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## Daily lives in Bucharest 1946–1950

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### Sanda Golopenția

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#### ABSTRACT

The text is an excerpt from the author's volume *Viața noastră cea de toate zilele* (Bucharest: Curtea Veche, 2009) narrating memories triggered by reading the Securitate files of Anton Golopenția, surveilled by the political police between 1949 and 1950. Translated in English by Lidia Bradley.

#### KEYWORDS

Memory, silence, family, Holy Days, Bucharest, Cotroceni.

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### No. 7, Strada Dr. Lister, Cotroceni

Among the many quarters of Bucharest that I got to know over the years, the first one was green and soothing, a gift.

We lived in Cotroceni, on a street lined with lime trees, across from the Saint Elefterie church, whose greyish and red brick stripes seemed to forebode the colours of a reversed winter coat, dyed wine-red and trimmed at the collar and the sleeves with a sliver of greyish-silvery astrakhan, which my mother would wear day in, day out for all those dark years. In that coat mother looked like a church tower herself, I used to think to myself, while waiting for her to come back from school, on a bench in the tiny rose garden at the corner of our street. In the evening, the round rose bed was watered with punctiliousness by an older man, all skin and bone, about whom I only remember the solemnity with which he held the hose and the meticulous patience with which he would make sure that each of the tall stems ending in a rosy-yellow flower would drink its share. The garden hose has stayed in my memory ever since like a prized possession, inaccessible, till I bought a simple one, the first, here in Providence, far away. The new acquisition and its meaning for my evenings was grafted onto the remembrance of the roses rendered happy in times past by a kind-hearted stranger.

Less showy and rather sagging, the roses in the park were still there when, many years later, one morning in autumn, with my sick mother barely standing next to me, we waited for a taxi that refused stubbornly to come and bring her to the hospital where she would die a couple of months later.

From the lime trees on Strada Lister, which smelled like a huge tea-pot every spring, my brother and I would pick “our” share with dignity.



Sanda Golopenția at the beginning of the 1950s



Anton Golopenția in 1949/1950, before resigning from the Central Institute of Statistics

The male and female blossoms, some orange and mat, others fair and transparent, would be spread out to dry on newspapers, which rendered our tiny living space even tighter. The high point of our contribution to transfiguring our dinners was when we would delicately stuff the dried-out blossoms into small sachets made of a light green cloth, sewn expressly for tea or bread crumbs. Then we would pull the string, green as well, but of a darker shade, and we would make a bow. The light, scented sachet would be placed on a shelf in the pantry. Four to five bags of these homemade sachets would hold us through the winter, we would not have had space for more anyway.

A yogurt peddler went up and down the street each morning. He advertised his wares by shouting. I would run down the three storeys of the building at the back of the courtyard, from which I dreamt every night that I would jump down with deft agility directly onto the asphalt. I would cross the narrow space, running, and come onto the street around “the front building.” Yogurt was sold in small blue porcelain pots capped with alu-

minium foil; I took them from the packed pushcart and ran home with the cool prey in my hands, while the peddler intoned with conviction “yoguuuurt ... fresh yogúrt”, lengthening the syllables as he disappeared towards Strada Dr. Clunet. It seemed to me that one of these pots should become part of my emigrant’s dowry; now, after all these years, I have it close to me, here in Providence, Rhode Island. On it the word “Miorița” stands out in fine handwriting on the pale blue background, the colour of the old houses of Transylvania; I put spring flowers in it, or wild ones, and I feel closer to the murmur of a good Bucharest.

In the wild garden behind the Saint Elefterie church, shepherds would start arriving towards Easter with lambs to sell. For a while there was tumult and wailing in the street. Then all of a sudden it grew quiet again, and our interest would change direction, attracted by the triangular space beside the newspaper kiosk on the Strada St. Elefterie, where tin pans were being mended, minced meat rolls were grilled and sold, and where, sometimes, we could buy layered ice cream.

It was the time of food ration cards. I bought daily three or four slices of clay-like bread, which the baker behind the St. Elefterie Church, a former university professor, weighed gawkily on the scales. From time to time one could find butter at the grocery, sometimes ham, bologna sausage, krakauer, and at the market near Strada Costache Negri, my grandmother would even buy a chicken when we had become fed up with the smelly old mutton from the butcher’s.

In “the garden with the statue” between Bulevardul Ardealului and the Dâmbovița quay, where I had once discovered dandelions, we would play the statue game walking, guilt-ridden, on the regularly mown grass, up to the flower beds in the centre.

We lived at number 7, Strada Dr. Lister, in the back building, on the third floor, to the right. Between the building in the front, identical with our own, and ours, two rectangles — with small, wild roses, blood red, raspberry red, cherry red, coral, pink or wine red—

framed both our main door and the back door of the other building. To the left of both buildings, the small wagon that carried the garbage collected at the back of the yard moved on narrow rails up to the street, sliding under the cherry tree in the neighbours' garden, from which we were separated by a high wooden fence. Towards the street, a thick concrete wall two-feet high, topped with thick iron bars looking like the back of a chair, would often-times host, also close to the cherry tree, a tall man with blue eyes, and long, white hair; his clean clothes had long ago lost their colour, growing white, like him. He would linger there for hours, serene and silent, and people would set by his side food, some old piece of clothing, or, rarely, money. When this happened, his face cleared a bit, he would bend his head in a dignified sign of gratitude, and the day seemed brighter.

To the right, a low wire fence did not quite manage to separate us from the neighbouring courtyard in which the champion Julieta Namian would hit a tired tennis ball against a green wall, all day long. In the back right-hand corner of the courtyard, the moist shade of a mulberry tree, reaching towards us from the huge garden of nameless neighbours in Strada Costache Negri, would entice braver children, who climbed up and down it incessantly, in ways that are still unimaginable to me. When I grew silkworms, the leaves of the mulberry tree filled my father's office for a time, and our apartment got to know the discreet noise of their rhythmic crunching.

Our apartment consisted of two rooms and a hallway. The largest room was the bedroom in which my mother, father, my brother and myself slept. It also housed my mother's books. The smaller room was my father's study, with his bookshelves and a narrow bed covered with a soldier's blanket, on which, for years, slept my grandmother, who sought refuge in Bucharest after her house in Bozovici had been bombed and, later, sold. Before she came, that bed had served for my father's younger brother, Bubi. Several years after my father's death, when we had grown up, my

grandmother moved to live with Bubi and his wife Maria, who had young children.

The bedroom was separated from the hall by a large glass door, covered, like the glass door of the office, with curtains hung from metal rods. I have just one memory of that large glass door being open, for Christmas. A tall Christmas tree stood right between the bedroom and the hallway, from the kitchen came the scent of roasted sweet chestnuts, and, for a moment, bliss alighted on our lives.

The hallway was pierced by doors – towards the two rooms, towards the entrance, towards another small hall by which we accessed the kitchen and the bathroom, towards the narrow, long balcony on which we lay in the sun listening to the sizzling of hot oil and the din of pots and pans put to good use in the kitchens of the front building.

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**Girlfriends**

There were no girls of my age in our apartment building: my name was not called out by children, nor by my mother or grandmother. When I was not at home, I visited my friends in the neighbourhood. One of them lived on Strada Lister, just after the cobbler's at No. 12, and I would go there to play on her swing—I liked to work the swing faster and higher back and forth, back and forth, until I grew dizzy. Another friend, whose second name was Nichifor, was the daughter of one of the powerful men of the moment. She lived in a cream-coloured villa before the pink house on the corner to Strada Dr. Pasteur, both of us would climb into the attic, to taste from the dark grapes hung to dry out on a string. Her parents did not like me. There was Tamara Zambilovici, also on Strada Lister, up towards Gaghel's villa. Gaghel used to own a chain of bakeries. I think it was at Tamara's, or at a friend of hers that I climbed on a ladder into one of the sour cherry trees behind the house. Carmencita Lepădatu lived not far from school, near the art historian Oprescu's house.

Ketty (Alexandra) Nicolau, a strong chess player already, lived somewhat farther away, on Strada Iatropol as I remember. She had all sorts of shells, brought back from the seaside by herself, her brother Claude and her sister Monica. In their house a French chef did the cooking, whose milk rice was unsurpassed, Ketty was the only one in our class who managed to dance the Cossack dance (*kasachok*); she was my soul mate.

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### **Mademoiselle Economidis**

With the Stamatina daughters at Dr. Lister 1, with Dănuț and myself, and others whom I do not remember, our parents had organized a French class and they all paid Mlle Economidis to teach us twice a week. The classes took place at the Stamatins'; we would not have had enough space for them in our home. There, around Christmas, I ate fondants for the first time. I had not known that something so delicious existed in the world. From the Stamatina girls I used to borrow books later on; those I owned had been exhausted long ago, read over and over.

Miss Economidis had short straight hair, dyed like copper. She stood upright, naturally elegant, lived by the Pioneers' Palace, in the same house as writer Nicolae Batzaria, and she asked us to write portraits of acquaintances in French and read them to each other. I remember how I listened to a portrait written by Chiți, the elder Stamatina sister, without realizing it was depicting me. I was likewise surprised, later, listening to my own voice recorded on tape, unable to perceive in it anything familiar. Chiți was speaking about the determination with which I defended my brother against other children.

The cobbler's at number 12, Strada Dr. Lister. A man of about fifty, grave and sad, surrounded by patches of leather sole, shoes, sandals, worn-out boots, soldier's boots, leather of all sorts, shoe cream and dyes, lasts, pliers, drills, blakeys and an unlimited number of

tools. It might be because of him that I have taken lately to describing the disorder of papers surrounding me at the office, at school or at home by saying "it's like a cobbler's shop".

This kind, pale, soft-spoken man mended, dyed and straightened the worn-out shoes of the whole district, he helped us all to a lighter step. He seldom smiled, I never saw him standing, only sitting down on his low stool. His workshop was located in a dark garage, we would go down a slope to enter it.

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### **Tram number 14**

In my childhood, tram number 14 passed along Strada Dr. Lister. Children would put carbide on the rails, which exploded with a bang when the tram hit it. The tram stop was in front of the Meinel store. Meinel sold coffee, sometimes oranges, each wrapped in its own thin paper wrapping. Close to Meinel there had once been a flower shop, with windows along which water streamed down, mysteriously, at all times – I dimly remember a moment of wonder when, not finding a word for the magnificent flowers, I created one myself, and I sang it like an incantation, over and over again, in front of the window: *ciuli* (pronounced *tschiuli*). By 1948 the flower shop had long been replaced by a grocery store to which I would be sent to buy butter, sometimes ham. Butter was brought in large cakes, from which slices were cut off with a big knife, the way they also used to cut the halva in the store across the street. I left the shop with the slice of butter wrapped in white paper and on the way home I would eat from the good cold butter, too good to be wasted on bread, so tasty, sweet and fresh as it was.

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### **A round market**

I see it as in a dream. The St. Elefterie Market. An American-like glass-paned bank building

rises now on that spot. Our market was round, with dark shops, each shaped like the segment of a circle, with the goods exhibited outside, at the front. They would sell there butter made out of buffalo cow milk, with patterns stamped on it. They would sell chickens, and when Mr. Vasile the concierge was not to be found, cutting their throats posed a problem. At the corner, in Strada Costache Negri, was the butcher's, where during those years, to my grandmother's dismay, they would sell mostly sinewy mutton with a pungent smell, which she, a Bohemian from Banat, would reject instinctively. Just as the Bucharest people did, as a matter of fact.



House in Cotroceni. Behind it, St. Elefterie church

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### The C.A.M. kiosk at No. 2, Strada Elefterie

The imprint of the steps that brought us to this kiosk would have dug, in time, visible furrows. There we bought the newspaper, stamps and envelopes with stationery (always slightly crumpled and smelling of cigarettes). There we found matches or fiscal stamps.

Next to the kiosk a peddler of layered ice cream set up his stand each summer. I would run from home with a soup bowl in my hand, pay in a rush and run back home as fast as my legs could carry me, climbing the three storeys at once, with the ice cream dripping slowly, in its different colours, and we all marveled at its festive composition and at the sweet coolness it left in our mouths. About once a summer a man came there to tin pots and pans, or to sharpen knives. Later the minuscule garden next to the kiosk turned into a place with a barbecue for sausages.

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### Pontiac and Buikeikt

In Bucharest at that time they still used the old cars, from before the war, fixed and patched up endlessly. In the park with the statue, my

brother and I would while our afternoon away guessing at which make of car would drive first down the Bulevardul Ardealului. I do not remember what the stakes were, but I still hear the triumphant tone in which one of us would cry out loud: Ford! Plimut! Pontiac! Buikeikt! (Plymouth and Buick Eight, of course, but we had no knowledge of English whatsoever.) That's how we played for hours.

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### The park as it was before the Opera was built

The alleyways of the park between the Venus Arena and the Faculty of Law were covered in pebbles of many delicate shades which screamed under our feet and slowed us down. The leaves of poplars that I no longer manage to place in the landscape would shiver and shine in the sun. My mother came with a folding chair and with a bag of eye-shaped almonds that she would carefully crack open with a special little nutcracker. Sometimes we would take fruit cakes baked by our grandmother with us, eating with relish the tasty imprints that cherries or apricots had made in the dough.

I ran around on the grass, looking for

flowers, through bushes, gathering branches of Japanese quince or searching for twigs on which snails had blossomed after rain. A man was hiding in the bushes, that I would later learn to call an exhibitionist. I did not quite understand the hurry with which he was calling me, the strange look in his eyes, the insistent way in which he would urge me to get closer. But mother's voice, suddenly worried, would always come to my rescue in time. I would run towards her and forget in an instant the humble, unspeakable gestures.

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### **The Central Institute of Statistics: No. 31, Strada Brezoianu**

My father's office at C.I.S. was on the second floor. The big hall of the Office for Studies seems to have been there too. I remember that one day, when father took me with him – he was not a Director yet –, I read out a new slogan on the wall: "Those who will not work, will not eat". "What won't they eat?" I asked, eager to understand this unheard of statement. It was my father's turn, and his colleagues', to



Statue of Sanitary Heroes

wonder. "What do you mean, what?" "Well, won't they eat soup, or stew, or what won't they eat?" I remember answering, and, for a moment, their faces lit up.

It was a time of bewilderment. Someone at school had asked a similar question when we said good-bye to each other—and to the French School, which was closing, and sang "To the last one they will perish / the enemies of the people", – "Up till one o'clock when, on what day?" I found out then from the teachers, and my mother confirmed it, that in Romanian până la unu "until one o'clock" also meant până la ultimul, "to the last one." It was not much clearer, but by then I had given up trying to understand in depth every slogan and every song.

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### **Going to school through the Cișmigiu park**

In the short time he was director general of the C.I.S., my father had to use the official car more often than usual. He had to get quickly from one of the buildings of the Institute, the one in Strada Brezoianu, across the Cișmigiu park, to the others, the headquarters in the Splaiul Unirii, or to the one in Șerban Vodă, where the Archives and the garage were located. The driver, the austere Mr. Chelu, showed up every morning at No. 7, Strada Dr. Lister and from then on my father would no longer walk me through the Cișmigiu park to school—which was on Strada Christian Tell (whose name jingled for a long time in my head like a tiny bell: cristiantel)—and send my brother to kindergarten by car, but he submitted instead to the grown-up discipline of sullen, motorized efficiency.

When we walked together to school, the amusements that my father invented were not few. These were the years in which we ate maize mush in the morning, at noon, and in the evening. Maize mush with jam in the morning. Maize mush with potato stew or cooked beans at noon. Maize mush fried in fat

or maize mush with milk in the evening. The left-over maize mush was wrapped every morning by my grandmother for us. We took it to the beavers and the deer in the Cișmigiu park, not far from the exit towards the Conservatory. The beavers would hardly let themselves be seen, busy as they were with their woodcutting on the small island on the pond. We would throw clumps of dry mush and watch to see how they got them. Where the deer were, there was a sour smell, from the neighbouring foxes. I would stretch out my hand with cold mush, their lips took it from me delicately, my father looking on.

To get to Cișmigiu we would cross the Eleferie bridge, leaving the Dâmbovița river to our right. On the Dâmbovița quay, more precisely on the slope leading to the muddy water, poppy flowers were growing, and we would talk about the probable number of petals; for me every flower had at least five, four said my father, five I would insist with conviction. I remember how I once saw him jump with ease over the metallic fence and run down the slope, he stumbled a little, reaching for a poppy that I could make out round and full and most certainly having lots of petals. He came back triumphantly, there were four, all crumpled on top of each other. That is how I learned that common poppies, unlike the double ones, indeed have only four petals.

We walked on Bulevardul 6 Martie to Piața Kogălniceanu. Entering the park by the rose alley, right after the Lazăr High School, we would look at the statues of writers. Then we went out by the Conservatory exit, where in springtime an elegant little tree blossomed in pink, crêpe-paper tassels. I remember how once, seeing that I was pining for them, my father broke off a twig and offered it to me. It had been a royal gift, he had assumed a serious risk, I thought, by breaking off a branch from a tree that was not ours, and, ever since, each time I pass by that place (where the tree lives on and probably blossoms just as wondrously), I remember the joy and terrified pride I felt one far-gone spring. He had won, in one second, my life-long devotion.

We would then pass an antiquarian bookseller, somewhere towards Calea Victoriei, not far from the Athénée Palace Hotel. At times I stopped still to look at the guards of the Royal Palace, turned into stone, as in the sleeping forest.

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### Russian language

Because of Russian, after the French school had been closed down, my mother and father decided it was better for me to repeat the year. I had started the French school at six and a half and had “jumped”, in the middle of the school year, from first grade into the third, as was usual for the children who did well, so that they did not get bored. Instead of registering me in the fourth grade at St. Eleferie School, my parents thought it better for me to repeat the third year, so as to get used to the new school, to the new teachers and subjects, and to start learning Russian after I had given French some time to settle.

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### The chests

When he resigned, my father acquired some chests. They were large, made of oak, yellowish-orange, with handles made of thick, braided rope and with a sliding lid. They had served to store census cards and statistics documents when the Institute was evacuated during WWII. In the after-war years the employees still kept old provisions of minuscule soldiers' biscuits in them, of which I ate my share, heartily, each time my father took me with him to his office.

He then put all his “personal” belongings into the chests. Letters, reading notes, photographs, books from his private library, which, too numerous to be kept on our shelves at home, had been gradually taken to the Institute and were now coming back to get squeezed in the study room where my grand-



mother slept and we children took turns doing homework.

Months of careful selection followed. Some of the books would stay upstairs, on the third floor, where we lived. Others would be stored in the basement chamber corresponding to our apartment. My father went up and down the stairs. The chests, their lids slid open, had been placed on top of each other to build deep shelves. Books were thoughtfully and patiently arranged in them.

For a while life went on like this, with my father at home, going downstairs to the basement to read, doing piece-work for the Planning Commission and having, all of a sudden, more time for us.

In the spring of 1949, our basement chamber was assigned to someone else. The chests were to be removed from there urgently. Father, together with a friend, moved books and papers from early morning till late at night. They put them in a locked area in the basement. They took them there in batches, filling box after box, pouring DDT onto each new layer, since the cellar was at risk from mice and cockroaches. The book chests, with their lid closed tight, were piled up on top of one another. At the bottom, which you could not reach without moving everything away—the cellar was tiny and the chests, cubes with one-metre-long sides rising up to the ceiling, were heavy—father had put the chests with the reading notes, works in progress and letters. He nailed their lids shut.

One day father did not come back from the library to which he hurried every morning with writing paper and a slice of dark bread. No one went downstairs to the cellar again; even my father had stopped going to his books a while before his arrest.

Years went by. The chests provided so many reasons for the housing authority to hassle us. “What’s in them? Books smell. They attract mice. Basements are not for books.” My mother firmly refused to open the door to the storage chests. My brother and I looked sometimes at the chests through the bars, when there were problems with the plumbing and

grandmother sent us to fetch water from the basement in a bucket.

One spring the basement was flooded. Together with my father’s youngest brother and us, my mother unlocked the door. Climbing up the chests, we removed the lids of the upper ones. We emptied them and moved their contents, layer by layer, until we reached the bottom. We did not open all the chests. The wood, solid and thick, had not allowed the water to seep in. The chests with their lids nailed shut stayed closed. There was a mouldy smell in the cellar. We put the books back into the chests, the chests in the pile; we children took some books that seemed legible to us upstairs. For weeks the apartment smelled of DDT (Although the dictionary definitions speaks of a colourless odourless substance, in my memory DDT stays white and with a definite smell) and we had sore throats. The cellar was unlocked again when, upon my mother’s death, the apartment had to be evacuated.

When—together with some friends—I brought the military chests, untouched for almost 20 years, out into the daylight, and started pulling out the nails with a pair of pliers, a neighbor, a retired Securitate officer, stopped to see what we were doing and said: “Be careful, there might be bombs inside”. (“Lupta” [The Fight], 15 March 1985)

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### **When they left for work**

When he left from home to spend the whole day at the Library of the Academy, my father would take along a hunk of stale dark bread, the kind we bought on ration cards. At the bakery in the Strada St. Elefterie the shop assistant was a former university professor, one whispered he had taught psychology. From time to time his smiling wife came to help. The ration cards were in different colours, made up of small undetachable squares which we would cut gingerly with the scissors in the beginning and which, later, apathetic, we would tear away with bare fingers. My father did not have a ra-

tion card. My grandmother had a dark grey one. The unexplained symbolism of the two exclusions did not escape us. It was echoed by lumps in our throats when we were offered a cake at a cake shop, which my brother and I would swallow hesitatingly, almost with guilt. Our mother or father, who bought them for us, did not eat any. We finished ours quickly, eager to leave that space of unshared pleasures.

Father went down the stairs running, and, once in the courtyard between the two apartment buildings, he would turn as if by reflex towards the building where we lived and, slightly lifting his hat, he would greet whomever was at the windows. Mrs. Vlădescu, a retired physical education teacher, on the first floor to the left; Mrs. or Mr. Fortunescu, rosy and smiling, retired as well, on the second floor, also to the left; on the left ground floor, Dr. Abrudescu's mother, who was then over 80 and whose son managed to procure orange juice for her every single day. From the right side of the building, on the ground floor, Mrs. Plăcințeanu happened to look out into the courtyard from time to time; she was the wife of a university professor who would later go into hiding, only to be arrested soon afterwards as well. On the second floor Mrs. Moscos, a Greek, stood always at the window; her husband had also disappeared, they said he had left the country. Father would then walk away briskly, towards books and forgetting.

Mother went to school with fatigue written in bold letters on her face. The telephone conversations have long disappeared from my memory. But I knew about hiring, downsizing, and purging, as I knew about the State Planning Commission, for which my father worked now. I also knew about the Theses on Romanian Literature, which teachers taught while waiting for the new handbooks to come out; my mother read them gloomily while preparing her lesson plans at the unvarnished fir wood table, over 2 meters long. The table filled up the hall, and was alternately covered, on one stretch, with plates and cutlery in the morning, at noon and in the evening, and on

the other with mother's copybooks and books, or with those belonging to my brother and to me. Mother left the building without looking right or left. Without looking back, she slowly disappeared around the corner.

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## Provisions

To get the necessary provisions, my father had gradually developed a genius that sometimes crystallised into small miracles. In those years of poverty, a walk to the lakes outside the city brought us back fish or some crabs, while a walk in the woods brought us snowdrops, transplanted in miniature pots. Friends from all walks of life helped him bring us little surprises or buy us nutritious supplies for winter. From some he bought, in good husbandry, plum jam in large, deep earthenware pots, from others, also in enameled earthenware, pork fat with pieces of meat in it, or sometimes a little barrel with cheese, a little crate of apples, or a bucket of wine. Strings of onions and garlic appeared like decorations in the kitchen, potatoes were stored in the wooden box in the cellar. Once, I do not know how, a huge catfish found its way into our bathtub.

When there was no time for serious shopping, my father managed to discover, in 10–15 minutes, something good to bring home: halva, chestnuts, lemons. He walked fast,



Ștefania Golopenția with her colleagues and students in a classroom filled with propaganda posters and portraits of the Communist leaders

bought what he could, and went afterwards, by car or on foot, slowly or in a hurry, to his everyday work, which needed to be done well and to which he had given full thought while walking or queuing up.

From the Peace Conference in Paris he had come back in 1946 with a bunch of bananas, the first I had ever seen. He watched our reactions with curiosity. I do not know how Dănuț reacted, but as for me, my disappointment was absolute. For me bananas were akin to maize mush.

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### Buying petroleum

We used two petroleum lamps to cook. The cast iron stove, with an oven, was used sparingly, since wood was scarce.

I remember my father telling us once, on a dark autumn day, that since petroleum was rationed to only 5 liters per person, we would all three need to go to the warehouse near the A.N.E.F., to get 15.

I carry in my hand a rectangular container tied with rope. The rope presses against the flesh of my hand as hard as the metal handles do. We queue up all three silently. With a sense of conspiracy, I do not look and do not talk either to my father, or to Dănuț. One should not find out we know each other. Otherwise not only would we be refused the petroleum, but we would also be punished in some way, I do not know how. As if not understanding the risk, my father is smiling. We go back home and, only after having crossed the large intersection at the Elefterie Bridge, I calm down and accept to hand over the container of guilt.

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### The wool blanket

From the Unirii market my father once bought a wool blanket with white and grey stripes. The blanket was not new—it had lost its down and shine, but it was large and carefully folded,



Sanda Golopenția at the end of the 1940s

and it would serve us well. Father unfolded it happily. From its centre, on the last fold, a hole as large as a soup bowl gaped back at us. He had bought it on trust, he had not checked it. Looking at it now, he was saddened, not by the waste, but by the disappointment. My mother, saddened too, but for other reasons, looked on silently and tired.

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### At Străulești, Dămăroaia, Cățelu, at Băneasa and Fundeni

In October and November 1949, as I learn from the surveillance notes, we went for a walk with our father every Sunday. Either because we had both grown or because our father had more time for us, we were no longer limited to the park near the Faculty of Law, or to the Botanical Garden, or the Cișmigiu, as in former years. Our walks get longer, more daring and offbeat. Father shows us Bucharest, with its surroundings, trying to get us accustomed to the ways in which the city could be crisscrossed by public transportation, available to all. We usually left directly after lunch and went by tram (sometimes taking the wrong ones), by bus and on foot all the way to the villages of Cățelu, Străulești or Dămăroaia, to the forest at Băneasa, the lake and village of Fundeni, the lakes Pescăruș, Tei, the Freedom Park and the Metropolitan Church, to Mogoșoaia.

We took along a food basket or one in which we could bring back home grapes, some picked by us, others bought to complement a scarce harvest. Father gave us explanations about acorns and flowers, villages and hills, he took us to a vineyard recently harvested, to see what it looked like and if we could still find some grapes.

A.G. mentioned these walks he took with us almost as if he had foreseen we would be orphaned, as he said in a declaration. He wanted to bequeath us memories. By way of the shadowers, the memories left in my mind become keener. As far as the walks were concerned, my father might have wanted to walk for himself as well, too, to clear his thoughts, and forget his grief.

Our Sunday walks cease between 4 December and 15 January 1949. It might have been bitterly cold that winter in Bucharest. My father needs to finish a project for the State Planning Commission and does not readily leave his desk. Or he foresees, he knows even, that he will soon be put under arrest.

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### **Grandmother**

The Germans had bombed her house in Bozovici, in which she had lived as its mistress for less than two years. Before that, she had lived there after her divorce, as the daughter of Anton Staschek and the niece of his cousin, with carefully minced rights and endless duties. The marriage to Simion Golopenția, who was a Romanian Railroads employee, had taken her to various towns and places; to Slavonia, then to Cluj and lastly to Timișoara. Grandmother had insisted that Simion study law and take his doctorate; she had embroidered for money to support the household and had studied with him, youthfully, at his side, to give him courage. Once he became a lawyer, the husband ran away with Scumpa (Dearie), in the year of the comet. Grandmother was left with three sons to bring up, feed, and dress, and, in order to make ends meet, she gave

room and board to youngsters that came from afar to study in Timișoara's schools. Lodgers and embroidery or macramé were the solution; her parents had not sent her to school, as she had hoped for in her enthusiastic teenage years, and she could not become a teacher, as she had dreamed. The house in Timișoara, of which she was the mistress after the divorce, and the one in Bozovici, after her father's death, hosted the short interludes of freedom in the life of Emma Staschek Golopenția, my grandmother.

After the bombardment of Bozovici, grandmother had come to Bucharest to cram into our tiny apartment with us. She did the cooking and the washing; she would knit us sweaters from my father's old ones, which she endlessly unraveled and whose ply she knotted back together in silence for hours on end. Now and then an irrepressible upsurge of liberty awakened in her, and she would gather her possessions—a china bibelot representing a young lady and a young man, both dressed in golden period costumes; the Bible with a few pictures, as the Catholics have it; her few clothes—and she went to stay with her friends who had also come to live in Bucharest, to the Cloșan family, or to the Itus. She spent a few days there, and then came back to our cramped abode. When my father wanted to bring her joy, he would bring her books—in German or in Hungarian, which marked the secret bond between them, and separated them from us and from the present, by ushering them back to a shared, past space.

On holidays grandmother would take me with her and we would go to mass at St. Joseph's Cathedral. Sometimes she would recount, with humour, how thieves had robbed her and the children of the few things they owned in the house in Timișoara. At other times she remembered how she came back to Bozovici from school, on winter holidays, by horse-drawn sleigh and she would see behind them wolves' eyes, shining in the dark. Or she would cry and tell me to ensure that she was buried in a Catholic cemetery. From us grandmother moved to Bubi's, my father's youngest

brother, who lived in Tei and had, in his turn, children that needed raising and hardships to overcome. And she lived all the time, there as well as with us, with invisible suitcases in her hands, dreaming to go not even she knew where, to be free in a space of her own that she was never granted. There was a Russian song I used to listen to over and over again with my friends in Bucharest in the 1970s, two verses of which stuck in my mind: *Kliuci drojit v zamke/ Cedoman v ruke* (The key shivers in the lock/ The suitcase in my hand). Every time I heard it – grandmother had died and had been buried by then, as she had wished, in the Catholic section of the Bellu cemetery – I thought of her. By herself on holidays, with an orthodox husband and orthodox children. By herself with her grandchildren, who all wondered at the way she talked (she said *hă!* for *uite!*, look!, and *șcățulă* for *cutie*, box), she drank her tea (she used a huge cup of half a litre, from Banat, like the one I use for my tea now, here in Providence). An independent woman who had married the villager Simion Golopenția from Pecinișca, braving the opposition of her parents, who were better off, more bourgeois, and with higher expectations. Who had studied law, together with him, encouraging him to get his doctorate. Who had urged her children to study and who had been urged later by her eldest son, my father, and in agreement with her ex-husband, to go back to her parents' home, so that life would get back on track and everyone would be at ease as far as she was concerned. My grandmother who used to set the alarm clock so as to be able to measure her hours of work for pay scrupulously. My forgotten grandmother, with her troubled life, lived with dignity and pride, without joy.

Grandmother could cook food for us out of nothing at all. Potato stew with tomato juice. Lentil soup, black—the blackest of all—or caraway soup, greyish. On holidays, breaded chicken with endives and floating islands. When she managed to make crepes, my brother and I would swallow them without pity, as she was placing them on the plate. The

plate would forever be empty and grandmother was pained like a child. Grandmother would wash the dishes and I would dry them. She would never throw away the grease left in the basin for washing dishes, or the leftover sauces. She would mix them with the soil in pots that were more often than not simple cans, and which she used to grow lemon trees or small ungrafted grapefruit trees whose leaves, when rubbed, would give off a refreshing scent.

What upset her was when we came home later than she expected us to, without having let her know in advance. “Dog or kitten, I’ll be late”, that’s all you should have told me, she would say with annoyance, and her strange words did not make us laugh, they expressed not only her worry, but also the suffering at what seemed to her our lack of delicacy, the rudeness of children unable to anticipate the concern of those who love them.

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## Mother

My mother would leave for school in the morning, come back and do homework with us; she would struggle to obtain for us, besides the food grandmother cooked, some milk, or butter, or ham, or fresh eggs; she would take us for walks in the park near the Faculty of Law, in the one with the statue or in the Botanical Garden, where she always chose the sunny benches near the hot house and the labyrinth. As the one under surveillance was my father, and as they were sharing their tasks, as, furthermore, my mother had to prepare, at home, the lessons she was going to teach and do all the housework, together with grandmother, the agents see her only rarely going out shopping or walking with my father.

She had heaped her books in a bookcase in the bedroom. Not having a desk of her own, she had crammed her field research notebooks and her articles next to the linens, in the wardrobe there. As her cooking ambitions were not especially strong, mother had given

over the kitchen to grandmother. My father had his own study, doubling as bedroom for my grandmother. In the dining room, at the long table, mother wrote and read next to us, while we were drawing, learning to write or read. In a way, my mother was the most devoid of her own space in our house, where no one was in fact enjoying one.

During the first two grades, my mother had followed my progress attentively, with eyes that never missed anything: she would have a look at the assignments I had written, ask me to rewrite them when she was not satisfied, and show me how to draw tubers or butterflies. Now she was doing the same with Dănuț. In those years without radio or television, my mother was, above all, the background voice that called us out at the sea of books, reading to us as only she could do it. Her voice was full and warm—in her youth she had sung unrivalled, the researchers of the Gusti teams had nicknamed her Maria Neichii—and she would select for us vivid texts that would stay in our memory. I fell asleep many times listening to her reading Ispirescu's or Grimm brothers' fairy tales, which at one point I knew by heart. I hear her reading to us poems by Eminescu or Coșbuc, later on from Arghezi. As she was reading to us about the deer dying in the forest of Petrișor, I could not know that, much later, she would likewise die alone one night, our brave and sad mother, strong and fragile.

Twice a year, in spring and autumn, mother took us on our ritual shopping tours. We went to the commercial Strada Lipsani, passing by Șelari.

We bought sandals, shoes or boots, according to the season, or cloth from which the taylor made us coats. We dropped by at the drugstore, where mother composed her eau de Cologne, asking the shop assistant to mix two parts of lavender oil, one of chypre and one of patchouli. I would look intently at the funnel, at the liquid flowing slowly through it. Much later, in Mexico, I saw perfume makers use the same gestures when creating scents to order. Mexican women, though, asked the perfumers to blend for them, as best they could, French



Dan Golopenția at the end of the 1940s

fragrances—Guerlain, Dior—or Italian and German ones, and pour them into vaporizing vials.

Once, when mother took us into town, we saw, near the clock in front of the University, a bear dancing. He stepped on soft paws, to the sound of the tambourine, over the back of the “patient”, people lay down for him without fear, mother and we wondered at their coming back to life afterwards, watching them move gingerly to check if the “treatment” had worked.

Once or twice a year my mother brought home a seamstress, who came with her sewing machine and cut out and sewed for a day or two, making us new clothes and mending the old ones like in fairy tales. She sewed us blouses, shirts, school uniforms, and we felt irresistible for several days afterwards.

When I did not know something I would ask mother. She was then, and later, our willing encyclopedia. It was from her that I received, one after the other, the books that she thought were worth having. Alice in Wonderland at some point, Saussure's introduction in linguistics later. With Dănuț and with me, mother took apart for several years the syntax of sentences that she would on purpose make as twisted as could be, getting us used to the

pleasure of rearranging them clearly. It is from her that I learned Romanian, I learned to dream of words from her. Dănuț told me once how he misses, even now, the moments when the word in the book, the voice that utters it, and the ears that listen to it are brought together, with imagination, in the act of living together, and not by pressing a switch on an electronic broadcasting device.

Our mother wanted us to learn foreign languages and enrolled us both at the French kindergarten behind the Biserica Albă. I got to go for two years to the French school in Strada Christian Tell, with public exams which mother never failed to attend. This school, in which my father had not believed, served me well later, as it gave me confidence in my command of French, learned through games and songs at a young age, and through a primer and other textbooks published in France. Later, after my father's death, mother would give private lessons in order to be able to pay for our German lessons with Brother Athanasie from St. Joseph Cathedral, or, for me, Greek lessons with our neighbour a few houses down on Dr. Lister, professor Marin, discouraged and bored in those years – he was the “Submarine” professor character in *Çișmigiu et Comp.* Always inventing new occupations for us, she would take us to the Club of Employees in Education to learn to play the piano, or Esperanto, and, in my case, to make masks out of paper-mâché. She would take us to the theatre and the opera, buying cheaper tickets through her school, or to the cinema. One summer, after her step-father passed away, my mother unexpectedly inherited a small amount of money. She transformed that summer into a movie festival, and for as long as the money lasted we would go twice or even three times a week to the open-air cinema, watch a movie and then eat grilled sausages or steak. Who else could compare to us, for our mother was coming out of her depression and she had reinvented, towards the middle of the 1950's, joy and playfulness.

About herself, about her childhood, my mother almost never talked. I found out a little something by listening to her poems or

reading her letters. A fragment of her poem, *Shutter*, allows me to imagine bridges between her as a child and us at that time—she had been brought up by a grandmother after her mother had remarried: “You cover me lightly / and you bend / smiling / gently / to read in my eyes / from close by / my melancholy / weighty / not to miss anything. / How lucky / that we have eyelids!” (*Ștefania Golopenția, Sporul vieții [Life's Gain]*, p. 268). Dănuț and I were both like her as a child, and she would look back at us with the same full gaze that had once been directed at her by her grandmother, the hide-and-seek game between those who knew and those who were learning to love had started again.

We never went on holidays with both my mother and father at the same time. Mother took us a few times to Bozovici, to Băile Herculane, to Sinaia (where the Institute for Statistics had a villa for employees), to our godmother in Hodac—a teacher like herself—whom she had made friends with while doing field research. With father we went once to Sebeș, one summer when he gave a course on sociology and statistics for the C.I.S. staff. We ate wild strawberries and cream in our room every evening and I saw purslane flowers for the first time in the Cotoras' garden.

After our father was arrested, mother never came on holiday with us again. For a time she would go, with other colleagues, to take care of other people's children in summer colonies, getting, in exchange, places for us in parallel ones. I remember that we were the first to receive letters when we went to camp. She would take us to the station, go back home and write each of us a letter or a post card so that we would not argue. Then we grew up, and on the rare occasions that we went anywhere during high school or college, our mother would stay home, receiving our letters, or those from friends or colleagues who reported on their summer joys. She bore with difficulty the steaming hot summers which offered her no rest, dreaming at times of a journey to Craiova, the town of her childhood, which she never made.

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### The wonderful Mr. Negru of our grey childhood

I can barely picture him, I would like to see him clearly, to have his photo. He was not very tall, had a moustache and an aquiline nose, a faint smile about the corners of his lips and grave eyes. Paradoxically, he seldom came to visit while my father was free, but became our never-failing visitor after his arrest and subsequent death. He was the only one who came to see us regularly. There were several other kind-hearted people, Nicolae Economu, Ion Apostol, Iuliu Mălinaş and Alexandru Nistor, who thought of us on every Christmas, all those long years. But Mr. Negru came to see us all the time, he was a part of our lives.

Having become a dental technician with stoicism and a sense of humour (he would only return to the field of the history of statistics in the 1960s), joking about the fact that his first name in the phone directory was Jenică (from his wife Elena's middle name, a confusion that sometimes proved to his advantage), Mr. Negru had something to say to each of us in those dark years. With my grandmother he talked about the Banat. With my mother about school, the new curricula, D. Gusti, his Sociological School and the employees of the former Institute of Statistics, about the trivial or important events in our lives: that I had not been made a pioneer, that we had to go to camps if we were to go on holiday at all. With my brother and me, he would talk about lessons and walks. He took over and on many a Sunday organized outings for us. He might have been the one who took us to the Simu Museum once. He had a nephew, Nini, and the three of us made an eager team whom he led at a brisk pace to stadiums, museums and parks. I remember that during a walk he talked to us about big transportation containers that could be moved as single units and about the fact that they had been conceived by a Romanian.

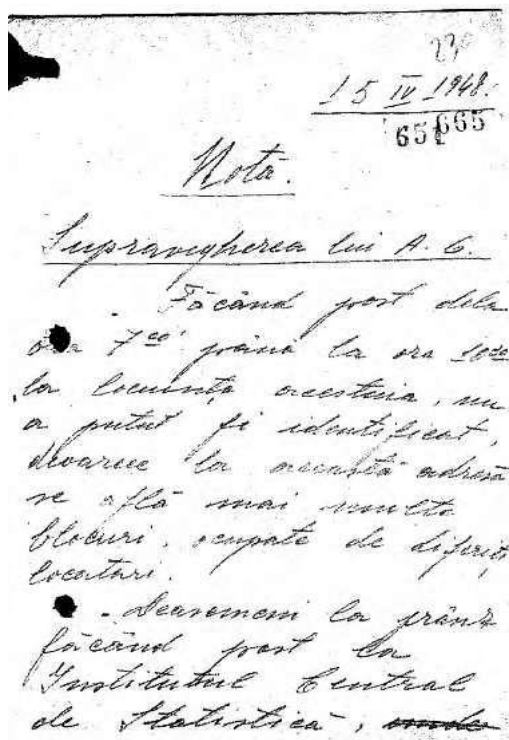
Our mother, who had long ago given up on any visits, took us to the one-room apart-

ment on Strada Batiştei, where Mrs. Negru prepared for us a delicate beef salad with chicken breast instead of beef and apples instead of pickles. We would talk at length, as families do, the Negrus were a good, reassuring presence. Mother would smile for a moment, we had friends.

When we were really short of money, in spite of the private lessons my mother gave in order to augment her teacher's income and to be able to support the four of us, mother started to glance more and more often at the bedroom closet that contained all her possessions and at the black wardrobe in the corridor in which some of my father's belongings were still stored. What had not been turned over or unravelled to be refitted for us children was taken out, critically examined and shown to Mr. Negru. Mother's French evening shoes. Father's gold watch. Other objects I do not remember. Mr. Negru came by, evaluated them, established the minimum price below which a sale could not be conceived of, and made plans about when and with whom and with which other objects he would go to the flea market. Flea-market Sundays were always cold and rainy, as if on purpose. As evening came, Mr. Negru, shivering, returned from the flea market with the news, his face grey. Most times he had been unable to sell anything. But he had conversed, around a primus stove on which tea was brewed continuously, with such and such a person, who had come to sell this and that object, and he recounted with humour the latest happenings in town. We all relaxed, the flea market was at least interesting, if not an opportunity to improve our finances. Mr. Negru left, having consoled us indirectly, a few weeks later another sale was in the planning, our problem was that we didn't have much to sell, nor were people able to purchase much.

After a while Mr. Negru started writing. He wrote about the village of his childhood, Toracul Mare, in the Serbian Banat. He would read from his pages with an equal voice, a slightly skeptical expression on his face, waiting to see what my mother and grandmother would say, how we children looked at him. He





Surveillance note on Anton Golopenția (1948)

was a gifted storyteller, we listened to him on every occasion, caught in his time and space, forgetting ours. I wonder what happened to those texts; they deserved to be published.

When we grew up, Mr. Negru was part of what happened to us: University admission and graduation, searching for jobs, my wedding, Dănuț's departure for the United States. When the time for the great departure came for me as well, it was to Mr. Negru that I went to say good-bye. Mrs. Negru had died not long before. From a drawer he took out a cross with a little gold chain that had belonged to her, and hung it around my neck, like a father. His eyes were wet; he was thinking, as we did, that it was not right, not natural to leave for ever, as we then thought, the country where you had been born and where you had known your parents and your first friends. I believe he was thinking of my father, of his imprisonment, of my mother, and of disintegrations.

I wonder whether my father had not talked to Mr. Negru about our walks, maybe even about his arrest, which he saw coming. Whether he had not asked him, as I learned

much later he had asked our aunt Maria, to watch over us and help when possible. But I believe, I know that Mr. Negru would have come to us even unasked.

When I went back to Romania, after 1989, Mr. Negru was no longer alive.

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### Meeting Mrs. Negru in Cișmigiu

I cannot leave untold the story of my last meeting with Mrs. Negru. I was walking through Cișmigiu, where the beavers were, without thinking of them, it was towards the end of the 1970s, and I saw her all of a sudden in front of me. She was walking deep in thought. She told me then, with sadness, that she no longer understood any of those dear to her, who were all trying to convince her to have a biopsy, to see what could be done about a cancer she seemed to have. With her large, grave eyes, Mrs. Negru was telling me she thought this was almost indiscreet. She did not want to know what would cause her death and did not want the others to know it either. Sad and lonely, she was thus walking with her illness, accepting her death and wishing for one thing only: that the others accept it too, naturally, with firm delicacy, without fuss. This stayed in my mind as a lesson.

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### The Simu museum, the Antipa museum

I remember the sculptures at the Simu Museum in a space full of light that does not resemble in the least the images of the halls I see on the Internet. It could be that the first visit we paid there with my father got overlaid in memory by a later one, in which I still see father next to us, but could Mr. Negru have taken us there instead? I remember I went to the Simu museum shortly before it was demolished, it was already isolated from the city, shrouded by fences, and people came to see it once more, to say good-bye.

On the other hand, some time before, whether long or short I do not know, I see the visit to the Antipa Museum, the amazement in front of the whale-turned-house, inside of which I vaguely imagine a possible life that I cannot find words for yet. And my father next to me, who does not break the spell, but keeps silent and seems to smile, vaguely.

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### Going up

We lived on the third floor and we often walked together as if joined at the hip, my mother, my brother and I. A Siamese family. We went together to Lipsani to shop wisely, as each season required. We went to the private pastry shops offering kataifi on Bulevardul 6 Martie or to open air movies. To a conference or to an esperanto lesson at the teacher's club near Piața Kogălniceanu. To bookstores, the botanical garden, or to the the-

atre. Sometimes we would pay a visit to friends. Every time we came back, while climbing purposefully the numerous steps, before reaching the second floor, mother would suddenly stop. She stood still, speechless, her left shoulder slightly lowered. We did not overtake her. We kept silent too. Sometimes we would hear the clear buzz of a bee around us, or a tired fly hitting against the window pane, the clatter of cutlery and faucets from the open windows of the kitchens in the opposite building. Moving from that place seemed after a while quite impossible.

Frozen on the step I wondered, almost breathlessly, what would happen if this time mother could not climb all the way up. If we were to be discovered on the staircase in our grave statue game by our neighbours. Those long minutes passed slowly. We guessed at and shared our benumbed tiredness. Then, without a word, or even a sigh, just as unexpectedly, my mother pulled herself together and, light as a feather, started climbing up the stairs again.

