spaces in an attempt to "engineer" or order empathetic responses amongst visitors (see Modlin, Waterman and Gentry 2011; Waterton and Dittmer, 2014). These include, for example, photographs and personal effects of victims, lists of names, and audio or visual testimony of survivors (Violi 2012; Sodaro 2018, Zombory 2017). Such approaches are intended to affirm the humanity of those who suffered (Moore 2009) encouraging visitors to identify with their situation. Additional design features, lighting and sound effects also work to create a sense of exposure and/or claustrophobia among visitors so

that they can better connect with the experiences of victims (Sodaro 2018). However such display practices cannot determine empathy: instead, visitors have emotional agency (Zembylas 2018) and can respond to museum presentations in a range of ways, some of which may not be those intended by designers (Waterton and Dittmer 2014). A related issue is a concern that the empathy developed by visitors may be shallow in nature with little deeper or critical reflection (Markham 2019), something that has been termed "lazy" empathy (see Tucker 2016). Consequently, empathetic responses, while potentially meaningful for visitors, may do little to challenge the existing order (Markham 2019).

Memorial Museums in Post-Communist East-Central Europe

While museums which memorialize political violence are located throughout the world, there is a particular concentration in post-communist East-Central Europe. In the aftermath of the Second World War a number of memorial museums were established in the region intended to remember the atrocities of the Holocaust. After 1989 a new generation of such museums was established that focused on the repression and human rights abuses committed by the communist regimes which came to power after the War. In the later stages of the War some states had been invaded and annexed by the Soviet Union. Other states were occupied by the Soviet Army at the end of the War and local communist parties, with Soviet backing, took over power in each country. Thereafter communist regimes embarked on a radical reform project through the imposition of a single-party state and a planned economy. However, since they lacked legitimacy and popular support, communist states relied on harsh repression to maintain their rule. Opponents were imprisoned; opposition groups were repressed, and the population was subject to surveillance and harassment by powerful internal security services. The Soviet army violently repressed an uprising against communist rule in East Germany in

1953, and invaded to overthrow reformist governments in Hungary (1956) and Czechoslovakia (1968).

Communist regimes throughout East-Central Europe collapsed between 1989 and 1991. Thereafter, these states have embarked on the difficult process of coming to terms with their recent past (Welsh 1996). Most countries have established memorial museums to commemorate the human rights abuses of the communist era (Dobre 2013; Jones 2013; Zombory 2017). Some – such as the Museum of Occupations and Freedom Fights in Lithuania (1993) and the House of Terror in Hungary (2002) – have been established by state authorities (Wight and Lennon 2007; Sodaro 2018). In other cases – for example the Museum of Occupations in Estonia (2003) and the Museum of the Occupation of Latvia (1993) – civil society actors (including anti-communist activists and academics) were the driving force (Zombory 2017). Some, like the Hohenschönhausen Memorial in Berlin (1994), were established by former inmates and are now funded by state authorities (Byrnes 2017). Others were founded by private sector interests such as the Museum of Communism in Prague, Czech Republic (Dobre 2013). Many have adopted the approach of memorial museums elsewhere (Sodaro 2018): they seek to communicate a moral message through an experiential mode of display; they seek to condemn communism by emphasizing the terror and crime committed by state authorities; and there is a strong focus on the victims of communist regimes (Zombory 2017). Like memorial museums elsewhere, many are located in buildings associated with political violence such as prisons or the headquarters of the security services (*ibid*).

Memorial museums in East-Central Europe indicate much about what post-communist societies want to remember and what they want to forget (Dobre 2013). Communism is

widely discredited in the region (notwithstanding a degree of nostalgia among some social groups) and opposition to communism is an important source of legitimation for contemporary democracies (Zombory 2017). Therefore memorial museums have little concern in offering their visitors a balanced interpretation of the recent past. Instead their message is unambiguous: they emphatically condemn communist regimes by emphasizing the terror and crimes committed by state authorities. Communism is presented not as "a failed social and economic project" but as a criminal system (Ploscariu 2013, 46). Memorial museums make little attempt to discuss what such regimes sought to achieve, or examine the nature of everyday life within a communist state. Neither are visitors encouraged to critically debate and negotiate the recent past and come to their own conclusions. Instead, the messages presented are combative and selective, and in many cases are reduced to a binary struggle of good versus evil (Dobre 2013).

Given their emphasis on condemning the communist past, such memorial museums focus firmly on the victims of repression. They aim to commemorate the suffering of victims and provide them with a form of recognition and redress. However this process of remembering is highly politicized. In some cases the focus on victimization goes beyond the individual to embrace the whole nation, which is presented as the victim of an alien ideology abusively imposed by a foreign power: see Ploscariu (2013), Wight (2016) and Sodaro (2018) in the cases of Romania, Lithuania and Hungary respectively. Similarly, the commemoration of victims may be gendered, and Haliliuc (2013) argues that memorial museums can reify the experiences of men as both victims and opponents of communist regimes, whilst marginalizing the experiences of women. Furthermore, the emphasis on victims means that many memorial museums say little about the perpetrators of state-sponsored violence, although there are notable exceptions such as Hungary's Terror House (Zombory 2017;

Sodaro 2018). Neither is there much attention to post-communist efforts to demand accountability for perpetrators.

Remembering Communism in Romania: Sighet Memorial Museum

In post-communist Romania, the memorialization of the communist era unfolded in a specific context. Politics was initially dominated by former members of the Romanian Communist Party who, despite professing their adherence for democracy, had deep roots in the power structures of the former regime. Consequently, they showed little interest in asking difficult questions about the recent past. Similarly, after the repression and humiliation they had experienced many ordinary Romanians were eager to forget the recent past (Stan 2013). Romania's museums also avoided the communist era entirely in their displays (partly in response to the overt politicization of history under the previous regime), something which Bădica (2010, 83) has termed the "black hole paradigm".

In these circumstances, civil society groups led in remembering the hardships of the communist era. The Civic Alliance Foundation – led by two communist-era dissidents (Ana Blandiana and Romulus Rusan) – spearheaded the campaign for a museum dedicated to the victims of communism. The Foundation identified a former prison in the town of Sighetu Marmaţiei as a suitable site. The building was used in the late 1940s and early 1950s to incarcerate much of Romania's pre-War elite (including politicians, academics, military officers and priests) who were identified as opponents of the communist state. Detainees were kept in extremely harsh conditions and 54 people died in the prison between 1948 and 1955 (Dobre 2013). The foundation purchased the building in 1993 and opened it as a museum in

June 1997 (see Figure 1) as one element of a broader memorial complex entitled *The Memorial of the Victims of Communism and of the Resistance*.

The mission of Sighet Museum is summarized by the epithet "memory as a form of justice". According to the museum's founder, it is intended as an educational resource to explain communism to young people who did not live through the communist era and who have limited knowledge about it (Ana Blandiana, interview 6 February 2018). Furthermore, the museum aims to enable young people to understand the importance of democratic values and the rule of law so that they are able to defend such values (Ioana Boca, executive director of the Civic Alliance Foundation, interview, 6 February 2018). In 2017 the museum attracted 106,000 visitors, of whom 95% were Romanians. Educational visitors (school and university groups) account for over half of the Romanian visitors.[1]

Initially confined to a few rooms, Sighet Memorial Museum has expanded considerably since its inauguration and now includes 87 thematic displays in most of the prison's former cells (see Figure 2). Most cells are typically small and would have catered for 1 or 2 prisoners, but some are larger and accommodated up to 30 people in cramped conditions. The museum presents the manner in which the regime seized power; the repression of the pre-existing social and religious structures; the system of incarceration and punishment which the regime used against its opponents; the nature of life in communist prisons; the biographies of some of those held in the prison; and the nature of opposition and resistance to the regime. Like other memorial museums it adopts an experiential approach (see Sodaro 2018) by giving the visitor a sense of how it might feel to be imprisoned. However, unlike many memorial museums the display approach does not rely on dynamic or interactive exhibits. Instead its displays are somewhat traditional in nature, being dominated by text, images and photographs, with a few

video presentations. The museum also features various additional commemorative features located in the exterior courtyard.

FIGURES 1 AND 2 ABOUT HERE

Sighet Memorial Museum is attracting growing academic attention and critique. Commentators have highlighted its combative but un-nuanced condemnation of communism (Cristea and Radu-Bucurenci 2007; Bădica 2010; Dobre 2013; Ploscariu 2013); the focus on Romanians as victims but with little consideration of the experiences of other minority groups (Ploscariu 2013); and the marginalization of the experiences of women (Haliliuc 2013). More broadly, the politicized and selective remembrance of communism within memorial museums has been examined in a range of post-communist countries including Estonia (Burch and Zander 2010); Hungary (Zombory 2017; Sodaro 2018), Lithuania (Wight 2016), and Germany (Byrnes 2017). Such analyses are characterized by a critical interpretation of how a museum deals with a traumatic past in which the researcher takes on the position of a privileged expert commentator. These sorts of textual approaches – based on reading and interpreting the ways in which the past is represented – are commonplace in museum/heritage research (Alderman and Modlin 2016). However such perspectives are able to say little about the experiences and acts of meaning-making of the people who visit memorial museums.

Methodology

In order to explore the ways in which young Romanians respond to Sighet Memorial Museum, data were collected from two sources. The first was interviews with the museum's

founder and the Executive Director of the non-governmental organization which manages the museum, undertaken in order to understand its mission and philosophy. The interviews were recorded with the permission of the participants and transcribed. Both interviewees gave permission to be quoted. The second data source was focus groups with young Romanians (who make up the museum's principal target audience). A purposive sample was selected, which was both accessible to the researchers and able to provide rich data (Denzin and Lincoln 2005). For reasons of accessibility, and in line with the museum's mission to educate young people, the sample was restricted to students, specifically final year undergraduate students from University of the West in Timişoara (a city in western Romania). The students had visited Sighet Memorial Museum during an educational fieldtrip to the Maramureş region early in the 2017 autumn semester. Whilst the use of students does limit generalizability, it can provide an indication of how young Romanians with no first-hand experience of communism engage with the recent past.

Four focus groups (each involving between 10 and 12 students) were undertaken. Participation was voluntary but 43 of the 45 students who had attended the fieldtrip took part. All participants were given an information sheet which explained the scope of the study (exploring responses to the museum among a generation that had no first-hand experience of communism) and were also asked to initial a consent form. Each student chose a pseudonym by which they would be identified in the presentation of the findings. The focus groups ranged in length from 50 to 90 minutes. The participants were all in the 20-23 age range and most (28 out of 43) were female reflecting the broader composition of the students' year group. The sample, although small, is sufficient to illustrate how young Romanians responded to a museum dedicated to the communist past. Our aim in data collection was not to generalize but to explore in depth the experiences of this particular group of visitors.

The research design purposefully avoided collecting data immediately after the museum visit. Whilst the post-visit stage is conceptualized as an important stage of the overall experience (e.g. Aho 2001; Cutler and Carmichael 2010), there remains a lack of research into the personal meanings attached to post visit recollection (Wright 2010). Most empirical studies of museum visitors are conducted at the end of the visit, meaning that they record immediate impressions and experiences (Falk *et al* 2004), but do not capture reflection or contemplation which takes place after the visit (see Smith 2010). Initial memories post-visit are liable to change, and the visitor needs time for these to be consolidated (Nader 2003). This research was conducted post-visit, in order to capture the reconstructed memories of the visit (Braun-LaTour, Grinley and Loftus 2006). Falk *et al* (2004) adopted a similar approach, using a period of 4-8 months after the museum visit, whilst De Witt (2008) used a shorter 10-12 week period. This study used a two month period (with the focus groups being conducted at the end of the university term), allowing a period of time for the recollections to be consolidated, but still allow for ease of recall (Faulkner and Raybould 1995).

The focus groups were subsequently transcribed and analyzed using a form of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2013). The analysis started with repeated reading of the transcripts. This was followed by open coding which consisted of labelling and describing the numerous ideas within the transcripts. These open codes were subsequently grouped into higher categories or potential themes. The approach was inductive or "bottom up" in nature (*ibid*, 178) in that the themes were derived from the data. These candidate themes were then reviewed to confirm they reflected the data. To ensure inter-coder reliability this analysis was undertaken independently by two of the authors, followed by a process of comparison, negotiation and agreement on the final themes. Following this process, it became clear that

the story being told by the respondents was one of empathy. Three themes relating to empathy were identified. The first was the level of empathy. This was further coded with three sub-categories: no apparent empathy; shallow empathy (characterized by sadness, compassion or sympathy but with limited perspective-taking); and "active" empathy, defined, following Smith (2011) as something which goes beyond general feelings of sadness to embrace deeper imaginative and cognitive reflection and insight (see also Smith and Campbell 2016). The second theme was elements of the museum's design and presentation which had a particular influence on empathy. The third theme was the influence of the entrance narratives and background knowledge of visitors on their development of empathy.

Exploring Empathy in Sighet Museum

Entrance Narratives

The students arrived at the museum with a wide range of "entrance narratives", defined as prior knowledge, experiences and memories of a topic (Doering, 1999). In many ways they formed a largely homogeneous group: all were ethnic Romanians; all were born after the end of the communist era; most were from middle class backgrounds; all but one described their religion as Christian; all were from the western part of Romania (the university's catchment area); and most were visiting the museum for the first time. Furthermore, few (apart from the 4 students who had visited the museum previously) had any awareness of the ways that the communist regime treated its opponents or its system of incarceration.

However, in terms of prior knowledge and understanding of Romanian communism there was considerable diversity. The students had a wide range of second hand or "prosthetic"

memories of the communist era (Landsberg 2004). This knowledge was derived both from parents and grandparents (and, as such, reflected a diverse set of experiences) and from school. However, the latter was less important than personal testimonies for many of the students, particularly since the post-War period was not a compulsory part of history curricula in Romanian schools (Stan 2013). It was also apparent that family and school were sources for understanding very different aspects of communism. School learning tended to focus on the broader political dimensions, along with key leaders and dates. Conversely, parents and grandparents were the principal source of information about everyday life. The students also had a range of views about the communist era with around half having a negative view, whilst an equal number were ambivalent and could identify both good and bad aspects of communism (reflecting what they had been told by their relatives).

Displaying Empathy in the Museum

The focus of this study was not on the immediate sensations that students had experienced in the museum, but on their recollections (after a period of reflection) of how they had felt. A similar approach is used in studies which make use of travel blogs or online fora (for example Isaac and Çakmak 2016). None of the students had any difficulty in recalling their experiences in the museum, reflecting "the highly energized emotional content of traumatic histories" (Smith and Campbell 2016, 449). It was apparent that a large majority (40) of the students demonstrated a degree of connection or empathy with the victims of communism. The most common form of empathy was sadness and compassion for the victims of communism. Indeed sorrow, sadness and pity were the most common emotional responses among the students (mentioned by 30 people). For example, Mara stated "it

made me feel a sense of sadness, especially when I thought how people lived then, and how they were tortured only because they stood up for what they believed and because they were against communism". Similarly, Vega recounted "immediately when you arrive in the museum you see clear proof of how people died, how much they were tortured…you are left with a feeling of such sadness". The predominance of sorrow as an emotional response is unsurprising and accords with studies undertaken at other memorial museums (see Timothy and Teye 2004; Chen 2012; Isaac and Çakmak 2016). Since memorial museums are underpinned by the "politics of regret" (Olick 2007; Sodaro 2018) they aim to produce strong emotional reactions in their visitors by presenting past suffering.

However, sorrow was not a universal response and some students displayed stronger emotions which, nevertheless, were underpinned by empathy. Some spoke of feelings of anger, revulsion, and hate (see also Smith 2011; Chen 2012), usually directed against the perpetrators of violence (who, nevertheless, are rarely mentioned in the museum). For example, Bebe stated:

> I started to feel a sense of revulsion, especially when I saw carved on the wall so many names – who died and who fought for the freedom of the people in that period, who wished to have more freedom of expression and simply to have a better life, a life which any person deserved

Similarly Meme expressed "disappointment and contempt towards the people who persecuted the prisoners". Such responses align with the museum's mission to highlight the criminality of the communist system. However, not all emotions were those that are conventionally considered negative. Some students spoke of appreciation for those who

had been imprisoned, such as Rubi who stated "I had a feeling of sadness, and at the same time, appreciation for the people who had the courage to speak out". Similarly Aria spoke of "a feeling of compassion for those who were tortured and at the same time thankfulness". Here the encounter with the "others" in the prison had stimulated Rubi and Aria to reflect upon their own contemporary situations and subjectivities.

It was also apparent that, in their responses to the museum – particularly developing empathy for the victims of communism – these students had largely acquiesced with the dominant or "preferred" reading of the museum's message (Buzinde and Santos, 2009, 453). They had accepted (with little debate) the museum's core message that communism was a criminal system. Given their limited prior knowledge of the communist system of incarceration this situation is unsurprising: these young Romanians lacked the cultural tools to critically interrogate the museum's messages (see Smith 2010). This affirms that empathy among visitors is not always associated with critical reflection about what is presented to them (Hamber 2012; Tucker 2016; Markham 2019). For most students visiting the museum had added nuance to their understanding of the communist period by confronting them with an aspect of the recent past about which they knew little. Among those who arrived with a negative view of the former regime the museum had amplified their existing views. However, among those who had mixed views about the communist era, the visit did little to resolve the tension between the museum's forthright condemnation of communism and the more ambivalent accounts which they had received from their parents and grandparents.

Up to this point the discussion has focused on emotional and empathetic experiences, but it is also apparent that empathy is about more than just feeling. Recent research in

museum/heritage studies has emphasized that emotional and cognitive experiences in a museum cannot be disentangled (Trofanenko 2011; Witcomb 2013; Smith and Campbell 2016; Savenije and de Bruijn 2017; Mulcahy and Witcomb 2018) and this is particularly the case with empathy. Developing empathy requires understanding and thought about the circumstances of the "other" (Savenije and de Bruijn 2017) which, in turn, can lead to an emotional response and connection (Landsberg 2004). In order to empathize with victims students first needed to learn about, and understand, their experiences.

Certainly the experiences of many of the students indicated that emotion and empathy could not be separated from cognitive processing of information. The most common way of considering cognitive experiences within museums is through assessing learning. However, a narrow focus on learning fails to capture the complex cognitive engagement that can take place during a museum visit which, nevertheless, may not lead to longer term learning. From the focus groups it was clear that students had cognitively engaged with the information in the displays and that such understanding had led to an emotional (and empathetic) reaction. These quotations were typical:

> "I learned how people were treated and I was moved by the number who were tortured there" (Sebi)

> "there were all kinds of stories posted on [the wall]…I stopped and I read some of them and they moved me" (Iris)

> "I was moved when I read some testimonies of the people who were tortured there, the letters sent by their families, and the conditions in which they lived" (Nica)

In other cases, emotion and empathy were linked to broader understanding and reflection about the nature of the communist regime. For example Luci stated "I was moved by the number of victims; I didn't know that there were so many people who were imprisoned because they spoke their mind". Similarly Amir stated bluntly "Horrible. To hear all those terrible, terrible stories, and all those experiences…I wouldn't want to live in that period". Jana also reflected that "those people went through things that were so bad…only so that we would learn and have freedom". These responses illustrate how an empathetic response to the prison was founded on having understood what had happened in the past (see Witcomb 2013). Thinking is inseparable from emotion, a connection that has been described as "*felt thought*" (Mulcahy and Witcomb 2018, 222, italics in original). Furthermore, while the museum says little about those responsible for committing violence, some students had gone beyond the information they encountered to develop strong emotional responses (such as anger or contempt) towards the perpetrators. Again this illustrates a deeper cognitive engagement with the museum's stories and an ability to make connections between the victims and those responsible for their suffering (even if the latter group are largely invisible in the museum).

"Active" Empathy

Empathy can take a wide range of forms and visitors will show different "registers of engagement" (Smith and Campbell 2016, 444) with a museum and its messages. In the case of these students, empathy most commonly took the form of rather shallow or passive engagement, usually in the form of sadness or compassion for those imprisoned in the museum. This is not to say that such experiences are trivial or without meaning, but simply that the depth of engagement with the "other" was limited. However, fourteen of the students gave responses which indicated deeper or more "active" empathy: their encounter had stimulated a deeper imaginative and emotional engagement with a traumatic past (see Smith 2011).

Active empathy most commonly took the form of perspective-taking (Endacott and Brooks 2013; Tucker 2016). It involved students trying to understand the experiences of the prisoners, usually by imagining themselves in their position. For example Manu stated "once you enter through the door it seems that you live what they lived through, and through the hardships of that time". Dodo went into greater detail and his response indicates how he had responded to the architecture and lighting in the building to imagine himself as a prisoner: "An image formed in my head, of what it would have been like. I even saw how it would have been if I for example, was imprisoned, I felt somewhat claustrophobic, to be imprisoned in a cell, alone". Gino had made a connection between the experiences of the prisoners and his own behaviour in such circumstances. He stated that he had felt:

> pity, so much pity, and a feeling of helplessness, and I thought that if they were tortured because they protected the others… I thought that if it was *me* that was caught and taken there...I wouldn't be able to hold out.

Mimi showed a different form of empathy, imagining herself as the relative of one of the detainees: "I thought about what would happen if one of my family would be in the situation of being there and of being treated so badly that they died there, without me knowing anything of them, or what would happen if it was *me* in there". These responses illustrate how the museum had created opportunities for some visitors to make their own imaginative experiences by immersing themselves in the position of the prisoners, something which Violi (2012, 44) terms a "*felt reality* of the past".

Recent research has stressed the affective and embodied nature of a museum visit (Witcomb 2013; Waterton and Dittmer 2014; Mulcahy and Witcomb 2018). However the physical sensations evoked by the museum did not emerge strongly in the focus groups, perhaps because of the interval that had elapsed between the visit and the data collection. However, some students did report being viscerally affected by the museum and, significantly, they were all among those who displayed active empathy, again indicating a deeper affective engagement with the site. For example, Zoia spoke of "an atmosphere. I felt an overwhelming atmosphere, and very negatively charged I could say, especially that we know that people were tormented, tortured and persecuted, and that they died there". Similarly Mimi stated "everything gave me a feeling of fright and fear. I didn't want to be there, not then, not as a visitor". Other students had stronger physical reactions such as Cara who stated:

> For me there were many sensations and emotions which I passed through there, starting with fright, through pain to… I don't know, effectively terror…I had the beginning of a panic attack at one point, looking from cell to cell and, I don't know, there was much to take in there.

Cara was not alone in such a response: Didi reported being moved to tears during her visit.

The question arises as to why some visitors display more active or intense forms of empathy than others? This issue has been little researched. The background and characteristics of visitors themselves may be important (Mason *et al* 2018). Other studies have indicated that gender can be significant: for example, Smith (2010) reported that empathy was more common among women. Gender was not significant in this study since the "active empathy" group was comprised of near equal numbers of men and women. However, it was apparent that the "active empathy" group tended to share certain characteristics in terms of their background and entrance narratives. For almost all of them, their family had been their main source of knowledge about the communist past, rather than knowledge gained through schooling. Furthermore, many of this group had traumatic experiences of communism within their family histories which had been passed to them by their parents. For example both Dodo and Didi had grandparents who had been subject to internal deportation in the 1950s when those Romanians living close to the Yugoslav border were forcibly moved to the Bărăgan Plain in eastern Romania (they were later allowed to return). Roza, Tedi and Cara all had grandparents who were farmers and had been compelled to "donate" their land to a collective farm during the collectivization programme of the 1950s and 1960s. Gino also told of how her grandparents had been forced to work on a collective farm. Amir also recalled how land belonging to his parents

had been confiscated. Furthermore one of his grandparents was a member of the *Securitate* (the notorious internal security service) and such people faced stigmatization both during and after the communist period. Furthermore, almost all the students in the "active empathy" group had negative (rather than ambivalent) feelings about the communist period and its implications for Romania.

These findings suggest that the degree or depth of empathy in a memorial museum is strongly influenced by the background of visitors themselves (see Smith 2011; Markham, 2019). All shared similar socio-cultural, ethnic and religious backgrounds, which not only forms their entrance narrative but also their historical understanding (Savenije and de Bruijn 2017). What appears to be different is how the family histories of the members of the "active empathy" group seem to have shaped their views of the communist era and the way in which they showed sympathy and empathy for "other" victims of communism. It also appeared that, in addition to empathizing with the victims that they encountered in the museum, these students were also making empathetic bonds with earlier generations of their own families (see Jacobs 2014). These findings highlight how it is important for visitors to have a degree of existing knowledge in order to make comparisons with what they encounter and relate this to their own world (Schorch 2015), to allow for perspective-taking to happen.

The Influence of the Museum Environment

Museum visitors will respond in diverse ways to "the material, aesthetic, and spatial qualities of the exhibition/interpretation" (Witcomb 2013, 256). In the case of Sighet Museum, the students identified numerous features that had had a particularly powerful

impact on them (although no individual feature was mentioned by more than a quarter of the participants). However, it was apparent that the design of the museum space appeared to have little influence on the depth of empathic response. Members of the "active empathy" group were no more likely to identify particular features of the museum as having a powerful impact on them than members of the "shallow' empathy" group. Similarly there was no element of the museum that was highlighted only by the "active empathy" group.

The most influential feature of the museum was the building itself. Memorial museums are frequently located in former prisons and detention centers (Zombory 2017) precisely because such spaces can have a powerful influence on their visitors. The prison's cells had a particular impact. For example, Suma stated "The cells…I simply thought about the way in which people lived there, how they were held and what conditions they experienced". For Dodo "what counts is the cells; the place in which people lived keep something of their spirit". Two cells in particular – where prisoners were held in isolation – had a particular impact: both were unlit, contained no information, and visitors could close the door behind them and stand in darkness. Students termed these the "torture cells" and for some the encounter had been a profound experience. Mara recalled "I felt shock... The torture room impressed me most when I saw how they tortured every prisoner". Similarly Cece reported "I had an unpleasant feeling, especially when I visited the torture cell, it seemed horrifying to me and I couldn't imagine how people could be taken there and held". The torture cells were particularly powerful because they acted as an imaginative gateway to another world (see Gregory and Witcomb 2007). Simply the experience of being in this cell enabled visitors to give free reign to their imagination and contemplate what it would have been like to be incarcerated within. Since such acts of imagination involve cognitive processing

this again highlights the entanglements of emotion and cognition within a memorial museum.

Other features of the museum also had a powerful impact. A number of students mentioned a hallway filled with photographs of those persecuted by the communist regime. For Nada "what moved me the most was that corridor, full of photographs of the victims". Similarly, Gila recalled being "gripped by a sense of sadness, especially when I saw that wall, full of photographs of those who died". By presenting the victims of communist repression as individuals, these visitors were able to make an empathetic connection with the prison's inmates and their stories. Those persecuted became real people rather than an abstract concept. The role of photographs in setting up affective connections between visitors and a memorial site has been noted in other contexts (Markham 2019). In particular, photographs individualize the victims (Sodaro 2018) who might otherwise be thought of in more abstract terms.

Like many other memorial museums, Sighet includes an assemblage of additional commemorative features (see Violi 2012; Sodaro 2018) situated in the external courtyard of the prison. They include several walls on which are inscribed the names of those who died in communist prisons; a statuary complex representing the victims of communist repression; and an underground space for contemplation and prayer. The walls of names generated particularly strong reactions. Roza stated "What impressed me was, when you enter the courtyard, there's a whole wall with names written on it, really small, of those who died, and I presume that they aren't all there. So many people died, practically for nothing". Sara echoed these sentiments: "I was moved by the courtyard, by those walls on which were written the names. I was terrified that so many names could be there, I

couldn't believe it". These responses indicate how the wall monument is particularly effective in communicating the scale of communist-era repression which goes beyond those incarcerated in Sighet prison. For others, the statues had been particularly moving. Manu stated "the image that remained with me is that statue of people in front of the wall, which maybe represents the fact that people were shot". Didi spoke of "that monument in the courtyard which represents people in front of a wall, and I thought that the wall exactly represents censorship and pain". Again, this monument provided visual and symbolic reinforcement of the museum's key messages about suffering in the communist period, in a way which invited visitors to make a connection with victims.

Conclusion

Memorial museums have been established in many post-communist countries in order to commemorate the victims of communist-era repression and ensure that future generations do not forget the suffering under communism. They are important sites of intergenerational memory (Văran and Creţan 2018) in which those who have not lived through the events that are interpreted can develop a better understanding of a repressive past and create their own "prosthetic" memories of that past (Landsberg 2004). One of the key ways in which this takes place is by encouraging visitors to develop empathy and a sense of connection with the victims of political violence. This paper has explored such practices in Sighet Memorial Museum among a group of young people who had no direct experience of communism but whose understanding of the recent past was largely derived from their families and schooling. Developing empathy is not an inevitable response but in this case a majority of these visitors showed some degree of empathy with victims whose experiences and situation were completely unlike their own. Moreover, this sense of connection with

the victims of communist repression was something that these visitors had little difficulty recalling two months after their encounter with the museum.

However, empathy with the victims of communist repression varied in intensity. In its more shallow forms it was characterized by sadness, sorrow or compassion for the victims of repression. While categorized as shallow these can be meaningful experiences for the individuals concerned. Deeper (or more active) empathy was characterized by an ability to engage the imagination as a starting point for reflection on the conditions of those incarcerated in the prison. Regardless of its intensity, empathy is an entanglement of the cognitive and emotional. Even those who displayed shallow empathy were responding to having read and understood a part of the museum's displays in a way which enabled them to consider the experiences of the victims. Some students were also able to look beyond the victims to consider the role of perpetrators (an invisible "other" in the museum). Deeper empathy was characterized by more complex imaginative engagement and perspective-taking in which students imagined themselves in the position of the prisoners.

It was also apparent that some elements of the museum's design and interpretive strategy – particularly the prison's former cells, the photographs of victims, and testimonies of those who had suffered - were particularly impactful in this respect. Furthermore, the commemorative features that have been added to the site since it opened as a museum (especially the wall of names, and the statues) had heightened the emotional impact of the visit and reinforced the museum's messages. However, these elements work in different ways for different visitors and there was no single display feature which had had a universal impact on all of the students. Furthermore it was apparent that the intensity of empathy was shaped by what the students brought with them to the site in the form of prior

knowledge and existing views about the communist past. The importance of family stories was apparent so that those individuals who had traumatic experiences within their family history were more likely to develop deeper empathy for the victims of communism. The implication of these findings is that empathy in a memorial museum is effectively an interaction between the background and personalities of visitors themselves and the physical space of the museum. Therefore, memorial museums can produce possibilities for empathetic responses among visitors but cannot determine the nature or depth of such responses.

More broadly, these findings underline for geographers (and others) interested in post-communist memory the importance of memorial museums as sites – or "traumascapes" (Turmarkin 2005) - where such memory is constructed, performed and negotiated. Such museums are places where young people who have not experienced communism can become participants in the process of remembering, irrespective of whether the empathy developed is shallow in nature. In this sense, museums – alongside monuments and memorials – are important sites of post-communist memory work. Furthermore, memorial museums can reinforce the messages of school education or, as in countries like Romania where the education system has been reluctant to address the communist past, they can provide alternative sites for encountering and remembering the human rights abuses of communist regimes.

There is considerable scope for further research into empathy within memorial museums. This study has focused on a specific group of young people and we do not claim that all visitors would respond to the museum in the same way. Indeed, as a group involved in higher education these students may have been better able to reflect critically upon their

experiences in the museum. Other visitors may respond to the museum's presentations in very different ways. These include other groups of children/youth who have not lived through communism, but also older visitors who have personal experience of living under communism and who may respond to museal presentations of the communist past very differently. There is also scope to focus on intergenerational visits comprising adults who have experienced communism and young people who have not. Such research would uncover the interactions and meaning-making that goes on between generations in remembering communist repression. Further research into empathy within memorial museums could also elucidate how both emotional and cognitive experiences can contribute to the development of "prosthetic" memories (Landsberg 2004) of the communist past without resorting to assumptions that feeling is in some way inferior to learning within museum spaces. This, in turn, could highlight how empathy can be used most effectively as an educational strategy within such museums. A broader point is that a focus on the visitors to museums (the "users" of places of memory) allows different insights into the nature of popular post-communist memories. Much of the study of how populations regard and remember the communist past has, to date, been derived from large-scale opinion surveys. A focus on visitors to memorial museums allows for additional insights into how the meanings of the communist past are negotiated within the practices of everyday life.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors

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Figure (photo) Captions:

Figure 1: Exterior view of Sighet Memorial Museum

Figure 2: Interior view of the Museum

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Endnotes

[1] Information supplied by the museum (from the Sighet Memorial Database, 2017).