



Research Article

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Received: 3 November 2020 / Accepted: 19 December 2020 / Published: 5 March 2021

Remembering the Albanian Communism: The Creation of the Collective Memory Through the Lens of the Literature of Memory of the Albanian Catholic Clergy

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.36941/ajis-2021-0051>

Abstract

This paper aims to analyze the contribution that the literature of memory is giving in the process of constructing the collective memory about the Albanian communism. The main work, which is the central part of our research, is about Father Zef Pllumi's book "Live only to tell" which is considered as a monument of the collective memory regarding the Albanian experience during communism. Also, this paper aims to analyze the contribution of other Albanian Catholic clergy had in facing the communist regime in Albania and the legacy they left in creating the Albanian collective memory. The method of research used is a textual analysis of the narration and the relation between fiction and history, between the general historical myth and the personal truth, which is a very interesting type of literature that is written like history but, at the same time, it feels like fiction. After the fall of communism in Albania, the Albanians, especially those who were subjected to this extreme violence and oppression, felt the need to share their experience in various ways. One way was through the literature of memory, which is an important element in the process of the creation of collective memory for a very disturbing past for every post-communist country.

Keywords: communism, collective memory, the literature of memory, testimony, documentary prose

1. Introduction

"... you must live only to tell. Even if you are not able to do anything else in your life, **live only to tell**. Do you fully understand what I'm trying to tell you? Everyone else is dead, we are dead and you are going to be dead too: everyone is going to be forgotten if no one is not going to tell what happened. **Who lives must tell!** It is not because we are going to die today. We already know that. But we must not be forgotten for tomorrow and the next centuries. Do you understand that? Brother Zef, today I'm your Superior and I'm giving you an order: go, live! Only to tell!" (Pllumi, 2006, p. 253).

Soon after the fall of communism in Albania, the Albanians, especially those who were subjected to the immense violence and oppression from that political system, felt the urge to tell their stories. For some of them, that wasn't just something that was done because they wanted to be famous or important in the eyes of the world, but they wanted to inform everyone on what really happened during that dark period of Albania's history.

On the other hand, this was also a way to confront themselves with their sad past as a need they had to survive again in the new reality after communism collapsed. As Hauser states *"the recuperation of the historical memory, especially of those aspects censored during communism was an important aspect of the deep post-communist transformations"* (Hauser, 2011, p. 159).

In the respect of the recuperation of the historical memory in 2010 in Albania was founded the Institute for the Study of the Crimes and the Consequences of Communism (Instituti për Studimin e Krimeve dhe Pasojave të Komunizmit- ISKPK) which is serving to the process of making public the experience of the people that used to suffer under communism, through numerous publications every year. Several of these publications resulted very helpfully for this paper, such as *Zërat e kujtesës*, vol. I-V (The Voices of Memory, vol. I-V); *Burgjet dhe kampet e Shqipërisë komuniste* (The Prisons and the Camps of Communist Albania); *Nën terrorin Komunist* (Under the Communist Terror); *Terrori komunist i vitit 1951* (The Communist Terror of the year 1951); *Dosja e diktaturës* (The File of Dictatorship); *At Pjetër Meshkalla* (Father Pjetër Meshkalla); *I Lumi Dom Shtjefën Kurti, Dëshmitar i Kishës Martire* (The Beatified Dom Shtjefën Kurti, Testimony of the Martyr Church).

Religion was severely attacked during Albanian communism. In 1967 Albanian communist regime proclaimed Albania as an "atheist state" and everyone who was part of religious institutions had only two choices: that person either had to abandon his faith and in a lot of cases he had to do this disconnection with his religion in public, as a propagandistic way to make the others, either his colleagues or the believers, to follow his example and this was somehow the "easy" way. Or he could choose to face the situation, to not accept to do this forced choice and this would mean only one thing: the beginning of living a hell on earth until their last breath:

"The hunger and the instinct of survival are strong enough to bend on his knee even the people with toughest characters. These are the miracles of the Devil because on the face of the earth miracles happen but you have to discern which of these miracles come from God and which from the Devil" (Pllumi, 2006, p. 201).

This choice would mean imprisonment, physical and psychological tortures beyond imagination, and total deprivation from basic human rights. Living in those extreme conditions gives us the "perfect" example of the literal meaning of the word "survival".

According to Joanna Wawrzyniak (2015) under these circumstances the memory and to be more precise the "functional memory" is very important in the process of building social identity:

"What is of interest here and may be termed the cultural approach in memory studies is based on analysis of the various products of culture that, depending on the methodological stance of a given author, are treated as representations and institutionalizations of some sort of 'collective consciousness' in the Durkheimian sense, or as products of the accumulation and interpenetration of various versions of the past. (...) One of the most useful distinctions advanced by Aleida Assmann is that between 'storage memory' (Speichergedächtnis) and 'working memory' (Funktionsgedächtnis). The former does not play any crucial role in the present (but might be activated one day), whereas the latter is important for the formation and maintenance of social identity" (Wawrzyniak, 2015, pp.21-22).

2. Method and Materials

This article presents a research made based specifically on the work of one of the most important testimonies for the communist regime, the documentary prose "Live only to tell", by Father Zef Pllumi.

The method used in this paper is a *textual analysis* of the narration and the relation between

fiction and history, between the general *myth* and the personal *truth*, which is a very interesting type of literature that is written like history but, at the same time, it feels like fiction. Like Michael Calvin McGee mentions “one can get a more developed picture of a whole “text” by considering three structural relationships, between an apparently finished discourse and its sources, between an apparently finished discourse and culture, and between an apparently finished discourse and its influence” (McGee, 1990, pp. 274-89).

3. Analysis of Results

The history of Albanian literature and theater remains a study challenge, despite the great documentary contributions so far, from its scholars. The discovery, recognition, and publication of other works, still sleeping in archival funds, will be another attempt to enrich the Albanian dramatic history, the trinomial language-imitation-public, which require profound observation of social development in the concrete period historical, infrastructure and theater structures, dramatic production review, and publishing, reading and re-reading dramatic texts of the time.

These were our efforts, which with modesty and extraordinary gratitude to the contributors of this genre to our beloved, we present it to the reader.

Father Zef Pllumi, is one of the few priests who managed to stay alive for about three decades in different prisons around Albania. He was convicted as a political prisoner with the only “fault” that he was a priest and that he didn’t admit to abandoning his devotion to God.

After spending more than a quarter of a century in Albanian communist prisons he was released in 1990, at the time when the regime was falling apart. In 1995 was published the first part of his trilogy “Live only to tell” (in Albanian, “Rrno vetëm për me tregue”, Pllumi, 2006), which was a testimony of one of the few survivors priests of the communist prisons and one of the most important intellectuals who brought maybe the most complete data that Albanian history has in the respect of communist period.

“Literary scholars are also intensely interested in memory-related issues, from several vantage points. The accuracy (or tendentiousness) of autobiographical memoirs represent one case in point. Usually, memoirs are written late in life, sometimes without the aid of diaries or notes, so their veracity (especially of distant recollections of complex events) may be questioned. In addition, every part of the world has its own history, culture and myths, and the preferred narrative forms for making sense of the past may vary across peoples.” (Roediger & Wertsch, 2008, pp. 12-13)

We think that the opinion above from Roediger & Wertsch matches perfectly with the case of Father Zef Pllumi and his saga “Live only to tell”, as a personal way to tell a personal history.

This type of history we are talking about in this paper is not an academic history, it is the narration of a personal story, it is the story of Father Zef Pllumi itself and at the same time, it is the story of all those people who refused to submit their freedom of thinking and being different to the regime. This book is a personal testimony, as well as a collective testimony of the people who were imprisoned, also it is the story of all the other Albanians who maybe were not in a penitentiary institution called prison but, in fact, they were also deprived of a lot of basic rights and they just had the illusion of being free while they were actually living in a larger scale prison called Albania and this fact had to be narrated not only through history but also through literature which is personal and collective at the same time:

The ‘collective memory’ of war is not what everybody thinks about war; it is a phrase without purchase when we try to disentangle the behavior of different groups within the collective. Some act; others – most others – do not. Through the constant interrogation of actors and actions, we separate ‘collective memory’ from a vague wave of associations which supposedly come over an entire population when a set of past events is mentioned. (Winter, J., Sivan, E. 1999, p. 9.)

Heidegger (1976), breaking down the relation between speech and discourse, sees the second as

the home of being, which, according to him, decides whether to wake up in certain periods, while Derrida judges that between being as such, language and speech, there is a "difference". The Being is differentiated in language, it is mediating, but it departs from language, becomes present but absent at the same time, becomes a sign, becomes a trace, considering the text as bearer of meaning and witnesses of an event. Truth becomes a trace, while writing, the linguistic sign, reflects the truth between the lines, in what is not stated in the text, but in which the text itself is a sign, thus by going through the process of destroying the text, where the being itself has left a mark. "Leave the word, let it speak for herself, which it can only do in writing" (Derrida, 1978).

"Live only to tell" is written in a documentary novel style which means that in one hand this work can be read as a factual history book and on the other hand, without losing the dimension of the historical truth, the experience of reading this type of history is not the same as reading just a bunch of facts, dates, names or events:

In the non-fiction novel, new journalism, "faction", or whatever one calls it, the novelistic generate an excitement, intensity and emotive power that orthodox reporting of historiography do not aspire to, while for the reader the guarantee that the story is "true" gives it a compulsion that no fiction can quite equal" (Lodge, 1992, p. 203).

This special type of prose offers to the reader the emotional feeling of reading a fictional book but with real facts and episodes:

The boundaries of the fictional literature are not rigid, but often are fluid therefore it is not always easy to define which work is literature and which is not. On the contrary, some works are not written for literary purposes (but for historical, philosophical purposes, etc.) and that latter is accepted in the canon of the fictional literature" (Gojcaj, 2007, p. 34).

Despite the title of the book, Father Zef Pllumi did not want "only to tell" what happened in communism but in this novel, he also wants to narrate everything in a way so it can't be forgotten from the reader and this is why his history is a personal history and a collective memory, full of emotions and not only an assemblage of cold historical facts. In this respect, we agree with J. Wawrzyniak when she argues as below:

What recent scholarship in memory studies teaches us is that collective memory is not just a collection of ideas about the past but, above all, a product of communication. In this process, private and vernacular memories are transformed into narratives that feature elements of 'invented tradition', and these are in turn transmitted to new members of social groups as the official history of the group, which can be also termed 'public memory' (Wawrzyniak, 2015, pp.21-22).

Probably Father Zef Pllumi would not have been the one we know today from the testimony that he has left behind if he had not been so strongly tested through his long years of prison. Evidently, the deep spiritual peace and the great lucidity of reasoning which is felt while reading "Live only to tell" would have never been the same unless he was tested through the fire of suffering. Through this bitter experience, Father Zef Pllumi is a member of a *memory group* which never chase to tell us the real face of communism.

According to H. Marcuse (2001) *such groups usually share common experiences and goals, as well as images of the past ... Individuals who accept the memories, values, and aspirations become part of a memory group; members who no longer share them, leave it' (Marcuse, 2001, p.14).*

4. Discussion

Dante Alighieri in "The Divine Comedy" had to go down to Hell before going to Paradise and Odysseus had to fight with the monsters before he could to return at his home, in Ithaca. It seems that there is a universal paradigm in the way things work: there is no easy way out to find the real self and, in some

cases, this way is very hard to be undertaken, but it is the only way.

Father Zef Pllumi made the decision and chose, with his free will, to make the same Dantesque journey through the communist prisons, from horror to another horror, year after year, until one day he had the opportunity to write his memories a whole the experience he had and to share it with the others so everyone could understand what Albanian communism really was:

The events that I'm telling here are very difficult to write, therefore I'm asking you to forgive me because I'm not a writer and I'm kindly asking you to reflect a lot on the events I'm telling here and to think for the real cause why they happen...Why?" (Pllumi, 2006. p. 15).

Joanna Wawrzyniak (2015) speaks about how important is the category of myth as a "rejection of historicity" in the process of creating the collective memory:

At the same time, the category of 'myth' can help us to grasp these forms of collective memory that function as metanarratives about the past. As a story about origins, a myth serves cognitive, integrative, communicative and legitimizing functions, and in modern times is often advanced by the state. The time of myth is 'a rejection of historicity', a liberation from linear time, and enacting of the past in the present. Myth is recognizable above all in the system of symbols and rituals. Various memory groups might organize their stories and actions according to a myth, and they may contest dominant myths (Wawrzyniak, 2015, pp. 22-23).

However, his journey was not as parabolic like that of Dante or as fabulous as that of Odysseus. Father Zef Pllumi made a journey of flesh and blood, through a terrestrial hell, filled with horrors no less shocking than the Dante's or Homeric scenes. Today we can also see this Franciscan priest journey, who was blamelessly sentenced (same like Jesus Christ) as an allegory, same like the allegories of Dante and Homer: as the allegory of seeking a new "Paradise" or a new "Ithaca", in other words, seeking the personal spiritual peace and the fulfillment of his religious tasks.

In fact, the Marxism itself proved to be also a "religion" because of his "mythical structure", according to M. Eliade (1957):

It has been also widely argued that Marxist thought had a mythical structure. The struggle of the proletariat with the bourgeoisie was presented as the final battle between good and evil. The struggle and suffering of the communist redeemer led to an ontological change in the order of the world, including the creation of the 'state of the Sun', or 'kingdom of freedom'; a society without class divisions and ethnic belonging would be both the beginning and the end of history (Eliade. 1957, p.20, cited after Joanna Wawrzyniak, 2015, pp. 22-23).

In this particular type of prose, the place that almost the whole story talks about, in the majority part of the novel, is the space of communist prisons. On the other hand, within this place, in the conditions of the violence and the extreme oppression of the fundamental human rights, Father Zef Pllumi creates, however, an inner dimension of freedom, which is a state of mind of considering somehow being free and creating this new reality inside the cells of the prison:

Despite our political and religious point of view, we were good people: we were all brothers. This was the canal in the middle of the marsh, where all the religious, social and political ideologies used to sink and what remained was only the man. This is the law and the command of the true God." (Pllumi, 2006, p. 212).

Through this way of thinking, he proves exactly the idea that freedom to exist and to think is an indestructible personal right and that it cannot be annihilated even through limitations, constraints, or even physical violence. The survival of Father Zef Pllumi is not limited only to physical survival because if it was just that, he would not choose to pursue his religious and spiritual vocation when he had obvious consequences for this choice. He understands survival as an effort and resistance of being free and he understands that seeking for freedom would mean being under a constant risk:

"All the countries under the communist rule has had numerous victims in this regime. But it is not only the memory for the crimes of the past and the memory of the victims that unites us. What unites us is the memory of the love for freedom and for those people which despite all the oppression managed to find the courage to oppose the regime with their open protests and to risk their life and the health of their families and also the future of their children." (Eppelmann, 2011, p. 7)

Despite appearing as a tale that speaks about prison, no matter how paradoxical it may seem, "Live only to tell" actually talks about freedom. In all the meanings of the word "prison" there is not a single connotation that gives a positive feeling, but if we read this book with the right attention "Live only to tell", we would see that Father Zef Pllumi is spiritually a completely free man.

He lives out of the physical situation where he is and, in his mind, he tries to create small pieces of freedom to survive. For example, we can see these little spaces of freedom when he tries to create a garden of flowers in the prison camp; when he becomes "friends" with a toad that he takes care of it every day to feed him and shed tears when he learns that the toad has been poisoned during a disinfection process in the prison; when the cats return to the beloved friends of the inmates and when the presence of the mice's is not as terrible when you are in the isolation room and when only the presence of another living being keeps alive the hope that you will survive another day.

Father Zef Pllumi has an impressive desire to create, no matter what. He wants to create even in the conditions when he faces with infectious diseases or epidemics that were present in the prison camps and when the prisoners use to die every day; he wants to create despite gangrenous wounds, malnutrition, water infected with worms which must be drunk anyway because of the extreme thirst and the close possibility of death from the dehydration. The immense joy that he has when he had to fix an old writing machine, to build tools, or the desire to make new friends in any prison where he went, was certainly a form of physical survival and a way to maintain the mental balance that, in that situation, was a nearly impossible mission. Father Zef Pllumi creates a brand new "place" to set his existence to escape from that physical state which he could not change. This new reality is in its mental state which rejects what is happening.

This might be exactly the case that supports the concept that there is no really an "objective" reality and that everything is a matter of perception and choice. On the other hand, his steadfast resistance to faith makes him see every moment of suffering as a new step that brings him closer to his Creator. In his mind and thoughts is clear the idea that the suffering of the flesh cannot destroy the human soul. He accepts to "hold his cross" and from this Christian perspective, of all the situations like being under physical tortures or mental pressure, are faced under this divine light, which enables the creation of this new spiritual level of existence that overcomes the physical one.

In Matthew's Gospel (Matthew 4: 1-11), it is said that Jesus Christ was brought into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit Himself to be tempted by the Devil by allowing him to fast for 40 days and that because of His human nature Jesus was quite hungry. When the Devil saw this human weakness, the hunger, the pain of the flesh, thought to benefit to overcome Christ by remembering His omnipotent divine nature and telling him that Christ could easily turn stones into bread, but the son of God and son of man at the same time responds:

*It is written that man does not live only by bread but by every word that comes from God's mouth.
(Matthew 4: 4, The Bible, The New Testament)*

We believe that Father Zef Pllumi, as a son of man, and as a man of God, has internalized this gospel and that was the reason why he survived in his long years of suffering.

Other contributions by Albanian Catholic clergy:

The constellation of Franciscan and Jesuit fathers, the Catholic clergy in general, over the course of our history, marks a large number of contributing personalities in the field of artistic creation; it encompasses all areas of human thought and creation:

Fr. Leonardo De Martino (Arberesh) (1830-1923) poet, playwright.

Dom Pashko Babi (1843-1905), translator, writer.

Dom Ndue Bytyçi (1847-1917) poet, pedagogy scholar.
Fr. Anton Xanoni (1863-1915) writer, textbook author, literary anthology compiler.
Dom Ndoc Nikaj (1864-1951), historian and writer.
Dom Ndré Mjedja (1866-1937), poet and philologist.
Fr. Pashk Bardhi (1870-1948), writer.
Fr. Gjergj Fishta, (1871-1940), poet, playwright, translator, publicist, etc.
Fr. Shtjefjen Gjekov (1874-1948), ethnologist, researcher of customary law.
Fr. Pal Dodaj (1880-1951) publicist.
Fr. Marin Sirdani (1885-1962), writer and historian.
Fr. Vincenc Prennushi (1885-1949), folklorist, poet, playwright, translator.
Fr. Anton Harapi (1888-1946), speaker, publicist.
Fr. Justin Rrota (1889-1964), linguist, writer.
Dom Lazer Shantoja (1891-1945), poet, publicist, first Albanian Esperantist.
Fr. Bernardin Palaj (1894-1949), ethnologist, poet and playwright.
Fr. Donat Kurti (1903-1983), ethnologist, professor, translator.
Fr. Benedikt Dema (1904-1960), writer and publicist.
Fr. Gjon Shllaku (1907-1946), philosopher and educator.

Fr. Daniel Dajani (1916-1947) publicist and so on, they are also real contributors to the establishment of Albanian schools, in the education of the population and the dissemination of knowledge.

5. Conclusion

With his monumental work "Live only to tell" Father Zef Pllumi gives to us a spiritual, as well intellectual legacy, through his narration and documentation of the Albanian communist past. This testimony of human dignity against oppression and violence should serve to us as a fundament to maintain a current relation with the collective memory and our traumatic past, so we can be aware of the risks of totalitarianism and authoritarianism while we try to build a better future for the next generations.

The contribution of other Albanian Catholic Clergy in creating the institution of collective memory through their works is also very important. With the motto of their apostolic-pastoral and patriotic *Religion and Homeland*, a task for the Franciscans and Jesuits was education, particularly in conditions of almost total illiteracy and deteriorated language after five centuries of occupation. In this picture, the return of attention was immediate in the traditions and significant figures of Albanian life, highlighting the parallels (mythical, legendary) and the historical-literary arsenal through the instrument of the native language. A great contribution was given to our classical literature, as it has been observed and continued, that the genre of drama was a preference for their creativity, and this bears the explanatory argument, due to the particularity of genre itself, but also of the extra-national panorama that we mentioned earlier.

The significance of the discovery, recognition, reading and re-reading of Albanian literature and especially the literature of memory has put our scholars in our literature quite and fairly rightly. The history of civilization cannot be complete without the identification of cultural facts of development, namely art and literature. *In this way it is hoped that the modern reader, who inevitably approaches this subject with some prejudice as a "book" should look and be read, can be helped to form an idea of some fundamental differences between antiquity and modern literary culture, and thus achieve a clearer evaluation of books.* (The Cambridge History Of Classical Literature, 2008, pp. 3-4)

This literature text, in Gegh dialect, which is one of the two dialects of Albania (Ghegh is the Northern and Toskë is the Southern dialect) we believe contributes to the recognition and reading of literature, in Albanian contexts, in the recognition of our literary heritage and the creation of active reports with it.

According to Louise Cowan, in his book *Invitation for Classics*, "classical authors exhibit remarkable style, fine workmanship and intense intellect, create minds of imagination and thought,

portraying life as complex. This goal is accomplished by the classics by describing the negative and positive aspects of the human character in the process of discovering and testing the virtues that are sustainable. Classical books have a transformational effect on the reader's self-understanding, as well as inviting and surviving frequent readings. Classics fit in different times and places and provide a sense of common life for humankind, while their appeal lasts long". (Cowan, 1998)

Classical literature remains an invitation to understand the essence of our existence and civilization through inspiration and literary passion:

National classics are read in difficult times. Times are repeated, resembling each other, no matter the circumstances, even the classics in their works exhibit the fundamental features of the nation, characterizing situations that are not just a matter of time. The fundamental ideas of their works are continually repeated, whether they are praise or criticism for the nation (Hamiti, 2013).

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