Storytelling and Agency: Place Attachment Bridging Past, Present and Future in Romanian Deportees' Memories

Oana-Ramona ILOVAN[1], Claudia-Florentina DOBRE[2], Vasile ZOTIC[*3], Adinel-Ciprian DINCĂ[4]
*Corresponding author

[1] Babeş-Bolyai University, Faculty of Geography, Department of Regional Geography and Territorial Planning, Territorial Identities and Development Research Centre, Cluj-Napoca, ROMANIA

[2] Romanian Academy, "Nicolae Iorga" Institute of History, Bucharest, ROMANIA

[3] Babeş-Bolyai University, Faculty of Geography, Department of Human Geography and Tourism, Centre for Research on Settlements and Urbanism, Cluj-Napoca, ROMANIA

[4] Babeş-Bolyai University, Faculty of History and Philosophy, Centre for Diplomatic and Medieval Documentary Palaeography, Cluj-Napoca, ROMANIA

✉ oana.ilovan@ubbcluj.ro 0000-0003-2075-1808
✉ cfdobre@iini.ro 0000-0001-6778-3466
✉ vasile.zotic@ubbcluj.ro 0000-0002-4489-0637
✉ adinel.dinca@ubbcluj.ro 0000-0001-5817-815X

A B S T R A C T

Political deportation is one instance that defines the memory of violence and trauma in post-socialist Romania. Building on experiences of the deportees to the Soviet Gulag (from Northern Bukovina, in 1941) and to Bărăgan region of Romania (from Banat and Western Oltenia, in 1951), our paper explores the connections between exposure to traumatic events (i.e., deportations) and place attachment (re)construction. Despite a shared sense of their vulnerability during deportation, some deportees survived its horrors and were able to narrate their experiences. Based on deportees' narratives of fear and survival, we investigate, through a qualitative methodology, the impact of exposure to structural violence and deportees' positive, negative and mixed emotions about places. The impact of the extreme and dramatic political events of deportations on people's cognitive and emotional bonds to places includes both the loss of place of residence and the construction of new people-place connections in deportation spaces. Findings show a strong relation between people and several values, together with related activities that are frequently mentioned in deportees' life histories: faith in God, family, socialising and leisure, freedom, patriotism, and political views. We concluded that valuing all this gives and maintains deportees' hope, which is a positive emotion that contributed to the (re)construction of people-place bonds during deportation and afterwards.

1. CONTEXT, RESEARCH AIM AND BRIEF REVIEW OF THE CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

A compatible historical methodology, aligned with Cultural Geography, is designed to explore how personal experiences and memories inscribe meaning onto places, particularly in the context of displacement, loss, or social upheaval. The complexities of these issues have seldom been explored, particularly regarding the interplay between place attachment and memory in

communist and post-communist Romania. Recently, research into trauma, spatial politics, and (post)memory has highlighted that the act of remembering is intricately linked to artefacts preserved by ancestors, visual representations like family photographs or YouTube videos, and the narratives that are handed down through generations. Additionally, interviews with individuals across different age groups have uncovered a collective "traumascape" that is deeply embedded in intergenerational memory (Văran and Crețan, 2018; Bora and Voiculescu, 2021; Ilovan et al., 2024).

Through a microhistorical approach, our study focuses on the nuanced and often overlooked experiences of individuals, positioning them as active agents rather than passive subjects of historical forces. Within this type of analysis, the emphasis is placed on the individual as a historical phenomenon, utilising the concept of agency "defined as one's ability to have some control over the social settings people are part of" (Magnússon, 2022a, p. 47). Through a method referred to as the "singularisation of history" (Magnússon, 2003), the specifics and intricacies of events and objects are examined in order to uncover significance within them, rather than in broader contexts. The intersection of private and public histories ultimately reveals how individuals assert their agency in the face of trauma and how their personal histories become embedded in places that hold symbolic and emotional significance (Gruner-Domić, 2024).

Drawing on legal records, letters, diaries, folklore, material culture, and oral traditions, Ginzburg's "clue method" (Ginzburg, 1989) interprets historical sources - often indirect or censored materials - as valuable traces that allow historians to reconstruct obscured or forgotten realities. Thus, critical inquiries arise when using microhistorical techniques to investigate place attachment in connection to political deportation (for methodological challenges on this topic from historical perspective, see also Steiner, 2007) under the communist regime in Romania, complementing the contexts highlighted by Environmental Psychology and Cultural Geography: What sources (memoirs, oral histories, recorded interviews, letters, official documents) reveal personal experiences of displacement and what methodological challenges arise in working with fragmented, subjective, or censored sources? (Kasemets and Palang, 2019); Did deportees maintain a sense of belonging to their native place despite the trauma of displacement? (Violi, 2017); Did they maintain traditions, dialects, religious practices, or local customs in their new settlements?

All these questions are justified considering that attachment towards a certain place or to a certain social group induces individuals' strong motivations to carry out actions through which they shape their personal space (household and land), as well as their communal space (the whole village, the church, the school, etc.). Place and group attachment thus become the drivers for establishing settlements, impacting language, material and immaterial culture, which eventually contribute to the cultural identity of human communities. In this context, the way individuals manage and succeed to maintain and (re)construct their place attachment, especially under new circumstances of terror and dehumanisation through deportation is a solid argument in assessing the power of place and social attachment to fight disruptions and build resilience.

Against this theoretical and methodological background, our research answers the question concerning the forming of place attachment in repressive contexts: in Siberia, Kazakhstan, and the Polar Circle, and in Bărăgan as deportation spaces. The research question addressed to our qualitative data enquires about the values and activities through which deportees (re)constructed their emotional bonds to meaningful locations in their lives. Thus, we focused on deportees' life histories, aiming to uncover the positive emotions that shaped their place attachment in repressive contexts (either their native areas or the traumascapes). Our investigation delves into the creation of place attachment following experiences of dispossession and displacement, emphasizing the role of memory in reconstructing the values and activities that foster positive emotions and connections between deportees and their environments. Therefore, this process of constructing bonds to places is investigated in relation to several personal and community values: faith in God, family, leisure, the Romanian nation and anti-communist political views.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. Case studies

The places of attachment that we explored are the home places of Northern Bukovina, and Bărăgan and the Soviet Union as deportation spaces (Fig. 1).
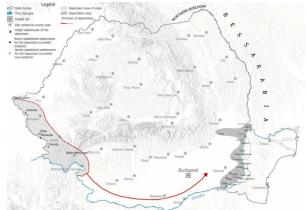

Fig. 1. Native places (Northern Bukovina, 1941, Banat and Western Oltenia, 1951), and Bărăgan deportation area (1951).

Before World War II, Northern Bukovina had a rich political and cultural life (Nistor, 1991). During the Middle Ages, it was a component of Moldavia and was inhabited mostly by Romanians. In 1775, the northern part of Bukovina was given to the Habsburg Empire by the Ottomans. During this period, it was colonised by Jews, Ruthenians, Germans, Hungarians, and other ethnic groups. However, Romanians constituted the majority of the population, who in 1918 decided to join the Kingdom of Romania. It became part of Greater Romania for the period between 1918 and 1940.

The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, through which the Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union agreed upon their spheres of influence, gave to the U.S.S.R. the impetus to occupy Northern Bukovina on June 28, 1940, although in violation of the provisions of the pact. Mass arrests were made by the Russians throughout the occupied territory (Creţu, 2010). Many Romanians were deported to the Soviet Gulag, men and women being deported separately, as a rule (Nimigeanu, 1958, p. 120). The new political regime drastically changed locals' lives. After a few months, Northern Bukovina was again included into Romania and remained part of the Romanian state up to 1944. Starting that year, Northern Bukovina was included into the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic (a communist state) until 1991, and since then it has remained part of Ukraine.

When the communists came to power on March 6, 1945, approximately 80% of Romanians were peasants. Most of them were poor or on the verge of poverty (Dobre, 2024, p. 13). They were attracted by communists through a series of social reforms and promises of a better life. The land reform of 1946 transformed poor peasants into landlords. Refugees from the lost Romanian territories of Bessarabia, Northern Bukovina, Southern Dobrogea also got land and houses in Banat and Western Oltenia area, which used to be inhabited by Germans, most of whom being deported to Siberia. Banat was a multi-cultural, border region which welcomed, besides Romanians and Romanian refugees, other citizens of Serbian, Croat, Hungarians, German, etc. origin. When the relationship with Tito's Yugoslavia became tensioned, in March 1951, the Romanian communists decided to deport the arbitrarily chosen "unfaithful" population from Banat and Oltenia regions to the south-eastern part of Romania, in Bărăgan.

The deportation started on the 18th of June 1951 and lasted several days. People were transported in cattle wagons, in various locations of Bărăgan region, where they were abandoned in the empty fields. However, they were surveyed by the State Police (RO: Miliţia) and the State Security, and they were not allowed to leave the area. In the subsequent months, they were forced to build their houses and all other buildings needed in the new villages. They lived there until 1955, when their compulsory domicile was lifted. Afterwards, most of them returned to their homes in Banat and Oltenia. Those who were refugees have remained in the Bărăgan area up to present.

2.2. Research data and methods

Through writing and oral storytelling, in order to make sense of what happened, the past is restored using memories (Ilovan et al., 2016). These memories and confessions are authentic documents with a therapeutic role for writers, interviewees and readers (Dobre, 2020, p. 1). In this process, past-presencing is also realised by means of recollecting place attachment instances and practices (Ilovan and Mutică, 2024). The recollective act is related to a present external reality, which is subjectively interpreted by the autobiography writers and interviewees.

For Northern Bukovina, we analysed the testimonies of Aniţa Cudla (b. 1904 – d. 1986, from Mahala village, deported with her three sons), Dumitru Nimigeanu (b. 1906 – d. 1991, from Tereblecea village, deported with his wife and daughter), and Aurora Bujeniţă (b. 1936 – d. 2020, from Mahala village, deported when four years old, together with her mother, brother, aunt, and grandmother). They were all peasants. Aniţa Cudla and Dumitru Nimigeanu, who experienced deportation as adults and parents, wrote their memoirs during the communist period but only Nimigeanu was able to publish it in 1958, in Paris, while Aniţa Cudla published her memoirs after the fall of communism, in 1991. Aurora Bujeniţă, a child during deportation, gives interviews during post-communism. Memory is also mediated online by videos with interviews of Aurora Bujeniţă (Compania de Stat de Televiziune şi Radiodifuziune Cernăuţi, 2016; Trinitas TV, 2017; Agerpres, 2018) and of Bărăgan former deportees, collected in a documentary available on YouTube (Antonovici and Dobre, 2013), and which was based on interviews later included in an edited book (Antonovici and Dobre, 2016, 2024).

Memory and the associated storytelling are self-referential processes (Dobre, 2015). Deportees' self-referential writing and oral storytelling are based on their deportation memory; therefore, we selected parts of their life-histories for narrative analysis and discourse analysis. This helped us gain insights into the construction of place attachment in connection to deportation. We considered the subjectiveness of individual memory. Language shapes this memory, which, especially in the case of recalling traumatic experiences, is sequential, often circular, never linear (Antonovici and Dobre, 2024, p. 69).

We therefore answer our research question based on respondents' testimonies. Deportees communicate in a vivid way their memories of deportation and related trauma. Interviews and written

texts are carriers of both individual and cultural memory. They produce this memory. These deportees are all survivors in a national crisis induced by criminal acts of the communist regimes: of the Soviet Union and of Romania.

We explore representations (i.e., written and oral texts) of deportees' connection to place. In order to investigate the experiences of attachment we used data about emotional bonds to the deportation space and to the home place. Sometimes the two spaces overlap. The life history method, a non-directive type of interview, was used for interviews. When focusing on the life histories former deportees told, we paid attention to their experiences and beliefs. Therefore, deportees' biographies are an analytical tool, where deportees' narrative schemas of presenting deportation experiences are respected by the interviewers. Deportees reminiscence over their experiences about childhood or adulthood in deportation. They discuss the sources of their distress and hope during deportation. Both families' and communities' violent or pleasurable experiences are described, but with a focus on the personal. A thematic analysis of our primary sources enabled us to identify several key ideas for the preservation and construction of place attachment, as we analysed their memories of political violence. In addition, we used photographs from deportees' personal archives or taken at memorial events related to deportation as these images contribute empirically to present the cultural and collective memory practices and instances.

Research so far proved that autobiographical and self-referential records serve as invaluable sources for microhistorical analysis by offering intimate insights into individual lives, emotions, and perspectives (Lepore, 2001; Banner, 2009; Magnússon, 2016, 2022b). Unlike official records or grand historical narratives, these personal documents capture the complexities of everyday experiences, allowing historians and human geographers to reconstruct how individuals navigated social, cultural, and political landscapes. They provide a unique lens for understanding agency, as they reveal how people perceived and responded to historical events.

Moreover, autobiographical sources are particularly useful in exploring themes like trauma, identity formation, and place attachment, as they document the ways individuals process and inscribe meaning onto their lived experiences (Magnússon, 2020). However, the caveat in this particular instance stems from the fact that the source material has been edited either for broadcasting or printing, most likely catering to the expectations of the audience. Furthermore, one should recognise the subtle differences between the formulary-based questionnaire specific to oral history methodology (Portelli, 1998; Abrams, 2010) and the techniques used for qualitative research: free association tasks, in-depth interviews, and verbal reports from focus groups (Lewicka, 2011). Last but not least, self-censoring, memory alterations and impaired processing are all deleterious psychological effects of trauma, and "narrative strategies of storytelling should be taken into account in any practical interventions that involves testimony about harm" (Hatavara and Presser, 2025, p. 1).

3. RESULTS

3.1. Deportation journeys

Fear, despair and hope are among the most frequently mentioned emotions by former deportees. They point out critical moments in their traumatic memory: fear of deportation when they were taken from their homes, the terrible journey to the deportation space in trains for animals, first seeing their deportation space, spending the first day and night there, the first winter under terrible living circumstances, people dying of cold and hunger, diseases, and their return home (for those who survived). During all this, acts of humanitarianism as well as of betrayal and the ubiquitous existence of traitors are leit motifs of their communist experiences as the former deportee Aurora Bujeniţă pointed out (Compania de Stat de Televiziune şi Radiodifuziune Cernăuţi, 2016).

Most of the deportees (either from Northern Bukovina or Banat and Western Oltenia) reported to have coped (or their parents did) with the fear of displacement. For instance, Aniţa Cudla's fear of displacement was only exceeded by the later trauma of deportation. She understood the dimension of her misfortune when she decided to remain in Northern Bukovina, letting go a good opportunity to flee to Romania. The legitimacy of the source – her husband – is high when Aniţa Cudla is convinced by him to remain in their village, in Northern Bukovina, against all odds:

> … he began to lament, that he had been four years in the World War and had suffered enough and if the war came again, with a lot of work and difficulty he had built his household and now he had only finished the household, everything was ready, only to live, and again to go out, to go! (Aniţa Cudla, 2024, p. 68).
> … I came on the wretched way, to home and wealth, which my husband was sorry to part with (Aniţa Cudla, 2024, p. 75).

Although risk was perceived as high, they decided not to leave due to all assets and work invested in that place. And also, to avoid being strangers somewhere else. They are representative of the Romanians who are fond of their land, of traditions, and have faith in God that all will be well in the end (Nistor, 1991). Also, higher place attachment downplays

risk, and such distorted perceptions of risk and safety may make people stay longer in potentially dangerous situations (Greer et al., 2020, p. 322). Thus, place attachment is a variable that affects risk perception and coping strategies (Navarro et al., 2020, p. 7), due to the subjectivity of this relationship. Spatial and temporal closeness to the loved place gives individuals a sense of power over their lives because they feel they control their living environment. Because place attachment shapes their adaptive behaviours and attitudes towards risks, it impacts people's resistance to move from the places they feel attached to (Navarro et al., 2020, p. 7). Despite the spatial and temporal closeness to war and possible displacement, the attachment to their place of residence was a personal and community value.

Living in a border area meant learning how to survive under unstable and insecure circumstances; war was normalised in daily life and also on special occasions:

> ... although it was wartime, people still prepared, as was the case back then, an oven of pies, roast meat (Aniţa Cudla, 2024, p. 36).
> ... they slaughtered and killed the cattle and people of the village, because bullets do not choose only soldiers (Aniţa Cudla, 2024, p. 43).

Also, a learnt adaptive strategy for people in the border area of Bukovina was to flee when Russian soldiers came. However, deportees' testimonies reveal that no preventive coping behaviours were efficient in the face of extreme risks because of these people's social vulnerability (i.e., inability to withstand adverse impact from political, social and economic factors):

> We stayed a few more days until the road cleared and we returned home again. My parents decided that they would no longer try to run, because they solved nothing, only struggled along the way (Aniţa Cudla, 2024, p. 39).

Nevertheless, both in Northern Bukovina and Banat or Western Oltenia, many were taken by surprise when they were forced to leave their households:

> You went to bed at night, but you weren't sure that you would wake up the next morning still there. When you went out in the morning in the village, it was impossible not to hear something new: last night, they arrested so-and-so, or so-and-so fled to Romania, or you'd see militia trucks driving from house to house, legitimising everyone. [...] At night, when the dogs barked, our hearts stopped beating (Dumitru Nimigeanu, 1958, pp. 42-43).
> Now everyone was worried, believing that it was their turn. [...] Our life was dark, because we could see the Siberian mist before us! (Dumitru Nimigeanu, 1958, pp. 55-56).
> Father got up early that morning as he had begun harvesting the barley, and prepared his wagon, horses, everything he needed to go to the barley harvest. When he went out to the gate, our gate was a big gate, he saw a sentry, a soldier from the Romanian army with a loaded machine gun. He summoned my father [...] The order was clear: 'Within 2 hours you must leave the house!' (Carl Franz Dunaenco, 2024, pp. 130-131).
> And at night, they came with armed soldiers to the gate. [...] I have the image of the dog howling in the backyard (Victor Gaidamut, 2024, p. 84).

All these people describe how they had waited for the disaster of deportation, not knowing when it happened and if it would affect them:

> ... a brother-in-law of the head of the Security in Timiş told him that they would be deported, and he would do well to go home. My parents thought of running away, they could only go through the cornfields, because the village was surrounded by military troops. But the grandparents said to stay united, so that they didn't remain alone. That evening they didn't go to bed, and our mother put us girls to bed dressed. They thought that if they deported us, at least we would have our clothes on. In the morning the soldiers came and told us that we were being deported (Florica Minodora Martin (Negru), 2024, pp. 220-221).
> They were not told where they were being taken. They were convinced that they were being taken to Russia. [...] it was impossible to find out where they were taken (Monica Bocşa (Constantinescu), 2024, p. 96).
> We didn't know where we were going. I thought they were taking us to Siberia, it was a big secret (Teofil Lupu, 2024, p. 164).

Not knowing their destination, the deportees from Banat and Western Oltenia experienced thus one major insecurity of their displacement:

> My mother told me: 'if we feel that they are taking us to Russia, we set fire to the wagon and run away!' That was terrible ... every time I think about it I feel like crying! (Victor Gaidamut, 2024, p. 85).

When realising they were not deported to the Soviet Union, but to Bărăgan area in Romania, many felt relieved:

> We were satisfied, we were saying: 'good thing we didn't end up in Siberia!' (Teofil Lupu, 2024, p. 164).
> I was two days old when I left Banat. My parents did not know where they would be sent and they were afraid of Siberia because those who remained in Bessarabia, who did not manage to escape, were taken to Siberia and, in most cases, never returned, or they came back without hands, without legs, crippled ... Fortunately, they were disembarked at the station in Perieţi, in Fundata (Greta Donţu (Anghelache), 2024, p. 141).

3.2. Meaningful connections and place attachment

3.2.1. Faith in God and place attachment

Faith in God is a healing and resilience element. Faith and place attachment intersect when deportees from Northern Bukovina reflect on what they call the sacred place of home. The church was a central place in the old village, like faith had a central place in their lives. The sacred land of home, of the region and nation are being missed:

> Stray village (Tereblecea) [Sat pribeag (Tereblecea)]: Among strangers… as among strangers!/You have no icons to worship!…/only in your language all the saints/know your nation…and parents (poem about Tereblecea, at the beginning of the village monography, revealing about the local territorial identity, in Crețu, 2010, unnumbered page).

Belief in divinity is crucial for individual resilience (cf. Conțiu, 2016, 2018); it creates new attachment or maintains old attachment (through rituals). Place attachment is sustained by individuals' spirituality that encompasses everything, even individuals' bond to their living environment. Place attachment or topophilia is a value at the individual level, as well as a community-based value. Topophilia is dependent on cultural values (i.e., faith in God) and economic ones (i.e., the land), which shape the identity of place (Ilovan and Istrate, 2021; Branda, 2022; Merciu et al., 2022):

> …1940, people were preparing to take to the woods, but they could not part with the land worked by them and all their ancestors (Dumitru Nimigeanu, 1958, p. 24).
> Poor people, they were crying that they would never see their holy land again, nor the graves of their parents (Dumitru Nimigeanu, 1958, p. 70).

For both the Soviet Union and Bărăgan deportees, their faith in God, that He will save them, that justice will come to the righteous, are unwavering beliefs. The deportation experience could not strip these people of their humanity. Their faith and human solidarity were the antidote for hate (Nandriș, 2024, p. 204). The humanistic frame of their experiences in deportation goes beyond any ideologies and faith prevents them from feeling completely detached and hopeless:

> … I was sitting sad, looking at my children and thinking only of God. And I prayed that He would give me the strength to withstand whatever came (Anița Cudla, 2024, p. 91).
> Mother said: 'don't cry. Make a cross with the tongue inside your mouth and it will be easier for you. God hears you, God sees you. He will not abandon us. He will get us out of here' (Aurora Bujeniță in Trinitas TV, 2017).

> God gave me strength, encouraged me in difficult moments. There, in Kazakhstan, I always prayed: 'Help me, God, to see my little girl, my parents, my house!' (Ileana Cojocaru in Crețu, 2010, p. 79).

> Work and faith in God. These two have always given me strength (Leon of Nicolae Cojocari in Crețu, 2010, p. 203).

> Most of the time, prayer was our only support and God our only hope and only help (Silvia Mudrei (Moldoveanu), 2024, p. 254).

> … people cried and prayed to God: 'Lord, save us from this misfortune that has befallen us!' Probably their prayer was answered because in the fall of 1955 we were set free (Leonid Galațchi, 2024, p. 110).

The connection between place and the ritual of death is recalled in the case of Northern Bukovina deportees, when they think of home or of their own death. They ponder about the sacrilege of being buried in foreign and strange land, with no Christian ritual:

> We looked at each other and thought, this is the end of us. However, I did not lose hope in God. We all prayed to God to give us strength and to help us with His power, so that we could overcome all the difficulties that stood against us, and we could get out of that abyss, that we would not be stuck in such remote deserts (Anița Cudla, 2024, p. 113).

Inhuman conditions are fought against through faith in God, memories of a better past and hope to survive and escape eventually:

> I was thinking, God, what have I done wrong that I am not allowed to live on this land [Bukovina], to breathe this pleasant air […] God, I would be much happier if someone shot me to die, to stay here, on this land, than to go back there [to the Polar Circle] (Anița Cudla, 2024, p. 181).
> Thinking about what I have been and what I've become, suddenly my heart broke and I started to cry bitterly. I sat down and cried like a baby, not being able to stop. I fell on my knees and prayed to the Holy God to forgive me if I had been so sinful. I thought that I worked all my life with the sweat of my brow to make a household, and now I am buried alive in a hovel, thousands of kilometres away from my Country (Dumitru Nimigeanu, 1958, p. 90).

Praying to their God, writing about their extreme experiences in connection to religiosity are forms of resistance. Religion remains "a cultural system constituted by memory" (Hałas, 2010, p. 314). Keeping religious holidays enabled them to maintain their identities as social groups and better appropriate the space of their deportation. A former deportee of Bărăgan points out deportees' awareness about religious holidays:

Yes, religious holidays instilled faith in us and we always knew when Easter was coming (Marcela Burlacu (Bent), 2024, p. 127).

Rituals create place attachment. These are context dependent (on space, time and social factors). Space related rituals engender feelings of belonging to community and places. Besides singing, the games played by children, and place-making through gardening, etc., religious celebrations instilled rituals that gave new meanings to deportees' lives in Bărăgan (Fig. 2).

Fig. 2. Wedding at Dâlga, in 1958. *Source: personal archive of Epifan Gălan. © Antonovici and Dobre, 2024. Reproduced with permission.*

They celebrated dearly religious holidays, first hidden and fearful, and later quite openly. Weddings and baptisms took place too, although the first were challenging to organise:

There weren't many weddings, you know. No one came forward, because we had no basis. We didn't have a church. We used to go to Radu Negru or Călărași for Resurrection, when there were no more restrictions (Teofil Lupu, 2024, p. 167).
They got married and there were weddings, but not quite like that, but there were... We didn't have a priest... I know they got married before, but I don't remember any pomp... I don't remember any meetings with traditional dances or anything like that ... (Silvia Mudrei (Moldoveanu), 2024, p. 251).

Enduring a disaster event such as deportation may form social ties that are founded on shared strategies for coping with adverse consequences. The sense of community improves coping and place attachment (de Jesús et al., 2022) and keeping faith in God proves to have been such a common strategy.

3.2.2. Family ties and place attachment

Values play an important role in creating, maintaining or destroying place attachment. Place attachment and family continuity are ethnic and religious in Northern Bukovina. Place attachment is related to the value of family. This is a common value for Anița Cudla, Dumitru Nimigeanu, and Aurora Bujeniță, their memories prove:

... my enemies kidnapped me from my nest and my sweet mother was left ill in bed (Anița Cudla, 2024, p. 174).
He was for the family, he was not sorry for all his work that he poured it out for the family so that he could use it for the place where he was born and have something to start a new life, to have something to comfort himself after so many hardships. His character was and is to be able to do good and help another (Anița Cudla, 2024, p. 189).
... we used to go through collective farms to beg for a potato or a handful of barley, oat or wheat. Only this shameful deed saved my life and that of my family (Dumitru Nimigeanu, 1958, p. 140).
Mother said [when leaving to be imprisoned]: Aurora, don't leave Mitruță at any time [her brother]. Don't leave him alone. Be together all the time (Aurora Bujeniță in Agerpres, 2018).

Family creates a sense of place for Anița Cudla. But she does not experience shared meanings and social belonging like in the case of Bărăgan deportees. Reading the deportation space offers her no anchors for valuing her identity. Her emotional bond to "the North" (i.e., the Polar Circle) is based only on the presence of her children there. In addition, humanitarianism acts ensure household resilience during deportation:

I boarded the steamer and returned to my children. When I arrived at Șuga, which was the name of the village where I lived, only the youngest boy went out to meet me, because the two older ones were away, at sea. I was lucky with the women I lived with in that house... (Anița Cudla, 2024, p. 158).
This family love gave us strength in all difficulties, and we were able to resist and saved our lives (Anița Cudla, 2024, p. 190).

However, for both Anița Cudla and Dumitru Nimigeanu it is impossible to construct a sense of place based on creating homes. Anița Cudla's letters, after years, when she was allowed to write home to her brothers, always ended with: "Do not forget us". Her wish to meet her brothers again appears as a constant when thinking of home.

This sense of place, of home and of personal fulfilment through family is experienced also by deportees in Bărăgan (Fig. 3 and Fig. 4):

Fig. 3. Children born and raised in Bărăgan, during deportation, Fetești town, 1972, after relocation (*Left – Zotic Constantin Ilie, right – Zotic Eugenia and in the middle – Zotic Iuliana). Source: personal archive of Zotic (married: Petcu) Eugenia, Fetești town, Romania. Reproduced with permission.*

Fig. 4. Deported Bukovinian people from Tereblecea, with mandatory residence set in Lătești, Bărăgan (via Banat): from left to right, upper row: Sârbu Niculiță, Constantin (*married: Zotic*) Elena, Zotic Vasile, Zotic Aurel, Zotic Vasile; lower row: Axeniuc Eleonora, Zotic Constantin, Axeniuc Silvia, Dubău (*married: Zotic*) Eugenia, Axeniuc Serghei. *Source: personal archive of Zotic (married: Petcu) Eugenia, Fetești town, Romania. Reproduced with permission.*

My parents resisted because they put all their hope in me, that I would succeed and that I will do better in life. You see, that's how they saw it, that by having a fulfilled child they also fulfil their dreams, because in their life they only had problems and hardships (Marcela Burlacu (Bent), 2024, pp. 123-124).

It was hard in Bărăgan for my parents, but they overcame all the troubles. I was their hope; for me they fought (Aneta Mingea (Udrea), 2024, p. 159).

After two months, I escaped from deportation and went to Transylvania to my sister to finish the Pedagogical School. I stayed there for a year without an ID, with fear in my heart. I finished school and got my teaching diploma. I returned to Bărăgan to help my parents earn a living and I was a teacher at the school in the commune. [...] We stayed there until they let us go (Daria Gogu (Andronache), 2024, p. 175).

3.2.3. Leisure activities constructing deportees' affective bonds with space

Social relationships invest space with meanings and emotions, transforming it into place. Despite hard work and hard life in general, Bărăgan deportees experienced pleasant moments. They organised and participated at celebrations, parties and other events (e.g., reading meetings and football games). These events were means through which deportees appropriated space and time, they (re)created bonds with each other and with the native locals of Bărăgan, who lived nearby the new villages of the deportees. Thus, the official paradigm which divided them into two antagonistic categories – 'enemies of the people' and 'good comrades' – was effaced (Dobre, 2023).

Former deportees remember with pleasure the ludic aspects that determined attachment to the space of Bărăgan. Balls for the youth were one of the attractions. Those dancing parties could take place in the nearby deportation space, where deportees and locals would meet and socialise:

I want to tell you that the youth, as they were in that situation, were still having fun. Balls were organised at the farm. And we used to go to the ball at the farm, where young people from the neighbouring villages, farm workers, came. We, from the new village, were considered the smartest, the most beautiful, the cleanest, and even the richest. The people of Banat, the Serbs, the Germans, the Hungarians in the village were helped by the people who remained home. Those who took it harder in Bărăgan were the Bessarabians and the Bukovinians, the Macedonians, because they had no one to help them (Daria Gogu (Andronache), 2024, pp. 175-176).

Also for the youth, parties and feasts were organised in the deportation space itself:

And they had a good time there in the village, at Fundata, you know, they had a good time. [...] When they were young, there were Christmas and Easter parties, they gathered in the house, ate, drank, from what they managed to save. [...] We children had our room, the first room, and they had theirs. They never allowed us to attend their parties, to see what they were doing there or what they were singing. We were at our table, they were at their table (Monica Malofei (Marin), 2024, pp. 188-189).

They were beautiful girls, and we had balls. They also came to us from Radu Negru. There

were some boys in the village who played the accordion, one Soleanu played the saxophone. We had some amazing balls there (Teofil Lupu, 2024, p. 167).

Despite poverty, children's birthdays and onomastics were celebrated (Fig. 5):

Fig. 5. Members of Tereblecea community located on the same street in Lăteşti, 1962. *Source: personal archive of Zotic (married: Petcu) Eugenia, Feteşti town, Romania. Reproduced with permission.*

...when there were children's birthdays, we made cakes and there was a boy who had an accordion and we children sang and danced (Silvia Mudrei (Moldoveanu), 2024, p. 251).

We celebrated our birthdays together with colleagues and friends, improvised clothes from all kinds of substitutes, sang Christmas carols, decorated the Christmas 'tree', etc. The tree was improvised from cotton twigs wrapped in green crepe paper. The decorations were the nuts, sugar and candies wrapped in pieces of tinfoil found in some luggage, chains made of glossy paper, remnants of candles, etc. (Silvia Mudrei (Moldoveanu), 2024, p. 259).

School celebrations brought some of their childhood joy (Fig. 6):

We had exceptional teachers, deported like us, many high school teachers. They taught us with talent, pleasure, dedication and lots and lots of love. They also tried to organise celebrations, so as not to be widowed by the joys of childhood. With their help and competent guidance, we also managed to present theatre performances. One was 'Sânziana and Pepelea' by Vasile Alecsandri (Silvia Mudrei (Moldoveanu), 2024, p. 257).

Such leisure activities are a proof of deportees' resilience, where resilience is "the capability of a community to face a threat, survive and bounce back or, perhaps more accurately, bounce forward into a normalcy newly defined by the disaster" (Ruiz and Hernández, 2014, p. 281).

Fig. 6. School celebrations at Olaru village, Bărăgan, in 1953. *Source: personal archive of Silvia Moldoveanu. © Antonovici and Dobre, 2024. Reproduced with permission.*

3.2.4. (Un)Hidden political views: place attachment for "the enemies of the people"?

In the case of the Northern Bukovina space, deportees' stories reveal: the transformation of this space into place (attachment to home, village, region, nation), the destruction of place (during Soviet occupation), and restoration/reconstruction of place and place attachment (also during Soviet occupation and after).

For Northern Bukovinians deported to the Soviet Union, place attachment is grounded on a national feeling. Place attachment is experienced also as territorial or political attachment to a country and ancestral space, to the Romanian nation. Patriotism is associated with attachment for various levels of space, especially for the region (Bukovina), and for the Romanian nation.

Coping and resilience building are the key roles of territorial or political place attachment. Place attachment was part of the socialising system in a region as Northern Bukovina, where patriotism and Romanianism were presented as a feature of people and places in the struggle for national survival (Nistor, 1991). Nationalism, as a system of meaning, impacts how inhabitants interpret the reality of deportation and how their memory of trauma is constructed. In fact, place attachment to the regional and village levels were part of the sense of a common past and future national imagined community (Nistor, 1991; Creţu, 2010).

Therefore, deportees' emotions about the regional and local space in Northern Bukovina have a sociocultural explanation related to the Romanian nation. This is also the reason for the strong connection between local and societal in their trauma construction.

Place attachment is part of the active politics of remembering especially in a small region, like Northern Bukovina, under foreign rule for a long period of time (starting with 1775, the Austro-Hungarian Empire and then the Soviet Union, from 1944 to 1991). The regional identity of Northern Bukovina was strongly connected to the national one, the Romanian one, which seemed ephemeral and needing more protection because of frequent border changes:

> My native commune had become a border commune. The border passed right over my field, which was half on the Romanian side and half on the Russian side. ... Soon I started helping those who wanted to flee to Romania (Dumitru Nimigeanu, 1958, p. 28).

Inhabitants of Northern Bukovina were used to a hostile cultural environment in the Austro-Hungarian Empire (Nistor, 1991). Foreigners and especially Russians were perceived by the Romanians of Bukovina as agents of trauma (Nimigeanu, 1958; Cudla, 2024). Place attachment actualised the past issues and related them to deportees' present and future decisions. Past and present contributed to preserving place attachment or adjusting it.

Place attachment in Bukovina is institutionalised at the regional level through a nationalist discourse. At that time, such a discourse was crucial to the formation of Romania as a state. Survivors' memories, individual traumatic memories of deportation are part of the nation building process. The cultural memory based on Romanian nationalism is obvious in Dumitru Nimigeanu's autobiography:

> [referring to year 1944] ... the villages and towns in Bukovina occupied by the Red Army were just being announced: Cernăuţi, Storojineţ, Adâncata, Tereblecea, Şiret, Seletin, etc. It was not said that they were occupied, but 'liberated by the Red Army, from under the Hitlerite yoke' [...] We were desperate, we had forgotten about hunger. I didn't seem to care about my life, because thoughts about the motherland filled me with sadness (Dumitru Nimigeanu, 1958, p. 123).

Northern Bukovinians' group identity is political from two perspectives: as Romanian Bukovinians in a region that belonged to other political entities besides Romania, and as political deportees. In Dumitru Nimigeanu's autobiography, one cannot identify victimhood but fighter nationalism for Bukovina. It is an obvious sense of homeland, of nation and especially of religion (Orthodoxy as a marker of ethnicity). His discourse is strengthened through a

sense of patriotism, as tragic memories at the local scale are upscaled to the regional and nation levels. The feeling of belonging to a nation gave D. Nimigeanu a sense of pride; he felt reassured by the sense of his national identity. His attachment is a territorial attachment, through the region and homeland.

However, Dumitru Nimigeanu perceived political agency as very difficult in Northern Bukovina and in Romania, and that is why he decided to use his deportation and return knowledge to mobilise forces against communism, but when he was physically outside that system. Through his autobiography, he makes public his experiences of fear, loss and anger at the communists. Dumitru Nimigeanu perceives communism as an extreme and tragic experience that he fights to survive physically, in a harsh space, as well as psychologically, by struggling to find a place of freedom, where his values can thrive. For him, communism functions through the organisation of atrocities, which its victims can hardly escape. Dumitru Nimigeanu's testimony of his traumatic memory is a manifesto; it has an activist component:

> But on paper, life had changed completely, showing various kolkhozes surrounded by modern stables, with flocks of sheep, fat horses and cows, strong men, beautiful girls and all well-dressed! I, who had travelled the length and breadth of Kazakhstan, had not seen a house or a stable as beautiful as those on those posters, but only hovels in the ground and similar stables, made of furrows of earth and also covered with earth... And people wore rags, and they stank [...] But... propaganda maintains communism! (Dumitru Nimigeanu, 1958, pp. 200-201).
> This is the life in the communist paradise, by which all those who have not experienced it are blinded! (Dumitru Nimigeanu, 1958, p. 117).

Aniţa Cudla, Dumitru Nimigeanu, and Aurora Bujeniţă want to be listened to, understood and paid attention to their life experiences as activist acts of remembrance. This attitude is made explicit in Nimigeanu's writings:

> Many times, in the evening, on moonlit nights, I would go outside to look at the vault of the sky, clear and clean, to forget about our ragged life and the bitter past, when the wicked from the East had rushed upon us. [...] I was thinking that if I get out of here safely, I should also tell others, who will have ears to hear, what communism and the 'allies' in the East mean (Dumitru Nimigeanu, 1958, p. 212).

From Dumitru Nimigeanu's autobiography, the reader gets a sense of his ideological and political resistance. This is not mentioned at all in Aniţa Cudla's writings; in fact, the word 'communism' itself is absent. She only mentions the political system when she received her rehabilitation:

... they sent us all rehabilitation papers, that we were unfairly deported and that we were allowed to return to our places... (Aniţa Cudla, 2024, p. 183).

Her resistance is mainly expressed through faith in God and hope for the survival of her family. Aniţa Cudla's place attachment is found in her daily routines that memories and writing her life history help her recollect. Her autobiography may have been affected by the moment when she wrote it: during socialism, in the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic.

By contrast, former deportees of Bărăgan are vocal against communism during their interviews, in the post-socialist period. The communist iconography includes the enemy of the people, in this case, the deportee. These people ask about the (in)justice of their new acquired identity. They felt they were compelled to sacrifice their lives or part of them for no good reason. The homeland they love is not the communist one. For deportees, the relation to the system is a strained one because of the perceived injustice:

An idea that blew our minds. I mean communism... the regime's crimes are estimated at several hundred million. Such a thing has no justification! (Victor Gaidamut, 2024, p. 93).

I have always hated the communist regime ... with the utmost contempt (Carl Franz Dunaenco, 2024, p. 137).

I thought communists were devils (Daria Gogu (Andronache), 2024, p. 177).

I still wonder to this day, 'what had my parents done?!' They hadn't done anything wrong. Except that my father was a refugee from Ukraine. You have seen what wartime problems are like. He was also a refugee out of fear of Siberia. That was it (Domnica Malofei (Marin), 2024, p. 194).

Unfair, very unfair! ... In my high school years, for fear that I would be expelled, ... I participated in all the artistic formations, I was also in the choir, and in dance, and in the theatre classes... ... I was versatile ... for fear of not being expelled; they had to need me (Marcela Burlacu (Bent), 2024, p. 122).

These informants tell their stories as an act of historical justice and raise awareness, condemning communism, in awe at what people could endure during the illegal and criminal act of deportation, with devastating effects on their lives. Through storytelling all former deportees manifest individual freedom. They have the courage to testify to their deportation experiences and re-live the associated trauma (some of the interviewees, from both Bărăgan and Northern Bukovina, cry or feel disturbed when recollecting certain events, people and places).

4. AGENCY THROUGH STORYTELLING: (DE)CONSTRUCTING TRAUMATIC MEMORY AND PLACE ATTACHMENT

In this section we answer to the following question: What was the purpose of deportees' life-narratives? Remembrance of deportation is a bottom-up process, from the local level, for both Bărăgan and Northern Bukovina.

The analysed sources show that old place attachment is even more powerful during the extreme experience of deportation in the case of deportees to the Soviet Gulag. Homesickness reveals the multifaceted connections that Aniţa Cudla and Dumitru Nimigeanu had with their significant places. For Aniţa Cudla, place attachment has shared cultural meanings such as traditions and strong faith in God, family, while for Dumitru Nimigeanu the Romanian nation is also evoked, besides the above. Their fondness of place and especially of their household was also supported by the pride of creation through sustained purposeful work. Ownership over their house and land, animals and objects, alongside treasuring family, were at the basis of their topophilia in Northern Bukovina.

Through storytelling, the deportees invest the experiences of their repression with meaning and emotion. Using stories to tell about their trauma, they refer to places, attachment or lack of it, in a variety of ways. For Northern Bukovina, both autobiographies (Nimigeanu, 1958; Cudla, 2024) and all interviews (in Creţu, 2010 and those with Aurora Bujeniţă) testify about the repressive regime which destroyed the countryside. Deportation is perceived and represented as a traumatogenic event. Collective fear and the anguish of being taken to death on the night of the 13th of June 1941 is remembered by all deportees.

The deportation space persisted in their life both as a trauma and as a stigma. They have no feelings of nostalgia in relation to the Soviet Union deportation space. In contrast, when (re)presenting their trauma, Bărăgan deportees communicate meanings, values and mixed emotions related to their deportation space and the places they created: 18 villages in 1951, only in a few months. Nevertheless, also their new social identity is marked by the deportee status.

Our research results show that deportees felt attached to former homes (in Northern Bukovina) or even to the deportation places they constructed with their bare hands (in Bărăgan). Local collective identity in Northern Bukovina is partially based on the collective memory of trauma. Deportees selectively exploit their painful past; affective connections with places create geographies of memory and place attachments. They all remember they lost the good life they had built for themselves, suffered injustice and needed to start again on their return.

The human centric trauma of war and deportation has become a source for the moral capital of the villages of Bukovina, with the highest number of deportees: Mahala and Tereblecea (over 500 people; Creţu, 2010, p. 61). What bounds them to their local

communities is ethnicity, language, religion, affiliation to the Romanian nation, and deportation.

Northern Bukovina villages construct a narrative of continuity with their violent past and past suffering (Nistor, 1991; Crețu, 2010). They self-identify as distinct local communities that underwent the horrors of dismantling through deportation. Before that, they had a prolonged experience of oppressions and war. The marks left by deportation on their village community consciousness are indelible. For Northern Bukovinians, their places meant their whole lives, built with sacrifice and hard work. Displacement meant losing everything that was attached to those places, except memories. This is true also for some of the deportees, who see the deportation space of Bărăgan as home. Erasing the memory of repression by demolishing the "new villages" built by deportees themselves (through forced labour) was an act of violence enacted by the communist regime, besides a second displacement.

Former deportees recovered memories of their past through writing and interviews. Their life histories are dominated by traumatic memories, by emotions of loss and sadness about the years spent in deportation. Their discourses are about survival under extreme conditions; when writing/narrating their lives, they reconstruct their identities around the aim of saving themselves and their loved ones:

> ... we arrived in Bărăgan, where we were thrown into the field of ripe wheat... I witnessed people fighting for a cup of water! (Victor Gaidamut, 2024, p. 78).

Mixed feelings of terror, fear, tension, uncertainty, and joy to survive hardships and communist authorities' aggressiveness underline the catastrophic character of deportation. It was sudden and, for many, also deadly. These recollections testify to the atmosphere of fear and anxiety that characterised the deportees' lives in the Soviet Gulag and in the "Romanian Siberia" (i.e., Bărăgan).

Deportees feel proud to have survived deportation, all its horrors and traumas. Place – a space they invested with meanings and emotions – has a key role for their survival. Both traumatic and pleasant memories are situated in space, but place attachment brings on another layer of significance to their recollections and adds to their complexity. We identified common tropes in deportees' perceptions and representations of space – of origin and of destination – during deportation. However, deportation space is one of fear, forced residence, and forced labour in inhumane conditions, more for the Soviet Gulag (Fig. 7) rather than for the Romanian one of Bărăgan.

In Bărăgan, some memories about working to build a school or some other facility in the deportation village are traumatic only in retrospect. Mr. Gaidamut, a former deportee, feels humiliated at the moment of the interview, although then he felt proud as a child, to be building his own school. Trauma is a reflective process that could also undermine any place construction and place attachment creation process, not only reinforce old place attachments:

> I survived on the edge of existence! As a child, I did not understand the gravity of the tragedy. No, I was a child, and it seemed to me that if I built the school, I was doing something extraordinary. Now, from the perspective of age, I realise that I was humiliated then (Victor Gaidamut, 2024, p. 79).

Fig. 7. The Brigade of Dumitru Vasilaş (*also called the Stakhanoviste*). Photo taken for the honours board at Kiselyovsk coal mines, Prokopyevsk town, Kemerovo Region, Russia (August 1949). *Source: personal archive of Vasilaş Gheorghe from Tereblecea village, Chernivtsi region, Ukraine. Reproduced with permission.*

However, a sense of pride to have won back their lives exists:

> What borderline situations we've been through! It was extraordinary! We've survived and we eventually prevailed. We've prevailed! (Victor Gaidamut, 2024, p. 75).

Place identity and sense of place are reflected in these writings and interviews. Life histories reveal the bonds with home places, with the rural area. All deportees, whose testimonies we analysed, came from the rural area. While those of Northern Bukovina had been living there for generations, the deportees of Banat and Western Oltenia have mixed origins: some have

already escaped deportation to Siberia by fleeing Northern Bukovina and Bessarabia and settling in Banat and Western Oltenia. The double dislocation of some deportees from these regions to Bărăgan Plain is painfully recollected.

Deportation is a shared trauma. Our sources testify about the shared traumatic reality. Nevertheless, former deportees exercise individual agency through storytelling in order to raise awareness about a criminal political system. All deportees bring their traumatic memories in a valorising context, either published as a book in Paris, in the free world (i.e., Nimigeanu's autobiography), or in a post-socialist context that condemns communism as a criminal regime (all the other primary data we used). Under such circumstances, all homes and places destroyed by communists (either in order to erase the traditional village or to erase the incriminating presence of deportees' villages) are even more valorised, their meanings are enriched by nostalgia, by deportees' feelings of love and loss, and by anti-communist resistance.

People reflect on places of the past from the perspective of their present, using the contrast: now and then (i.e., for Northern Bukovina: home village in Bukovina before and after deportation, and for Bărăgan deportees: the deportation village during deportation (placemaking) and after their liberation and the destruction of their villages). Place attachment is still strong in Northern Bukovina, although deportees felt that their lives were stolen from them, as well as their places. Their feelings of injustice reinforced and maintained old place attachments. Damage to their homes and village often reinforced place attachment. Previous findings also underline that "the experience of extensive damage to participants' homes and community actually reinforced place attachments" (Greer et al., 2020, p. 322; cf. also Ilovan et al., 2024). The lasting consequences of deportation on village territorial identity in Northern Bukovina cannot be ignored. The continuing significance of deportation in the society testifies about the cultural trauma this catastrophic event produced. The social memory of these villages in Northern Bukovina is made of the shared vision locals had on deportation related events and is made public or transmitted from one generation to the next through narratives (cf. Crețu, 2010). These narratives recreate the past and create the present and future for the respective individuals and communities. Their identities are established also on that memory, as the past is always present and inescapable (Fig. 8 and Fig. 9).

In addition, the analysed interviews and autobiographies contribute with valuable information to the national memorial discourse about the victims of communist oppression. To write, to give interviews/ speak about one's traumatic experiences is a form of

empowerment. The mnemonic tool of their narrativization significantly contributes with information about bonds to places: place attachment is actualised through writing and giving interviews. Communicating about deportation is a form of agency through activism and also a form of resistance. However, the book of Nimigeanu, despite his clear appeal to western intervention to protect the persecuted Romanians, had no impact at that time (1958) or decades later, during the communist regimes of Romania and of the Soviet Union.

Fig. 8. Commemorating the victims of deportations, Codrii Cosminului Forest, Northern Bukovina, Chernivtsi region, Ukraine. A common practice during the entire Soviet and Ukrainian rule, when such tributes were prohibited in public spaces. *Source: photo by Vasile Zotic, 2010.*

Fig. 9. Sweet bread, painted eggs and candles in memory of the victims of deportation to Siberia, Codrii Cosminului Forest, Northern Bukovina, Chernivtsi region, Ukraine. *Source: photo by Vasile Zotic, 2010.*

Similarly, for Bărăgan, although places disappeared (demolished deportation villages), place attachment remained even in their absence. The deportation villages had a stigma even after the rehabilitation of the deportees, when deportation was declared illegal by the communist regime itself (Dobre, 2024, p. 30). Their real moral rehabilitation happens only after 1989 (Dobre, 2020, p. 341). However,

findings show that trauma about space exists despite subsequent moral upbringing.

Autobiographies and interviews with survivors of deportation construct the cultural memory of those deported. Space and place are significant dimensions for both personal and cultural memory about the traumatogenic event of political deportation, perceived and represented as a personal and collective catastrophe. The destiny of the deportees is a shared one: they shared emotions and feelings, but still there is diversity due to deportees' personal features and histories. Therefore, they have particular responses to crisis situations.

Narrating personal deportation (hi)stories is empowering. When told, stories are (re)created. Narration, which is personal, is a form of representation, a self-referential practice. Through self-narration, deportees, as trauma survivors, become informants about the recent history, about the dehumanising effects of criminal political ideologies, of stigma and of injustice. Their autobiographies are a medium of cultural memory and proof of undeniable human agency that built resilience during and after deportation.

The politics of remembering deportation through public memorials and public policies could benefit from our research results (Markuszewska, 2022; Boţan et al., 2024). Such politics also raises awareness about the need to acknowledge trauma in a formal way: in the public spaces (i.e., architecture) and in education. Policy actions are needed in the face of present increasing political violence. Thus, our research can inform appropriate practices of memorialisation for traumatised communities and trauma places (Fig. 10).

Fig. 10. Official commemorative facility for the victims of Stalinist reprisals, Tereblecea village, Chernivtsi region, Ukraine (*left – chapel; right – commemorative inscription within the chapel*). *Source: photo by Vasile Zotic, 2025.*

Educational programmes for school and university students should include thorough information about these tragic events, due to their magnitude and impact, thus gaining the dignity fitting

such experiences. Also, policy actions acknowledging the trauma by authorities may contribute to healing instead of further traumatising the affected individuals and communities.

However, in Romania, there has not been enough recognition of the deportation and its traumatic legacy, yet. In Bărăgan, deportees' past is objectified in the post-socialist landscape through just a few memorials. The memorial landscape is thus a site for places the majority of which no longer physically exist (except Fundata and Dâlga) but only in the deportees' memories. However, these pieces of autobiographic literature and the published or broadcasted interviews have all the effective intensity that makes deportees' stories memorable and impactful eventually. Against this background, place attachment is a subjective construct (Greer et al., 2020, p. 322), which is critical for informing decisions about public policies concerning place-based phenomena (Markuszewska, 2022).

Besides memorial literature, documentaries, exhibitions, school and university textbooks that approach the topic of Romanians' deportation during and after World War II, scientific publications are another relevant means of informing policy and raising awareness. In this vein, our research contributes to a more in depth understanding of the communist past, using the perspective of people's bonds to their living environment during crisis situations inflicted by the political regime itself.

5. SUMMING UP: INDIVIDUAL AGENCY AND STORYTELLING IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF DEPORTATION MEMORY

Microhistorical methodologies applied in the interdisciplinary study of place attachment and its fluctuating relation with traumatic events allows for a nuanced understanding of how people and societies navigate displacement, alienation, and resilience. Based on deportees' description, in their narratives, of the process of place attachment or lack of it, findings show that everyday life got its meaning also from place attachment related experiences, because place attachment involved direct experience of the socio-physical environment. Family bonds, communality, faith in God, leisure namely, the space of their households and of their village were the key triggers for deportees' place attachment. Nevertheless, our research results indicate an affectively nuanced relationship (from love to hate or mixed feelings) regarding the place of deportation, but also the place of origin of the deportees (Fig. 11). Those who manifested positive feelings towards their native place or their place of deportation (traumascapes), eventually returned to their wounded villages in Northern Bukovina, or remained in Bărăgan.

In the same vein, we asked what the roles of place attachments were, according to deportees' stories about their deportation experiences. The key roles of place attachment were to reduce the trauma of deportation and contribute to the increase of individual's resilience in small rural communities. Collective suffering, trauma and resilience are part of local and regional territorial identities (Boţan et al., 2016). Traumatic experiences inflicted by the communist political, social and economic structures, were recollected by deportees who activated a wide range of resilience resources: place attachment is such a resource for their resilience and healing of trauma. Dumitru Nimigeanu's writing is a condemnatory one for the communist ideology and realities. But this notion (communism) is never mentioned in Aniţa Cudla's book. For many of the Bărăgan deportees, who voiced their contempt towards the communist regime, their life histories are both nostalgic and traumatic.
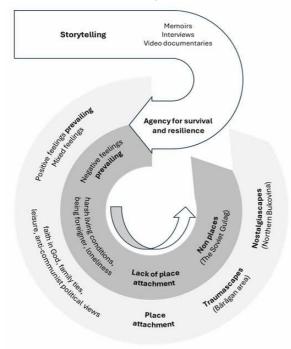

Fig. 11. Affective landscapes of the Romanian political deportees. *Source: own elaboration*

This study reveals that place attachment supported coping for survival and healing after trauma. Our sources (writers of autobiographies and interviewees) are coping models; they chose self-disclosure rather than remaining detached from their traumatic past. By making their stories public, deportation suffering and its aftermath are acknowledged and legitimised. Former deportees are also authentic voices and give perspectives about how the deportation experience should inform a trauma recognition policy and official condemnation of deportation.

Moreover, deportees' stories produce the knowledge about deportation that is so much needed in formal education, in schools and universities in Romania. Through such institutionalisation of memory, students could be educated about the profound and strong links between geography (space and place), history (time and events), and their impacts on the social.

Finally, our research paves the way for future analyses on place attachment (re)construction in deportation settings and afterwards, and also for refining understanding about people's affective bonds to places. For instance, after World War II, the Romanian communist regime deported thousands of Transylvanian Saxons to the USSR as forced labourers, punishing them for their ethnicity and alleged affiliation with Nazi Germany (Dincă et al., 2022; Bottesch and Wien, 2023). Many never returned, while those who did faced discrimination and marginalisation under communist rule. In the 1980s, a subsequent wave of coerced migration occurred as West Germany effectively bought their freedom. This large-scale displacement severed historical ties yet paradoxically reinforced a deep cultural attachment to the abandoned motherland (Gabanyi, 1994; Ohliger, 1996). Today, many Transylvanian Saxons actively invest in restoring churches, historic buildings, and cultural heritage projects in their hometowns, ensuring that their legacy endures despite decades of exile and displacement. Thus, studies on the affective bonds that displaced ethnic minorities still have with home places could be a valuable research route. In addition, our study can be also a basis for research on intergenerational memory transmission patterns about drastic events.

6. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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