



# Home Cultures

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## Forgotten Domestic Objects

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ALYSSA GROSSMAN  
**FORGOTTEN  
DOMESTIC OBJECTS**  
Capturing Involuntary  
Memories In Post-  
Communist Bucharest

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**ABSTRACT** This article presents an experimental anthropological method for researching memories about the communist past in Bucharest, Romania. Focusing on collections of ordinary objects in individual households, it examines how domestic spaces function not solely as repositories for artifacts of remembrance, but as containers for things that have been forgotten. Viewing these items as triggers of Proustian/Benjaminian 'involuntary' or inadvertent memories, rather than intentionally commemorative souvenirs, I explore how these new encounters offer alternative insights into perceptions of Romania's past, present, and future. Such an approach reveals forms and contents of remembrance work that counter dominant academic and popular discourses about how Romanians are currently reflecting upon their communist past.

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## INTRODUCTION



More than two decades after the official end of the Cold War, the topic of how people are relating to and recollecting the communist past is still a subject of intense debate. Many current analyses of the situation in Romania point to the “mnemonic battles” that continue to fracture social and political groups as they struggle to determine how the communist period should be remembered and represented (Hogea 2010: 27; Pop-Elches 2014: 100). Academic and popular discourses alike tend to characterize contemporary responses to the Romanian post-communist era as fraught with ambiguity and uncertainty, shifting between the two extremes of bitterness and nostalgia.

The official condemnation of Romania’s former communist regime, just a month before the country’s entry into the European Union (EU) in 2007, is often discussed as a controversial and highly charged act. While then-President Traian Băsescu’s public denunciation of communism as “illegitimate” and “criminal” has been critiqued as a symbolic move for Băsescu’s party to gain political capital and demonstrate national unity in the face of EU accession (Hogea 2010: 21), it is also widely described as a necessary effort to “set the record straight” about the atrocities that Romanians suffered during 45 years of communist rule (for a critique of this interpretation, see Tileagă 2012: 479). While the 660-page Tismăneanu Report, commissioned by Băsescu in 2006, which draws upon archival sources to identify the repressive and illegal aspects of the regime, has been criticized by some for its incompleteness and failure to include victims’ testimonies (Hogea 2010), the document is still largely interpreted by academics and the Romanian media as an essential initial step towards achieving “justice” and “closure” (Tanasoiu 2007: 60; see also Popescu 2010).

However, the apparent prevalence of nostalgic attitudes in certain segments of the Romanian population is often explained as a result of selective memory, attributed to the instable and alienating dynamics of present-day post-communism (Marin 2013: 5). Such discourses also underline the role that contemporary nostalgic memories serve in promising a common ground for individuals during a time when memories refuse to coalesce into any fixed consensus (Popescu 2010: 118). These analyses tend to dismiss the legitimacy of existing nostalgia by construing it as the only “seemingly stable reference point” that can be shared when too many different versions of the past are circulating in what is often described as a traumatized population (Popescu 2010: 121).

Most of these interpretations imply a desire and need for Romanians to come to terms with their memories in a unified way, in order

to move on and fully embrace their new European identity. The subtext suggests that a healthy recovery from a difficult history can only occur once there are secure resolutions or conclusions about its meanings, and implies that individual and collective memories should adhere to consistent and comprehensible cultural narratives. Yet as memory theorists have argued, any deep understanding of remembrance practices must acknowledge the expression of unsettled, incongruent, even incoherent perspectives. All collective memories involve variously competing and intersecting views, and all shared memory frameworks are transient, contingent, and continually shifting (see Misztal 2003; Zerubavel 2003; Delich 2004; Todorova 2004).

In practice, however, it can be difficult for a researcher of memory to access its fluid and contradictory qualities, as the very processes of eliciting and depicting recollections may inadvertently attribute to them a sense of stability or cohesiveness that they do not necessarily inherently possess. The cognitive anthropologist Maurice Bloch states that it is only through translating into language the “conceptual clumps” of visual, sensory, and verbal information comprising acts of memory that we can share and analyze them (1998: 24). Yet as he goes on to emphasize, the “logic-sentential terms” of language are not always the best means for evoking the visceral, non-linear, and multi-layered qualities of remembrance. For anthropologists, who by definition engage with and interpret individual and social narratives, this challenge is particularly acute, as simply interviewing someone about the past is often not enough to capture the open-ended, messy, and affective nuances both of memory work and memories themselves.

This paradox points to a recent concern to broaden and diversify the types of methodologies ordinarily employed within the field of memory studies (see Keightley 2010; Keightley et al. 2012). Rather than depending solely on conventional interviews, which tend to yield more explanatory and narrative-based discourses about the past, other less standardized or non-formulaic practices may be used to stimulate reflections of a more profound nature. Later, I elaborate upon an experimental anthropological approach that is more conducive to investigating different types of individual and collective memories of the recent communist past in Bucharest. By constructing investigative spaces in my fieldwork for ruptured accounts and unresolved perspectives to emerge, I point to forms and contents of remembrance work that do not always conform to unified, coherent, or explanatory narratives and do not necessarily align with prevailing cultural and national drives to commemorate the past in order to arrive at a resolution or to be able to “move on”. Specifically using neglected everyday household objects as sensory and material triggers of Proustian/Benjaminian “involuntary” or inadvertent memory, this article presents an alternative methodology for memory researchers, as well as a counterpoint

to dominant academic and popular explanations of how Romanians are currently reflecting upon their communist past.

### HOUSEHOLD OBJECTS AND INVOLUNTARY MEMORIES

The domestic interior can be seen as a “basic anthropological document” providing information about the “self-grounding of a particular society at a particular historical junctur” (Maleuvre 1999: 120). The contents and spatial organization of the home may be interpreted as “small social landscapes” indexing certain relations, identities, and values (Pesmen 2000: 214). Such ideas can be connected back to the French surrealists’ descriptions of bourgeois living spaces as embodying unconscious memories and desires, with material forms possessing psychological and emotional qualities. Walter Benjamin similarly pointed to the recesses of the interior as documenting traces of collective phantasies and political philosophies, providing “costumes of moods” for the particular eras to which they belonged (1999: 216).

Much existing research focuses on everyday household objects specifically in relation to discourses and practices of recollection (see Boym 1994; Buchli 2000, 2002; Crowley 2000; Makovicky 2007). As Gillis writes (1994: 14), “every attic is an archive, every living room a museum.” Yet living spaces and their contents need not be considered solely as carriers of memory. As Bachelard observed, domestic interiors also serve as repositories for things that have been forgotten (1958/1994: xxxvii). Attics, cupboards, closets, and spaces under the bed often contain artifacts that have accumulated over the course of many years, or that have been tucked away and disregarded for long periods of time. If a building’s architecture can be viewed as a metaphor for surfaces of the body (Bourdieu 1977), with its interior spaces evoking internal realms of consciousness (Maleuvre 1999: 124; Buchli 2002: 209), then objects in neglected storage areas may connect to thoughts and reflections that also have remained buried or unacknowledged for long periods of time.

Suddenly remembering a forgotten artifact can have a very different outcome from deliberately using a souvenir or memento to elicit a familiar story about the past. Objects that are not part of people’s calculated décor may carry a host of unspoken assumptions and stories. The jarring recognition of something that was once very present but subsequently unattended to for an extended period may stir up suppressed or unacknowledged thoughts that deviate from standardized individual or cultural narratives (see Makovicky 2007: 304). As Benjamin noted (1999: 389), new encounters with abandoned, devalued, or obsolete objects can break up the unquestioned surfaces of the now and spark moments of historical awakening, offering fresh insights into contemporary life. This dynamic enables us not only to look back at the past from which these objects came,

but also to see how our changing relationship with them affects our current understanding of the present and the future.

Benjamin adopted Proust's term of "involuntary" memory (1999: 211) to describe these inadvertent and unexplicitly commemorative reconsiderations of the past that were particularly radical and powerful. Brought about through spontaneous or unexpected sensory stimuli, involuntary memories have strong aesthetic and emotional components that distinguish them from intentionally cultivated memories (Ball et al. 2007: 117). Rather than resembling a documentary account or an archival record, they form a "collage of impressions" (Van Campen 2014: 17), deeply connected to a wide range of visceral and affective responses. These vivid memories tend to manifest as ruptures, rather than as settled narratives, and embrace the "jagged aesthetic of allegory, montage, and juxtaposition" (Jay 2012: 4). Such Proustian/Benjaminian involuntary memories retain a rawness that opens up spaces for remembrance that are not ritualized or worked through in pre-packaged ways. By refusing any sense of definitive resolution, they work against authoritative cultural or national narratives of memory that attempt to give a coherent or unified meaning to the past, and counter the dominant rhetoric of closure perpetuated by official "cultures of commemoration" (Jay 2012: 15).

## METHODS AND CONSIDERATIONS

In order to access and capture such unofficial registers of remembrance work in everyday life, I have been experimenting with ways of creatively provoking involuntary memories amongst my Romanian interlocutors (see Grossman 2009, 2014b). This particular research spanned 15 months of anthropological fieldwork in Bucharest just before, during, and after Romania's accession to the EU in 2007. During that period I asked 17 individuals to revisit their household storage areas, rummage through disused possessions, and discuss a particular object they found that they now associated with the communist past. Similar to Pesmen's investigation of the contents of "grandmothers' locked wardrobes" (with their old clothes, medicine bottles, crochet work, and dusty books) to tap the inner worlds of the "post-Soviet soul" (2000: 195), I used these re-remembered domestic objects to spark spontaneous, unrehearsed ruminations related to Romania's current post-communist moment.

My respondents belonged to different generations, from one respondent in her late twenties to another in her late seventies. All were old enough to have substantial memories of the communist period, which in Romania officially ended in December 1989. Most of my interviewees were born and raised in Bucharest, and had lived there for extended periods of time. They were generally well-educated individuals who could be considered to belong to the "intellectual" class, though in Romania such a background does not automatically

Figure 1  
Porcelain bibelot.



signify high levels of wealth or privilege. I knew many of them from previous episodes of fieldwork in Bucharest dating back to 1999, so these encounters built upon a previously established, long-term rapport. The interviews were conducted in Romanian; all translations into English are my own. Several respondents asked me to publish their real names, which I have done in this article.

I explained to my interlocutors that I was not interested in artifacts of propaganda or deliberately collected souvenirs, but rather in ordinary things that had been tucked away and forgotten, items now deemed old, shabby, unimportant. I specifically asked that they donate their chosen object to me, partly because I wanted to use the collected objects for an ethnographic film installation (see Grossman 2014a), but also to ensure they would choose something that did not have too much monetary or sentimental value. Initially, many people insisted they had nothing left from “back then”. But once they started looking, they often were surprised by what they found. They rummaged around cellars and balconies, through drawers and boxes, and I watched as they rediscovered mundane objects from their pasts and began to regard these once-familiar possessions with different eyes.

Once they decided on an artifact to give me (sometimes they chose the object on their own; other times they gravitated towards something based on discussions they had with me during their process of searching), I asked them to write a few sentences about what it was and what kinds of connections it held to Romania’s communist period. I then filmed them reading these statements, which often led to more extended discussions. Sometimes people were alone during



Figure 2  
Mesh shopping bag.



Figure 3  
Set of miniature cookbooks.

this process, at other times they were surrounded by family members, provoking further recollections and debates within the household. The presence of the video camera lent a more official tone to my somewhat unusual request, and encouraged my interviewees to give more serious consideration to objects that they initially dismissed as household clutter. Asking people to set their responses down on paper and present them to the camera required them to condense and organize their thoughts into a few succinct points, but also provided a foun-

ation from which they could branch out to more unstructured and spontaneous memories and associations.

My collection gradually expanded to include an odd combination of household items, some useful and others no longer practical: an aluminum ice cube tray. A glass pickling jar. A pair of knitting needles. A miniature porcelain figurine. A pair of broken eyeglass frames. A mesh shopping bag. A wooden darning mushroom. A bottle of ink. A set of miniature cookbooks. A plastic pencil case. A hand-dyed silk scarf. A schoolgirl's uniform. A bottle for making seltzer water. A manual typewriter. (See Figures 1–3.)

Describing all 17 of my collected objects and the responses of their donors would be beyond the scope of this article, so I have chosen to focus on four objects and the involuntary memories triggered and captured by their retrieval. I do not present these examples because they are representative of larger social narratives, but rather for their unruly and uncategorizable mixtures of “personal” and “individual historical” memory (for further discussion of these terms, see Kubik and Bernhard 2014: 10). My interlocutors' accounts simultaneously echoed and diverged from one another, both resonating with and contradicting broader collective and official discourses, highlighting the dynamic and idiosyncratic aspects of experiencing a shared political history.

#### ‘Boxes of Monkeys’: The Gomoiu Family

Marius and Tania Gomoiu lived in a two-bedroom apartment in Titan, a residential, working-class district on the outskirts of Bucharest. When I first asked them if they had any objects to donate to me, they seemed doubtful, explaining that they had already gotten rid of most of their possessions from before the 1989 revolution. I let the subject drop, but during one of my subsequent visits they decided to show me some photographs from their family albums, and I commented on the enormous spectacles that their daughter had worn in the 1980s. “There wasn’t much choice back then,” Marius told me. “You couldn’t just go to your optician and get the latest frames. You saved every pair you had, and when something broke, you would use parts from your other frames to repair it.” He went over to the sideboard, pulled out a drawer, and showed me two cardboard containers filled with eyeglass frames. Some were plastic, others were wire, and many were missing essential parts. I picked up a pair with no lenses, legs, or nose-bridge. “Would you be willing to donate these to my project?”, I asked. “Of course,” he said, “Is that the kind of thing you’re looking for?” I told him it was exactly the kind of thing I was looking for, and asked him to write two or three sentences about the glasses (Figure 4).

These eyeglass frames ended up in this state after they broke.  
I then used the rest of the parts in order to repair other frames.

This was necessary because eyeglass frames were very rare during communist times. These glasses are from my personal collection of frames that served as spare parts for future repairs. (Marius, 60, electronic engineer)

As Marius sat at the table writing, Tania piped up: "I used to save all sorts of odds and ends too. It was an obsession of mine." Walking over to a corner of the living room, she opened the lid to a bench and rummaged around, taking out plastic bags and little containers. "These are my boxes of monkeys," she told me with a smile. There were knitting needles, balls of yarn, spools of thread. Shoelaces, zippers, buttons, buckles, snaps, scraps of fabric, embroidered cloths, bits of crocheted lace. "You always had to mend clothes and sew things," Tania said. "And back then if you saw something good in the shops, you would buy it. Because you didn't know when you would find it again." One container held dozens of tiny plastic clasps, which she explained were brassiere hooks. "Whatever could be used, was saved," she told me.

Marius looked up from his writing. "Do you want to see more?" He opened another bench and began piling its contents on the table. Electronic parts. Clock mechanisms. Telephone wires. Walkman headphones. Screws. "Even buying one screw could be a right adventure," he said. Like Tania, he had gotten into the habit of saving everything that might possibly be used for repairs. Next came a stack of neatly folded plastic bags: large, sturdy ones with handles, printed with colorful pictures and foreign words. Whenever someone used to visit from the West, he explained, they would bring gifts in plastic bags. While the gifts themselves were important, the bags were also highly coveted because of the shortages in Romania at the time. People would wash and reuse them until they eventually fell apart. "Now we're left with this fixation for plastic bags," he said.

As Marius and Tania explained, the lack of available goods on the market, particularly during the extreme shortages during the 1980s, spurred people to stock up on things whenever they could find them, which often resulted in small-scale surpluses inside the home. "Even today," Tania said, "whenever I see something that used to be hard to find, I'll buy it. Even if it's useless." At one point, she had an entire drawer in her wardrobe filled with foreign brands of soap:

Whenever someone would come from abroad and sell soap on the black market, I would buy it. The strange thing was, I was happy to acquire it, but I couldn't bear to actually use it. Because once I used it, I wouldn't have it anymore. I mean, if I took a bath with Rexona soap, it was really a big deal.

**Figure 4**  
Eyeglass frames. Film still  
by Alyssa Grossman (2011).



**Figure 5**  
Circular knitting needles.  
Film still by Alyssa  
Grossman (2011).



As the Gomoius re-discovered and handled these objects that had been stored away, the textures and smells and images sparked memories that had both positive and negative connotations. Like many people of their generation, they were critical of how political restrictions during the communist era had limited their access to resources, speaking about the “obsessions” and “deformations” they developed from having to live with such constant and long-term shortages. As Tania noted, their hoarding tendencies were unfortunate reactions to Ceaușescu’s “politics of brutalization.” But they also indicated the qualities of autonomy and resourcefulness they had developed in

order to survive. Handicraft and do-it-yourself skills were a necessity in those days, and as they both explained, such knowledge continued to be useful in the uncertain economic climate of the contemporary post-communist period.

Tania showed me a pair of rough wooden knitting needles she had used during the 1980s. Her father had made them for her because store-bought needles used to be so hard to find. But the handmade ones were not easy to work with, and whenever Tania had a chance to buy imported needles on the black market or through connections abroad, she would do so, though she still kept the ones her father had given her. But now, she told me, the store-bought needles seemed less important than these wooden ones.

My father made them with his own hands. When I look at them now, they already seem to have a different value. They mean something else. Because my father is old, I see the parent-child relationship in a different way now. There are moments in life when you see things differently from the way you did before.

She decided to donate a pair of German-made circular knitting needles to me (Figure 5), ones that she had previously coveted but now considered dispensable, as they did not have the same kind of sentimental value as her father's handmade needles.

As I very much used to like all sorts of handiwork (sewing, crocheting, knitting), I acquired a lot of thread, yarn, and tools that could satisfy these passions. These stashes were necessary, as I was not always able to find what I wanted in the shops. The knitting needles I used spanned an entire evolutionary range, from homemade ones to more refined aluminum ones that were lighter but still uncomfortable to use because of their size. These circular ones from Germany were special because you could work more easily with them, and also because you couldn't get them unless they were brought in from abroad, and for a pretty price. But they were worth it! (Tania, 57, economist)

Tania was both critical and nostalgic about her pastime of knitting. She described her handiwork skills as developing in harsh conditions where there was often "nothing else to do." At the same time, she suggested that the possibility of taking up knitting again in the future could be emotionally rewarding. "I still hope that I will end up knitting all the wool that I've acquired," she told me. "Because I like it, it's relaxing. And I could make dresses for a potential granddaughter, or suits for a grandson. And those things would have a different value, because they'd be made by their grandmother."

Reconsidering these devalued artifacts after so many years, and explaining their significance to me in a different social, political, and

temporal context catalyzed the Gomoius to “see things differently,” as Tania had remarked. These new and unexpected encounters gave rise to Benjaminian dialectical images, “critical constellation[s] in which precisely this fragment of the past finds itself with precisely this present” (Benjamin 2008: 118). Sifting through dusty bags and boxes, picking things up and inspecting them, re-experiencing their contours and weights and surfaces, evoked perspectives and emotions that both overlapped with and departed from more established cultural narratives. Intertwined with commonly heard descriptions of the difficulties of nation-wide shortages and the struggles to acquire basic goods during the later years of communism, were allusions to the importance of the development of creative skills and personal hobbies. Along with familiar stories about the continued tendency to accumulate and hoard useless items, were references to strong inter-generational ties and kinship connections that many of these objects evoked. Marius and Tania’s resulting accounts portray them neither as overwhelmingly nostalgic for a lost era, nor as victims of a grim political regime. Rather than indicating an inability to reconcile with this particular history, the inconclusive, open-ended memories emerging from these material encounters revealed how two decades after the end of communism, people continue to actively question and re-imagine the past, present, and future.

#### Just Like Doctor Zhivago’: The Diojdescu Family

Dan Diojdescu, a 33-year-old student, had recently returned to Romania after five years of working in Paris. He lived in a studio apartment in the center of Bucharest, but often spent time with his parents in their flat in the outlying district of Berceni, where he grew up. When I asked him for a contribution to my project, he searched through his old bedroom and came up with two items: a bottle of “Super Ink,” still half-filled with dark-blue liquid, and a plastic pencil case from his early school years (Figures 6 and 7). I filmed him reading his written text in his parents’ living room, with his mother, father, and older brother also present.

“Super Ink.” Ink for doing your homework. Ink that leaves blue stains on your fingers, proving that you are diligent and that you do your homework. The same ink that I used for making designs (like in the Rorschach experiment) and for “taking fingerprints,” like in the French detective films with Alain Delon and Lino Ventura.

Cheap plastic pencil holder, with enough space for carrying an eraser, a pen, and two pencils. Ugly pencil holder that you tried to get rid of. It would either break in the second trimester, or else at the end of the school year you would use it in art class

for holding water when painting with watercolors. (Dan, 33, MBA student)

As Dan's experiences of the communist period coincided with his childhood and adolescence, these objects held associations connected as much to friends, school, and social activities, as to a period defined by its political dimensions. Pencil cases, as he explained to me, used to be important markers of status at school. Most children had the ordinary Romanian ones; but if you were lucky enough to have the right connections, you could get a fancy one imported from China. Dan's older brother Dragoş went into another room and came back with his old Chinese pencil case. It had a neat-fitting lid and a picture of the Little Match Girl on the cover. "Everyone envied you if you had one of these," Dragoş told me. "You'd never want to dip your paintbrush in something like this, would you?" "And it had a magnetic clasp," added their father Liviu, watching the scene from his post by the doorway. "Ah, yes, you're right!," said Dan. He held the case up to his ear and snapped it shut. "Click! Did you hear that? This was a good way to impress the girls." He snapped it again and laughed. "Talking about this now, I think what great joys we had in those days!"

During communism, Dan explained, Chinese products were considered to be of superior quality to Romanian ones and had a similar status to expensive name brands today. Particularly in the 1980s, Chinese goods were very hard to find outside the black market. This "Super Ink" was Romanian, Dan told me, so it was nothing special. But it was marked as STAS, a stamp that meant it officially fulfilled the standards of the communist state. He turned it over in his hands to show me the label, which included the original price tag. "Hey, look," he said, "seven lei. Wow. In those days, I didn't know what STAS meant. I just used it like an adjective. If it was STAS, that meant it was good."

There were also Chinese pencils, Dragoş recalled, which had nice designs on them, and were much sturdier than the Romanian ones. "Our pencils were always breaking," he said. "They could never be sharpened properly, and they scratched the paper more than they actually wrote on it." "And remember we had those terrible Flaro pens?", Dan said to his brother. "They would dry out, and you had to dip them into boiling water so that they would work again. They never wrote properly." "That's right," said Dragoş.

"You had to buy three refill cartridges, in the hope that at least one of them would work. One would stop, and then you'd change it and use the other one and use it until it stopped working. And then you'd go back to the first one again."

Figure 6  
 “Super Ink”. Film still by  
 Alyssa Grossman (2011).



“You know,” Dan said, “they talk about how capitalism is now such a consumer society. But if you think about all the things that were uselessly consumed back then...”

The conversation then led to a discussion about the strange chemical pencils that had been common for a while during the 1980s, which held a special kind of purple ink rumored to be toxic. There were stories that women used these pencils to dye their hair violet, because of the lack of proper hair dye in the shops at the time. Dan and Dragoș recalled a certain Madam Focșăneanu who had had particularly memorable violet hair. “She was the Education Inspector,” their mother Maria said. “She knew our friend Nicolau, and that’s how she helped you both get places in kindergarten.” In 1969, she explained, Ceaușescu issued a decree whereby women under the age of 45 were no longer allowed contraception or abortions, resulting in a surge of birth rates and a consequent shortage of spaces in schools, as well as a high death rate from all the illegal abortions. “I’m a child of the decree, aren’t I?”, Dragoș said to his parents with a laugh. He and Dan recalled how they had to go to school in shifts throughout the day because all pupils could not fit into a single classroom. They talked about how they had to do their homework by candlelight because of the electricity cuts during that era. Ceaușescu was so obsessed with paying back foreign debts, Maria said, that he took extreme measures to “save money” at the Romanian people’s expense. Women had to get up at four in the morning to cook, she told me, because by the evening, there would be no gas left for the stoves. “It was just like



**Figure 7**  
Plastic pencil case.  
Film still by Alyssa  
Grossman (2011).

Doctor Zhivago,” said Dragoș. “You’d have to wear three sheepskin coats at home because it was so cold indoors.”

“Remember the *Adidași* and the *Frații Petreeruș*?”, said Liviu, their father. Everyone laughed. He explained that during the severe rationing period in the 1980s, when there was hardly any food in the shops, the only kind of meat you could find were pigs’ feet and scrawny chickens that came two to a bag. People called the pigs’ feet *Adidași*, after the German shoes they could never hope to have, and they named the chickens after a popular Romanian duo, the *Petreeruș Brothers*, folk musicians of that era. As Liviu explained, people also ironically referred to *tacâmuri*, the claws, throats and other chicken entrails that you could sometimes find in the shops, as *takimuri*, giving it a deliberately exotic and improbably Japanese sounding name. “We Romanians are inventive,” Dragoș said. “We’ll think of anything to get a laugh out of our own misfortune.”

This interview, which turned into a shared remembrance session within the family, invoked commonly held, stereotypical portrayals of Romanian communism, but also more personal and individualized impressions of the past. The donated inkwell and pencil case, objects that had not been given much consideration for over two decades, served as material gateways for fragmented, personal stories to fold into more predictable social narratives. Revisiting these disregarded household items also produced particularly vivid and emotional responses. Hearing the “click” of the coveted pencil case led to accounts of repressive political measures and economic shortages, but also stirred up memories of the importance of past social connections and economic relationships, as well as forgotten details of other mundane commodities that had once been ubiquitous in day-to-day

life. Handling the inkwell, finding its original price tag and STAS label stimulated conversations about the inadequacies of Romanian products, but also provoked descriptions of the existence of other goods, encounters, and experiences, ranging from dire to hilarious.

The fond and funny tone of some of Dan and Dragoș's memories was not explicitly connected to the communist regime itself, but rather to certain materialities and social dynamics associated with their childhood during that era. As Todorova writes (2010: 5), positive descriptions of the communist past should not be interpreted as an outright denial of its negative aspects, but rather as indications of what is often absent in the present. The resulting mixture of nostalgic and critical memories in this case were not indications of larger cultural confusions or uncertainties about the impact of communism on Romanians' lives, as many contemporary analyses might suggest. Nor did the Diojdescus' responses to their neglected objects betray any particular need to come to a set of conclusions about how to deal with or move on from this past. While reiterating certain well-known narratives about the oppressive aspects of Ceaușescu's regime, Dan and his family cast themselves as agents whose partial, unfinished, and emerging recollections continued to shape and feed into their present-day perspectives and relationships.

### CONCLUSIONS

This research suggests that remembering and forgetting need not be viewed as separate processes, but rather as overlapping facets of a single, broader phenomenon. While forgetting is often defined as the opposite of remembering, as a structural problem specific to the culture of modernity (Connerton 2009; see also Gross 2000; Huyssen 2003), disregarding or overlooking something may also serve, paradoxically, as an inadvertent act of preservation. When people reconnect with their discarded belongings, such instances may provoke them to consider these objects' connections to the past in ways that have not yet become part of their articulated or rehearsed repertoires of thought. By returning to and re-evaluating what they once had cast aside, my interlocutors voiced new, non-commemorative associations related both to their possessions and to their individual and collective pasts.

While many people's accounts echoed popular depictions of Romania's communist period, the involuntary memories emerging from these encounters were also idiosyncratic and multifaceted, evading depictions of a single, coherent, national experience. Instead of demonstrating full complicity with or total resistance against the system, their descriptions show how people managed to work around it, subtly challenge and at times simply disregard it. Such perspectives illustrate the complex ways in which memory may filter in and out of ideological rhetoric and personal experience, and cross between individual and collective domains. By

simultaneously referencing but also deviating from standardized cultural recitations (see Green 2012), the responses in my study reveal a dynamic blending and overlapping of the concepts of “communicative” and “cultural” memory, which Assmann delineates as distinct sub-categories of the larger phenomenon of collective memory (2008: 110).

According to Assmann (1995, 2008), cultural memory refers to a group’s official memory, which relies on specialized carriers such as museums, libraries, and other institutions of preservation. It spans multiple generations, referencing mythologized aspects of the distant past through formal and material symbols. Communicative memory, he argues, is more of an unofficial, non-specialized phenomenon. It incorporates recent, even autobiographical types of recollection, which are shared amongst contemporaries through everyday interaction and spontaneous discussion. While Assmann maintains that communicative and cultural forms of memory occur on a continuum, where living, embodied memories may eventually transform into more canonized, mediated forms of memory such as archives or monuments, my findings indicate that the boundaries between these categories are not always as distinct or separate as he describes. Blending together the ceremonial and the informal, the institutional and the personal, the operations of cultural and communicative memory can be seen here less as a linear continuum and more as a layered patchwork.

As Alan Confino writes (1997: 1395), “we should look for memory where it is implied rather than said, blurred rather than clear.” Returning to and reclaiming forgotten objects, rather than deliberately saved ones, offers an alternative means of accessing and giving voice to scattered memories, dreams, and desires. The methodological approach detailed earlier avoids the traps of searching for and explaining memory in the form of “ritualized remembrance,” which as Benjamin argues, provides a sense of “false symbolic closure” (Jay 2012: 17–18). While it is common for memory researchers to claim that people “always strive to come to terms with the past...to generate a sense of order in their personal and collective lives” (Bernhard and Kubik 2014: 2–3), there is much to be learned from exploring memories that do not revolve around the ordering of experience or laying the past to rest. According to Benjamin, the labyrinthine and messy process of rumination is preferable to the practice of commemoration, which by attempting to attribute a fixed meaning to the past blocks memory’s “capacity for endless interpolations into what has been” (Benjamin 1986: 16). As he writes, “fruitless searching” may be more insightful than attributing fixed significance to a particular memory; it is the brief moments of insight punctuated by discontinuities that give remembrance work its powerful and transformational qualities (Benjamin 1986: 28).

Through their spontaneous and fragmented operations, involuntary memories reveal what planned or intentional acts of remembrance

cannot, particularly because of the new, sensory understandings that surface when the “has been” suddenly encounters the “now” (Benjamin 1999: 462). Such experiences challenge an historicist “eternal image of the past” in favor of a more dialectical history that is “originary for every present” (Benjamin 2008: 119), reinforcing the understanding that memories are products of current social dynamics and political configurations more than settled perspectives of an established story. By forging new points of intersection between memory and forgetting, and precipitating material disruptions in space and time, the practice of revisiting neglected household objects opens new possibilities for inquiry into the associative, non-linear, inconclusive work of making sense of the past in a fluid and shifting present.

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