

MARTOR



Title: "My America"

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How to cite this article: Moțoc, Cora. 2005. "My America". *Martor* 10: 219-222.

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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Martor is indexed by EBSCO and CEEOL.

My America

Cora Moțoc



I'm still seized by a sort of dumb nostalgia when I think of the 90s, the Revolution, the Topi-Top and Bonibon candies, of the protest or support marches, of the miners' revolts and of Petre Roman, of the high-waist, pleated violet (or indigo) blue jeans, of the tightly-fit dresses and the knee-high leather boots (a little like Julia Roberts' in *Pretty Woman*), of the Elton John, Sinead O'Connor, Glen Medeiros and Roxette videos, of the small corner shops (their ancestors, actually) selling Turkish cheap goods, of the juice distribution-machines where you got unnaturally-tasting, funny-coloured beverages, of the chewing-gum wrapped in pictures of famous football players (the pictures were usually those of van Basten and Ruud Gullit) or of sport cars, of skipping school to see a teenager-show hosted by a girl called Ambra on Rai Uno (she would always wear the coolest of outfits), of *Lambada* and the Adidas Torsion TV ad ... But that's only natural: I was a teenager back then. I only missed one year of the decade: the year when I went on a scholarship to the States.

I had no idea about the Romanian government's scholarship politics. The National Bureau for Scholarships Abroad was set up in 1998, and I had been to the States on scholarship from 1995 till 1996. Everything was still at the beginning; people either improvised a lot or followed old procedures. We were the Guinea pigs for an

entire host of education experiments: we had been the first generation not to go through an exam to pass from the 10th to the 11th grade, the first or the second generation to study in the modern languages department (we were obviously considered a bunch of pariahs compared to the Brahmans from the mathematics-physics department, and that situation went on even after we had begun to take part in school competitions), and the first to put their education on hold in order to study on a scholarship abroad.

My departure to the States, where I was to study in a public high school for a year, had come somewhat as a surprise: it was the result of a mind-blowing series of events and happy coincidences. I'm still brooding over that particular occurrence.

One of the English teachers in our high school was an American who had come all the way from Alaska to teach us. She had come to Romania through the Peace Corps Organization. She taught feminist American literature, everybody wanted to marry her off to some Romanian guy, and she had never heard of Anthony Quinn. One day we received an official announcement from the State Department offering 5 AYUSA (Academic Year in the United States) scholarships: a public high school, "accommodation" at an American family and all the other goodies. *The catch* was that only one of five was a fully-

funded scholarship. For the remaining four, transportation was not included. I had never before seen a one-dollar bill, let alone 1253 of them. That was the cost of a two-way ticket, plus three-day accommodation in Washington DC. My folks were both teachers, and we weren't strangers to scrapping in our wallets for some change to buy bread, but the matter of actually owning a pair of blue jeans and a leather jacket, like the rest of my mates, had been decided over once and for all. I had gone over the initial trauma and I had adopted a Chekhovian style wearing long skirts, extra-large jumpers and boots that would have looked familiar to a Russian kolkhoz worker.

The catalyst in my struggle for the New World was my mother. I was keen on going but I knew that we were short on cash and that my only chance was to get the fully-funded scholarship. I was floating in an atmosphere of dim frustration which was sending low frequency waves to my stomach, as if I had had a tank in there. "You're nagging me with that English stuff of yours but you haven't proven anything yet. First, try and see if you get chosen. Maybe you're not even as good as you think you are. If you manage to get one of the scholarships, I'll sell some of the stuff in the house and we'll send you there." I gave it a shot. There were 300 candidates and many stages: a file, an essay, a written examination and an interview with a professor from the English department at the University of Bucharest and with an American guy (someone from the Embassy most probably). The final exam was held in Bucharest; I had a 38 degrees fever and went in third for the interview; I remember quoting from Bobby Kennedy (a risky, yet inspired move).

Two months later I received a phone call. I was second on the list. It figured! Why should I have a peaceful summer? All summer long, with father as my companion, I gathered (i.e. begged for) money from all kinds of people who thought

that I was a worthy investment. We managed to collect the whole sum only one day before I left and we made the transfer. I left on the 11th of August. I was flying to the state of New York, "somewhere near Rochester". The rest of my Romanian mates went to different other places. At the airport we were all wearing AYUSA T-shirts so that we could be easily recognized, and we were even asked if we were from the gymnastics team headed for the Atlanta Olympics. When I arrived in Rochester I couldn't make out a thing of what the policewoman at the desk told me. Well, it happens. It still happens that I don't always manage to understand everything that is said with that nasal "Rochester-like" accent. But back then I almost burst into tears when, after three repetitions, I still couldn't understand a thing. She gave up and let me pass. I used to look less suspicious then.

Well, if Rochester hadn't thrown into fits of excitement, when I arrived at my final destination, I realized that the following year would be one of initiation. I was in the very heart of America. I had hit the core of it. I was *in the middle of nowhere*, as they say, meaning in the very core of nothingness. "The town" where I was supposed to spend my next year was called Ontario. It was made up of about fifty houses, a gas station and a drugstore. Then came the sweeping plain, fruit trees, a highway and, of course, Lake Ontario which was still at some distance from where I would live. It's cool for a week. It's like a week's vacation at a sanatorium: you sleep, take long walks and meditate. But one whole year in such a painfully normal place, as the Americans refer to it, can make you go nuts. I was somehow like the lady from the Peace Corps, who had told us about the scholarships. The only notable difference was that I was there to study, not to teach, there was nobody interested in marrying me off and I knew fully well who Mircea Albulescu¹ was (just for the sake of the comparison).

¹ Famous Romanian actor.

The time I spent in school was sometimes funny, and sometimes annoying but pretty easy-going compared to what I had to go through in Romania. My first essay in English literature was posted on the wall-gazette. (Yesssssss!) We did old English literature for one semester, and my American mates were positively horrified: they read Chaucer “translated” in American English or with the aid of a dictionary, if they dared, and watched video tapes with Hamlet (the Mel Gibson, not the Laurence Olivier version). I had known the “*thine own self be true*” and “*to be or not to be*” stuff from back home ‘cause we stood no chance of cheating with our English teacher. I had some problems with the vowels but in the end it all worked out. I will never forget the shock that I caused when I pronounced “*shit*” instead of “*sheet*”, “*bitch*” instead of “*beach*” and “*piss*” instead of “*peace*”.

The thing that proved the death of me was (again, obsessively) feminist literature. I asked the teacher to prepare an alternative reading list for those who did not find Toni Morrison and Gloria Steinem appealing. I think Mrs. Strickland (the English teacher, that is) was a bit horrified to discover that I liked Hemingway and Tennessee Williams, but she soon realized that I came from a patriarchal culture and it wouldn’t have been wise to push enlightenment down my throat.

The rest could be described as a series of strict rules combined with the freedom of choice given to students. You were not allowed to keep your cap on (the famous baseball cap which is part and parcel of any American wardrobe) during classes or chew gum. You weren’t allowed to run on the corridors, although the break between classes lasts no longer than two minutes and you had to get from one place to another carrying a pile of books. You needed a special written permission from the teacher if you wanted to get out of the classroom during class. But you were free to come to school barefoot (in summer some would wear slippers to school), ask the funniest questions, contradict what the

teacher and address them by their Christian names. You were also more than welcome to sit on the library floor and read undisturbed while sitting on the fitted carpet.

What made feel really uncomfortable was the 8 am class on the first day at school (and all the 8 am classes that followed) when, as I was seated at my desk, minding my own business, I suddenly saw my classmates standing up, facing the flag, taking their right hand to their hearts and beginning to utter the flag oath (they were accompanied by a voice coming from the speakers in the classroom). I was kindly explained that it was done at the beginning of each school day and that I was invited to join in. I opted for civil disobedience and remained seated.

During my year in America I satisfied my strangest desires: I went to the audition for the school choir and the teacher gave me a musical score (most American students play at least one instrument), but I explained that I had a very good singing voice. I could sing only by ear and I made a demonstration with Ella Fitzgerald; I entered the school music hall, which premiered at Christmas; I did community service at a senior citizens’ home where I played bingo and the winners got candy for prizes; I did babysitting and washed cars at a gas station for some extra cash; I went to a classical music concert at the Rochester Philharmonic and I sailed down the Niagara by the “Maid of the Mist”; I wrote an essay on Orwell and one on *The Rhinoceros* by Ionesco for a literature contest; I applied for Harvard Law School and failed; they would have accepted me at Northeastern but I gave up sending the necessary document on time; I traveled as far as I could between Boston and California.

Bottom line, I managed to get through that year, I learnt a lot, but I decided that I was hyperventilated by the American vastness, that I was getting too fat because of American food, that I tended to get lost in the neighbourhoods with identical houses, that I reacted violently to hypocrite politeness and that I generally preferred Europe.

I returned with the full conviction that my year there would be validated and I would go straight for faculty. What followed were countless trips to the Ministry of Culture building and just as many failed negotiations. My diploma was never validated because they said that they did not study the same subject matters in the States. I still can't fathom where I could have studied Romanian language and literature in the States but that matters little now. I managed to win a

battle though: I didn't have to repeat the year. All I had to do was to pass the school-leaving examination, meaning that I spent one year waiting for that opportunity.

The topic we had to discuss at the exam was from Mircea Eliade and I took that for a sign. And a sign it sure was.

Translated by Alina Popescu

