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# The Relevance of Memory and the Role of the Witness. A Case Study

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## ABSTRACT

This article attempts to recall, from the standpoint of the witness, the latter stages of Romanian communism, more precisely “agricultural training”, the generic term for the voluntary labour provided by thousands of pupils and students during the busiest period of the autumn agricultural season. It was not my intention to perform a socio-political analysis of this phenomenon itself, but rather to revisit the physical practices, the types of sociability, the type of food consumed, etc., while on “agricultural training”.

## KEYWORDS

Voluntary work, memory of communism, educational system, food, body.

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## Justification

I composed the text below in 1999, while a master's student at the University of Geneva in Switzerland. It was meant to be part of a more comprehensive personal study, an unrealistic and overly ambitious project to which I gave the provisional French title of *Le Dictionnaire*

*amoureux des années tardives du communisme*. I wrote only three entries, as a kind of trial run: the ARO off-road vehicle, the *Anticipația sci-fi* annual and agricultural training. At the time of writing these lines (12 years later, in December 2011) the news stands outside are selling ARO models (miniature cars) that are made in China, the initiative of an Italian multinational media player; the *Antici-*



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pația annual has become a rare collector's item, and agricultural training is nothing more than a memory.

Without fully realising it at the time, I was only reproducing on an individual level the tendency of the generation to which I belong, those aged between 16 and 26 in December 1989, to talk about what happened in the final years of communism from the standpoint of the witness. On another level, through my more or less organised endeavours, I was recreating a kind of map of the memorial sites of communism, material and immaterial, a de facto confirmation of Pierre Nora's (1984) statement that memory has never known more than two forms of legitimacy: historical and literary. In the absence of any "scientific" undertaking to study communism (which only came much later, partially and incompletely, in the form of the famous 2006 Tismăneanu Report) and of a museum of communism (still not in existence today), my



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generation undertook a travail de mémoire in the guise of books like *Anii 80 și Bucureștenii* ("The 1980s in Bucharest"), *O lume dispărută*, ("A lost world"), *Născut în URSS* ("Born in the USSR") and *Cartea roz a comunismului* ("The Pink Book of Communism") or international award winning films based on tales from the communist era, such as "12:08 East of Bucharest, "Comrades, Life is Beautiful" and "4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days". These books and films brought the witness and generational memory to the fore as a form of complex legitimisation with a high degree of flexibility vis-à-vis the past, albeit with less clear contours.

For my part, I assumed the role of the witness in the below text, a text, I repeat, written 10 years after the fall of communism, at a time when I was still to be "contaminated" (in inverted commas, of course) by what I would later read intensively for professional reasons on the sociology of memory. The innocent witness I was at that time had permitted himself to speak openly about what he had "really" lived through, thus allowing himself to avoid the professional strictures to which the historian or sociologist of memory is subject. He thus stands in opposition to the ranks of experts, those who proved unable to predict the fall of communism in 1989, but were later to feast on its remains through their books, colloquiums and seminars. Rereading this stowed away text, a multitude of elements from the past, from fetish objects to sounds, smells and tastes, all long since forgotten today, sprang back to life again, confirming, if confirmation were still needed, Maurice Halbwachs' observation on the witness: his activity is eminently memorial in nature and occurs within a framework of exceptional points of reference, which survive the passing of time.

So, if we accept that memory is a gateway to history, then what type of memory does the witness provide? This is an open question to which this text attempts to provide a partial answer.

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## Agricultural training

My first contact with “agricultural training” came during childhood. More precisely, one sunny morning in May our lessons were cancelled and Years 1-4 – an expression that, in the language of the day, implied the entire population of pupils aged between seven and ten – were sent out with no explanation to eliminate the rapeseed growing wildly among the corn from seeds left over from previous years.

The memory of my first day of agricultural training is still fresh in my mind, despite the intervening years: the green cheek of the cornfield pockmarked by yellow patches of rapeseed flowers, the oppressive heat of that late spring (we were all extremely thirsty), and the thorns and blistered hands at the end of the working day. I try to imagine today a group of 20 ten-year-old children from the West, or even rural Romania, where hard physical labour still exists, being forced to perform this ridiculous and pointless task, their palms full of splinters from the dry stems of the plants. Impossible.

To date no one has written a serious history of what for decades the Romanians called agricultural training, an expression which entered the vocabulary of millions of people. And I doubt this will ever happen, mainly on account of the inherent difficulties related to this kind of subject: the destruction or burning of the CAP (Agricultural Production Cooperative) archives in December 1989, lack of interest, a desire to forget as quickly as possible, indifference towards a past deemed to be of no interest, etc. – the common symptoms associated with memory in Romania. Nonetheless, the phenomenon in itself existed and cannot be denied. These lines are nothing but a modest attempt to counter this general disinterest, a message in a bottle adrift on the sea of forgetting. I know what I say may come across as slightly emotional, but any means by which we remember certain traumatising events in our lives requires emotion to trigger the process of

remembering. This is hard to explain in words.

The ideological and theoretical roots of agricultural training are relatively easy to identify in the discourse of any regime of a totalitarian hue in terms of building an ideal, “new man”, educating him through labour in a climate of supposed general, constructive enthusiasm. The communist regime in Romania was only recycling the traditions of the 1930s in respect of the labour camps of the Legionnaire Movement, followed by Carol II’s scout camps and not to mention the wholesale import of Soviet ideology during the 1950s, when the two extreme ideologies of the century combined to give rise to monstrous national hybrids.

Later, at the beginning of the 1980s, all ideological justifications were almost entirely cast aside in favour of the recourse to abundant and, in particular, free labour. Otherwise, what possible ideological or propagandistic explanation could have existed for the infamous hunger trains, as they were called by passengers, in reality train carriages requisitioned to transport the staff of entire factories to their temporary place of work in the fields of the Fatherland? How strange this expression sounds today! Firmly rooted in the “wooden language” of those years (Thousands of pupils and students on the fields of the Fatherland, in big letters, exclaimed the headlines of the newspapers at the time), it retains its power of fascination, that of a lexical “symbol” of a bygone era.

My personal experience is too limited to be able to describe the agricultural training system in all its complexity. I think it worth mentioning that I had the dubious privilege of spending my first school years in Brăila, a county which excelled in its use (or “exploitation”, which perhaps better describes the phenomenon) of the free labour of school children in its immense agricultural areas, in particular the famous Great Island of Brăila, a former lacustrine paradise, a natural wonder destroyed by the absurd plans of systematisation and transformed into a symbol of socialist agriculture. Another important aspect was



that each county, via its local overlord, the First Secretary of the Romanian Communist Party, had the power to decide the duration of the agricultural training, the number of people taking part, the difficulty of the work to be performed, etc. The arrival of the First-Secretary, Comrade A. L. in this case, inspired fear and awe: an ARO off-road vehicle with silver hub caps was his usual means of transport. When they spotted him on the horizon, the people in the field would start acting strangely: they sprung into action, shouting and yelling, hastening to fulfil their daily quotas. The fear of random punishment and the ruthless exercise of power was overwhelming. Comrade A. L. would never flinch from committing phys-

intellectual competition during communism, highly competitive and of a high level intellectually, as were the high school and university entrance exams), one of the favourite subjects of discussion among pupils who made it to the final stages at national level was agricultural training itself. Those of us from Brăila county always held the record in terms of the amount of time spent outside the school grounds, i.e. in the fields; it was estimated that between the ages of 10 and 14 (Years 5 to 8), during four years of secondary education we in effect lost an entire school year to the autumn winds and rain. An entire year! This stands to reason, what with the school year beginning around 10th November instead of 15th September, as



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ical violence or throwing people into prison when a sack of corn went missing. Later, after a period of relative obscurity post 1990, he became the mayor of the city of Brăila on the banks of the Danube, during the final years of his life donating generously to the building of new churches and monasteries.

I still recall how, during the famous “National Olympiads” for different subjects that were held around the same time (a form of free

it should have. How I both envied and loathed the children from Bucharest, Cluj and Braşov, who, with the “confidence” and arrogance of city dwellers, would say to us: “We don’t do agricultural training!” We do, we told ourselves, pondering the “equality of opportunity” between the village and the city constantly touted in the socialist Romanian press in those times.

The “normal” working day began at 7 am,

when we gathered in the school yard and were divided into groups according to classes and subject areas (mathematics/physics, chemistry/biology and mechanics in the case of our school). In exceptional cases – for example, a visit by the President Nicolae Ceaușescu to the Great Island of Brăila – the working day would start even earlier: at 6 am we would meet directly at the docks on the banks of the Danube, from where an antique ferry would transport us to the island in the middle of the river surrounded by gigantic dykes made of earth.

After the teacher in charge of each class (the form teacher) took the register, a general announcement, delivered in a military tone, would sometimes be made to communicate to us the “order of the day”, reprimands (e.g. “Pupils X and Y, who damaged the water installation at Cioara farm, had their heads shaved and their marks for good behaviour slashed to a 5”) or, only very rarely, praise from the “White House”, the local communist party headquarters (e.g. “Class 10A has harvested 12 tonnes of tomatoes in 8 hours, a new county record”, etc.). Nothing scared us, nothing motivated us; we were almost perfectly adapted to a system in which individual survival depended primarily on detachment and a minimum of interaction with the party-state.

Later, I realised we had been adopting the behaviour of a zek, a prisoner from the Soviet Gulag, whose only objective was survival, which he achieved by rationing his physical and mental resources. We were applying the tactics described by Varlam Shalamov in “The Kolyma Tales”, albeit without having read them at that time. The image that still haunts me is that of some shabby looking adolescents in their “training” clothes (clothes that were constantly passed around within the family); they were skinny and their faces drawn on account of lack of food or time spent studying by the light of a gas lamp or 6V bulb rigged up to a car battery, the consequences of the rationing of electricity. They were all gathered on the concrete platform in the school yard, the place of assembly where registers were taken, an essential element of aggregation in

any totalitarian system in which the individual as such ceased to exist, his individuality being cancelled out by the masses of which he was part.

Our outfits all shared something in common: most of us had long, dark green shoulder bags. In the mid-1980s, the working people were given gas masks for use in a guerrilla war, the war of the entire nation against an enemy never clearly defined in the official propaganda. The bags in which the gas masks came were extremely practical and functional, and it was these we used for school: the compartment meant for the activated charcoal filter was the perfect place for that all important “bottle of water”; the durable, wide jute strap left no marks on your shoulder; and it was easy to clean from the dust and dirt accumulated from a day’s work in the fields. It should be noted that plastic bottles were still unheard of in Romania at the time. The first time I saw a plastic bottle was in the autumn of 1990 – brought back from Turkey, filled with an orange, very sweet liquid. I mention this because finding the right water bottle – not too large, not too small, not too heavy, not too light – was a formidable challenge and our survival in the heat of the sun depended directly on this diminutive object.

After the register was taken, the class would split into two unequal groups. The first of these, containing approximately two thirds of the class, sometimes more, was boarded onto busses –another expression I recall now vividly, after having forgotten it for many years, and which almost writes itself. The other group was made up of the medical exemptees. I envied them terribly, for the “exemptees” got special treatment that was far more lenient than that of the majority: they would sort seeds for AGROSEM or pretend to clean the school yard or laboratories. They would be home by around 2 pm, leaving them plenty of time to revise their maths and physics courses, the two main subjects that came up in the difficult university entrance exam and which took up most of our time. Theoretically, the status of “exemptee” meant

the pupil in question was suffering from a serious physical condition that stopped him or her from performing heavy physical work. Only that this rule was always abused, a common practice in Romania. The “exemptees” were mainly made up of the children of the party secretaries and the managers of local food stores, shoe and clothing warehouses, and – interestingly, for we read a great deal in those days – book shops. Reading books was a form of breathing freely, an act committed against the surrounding system, pervaded as it was with the cult of personality of Nicolae Ceaușescu.

The buses that took us to the fields surrounding the city, some 25-30 km from the centre, were in most cases “requisitioned” from the city’s public transport system. Dirty, the windows covered by layer upon layer of dry mud and fitted with badly tuned engines, they spat out clouds of thick, oily and sticky smoke that lent a bluish-purple colour to the morning air of our adolescent years, during which we would go without sufficient sleep whenever we were summoned to serve our country through our labour. One special type of bus had two enormous metal cylinders containing liquefied gas on the roof (you’d be forgiven for mistaking them for two cruise missiles), a prototype that was not long in service owing to the high risk of explosion, genuine bombs on wheels! Later, when I saw Rossellini’s neo-realist film “Germany Year Zero”, I spotted similar buses, with gas cylinders on the roof, the same as in Romania in the 1980s, on the streets of a Berlin destroyed by bombs in 1846-47. In a private conversation, a driver working on the Bucharest to Geneva coach route told me that when he first started working as a driver he also drove that hybrid type of bus. The gas system was badly designed and mounted. Often the drivers would take the buses to the edge of the city, where they were safe and far from any open flames. There they would open the valve on the cylinders and let the hissing gas escape. This allowed them to report back that the gas had been consumed efficiently and that the in-

novation was of “great value”. Last year, on a short trip to Brăila, I encountered one of the last survivors of that “golden era” still in use: dilapidated and with chipped paint but covered in garish advertisements for second-hand Turkish double glazing, this old communist termite was still transporting passengers along route no. 4, which crosses Brăila from one end to the other. The gas cylinders had long since been dismantled but on the roof you could still see the remnants of the U-shaped fixture that held them precariously in place, just like the system for which they had become a symbol.

There were also occasions when we were driven further afield in the famous “Carpați” trucks belonging to the army. I will never forget one of the more dangerous practical jokes the driver played on us, albeit this was nothing compared with what awaited us later while on obligatory military service. A brave young driver from the Romanian army took the decision to cross an enormous potato field transversally and at great speed, instead of along the furrows, as would have been normal. There were around 20 of us in the back: we tried to hold on to the sides of the truck, but in vain. Our precious gas mask bags were scattered about the field and our faces left bruised from the violent impacts with the truck’s shuttering. At the end of the journey, the people who had played this joke on us, the army driver and his superior, treated us to the imbecilic and impersonal laughter of all men in uniform, while we could only cry out of fear and pain. Perhaps, without our knowing it, we had been put through a special kind of initiation rite. We were 15 at the time; all born in socialist Romania.

Another vivid memory takes me back to 1987, when we were taken by ferry to the Great Island of Brăila, Romania’s infamous agricultural region, one Sunday in the month of November in order to load barges with mountains of maize that had already begun to rot in the cold rain of autumn. That morning there was an extremely dense fog hanging over the river, very little light and the cold and sharp air ripped mercilessly through our



skimpy, unsuitable clothing. The sound of the horn from the boat overloaded with human beings and trucks ripped its way through the tender flesh of the fog: booh, booh... Suddenly, out of the primal soup of fog and Danubian waters, there appeared the prow of an immense tow boat towing a convoy of barges that was heading straight for us. But for the presence of mind of the captain of the ferry (who immediately changed course) and an incredible dose of luck, a new catastrophe would have occurred. At the infamous Cotul Pisicii, just two months earlier, a collision between a Bulgarian tow boat and a passenger ship had caused 215 fatalities in what was the largest ever shipping disaster on this river, something carefully covered up by the authorities at the time.

What did the work we did involve? Mostly we picked vegetables and fruit meant for “export” to the European Community and the Soviet Union. Over a period of four years, we harvested tonnes of peppers, carrots, tomatoes, strawberries, apricots and... water melons. Yes, water melons, too, for socialist Romania at the time was a great exporter of water melon seeds [sic]. One of the more fun and popular tasks we had was the “bursting of the melons”: into a primitive grinding machine, which made a terrible noise as if it were in desperate need of oiling (much later I was to hear the same metallic scraping sound in Fribourg, in a museum about Jean Tinguely and his modern art installations), we would throw giant melons (10-12 kg) to extract the mass of shiny black seeds. I also recall line after line of school children, excited at the sight of the refreshing golden red flesh of the melons stored in the shade of a barn, seated at long rough wooden tables, each awaiting the giant portion of melon he or she was entitled to. This was totally free, of course, for our task was only to separate out, by eating, the precious black seeds that would remain on the table at the end. A human machine for separating seeds, a living machine, an Orwellian metaphor for the entire society at that time. The most “ecological” of production techniques, even if we knew



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nothing of such notions in those days. The rest of the time it seemed we were performing only ridiculous and futile work, work that never seemed to end, just like the open fields before our eyes.

I hated picking tomatoes. Tonnes, tens of tonnes of tomatoes. My class was the holder of an unwanted record: 30 children had managed to pick 12 tonnes of tomatoes in one day, a record which later would be the cause of much unpleasantness, in that we would be mentioned during the order of the day as “production leaders”, something which was met with ironic gazes from the other children. The sharp juice of squashed tomatoes dripped out from all over – from the buckets, trucks and

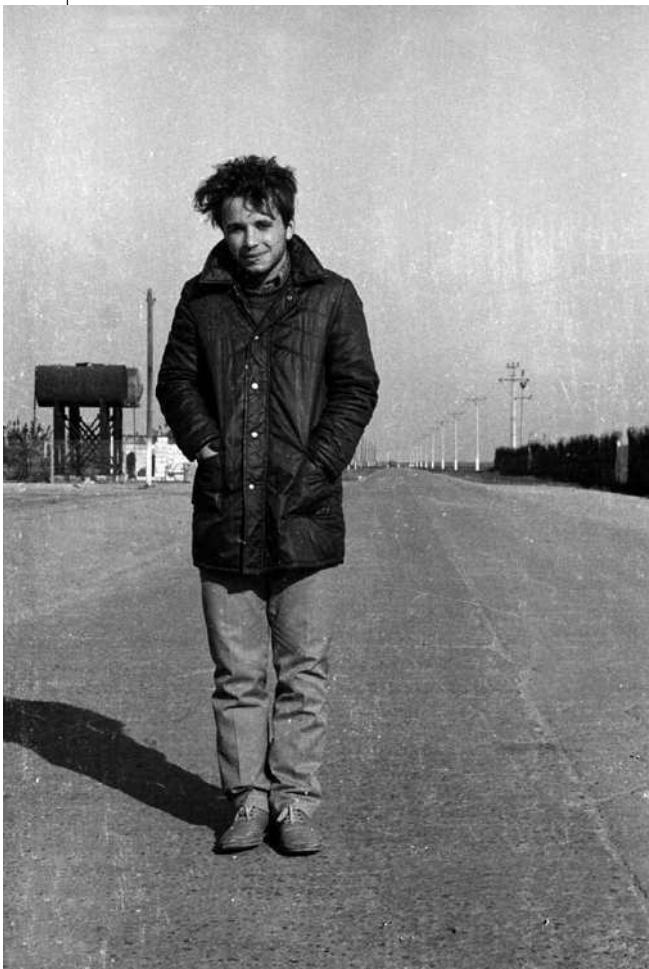


trailers, aggravating our skin already sore from the work of picking. Years later I find it hard not to wonder as to where all these huge quantities of vegetables were shipped to, given their almost total absence from the domestic market. What's more, when I buy tomatoes in supermarkets in the West, nicely wrapped in plastic like giant medicines and professionally lit by halogen spotlights mounted above the shelves, I search desperately for products that are "Made in Spain" or "Made in Marocco", and not in Holland, where they ripen under the artificial light of neon bulbs. I frantically seek out something with an iota of taste to it, a ray of sunlight absorbed within it, something that resembles the tomatoes from the fields of my adolescence. In vain. A vacuum of taste, forms with no substance – what a horrible sen-

sation!

I do not mean here to attempt an act of historical recovery or to praise "socialist agriculture". I am only trying to say that I am convinced I will never again eat fruit and vegetables like in those times, even if this country is still able to produce them. Judging by Western standards today, these were "bio" crops, cultivated in the midst of nature, without artificial light or the excessive use of chemical substances. None of this survives. Today, the former state-owned farms boast only a handful of miserable corn fields, dried out by drought and wind, traversed by carts pulled by skeletal horses. Even if Romania joins the EU, the old model of agriculture will not be reinstalled, for the model proposed by a unified Europe is based on quantity, uniformisation and maximum profits – not to mention the madness of genetic engineering in recent years that is being imposed on poor countries.

The lunch break was a precious moment of the working day. The difficulties faced by families in acquiring basic food stuffs was also visible in what the children ate: there was a predominance of *zacuscă* (a Romanian vegetable spread), fried fish caught in lakes and the Danube, canned food (rarely meat, which was hard to come by), boiled eggs, earth-coloured biscuits... all accompanied by the vegetables and fruit we found in the fields in abundance. I recall with great pleasure how we would roast potatoes in the hot ashes left over from the burning of the giant heaps of weeds removed from the potato crops. The pleasant heat the roast potatoes gave off when we held them in our freezing hands, their wonderful taste and the conviviality of a shared lunch are still fresh in my memory and perhaps constitute the most pleasant moments from those times. Occasionally, when working for a wealthier agricultural cooperative, if the president were nice he would send us our "lunch" by horse and cart. One such occasion remains imprinted in my memory: enormous loaves of bread made of pure wheat, two kilos each, plus jars of sweet-smelling apricot jam made on site. Drinking water was also brought to us by



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cart, in large aluminium recipients or wooden barrels swelling from all the humidity. Most of the time we avoided drinking this water, using instead to wash ourselves, but when there was a heat wave we would easily forget our fear of germs and bacteria and drink every last drop.

Pen knives or other fancier knives handmade in factories by acquaintances or parents, bizarre looking recipients, special vessels made of steel or aluminium for transporting food, and even a bottle or two of Pepsi or Coca Cola (the most luxurious thing we could ever dream of in terms of food logistics) would make us an object of envy at lunch time. Much later I would discover the explanation for our desire to collect and display these symbols of capitalist consumerism, which at the time we couldn't possibly comprehend. Sociologists have invented a brutal, scientific term to describe this bizarre behaviour: "poor man's commodity fetishism". Yet for us it was not a matter of fetish objects, but something useful and pleasant. Also much sought-after were the tall jars with metal lids used to sell Greek olives that were perfect for storing zacusca. The OBJECT itself still retained its main functional value and was naturally recycled like in

any traditional society still untouched by consumerism. Not to mention our innocence in matters of advertising messages – we were extremely sensitive to the attractive red of a Coca Cola bottle, purchased with hard currency in a special shop in Constanța, a mythical drink to which we attributed miraculous powers. I wonder what role this "breuvage miraculeux" played in the fall of communism?

I never knew who the beneficiaries of our labour were. One of the paradoxes of the Romanian system was that its agricultural sector produced enormous quantities of food stuffs but these were only found in extremely small proportions on the local market. We could always tell immediately if a batch of fruit or vegetables was intended for export from the special care taken over the quality of the packaging, the way in which the goods were transported and the strict selection of the produce, even in the field. Every pepper was carefully selected and wiped clean by us, high school students, with a soft cloth. A further stage of quality control followed, and the vegetables were cleaned again before being carefully placed in cardboard boxes with special protective compartments to prevent the goods from



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suffering even the slightest of knocks during transport.

There were many stories as to the destinations of these pampered products, including that Romania was using its agricultural produce to pay for the acquisition of *The Dolphin*, a worn out submarine purchased from the Soviet navy at the beginning of the 1980s. Another urban legend of the time, one which helped us feel better about all the hard work we were putting in, had it that a Romanian long-distance lorry driver or sailor, on reaching the Federal Republic of Germany (in Romanian shortened to RFG; another forgotten label from those times) spotted a queue of dozens of people outside a grocer's shop, a symbol of abundance in our image of the West. On closer inspection, what does he see? They were selling apples straight out of boxes on which it said "Made in Romania". The naivety of those days! Today I am convinced that these motivational stories were dreamt up in the psychology labs of the former Securitate. According to other such rumours, spread by whisper, young high school pupils who wrote their addresses with a pen on the inside of the boxes would later receive in the post the much-coveted signed photographs of top footballers from Germany, France and Holland, the countries our products were believed to be exported to.

The working day would normally come to an end around four thirty in the afternoon. It was not uncommon for us to be simply forgotten, left on our own in the fields, an oversight on behalf of those in charge of our transport, but also because of the enormous numbers of children engaged in mandatory work. When this happened we would wait patiently beneath the trees lining the road for the arrival of a bus or truck. In most cases it was evening before we got home. By then the electricity would have been cut off for rationing purposes. The same was true of running water. The members of our families would return from the fields dirty, hungry and ill-tempered. Later I would try to find the best image to describe the totalitarian regime I lived under.

The best way to describe it is in terms of the atmosphere of those autumn evenings when night fell quickly on the heavy exhaust fumes of the buses, on the swarms of dirty human beings, all dressed the same, confused and disillusioned. Not to mention the sound of the sirens from the "Progresul" excavator factory, punctuating the evenings with their tired gasps. A Romania of tired sirens – this is my picture of the final years of communism.

In the afternoons we had obligatory supplementary maths, physics, chemistry and biology lessons, depending on which career you wanted to follow (doctor or engineer, there wasn't much choice), haunted by the spectre of failure, which for us meant failing the university entrance exam. The electricity was restored late in the evening, pointlessly, around ten or ten thirty, when we were already in bed, ready for another day's agricultural work, but not before we had prepared our meagre lunches and placed them in our precious gas mask bags.

What does the memory retain of those eight years of agricultural training? This is a hard question to answer. In my case, I continue to wonder at the behaviour of adolescents from the West: superficial, irresponsible, extremely free – in both the good and bad sense of the word. Some time ago I saw some high school pupils in Geneva protesting in the city centre against "the exploitation of children from the entire world", without themselves having ever done a day's work in their lives. Nostalgia, too, great nostalgia. "Tomorrow is never as good as yesterday", the Romans would say. I still need to identify the object of this nostalgia – but that is something I am unable to do. However, I am able to identify things I do not regret, the first being the lack of hope in those days, despite our living in a system borne of the hope that one fine day the world would be a better and equitable place.

The political police, those two hours of television per day, the intimacy borne of the lack of electricity and the books purchased with great difficulty from bookshops – all contributed to the development of an inner life, a

special feeling of camaraderie that today no longer exists, a fragile micro-climate in which basic human values were better protected than today. And one more thing, in lieu of a conclusion, nothing compares to potatoes roasted in hot ashes, eaten with salt in the damp chill of an early November's day on the banks of the Danube laboriously carrying the unwanted waters of Europe downstream before gently depositing them in the Black Sea. The rest is to be found in the archives.

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