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## The small entrepreneur

**Elena Radu, owner of a chain of cosmetic beauty centres  
in Bucharest, 39 years old**

**Interview done by Carmen Mihalache**



How I got in this business ... I passed the faculty entrance examination during Ceaușescu's regime, at a time when a student was just a student and the prospects of getting a job were null. I couldn't get money from home because there wasn't any to send, and all the money I could count on was the pension I got from my dad. So I slowly began to learn: I divided my ration card ... Back then they didn't give us the scholarship money directly. We had a ration card and a seat a day or something like that ...

That was during my first year of studies, in 1989 or 1990. In 1989 the Revolution broke up, I was in my second year and I got a job in education. So I started working, making some money so that I could buy things and stuff ... My parents have five children and only my brother and I were that young. So ... When I was in my second year, I took a part-time job at a school, and so did a colleague of mine from the faculty. We supported each other and together we began to sell things to students in the hostel. We would buy bars of chocolate from the corner shop and then re-sell them to students in the hostel ... We didn't get much profit from that 'cause sometimes we ate the chocolate ourselves ... Later on, we started buying beer too, and all sorts of clothes, bathing suits, blue jeans jackets, and I myself can't remember all the things that we used to sell back then! We advertised in the hos-

tel, sold our stuff door to door, until a new friend of mine asked: "Since you've got a regular store in your room, won't you sell some wax my mom prepares at home?" And I said that I'd give it a try, if he brought it over.

So I began selling wax. After a while I told myself that I should give it a try 'cause back then I was waxing at a beauty salon. Let's do that ourselves, I said, seeing that we've got wax and everything ... I mean, I would sell it, and from the profit I made, I would get some for myself. So, I told them "let's depilate ourselves for free!" So we depilated one another, and, seeing that it worked, I said that I would turn that into a job. I got into the waxing business and I even have pictures with my advertisement posts saying "Cheap and quick waxing". I posted them in the Regie Student Complex, in Grozăvești, and I started getting busy.

The little shop I had in my room had begun to get in the way, because, while I was attending to my female clients, a chap would show up for a beer or I don't know what else, so I put an end to my sales in the hostel and focused on my depilation business.

I got the hang of it quickly and I became quite good at it after only one month's practice. I still have clients from my first month in the business, that's why I say that I was good. They must have been pleased with me! And I got start-

ed. This happened when I was in my fourth year of study, then the fifth came and I was still in the depilation business and I began to extend it... It was 1993, yes ... After I graduated from faculty, I thought that I should also get my master's degree. That was the first year when we had had a master's degree programme at the faculty and I had no idea what it was, if it would be of any use to me or not, but I decided that I would better be safe than sorry. I took my master's degree, I remained a little longer in the hostel – and that was good because I already had clients there. I graduated and I thought that I shouldn't give up on my faculty diploma which wrote that my graduation mark was 9, 24. I studied biology. So, I took a job in education but asked for a part-time job because I had realized that I couldn't attend to my clients and to my pupils at the same time ...

I had many clients. I was alone in the business, yet I had hundreds of clients a month. Yes, I did. I can't make an assessment, but on busy days I would have up to 20 clients. I had free days, I had to take a break for a few days; I wouldn't have made it otherwise ... I didn't work round the clock but still I worked hard. Sometimes until 1 in the morning ... I had appointments for half past five or six in the morning ... I even had appointments for 1 in the morning, if memory serves. It wasn't the usual schedule but it happened. And I said to myself that I should get involved more seriously in the business because I had no social status. Who knew about me? I worked in the hostel! I had to do something about it. I tried to talk to some friends of mine who had two salons and were about to open the third in the hostel. I told them that I could put in my time and my experience and they could put in the money... I'm happy it didn't work 'cause nothing would have come out of it. I'm saying this because later on I worked for them for a year and I realized that we didn't see eye to eye on a number of things ... we had different principles and ways of thinking ... So.

As I was saying, I took a part-time job in ed-

ucation and kept all my previous clients. I had no time left for myself. Not one hour. The only free day was Sunday. On the rest of the week days I had appointments, I had to clean my room and I was supposed to also go teach my pupils. Sometimes I would go to school first, then back to my room which I would clean, then I had appointments, and then I would clean again. So I had no time left for myself or for my friends ... That's when I fell ill. It must have been because of all the exhaustion and the stress. I developed an allergy to the smell of wax and to stress. The allergy caused by stress had the symptoms of an incipient asthma, so I said to myself that I had to give up something, but what? If I had given up cosmetics, all the money would have gone too and I wasn't prepared for that ... Besides I had grown fond, very fond of my job as a beautician. I forgot to tell you that, after graduation, I had taken cosmetics classes.

How did I get to that school? Well, a friend of mine claims that I graduated those classes thanks to her. Because she had been to the school but, as she had no calling for the job, she had given up and told me that I was good and I should give it a try. But I think that I would have ended up taking those classes friend or no friend, because all I did was depilate and I knew nothing of cosmetic treatments ... I also thought that I would develop my business and turn professional. I had a feeling that was what I was going to do, that I would stay in that business, and then I decided I had to learn and get a diploma, right? I went to a one-month school – I wanted to learn fast. I had been in school for six years and I didn't have what it takes to spend two more years in school anymore. I took those fast courses and I got a diploma. The Christine Valmy School. Now classes last six months but back then they would only last for one month. Well, later on, I went back to school for a two-month specialization course because the Ministry of Labour demanded that. But right after I graduated from faculty, I only did a month of schooling.

I can't tell, I don't even remember if that was actually the first cosmetics school in Romania. What I know for sure is that it was set up after the Revolution. Christine Valmy, who I think is a celebrity ... she was born in Romania, she emigrated to the States, she set up cosmetics schools there and then she came back to Romania ... There was a time when she would come back here every month to sign the diplomas but in the end she gave it up. In fact, as far as I know, the school only bears her name now, she's not ... I mean, they work under license, she only sells her name through that school, but she's not actually involved anymore. She has other people doing the job for her. Her beauty products were also on the market back then. Now they've disappeared.

So, I took those classes ... And I chose to give up my job in education after one year of teaching, and I went on working in the student hostel. I was again annoyed by my having no social status, by my not doing what I would have liked to; how long was I going to ... I got a visit from the friends that I told you about; those that I had worked for. They were opening their third salon in the area, but not in the Grozăvești Student Hostel where it had proved impossible, and they needed help: somebody they could trust with the new place. They knew me, they trusted me and they hired me but it wasn't what I expected. I only lasted 11 months there. I had limited authority; I only did what I was told to do. They limited my possibilities, they inhibited me, and I felt I could have done a lot more for that place, I could have run it more efficiently. And the salary was small, so I said to myself that it wasn't worth the effort. Besides, during that year, I had lost half of my previous clients because the prices they had there were twice as expensive. So people stopped coming to Henriette Body Centre.

That's when the owner left ... She was leaving for England for a month or two, I can't remember exactly. She gathered us in a meeting and asked if she could trust us, if we would stay

until she came back. That was when I told her that I was out! Although I had no back-up plan! I had no idea what I would do next: where would I work, what would I do? ... Nothing.

Then I went back to the student hostel. I set up a firm ... you know, I rented a space, a very small one, it had only 12 square metres or maybe less, and I took in my first employee. She was with me for six months. After that I also hired a manicurist – the first employee was a beautician, of course. I don't recall the details but I think the third employee was hired after one year or so ... Well, during the first year, employees would come and go, but what is important was that after a year or so, I would take in another employee. I remained in that 12-metre space for a year or two, no, it was longer than that, almost four years that I spent in that space – so, it was for quite some time – , and there were four or five of us working there. I employed five people: four beauticians and a manicurist. Or something like that.

After four years, I rented a larger space, three times as large actually, meaning 35 square metres, and I opened a hairdresser's, although I knew almost nothing about that. Well, I knew something but not much, I'm afraid. And a massage parlour. I had taken massage and make-up classes, but I only did a little massage because I wasn't very fond of the thing. I still have the hairdresser's, and the manicure-pedicure salon, and the massage parlour and the beauty salon. And that's pretty much where I stopped.

The second salon is not exactly a salon but it isn't a would-be salon either. The stress that had caused my first asthma symptoms triggered a second fit, and I couldn't take any medication anymore. I had taken that medication for seven months back then and I felt alright for the next seven years ... The relapse was so serious that, after seven years, I had to go to the doctor's again and I had to stop working altogether. The smell of wax was the worst. It was the stress too, but the smell of wax was the death of me. Two months after I had opened my salon and the

hairdresser's, in February, I had to give up using wax for depilation.

I was only at the beginning with my investments and I was in debt. I couldn't have rented a flat and furnish it properly ... If you take a look at a salon, you say that there isn't much to it, but that little that you see costs heaps of money ... It was a lot of money for me; maybe it would be small change for Gigi Becali, but to me it was a fortune. And I couldn't and wouldn't move. I improvised something there, in that place where my poor clients had to stretch their legs inside the fridge; I moved the sink, I adjusted the place, and I had them stretch their legs into the closet ... I could only do treatments, that was ok. That was happening in February and in December, a year after I had opened the hairdresser's, I managed to rent a flat downtown, I bought some furniture for cosmetics use, meaning the few things that I need in order to cope with wrappings, treatments, massage, and all the other cosmetic procedures, because I didn't want to give up the clients I had made ten years before. Most of them followed me there; some of them stayed with the girls at Grozăvești. What I can say is that a second salon is just a beginning, it's not something serious. I only go there if I have appointments, and I only stay for as long as I have appointments. That's pretty much the level that I've reached.

I for one can say that things haven't been so tough for me because I'm a fighter, or so I think, that I am a fighter. But I'm no saying that to compliment myself ... it's more like a self portrait. I can't say that it was difficult because I'm used to difficulties. I left the Chamber of Commerce in tears a couple of times, when I had to change the papers – the registration certificates were being modified at the time. I was a nervous wreck.

Let's begin with the first legal procedures that I had to go through when I set up my firm:

all I needed was money because there is a special office at the Chamber of Commerce which deals with these things, and it makes little difference whether you pay the commission to the guys at the Chamber of Commerce or you pay it to a lawyer who might turn out to be the wrong person for the job. And here you only go once and you say what you want ... Well, should I tell you about all the nasty things that happened then? Alright, I wrote down what I wanted, the setting-up act was not impressive, a mere two and a half pages, while other were 10 pages long, as some people wrote down all possible codes 'cause you never know what you'll end up doing in the future. I was determined to stay in this particular business, and I also got into trade with beauty products and stuff like that. And I asked for a CAEN<sup>1</sup> code because I had decided that that would be my future business and I wanted to know the CAEN code for it. As they also offered consultancy services, they were supposed to be able to help with that.

Setting up the firm didn't seem all that difficult to me because I went to the Chamber of Commerce, I paid and I got the papers. That was easy enough. But getting all the necessary approvals was the nasty party: I needed approvals from the Sanepid [*Health and Anti-epidemic Centre*], from the Fire Department, from the Environment Agency ... I didn't need an approval from these guys but I had to get a document from the city hall saying that “no authorization is needed” which cost a million lei or thereabouts! That was six years ago. But I didn't need it! I didn't get that document after all because I said to myself that something like that was intolerable: I didn't need that piece of paper, so why should I pay one million lei just to get a “no authorization needed”? Well, I didn't get it.

Later the legislation was modified and I had to change my documents too, I had to change my registration document. That was a really

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<sup>1</sup> The classified list of professions in Romania.

crazy adventure! Rumour had it that the commission you'd have to pay to a lawyer for all the trouble with changing the registration document was about 100 or 200 euros or thereabouts, I can't recall exactly. But it was a good deal of money anyway, so I said to myself that I'd better do the job myself! Had I known what was going to happen, I would have paid the lawyer! I went to the Chamber of Commerce twelve times. I went in Octavian Goga Street: "no, not here, you go to Romexpo Complex". I went to Romexpo only to discover that I needed one more printed form. Where on earth was I supposed to get it? In Octavian Goga Street. From there I went back to Romexpo and then back again, and I had no car or a taxi to take me there; it was just awful. I left the Chamber of Commerce in tears five times. I had no car, and I can't say that I own a car even now, I use the family car but that happens seldom. So, after I had reached a certain

level where I could withdraw my file, I got an appointment to go and get it. I went and asked for it. The clerk who gave it to me said: "The printed forms have been modified". - "I beg your pardon?!!!" - "The printed forms have been modified again". - "And what should I do now?" - "Well, you go back to square one". - "You must be joking!!!" You can imagine that I was on the verge of attacking the bloody clerk after all the trouble that I had gone through, I was almost in tears and I felt like smacking the idiot with that file! Was I to blame that the printed forms had been modified? But let's resume.

I can give yet another example. By the way, let's say that they got something wrong in your file ... No, better yet: I told you that it hadn't taken much time to set up my first firm. After that I said to myself that I wanted a specific domain and I needed the specific CAEN code for that. They gave me the wrong CAEN cod, and



when I wanted to undertake that activity they told me that it wasn't included in the CAEN. I went back to the Chamber of Commerce and told the clerk there, "Look, madam, I have a problem here". And she asks, "Have you paid the 200 000 lei tax for information?" – "I need no information; I just want to tell you that there has been a mistake!" They won't even talk to you until you've paid that tax because anything they say is information. I don't know if the tax is still 200 000 or 400 000, I think it is 200 000 lei. "Madam," I said, "you are the ones who misinformed me in the first place. I inform you that the CAEN code you gave me is wrong, and you will also have me pay for your having misinformed me. This is beyond my power of understanding!" Well, I went into fits, I felt like crying my eyes out right there in that office! I felt like ... like just forgetting all about any business. I paid for the whole thing, later I paid one more million to get the CAEN code that I had asked for in the first place. But they won't admit to their mistakes!

I never said I quit! No, no, no. There was never a moment when I would say "no more, I've lost all hope", because the business as such, not the bloody documents, was a pleasure: it was a pleasure to receive my clients, to work with people, with a team of my choice. It was what I was meant to do on this earth. No, I would have never given up. People, even those who won't admit it, think that each person has their fair share of hardship and difficulties in life, so I couldn't have been the one to make a tragedy out of everything that went wrong ... And the nervous wreck that you end up being!

I am mixing things up now because I tell you things as I remember them, with no specific order. For instance, after I moved to that larger salon, after I had redecorated the whole thing, 35 square metres in a student hostel, the respective hostel closed down for repairs for one whole year and I had to move again. And you can imagine that, seeing that I was moving to another place, even if I had all the necessary approvals

and the conditions were similar, I had to let the Chamber of Commerce know that I was moving from the block of flats D to the next door block of flats A, into an identical space. The announcement alone cost me two and a half million lei and I also gave a statement which said that the conditions in the new locations were the same, although the old documents were still valid. So, as I had made the announcement, I also had to send somebody over to the Chamber of Commerce to get new approvals. There was a sink in each of the three rooms. They said something like, "no, you need at least four sinks, three are not enough to get all the towels washed in time". "I take them home with me and wash them there daily". – "No, it's not enough". – "Why ever not?" – "Because you must have a contract with the Nufărul Laundry Service". – "But they'll charge 65 000 lei for washing a towel and a new towel costs 80 000, so what should I do, get single-use towels? I can't get them dry here because there isn't enough space, so I can't get them dry; I take them home with me". – No, you must get a receipt from Nufărul in order to prove that you have the necessary condition, as I have no way of knowing what you have at home; you might not clean them well enough". But you can tell a clean towel from a dirty one immediately, not to mention that you can also smell the difference! If I get the receipt, then ... won't they still check if the dirty towels and the clean ones are stored separately? ... No, the rule was that, if I had only three sinks, I had to close down half an hour earlier and sterilize the place. I said that yes, I did sterilize all instruments bowl. No, the bowl, they said, was for washing hair! Yes, I said, but a hair wash doesn't take 12 hours! She has three clients per hour at most, and the bowl it used half an hour out of six; she can clean the instruments during the remaining six hours, so we don't need a fourth sink. They kept saying that there wasn't enough space, and I would still need a fourth sink!

So, that's all I can say ... it's all rubbish, if you're asking me. Not to mention the statements

my accountant has to write, and she's always on the move, going from one place to another, I have no idea what she's doing right now ... At a certain point we had to buy one account book for all activities; I think somebody needs to sell their paper badly! That's what I thought, anyway. And the thing with the cash register was exactly the same, but what can you do! Seeing that I had only four employees, my account register would have been huge, right?! The thing they wanted us to buy can't be stored anywhere; it is twice the size of a regular school notebook and it has so many pages that, if my grandchildren inherit my business, they will never be able to employ enough people to fill in all the pages! But you were supposed to buy it within a certain period of time and adjust the records. My accountant had to stand in huge lines because the scandal was huge and you had to get one by a certain date, otherwise you would get a fine. They had to extend the deadline because the previous had been too short ... What can I say, there's too much bureaucracy, and we won't be able to get rid of it because I've heard that Americans are also up to their necks in it ... So, I don't think we'll ever manage to get rid of ours.

I'd rather things went this way: what business will you be in? I want to open a beauty salon. Alright. For a 35-square-metre salon you pay the state this much, regardless of your profit. And the rest wouldn't have to be a problem: statements which you made or didn't make, the profit that you made or didn't make, and how the business goes and so on ... you just pay the state and mind your business. You wouldn't have to pay people to take care of all the documents and ... And I can't recall exactly all the details, but there's so much bureaucracy around, and everybody knows this. My business is listed as a small enterprise with less than nine employees and worth ... I can't remember the exact sum but it's below the usual monthly circulation. I don't know how much I still have to pay but I can't get beyond this level, although I wish I could!

I am still in debt because the recent move

cost me ... Well, that doesn't matter anymore. I say that in the end it's worth it because, at the end of the day, I have a profit and I earn more than somebody working for the state ... I am at a middle-class level, and, you know, I can afford to take a holiday abroad or to ignore the fact that I pay 100 000 lei more for a pair of shoes; I have done for a long time ... One of my minor dreams was to always have fresh fruit at my table, which I have already fulfilled and I realize that back then this dream would have been impossible and that there are many people now for whom this remains a dream. And still I have to be happy with what I have. I also get the satisfaction of working with people, with my content clients.

I've read many books, yes. I think that you must have a very good basic training in the field because there are many salons which ... well, there are women who become involved with wealthy men ... It's not a big business, investments are not that impressive, although you have to have some money in the first place, and in my case, money was a problem ... These women I told you about think that, if they own a salon, they do nothing all day long but do their nails and hair ... I do my nails at home, I never get a manicure at my own salon and I also do my hair at home – I straighten it – because I don't have time and I can't take my clients' time. They have priority at the salon and I only do my hair there when I am invited to a wedding party or something of the kind ... In all the other cases, I do my hair at home. Of course I go there for a depilation because I can't do that myself, although sometimes I do it myself. And those women imagine that if they are the owners, they get to live the grand life. In fact, this position involves knowing your trade very well and showing people respect, be they employees or clients. You're not supposed to take your employees for slaves. They're your employees and your colleagues with whom you have signed an agreement, and if you're business goes well, they are happy too ... We all are happy. And I wouldn't trade my satisfaction for all the tea in China.



I don't mean to sound idealistic or romantic and to say that I do everything just for my personal satisfaction. If there were no profit coming out of it, I wouldn't do it. It would be impossible; you still have to make a living, to eat something, to travel, to buy clothes. If the business had been bad, I would have given it up, pleasure or no pleasure. Now I've managed to balance them nicely, you know: the decent profit that I make and the satisfaction that I get ... I can say that I'm happy with what I've achieved.

Still, you have to know things. That's what I've been telling you: there are these girls who take some money from I don't know what Arab or Turk and they open a beauty salon with it, but they show no respect to their clients, to their employees or to the trade, not to mention that they don't know the first thing about the job ... For instance, I know somebody who ... The recyclable wax that we use is thrown away after one week: we use it and then we throw it away. We have a special morning when we change the wax. We do it because after a while it starts causing burns or it won't come off, and that's when we dispose of it. The employee comes and says that the wax has to be changed, and they say, "It's just fine! You go ahead and use it". If you use it for too long, your clients will suffer. I wanted to change the wax supplier and the wax wasn't good, so I had to throw it away, and my money went down the drain too. But you can't help it. One of the women that I told you about could never understand such things because she knows nothing about this business. She would say, "The wax is good, how can it not be? I paid good money for it; you go ahead and use it". You lose customers this way and your employees have to struggle with their task. Well, the example I gave you is a practical one, and there are many others I could speak of. You have to know the trade, you have to like it and you must be aware that profit won't come overnight. The profit in this business comes in time but it keeps coming, there are no breaks. Take sales, for instance: you sell ten Opel cars in one month, so

that you could afford one at the end of the month! I can't do the same in my business. Things go slowly here, the old-fashion way. It's an old-fashioned kind of business.

That is a reason why many have gone bankrupt: they don't know how to balance quality and the price for it: most beauty salons are neighbourhood salons where people come to gossip about all their neighbours, to curl their hair and perhaps to buy Turkish shirts in installments. You won't find anything like that in my salon. It is indeed a neighbourhood salon meant for students because there are many students and graduates in the area. But most of my clients are 25-30-year old women, and only a handful of them are between 40 and 50; they must be about four and they are very demanding. The salon has a tradition and a target public. And our prices are average. I think I saw posters advertising for lower prices: 20 000 lei for a haircut, but generally speaking, my prices are lower than the average. In a student neighbourhood prices have to match their possibilities. There are of course salons where only celebrities and VIPs go, and there prices are huge; I can give you names, if you want. The offer is the same but ... I could afford some of the things they use because buying a more expensive hair dye is not such a big deal. But if I get it, I have to include it in the price for our services because I can't buy it for less. And then the client would have to come with her own hair dye, which she can buy in a store, and you lose money: you lose the trade markup, and then you might not be familiar with that hair dye and your client might be angry because the resulting colour is different from the one she saw on the pack. When you work with one type of hair dye only, you get accustomed to it. If I buy more expensive hair dye, I would be unable to sell it, and if I buy two kinds of hair dye, I would make an unjustified investment. You work function of you clients. A 50-ml tube of facial cream at the Marriot cost 11 800 000 two years ago. I wouldn't be able to sell that cream if I had ten years to do it: it would go beyond its expiry date three

times over. If I decide to sell a cream for 500 000, let's say, that would still be expensive for my clients. You have to make a selection of your clients but the most important thing is to keep them coming.

When I attended that cosmetics school, I noticed that my colleagues found it difficult to learn about the human skin and stuff like that ... I thought it was piece of cake, as I had already studied about it in my anatomy classes, I had passed a faculty entrance examination, anatomy had been a basic subject during faculty years, so ... It was easier for me to understand certain things. If I had been a mathematics graduate, maybe I would have been in serious trouble but I can't be certain. I still think that my previous training was of some use. At least I am aware that mathematics wouldn't have helped, but I knew a lot about skin and that was helpful. There are other things too, such as metabolism and so on ... Anyway, I went through a lot of books after graduation. I read them indiscriminately, and they were of all kinds: books I had bought at exhibitions, at conventions ... Yes, I love to read these books because when a client asks, I am able to supply the information. For instance, I had clients asking me if wrappings would help them lose weight. I answered that it would have been wasted money because the only way to lose weight is through diet and exercise. With wrappings, you pay four million lei and you go home with one kilo less but which you'll put back in a week.

I gave up my job in education for something that would get me more money. The money I earned was not enough for a decent living. It's not an option to graduate from faculty, pay rent somewhere and live off a salary not bigger than ... I don't even know the current salary but it must be 4 or 5 million a month. And if you're a biology teacher you can't live off private lessons the way math, Romanian, French or English teachers do. They can get loads of tuitions and things are ok, but if you're a biology teacher ... Pupils don't need private lessons in geography or biology. You can't make a living this way and that's that! The high school where I had classes was a bad one and I had no satisfaction whatsoever! The pupils were positively retarded, they almost fell asleep during classes and they used to say that the brain is located in the stomach ... What satisfactions did I get in the end? No money, stupid pupils, the high school was at the other end of the city, on Republica Boulevard and I had to go there daily ... If you want a career in education, you must have somebody to help you, like in medicine; in time you will eventually manage to climb the career ladder to the top. And we all know how that is done: when the school inspector comes, you pay him/her. You take one exam but you pay a three-month salary. I have no regrets. I am happy the way I am now.

*Translated by Alina Popescu*

