

# TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCES, PLACE ATTACHMENT, AND RESILIENCE IN THE CASE OF THE COMMUNIST/ SOVIET POLITICAL DEPORTATIONS\*

CLAUDIA-FLORENTINA DOBRE\*\*

ORCID 0009-0001-3327-1822

OANA-RAMONA ILOVAN\*\*\*

0000-0003-2075-1808

**Abstract:** The deportations to the Soviet Gulag and the “Romanian Siberia” have primarily been examined through the lenses of state repression and personal trauma, with a strong emphasis on collective and cultural memory. Our research builds on these perspectives, taking a step forward by corroborating the concepts of cultural trauma and place attachment to analyse the life narratives of deportees. This approach highlights the significance of both individual and collective agency in navigating the traumatic experiences associated with the Soviet Gulag and the Bărăgan deportations, as well as in redefining former deportees’ lives. Additionally, we explore how factors such as the natural and cultural environment, work, education, and community contribute to the development of new place attachments or the preservation of existing ones. Our findings reveal how former deportees utilise memory to articulate themes of injustice, hope, and adaptation amidst profound disruptions. This research not only offers fresh insights into the subject of deportations but also underscores the importance

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\*\* Ph.D., Habil., Scientific Researcher III at “Nicolae Iorga” Institute of History, Romanian Academy, 1 Aviatorilor Blvd., Bucharest 011851, Romania, e-mail: [cfdobre@gmail.com](mailto:cfdobre@gmail.com); <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6778-3466>

\*\*\* Ph.D., Habil., Associate Professor at Faculty of Geography, Department of Regional Geography and Territorial Planning, and Director of Territorial Identities and Development Research Centre, Babeș-Bolyai University, 5–7 Clinicilor St., Cluj-Napoca 400006, Romania, e-mail: [ana.ilovan@ubbcluj.ro](mailto:ana.ilovan@ubbcluj.ro); <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2075-1808>

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of incorporating the memory of these events into an official Romanian public policy on remembrance, thereby amplifying the voices of the former deportees who wish to share their experiences with future generations.

**Keywords:** Repression, Historical Trauma, Collective Memory, Testimonies, Place Identity Construction.

## INTRODUCTION INTO POLITICAL DEPORTATIONS AND PLACE ATTACHMENTS

Trauma, memory and place attachment studies are three distinct fields of scholarship which overlap in the case of political deportations. They have in common an interdisciplinary and qualitative approach to primary data, which are, in our specific case, testimonies of former victims of state repressive policies. These narratives are fashioned by the traumatic experiences lived by former deportees, but also by place attachment feelings, and resilience.

Trauma was defined as a cultural process, based on symbolisation, taking place “between the event, which has been traumatogenic for a community, and the establishment of its representation”.<sup>1</sup> It is the result of a dramatic event, a disruption in people’s lives.<sup>2</sup> Jeffrey C. Alexander argues that an event or historical period becomes traumatic depending on how it is publicly represented, encoded, and transmitted.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, cultural trauma plays an important role in making sense of a community’s past and providing explanations for its existence, and contributes to the creation of new collective representations of groups affected by traumatic events.<sup>4</sup>

Exploring the phenomenon of deportations to the Soviet Gulag and to the so-called ‘Romanian Siberia’ through the lenses of cultural trauma and place attachment represents a novel perspective that we have adopted in several recent publications.<sup>5</sup> Place attachment is seen as the positive emotional bond that people establish with places where they live or with places that matter for them, despite living somewhere else.<sup>6</sup> Based on this theoretical approach, the main question we

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<sup>1</sup> Elżbieta Hałas, “Time and Memory: A Cultural Perspective”, in *Trames*, 14, (4) (2010), 307. DOI: 10.3176/tr.2010.4.02

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>3</sup> Jeffrey C. Alexander, *Trauma. A Social Theory* (Cambridge Malden: Polity Press, 2012), 3–4.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, 6.

<sup>5</sup> Oana-Ramona Ilovan, Claudia-Florentina Dobre, Vasile Zotic, Adinel-Ciprian Dincă, “Recovering Place Attachment after Deportation? The Romanian Experiences Reflected in Oral and Written Cultural Heritage”, in *Transylvanian Review*, 33 (2024), Supplement 2 (Place, Culture and Legacy), 241–269; Oana-Ramona Ilovan, Claudia-Florentina Dobre, Vasile Zotic, “The Traumas of Bărăgan and Siberia: Identity, Place Attachment and Resilience in the Deportees’ Life Stories”, in *Balkanistic Worlds*, 2 (2025), 9–25. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15618959>

<sup>6</sup> Leila Scannell, Robert Gifford, “Defining Place Attachment: A Tripartite Organizing Framework”, in *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 30/1 (2010), 1–10.

aim to address in our study is whether emotional bonds to a place can develop in areas where traumatic events occur.

Previous empirical and theoretical insights into place attachment argue that a positive emotional link can be developed through daily interactions, towards one's house, neighbourhood, communities, rural and urban areas.<sup>7</sup> Places transform, their identity is processual, dynamic, subjective and experiential.<sup>8</sup> Places and their identities are part of people's identities,<sup>9</sup> who may feel attached or not to those places. Time and space are connected when analysing the identity of place. This identity is constructed through individuals' actions and interactions in a particular social context. In addition, place attachment is a concept that helps unpack the complexity of people's experiences and can enable a more refined understanding about the relationship between people and space during and after extreme situations, such as that of political deportation (*i.e.*, brutal communist repression through dislocation and relocation of people).

Because of a bias towards the urban, most of the research on place attachment considered cities and neighbourhoods (especially attachment in the form of residential satisfaction), while the rural areas got less attention. Therefore, our research contributes to filling in a gap research about place attachment in the rural area.

Understanding place attachment in resilient small rural communities is crucial for a sustainable development that capitalises on traumatic experiences. Place attachment is a resource for individual and settlement development, part of

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<sup>7</sup> Yi-Fu Tuan, *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perceptions, Attitudes, and Values* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1974); Irwin Altman, Setha M. Low (eds.), *Place Attachment* (New York and London: Plenum Press, 1992); Leila Scannell, Robert Gifford, "Defining Place Attachment: A Tripartite Organizing Framework", in *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 30/1 (2010), 1–10; Oana-Ramona Ilovan, Iwona Markuszewska, "Introduction: Place Attachment – Theory and Practice", in Oana-Ramona Ilovan and Iwona Markuszewska (eds.), *Preserving and Constructing Place Attachment in Europe* (Cham: Springer, 2022): GeoJournal Library, vol. 131, 1–29. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-09775-1\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-09775-1_1)

<sup>8</sup> Oana-Ramona Ilovan, Marinela Istrate, "Territorial Identities and Heritage. A Constructivist Approach", in *Journal of Settlements and Spatial Planning*. Special Issue, 7/1–4 (2021). DOI: 10.24193/JSSPSI.2021.7.01

<sup>9</sup> Richard C. Stedman, "Toward a Social Psychology of Place: Predicting Behavior from Place-based Cognitions, Attitude, and Identity", in *Environment and Behavior*, 34 (2002), 561–582. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013916502034005001>; Bernardo Hernández, M. Carmen Hidalgo, M. Esther Salazar-Laplace, Stephani Hess, "Place Attachment and Place Identity in Natives and Non-natives", in *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 27/4 (2007), 310–319. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvp.2007.06.003>; Oana-Ramona Ilovan, Ioana Scridon, Kinga Xénia Havadi-Nagy, Dănuț Huciu, "Tracing the Military Frontier District of Năsăud. Territorial Identity and Regional Development", in *Mitteilungen der Österreichischen Geographischen Gesellschaft*, 158 (2016), 215–244; Oana-Ramona Ilovan, Paul Mutică, "Advocacy for Territorial and People-centered Approaches to Development in Romania: Place Attachment Based on Industrial Heritage", in *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 27/5 (2024), 876–894. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13675494231192825>

the social heritage and identity of the respective communities. Acknowledging the complexity of this heritage can benefit public policies regarding the maintenance and promotion of the collective memory of those communities.

#### SELECTED CASE STUDIES OF COMMUNIST/SOVIET DEPORTATIONS AND METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES

Our case studies examine the 1941 deportation of Romanians from Northern Bukovina to the Soviet Gulag and the 1951 deportation of diverse ethnic groups holding Romanian citizenship from Banat and Western Oltenia to Bărăgan. In our research on Northern Bukovina we focused on the accounts of Anița (Nandriș) Cudla (1904–1986) from Mahala village, who was deported with her three sons; on those of Dumitru Nimigeanu (1906–1991) from Tereblecea village, who faced deportation alongside his wife and daughter; and on the accounts of Aurora Bujeniță (1936–2020), also from Mahala, who was four years old at the time of her deportation with her mother, brother, aunt, and grandmother. All these three individuals were peasants, and their stories were documented after the fall of communism in Romania. Anița Cudla wrote her memoirs during communism and sent them abroad, being firstly published in Romania in 1991.<sup>10</sup> Dumitru Nimigeanu published his memoirs in Paris in 1958, and later in Romania, in 1993.<sup>11</sup> Aurora Bujeniță shared her story through interviews in the post-communist period, preserved in various online formats, including video interviews produced by Compania de Stat de Televiziune și Radiodifuziune Cernăuți (2016), Trinitas TV (2017), and Agerpres (2018).<sup>12</sup>

As regards the deportation to Bărăgan, our study draws on 15 interviews conducted by Claudia-Florentina Dobre and Valeriu Antonovici between 2011 and 2014. These interviews involved deportees who remained in the Bărăgan region, specifically in Călărași and surrounding villages, as well as two former deportees who returned to their hometowns of Timișoara and Brașov. The narratives from

<sup>10</sup> Anița Cudla, *20 de ani în Siberia. Amintiri din viață* (20 Years in Siberia. Life Memories), 2nd edition (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2024).

<sup>11</sup> Dumitru Nimigeanu, *Însemnările unui țăran deportat din Bucovina* (The Memoirs of a Deported Peasant from Bukovina) (Paris: Fundația Regală Universitară Carol I, 1958; Timișoara: Editura de Vest, 1993). For our research, we used the 1958 edition.

<sup>12</sup> Compania de Stat de Televiziune și Radiodifuziune Cernăuți (2016), „Cireșe Amare” (*Film documentar despre suferințele victimelor deportărilor comuniste din #Mahala*) (“Bitter Cherries.” Documentary Film about the Sufferings of the Victims of Communist Deportations from #Mahala). Available at <https://youtu.be/iY9IHXdgc0U?si=LWLtGTqHX5N5Zu8Q> (Accessed 2nd April 2024); Trinitas TV (2017), *Aurora Bujeniță*. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xKrj8j12-u0> (Accessed 24th December 2024); Agerpres (2018), *Interviu. Aurora Bujeniță, povestea unei vieți trăite după șase ani de deportare în Siberia* (Interview. Aurora Bujeniță, the Story of a Life Lived after Six Years of Deportation to Siberia). Available at <https://youtu.be/nshLQh5RiIw?si=fb8QrR9GUQGh7YpQ> (Accessed 2nd April 2024).

these interviews were compiled and published in the book *Deportați în Bărăgan. Amintiri din Siberia românească* (Deportees to Bărăgan. Memories from the Romanian Siberia), with the first edition released in 2016<sup>13</sup> and a revised and expanded second edition set for 2024.<sup>14</sup>

Concerning the data analysis and interpretation, we performed text-oriented analysis, namely thematic content analysis, narrative analysis (paying attention to how stories construct and contribute to understanding the world), focusing on how narratives shape identities, traumatic experiences, and understanding of events.

“YOU CAN’T LEAVE US HERE IN THE FIELD!”  
THE ENEMY WITHIN? THE HARSH NATURAL ENVIRONMENT  
AND PLACE ATTACHMENT

Deportation and its extreme manifestations are profoundly related to space and its features. Through deportation, both individual and group existence are disrupted. First, the meanings of home places were disrupted through drastic changes in communities’ life. Then, the indelible traces of the terrible event of deportation are closely connected to people’s experience of the deportation space, because space was intentionally chosen by authorities to negatively impact their lives as deportees. The harsh living environment contributes to the generation of trauma and traumatic memories about space. For deportees, the chosen natural settings hardly supported human functioning as they knew it. The shocking, atrocious and horrific first meeting with their deportation space is represented through powerful painful memories.

At first, for all of them tangible reality was horrific in deportation. In a hostile natural environment, place attachment is especially produced with difficulty for newcomers, such as the deportees. They developed fears related to that space, perceived as a harsh and insecure one. Their deportation to the east was often followed by death, in which the natural environment played a role, therefore it was perceived as a fierce enemy.

Then, for deportees, adjusting to a whole different natural environment resulted in surviving. Life stories display old place attachments (for Northern Bukovina) and new place attachments (for Bărăgan) as part of the framework

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<sup>13</sup> Valeriu Antonovici, Claudia-Florentina Dobre (eds.), *Deportați în Bărăgan. Amintiri din Siberia românească* (Deported to Bărăgan. Memories from the Romanian Siberia), 1st edition, bilingual Romanian-English (Oradea: Editura Ratio et Revelatio, 2016).

<sup>14</sup> Valeriu Antonovici, Claudia-Florentina Dobre (eds.), *Deportați în Bărăgan. Amintiri din Siberia românească* (Deported to Bărăgan. Memories from the Romanian Siberia), 2nd edition (Târgoviște: Editura Cetatea de Scaun, 2024) (further cited as V. Antonovici, C.-F. Dobre (eds.), *Deportați în Bărăgan*).

of deportees' resilience. We see how non-places (in the Soviet Gulag) and new (although today non-existing) places (in Bărăgan) are subjectively constructed by deportees based on their memories and the experience of deportation trauma. Thus, one can understand how the deportation space becomes home for some in Bărăgan area or is resisted by the deportees in the cold regions of Siberia, Kazakhstan, and the Polar Circle.

For those in the Soviet Russia, the space of deportation is perceived and represented as a transitory non-place. The deportation space acted as a huge prison, as deportees were not allowed to leave or distance themselves more than a few kilometres. Movement was important, it meant freedom or the lack of it. At the same time, through movement, although limited, deportees could gain a sense of the new place. No comfort, confidence or hope could be gained from those spaces in the Soviet Union. Individuals' daily life, especially in the case of Kazakhstan and the Polar Circle, is experienced as a form of torture, designed like that in communist prisons of the period, to annihilate deportees' will and any capacity to act individually.<sup>15</sup>

For both Anița Cudla and Dumitru Nimigeanu, the space of deportation in Siberia, Kazakhstan, and the Polar Circle is one of anxiety and haunting fear; it is represented in a recollection of bad situations. A permanent state of anxiety in Siberia, Kazakhstan and the Polar Circle make Anița Cudla and Dumitru Nimigeanu represent the environment as spaces of suffering, not at all as places of attachment.

Familiarity with place and related attachment are constructed through the practices of daily life. This obviously happened also in the places of deportation. However, political, harsh geographical circumstances and social and economic ones prevented these deportees to the Soviet Union (Anița Cudla, Dumitru Nimigeanu, and Aurora Bujeniță) to develop attachment to their deportation spaces, and also triggered more recollections of former home places where life was comfortable, where the community manifested solidarity and similar social identity, and the climate was milder.

The natural environment made the deportation area a hostile space to live in. The significance of the natural landscape is very high in the formation of place attachment, and first of all in transforming the respective new space into a place. The landscape is one of death and trauma, featuring the apocalyptic images of an unfamiliar and unfriendly environment. Deportees experience homesickness, but their new and intense horrific situation prevents them to linger on that feeling. Their fear of the new unfamiliar surroundings is connected to feelings of alienation and to

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<sup>15</sup> Dumitru Nimigeanu, *op. cit.*, 23–156; Claudia-Florentina Dobre, "Uses and Misuses of Memory: Dealing with Communist Past in Postcommunist Bulgaria and Romania", in Małgorzata Pakier, Joanna Wawrzyniak (eds.), *European Memory: Eastern Perspectives*, series Studies in Contemporary European History (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2015), 299–316; Anița Cudla, *op. cit.*, 31–190.

the terror and surprise of realising the need to adjust to a severe natural landscape. Thus, space is a dynamic force<sup>16</sup> that shapes their lives in unimaginable ways. However, their immersion in that space of deportation is above all violent and thus positive bonds with it are not created. In addition, in Siberia, Kazakhstan and at the Polar Circle, deportees perceived as hostile both the new natural and social spaces. Lack of meaningful social bonds, except with few of the other deportees, makes it hard for them to form any ties with places, where an overarching aim was survival.

The deportees to Siberia, Kazakhstan and the Polar Circle constantly dissociate themselves from those deportation spaces where their need for shelter and food was indefinitely denied:

“... We managed to tame our hunger as much as we could, but the body didn’t have any kind of vitamin anymore, because now several years had passed and we had not seen fresh vegetables or fruit [...] and even if it had been on a more solid road, you could go better, but on the tundra there was moss, and it was soft. When you stepped you would sink almost to your knees and it was very difficult to walk, pulling your legs up like that all the time. Apart from that, you also encountered swamps and puddles; on that you had nowhere to go around, you had to crawl through them and get well wet. I sat like this all day and gathered fruit until I filled the buckets, one on my back and another in my hand. [...] it was very difficult to return. Tired because of the difficult trip, hungry, weak, one could barely walk through the moss, and we also had full buckets”.<sup>17</sup>

“All my three boys worked, you could buy as much bread as you needed, but we were really tired of the empty places. Summer lasted only 3 months. During this time, it was a little warm, but you could not enjoy the warmth, because the mosquitoes were sucking all your blood”.<sup>18</sup>

Their powerlessness in the deportation space of Siberia, Kazakhstan or at the Polar Circle, prevents them from any positive bond with the respective non-places. Space is repulsive, harsh, and dangerous. There deportees are constantly fearful and anxious. In their new horrible reality of deportation, old place attachments meant stability and psychological comfort and security. Remembering (home)place helps strengthening the connection with their past life and the hope of returning. Place attachment is knowledge (cognitive and affective) about their past, that they represent through their discourse about deportation and trauma. Place attachment is also heritage they carry with them.

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<sup>16</sup> Naghmezh Fazlzadeh, Nasser Motallebzadeh, Nasser Dashtpeyma, “Fear of Displacement: Disruption in Place Attachment in Don DeLillo’s *White House*”, in *Anafora*, 8/1 (2021), 163–186. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.29162/ANAFORA.v8i1.9>

<sup>17</sup> Anița Cudla, *op. cit.*, 139–142.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*, 171.

Anița Cudla wrote that she felt homesickness for the family and places left behind. She kept on identifying herself with her house and village in Northern Bukovina. She re-composed through writing the places of her past and we see how old attachments resisted critical periods and situations. Through recollecting the past, present and future needs are reconciled in her case.

Northern Bukovinians' old place attachment is a relevant player in their microcosm of daily life, maintaining deportees' capacity for resistance of resilience and hope. It changes throughout time due to a mechanism of comparing and thus contrasting home (in Northern Bukovina) and the spaces of deportation.

Concerning the deportation to Bărăgan, initially the environment was also perceived by deportees as harsh from their very arrival moment as they were deported from their mild, Mediterranean type of climate in the dusty, windy and arid steppe of southeastern Romania.

“For a whole winter this Bărăgan wind was blowing, and when the blizzard came it was terrible to live”.<sup>19</sup>

“We were there during the winter of '54 when the snow was as high as the house and dad had to make a tunnel through the snow so we could get out on the roof”.<sup>20</sup>

Their difficult and unexpected arrival to Bărăgan where they were dropped in open field leave them in anguish and fear, this contributing to their rejection of the new place:

“They had no idea what Bărăgan meant [...] And they took them to the middle of the field, where they told them: «This is your house!» You can tell... they were disoriented... They said they slept in the closet. It was so hot, without a tree, without anything... It was terrible! They were unused to that [...] They had to dig their hovels in the ground, because they had nowhere to stay”.<sup>21</sup>

“My mother realised, even though it was night, that we were in the middle of the field, and she said to him: ‘You can't leave us here in the field.’ The sky was above, and the wheat stubble was below, and he said to us: «Live here!»”<sup>22</sup>

“I remember that they brought us with luggage with everything there, they left us in a field. And the clover was so big that we children couldn't even see each other”.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Aneta Minge (Udrea), in V. Antonovici, C.-F. Dobre (eds.), *Deportații în Bărăgan*, 159.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*, 160.

<sup>21</sup> Monica Bocșa (Constantinescu), in V. Antonovici, C.-F. Dobre (eds.), *Deportații în Bărăgan*, 97.

<sup>22</sup> Leonid Galațchi, in V. Antonovici, C.-F. Dobre (eds.), *Deportații în Bărăgan*, 106.

<sup>23</sup> Daria Gogu (Andronache), in V. Antonovici, C.-F. Dobre (eds.), *Deportații în Bărăgan*, 184.

The initial experience of the Bărăgan deportees was marked by a harsh physical environment compounded by political repression, leading them to view their new surroundings as unwelcoming and alien. They faced constant surveillance, lacked essential living conditions such as access to fresh water, food, and adequate shelter, and were compelled to labour in the construction of new villages. For instance, the deportees had to walk a few km daily to reach the nearest water source (*i.e.*, the Borcea river branch, the lakes, and fountains of the locals). The burden was especially harsh for the children who were sent to bring water to their homes.

“The people were so troubled that death was seen as a solution. There was not a dog in the whole village because the people had nothing to eat, so they had nothing to feed the animals”.<sup>24</sup>

“He [father] made a kind of tent for us to shelter in because there was no tree, no weed, nothing, it was just stubble”.<sup>25</sup>

“It was a stake that symbolised the house, the land, the surface of the land and our future. There was a number on that stake, just as the prisoners wore a number, so the deportees had a house number”.<sup>26</sup>

“The settlement of Roseții Noi was created by us. They left us in the field, in the wheat field”.<sup>27</sup>

“We built that hut, but the cold was coming, and we were forced to make hovels”.<sup>28</sup>

“We dug holes in the yard, made wells. With the soil we took out of the well, we started making adobe”.<sup>29</sup>

“The village was heavily guarded; we were not allowed to leave the village. There was also an observer. ... A wooden skeleton, I think it was made of wood, ... where there was always a soldier with a gun, guarding the village and we couldn't go out”.<sup>30</sup>

“During the five years of mandatory residence, we were not allowed to go outside a radius of more than 10 km. The call was made in the morning and

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<sup>24</sup> Leonid Galațchi, in V. Antonovici, C.-F. Dobre (eds.), *Deportații în Bărăgan*, 110.

<sup>25</sup> Daria Gogu (Andronache), in V. Antonovici, C.-F. Dobre (eds.), *Deportații în Bărăgan*, 173.

<sup>26</sup> Valeriu Sârbu, in V. Antonovici, C.-F. Dobre (eds.), *Deportații în Bărăgan*, 195.

<sup>27</sup> Victor Gaidamut, in V. Antonovici, C.-F. Dobre (eds.), *Deportații în Bărăgan*, 87.

<sup>28</sup> Leonid Galațchi, in V. Antonovici, C.-F. Dobre (eds.), *Deportații în Bărăgan*, 107.

<sup>29</sup> Franz Dunaenco, in V. Antonovici, C.-F. Dobre (eds.), *Deportații în Bărăgan*, 135.

<sup>30</sup> Marcela Burlacu (Bent), in V. Antonovici, C.-F. Dobre (eds.), *Deportații în Bărăgan*, 119.

in the evening. [...] so that you would not have time to run away. There were German families who could not resist. On the margins of the village there was a German, a German woman with cut veins, she couldn't resist..."<sup>31</sup>

**“WE HAD TO DO HARD LABOUR AND THEN GO TO SCHOOL”.  
AGENCY AND RESILIENCE THROUGH WORK AND EDUCATION  
AND THEIR ROLE IN PLACE ATTACHMENT**

Agency in deportation is an individual feature that was exercised to the extreme by deportees. This agency either contributed to constructing their connection to the new space or to preserving the former attachment to home, by being aware of the contrast between the traumatic present and an idealised or better past, between the purpose and productivity of their work then and before. Personal agency not only built resilience but reflected the deportees' dynamic place attachment through work, education, family values and communal solidarity.

For instance, Anița Cudla, the deportee of Northern Bukovina, very much cares about solving day to day problems (cold, hunger, disease) that affected herself and her sons during deportation. This was a successful coping strategy that kept her alert against the horror of deportation. Female and male agency had one main purpose: to save the family, especially children. Sustained work also helped them survive in the harsh conditions of the deportations.

Work also helped the Bukovinians to adapt upon returning home from the Gulag. In Northern Bukovina, work was a key value; it stayed at the basis of all achievements. On return from the deportation space to Bukovina, Anița Cudla testifies about former deportees' agency through physical and social (re)construction of the home place. Place attachment-based strategies to manage crisis situations consist of the development of problem focused coping strategies through personal engagement:

“Then the middle boy, Vasile, answers us and says: I see that the snout is getting closer to the fingers and there is no escape; I'm going back to the North, there I know the work and I'm going to work and the money I earn I'll send them here to you to be used for expenses, until we can build our house”.<sup>32</sup>

In Bărăgan, there were frequent proofs of individual agency in placemaking and place attachment construction in deportation through work:

“I learned to make fences at the age of 7, from sunflower sticks, to surround the house and make it beautiful”.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Greta Donțu (Anghelache), in V. Antonovici, C.-F. Dobre (eds.), *Deportați în Bărăgan*, 142.

<sup>32</sup> Anița Cudla, *op. cit.*, 185.

<sup>33</sup> Aneta Mingea (Udrea), in V. Antonovici, C.-F. Dobre (eds.), *Deportați în Bărăgan*, 160.

“During this time, we were put to work. We would go to work on Monday and come home on Saturday”.<sup>34</sup>

“You realise what it means in October to knead the earth with straw with your feet! It was already cold, and we children were helping to make adobe. This is how the house was built until late in November. And the house was already very wet, it didn’t have time to dry, there was a lot of moisture from the humidity. We didn’t have wood to make a fire, so we collected cobs left over from cutting corn, sunflower stalks or straw”.<sup>35</sup>

“I was 5–6 years old, and my father had to send me to work in the vineyard... It wasn’t just me, all the children in the village worked”.<sup>36</sup>

Work was also used by the communist authorities to exert control over people. Therefore, the resistance to the regime manifests itself through people’s evasion from official time (*i.e.*, avoiding certain jobs). An act of agency, that risk could have been lethal in deportation.

“We had to do hard labour and then go to school. During the holidays it was impossible to stay at home. Always, from the first day of vacation to the last day, we were forced to go to farm work”.<sup>37</sup>

“I missed my parents the most. I had very little of them because they left in the morning at dawn when it was light and came back in the evening, broken from fatigue; they had no time for me. I remember that once a week my mother was allowed to stay at home for half a day to do various household chores, wash, cook, otherwise they were obliged to go to work every day. Sundays not so much. Not always.”<sup>38</sup>

Agency through work manifested also when deciding to stay in the deportation space (of Bărăgan):

“My parents stayed there and worked, cultivated corn. Then they managed to buy a house in Călărași”.<sup>39</sup>

In the “Romanian Siberia”, education was perceived as a means to escape and build a better life, and an instrument enabling agency:

<sup>34</sup> Leonid Galațchi, in V. Antonovici, C.-F. Dobre (eds.), *Deportați în Bărăgan*, 106.

<sup>35</sup> Marcela Burlacu (Bent), in V. Antonovici, C.-F. Dobre (eds.), *Deportați în Bărăgan*, 118.

<sup>36</sup> Domnica Malofei (Marin), in V. Antonovici, C.-F. Dobre (eds.), *Deportați în Bărăgan*, 181–204, 187.

<sup>37</sup> Franz Dunaenco, in V. Antonovici, C.-F. Dobre (eds.), *Deportați în Bărăgan*, 129–38, 136.

<sup>38</sup> Aneta Mîngea (Udrea), in V. Antonovici, C.-F. Dobre (eds.), *Deportați în Bărăgan*, 159–160.

<sup>39</sup> Marcela Burlacu (Bent), in V. Antonovici, C.-F. Dobre (eds.), *Deportați în Bărăgan*, 121.

“I learned like crazy, my father and mother told us «Learn because this is your salvation: education!»”<sup>40</sup>

“It was important for me to feel good, to read. If I immersed myself in reading, I was no longer interested in anything on this earth.”<sup>41</sup>

The narratives of the deportees show that agency might be essential in creating the attachment to places. This attachment is supported by spatial and cultural similarities between home places and the deportation space, and on values such as work, family, and humanity. A pleasurable experience of space constructs place and place attachment. Furthermore, sustained hope fed into individual agency aimed to ensure survival and eventually produced resilience. Therefore, we concluded that, although trying to colonise deportees’ daily life, the communist political system and its structures failed due to individual agency supported by hope for the better, and sustained work as a powerful strategy of survival and resilience.

#### BROKEN COMMUNITY STRUCTURES, NEW BONDS AND ATTACHMENT TO PLACES

Cultural similarities and/or differences between home and the deportation spaces matter for place attachment construction. Constantly feeling as Other in a foreign country strengthened Bukovinian deportees’ feeling of belonging to the Romanian culture. A key difference between Siberia, Kazakhstan, the Arctic Circle deportees and Bărăgan deportees consisted of the lack of or inadequate language skills and the culture shocks of those deported to the Soviet Gulag. There, they lost the familiar community structures, their customs and habits. Anița Cudla emphasizes the differences when describing the people living at the Arctic Circle:

“Only some wild people lived there, who fed on raw meat, raw fish, drank deer blood, dressed in deer skins, they didn’t know any other clothing”.<sup>42</sup>

Moreover, Northern Bukovinian deportees felt like strangers in the deportation space also from a cultural point of view. Both the physical and social qualities of space were equally repulsive. Anița Cudla describes one experience as the most terrifying moment of her life, when she travels with a local from the Polar Circle, for her imprisonment, as punishment for not having done her work when she was ill:

<sup>40</sup> Monica Malofei (Marin), in V. Antonovici, C.-F. Dobre (eds.), *Deportații în Bărăgan*, 187.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibidem*, 199.

<sup>42</sup> Anița Cudla, *op. cit.*, 176.

“So much horror, fear and suffering, as I had on that road [to be imprisoned, while traveling with a local], I have never had before”.<sup>43</sup>

Her alienation or detachment is a failed attachment to place. In deportation, the only feelings of cohesion she experiences with the other deportees are based on their ethnic origin (*i.e.*, Romanians) and, if not, then based on their sheer humanity.

In Bărăgan, the deportees were able to recreate the broken community structures. Due to the familiar cultural context, the presence of former neighbours or people they knew, less violent natural and social environment than in the Soviet Union, some of the deportees in Bărăgan were able to have less difficulty finding meaningful relationships and bonds in general:

“For example, on our street, we and the family we were friends with were strangers, on the other side there were only relatives, old people with children, with grandchildren”.<sup>44</sup>

The social cultural context of the two deportation spaces is different and pivotal because of this difference. The sociocultural setting of Bărăgan was more familiar to deportees, in contrast to the experiences of those deported to the Soviet Union.

Based on the comparison of deportees’ testimonies, for Soviet Union deportees, the deportation space is one of pain and trauma solely. The activities that give meaning to the places of their deportation are related to pain, distress, anxiety, more so than in the case of Bărăgan. Individual, family and community could be nurtured in Bărăgan as opposed to Siberia, Kazakhstan, and the Arctic Circle spaces.

Anița Cudla, Dumitru Nimigeanu and Aurora Bujeniță knew how to cope with the threat of deportation as the villages of Mahala and Tereblecea were in a frontier risky area, uncertainty about future being continuous in their lives during the war. The likelihood of war or deportation were constants of their lives. However, when they were removed from their native settlements, they experienced anxiety, fear and pain which hindered place attachment to the new forcibly imposed homeland.

At the same time, many Bărăgan deportees had a previous experience of relocating from Bessarabia, Northern Bukovina and other regions to Banat and Western Oltenia from where they were eventually deported to Bărăgan. Therefore, the memory of deportation is a mixed one, suffering met nostalgia which enabled the creation of new bonds with their relocation space.

In deportation, places are actively re-experienced through memory – nostalgia. For both Anița Cudla and Dumitru Nimigeanu, nostalgia brings about

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<sup>43</sup> Anița Cudla, *op. cit.*, 155.

<sup>44</sup> Monica Malofei (Marin), in V. Antonovici, C.-F. Dobre (eds.), *Deportați în Bărăgan*, 195.

feelings of their old place attachment during and after deportation. This attachment is solely directed to their homes, and at different spatial levels (house, village, region, and nation). Northern Bukovina and Romania are the homeland (because inhabitants had been deported to a foreign country).

In this specific case, the memory is an ally to deportees, it helps them to maintain their identity and their wish to find their way back home. Dumitru Nimigeanu remembers a discussion with a local of Siberia and his hope to return home:

“... I also made a request to move back home, as a ‘Moldovan’ from the ‘Republika Moldavskaia’ (because that’s what they call Bessarabia and Northern Bucovina now), wanting to be with several ‘Moldovans’ in one place”.<sup>45</sup>

In the case of the Bukovinians, returning to the homeland was a means of survival and a source of renewal:

“Since I began to receive letters from my dear brothers, it seemed to me that I had risen from the dead. Since they snatched us from our nest, and until I found myself with my brothers, I thought I was lost forever, to such a great distance and desolation we were taken”.<sup>46</sup>

“When the boys came from sea fishing, I told them that I would very much like to see the place where I was born”.<sup>47</sup>

The new space, that of deportation, could not replace the old place attachments or add to them in any useful way, except reinforcing old attachments because of the harsh physical and social environments. The birthplace and region defined deportees’ identity. Their allegiance to the past engendered lack of commitment to present and any future in deportation, as they could identify no meaningful experiences to improve their status. Therefore, the three deportees to the Soviet Gulag focus merely on narrating about an ongoing existential threat. Their narratives are built on memories of fear, insecurity, despair and sometimes complete powerlessness. All this dominated their stories.

In the case of Bărăgan deportees, nostalgia appears after the end of the deportation; it was directed to the disappeared villages and houses they erected. Remembering those disappeared places with love and nostalgia, while actualising trauma, enabled healing as well:

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<sup>45</sup> Dumitru Nimigeanu, *op. cit.*, 147.

<sup>46</sup> Anița Cudla, *op. cit.*, 175.

<sup>47</sup> Anița Cudla, *op. cit.*, 178.

“I look with pain ... with tears and with nostalgia at the place where the village was... I’m telling you, to this day I’d be able to locate the street and maybe even the house where I lived. They made a documentary some time ago and I was with my father – he lived to the age of 94, he was old but he remembered it perfectly – and when I went there my father showed me: «This is exactly where the street was, this is where the house was!» If I went there again, I think I would relive, with tears in my eyes, all I suffered there, particularly that first night I spent on the suitcase, in my mother’s arms, out in the open...”.<sup>48</sup>

“I wish I could go to the village where I grew up. I’d like to see the grass around the house, I’d like to see the trees that mom and dad planted. The acacias that surrounded that whole big yard. I miss the flowers that, with the help of some German neighbours – they really loved flowers and gardening in general – we planted in front of the house”.<sup>49</sup>

In Bărăgan, the cultural and religious background was similar to that of home, although deportees had diverse ethnicities and religions. Religion fostered connections within the small community of the village and a sense of belonging. Furthermore, social activities such as playing football, organising balls and other social gatherings gave them a sense of togetherness and built social capital in deportation:

“We also had a football team. People had organised themselves. They had also set up a church, out of a house. The priest was also a deportee”.<sup>50</sup>

The Bărăgan deportation, despite evoking feelings of nostalgia, remained a profound source of trauma:

“One time, at the train station in Timișoara, to get a ticket I had to fill in those coupons we get, and the lady at the counter told me some really harsh things – ‘You have so many benefits, I have no idea why’ I told her: ‘Don’t forget I had a childhood which could hardly be called a childhood, maybe it’s compensation of sorts, for how I lived’”.<sup>51</sup>

“If I were to go to that place again, I think I would relive with tears in my eyes everything I suffered there, and especially the first night when I sat on the suitcase, in my mother’s arms, under the open sky”.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Marcela Burlacu (Bent), in V. Antonovici, C.-F. Dobre (eds.), *Deportații în Bărăgan*, 125–126.

<sup>49</sup> Aneta Mîngea (Udrea), in V. Antonovici, C.-F. Dobre (eds.), *Deportații în Bărăgan*, 156.

<sup>50</sup> Victor Gaidamut, in V. Antonovici, C.-F. Dobre (eds.), *Deportații în Bărăgan*, 87.

<sup>51</sup> Aneta Mîngea (Udrea), in V. Antonovici, C.-F. Dobre (eds.), *Deportații în Bărăgan*, 161–162.

<sup>52</sup> Marcela Burlacu (Bent), in V. Antonovici, C.-F. Dobre (eds.), *Deportații în Bărăgan*, 126.

However, this suffering built resilience and enabled the deportees to succeed in life:

“But these sufferings strengthened me. I am very energetic, although quite sickly, maybe the life in Bărăgan from my childhood left its mark on my health. But I am a very energetic, strong, enterprising nature. I was hardened by all the sufferings of deportation. And not only me, others too. We were strong and we resisted. I made it in life”.<sup>53</sup>

Perceptions of the past are quite nuanced in the case of the Bărăgan deportees. Despite nostalgic feelings, there is a general agreement that there were hard times, when people tried to construct a sense of normality under extreme repressive conditions. Former Bărăgan deportees acknowledge this:

“Then came the winters, hard times came”.<sup>54</sup>

“This is the memory of the deportation and of the compulsory residence, the hunger and the cold that I endured, because they could not buy us clothes as there was no money”.<sup>55</sup>

“Those were extremely difficult years; I almost don’t want to remember it anymore”.<sup>56</sup>

“I don’t want to think, God, what I’ve been through!”<sup>57</sup>

The deportees who remained in the deportation space or nearby (in Bărăgan) and those who left the Soviet deportation space for home (to Northern Bukovina) form an imagined community who shares many experiences and features. The local dimension of the traumatised past and cultural collective memory is connected to the village identity for those affected by deportation. In this context, trauma unites those who remained and those who were displaced. However, as most of the Bărăgan settlements were destroyed by the communist regime, or disappeared naturally, places of trauma could not and would not be embraced as part of the local identity during communism or even after the fall of this regime. The intentional destruction of deportation villages in Bărăgan, as in the case of destroyed village communities in Northern Bukovina, constitutes place-based wounds in the deportees’ lives.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibidem*, 124.

<sup>54</sup> Franz Dunaenco, in V. Antonovici, C.-F. Dobre (eds.), *Deportați în Bărăgan*, 135.

<sup>55</sup> Greta Donțu (Anghelache), in V. Antonovici, C.-F. Dobre (eds.), *Deportați în Bărăgan*, 143.

<sup>56</sup> Marcela Burlacu (Bent), in V. Antonovici, C.-F. Dobre (eds.), *Deportați în Bărăgan*, 115–28, 124.

<sup>57</sup> Epifan Gălan, in V. Antonovici, C.-F. Dobre (eds.), *Deportați în Bărăgan*, 147.

## DISCUSSING TRAUMA, RESILIENCE, AND PLACE ATTACHMENT IN DEPORTATION

The Bukovinians Anița Cudla, Dumitru Nimigeanu and Aurora Bujeniță describe their experiences of displacement, deportation, and return in terms of tragic, traumatic experiences. They narrate the horrors of deportation (forced labour, survival, illness and death under harsh environmental, political and social conditions), and the consequences of a haunting past related to deportation. For Bărăgan deportees, our research results show an affectively nuanced connection (from love to hate or mixed feelings) regarding the deportation space. Thus, place attachment is a sociocultural phenomenon, encompassing varied and sometimes contradicting emotions about places. Due to changes, the landscape of home, be it Northern Bukovina or Bărăgan, although one of rupture, is a dynamic source of identification rather than a container of such identification.<sup>58</sup>

By analysing the memorial discourse about repressive political dislocations, we find out about the complexity of individuals' relations to space and place, and the impact that these relationships of attachment or lack of it had on their life choices, and personal identity. Based on survivors' memories of past experiences (before, during, and after the deportation) and through the lens of place attachment, one can identify a history of emotions.<sup>59</sup> For deportees, the memory of place attachments is part of their identity.

Memory wounds are created by loss (which is experienced when leaving home or on their return, and through everything related to the enslavement of the deportees). In this context, place attachment is an active factor in the dynamic process of identity (re)construction and of imagined communities' construction at the regional level. The discursive practices of deportees – of those who returned to Northern Bukovina and who remained in Bărăgan – support this finding.

In our approach, we explored a focus on individual's agency to act independently of societal structures and the impact of these structures on individuals' lives.<sup>60</sup> Deportees speak about being victorious due to their agency, and surviving the communist system and its persecution. Place attachment, among other bonds and values, was a resource for and a result of their agency. Place attachment is a constant in deciding upon coping or protective strategies (e.g., to manage stress, to solve problems).<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Monica Iorio, Andrea Corsale, "Diaspora and Tourism: Transylvanian Saxons Visiting the Homeland", in *Tourism Geographies*, 15/2 (2013), 225. DOI: 10.1080/14616688.2012.647327

<sup>59</sup> Rob Boddice, *The History of Emotions* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018); Barbara H. Rosenwein, Riccardo Cristiani, *What is the History of Emotions?* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018).

<sup>60</sup> Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 29.

<sup>61</sup> Oscar Navarro, Diego Restrepo-Ochoa, Luz Adriana Muñoz-Duque, Katia Zapa-Perez, Denis Mercier, Ghazlane Fleury-Bahi, "Determinants of Coping Strategies in Two Types of Natural Hazards: Flash Floods and Coastal Flooding", in *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction*, 46 (2020), 101–514. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijdr.2020.101514>

Place identity and personal identity are continuously negotiated and feed into individual's place attachment. Negotiating these processes occurs between individual and communal or group features.<sup>62</sup> Through deportation, these features were under strain, people struggling to maintain anything that could help them adapt and hope. Place attachment to their homes and village life was a significant part of their resilience. It provided them with "a meaningful relationship to the world".<sup>63</sup>

They feel they have made history; because of their agency, the deportees were not and did not feel like mere victims of history. This perception and feeling were confirmed by both Northern Bukovina and Bărăgan deportees.

"But we have those anti-communist fighter certificates. [...] Perhaps the greatest satisfaction is that paper which is not worth money, but which is morally worth more than anything".<sup>64</sup>

Place attachment is manifested within a framework of power, but where individual's agency could not be eliminated. Agency and social structures construct the identity of both people and their places. According to Butler's perspective, agency should be understood "not only in terms of resistance to power relations but also the risks assumed by this resistance to domination".<sup>65</sup>

Past places are perpetually present through memories, where trauma has the function to contrast between past before and after deportation. Place attachment supports individuals' agency or capacity to act independently irrespective of any social constraints and more exactly place attachment recollection and construction is part of deportees' continuous struggle to maintain hope and individual agency and to resist oppression in order to survive. When resisting domination, despite the implementation of large and impactful structural changes from above, the role of individual's agency, within the context of strong or weak social capital – based on place attachment, work and family values – was decisive for individuals' and communities' resilience.

However, through remembering old places and affective bonds to them, deportees fight detachment in the home place which underwent community and place loss. Through recollections of trauma and place attachments, past is appropriated. Also, deportation trauma experiences impacted strongly post-deportation resettlement experiences.

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<sup>62</sup> Barbara B. Brown and Douglas D. Perkins, "Disruption in Place Attachment", in Irwin Altman & Setha M. Low (eds.), *Place Attachment* (New York and London: Plenum Press, 1992), 279–304, 280.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>64</sup> Florica Minodora Martin (Negru), in V. Antonovici, C.-F. Dobre (eds.), *Deportații în Bărăgan*, 219–44, 234.

<sup>65</sup> Judith Butler, *op. cit.*

As people accustomed to instability and war, living in a border area, or as people previously displaced (voluntarily or not in the case of refugees from Northern Bukovina and Bessarabia settled in Banat and then deported to Bărăgan), these deportees were not taking places for granted, they were aware of the benefits and costs of being in a certain place. Our results corroborate with previous research (on refugees and disaster studies) that place attachment can motivate return after displacement<sup>66</sup> even if the danger continues at home (communist regime dismantled communities), and also because, once exposed to such extreme violence, people tend to accept risk more easily.

#### POLICY IMPLICATIONS: STORIES ‘STICK’ FOR RESILIENCE CONSTRUCTION

The transmission of memory through testimonies helps dealing with traumatic past experiences. As an individual faculty, memory can enable the healing of individuals and entire communities through public display of recollections about traumatic events. In addition, awareness of the entire society helps with healing cultural historical trauma. Therefore, our research argues for a politics of memory developed around the concept of place attachment in times of crisis.

Dignity and acknowledgement are needed for deportees in Romania too, by including their experiences in school and university textbooks. Nowadays, these materials and other cultural texts rather ignore the subject of deportation. At present, confined to local or media transmission, deportation memory needs to be included in school and university education and in the official political discourse in order to shape policies that restore and turn to good account the respective individual and cultural memory.

Such research results are relevant for both policymakers, as this can help these experts think spatial politics in more inclusive ways, and lay people. The way former deportees recollect space and place offers new knowledge about the relationship between trauma and place attachment during and after periods of personal and community crisis. The appropriation of the deportees’ memory by present and future generations is not only an act of historical justice, but understanding their place attachment can bring valuable information to be used in actions that fight oblivion.

Another benefit of our research for policy actions refers to the generally recognised necessity to acknowledge the residents’ local knowledge, increase

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<sup>66</sup> Faten Ghosn, Tiffany S. Chu, Miranda Simon, Alex Braithwaite, Michael Frith, Joanna Jandali, “The Journey Home: Violence, Anchoring, and Refugee Decisions to Return”, in *American Political Science Review*, 115/3 (2021), 982–998. doi:10.1017/S0003055421000344

awareness and plan prevention actions concerning drastic changes in their lives, considering place attachment a resilience determinant for individuals and communities. It can help strengthen individuals' involvement in participatory processes in order to recover.<sup>67</sup>

Remembering communism through people's stories of attachment to places can inform European memorial policies that hinder oblivion, raise awareness against political oppression, and contribute to the healing of individual and collective trauma. Analysing such memories sheds light on the long-term implications of the deportation experience at a personal level. It also shows the role of place attachment in individuals' coping with psychological distress.

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<sup>67</sup> Alex Greer, Sherri Brokopp Binder, Alexis Thiel, Mehdi Jamali, Ali Nejat, "Place Attachment in Disaster Studies: Measurement and the Case of the 2013 Moore Tornado", in *Population and Environment*, 41 (2020), 311. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11111-019-00332-7>