

MARTOR



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Author: Iuliana Căpâlneanu

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The traders



In the first years after the Revolution I can't say that I achieved much. I didn't have much money, apart from what my parents gave me and that wasn't much. Around '92, thanks to my friends, my curiosity and my defying character, I started doing drugs. First I did it for fun, but I soon became addicted to heroin. I had already become familiar with a lot of young people who sold drugs but money to get them was the real issue. Heroin was very expensive and I needed ever more. I couldn't give up drugs, so I had to find a way to make money. I began by taking things from the house and pawn them for drugs. Later I was planning on getting them back.

That's how I lost most of the valuable things in our flat. My mother was so upset that she got seriously ill. I couldn't think of anything else but money: how to get them and how to spend them on drugs. That's how I started stealing. I stole cars and from cars, things like stereos, mirrors and generally anything that I found inside. Then I sold everything and get drugs. I also stole from stores, any kind of stores. In '96 I robbed a woman who was just getting out of a bank and had a lot of money on her. I wasn't thinking straight: I could have killed her because I actually stabbed her with a screwdriver. The woman pressed charges and I was arrested. I was sentenced to prison and spent two years there.

There was a good part to this story: in prison

I managed to give up drugs at a time when nobody believed that such a thing would be possible anymore. When I got out, in '98, my mom's health was even worse and soon she passed away. My only surviving relative was my brother who had a family and couldn't do much to help me. So I didn't really know what I could do to earn a living, especially that there was nothing in particular that I was good at. I had no income. Then I asked some friends for help. I knew they had made some money working abroad and I asked them to help me. Their "work" was actually to steal from credit cards. After I had started making money myself in this way, I had to pay for any piece of information they gave me because that was the rule, even if the people who gave you the info were your friends. Everybody knows that you can make a lot of money stealing from credit cards. I went with them to Spain and I learnt how to do things. I got a lot of money out it. At the beginning I was in the front line, meaning that I was in the greatest danger to get caught by the police. Later on I became the least in danger to get busted. I bought myself everything I needed to make sure of that: a video camera, which we called the pussycat, and I started renting the cars I needed to go to different places, generally to the ATMs I surveyed with my pussycat. We almost got caught by the Spanish police once or twice but we managed to escape.

In two years I had gathered so much money that I went back to Bucharest and bought a flat, a cool car and set up a firm, a restaurant which is doing very well! When I look back on things in the past, I myself am amazed at what I was capable of doing and I can say in all honesty that during my prison years I hadn't even dreamed I would end up doing such things. Frankly, I can't say that I am proud of the way I got my first money and I'm no role-model, but I am proud of the fact that I managed to start again from scratch at a moment when I couldn't have sunk any lower. I had hit rock bottom. And I want to tell you something else: as soon as I got back to Romania, I became completely legit. I didn't even cross the street on the red traffic light. I can say that I obey all Romanian laws. But I had to live for many years at war with them to realize that they are actually made to be observed.

(Aurelian P., 28, self-employed)



The Revolution found me and my family living reasonably comfortably: my mom was a shop assistant and my dad worked at the subway. We were lucky to have my grandparents, though. They lived a few kilometres away from Bucharest and they had a lot of land where they

grew water melons. My dad and I went to collect them, first by car, some family friends' Dacia because we didn't own one, and then sold them in Bucharest. We would spend weeks on end sleeping in the car or even outside, next to the water melons to keep watch because we couldn't take them all home. This situation lasted for two or three years.

Meanwhile, my mom quit her job at the store because the salary was very small, and we bought a TEC soft-drinks distributor. All family members took turns selling drinks, but I spent the least time doing that because I had to go to school. That was the first time when I could truly notice that my family had begun to prosper. At the time everybody drank that kind of soft drinks and they didn't just have a glass while in the street, they even brought 1 or 2 litre bottles and bought differently-flavoured soft drinks which they took home.

But there was another craze sweeping the country: everybody traveled abroad and brought back clothing. So I left the soft-drinks distributor business to my family and I began taking regular trips to Turkey together with a couple of friends of mine. At first we would bring back blue jeans, leather jackets and all sorts of clothing, one more colourful than the next, and they sold well, we had no complain about that. Around '97 - '98 designer clothing came into fashion and you just couldn't be seen wearing any kind of blue jeans. They had to bear the name of the designer. People didn't want to wear suits made in Istanbul anymore, but demanded Emporio Armani ones, so we too advantage of the whole thing. We would bring back from Turkey suits that we sold as designer clothing after we had attached to them original labels we had got from friends who stole them from the West. We would take the suits to a tailor's and we would ask the man to add something to the label so as to make it distinct from other. In case a buyer saw that other people had similar clothes, they would have the proof that theirs was the original thing

and that they hadn't been cheated.

I don't mean to be mean but the snobbery characterizing the Romanians was our principle advantage in this business. You could sell any piece of nonsense as long as our Romanian client saw a designer label on it. We sold everything for prices three or four times more expensive, and even for more than that. We did exactly the same thing with perfumes. I remember that once we brought back some gym suits, which we pretended to be designer made, and a few days later we found out that others had brought the same kind of gym suits to sell in their stalls in the bazaar. We had added the usual fake labels. but that wasn't enough anymore, so we took them to the tailor's and we had a sort of colourful star sewn on their pockets. I

can't even begin to describe how proud our clients were to see that they had bought the original gym suits, as they had the star to prove that. The other gym suits sold in the bazaar did not have it.

Now things have become more difficult because Romanians travel more and more and they have learnt how things really are, what quality is merchandise and what isn't. But, at the time, if you were smart enough, you could make some handsome money from other people's stupidity.

(Sorin I., 34, self-employed)

Translated by Alina Popescu

Interviews done by **Iuliana Căpâlneanu**

