

# MARTOR



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Title: "My generation among generations"

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How to cite this article: Mateoniu, Maria. 2005. "My generation among generations". *Martor* 10: 24-29.

Published by: *Editura MARTOR* (MARTOR Publishing House), *Muzeul Țăranului Român* (The Museum of the Romanian Peasant)

URL: <http://martor.muzeultaranuluiroman.ro/archive/martor-10-2005/>

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## My generation among generations

**Maria Mateoni**



How can I write about the '90s disregarding the Revolution, because, for those of my age it is then when everything has started, the awakening and the disappointment, once with the shattering moment when down the streets of Timișoara people were being gunned down, stepped over by tanks?

The 1989 Revolution was a shock, because, due to my indoctrinated child's naiveté I would still believe that Ceaușescu had no idea of what was going on in the country, had no idea that the shops were empty and we had nothing to eat. I used to tell myself that he was lied to by those surrounding and frantically applauding him during the Party's plenary meetings. I cannot explain myself where this need to believe in a good Ceaușescu came from, probably from an incessant urge to believe in something good, in an ideal.

And as the belief in God seemed appropriate only for naïve and less learned people, I left my grandmother alone to go to church, because my mother was being caught in her job at the factory and I carried on with my rather earthly and quite revolutionary ideals.

I was a student, belonging to the YCU<sup>1</sup>, when the Revolution started in Târgu-Jiu. Without it, I

could have become the vivid reincarnation of the new man.

This thought startles me even now, giving me shivers down my spine, hence a sometimes-ravishing revolt against communism, against manipulation and the well-concealed lie.

I remember the inspection we had, just a few weeks before the Revolution and which remained carved into my mind like a foretold.

We were waiting for an inspector from Bucharest, a certain comrade Vlăduțescu, if I'm not mistaken, and our economy teacher had long warned us that we were supposed to learn from the party's plenary meetings and from Ceaușescu's speeches.

She had also indicated us what exactly to learn and each of us had to know by heart a certain part, everything was staged, the roles were well distributed.

I also remember the teacher's sickly fluster and now, that I think of it, I recall that it must have been a severe control, dictated by fear.

The fear of collapse, because in the Soviet Union there was Gorbaciov's Perestroika and the other communist countries had already changed their orientation. Romania was the only one left, with a Ceaușescu standing his ground, deter-

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<sup>1</sup> Young Communist Union.

mined to carry on with his spectral ideas.

Thus, the comrade inspector came to our high school in Târgu-Jiu. We all delivered our speeches the way we could. We had to defend the sole Party because it represented the entire nation and the socialist-type democracy, which was the real democracy.

I forgot the bit I had to learn- I guess that knowing it would crown it all- it was something about equal rights and about the entire nation's chance to work.

I was supposed to say that we didn't have redundancy like in America. We all had to fight against the market economy, the biggest scourge of humanity.

Some girl in the group was supposed to talk about the market economy, one with good memory and who had learnt The Comrade's speeches more efficiently than I had. She used to jump in the conversation every time one of us would lose track or stammer.

Moreover, she used to articulate the words and to speak perfectly, in a very soapy manner, as expected, taking after the recitals delivered during Cântarea României Festival<sup>1</sup>.

But we used to have a classmate who started to make practical jokes, telling quips about Ceaușescu and sharing with us what he used to secretly hear from America's Voice. He kept on saying that Ceaușescu was going to be overthrown and I was either angry or dead frightened.

And here I see our guy putting a straw fig in the hair of the girl with perfect articulation, ruining the hairdo which she so carefully arranged for the inspection.

And as she was jumping on and on in the conversation, completing our speeches, the fig was haughtily dandling onwards and backwards. I can remember feeling all my bones stunned and then there followed the laughter coming from the boys in the last row, the deadly pallor

spreading on our teacher's face and finally the inspector's fidgety laughter.

The rest is a blank page because the end of the story has been completely erased from my memory. I can only remember that for me the inspection represented the first sign that Ceaușescu's regime was going to collapse.

Once with the events in Timișoara, the Revolution also triggered my free falling, my remorse, an imaginary guilt, exacerbated by the passing of time. Then, the need to believe in something.

Because I took refuge into my room to follow the events live. I had been watching that broadcast revolution for days so that I nearly set my TV on fire. So that my mom would tell me sometimes, turn it off, girl, because it breaks down. No, because it ends in a jiffy. It, meaning the Revolution.

But the Revolution was not about to end, I had all the time in the world to admire Iliescu for a modesty overemphasised by his worn out sweater like that of a worker leaving the Canal, or Petre Roman's scholarly youth. Everything was beautiful, everybody could speak live, the peasants had been returned their land.

There was one guy showing up on television in order to comment the first legal decisions taken by the National Salvation Front and who was repeating the words 'extraordinary' and 'we have never had such freedom' after every sentence. They used to pray while showing the dead people in Timișoara. Shootings started in Bucharest.

There were incessant discussions about the terrorists coming from the Orient to attack the national television. Terrorists were all over the place, but especially on top of the television and in the neighbouring blocks.

I really bought this lie regarding the live broadcast Revolution, since I was as gullible as mostly all my peers back then. I remember I also said a prayer; I used to know it from my grand-

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<sup>1</sup> Praising Romania Festival.

mother who had died in the meantime.

How sorry I felt for having accused her of ignorance! Had the old woman only known that times changed and I changed with them, that we started a revolution, that youngsters died and that nowadays you aren't supposed to whisper 'Our Father' secretly, at home, in front of the icon, but to say it down the street, in the marketplace, for all dead people!

In that provincial town, where I used to go to school every day, things were perceived like that. We also tried to start a local revolution, in our school. So that we stopped going to classes and we asked for another principal.

There was one, a certain Mischie, who, in the meantime became the prefect of the district and I hear now that he has been replaced.

It is said that he has stolen from the state's funds. We couldn't replace Mischie because he left the school later out of his own will in order to go to parliament and our local revolution quickly ended up with a few poor marks.

Thus, everything left was the great broadcast revolution. And between the bachelor apartment where I used to live and school and my addiction to follow the events on TV I got caught by the miner riot.

At the time, I used to live on Minerului Street<sup>1</sup>, a street near the high school, where during winter I would get it in the neck from the kiddos gathered around the block who used to throw snowballs at me during winter and pinchings during summer.

That was a street full of people (because at the time people would still have many kids), with men gathering together to fix their cars and with women cracking in front of the blocks, like women at the countryside. There was a lot of gossiping, but a lot of politics as well, and not only did people express their opinion but they also definitely knew what and how.

The undeniable truth, that's what commu-

nism had taught us, and that truth was at the time in the hands of one man, Ion Iliescu. He became the hero of the Revolution and my neighbours would worship him. He, the hero, with a waggish smile on his face and by means of the TV screen, was asking me to defend him from the 'ragamuffins' manifesting in Universităţii Square, as we had previously defended the planned economy during the inspection.

I didn't do it out of fear and that was the beginning of my viewer position. I was very well acknowledging the situation and the climax was reached when the police tried to disperse the „ragamuffins”.

One of the neighbours took his TV in front of the block. Television was again getting all the attention. I remember one of the TV presenters, a certain Stark, who showed up with a bandage wrapped around his head and rattling away, saying that he got beaten up by the „ragamuffins”.

Once in a while images with the racked television would take turns with those down the street. The broadcast 'ragamuffins' were gypsies. I clearly remember that one was saying that he was innocent, that he only threw a petard.

But the atmosphere was still apocalyptical since the women around the TV wouldn't stop saying: „Dear God, what would those people want now, since they wanted freedom and freedom they have got, now that we are swamped by work and they are howling down the street!”- „Hoodlums, says another, during Ceauşescu's time they were forced to go to work and now they keep on screaming down the street, what is Iliescu supposed to do to them, can't you see they are gypsies?” “What would I do to them if they were in my hands!” says one of my neighbours, a brawny mechanic wearing a grease-stained T-shirt.

There I stood, with them, for days, because the TV was in front of the block, right next to my window, I couldn't ignore it. I remember the no-

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<sup>1</sup> Miner's Street.

tification according to which the miners were coming to Bucharest to bring order into the country, my neighbours' pride, many of them miners themselves, but in Rovinari and Motru coal fields not in Valea Jiului, where the ones bringing order were supposed to come from.

I don't know any of my neighbours to have gone to Bucharest, but they all stood by their comrades and supporting their decision to make things right and fighting against the „ragamuffins”.

Even now I can see the images broadcast then, very few showing the miners' intervention, the majority displaying the moments when they were waiting in the train station, with some freak miners, dozing, since they were dozing most of the time down the streets or in train stations.

I am saying this because I remember my neighbours' reaction, their discontent, because people were asking themselves why the miners didn't finish 'cleaning up' why they were loitering without taking action. A few of my neighbours who were miners were waiting for the signal coming from the union leaders in order to head to Bucharest.

Later on I had the chance to see images with aggressive miners, with bats in their hands, hitting people down the street. I especially remember the images with the workers in Bucharest, congratulating them, middle-aged people who were saying that the miners were the nation's pride. It is more than obvious that I cannot forget Iliescu's apparition at the balcony, while pi-

ously thanking the miners for their self-denial.

Big technical perversity can the television be if in wrong hands!

After the miner riots, during the fall of 1991, I went to university. My mother was afraid of letting me go, since Bucharest was a dangerous city. She kept on telling me that I would be better off in Cluj, since it was quieter, cleaner.

This is when I grew wise and I realised all about the 'ragamuffins'. The walls of the Uni-

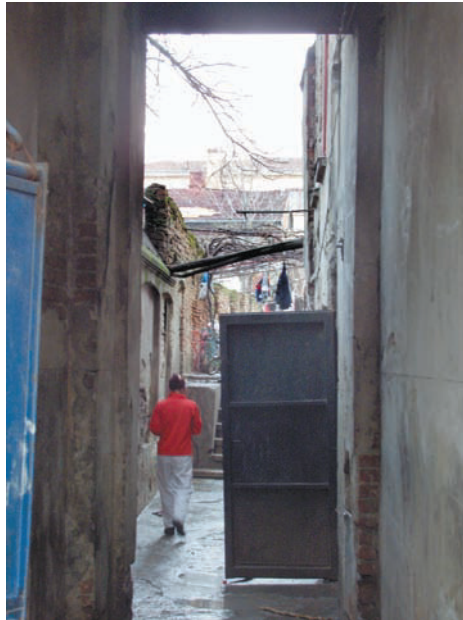
versity still preserved the marks of the Revolution. You could still see inscriptions saying 'Down with the communist regime'. I couldn't even get the chance to properly read them and at the time I didn't think to write them down.

Well done for those who did, Irina Nicoau gathered them up in a booklet. I didn't think that they would be gone. After the miner riots the inscriptions had been scraped, direct order from the leaders, the walls washed because there were no money for re-

newal in the emptied funds of the town hall.

Even if everybody wanted the Revolution to be forgotten as street riot, concealed and settled according to the rules of those acting as its unique representatives, the students of my generation wanted to carry on.

I wanted it less, it took me some time to understand and from then on I kept on feeling the fear of being once again lied to I had the chance to witness manipulation, to learn the feeling produced by imposture, no matter the form. I used to sit back, either admiring the active ones or



suspecting them of God knows what hidden interests, neither of the two attitudes being eventually carried out. But I was curious, that is why I was letting myself dragged in all sorts of new situations.

I remember the moment when I stood in the airport waiting for Queen Ana, without being a royalist and without believing in the monarchy as an alternative to the actual situation. But I went with a few colleagues who, with several exceptions, were not real royalists either. What really mattered was not to be a communist, you could have been anything else but communist. And for the majority of us, Iliescu was nothing but Ceaușescu's prolongation, so you weren't supposed to be with him.

Pretty much everything organised was in the ragamuffin spirit, since we were all students, right? The students who between 1991-1992 heavily protested against Iliescu's regime were the models. They were the authentic revolutionaries (what is authentic is, by all means, an instance connected to the époque, to time), we pertained to the afterwards, we were the descendants. We used to be, at least during the '90s, in the shadow of those 5-6 years older than us.

Coming back to the Queen Ann moment, some of us went, I ignore the number, to the airport. We were supposed to take, I can't exactly tell what, the trolley to Eroilor station and I had no ticket. I just stepped in like that, with no ticket and I got caught and the ticket collector, a sturdy woman with funny accent started to pull my clothes.

I was trying to escape and she wouldn't let me go and as there were several boys in the group determined to defend something, no matter what, things were kind of getting out of control. The lady ticket collector wanted me to pay the fine, the colleagues wouldn't let me since we were heading to the airport to see Queen Ann.

Everybody was in touch with our aim in no time. That was the sparkle which triggered a scandal I shall never forget. It only took a few

minutes, a few implicit words, for the trolley to be split into two, ones with us, the others with the lady ticket collector. I can't even remember how many curses we had been hurled at back then, but at least we got out of it unharmed.

We finally reached the airport and saw the Queen. Yes, she seemed a quite reserved woman as I had already been told before. 'She has something distinguished in her, my colleagues told me, she is a real lady.' That meant, I reckon, the opposite of the proletarian, of the communist-type man. One was the blue blood king and the other the miners' hords.

Only after years did I manage to realize the big gap between workers and intellectuals that the '90s envisaged. The communist propaganda had been effective. 'The bearded people', 'the ragamuffins' were on one side, the miners, the women in Apaca on the other. I am afraid that the gap still exists and that it will take time for it to vanish because the revolution still carries on and the revolution means enthusiasm, hope but also disappointment, frustration, hatred.

Coming back to the '90s, I remember that I had a colleague in the Union of Students' board. We had only one thing in common, we both wanted to become archaeologists. What a passion this archaeology was! Or had it been nothing but a subtle way to find refuge in the most remote time possible?

I guess she made her mark in the field. As she couldn't work for the institute because the vacancies were soon gone, she went to Switzerland. I haven't heard anything about her, but she was a tenacious girl. It was something tough in her attitude and, unfortunately, she wasn't really letting you time for rebutting.

She used to speak quite a lot but she did it well. She was the one who would organize all types of protests, what you could still do after Universității Square had been evacuated, meetings with political prisoners...

The meetings were very well organized and *Memoria* journal was very common among us. The items present in the University library

weren't enough anymore so then our colleague who was part of the Union of Students, used to help us to get our hands on one of them. She saw it as a mission, since, as she herself had told us, one of her brothers had actively participated in the Revolution and then in the protest in Universităţii Square. For her, the model was embodied by that brother investigated by the Security forces and then beaten by the miners.

This girl really shared a terrible regret for not having been part of an older generation, eventually her brother's and an impetuous desire to carry on with the protest. At the same time she was extremely haughty as if assuming her brother's persecution.

Many folks would envy her for it while at the same time splitting hairs and analysing her behaviour. The boys were the ones who would usually take the mickey at her since from time to time they used to call her 'the man-woman'. It is only now that I have come to realize the meanness, the impotence and the number of cultural stereotypes behind this judgment.

One of the actions organized by my colleague was the one meant to set the Bassarabian Ilie Ilaşcu free. The protest started in front of the University and we knelt in the middle of the road, facing the roadside crucifix set up in the memory of those who died in the Revolution and we all said "Our Father" while holding candles in our hands.

I wanted to be touched by the event in order

to experience that elevating feeling similar to those gunned down during the Revolution. But I wasn't. I had listened to so many broadcast prayers so that the gesture, the posture, all seemed fake to me and I soon felt ashamed.

Maybe those around me and whom I was touching with my shoulders, honestly believed in that prayer for the soul of the dead. I didn't, I just involuntarily pretended because my own words seemed when empty, when perverted.

We set a protest in front of the Russian Embassy, shouting my lungs out: "Down with the communism" and "Bassarabia, Romanian land". I somehow wanted to tell everybody that I wasn't going to be fooled anymore. As far as I am concerned, there was something else beyond that protest meant to set Bassarabia free, an inner moaning, a cry: 'I managed to break free, I will never be manipulated either by you or by others!'

But it was just an illusion because I was looking for answers outside. Freedom isn't an emanation of the government and, regardless of the place, in my country or outside of it, freedom is nothing but a state of being. One more or less important, according to age, experience, education, character. Because I would never do today what I used to do in the past and not out of shame, a vivid proof of that being the afore-written words.

*Translated by Raluca Vîjăac*