

# MARTOR



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## Byzantium or Istanbul?

Magda Manoliu, former university lecturer,  
63 years old

Interview done by Vlad Manoliu



We began our little frontier trade immediately after 1989. A lot of Turkish firms mushroomed around Gara de Nord, offering transport to Istanbul (there where coaches leaving every hour – you weren't even allowed to book your place in advanced, you just went to the station and got on the coach to Istanbul). Many people went there, bought all sorts of goods from the Turkish bazaars and then returned to Romania where they would sold them. The coaches were overloaded with these people we can't even attempt to call retailers. Most of them had jobs and had become retailers only on their spare time. They bought leather jackets, T-shirts, cosmetics products ... and brought them back home. They of course had all sorts of arrangements made with customs officers. While traveling, one of these retailers collected a certain sum of money from each passenger and, when they arrived at the border – because the coach's luggage compartment was crammed with bales containing the merchandise – they gave the money to the customs officer in order to avoid the check. The sum they usually gathered was considerable, I can't remember the exact amount but I think it must have been between 5 and 10 dollars for each passenger.

As we wanted to go to Istanbul in search of the old Byzantium, we decided to take one of these coaches because it was much cheaper and

much more convenient for us. Alright, it was a plan then. We set off and we wandered like a bunch of lunatics through the whole of Istanbul for two days (unfortunately we only had money for a couple of days). We visited Saint Sophia, the Blue Mosque, Top Kopi and a lot of other wonderful places. We promised to ourselves that we would one day return and got on the coach back to Romania. I forgot to mention that it was five of us, I, my husband, and some friends. Our fellow travelers had gathered around the coach and were chatting. I accidentally overheard what they were saying. They were raising the problem of how much to ask each passenger to contribute to "smooth" the passage through customs. I started actually paying attention as they started talking about their shopping in Istanbul, about the prices they paid ... Their language was a rather colourful one with many grammar mistakes and slang expressions, it was something altogether entertaining. Having raised the question of the individual contribution to the common bribe, they settled an amount and then one of them said to another, "Man, you go to those in the front too!" And the man replied, "I won't! Can't you see they have no luggage?" "You go, man!" He came over to where we were staying and told us that, alright, the deal was that the customs checkpoint was almost in sight and we all had to pay five or ten dollars each but I

can't remember the exact sum. We told them that there was no need for us to pay as we hadn't bought anything from Istanbul. In utter amazement, the man gave us this shocked look and asked, "Then why on earth did you go to Istanbul in the first place? What did you do there?" We didn't even blink when we told the man that we wanted to simply visit Istanbul. "What did you want to visit?!!!" The man was a complete mess and he managed to utter, "Alright". Then he left, went to the back of the coach, flung himself on the chair and let the others know that,

"We can't ask for money from them, they went there to visit the city!!!" There was a moment of silence on the coach and that was one of the few occasions when we got to be perceived as a breed of rare animals on public display at the zoo. We were completely different. The funny thing was that they didn't seem interested in us. No! They simply pitied us. The people we traveled with we felt sorry for poor us.

*Translated by Alina Popescu*