

Communist power did not need local communities because of their hidden potential of solidarity in a smaller group than the nation. The entire cultural discourse was “national”, because the power needed only one type of solidarity: around the dictator. Museums could not make an exception. All the museums had to copy the „national“ ones. This fact was obvious, especially, in the case of the history museums, because of the easiness with which this kind of museums may be politicised. The propaganda institutions issued even an official guide, describing the “story” of any history exhibition from Romania. All of them should have start with the Palaeolithic and should have end with the last communist party congress. It would have been difficult to recognize the identity of any local museum. That is why, the inhabitants of any city or town would not have felt any real connection with “their” museum.

Not only the exhibitions’ content was de-personalized. The entire institution was just one of the many cultural institutions of the country, having only one goal: that of propagating the party’s politics. Having no specific identity, these museums were subordinated, in fact, not to the local authorities, but to the central ones, though the directors were appointed locally. It is, also, interesting to note that by the end of the ‘70’s, the state started to unite many of the local museums in county museums. In the very first years of the next decade, most of the different specialised county museums were united in the so called “county complexes”; this meant that a county museum of natural sciences, one of history, one of art and one of ethnology came under the same administration.

After communism has collapsed, the new realities have produced very slow changes in the local museums, because of several reasons.

First of them was the simple inertia of the people. Though good professionals, many curators knew to make only one type of exhibition: the one they did until that very moment. This meant that the whole concept of planning and mounting exhibitions was one corrupted with politics and political propaganda. Secondly, they lack different experiences, while not being allowed to travel and/or not having access to foreign publications. Many of the curators, simply were not aware that different kind of exhibitions could be realized. Thirdly, the historical research was hiding many aspects of the past realities, for the same political and propagandistic reasons. It was extremely difficult, in such conditions, to come with new facts, as long as many archives were closed and historical researches were far for being satisfactory. Fourthly, the heritage owned by the museums was not enough illustrative to sustain a new exhibition theme and the need for new acquisitions campaigns was obvious. Fifthly, the lack of money and desire to mount new exhibitions were, somehow, contagious,

when many other temptations have appeared and the whole society was confused about what were the priorities. One of these priorities was the mere status of museums and curators. Already, at the end of the 1989, the debate about the need for a special law on museums was started. Curators were trying to gather in different associative structures and to define the future of their institutions. Much of energy was spent on these activities – unfortunately, with fewer results. Sixthly, only a few of the directors were prepared to be good managers, to have initiative and to ignore waiting for orders that would not come, anymore, from nobody. The people were, finally, free, but many of them could just not believe it or they did not know what to do with their new liberty. Museums, as many other cultural institutions were not ready at all to face the new political, economic and social realities of the '90's. Finally, because many curators were trying to escape – in the decades before – from being transformed into propaganda activists, themselves, many of them have tried to harbour themselves into “pure” research, forgetting about their duties towards the communities in which the museums were built. For many curators, it was, somehow, felt as a humiliation to devote time and energy for visitors and, generally speaking, for local communities. The only duty of a curator was felt to be that of devoting her/his resources to the researchers' community.

It was impossible to change all these realities over night or, even, over one or two years. In many county museums, curators have decided to bring back their institution's independence. Some of the “county complexes” were split in their initial components. Apart of the professional reasons, we may say that the society was not ready to welcome, for many years, local museums, because many of the specific links that are common in a local community were and are still missing in the Romanian society. The four decades of social experiments have forcibly moved huge masses of people from rural to urban areas and from one region to another, dislocating national minorities from their usual habitats and destroying traditional localities just for the sake of an artificial and superficial “modernisation” of the living conditions. Many of the new urban inhabitants did not feel “at home” in their tiny flats in dilapidated blocks from remote districts. For these people, a potential local museum would have told a story that was not their, and thus, it was extremely difficult for the curators to look for the right way to communicate with them. On one side, these people were not ready to integrate themselves in the urban communities and on the other side, curators had no special strategies to deal with them. Another obstacle was that of the local public administration. Almost half of century, the local administration was just an obedient accomplice of the orders coming from the central administration. one cannot build a local community without legal tools: accountable elected local officials – mayors and councils – local budgets and legal frames for taking decisions. All of these tools started to be seriously taken into consideration only after the end of 1991, when the new Constitution have stated that the local councils are not representatives of the central power, of the state. Still, after ten years, the system is not a very efficient one: the law on local public administration was fundamentally changed early, this year, the law on local public finances is going to be changed, as it would be, probably, the law on local elections.

One of the delicate matters concerning the local museums, in Romania was the de-centralisation. When the Ministry of Culture was organised, by the end of 1989, a total confusion surrounded the status of the cultural institutions that were not considered to be of “national importance”. Leaving aside the ambition of some of these institutions to “upgrade” their role and place from the local profile to a national one, the Ministry have decided it’s network of subordinated institutions during 1990 and most of the museums were left aside, being placed under the local authorities, in spite of their obvious weakness. The situation changed in 1994, when the Ministry took under it’s authority almost all the museums that were subordinated to the county councils. The main reason was the desire of the Ministry to have full control over the decisions of two county museums placed in the two Romanian counties inhabited, mainly, by the Hungarian national minority. One of these museums, with more rapid reactions, have preferred to split it’s entities and enter under the control of the different localities where it had branches. Thus, on the “ruins” of the county museum, in a few days, have appeared six local museums. We have to add that some other county councils vigorously contested the governmental decision. After two years of trials and disputes, in 1997, the Ministry of Culture have started, one more time, the process of de-centralisation and it is worthy to note that this process, though it lost some of it’s speed, was never entirely stopped and it is still under way, right now. Thus, most of the museums having local importance came under the rule of the counties. For them, only starting with 1997, when their legal status was, finally, established, the need to start a local strategy for their further development was felt.

Some steps are to be taken. First of all, the museum managers and the administrators have to decide if they would have a pure local museum or rather a regional one. In this respect, they have to take into consideration two factors: the museum’s heritage and the financial possibilities. It would be desirable to take these steps even before the new law on public museums and collections would come into force (probably, by the end of the next year). That law would start a procedure of accreditation, trying to fix museums into certain categories: national, regional and local. It would be much easier to take these decisions right now, without the pressure of accomplishing some legal terms. Once fixed, the authority in charge should ask the museum to define itself a certain mission and that authority should accept this one. A second step would be that of adapting the museum’s policies to the assumed status, regarding future acquisitions and research campaigns, in order to come closer to the museum’s mission. A third step would be that of drafting a new visitor’s policy, taking into consideration a presumed profile of the most common today’s visitor and that of the public categories the museum wishes to attract, in future. After all these steps are secured, the museum may start the real work, in order to accomplish its duties towards the local or regional community.

A great help may come from international bodies. Professionally speaking, ICOM has, of course, a leading role. It’s International Committee for Regional Museums would need a better dissemination. The European Museum Forum comes closer. It was created and it stands, since then, in the middle of the “road” between museum professionals and museum’s

public and it offers precious professional advice. On the other side, all the museum managers should be aware of the possibilities of taking part in international projects, financed by the European Commission, through it's Phare programme. In order to be ready to take all the advantages from the development funds released by the European Commission, the museum managers need to have permanent and solid contacts with European partners and, of course, pragmatic and creative ideas to fulfil by the mean of this programme.

However, all this work has only a preparative feature. It is necessary for the biggest challenge the museum has to face; the meeting with the community. Any public museum should keep in it's mission the rule of serving those who are paying for it: the local contributors. If all the preparatory steps (changes in management, in the economic field of activity, in the public relations' one a.s.o.) are taken in, maybe, an easier manner, this last one implies a profound change of mentality and it would take more years from now on. When judging this change in the curators' mentalities, it is obvious that many good examples could be offered, already, as those concerning the local and regional museums from Slobozia, Călărași, Giurgiu, Brăila, Miercurea Ciuc and Galați, but there is, still, a long way to go on, in front of most of the museums, in the years to come. Ironically, this way seems to be longer right now, when it is clearer then ever, in the last decade, that museums should become stronger actors in educating the local communities and in preparing them for a true global world with global problems and global wars.