

USING AN ANCIENT SAINT FOR CONTEMPORARY POLITICAL PURPOSES: THE CASE OF IRENAEUS OF SIRMIUM IN SREMSKA MITROVICA TODAY

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In the Later Roman Empire, during the early centuries of our era, Sirmium was one of the most significant urban centers. Settled in Pannonia, on the crossroads and between the two important rivers, Danube and Sava, it caught the eye of the Roman emperors and became one of the emperors' capitals during Diocletian's tetrarchy. Parallel to it, it has become the eminent Christian center and the place where, after the fourth edict against Christians, issued by Diocletian, many martyrs ended their lives. When the infamous persecutions occurred in 304 CE, one of the martyrs who died for faith in this city was the first bishop of Sirmium, Irenaeus.

The hagiographical narrative that has accrued around his name claims that he was so assiduous in his faith that he endured a number of days in a prison. Although maltreated and forced to sacrifice to pagan gods, he consistently refused to do so. After a while, he was taken to a bridge, where he was again asked to sacrifice, at least for the sake of his family. He rebuffed them, saying he had no family. After abnegating all for Christ, he was beheaded, after which his body was thrown into the river Sava.

Today there are existing remains related to Irenaeus in Sremska Mitrovica, the current name of the city. These archeological remains testify to the existence of the early cult, dated to the period from the 4th – 6th centuries CE. The destiny of the city was turbulent and saw many successions of inhabitants and invaders, so the cult places ceased to function and the name of this saint went into oblivion. Interestingly, it popped up again through a number of manuscripts of hagiographical narrative, called the *passio Irenaei*, which were transcribed and translated across the breadth and length of both East and West, in Latin, Greek, and Old Church Slavonic languages, emanating from the 8th century. Concomitantly with it, the name of this saint continued to crop up within certain communities, and with the revival of his name unveiled the memory of the saint. While the aim of my broader work is to follow up on the appearances of this saint in different sources in the Middle Ages, and to see into how it relates to the mechanisms of memory resurfacing, the purpose of this paper is to explore the contemporary moment and the memory of this saint in Sremska Mitrovica today.

What was called Sirmium in antiquity are now two towns within the borders of contemporary Serbia: Sremska Mitrovica and Mačvanska Mitrovica. Once one of the most important cities of the later Roman Empire, it is now a town of average size. Sremska Mitrovica has 42 980 citizens, and Mačvanska Mitrovica has 3896 citizens, according to the census in 2002.¹ The river Sava is a natural border between them. While serving as border numberless times in the past, the river Sava does not separate these two towns in terms of administration today. Mačvanska Mitrovica belongs to the municipality of Sremska Mitrovica, and along with it, belongs to the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina. Actually, Mačvanska Mitrovica is the only place across the

¹Republiki zavod za statistiku (Institute for Statistics of Republic of Serbia), Stanovništvo. Popis stanovništva, doma instava i stanova u 2002 (Population. Census of Population, Households and Dwellings in 2002). Belgrade, 2003.

river Sava that belongs to the Vojvodina.

My research trip to Sremska Mitrovica began with the assumption that there is no community, nor a group of people worldwide today, who would remember Irenaeus more than would this community, which geographically belongs to his hometown. Successions of centuries and peoples occurred, but the memory of Irenaeus, who died in this town in the 4th century somehow still endures. My doubts centered on the extent of the remembering. In this sense, the circle of memory would spread from this town, but then narrow down again to where it initially began.

My aim upon arriving at Sremska Mitrovica was to investigate contemporary remembering of Irenaeus. It pertained to the extent of people's familiarity with this saint. I wished to capture perceptions in the contemporary moment, regardless of the complexity of the past. In spite of historical interpretation, oblivion and discontinuity, migrations and changes in the power structures, the memory of this saint perseveres in Sremska Mitrovica. Without going into the question of people's belief, my interest lay first and foremost in what was influencing and shaping memory, through the mechanisms of power, since remembering is usually socio-culturally situated, as a form of human action.

By remembering I presupposed a collective action. Collective memory always testifies to the will and the wish of a social community or one the structures of power to choose and to organize the representations of the past. It in itself, contains an intention – social, political, institutional, etc. - which supports and approves its introduction into the public domain.² When it comes to studying collective memory, the crucial question is who wants people to remember something and why.³ I investigated collective memory by means of a survey. In this case, one should interview several local citizens, in order to comprehend how much this issue is seen from the personal point of view, and how an expression of individual memory overlaps with collective thinking. Individual memory sometimes overlaps with the collective, but can also go astray. In such research, interviews with chosen informants plus a more informal survey, based on questions posed to random passersby are a must. For the interviews, targeted informants were a historian from the Museum of Srem, Bora Čekerinac, an archpriest, Djordje Blagojević, and one of the parishioners from the church dedicated to Sirmian martyrs.

It was a complex and highly complicated issue to analyze the remembering of a fable which occurred in the 4th century, which somehow lives discontinually from the event itself through to the present, the 21st century. Certainly, this does not presuppose continuity, but rather the resurfacing of memory. When not directly linked to the events in question, memory is usually textually or orally mediated. Here, resurfacing and reemergence of memory as a complex phenomenon, appears thanks to the mediators between the mediated memory (through the texts) and the masses. It is crucial to understand how collective memory, when linked to the systems of power, and reflecting the politics of memory, influences the masses. In cases such as this one who directs the remembering? Is there such a thing as a remembering by the common people? There is certainly not a direct continual link in the oral tradition. Even if common people know, there has to be a higher instance which brings back the saint and directs the remembering. Is it the church? Is it the state?

My initial stimulus for conducting this research lay in the fact that several newly built

² Jovan Byford, *Potiskivanje i poricanje antisemitizma* (Suppressing and Denial of Anti-Semitism), Belgrade: Helsinški odbor za ljudska prava (Helsinki Board for Human Rights), (2005): 49.

³Peter Burke, "History as Social Memory," in T. Butler, *Memory, History, Culture and the Mind*, New York: Blackwell, (1989).

objects dedicated to Irenaeus had appeared in modern Mitrovica. Memory was fostered through the erection of public monuments. The bridge across the river Sava, connecting Sremska and Mačvanska Mitrovica, and a newly built church bear the name of St Irenaeus, and a street was named for Irenaeus.

Demetrius vs. Irenaeus

Aside from the complex issue of remembering itself, there are other complications. Irenaeus was never the most dominant saint in his own hometown. Another saint, namely, St Demetrius, has been lending his name to Mitrovica since the medieval period. Clearly, today both Sremska and Mačvanska Mitrovica honor St Demetrius. His dominance in the town is striking. His name is memorialized by the main Orthodox church in the town center, and by one of the important streets.

Neither scholars nor citizens are clear as to who Demetrius was – whether he was the deacon of Irenaeus, who in 304 CE, died together with Irenaeus on the bridge. Or was he the same person known as St Demetrius of Thessaloniki, whose cult was transferred from Sirmium to Thessaloniki.⁴

In a book dedicated to the bridge, "*Most „Sveti Irinej“*" (The 'St Irenaeus' Bridge),⁵ this confusion is obvious. The author said at one point that the bridge of Artemis was a killer bridge, where St Irenaeus and St Demetrius were killed.⁶ Obviously he meant the deacon Demetrius. A president of the Mitrovica municipality from 2000, Ilija Milinović, wrote a closing article for the same book, where he remarked that "on the bridge of Artemis once in the past the truth was defended, when the deacon Demetrius, whose name is built into the very name of the town, gave his head for faith and truth."⁷ Here we see that he confused the facts on who named the town. People in Mitrovica celebrate St Demetrius, after whom the town is named, on 8th November, which is the feast day of St Demetrius of Thessaloniki.

My other informant, a parishioner from the church dedicated to Sirmian martyrs, told me that

when it comes to Demetrius, the scholars still search for the solution of this problem. It is not the same person as Demetrius of Thessaloniki, although there are assumptions that it is. I would not know if this same saint was dominant here and in Thessaloniki as well. However, he became dominant in this town, and the big church in the town center is dedicated to him. Even if pushed aside, Irenaeus is present, at least in this church, as we have an icon of him, while there is no representation of Demetrius. Otherwise, if we would know for sure who he was, Demetrius would get his own place in the altar. The fact that Sirmian martyrs are celebrated in the first Sunday of August is only a temporary solution. The exact date on when it happened remains a matter of research. Demetrius also is still under research. If they would find out about his real identity, maybe they would discover the real date of his martyrdom.⁸

Over the course of history, St Demetrius of Thessaloniki became the prominent saint, of both Thessaloniki and Sremska Mitrovica. This feature somehow pushed Irenaeus aside, from the

⁴ See Vickers, M. "Sirmium or Thessaloniki? A Critical Examination of the St. Demetrius Legend," *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 67 (1974): 337-50.

⁵ Miodrag Milovanović, and Nedeljko Terzi, *Most "Sveti Irinej"*, Sremska Mitrovica, Sirmiumart, (2000).

⁶ *Ibid*, 164.

⁷ *Ibid*, 182.

⁸ Personal interview conducted in April 2010 in Sremska Mitrovica.

broader common perspective and from the purview of people - a process continuing since the Middle Ages till now. As Bora Čekerinac said, „Irenaeus was a more important figure, as he was a bishop, while Demetrius was a deacon. Still, Irenaeus was a little marginalized.”⁹ St Irenaeus, therefore, became a borderline, peripheral saint. While not the main one in the two towns, he is still present, in those several public monuments, and in the mind of certain people, at least.

The Bridge of Irenaeus

Ivo Andri , a writer and Nobel prize winner, once wrote: “There are no buildings that emerged by accident, disconnectedly to human society, and disconnectedly to the needs, wishes and customs of this same society.”¹⁰ The same happened with the emergence of this long, elegant bridge, which connects the two Mitrovicas. It is important to stress that the bridge was highly needed and expected in the local community. Around it, especially in the years of building, much fuss had been made over it, usually by local and state politicians, who were gaining points by making promises related to the bridge. Quite a lot of mythology got constructed around this bridge.

Aside from its necessity, what is striking is that the bridge bears the name of Irenaeus! Those in charge for the naming of the bridge were aware of the late antique story about martyrdom. Insiders would instantly recall *the bridge of Artemis* from the Greek passion or *pons Basentis* from the Latin passion. The question was, who came to this idea and what fictitious parallels were constructed around it?

The bridge building took place between 1990 – 1993. These were extremely chaotic and turbulent years in Serbia. Nationalism, as a dominant ideology of Serbian society, gradually started to gain ground. Milošević’s appearance on the political scene and the rise of Serbian nationalism got major support, even from the Church.¹¹ When finished, the bridge was officially put into use on 28 June 1994, on Vidovdan day [St. Vid’s day], and also blessed by the church authorities. Again, insiders know what Vidovdan means for Serbs. According to common belief, this was the day of the Battle of Kosovo battle 1389. This day of loss became so important and mythological for Serbs that it has been celebrated nowadays almost as if it was a victory. The symbolism of this date was confused with the religious connotation in the name of the bridge. St Irenaeus was historically not in any way related to Serbs, just to the geographical place, and the Kosovo battle took place far away from Sremska Mitrovica. Mixing moments of glory with moments of suffering and grief provided an apt metaphor for this situation.¹²

I went to the municipality office to inquire who was in charge for naming the bridge. To quote Bora Čekerinac, the name of the bridge “had to have come by decision. It could not have come just like that.”¹³ I found out that there is a whole book dedicated to this bridge, published in 2000.¹⁴

However, the book does not say a word about the naming of the bridge. I consulted the *Službeni list* (The Official Bulletin)¹⁵ from 1993, and there it was. The decision from 1993, about the

⁹ Personal interview conducted in April 2010 in Sremska Mitrovica

¹⁰ Ivo Andri , *Bridge on the River Drina*.

¹¹ Jovan Byford, *Potiskivanje i poricanje antisemitizma* (Suppressing and Denial of Anti-Semitism), Belgrade: Helsinški odbor za ljudska prava (Helsinki Board for Human Rights), (2005): 54.

¹² Galia Valtchinova, “Re – intervening the Past, Re – enchanting the Future,” in *The “Vision Thing.” Studying Divine Intervention*, William A. Christian Jr. and Gábor Klaniczay, eds., Budapest: Collegium Budapest Workshop Series 18, (2009): 167.

¹³ Personal interview conducted in April 2010 in Sremska Mitrovica

¹⁴ Miodrag Milovanović , and Nedeljko Terzi , *Most „Sveti Irinej,”* Sremska Mitrovica, Sirmiumart, (2000).

¹⁵ *Službeni list opština Srema* (The Official Bulletin of the Municipalities of Srem) 3 (XXIII), Sremska Mitrovica: The Historical Archives (1993): 81.

name of the bridge, was signed by the president of the municipality, Slobodan Prodanovič. I was unable to find this person and people were saying that he left town. However, in 1993, the Socialist Party of Serbia (Slobodan Milošević was the president of the party) presided over the municipality of Sremska Mitrovica, as well as over the whole state. One of the initial pages of the book shows a photo of Slobodan Milošević on the bridge, with the title – “Among the first ones on the bridge.”¹⁶ He gave the following statement on this occasion: “I am glad that I am here today, in the heart of Srem. Srem gave a huge contribution to the unity of Serbia, and was the first to break with the politics of autonomy, which was dividing Serbia.”¹⁷ Clearly, the bridge, as a symbol of the link between Sremska and Mačvanska Mitrovica, between Srem and Mačva, between Vojvodina and Serbia, was another item to be used in Milošević’s endeavors to break with the politics of autonomy, due to his own economic and political goals, because of the creeping threats of increasing autonomy that were coming from Kosovo. Again, in the opening of the bridge, with the great celebration that followed, Aleksa Joki, the minister for traffic and connections in the Government of Serbia stressed that “now there are no obstacles between Srem and Mačva, nor will there ever exist again.”¹⁸ In other words, the link established by the bridge symbolically abolished every autonomy.

In *Most “Sveti Irinej”*, written as a collection of essays, Dimitrije Stojšić, a political candidate in the election campaign of 1990, wrote that

“if we dive into the river Sava, we can see the remnants of ancient history, and the traces of the first bridge, where the great martyr Irenaeus gave his life because of faith, and from where he went into sainthood and into legend. We can see and be proud of the message of his sacrifice – the one who has faith will win. We conveyed this message with dignity, by writing a new history of this young bridge, when we were standing unarmed on this and many other bridges of this country, which American and NATO vultures were bombing. We were ready, because of our faith, to sacrifice ourselves to their bombs, knowing that Irenaeus’ death overpowered their persecutors.”¹⁹

Going back to the hagiographical narrative, it was interesting for me to see that, due to the research of the topography of Sirmium and the sources,²⁰ it is now been considered that the bridge where Irenaeus was supposedly beheaded was not in the same place of the modern, pedestrian bridge, named after him. As being a link between the town and the western river island, Carbonaria, in antiquity the bridge of beheading was more westward from the modern one. Interestingly, walking west one can see the remnants of what locals call “the old bridge”, also a modern structure, but abandoned and dismantled. This “old bridge” is only 100 meters from the site *Zidine* or *Širingrad* – the place where in the Middle Ages three subsequent structures were built from 10th – 13th centuries, from which the last structure bore the name of Irenaeus. Petar Milošević says the same about the old bridge, where Irenaeus was beheaded. *Pons Basentis* was the bridge that led to Bosnia and Dalmatia (*Ad Basante*) and was located westwards.²¹

¹⁶ Miodrag Milovanović, and Nedeljko Terzi, *Most “Sveti Irinej”*, Sremska Mitrovica, Sirmiumart, (2000): 3.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 3.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 166.

¹⁹ Miodrag Milovanović, and Nedeljko Terzi, *Most “Sveti Irinej”*, Sremska Mitrovica, Sirmiumart, (2000): 71.

²⁰ See Petar Milošević, “Sava – njene ade i mostovi u antici (Sava – its Islands and the Bridges in the Antiquity),” in *Most “Sveti Irinej”*, Sremska Mitrovica, Sirmiumart, (2000): 10 – 13.

²¹ Petar Milošević, “Sava – njene ade i mostovi u antici (Sava – its Islands and the Bridges in the Antiquity),” in *Most “Sveti Irinej”*, Sremska Mitrovica, Sirmiumart, (2000): 12.

The Street of Irenaeus

Towards the end of 1992, the municipality of Sremska Mitrovica decided to change a number of street names and introduce new ones. The records show that it was the Committee for Naming the Streets and Squares who was in charge for this change that occurred in Sremska Mitrovica in 1992. The decision was again signed by Slobodan Prodanović, president of the municipality. On this occasion, the names of 39 streets and squares were changed. It was a part of a larger project, one of the ways to break with the old, communistic and partisan past, to which the old names bore witness. Naturally, memory functions to provide a usable past for the creation of coherent individual and group identities.²² To illustrate with some of the street name changes, the streets of Maršal Tito, Sonja Marinković, Ivo Pinki, Lola Ribar, etc. were replaced by street named for Ćira Milekić, Vuk Karadžić, Nikola Pašić, etc. Among the 39 new street names, certainly national characters from the Serbian past were put into focus, but there were also the names of local prominent citizens, local *toponyms*, names of prominent Christian Roman emperors, but also Roman gods, like Jupiter. Among them, Irenaeus found his place, I would say, partly because of his Christian beliefs, partly because he originated from this town. This suited the search for new forms and patterns of ancient grandeur for a young national community with heightened sensibility to its past and concern about its place in history.²³

Bora, my informant, recalled the huge wave of street renaming in 1993, as he was a member of this committee. In 1993, in his words, at least 50% of the streets of Mitrovica bore names related to the partisan past. "Renaming was the imperative of the time we lived in." When talking about the committee, he claimed that it consisted of insiders on the subject and was not politically biased – people who participated were Petar Milošević, Radomir Prica, Dragan Popović, and Bora. "Sometimes, though, we had to justify ourselves in front of the higher authorities for a particular name of a street."²⁴ In other words, the work was left to be done by specialists but was monitored by higher political structures.

What happened in 1992 - 1993 can be interpreted as the development of the idea of national grandeur. As happened in many other cases, materializing the greatness and making history palpable by projecting the glory of history on everyday life²⁵ might have occurred there as well. The new street names were linked with new nationalistic ideas and "heroes" that are "our own". Therefore, Irenaeus emerged, yet again, as a part of the larger project. In the reconceptualization of identity, historical memory provided for the production and reproduction of newly formed identities.²⁶ Bora Čekerinac, my informant, said a very important thing in relation to St Demetrius: "Demetrius did not exist, but we (the Committee for Naming the Streets and Squares) brought him back (to common knowledge). Before 1941, people knew well who Demetrius was, and his name was the name of a street and a square. This nation knows well what *Mitrovdan* is."²⁷ To be known and then forgotten, and resurfaced - obviously this was not only the destiny of one saint, but for many others too, during smaller and larger periods of time. And

²² James V. Wertsch, *Voices of Collective Remembering*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, (2004): 31.

²³ Galia Valtchinova, "Re – intervening the Past, Re – enchanting the Future," in *The "Vision Thing."* *Studying Divine Intervention*, William A. Christian Jr. and Gábor Klaniczay, eds., Budapest: Collegium Budapest Workshop Series 18, (2009): 159.

²⁴ Personal interview conducted in April 2010 in Sremska Mitrovica

²⁵ Galia Valtchinova, "Re – intervening the Past, Re – enchanting the Future," in *The "Vision Thing."* *Studying Divine Intervention*, William A. Christian Jr. and Gábor Klaniczay, eds., Budapest: Collegium Budapest Workshop Series 18, (2009): 159.

²⁶ D. Lowenthal, „Identity, Heritage and History,“ in J. R. Gillis, ed., *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, (1994): 41 – 57.

²⁷ Interview conducted in April 2010 in Sremska Mitrovica

usually the resurfacing of saints came through politically fueled actions.

The use of history was therefore political, because national histories provide a population with heroes, monuments, and other evidence for the existence of national identity through the ages.²⁸ And yet again, Irenaeus was adopted as “our” by somebody’s initiative. What mattered, however, was to find out who pulled up this saint. The “Bulletin” specified that the naming committee consisted of politicians, local citizens, prominent cultural and public figures.²⁹ Some of them knew of and pulled up Irenaeus. People used their popular as well as expert knowledge as a critical resource for interpreting the changing present.³⁰

The Church Dedicated to Sirmian Martyrs

I learned of the church from archpriest Djordje Blagojević. He said that the church is in a part of the town, called “Little Bosnia”. According to my informant, a parishioner from this church, the name of this part of town came from the fact that many people who came from Bosnia, either as colonists in the 1940s, or as refugees in the 1990s live here. What came to my mind was perhaps an accidental parallel. *Pons Basentis* was, according to Petar Milošević,³¹ the bridge that led to Bosnia. Irenaeus was persecuted on this bridge. Now the church dedicated to Irenaeus is popularly called “Little Bosnia.” The same went for the “old bridge”. These were details where it seemed that oral tradition played its role, although I would never be able to explain it.

The church was built between 1994 - 1998 in Sremska Mitrovica. Its name encompasses among the other Sirmian martyrs also Irenaeus, including above all, Sinerotes, Demetrius and Anastasia. In the interview, the archpriest said that this church was named for the Sirmian martyrs, since in the 1990s we had “new martyrs” from the wars and therefore the parallel with the old martyrs was striking. At the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, martyrdom and victimization were the dominant subject of Serbian nationalistic rhetoric, in political and church discourse.³² Old martyrdoms are usually mentioned in relation to new martyrdoms.

Also, according to the archpriest, according to oral tradition, in this part of town, there had been a concentration camp during the Second World War, a gathering place from which people were led to be executed. He said he did not know if this fact influenced the building of the church on this particular spot. The biggest celebration of this church is the first Sunday after St Ilias (beginning of August). The archpriest also mentioned the confusion over the date of celebration of St. Irenaeus. The archpriest was well aware of the power of local influence: “If it was not for Mitrovica, St Irenaeus would not be mentioned at all, if we exclude the written literature.”³³

My other informant, the janitor and a parishioner of the church dedicated to Sirmian martyrs, said that the church was built on the initiative of citizens, who wanted to have a church closer to their part of the town. The other, main one, dedicated to St Demetrius was too far away from their houses. He said that the name was given to the church by the bishop. I heard the same from the archpriest. According to what the janitor knew, the church was dedicated to “a bishop and

²⁸ Victor Roudometof, *Collective Memory, National Identity, and Ethnic Conflict: Greece, Bulgaria, and the Macedonian Question*, London: Praeger Publishers, (2002): 9 – 10.

²⁹ Službeni list opština Srema (The Official Bulletin of the Municipalities of Srem) 7 (XXIII), Sremska Mitrovica: The Historical Archives (1993): 293.

³⁰ Galia Valtchinova, “Re – intervening the Past, Re – enchanting the Future,” in *The “Vision Thing.” Studying Divine Intervention*, William A. Christian Jr. and Gábor Klaniczay, eds., Budapest: Collegium Budapest Workshop Series 18, (2009): 160.

³¹ See footnote 21.

³² Jovan Byford, *Potiskivanje i poricanje antisemitizma* (Suppressing and Denial of Anti-Semitism), Belgrade: Helsinški odbor za ljudska prava (Helsinki Board for Human Rights), (2005): 72.

³³ Personal interview conducted in April 2010 in Sremska Mitrovica

a deacon (meaning Irenaeus and Demetrius), who were beheaded on the bridge on Sava by the enemies of Christians." In his story, one can see a general *topos* of what is known at present by people in this town about Irenaeus – his position in the church and the beheading on the bridge. Nothing more is mentioned. "Nobody (he meant people, citizens) remembered them so far, but now they recalled them when this temple was built. You know, the 3rd century AD was a long time ago"³⁴

Sirmian martyrs, according to my informant, are celebrated on the first Sunday of the month of August. Many people gather and it is a huge celebration. As for liturgy, on that day, all the martyrs are mentioned as a part of it.

Survey

I also interviewed local people in both towns. From a sample which is certainly not representative (30 people), I still noticed some patterns in the answers. The questions pertained to whether the modern inhabitants were aware of Irenaeus' name, and when/where they had heard of him. Some 40% of the population still did not know of Irenaeus, which left 60% of the population who knew of him. Then, there was a pattern in the answers between generations. Those in middle age and older citizens who knew of Irenaeus said that they had heard of him from the stories, in the town, or "here", as a woman said. The younger population usually heard of him in school. While the older generation missed the chance to learn of Irenaeus in school, as they were educated during the socialistic period, the younger ones now have the chance to learn of him in school, when religious education came back to schools, and the local community certainly needs to strengthen its links with the Christian past. In the post-1990 period, education was also re-nationalized, as part of a political program providing the ideological infrastructure for the period. Serbian textbooks provide the paradigmatic case for this tendency.³⁵

Conclusion

None of the people that I talked to mentioned the story of Irenaeus in its complete form, which exists in the passion. Also, nobody told the story with much detail. Details that were mentioned and emphasized were the bridge and beheading. I concluded that these are the major *topoi*, which are remembered. Memory usually functions in a way that consists of reorganizing, or reconstructing, bits of information into a general scheme, rather than it is a matter of accurate recall. Humans are often quite good at recalling the gist of what happened, a process that involves selectively using, and often distorting or deleting, pieces of information that do not contribute to the overall picture they are reconstructing.³⁶

I left Sremska Mitrovica, half convinced that a memory of Irenaeus existed. During the time that he resurfaced in the local community and in the mind of common people, this country ascribed to itself plenty of new martyrs, linked to the old martyrs by the same idea – death for faith. New martyrs were understood to be the victims of the wars in Croatia, Bosnia, and later, Kosovo. From the higher authorities and political powers, this was an easy link. The saint became a tool, once again, to invoke new, nationalistic ideas, grandeur, and identity.

Several features appeared in the 1990s and corroborated this memory, but in the mind of common people these ideas are present only partially. Certainly, those who live in Irenaeus' street

³⁴ Personal interview conducted in April 2010 in Sremska Mitrovica

³⁵ Victor Roudometof, *Collective Memory, National Identity, and Ethnic Conflict: Greece, Bulgaria, and the Macedonian Question*, London: Praeger Publishers, (2002): 14.

³⁶ James V. Wertsch, *Voices of Collective Remembering*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, (2004): 8. make. The saint became a tool, once again, to invoke new, nationalistic ideas, grandeur, identity.

know of his name. Certainly, people employed in the Museum of Srem, and generally, educated people know of him. Certainly, the parishioners who celebrate Sirmian martyrs in the first week of August know of him. The same cannot be said necessarily for the people who cross Irenaeus Bridge, as I realized by asking some informants on the bridge, who still did not know this name. In this sense, the decisions from 1993 to name the bridge and the street after the saint did something towards enhancing the memory of the saint, but not a great deal. Apart from education in school, where children can hear about this saint, there is also the church, especially the one dedicated to Sirmian martyrs, where both young and older generations can hear of this saint. I did not have the feeling that citizens really perceive the origin of St Irenaeus as something different from their own origin. His Christian beliefs and his origin from this town were put in front; his Roman citizenship or his Greek name were not mentioned at all. Remembering presupposes the distance, a separation that the group experiences between itself and the event from the past.³⁷ Though well aware of the time distance, people still tend to embrace heroes and characters, if only needed, even if heroes themselves were not what they are taken for. Once the connection of places of history is made to the modern state's physical and political geography, the landmarks of national territory become holy and the heroes become "our own."

³⁷ James V. Wertsch, *Voices of Collective Remembering*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, (2004): 46.