

Generations and Memory Places: The case of Rousse,

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Annotation: Each generation remembers its own city places, tightly related with the personal experience – emotions and everyday life. According to the social cultural circumstances, every age group bears its own specificities and has its own unique memory. In terms of the ex-communist regime in Bulgaria, we may say that there are mainly three groups of people we can observe today. We have the “predecessors” – the grandparents, welcomed the red army in 1944; the “witnesses” – the parents, who lived on communist rules; and the “successors” – their children, trying to forget what they even do not remember.

In the case of Rousse – a Bulgarian town located on the river Danube – we are using twenty-two interviews in which citizens of the three main generations point at their valuable markers of the city landscape and draw a mental picture of significant areas. What are those signs of memory for the Rousse “predecessors”, “witnesses” and “successors” and how long have they remained valuable for the city’s history? These are the topics the text will try to explain. What is remarkable for a single age group and what is important for all the citizens will explain how people construct their identity and how they maintain the city being.

Keywords: memory, urban places, generations, local identity, public zones.

Introduction

The realms of memory have become broadly discussed subject matter since the end of 19th century. The interesting and up-to-date problems of materialized identity aspects could be widely applied even today. And in Bulgarian milieu realms of memory are still new and rarely discussed as topics. A particular motivating field for the identity-memory subject is the case in Rousse, the city I examined in my dissertation thesis. Hereby I am presenting one side of the local aspects of the problem, connecting memory places to different generation.

Memory is, in fact, an ability to sift out what has happened, to mark significant things, and to preserve the result. Everyone remembers exactly the things that identify him or her and what exactly is important for everyone. It is everything that proves the existence of a person, which makes him an individual, different and unique. Respectively, the city memory, as “cohesion” of individual memories, maintains the valuable facts and events of a settlement precisely to mark an urban place as a living one, to highlight its exceptionality. In terms of the correlation “city – citizen” there is a two-way process of identification. On one hand, every citizen constructs its own mentality and self-evaluation in accordance with the cultural and social meaning of its surroundings. On the other hand, the settlement’s self appraisal results from various public and social activities represent it as an everyday or holiday life area, as well as practiced space.

Places, which keep preserving the city habits and traditions, are also called memory places (according to Pier Nora’s terminology). At the same time they are markers on the urban landscape creating the mental and the material existence of the city and, what is more important, they are the identification signs with which the citizens commemorate their past. Both city spaces as a whole and the remarkable parts of the city area thus memorized.

The memory places are subjected to active practices of human recall and are thus communicated. A number of authors connect memory with activity (practice, happening); for example, in the references of Henri Lefebvre, Yi-Fu Tuan, and Ian Asman. We remember such spaces in connection to our own acts or status and, in this way, evaluate our existence,

differing from the others at the same time. Parallel to that the city area bears those signs of its existence and signification, which make it unique and therefore important.

This mutual interpenetration of the city and the individual memory is often examined by the oral history method. This method had been known since the end of 50s years of the XX в. in USA and United Kingdom and is developed during the 60's of that same century. In the biographical narratives the personal past appears as interwoven with the city and offers a clear picture of how the city dwellers use a given place and how this place has changed during the time. Oral histories transcend the memory with its transformations and permanent reconstructions, thus registering the processes of city life and the citizens' identity construction. In the different personal revelations we can find the general social stance for a particular piece of the urban history. At the same time the oral history method clearly defines the main three generation stereotypes – the adults (“grandparents”), the middle-aged (“parents”), and the young (“children's”) ones. Today in Bulgarian social life these three age groups are inevitably connected to basic periods of national history – The World War II and the establishment of totalitarian rule; the communist regime and its end; the post-socialist transitional period and finally the accession to the European Union.

Here I examine the intertwining between memory and history. I am using the differentiation between the two terms in accordance with Daniela Koleva's statements in her article “What I am Telling You is True! Live Histories between History and Memory” (Koleva, 1998). I also place attention on the urban events connected with personal experiences and highlight those elements of the urban milieu. They construct the settlements' and the citizen's self-awareness, and provide their perpetuation.

In the case of Rousse, the three age groups could not be defined so easily. As a Bulgarian town situated on the river Danube, Rousse has specific local myths which contribute for the town's representation and self conceptualization. The geo-strategic settings – and basically the role of the river Danube as a connection to the West - are thoroughly reflected in those myths and whose reflections are utterly important even today. Generally, the myths that construct Rousse's local identity could be summarized as follows: it is a city with European and aristocratic manners since the late Ottomans times; the people of Rousse are modern-minded and broad-minded, and so is the local society. The city has a multicultural outlook and is ethnically tolerant. This is the place where a lot of modern things have happened for the first time in independent Bulgaria. All these myths are internally connected and all of them contribute to the city and the citizens' identity construction processes.

In fact, Rousse has a twenty century long history and is a good example of a successfully settled continuity since ancient times. The first evidence dates back from the times of the Roman Empire, when it was a fortress which played an important role as a trade center on the river juncture and was named Sexaginta Prista (meaning “the sixty ships harbor”).

A certain prerequisite for the city development is the river Danube. Functionally the town is dependent on the river and even transcends the river's presence in the creation of urban open spaces and urban infrastructure. Although the river is not so widely used nowadays and is sometimes almost forgotten by the citizens (Nenov, 2001: 540), it is still remembered as a connection with the European way of life and thinking, as it was used during the Ottoman times.

The city is a typical example and even concomitant with the stereotype of the Bulgarian urban model in modern times. It bears nationally defined characteristics and has its own development mainly since the beginning of the 40s of the XX c., as well as between the two World Wars. The assertion is based on the Nikolai Nenov' thesis in the preface of his book “Rousse – a portrait of the century”, mentioned in the references below, p. 18.

It is the city where most of the first events of national modernization took place and is connected with more than 30 proceedings and spots connected to it. Between them are: the first film show, the first meteorological station, the first Bulgarian ship, the first private bank, the first railway station, the first insurance company and etc. Claiming to be a pioneer in a number of spheres, the city of Rousse is an interesting setting, which offers vast prospects for research on the topics of urban memory and identity.

Method and Data

The current research is based on 122 interviews with the citizens of Rousse. All they point out is the valuable markers on the city landscape and “draw” mental pictures of the significant areas and regions. The interviewees’ range covers people from different ages, social status, and ethnicity. Since I investigated the subjective perspective of the past as constantly transforming and adaptable, the focus is not on the city history, but on the city memory instead. Precisely because it represents the human thinking for particular spaces, the city remembrance gains its valorization as a continuously building and shaping structure and bears the characteristics of long lasting dwelling which has successfully preserved its “liveliness” and impetus.

Which and whose are those signs of memory for Rousse’s generations and how long they remain important for the city’s history – these are the topics which the text will address later. What is remarkable for a single age group and what is important for all the citizens will give light on how it explains the human identity constructs and their maintenance within the city being.

The current text is a synopsis of the larger and more detailed research of the different generations’ memory places in the town of Rousse. Thus, only the general research findings and conclusions are presented.

As I have already mentioned, the main methodology, which I have used is the oral history one. The method is also defined in the preface of the already cited book “Rousse – a portrait of a century”, where are presented most of the interviews of the current approach (Nenov, 2000: 16). It helped me envision the image of Rousse’s space as it exists in its citizens’ consciousness. Similarly to the mental maps method in the life histories what I distinguish is what I find repeatedly occurring in the interviewees many times (in other words, what functionally exists and is found to be important in their holiday and everyday life). The mental maps method is an analysis of pictures and drawing of people, asked to describe a given place on a sheet of paper. The method is found by Edward Chace Tolman in 1932. Newspaper articles and website forums and pages, illustrating the public opinion are used as an additional data for the present research. Under depict I mean precisely the way in which information is perceived as an image, in paper or in digital mode. Both types of media rely on the visual attraction and effect over its reader.

The Generations

The mentioned age differentiation is more subjective than objectively defined, for the reason to follow the investigation point of interest – the personal, the particular and the variant one. There is a clear distinction between the separate generations’ urban concepts and which is not so visible, as the chronological steps in the city development. We can observe clear-cut differences in the way particular city spaces are viewed by speaker of varying age. How often the inhabitants visit them and what meaning they have for them is of great importance. The more the space is “practiced”, the more colourful and abundant, even more contradictory, the memories for the place will be. When a certain area plays a significant role for a city, then this area is already necessary for the settlement, which can guarantee that both – the city and its place – will survive in its citizen’s memories.

The interviews are arranged systematically as to reflect the answers of the citizens from the different generations. The similar historical background in each age group objectively presumes the possibility of similarities in citizens' habits and their participation in the city cultural life. The principal age differentiation is divided in three groups as follows: 16 to 25 years, 30 to 50 years, and above 60 years. This intends to be representative as far as it is based on the already specified number of interviews.

Usually the answers are individual and variable, but if we investigate them as a whole, we could find the mosaic aspects of the public spaces in Rouse. There are two major lines in the response, which are very obvious: the specific use and the cultural and historical continuity of the spaces.

The functional aspect is an essential one and according to it the memory places of the town are marked. The degree of the usage is crucial for the process of space perceiving in an individual memory and in a collective city recall. The current investigation demonstrates three key zones in Rouse, declared to be of the utmost importance for its inhabitants. All of them are open central zones for communication and entertainment:

These are the main memory places which bear the city tradition. They are the socio-cultural arena for public events and celebrations. On the one hand, they provide possibilities for information and emotional exchange, and, on the other, they serve as recreation centers. The three major zones are structured by the gathering of their constructive elements, namely – the particular squares, streets, buildings, gardens.

In this way, these open city zones could be termed as memory places, although each memory place consists of concrete elements, reiterated by the citizens in their biographical recalls.

In the general presentation of the city memory, several conclusions can be drawn from the oral history interviews with Rouse's citizens belonging to different generations:

- The main memory places are situated within the framework of the three major public zones in the town – the Center, the Park and the River. Every one of the three zones has its own specificity and provides a different way of perception of its surrounding in the perceptions of its inhabitants. For this reason the areas co-exist peacefully, not opposing to each other.

- It is the functional aspect, according to which these zones are defined. The wider possibilities for use and entertainment, the more vivid and long-lasting is its image in the individual recollections and hence in the social city memory.

- The different generations' opinions for the memory places are not obviously opposed. On the contrary, they confirm the idea of gradual accumulation of the chronological layers, of their adaptability to the present day requirements. In the case of Rouse there are no sharp denials of political systems, but rather different view of life and different functional applications, corresponding to each group age.

- The local traditions in Rouse are inevitably transformed because of the characteristics of the particular historical period. However, the idea for the preservation of the city traditions is an important concern for all the generations.

Instead of a conclusion

The city memory preserves from the “historical chronicles” only those facts and images, which prove the significance and the uniqueness of the space and of its dwellers. In the case of Rouse the memory places and their definition and continuation are part of the particular processes of local identity construction. Typical for the city is the image of the multicultural mentality of its citizens (and the use and conceptualization river has played its central role in

its construction). The inhabitants rightfully pretend to be open-minded and modern people, and this comes from the local characteristics of the city. The pioneer self-consciousness and ingenuity in a number of fields are still the milestones, which sustain Rousse's identity nowadays. This actively contributes to the unique urban vision of the Danube city and further explains its distinctive development.

However, the image of Rousse as a particular post communist Bulgarian city could not be envisioned by one-side investigation and its interesting subject matter makes a certain request for future research.

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The European city is an urban concept grounded in the tradition of European sociology. The concept aims to summarise the specifics of European urban settlements, such as high population density, a mixture of functions and populations, and the city's active role in ensuring social cohesion.

The original idea of this website was to present the results of the workshops organized by seven European NGOs working in a joint project Cultures from Around the Block financed by The European Year of Intercultural Dialogue 2008 (a key sponsor of the website). The workshops were targeted especially to the immigrant but in some cases also to non-immigrant youth. You can find the information on the workshop in the section Media.

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