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Author: Vintilă Mihăilescu

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The first east-west encounter

Vintilă Mihăilescu



For me, the first days of the Revolution especially meant the contact with the West. Why was that? Because my brother, who lives in Switzerland, was a very active member of the Helsinki group, with very many press contacts and he used to give my address to everybody. Hence, right from the first day, when the whole story broke out in Bucharest (after taking my family to a safe place, taking into account that bullets were whistling around there), I started to heroically broadcast about the unfolding of the events, below the living room table, God knows what or for whom. Later on, when arriving to Germany and Switzerland I was surprised to find out that people used to know me due to those first 'reports'! Connected to this idea, I was faced with a bigger surprise which I understood only later: a lady reporter with great experience concerning war reports and who had been sent by my brother to stay with us, went to Timișoara to do a report on that 'massacre' which had impressed us all. When coming back, the first thing she uttered was *fake!* And she explained to me how they had done the set-up. Of course I didn't understand a word, of course I didn't believe a word and that I was shocked and cursed her till the cows came home. I could see the thick end of the stick a month later when my brother sent me the article she wrote for that newspaper she worked for and in which, on two pages, she was

presenting precisely the official version of the 'massacre in Timișoara'. I talked to her after several months, when I had time to understand what had happened a bit more and I told her: 'I nearly felt like smacking your face for what you told me about Timișoara back then. You had the chance to see. You were experienced and you saw that it was a set-up. Why did you write exactly the opposite on those two pages?' – 'Well, they made it very clear to me: I either write like this or I go and write somewhere else..' And that was my first question mark connected to the background of the press liberty.

On the other hand, it took time for me to understand what I had done in those first days and I think this is a pretty edifying story. For example, during the first days of January, on 2nd-3rd January, I guess, when things were still unclear, two guys, a sort of emissaries, a French and a Swiss, popped up in front of my door. Of course I had no idea who they were (one of them said he was the president of the Independent Radio Station Association in Europe or something of the kind- which sounded very impressive!) and they invited me to France. There I lived in Forcalquier, the headquarters of what I was later on going to realize it was Longo Maï, one of the most solid cooperatives *soixant-huitarde* in Europe. I had the chance to speak about freedom on their radio, I really enjoyed eating together,

didn't exactly get what they did there or how they earned their living, but I didn't get many things anyway and the place- somewhere in the South of France- was much too beautiful in order to ask yourself vile questions.

From there, I headed towards Switzerland, where I met some persons who seemed very important and chewed the fat a little bit. My mission was to break the ground for the official visit that some dignitaries, well, some 'emissaries of the Occident' were going to pay to Romania. Hence, in January, I was the one in charge with organizing the first visit of a parliamentary delegation from Switzerland, which arrived with a personal plane on Otopeni Airport. The whole story was quite hallucinating because I obviously had no idea of what that meant. I remember that I was with a friend of mine at 'Intercontinental' where we discarded everybody saying that we had a political mission, while I was using seven phones at the same time (and they weren't mobile phones), the rooms in the hotel weren't yet reserved, I yelled at them and they emptied the rooms in two minutes, I immediately asked to talk to Petre Roman (I knew he was something big around there) and I told him that a Swiss Parliamentary delegation wanted to talk to the country administration...In a nutshell, I organized this first visit of a Swiss Parliamentary delegation completely lacking a full understanding of the facts. There was also the problem with Ceaușescu's famous money.

I will make a digression here, because things are connected...My brother, in Switzerland, together with a larger group, but that was his initiative (right on 22nd, 23rd, 24th December) managed, due to a lawyer's help, to block some funds - or that's what they thought...What did that mean? It's hard to say. He really got involved in that thing with Ceaușescu's funds. I was supposed to negotiate with the Romanians; he was going to take care of things in Switzerland, together with the lawyer from the 'Marcos case' in Philippine. Neither of us really knew what was all about but we had a patriotic mission to ac-

complish. So, I had been caught in this story till one day when I asked my brother: 'Good, what shall we do now with this thing?' - 'What thing?' - 'Well, the one with Ceaușescu's money' - 'What money?' I say: 'What, are you crazy? The one we talked about!' - 'I don't know anything...' And he laughed. In order for him to later on tell me that two persons had allegedly disappeared on that network. And he didn't feel like being the third at all, hence, he wasn't going to put me in the position of being the fourth. So we suddenly left that game which was too big for us. But, at the moment, I was still involved in that story and the discussion between the respective Swiss delegation and the provisory Minister of Finance had to deal with that issue as well - and I obviously took part in it.

The other side of the shield was even funnier since the Swiss invited a commission from the municipality in Bucharest to visit Switzerland. I was supposed to organize this delegation as well, because I was their only contact. Hence, I vamped up the delegation. I obviously took mayor Predescu as well, but the rest of the group were people from the town hall caught by the revolution in the same place. Well, I also did a bit of selection and I gathered two or three people from the town hall and the rest were friends of mine, also from the revolution, chosen according to other criteria than the political-administrative ones. This delegation was grandiosely received in Switzerland, with press conferences, with an absolutely memorable stage on the airport of Geneva: we were hence received in the protocol hall in order to drink a glass of champagne, and at a certain moment, one of the fellows in the delegation went to the toilet. After fifteen minutes, the guy wasn't coming back...What had happened? The door wouldn't open because he hadn't washed his hands. That was the most stressing contact we had with the Occident.

The second thing was even more interesting. A delegation from 'The Revolutionary Bucharest' had been invited to France, also to

Forcalquier. But, since things were more stable, the delegation was only made of people working in the town hall. District boys, workers, unemployed persons, all gathered together in eager rivalry- but it didn't matter because they all had their position!- and they were all visiting the Occident for the first time. And we arrived at Forcalquier which, I repeat, is a sort of headquarters of a cooperative, which in France is considered a sect, with a very strong network (it has many more subsidiaries in France and not only). Leftist...to say the least. The dark figure of the group was the famous Rémy. He used to be present on the '68 barricades and had previously taken part in the war in Algeria. The whole story was based on some phalanstery principles- they worked and shared everything together. With an ideology which rather headed towards anarchism. I knew I was going to France in order to meet the capitalist dawn, freedom and democracy. And I was faced with that thing which didn't fit our perception at all. At least I was curious. But the others were indignant because they had expected to be received in a five star hotel and the reality was that we were all sleeping in some countryside stables, because- at the end of the day, that wasn't important, what really mattered was to be and to work together, right? We were together on the 'barricades' and our people felt like anything but doing that. We had to take part in various debates- we were coming from all ex-communist countries- but Romania's delegation found a field and started a football match and it was impossible for anyone to take them out of there. Since they don't show us anything and they put us in this damned stable, at least we should play some football!... And during the three days of great meeting between East and West, Romania's delegation had played football and had cursed capitalism.

The more interesting side of the story and that really confused me, was the relationship between the Swiss bankers and that organization, which, I repeat, was as anarchist as it could be and which represented our first contact with the

'Occidental capitalism'. The members of that cooperative used to take at arms in order to protect themselves from the police the government had sent them around the '70s, '80s, hence, long after '68. They were armed and protecting themselves while in the mountains, so to speak. They had weapon deposits prepared for 'the great revolution' which was to come, had contacts all around the world. They gave up that strategy- I later on found out- around year 2000; they reached the conclusion that 'the great revolution' wasn't going to come and then they changed tactics. Both the Swiss visit to Romania and the Romanian visit to Switzerland had been organized by Longo Maï. It was only later that I finally understood- and only on the surface level- that a third of the income the organization benefited from came from Switzerland. How was that possible? -Common business. In 'the industry of the humanitarian actions' as some stated it. So, this first contact left us (the few of us who went there, apart from 'the town hall football team', which quickly solved the problem) with a very prudent image, so to say. In as much as we found it very difficult to understand how those positions, which in my mind were at extremes, managed to combine: hence, on the right bank- capitalist extreme, or whichever way you want to call it, the Swiss banker and his private jet, his bank account, his image, and on the other, this network which was clearly not only leftist, but also sharing an anarchist ideology. Therefore, we reached the conclusion, which turned into a premise, that things were far more complicated than we had expected, that the other Europe, towards which we were heading, wasn't as monochrome as we had imagined.

For a few years, around 3 or 4, I was also present on some lists of the possible contacts, a sort of potential people of the future. Therefore, there was hardly any weekend without me being involved in a workshop, in a colloquium around the Europe where my position and that of the others was simply that of witnesses. Which meant that I wasn't an anthropologist, we

weren't actually considered to be professionals in a domain or the other, but, if you were more or less fluent and coherent in a foreign language, you were made part of those conferences, debates, so and so forth. Hence, I was the inner witness who was exposing the communist Europe to the Occidental Europe. And I was valorised as such. I started to get away from these networks and to be more or less excluded from them the moment I became an anthropologist with the ambition of having a more professional discourse. Yet, this interested nobody. I was supposed to narrate- obviously in a very intelligent way- about the communist society. The moment I stopped 'narrating' because I had my reserves and my opinions, things started getting a different course.

Around '93-'94, in Brussels, during a very noisy conference with hundreds of guests and to which I practically had no idea why I had been invited, with ambassadors, with Jacques Rubnik, with great commentators, all of a sudden Vintil? pops up. I cannot say why I was there, but it must be because up to the respective moment, I had properly fulfilled my tasks and I was present on a list with potential people of the future in Romania. I remember a very weird moment when the ambassador of Poland in Paris, if I am not mistaken, stopped the plenary discussions in order to say that he visited some colleagues from the European Commission in Brussels and that he wanted to tell us a thing which he found very weird, that was the fact that he discovered some offices which were dealing with determining 'the nations with European vocation' -and, implicitly, of those nations without a European vocation, as far as I could tell. Obviously that the respective European vocation spanned only up to the frontiers of the Carolingian Empire, thing which was easier understood later on. The war with Yugoslavia was being prepared and the difference in European vocation was passing through the middle of Yugoslavia. That moment, a Swedish who was chairing the conference, said: 'Well, thank you, we have to recess now because...the

lunch is getting cold'. Under this pretty ridiculous pretext, the discussion was stopped.

The next day I was invited in a show, *Le Divan de l'Europe*, at TV 5 International, a very important show, ideologically speaking, where the great European minds used to debate the big problems Europe was faced with at the moment. I was surprisingly invited, together with Jacques Rubnik and with the Hungarian Minister for Minorities. When I found out that they were going to bring Transylvania into discussion and when I also saw the minister coming with two suitcases full of documents, I said to myself that I got into lumber. I only knew history on a common sense level, like any other person, and here he comes with documents, mopping the floor with me. To cap it all, when I entered the studio, I saw a map of Romania hanged on a wall, but without Transylvania. The national and patriotic responsibility made me draw the attention to those people, saying that I am sorry, yet I am here to represent Romania and I cannot start the show with such a map. They said: 'Well, excuse us, this one is left from another show, a historical one...' I say: 'Well, OK!' I was very proud for setting down my foot. They took the map off the wall, which lent me wings to carry on. What was going to happen next was the great confrontation with the Hungarian minister who couldn't speak French very well and who, I could find that out only later, was ten times more stressed than I was because I could speak French well. The editor of the show was very clear: 'Well, I ask the questions, none of you steps in, you don't take the very words out of each other's mouth. I punctually ask the questions and you answer, nobody breaks the rule, nobody speaks with nobody unless I ask the question!' Which was a different image from what I used to know about dialogue in such a situation. It was a funny moment when Transylvania and the Romanian-Hungarian relationships were brought into discussion and the minister said: 'Yes, relationships are tense, but because of the Hungarians who did this and the other...', moment when I jumped in and, full of

respect, said that the Romanians had done this and the other...For a quarter of an hour, each of us kept on saying not that 'you do the villainies!' but 'we are to blame!'. Each of us fearing the other. That happened to the general stupefaction, since they were expecting to see a conflict, some tension to make the show successful. Afterwards, we went together for a beer, when we spoke English and we carried on being friends for a long time.

Another incident took place when Rubnik led the discussion precisely to the story regarding the nations with European vocation and how Europe, of course, had to open up, but the real Europe was that one. And how within that Europe there were yet nations which didn't really have that vocation. Hence, in diplomatic terms, the idea was that there were two Europes. This is when I broke the rule and I asked what was the respective dichotomy based on, 1000 years after the Carolingian empire. Did nothing happen in a thousand years? Should we come back to religious wars? Was that Europe's future? I was very aggressive, to the editor's despair who wasn't able to stop me. When I came back home, I saw the show my wife had recoded. Watching it, I had a very weird sensation that it didn't fit me. And I suddenly understood: everything I said

was there but had been switched when they did the montage. Firstly, I was on screen, angry, making a row, nobody could tell why and afterwards they presented Rubnik, replying nicely, calmly about the nations with European vocation. Meaning that, all off a sudden, the hysterical Romanian started to make a row, commenting on the relevance of the idea regarding the Europe of the privileged nations, so and so forth and after that Rubnik showed up to return things back to their place. One couldn't make anything of my replies; all the more, the significance, the message was exactly the opposite. So, they did a great job when doing the montage. I asked a lawyer if I had any chance to sue them, but he said I didn't: from a juridical point of view, everything was Ok, nothing had been added or taken out! I had to make do with sending the editor a short letter simply saying: *Chapeau bas!* And this is how my Occidental media career was over. After this incident, the rate of invitations dramatically decreased and after a year or two I was only invited in anthropological contexts. And, not to forget, when I saw the movie in Bucharest, I was surprised to see the map back at its place on the wall...

Translated by Raluca Vișuc

