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Trading in clothes, silver, fake precious stones and tobacco

Petre Marin, merchant, 50 years old
Interview done by Gabriela Cristea



At the beginning of 1991 I traveled to China by train. We were a group: Geta, Vili with his wife and two more people. We got together and left for China via Russia by train. When we arrived there, during the first months of 1991, there was no such thing as cargo, there was nothing there ... All you had was what you could carry with you on the train. Then, in time, the Tarom company introduced a flight to China in its timetable but cancelled it soon after. At the time we traveled with The Chinaman¹ and anything branded “Made in China” sold immediately because there was no competition on the market.

We brought back leather jackets, blouses, pullovers, footwear ... pieces of jewelry made of enameled gold or silver ... all worth around 2000 dollars per person. The funny part was that we had had a CEC deposit for a Dacia² ever since Ceaușescu was president. We withdrew the money and bought a train ticket. So, we left for China.

We had found out about this from Mrs. Geta Gușă who had been the first to travel to China by train, as she was a tour guide working for ONT.³ Where she had picked up the news I did not

know, she just told me the story of her voyage there. At first, she was also the one who gave me the money I needed for shopping there, as she had plenty. So it was ...

And it took us two days to get to Moscow. We changed trains there and, leaving from another station, we arrived in China. The journey through Mongolia took seven days, and the journey back, through Manchuria this time, took eight days plus two more from Moscow to Bucharest. Later, as more and more tourists started visiting China, people commonly traveling by train, return tickets became more and more difficult to find. We waited almost two weeks there just to be able to buy our tickets back. We got up at 4 am, waited for an available ticket at the travel agency until 2 pm and still couldn't find any. So, that's how we spent two weeks in China in order to buy return tickets. The trip both ways took exactly one month, shopping period included.

As soon as I came back with the merchandise I gave it all for sale on consignment. I don't think it took longer than one month to sell ... It just flew out of stores! The market was available. Anything bearing the sign “Made in China”

1 The Chinese Airlines.

2 This Romanian car was bought according to a list made by the CEC (The Romanian Savings Bank).

3 The National Bureau for Tourism.

would sell immediately because there was no competition for it. This situation went on for quite a while until 1995 or the end of '96. That was when the system changed and more Chinese came to Romania for trade. We brought back packs of goods while they started using containers for their merchandise and that's how things changed. On top of everything, the purchasing power had begun to decrease.

I traveled to all sorts of places: Turkey, China, Dubai, India, Thailand ... I would make 6 to 8 trips in one year. I brought different things from different places. The peak of my activity was during 1993 and 1994. Yes, that was the period when I circulated the most money ... That was when my father decided to join me ... around 1996. I even remember what happened during his first trip. My father had been advised to buy little tin boxes containing that Chinese ointment. I think he got them from Iabalu, oh no, it was from Honciao¹, the wholesale store next to a wall there, which, by the time we got there ourselves, had been transferred to one of those huge buildings ... Yes, from Iabalu, where we ate snake ... So, he bought several packs and he carried them back to our hotel room in a bag. They were pretty expensive ... The smell of the ointment was so strong that we could barely breathe. Then Vili, the boy he shared the room with, grabbed the bag and hung it out of the window. The hotel security noticed and confiscated his bag. When my dad came back, he couldn't find the precious bag! In the end, he found it at the front desk. The Chinese had panicked thinking that it must have been a bomb or something! We had more such incidents in an airport in Vienna. They saw bullets hidden in our bag on the screen of that TV set of theirs, when in fact the incriminated items were toys which threw a red light when switched on ... Oh, there were so many things we used to carry in our bags! Silver and gold ... 20 kilos at every trip till our should-

ders felt sore ... When they cancelled the Taron flight, we took a flight that would stop in Vienna before arriving in Bucharest ...

Yeah, these stories have become the folklore of our group. The members were always the same: me, Romica, Vili, uncle Gigi, Geta Gușă, Geta Doban... at the beginning these six were permanent members. Then the Raicu brothers from Ploiești, Costică Țiganu, Mama Costică (Costică Țiganu's mother)... This was our group, always together. The one who started the whole thing and the one who had the most money was Geta. She still travels to China and has a store on Calea Victoriei. Of course her business can't compare to ours anymore. She was the first to go there, and then the first to make wholesale imports of tobacco. She was the first to set up a firm dealing in silver. Actually many of us had firms, but hers was special because it dealt specifically in silver and gold. She was the first to deal in silver at Prisma², and I followed her example a week later. I brought my silver from Thailand. She was the first to deal with silver ... She's in a league of her own, you know!

She went to India, to Madras, and brought a wholesale transport of tobacco. Back then tobacco was sold right outside the factory gates. In Romania, immediately after the Revolution, the market simply froze. Nothing was sold or bought anymore. She knew people who gave her tips and she herself had good intuitions about the market... She calculated everything by the ton... She brought containers with tobacco several times a year, can you imagine that?! She was the wealthiest of the group. She would lend money to everybody else, with an interest of course. This happened because she, as she had been a tour guide and the first of us to bring containers of goods by ship, had stopped bringing things by plane. This kind of transport was too expensive and limited to a certain amount. She was also the wealthiest of the group.

1 Names of specialized bazaars in Beijing.

2 Wholesale store on the outskirts of Bucharest.

When we started transporting things by ship, the goods would take around forty days, maybe a month and a half to arrive. Sometimes there were also delays. We brought them over from Constanța and got them through customs here, in Bucharest. I remember that the first time when they transported our cargo, clothes it was, by plane, there was a pack in the luggage compartment containing mace reed, which we had to get through customs. We had mace reed instead of leather jackets in that pack. The Chinese had fooled us. They had cut the pack, had taken the clothes out and then had sealed the packs now containing mace reed. Back then there were no cargo firms in China. Everything was done by unauthorized persons. Later, in '92 – '93, Panasonic came and started selling things legally and made shipments too ... Oh, my God! There were so many people in those storehouses where they prepared our packs! They were Russians, Bulgarians, Serbs, all packing up goods. Especially the Russians.

After that I started buying silver. I brought over it from Thailand because I had difficulty selling merchandise from China once Chinese tradesmen had become more numerous. That was when I started looking for something else. And we found Thailand, and after that India ... I traveled there regularly for two or three years and business was good. Then Tarom cancelled the flights ... I never understood why the direct flight to China was cancelled by the Tarom guys. Nobody can understand politics. At the beginning they cancelled the flight to China through Karachi, where I used to buy this and that from the airport, as prices there were really good. They cancelled this flight and introduced a direct one, no stop on the way. Next they cancelled the Thailand flight, then the one to India. No wonder that the Chinese tradesmen conquered out market slowly but surely ...

In '96 the changes in the political system were followed by changes in customs regulations. The Peasants' National Party came up with new ideas, with their own policy and the

system, as with any government change, also changed. Everything changes at a moment like this. And so the head of the customs department was also changed, but I can't recall his name. When the PNȚ (the Peasant National Party) got political power, they changed him too and, a few days after that, he ran away to America and never came back. The prices changed too and everything else, for that matter ... Up to that point, a blouse was worth a dollar at customs. With the new regime they put a fixed price, five dollars a blouse. Everything had a fixed price at customs: shirts, T-shirts, dresses. You couldn't afford to make imports anymore, as you bought a blouse for two dollars there and here you had to pay five for customs taxes. It was only natural that things would become less ... profitable.

In '91 when I went on my first trip, there where no customs taxes! We had come by train and nobody asked a thing about it. There were no customs taxes, nothing at all back in '91. Later they started adding taxes and issuing laws: that you were allowed to bring back goods worth up to 100 dollars without paying for the customs and stuff like that ... But at the beginning there was really nothing of the kind ... At the end of '92 and the beginning of '93 they started issuing receipts at customs: you paid for ten of these blouses, for five of those blouses, you paid for everything ... It wasn't much, the prices were very low, less than a dollar per blouse. You paid 20 dollars for a leather jacket ... The prices for fake precious stones were very low ... You rarely paid more than a hundred. That's right, they called us self-employed. There were no firms at the time, you did everything individually. Later on they said that you were allowed to bring goods worth not more than a hundred dollars without paying customs taxes, to which you could add your personal luggage. You had to pay for anything in excess of that. After that they said that you weren't allowed to leave the country with more than 1500 dollars on you. And the list continued ...

Back when business was good, you would sell



your merchandise for twice maybe three times its value. It all depended on the demand and the market. In time, as competition developed on the market, the prices started going down. You couldn't estimate the financial growth easily. You placed the goods in stores and you couldn't simply wait to see how it would sell in the end ... Anyway, we used to travel with only small sums on us, not more than 1000 maybe 1500 dollars and we couldn't wait to get more because we weren't allowed to travel abroad with more. You couldn't plan anything in advance. As soon as you had 1500 dollars you hit the road again! I didn't try to leave the country with more than that because I wasn't allowed to. Even if, later, you could leave with more money on you ... Yeah, but when we started leaving with 5000 dollars on us, we were already shipping containers and the market had already got worse.

I said that at the beginning we placed our goods on consignment because you couldn't get a store of your own. They were all owned by those who had managed trade before 1989 and you just couldn't kick them out. In time they went bankrupt, one after another, and you moved in and reopened the stores, set up firms and got equal working conditions because, starting virtually at the end of '94, you were allowed to make imports only through a firm. My first store was a rented stall in the Exhibition, then the next one was at Prisma and later, in '96, I managed to rent a store in Dorobanți Street, downtown.

In '99 I bought from the city hall a store at Gara de Nord, next to the Ministry of Transport building. I am still the owner but the situation is very complicated because sales aren't that good right now ... Taxes are very high. I think that we are the only ones who pay their state taxes. We are the owners of small firms. Because the big ones and their owners, as the press also writes, owe hundreds of millions and they never pay ... I don't believe that small firm owners owe the state a single leu. It can't even be so because, as soon as you owe them something, the Financial Guard shows up and puts a lot of pressure on you.

The affair with the shops was also complicated. Some of them were closed down when others were just being opened. In '94, the stalls at the Exhibition were all closed down because those who had their wholesale store there moved their business to Europa when it opened. In one year they were all settled in Europa, and they had all left for Europa or Prisma, as it opened in '95. It stayed in business until 1999. They started raising the rent, asking for a pledge sum of 500 dollars, to which you added the maintenance costs. At that point the expenditure was higher than the income.

At the beginning my stall at Prisma was very profitable. In '95 and '96 there were as many as five hundred cars in the parking lot at weekend, not to mention the people who arrived by special

buses from downtown. The crowd was huge. The parking lot was virtually packed with vehicles! When they started asking for pledge money and demanded that we didn't close our stalls, as each of them pursued his own interests... For instance, we weren't allowed to close before 7 o'clock or leave the stall. Why on earth? If I knew that after five days I would have no more customers, why was I supposed to keep my stall open? Not to mention that the shop assistant, who was there from 9 to 7 pm, wanted to leave earlier on Sunday.

Our stall was at Prisma 1, but there were 800 other firms which wanted a stall there too. People paid huge bribes to get in and open a stall. If you did as little as closed the door or didn't open the stall for one day, they would immediately give you a warning: next time we'll kick you out! They checked on you every ten minutes! "We will kick you out, you know, 800 hundred other firms are on the waiting list to get a stall here and you won't be missed" ... Meanwhile, they had the brilliant idea of building Prisma 2. Once

they had done that, they realized that people weren't so eager to get in anymore. Firms began to move out also because Niro had just opened. Many left Prisma for Niro. When they finished building Prisma 2, they found that there weren't 800 firms on the waiting list anymore. There were only 50 firms that had signed up for the opening. In three months Prisma 2 had become virtually empty and people started moving out their business from Prisma 1 too. The Mall opened next ... Prisma was too far away, in Balotești. It wasn't profitable anymore. The Mall and Niro were closer. If you wanted a special kind of goods, you went to the Vitan Mall. In time, Prisma was forsaken. Nowadays, it is still in business but it's empty. If you can count 20 cars in the parking lot, that must be a good day. There used to be five hundred of them ...

Translated by Alina Popescu