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Old and new mentalities

Ștefan Aioanei, shoemaker, 76 years old
Interview done by Vlad Manoliu

In the end sun shone brighter when you weren't alone, right? I only know one thing: no sword cuts off a bowed head. I mean, you shouldn't stick out like a sore thumb when everybody else keeps a low profile. As a boy, I learned that you should stay low – my old man slapped me till I got the hang of it, you know! Whatever you might be thinking, keep it to yourself or whisper it into your mother's or your wife's ears, and that's that. You nod to your bosses and drop a "that's true" once in a while – that won't kill you, right?

Now I see that having ideas is in great fashion and everybody is keen on being top of the heap. And if you don't like this or that, you just go and work for another employer. You go back to square one. When you get the job, you start squabbling over money, over ideas, over your own person. But there's a catch here, and a big one this is – you must know a good trade, not just one that is in demand, but one that you know in and out, like the back of your hand; and you must be tough, 'cause you don't want people coming and blowing your chances away from you! You keep your chin up, but not without good reason. And that makes you a winner. That's what my grandson, Ionică, keeps telling me. My son has no clue about these things. He's afraid of others and of me. Now he's unemployed, now he's, as I say, busy selling bags of

trinkets at a street corner. He comes home with a host of fears about him – an imminent earthquake next year, too many thieves in the streets, Iliescu would "give us" this and that but the people around him won't let him. My son had only 10 years of schooling, then he graduated from a vocational school, and I bet he's already forgotten all about it – it's like flogging a dead horse, I tell you. When he's in company he feels top notch – but he won't dare do more than give people a nudge or whisper. Ionică is different. He was in the 10th grade in 1990. When I went to his school, a lady there told me, "old man, your grand son has potential. But he needs peace and quiet, a library card and a word of encouragement", and she schooled me to keep an eye on the boy and see who he's hanging around with, to tell him a couple of old words of wisdom, but to let him learn things the hard way too. "You know, old man, that times have changed. No more fear. Now it's the time for smart people to step forward. Now you can't hide behind the old crowd mentality any more."

In time, I managed to get it through my head, but my son simply wouldn't get it: forget about school, send the boy to work! But I never gave up. I gave him the room in the back, 'cause I took his father to live with us and even my wife said: "Get him to live with us, Fănică, 'cause he's lonely and this is a good and respectful kid."

And I brought him to my house and things started rolling. My old lady knits pieces of macramé to get more money for the daily needs. She sells her stuff quite well, but it's darn hard work, sir. I go fishing now and then. Once in a while, I mend the neighbours' shoes or boots. Whenever I make a trip down Calea Moşilor towards Sf. Gheorghe, via the route on the 21 tram, I make sure that I get my veneer from the wholesale store. Time went by and Ionică got to college, and now he's the one bringing me money for the veneer. We supported him through school, and now he, the apple of his grandmother's eye, is providing for us! He's like the Easter Resurrection light to her, you know. While he was away to college I took all sorts of jobs – now he says: "I'll get the money from now on, grandpa." He says that he does all kinds of things on his computer. After graduation, he studied one more year, 'cause it's a good thing to know more, right? He's got a decent job, drives around the compa-

ny's car when he pleases and they give him petrol for it too, can you believe it? He's a tough boy, nobody's toy. But when he drops by our place he's got tears in his eyes and he would just about take us to live with him and his wife. But I won't allow it. 'Cause his is a different world. We are like the meek of the world – we catch wind of what's going on and we are glad, but we keep to ourselves. He helps us go by. When he's got some time to spare, he comes with me to the pond and we fish. He just did that three days ago. But I know that he actually came by to tell me that they're going to start up a family. That's mighty fine, I say! Mighty fine! He won't be all alone when I'm dead and gone. 'Cause all men die, what would you expect?

Translated by Alina Popescu

