Sulina - Memory, Narratives and the Postindustrial Urban Landscape

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Key words: memory, urban scenery, history, narratives

Abstract: This paper discusses the case of Sulina, a small port-city at the mouth of Danube, with a fascinating history and a rather gloomy present. Looking at local narratives, the paper deals with the intersection of urban landscape and city stories, analyzing the role of memory and nostalgia in inscribing the place with certain meanings, while concealing others.

Sulina is a small city at the mouth of Danube, in the Eastern margins of the enlarged European Union; a pirates nest and a modest rural settlement for most of its history, Sulina was, for more than a century, the headquarters of the European Commission of Danube (CED). Between 1856 and 1939, it will turn Sulina into “the most cosmopolite city in the country” (as a newspaper wrote in 1925), a fashionable resort and a flourishing *porto franco* of over 10 000 inhabitants (with about 20 different ethnic groups and several religious confessions). Beside its unique multicultural history, Sulina is also a post-socialist city, with a former prosperous local industry during communism, now sharing the decaying fate of many of the small cities of Romania. Opening both to Danube and to the Black Sea, Sulina is today a marginalized locality, only accessible by water.

The urban landscape, an architectural blend of XIX century buildings, interwar houses, modern terraces and monotonous blocks of flats, is the living proof of its fascinating history. Passing from street I to the other five parallel streets of the city entails a unique gradual translation from urban to rural, each with specific architecture and routine. Even though this distinctive landscape stands witness to the city’s better epochs, and to subsequent political upheavals, in the case of Sulina, the urban palimpsest currently speaks the language of decay and transformation.

I use the expression “urban palimpsest” in the sense that urban places are always made and re-made through the incessant process of remembering and forgetting, in both their physical and symbolic outlook. Some places are preserved because they carry important memories for a group, some places are re-inscribed with new meanings, while some other places just die out, elapsed from memory. Any city is home to so many stories, so many memories, and these overlap, synchronically and diachronically, producing a unique urban palimpsest with old meanings, voices, images revealing themselves through the dense canvass of today’s metaphors and inscriptions.

Looking at the city’s postindustrial landscape is just one of many layers of comprehension that the scenery of Sulina opens to. The recent communist past, although programmatically absent from the mainstream urban and social discourse, is everywhere present in the form of abandoned factories and blocks of flats, vacant “universal shops” or inscriptions on the walls. Across the Danube, the former shipyard, built during the golden ages of CED, testifies to a more prosperous age; today, however, huge deserted constructions are being inhabited by wild horses, with a luxuriant vegetation taking over the place. On the left side of Danube, in the city proper, old Trabants rust on the streets, signs of a thriving communist period when people could afford buying cars to drive around in a place of only 14 square kilometers. Here and there one can spot a useless boat in the middle of a garden or in front of a house. While

the first streets are swarming with ATVs that stir clouds of dust and sand on the road to the beach, towards the margins of the city nature takes over, cows are walking the streets and small dogs sit dormant on the sidewalks, while silence reigns supreme.

It can be argued that the landscape of most post-socialist cities of Romania is a kind of palimpsest with different layers of meaning, where stories and discourses collide to establish a new reading of the city, one that puts the communist past out of sight. New business networks, new places, new power relations, are being inscribed on pre-existing spaces, while abandoned industrial landscapes are being reinterpreted. My research aims at describing how, in the case of Sulina, memory plays a vital role in (re)inscribing the landscape with new (old) meanings, erasing or obliterating other (and others') denotation, and in giving a sense to "our' city.

Collective memory feeds local identity and can re-enforce the meaning of "community", across group differences (Bélanger, 2002). However, it often tends to conceal the fact that remembering is quite always an unfinished negotiation. Diverse groups in a city enforce as many social memories, routed in the specific experience and history of those groups. However, in practice "some memories have always been able to stake a broader claim to public legitimacy than others" (Bélanger, 2002: 78). In the case of Sulina, my paper will also describe the intricate liaisons between "collective memory", or rather the mainstream narrative about "our city", and counter-narratives, stories of people who belong to different groups and who endeavor to assimilate their own biographical narratives into the main "official" mnemonic account. As Tim Edensor argues, "telling stories about the past, about people, places and things and sharing them with others is an ontological condition of social life. In order to situate ourselves contingently in relation to place and history, narratives combine collective and individual identities, inserting the personal into the social, and vice versa" (Edensor, 2005: 159-60). Stories we narrate depend on our own incorporation into a social medium: not only for having our 'truth' validated, but also for placing ourselves securely into the community, for the feeling of belonging and of viewing our story as part of the general narrative – thus conferring it substance and significance.

Narrative is central for the functioning of memory not only for being "capable of playing a number of different (cognitive, social and emotive) roles at the same time" (Brockmeier, 2002: 27), but certainly for allowing a vital space for the play of identities, for the reconsideration of what is being remembered and, most importantly, of the self of the narrator amidst these (its positioning in the life of the community – and collective memory). As Antze and Lambek point out, "people emerge from and as the products of their stories about themselves as much as their stories emerge form their lives. Through acts of memory they strive to render their lives in meaningful terms" (Antze and Lambek, 1996: xviii). Stories people tell about places serve not only to position them in a desired location, but also to delineate social boundaries, to assert who "belongs" and who doesn't, to clarify who "we are"; as Bird argues, "shared narratives serve culturally to construct a sense of place and, with that, a sense of cultural identity that includes some people while excluding others" (Bird, 2002: 520).

In Sulina, since 1989, after the dissolution of the communist regime, most of the local industry has dismantled; people have lost their jobs, the unemployment rate become one of the biggest in the country, and the city continued to slowly destroy itself. Sulina lost its centripetal force of attraction, as "the city" of the region and became the place everyone wanted to leave behind. This is, roughly, the context in which people in Sulina started to "remember" and celebrate the "good old days" of the CED period. This process of "collective" remembrance recollects the past in the frame of two main intertwining storylines: that of prosperity and that of intercultural tolerance. Sulina was a *porto franco*; people came and went. There was indeed a unique blend of ethnicities, religious confessions and languages.

Nevertheless, nostalgia tends to even out the rough edges, to "forget" the conflicts and to present the past in a blissful color. Actually, those very ethnic groups that made Sulina the "most cosmopolitan city in the country" are no longer there. Jews, Armenians, Turks, Greeks were traditionally urban populations, involved in commerce and trade; they made the city a multicultural space built around these occupations and embedded into a particular fashion of urban inhabitance. Almost certainly, the functioning of CED with its many representatives and employees of different ethnicities, working together and communicating on a daily basis had an important share in the "cosmopolitan" outlook of the city. However, the French, the British, the Dutch, Italians, Germans etc. are not "remembered" (except for few cases where the informants' family had personal connections to them). Those who stayed in the collective memory are people who were part of the multicultural day-to-day life of the city, involved in its networks and in the very fabric of urban co-inhabitance. Today, most of the residents are either Romanians, or Lipoveni, who came to Sulina, "to the city", from neighboring villages. Very few are old enough to actually remember Sulina before the war; some of them learn anew about Sulina's glorious past, and should be less likely to long for a past they have no connection to (biographical and/or affective).

However, if memory does work as a cohesive element of a group, and can even create a new community whose recollections go beyond people's own direct experiences, as scholars have shown , than it is only natural that all current inhabitants of the city seem to agree on Sulina's wonderful history. In broad lines, they "remember" pre-war Sulina as a flourishing city, attracting resources from the region, especially from the Vâlcov area (now on the territory of Ukraine). Stories about huge amounts of vegetables, bulks of butter, meat and other foods sold in the streets by peasants and merchants constantly pop up in interviews, together with details of places and locations specific to an urban cosmopolitan life (shops, cafes, restaurants, theaters, brothels). In the interwar period, when CED was still present (up until 1939), the city had the life of any other flourishing cosmopolitan harbor. As part of the general narrative of the "good old times", one of the informants, Mrs. N., 75, born Ukrainian, who married a Greek and declares herself Greek, remembers a Public Garden and the fanfare of the City Hall, with public performances every Sunday. *Ladies would wear long dresses, nice cloths, hats; there were stores with English and imported fabrics*. Life in inter-war Sulina is painted in light colors (somehow blind to ethnic and class differences): *The Greeks organized very fancy balls, where people had to wear formal dress.* (Obviously, the Lipoveni fishermen had no knowledge of such codes). All these details of a long-disappeared bourgeois world are mixed, in the case of Sulina, with traces of a multicultural prosperous urban life. *There was a café with cookies, a lemonade shop held by Zamfiropol family, who were very secretive about its recipe. Another Armenian, Echmegean, had a lemonade-shop. Peasants came with food to the market: bulks of yellow butter, flour*. "Greek" narratives reconstruct from memory a typically Mediterranean landscape and have in common a certain impression of the antebellum life in Sulina, with emphasis on the commercial aspects and details of a day-to-day comfortable life.

However, there is a reverse to the medal. Mr. C., 66, son of a widow, was born on the other side of the river, in Prospect neighborhood (which used to be called in a derogative manner *mahala*). He attended the elementary school in Prospect (at Mila 4), then "crossed" the river into the city to continue his studies. He had to drop school very soon and began working at an early age as a servant and then as a construction worker, where he heard many stories about the city from his elder co-workers. His memories of inter-war Sulina are the memories of a child fascinated with the life of the people "across" river, with the wonders and pleasures of "urban" life (as opposed to the poverty and hard life of the *mahala*). *Next to the cathedral there was a cinema known as Eleni. I remember being fascinated by the loud music there and by electric lighting in the cinema. At the ground floor of Jean Bart's house (Jean Bart pension & restaurant today) there was a bookstore known as Dumitriţa's. Madam Dumitriţa (a*

Ukrainian) was a mean woman, always shouting and cursing young boys. She had two good friends, Frosina the Greek and Gulbiden the Turkish. Where Coral pension is today there used to be the Army's House (an officer's club). Sulina was full of soldiers and there was a lot of order and discipline in the city. In the end, Sulina of memories is just the antipode of the present, as our informant emphasizes: Before, everybody lived in harmony, but today everybody wants to hurt the others. This is just an expression of the way in which nostalgia for a past presumed to be the "golden age" takes the form of a desire to stop time, to re-construct a vision of the past which could counterbalance the unsatisfying present and fuel the hope of a better future (Edensor, 2005).

In opposition to this quasi-mythical prosperity of the interwar period and CED, "remembered" by older informants as part and background of a happy childhood, come the years of the second world war, which brought for Sulina – and the region - a series of sad events: an earthquake followed by flooding in 1941, then a period of drought, hunger and poverty immediately after the war, in 1944 - that ended an epoch. With the beginning of war and Romania having just taken over the jurisdiction from the European Commission, in 1939, the overall decline of Sulina commences. The rich people start to leave the "sinking ship". After WWII, Sulina never was the same city again. "The war was harsh and painful for Sulina because it was the closest city to the Russians. It was the first Romanian city to be bombed and ruined. The city's decadence continues after the war, its commercial activity disappears. This confirms the saying of a Dutch engineer working in Sulina during CED: 'after we have left, this city would turn into a fishermen village' ".

The 50's witnessed a constantly modifying demography, with old bourgeois habits and places dying out, on the background of general transformations by the recently installed communist regime. The communist period, at least in the beginning, seems to have kept Sulina, unlike other places in Romania, in a marginal position, in a kind of grey zone, with no clear rules (or not so harshly enforced). Long Mitza, the owner of a brothel, is still there in the 50's as a respectable tobacco shop owner, with her stylish blue dress as a reminder of another epoch. People may or may not have jobs, many of them coming to Sulina from the rural area, trying to escape the communist nationalization of land, and life goes on.

The urban scenery of the city, however, undergoes drastic changes. Following the war, many of the old houses were demolished, while the official propaganda presented this process as a 'renewal' of the city. Some people remember that after the war, *it was mostly empty plots and a few houses here and there, due to heavy bombing, while others remember a stupid, unschooled mayor who, after the war was over, gave permission to destroy a lot of good, stone houses. According to a similar narrative, the first thing they demolished was the Anglican church, this way all connections with the imperialists would disappear.* In fact, under the apparent rebuilding of the city, many of the symbolic reminders of Sulina's "imperialist" past were intentionally destroyed and the architecture of the city transformed according to the new times (less bourgeois houses, more communist blocks of flats).

Bélanger contends that "the memories attached to a particular area of the city such as old waterfronts, monuments, and buildings contribute and become inseparable from the way urbanites live transitions and changes around these places" (Bélanger, 2002: 81). In Sulina, nostalgia for the former landscape of the city (illustrated by a shared remembering of the many channels that cut the place across) speaks actually about (longing for) a status quo ante. Sulina also had a lot of river channels, made by the Commission. *These had a role of communication (people would use it as a travel route) and they relieved the pressure from the Danube at high tide. When we went to the seaside, we would pass along the bridges, and could see the fish in the clear water, with water lilies and willows. That was very nice. But then they drained it. They drained it for agricultural reasons, which wasn't really productive*

anyway. Then they had to build the dike to protect the city from flooding, because the channels were closed. This dike compromised the beauty of the swamp (Mrs. N.).

Most inhabitants of Sulina resent the way the communist urban planning bluntly changed the local landscape (closing the natural channels and trying to transform the plots around the city for agricultural use) as a forced intrusion onto "their" city. Conversely, turning these useless agricultural plots back to nature signifies symbolically getting old Sulina back. According to another narrative, *the communists considered the Delta an asset and, at the beginning, they planned to turn it into a big fishery. All private fisheries were nationalized, and people need special authorization to fish. They were all turned into state registered fishermen. The vast majority of the fishermen were Lipovans and, because they were state employees, they had a privileged position like access to food ratios. However, back then the situation was very different, fish was abundant and people could survive even though they had to take most of the catch to the state owned fishery.* Political changes, obviously had repercussions on the interethnic relations in the city. At least in the first decade, the Lipovans in Sulina seemed to have been the protégées of the communist regime (occupying preferentially offices in the local administration, enjoying certain privileges such as access to food etc.). *For the others, bread was scarce and rationalized. Traditionally, when people have guests they give them the best they have in the house. In those times, it was bread. We were queuing for hours to get to buy a skinny chicken. Nevertheless, gradually the communists provided jobs for everybody* (Mrs.T.).

In the majority of the narrations of people who "came" to Sulina, the place was not a very welcoming one, having obviously lost its interwar appeal. Mrs. P, 96, Ukrainian, and probably the oldest in Sulina, remembers that when she came to Sulina, *nobody had gardens. There were only fishermen, and nobody had gardens*. Also, Mr. S., 73, Lipovan, has a very austere recording of his coming to the city: *In 1953, when I came, the city was old, old. Old buildings. No hotels. We cut some reed and slept on it in a building, we were 30-40 men working at ice-cutting. The city was degraded, mostly Turkish buildings. Very cold. Until the '70, the 6 street only had a few houses. That's when they started building in this area*. Mr. H., although Lipovan, went to Romanian school (in the '50s). *We had teachers who were sent here as political punishment. When we came to the Romanian school, there were the Androcencu sisters, who were very elegant. And we, the Lipoveni kids, were wearing gum shoes and cloths re-tailored from our brothers, you can imagine. But we were very good at math.*

In a kind of symbolic "compensation" for the lost of the interwar prosperity of Sulina, some of the informants "remember" the good times of the communist period (when the *porto franco* functioned in one part of the city and allowed people, using different half-legal strategies, to sneak in and buy cheaper merchandises, later sold at a bigger price in the "other" part) . Part of the same narrative, others remember, with visible satisfaction, how they used to steal from the huge amounts of sugar, for example, that was being loaded on ships in that area. The methods and situation are strikingly similar to those of the half-pirates/half-thieves inhabitants of XIX century Sulina. This is in fact part of a recurrent narrative that seems to inform the present local identity, as a kind of pride taken in avoiding taxes and gently working around the law. The prosperous – for some - period of the communist regime seems to act, in certain narratives, as a compensation for the affluence of the interwar period and in contrast with the current uncertainty of the transition.

This is where the waters of "memory" come apart. On one hand, we have this official, some-how "programmatic" nostalgia for the CED period, and the overarching narrative, in which everyone seems to participate optimistically, of a "mythical" Sulina, a city of incredible affluence, with "over 40,000 inhabitants" (compared to less than 5,000 today), "27 ethnicities", several confessions and ethnic schools. On the other hand, most of the current

inhabitants of Sulina yearn for the (presumed) security – both social and economic – of the communist period. As Pine, Kaneff and Haukanes make clear, conflicts over memory are not only about the historical truth, but also about identity claims and power (Pine, Kaneff and Haukanes 2004: 3-4). In this case, divergence over memory can hide an underlying, tacit divergence between groups, who develop loyalties and memories of different times. After all, many of the Lipoveni and Romanians used to work for the Greeks and Armenians – main characters in the nostalgic narratives - sometimes as domestic servants. Even when they participate in a common mnemonic account of Sulina's "good times", details of their own biography locate them in different social strata and places.

In Sulina, the urban landscape appears extremely permeable to socio-political variations, while mainstream discourses of memory reconstruct a rather abstract "historical" Sulina that does not seem to adhere to the city landscape of the present. Though remnant buildings are testimony to the golden ages and the official discourse looks good on tourist brochures and sometimes tricks uninformed visitors, there is clearly a hiatus between this official narrative and the local urban palimpsest. A local museum in a former lighthouse speaks mostly of the local hero, the writer Jean Bart, and the activities of CED, but does not manage to envision the intercultural life of the antebellum city; nor does the annual Festival of Minorities, trying to exhibit the ethnic diversity of the region (Greeks, Lipoveni, Turks, Tatars, Armenians etc.), or the highly advertised "maritime cemetery", with separate sections for Christians, Jewish, Muslim and Lipoveni old-believers. The urban landscape of Sulina is composed of "historical" buildings, many of them anonymous, with no specific story, just a free-floating narrative filled with nostalgia that rarely actually clings to a certain edifice.

Tim Edensor argues that "in a conventional reading of the urban landscape, dereliction and ruin is a sign of waste and for local politicians and entrepreneurs, tends to provide stark evidence of an area's lack, that simultaneously signifies a vanished prosperity and by contrast, an uncertain future" (Edensor, 2005: 7). The ruins in the urban scenery of Sulina (old damaged houses, sometimes just a façade still standing while on the inside wild vegetation has literally consumed the walls, abandoned shops still bearing "communist" inscriptions) speak different memories and evoke different stories and ghosts. They make up a contradictory and heterogeneous urban landscape, with restaurants full of lights and voices neighboring a silent and dim empty house, the former communist market, deserted for years and suddenly transformed into the most fashionable open air restaurant for tourists, hiding behind it the unpretentious local taverns mostly frequented by Lipoveni. The half-wild horse eating the flowers in front of the Townhall in broad daylight, with the European flag waving and the amused tourists passing by is just part of the picture and a piece of the bewildering, unexplainable allure of the place.

This first street, paralleling the stream of Danube, full of sounds and lights in the warm summer nights, overlooks the old shipyard and the Prospect fishermen neighborhood across the Danube, where life has a different rhythm, prices are smaller and there are hardly any lights at night. This heterogeneous physical landscape is wrapped in multiple overlapping semiotic strata. Stories of people born in Sulina, whose lives are intimately intricate with its history, stories of people who came "to the city" from the deep of the swamp, for whom the space of the urban is a collection of ill-fated places and magical spots, of supernatural inter-dictions and witchcraft, stories of people who try to find the stories of the city, and overall, the mainstream narrative about "how this city used to be", a narrative that feeds the local pride and substantiates the identity of the place.

What this overarching narrative, that seems to saturate the current social and discursive space, is actually doing is to silent counter-memories, the kind of memories that would testify to a different record of the past. Tim Edensor discusses "the power of involuntary memories" that "also lies in other experiences beyond childhood, in the rooms we have lived in, places

we have been, things we have handled and the faces we have known but appeared to have entirely forgotten. These experiences, constituting a storehouse of mundane and extra-ordinary events, mix sensations – and hence bodily memories – together with the recall of overlapping geographies with their reference points, routes and networks" (Edensor, 2005: 144-5). A ruined factory is also the space in which people have worked, walked, laughed, lived; all those memories still cling indistinctly to the space and the walls and the rooms of that deserted building. As de Certeau and Giard argue, "successive living spaces never disappear completely; we leave them without leaving them because they live in turn, invisible and present, in our memories and in our dreams. They journey with us" (apud Edensor, 2005: 145).

In Sulina, the fish-tinning factory, built upon the place of a destroyed Armenian church, stands quiet in the sun, in a deceptive anonymity. A critical challenge for the researcher would be to unravel all those embodied, sensual memories which are still dormant or have been intentionally muted by prevailing narratives. In a place like Sulina, with so many over-lapping semiotic and mnemonic layers, in which political and social features have changed the rules of the game, at least in surface, so many times, gaining access to such memories and minutiae of day-to-day life during communism, to the embodied memories of working in a factory and the biographical details of the transition from rural to (quasi-)urban living, would open up a new and deeper understanding of this particular place, of the stories people tell and the stories they hide, all of them, in one way or another, shaping the current life and land-scape of Sulina.

i See Irwin-Zarecka (1994).
ii This could be interpreted as part of an overall narrative in post-communist Romania of the "golden ages" of the interwar period, where people (and politicians) turn to when they want to elude the communist period.
iii "Mahala" is a word derived from Turkish (originally meaning "neighborhood"), but in Romanian has a rather pejorative meaning, as suburban neighborhood, with specific habits and behaviors, usually populated by minorities.
iv "Sulina changed. I left in the 60's from Sulina, and came back in 1973. And it was different, I don't know what, but it changed" (Mr. H., 64).
v "In the *porto franco,* people that were selling milk were allowed to get in, they were selling the milk and then hide forbidden merchandise in the cans. Even textiles, they would put it around the waist underneath the cloths, to avoid the taxes at the customs" (Mr. P., 72).
vi "Also, with sugar was very nice…We used to go by boat close to the ship, and they gave us sacks of sugar, we filled up the boat. And we just paid very little. Periprava was full of sugar, Sfistofca was full of sugar. Even so, the owners used to come here as the only place where there is no stealing. Because in other places it was even worse. And for those quantities, the stealing was insignificant" (Mr. H., 64).

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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.

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