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Author: Răzvan Nicolescu

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Through market economy. From one astonishment to the next

Violeta Mayer, enterprising, 59 years old
Interview done by Răzvan Nicolescu

I'm a photographer and I accept tips. The Revolution found me at IMGB. I was a technician at the Metallography Laboratory – department for the microscopic study of metal composition... Right after the Revolution, salaries were re-negotiated... 6000 lei for the laboratory janitor. Well, they gave me the same sum. They said they would not give me more because I was a photographer and I accepted tips. But they had forgotten to say that I had taken photos of them, too, and they never brought me as little as a bar of chocolate to thank me ! Well, I developed the films they would bring with them from their delegations and not only! Or, another example: at a certain time, the photos on our work cards were changed. The factory had 10-13 thousands workers. They forced me to take their photos. I took them ; while I received 1 leu for each photo, they received 50, and they also kept whatever else was left... there were too many... How could they use tips to justify a lower salary? How could I be given the salary of a cleaning woman after I had worked there for more than 20 years ? But, I had nothing to say. I stayed for a few months only and I left.

Luckily in the 1990s my father was still working at the „Miorita” milk factory and he had a stall with icecream in Doamna Ghica. I suggested to him (...) to sell other things, too: groceries, cigarettes, it was still possible, then...

My father, a very honest man, said, “how could I compete with the neighbour who keeps the same goods ?” He couldn't... Of course, after he had taken his stall away, another man replaced him, and what a competition he used to make! But my father couldn't possibly compete with him. There was a certain thing, you know....no longer possible today: how could he open a stall with the same goods, being also a friend of the guy? He couldn't!

The same year, in summer, I started a business with a former colleague (I was still working at IMGB then, I worked there till '91, in spring), a small workshop for making snacks. Why that ? It was my idea. My sister met a few people roaming around these products, saw that there were only about two important producers in Bucharest then, and they were doing great, and she told me: “Violeta, let's do it!” I...I didn't agree. She kept on insisting, and one day this colleague of mine came to me, I talked to him and he told me about his having a house at a distance of 25-30 km from Bucharest, about his providing the corn, the corn flour, about the smaller price, he had received the house from I don't know where, finally, the very thought made me happy! I came up with the money for the snacks machine, I went to buy it from Botosani, I brought and installed it, I arranged with the electricity, 'cause we didn't have three-phase

current... The family association had his name. I didn't mind, because the verbal agreement had been that we would produce and sell through his association, and we would share the profit: we would subtract all the expenses, in a fair way, and then we would share what was left. But, after we had made the association, after the machine had started to produce, in a week or two changed things: he started to tell me that he couldn't find corn, that the maize flour was expensive... He had forgotten we had to sell and share the money. The firm being registered on his name and his family's name, they also sold the product. He had suggested to me to divide the production in two parts – half for him, half for me – but I had to sell my part alone. And, how could I sell it if I didn't have anything, documents of the firm, anything? So I realized it was high time to step back. I did so in two, three weeks... (...) So, that was the way everything ended; he went and bought another machine, and I started to look for another place to go on... And I couldn't find it. That was the first time I felt I was going crazy: I had taken the car I had bought, but I had no place for it. I don't know what was in my head – crazy ideas!

I rented only the ground floor. But I couldn't connect it to the electricity network, because RENEL wouldn't approve... Until I found the suitable person to help me with the agreement, I kept wasting my time: from July, 1990 until April 1991, I couldn't do anything. Meanwhile my colleague got richer and richer: it was the time when there were only a few producers and the production was all right... We moved there only in 1991, in spring, with the machine and the workers...

The idea was to make snacks and sell them whole sale, because one couldn't sell too much and, being very cheap, you earned almost nothing. It was all about producing. But, I could hardly imagine that the machine had so many problems, meaning that it worked with a lot of difficulty. But, I ran into a former colleague, from Otelul, too, who, as he was retired, came

and helped us – a meticulous man, a wonderful man, God rest his soul! He died saying: "Here, you'd need a team of people!" I happened to find some pleasant people, dealing with wrapping, nice people. So, after all, it all turned out to be a pleasure!

In '92-'93 Robert, my sister's son, came with a Volkswagen from Germany, and we decided to take him with us to help us carry the bags: about 20-30 sacks with maize flour that we had to carry every day by a Dacia, from a distance of 60-70 km... it was rather difficult... I don't remember how much he asked for it then: about \$ 9000. I paid the money and took the car. I never drove it, only my sister did. It wasn't new, it always needed fixing. And, not knowing what to do, she took it to a service. But not at Volkswagen, it was too expensive. Oh, I don't know what those people did or didn't do, but the fact was that it had problems all the time. The problems didn't disappear and they cost us a fortune... In addition, the car was stuck at the service workshop and we couldn't carry the maize flour, the snacks... For example, schools demanded 5-6 bags every day, but it was all for nothing if you couldn't take them in the morning, when the students came. And how were we supposed to transport them since we didn't have a car? 'Cause the person who sold them made profit with them! And if you don't take the bags, he finds other producers, for there were so many already...

Oh, and my sister had children, grand children and someone had to look after them. When there were problems at home, she used to leave everything and go there... And this is how she started getting in trouble: she had to miss work either because of the car, or because of the children. When she became the boss, the problems with the car started – it didn't bring maize. Now I believe it wasn't important to have a bigger car, I think it would have been better to have somebody to deal with the supplies... But could you trust anyone? You don't know what he can do with the car; you don't know if the person buys what you really want... Moreover, one of the girls

working at the wrapping section was more like a shrew, she was the only one who had graduated from high school and she enjoyed drinking. She was drinking, she was nice, full of life (...) and she taught the other girls, too: they used to sell a bag, or two with snacks, they got money and they sat and bought something to drink... With nobody there to keep an eye on them, work slowly came to a stalemate and I closed the shop... So I didn't have a business partner to work at the same pace as me, and my sister made me take more than one step behind...

In 1990, in autumn, I set up a table. I had a table in the Miniş Market! I rented the place, I brought a table and started to sell all kinds of goods, for I was allowed to do that, then. I used to buy them from the Exposition, the place with the big en-gross. I'll never forget that piercing cold, that winter...

Meanwhile, the market management gave us the permission to bring that stall from the TLCR (father was their employee). We arranged at TLCR to move our ice-cream stall, and their manager agreed. If he had remained there, he would have had to sell their ice-cream and he would have gained nothing more. So, we took the stall from Doamna Ghica and moved it to Miniş. That was in December, 1990.

So, father came to Minis, too. He came as an employee of TLCR and the stall still belonged to them. They allowed us to sell some things which were ok with the icecream, I don't remember what, exactly. What we could not sale there we would take to the market stall and sell it there. Almost immediately we started stuggling to buy the stall, for TLCR had started to sell them. And we struggled and struggled for one or two years to buy it, and finally we succeeded. It was meant to be! After buying it, father resigned.

Up to then I had had a family association; then I created the LTD. In this way, I was allowed to have employees. I employed them, and then I introduced all kinds of goods for sale: sweets, drinks. But no cigarettes. I didn't have any restriction, but I thought it had to be decent;

after all, it was an icecream stall. That is, they were kind, they moved the stall there, they also sold it to me, we shouldn't be rude...

So, we had a stall and the production of snacks. I gave up the table after that memorable winter. My father and sister both stayed outside, all the time, they were frozen to the bone, it was horrible! But I had to do everything for money, I had to pay my debts, because I was in debt. And we kept on like that for about two years, or even a little longer. And I said : „Let's extend our business, we can't deal only in snacks, can we? Let's make a shop, too!”

There were many places sold at auction then, and we thought of buying one. The ABC („Tobacco”, in the past) sold something. I went there, I saw them and I found a place on Mărgeanului, selling by instalments. Somewhere in Rahova. I didn't like it too much, though, I don't know why, but I said : „Let's take it!” That happened in.. 1994! I had to invest a lot of money then, because the ABC didn't give me the whole place. It had about 62 mp, but they gave me only 58 mp, and I had to build a dividing wall, I had to make a lot of things. And that cost me something... a few years passed! Because when you invest money, you bring everything with you, you bring shelves, you gather your customers... The agreement was the following: we take the shop, I was to take care of it for as long as I could, and my sister was to stay in the snacks business. But my sister was busy with her te children, the grandchildren, so she couldn't take care of the business; she lost it. So in the end we went bankrupt again; we were left with the shop and the stall...

It was well with the stall... At a certain time, an acquaintance of mine appeared with a machine for juice, that one called Magic ! (...) There were the TEC and the Magic ! The woman, who hadn't seen me before, was pleasant and she told me that the machine was a fountain of money, and that I should buy such a thing right then! So, she recommended me Magic firm, but I was short of money at that moment, and, because I

had to buy it with cash, I bought a smaller machine and placed it at my father's. It didn't have too much power of refrigeration, but it was running ok. At that moment, the woman with the machines asked me : „Why don't you buy a bigger one, for street commerce, with better cooling power ?” I answered, I don't have any money, only if I can take it in instalments.” She told me to make a new type of contract, they had just appeared, and guarantee with the house. I told her I won't touch the house ! All my life I've avoided a thing like this... And I gave it up. But later on the girl from Magic firm appeared and she told me: „OK, we're giving it to you on easy!” I say: “And according to what contract, seeing that I woun't guarantee with my house!” and she answers: “There will be no contract!”

Many times during these years I found myself astonished... Or, for example, I went to an whole-sale and I had 700 000 lei less than necessary to pay for the goods. About.... 10-12 years ago... This shop-assistant, who didn't know me, told me: „It's OK, you'll bring it to me in two or three days..” And I told her: „But you don't know me!” And she said: „ I bet you'll bring it!” She was sure I was going to bring the money back to her! Then it happened to me once again. I told to myself that maybe I had the word „sucker” written on my face, on my forehead, that I wouldn't steal! Or maybe I'm a reliable person, you can easily see I'm not one of those who don't bring back the gift... I don't know. No, that was called market economy. And they knew how to do it, they took the risk and attracted customers. They went on well, and we paid our debits honestly.

The Rush. We would buy from wholesale stores, and from the Metro, for a year. Flora was a very big one, very uncivilized, but all the people there sold things first hand and you could buy all the goods cheaper. In the smaller ones, like Chirigii or Manor, the people sold again what they had bought from Flora and they added a small supplement. And then, we used to buy directly from Flora so as to make sure that our

store or stall were more competitive.

I used to carry everything with my car, the one I had had since leaving the factory, a 1310 Dacia. I would go to the shop many times a day, and to the stall, too: I had to go to the market for vegetables and fruit from Voluntari for the shop, and then I had to go to Manor for the stall, then to Flora, for the shop... Then another one opened in Metalurgiei, where I used to go to buy eggs and vegetables and fruits for the shop... And that was how I used to walk all day long and I couldn't go on like that, I was more and more tired.

The Miniş Market is one for old people, the retired, the poorer ones... There are very few people who have the money and want special things. But I always tried to bring such things. Just as I used to do with the shop: wandering about more, keeping better company, enjoying better shops... I was trying to bring quality products into my shop, I couldn't afford bringing in any cheap stuff... So, my shop also entered this better world... But the stall was visited by the people who lived nearby. On Saturdays and Sundays, on holidays... I was trying to buy all kinds of boxes - father had some very good customers who would always look for special candy boxes. I used to bring them, and then these customers came to us only, because they knew I was in the habit of bringing things especially for them... There were all types of people... people who owned something and poor ones, but I didn't think at the risks taken if I couldn't sell your stuff... Today, you take 100% risks because you no longer sell them. Now they are sold in supermarkets, in big shops, not in the little ones.

It was difficult with the shop... I would get sick before I reached Rahova! I got sick at the very prospect of travelling that far. I had to be happy, but I was sick Oh, and finally I really started to enjoy it. It got better and better, but there was something else: we happened to have some very good shop-assistants. They kind of stole from time to time, but they were good. That had eaten me alive all those years: the in-

ventory, the fact that they used to steal... I had almost got over those, too, I was OK, I liked to bring in supplies... I'm sorry I don't have a photo from that period. When the girls took photos at the shop... It was pleasant, the girls were very nice. The shop-assistant is very important in a shop – they have to be kind, pleasant, gentle. I had a girl – she used to keep the bags for the customers, she used to say „How do you do !” She would say it for her own interest, she knew each of them would give her something, but that was not my problem, it was her business, all that mattered was only that she was gentle and kind. I would have enjoyed to teach a lecture, to make shop-assistants smile, laugh, help the clients nicely... That was a shop with a high profit. And I had two fabulous shop-assistants, especially Jeni, one of them. The girls kept pestering me, saying that Jeni used to steal, and some other things... I also had an older one, who was extremely kind. She helped me with some problems, my own family wouldn't have done that. But she had the foulest mouth you've ever seen!

But I got ill for one year and a half because of so many errands. My father was already very ill, mother couldn't walk any more, my sister had separated from me, in the meantime... For she had wanted to change the agreement : because of her money problems in the family – they could hardly manage – she wanted to share our daily profit, then to spend her share for her own needs, and to use mine to go on. In business, if you don't go on with the money, you can't advance. If you spend it, what will you do ? And we didn't come to an agreement. There were talks, rows and we split up.... That happened in 1996.

Meanwhile, I went on struggling with Mărgeanului and Miniș... Father died, mother was going from bad to worse, and my business was not quite good... I couldn't manage with the supervision any more. When I was there, I didn't know what was going on there, when I was here, the other way round. As a rule business, if you're not able to keep an eye on things, you'd better

give the whole thing up! I wasn't the boss any more, people were, and I didn't know exactly what they were doing... And if you depend on them, you are the fool: you pay salaries, taxes, rents, but you are controlled and so business comes to a stop. So I finally gave up Mărgeanului, because that was so very far away from home, about 15 km, while the stall from Miniș was at about 3 km.

I miss the customers, who were very pleasant. They were sorry, too, when they heard I had left. One of them, a teacher from a Nourishment School on Viilor, could hardly believe his ears. She said I should have told her, and she would have become my partner, she would have helped me with money and would have come to help me sell. But I hadn't told anybody: I made the inventory and I left... I just couldn't go on...

A week after I was numb... Years after, I wouldn't hear about business... when somebody reminded me about the shop, I wept and wept and I left, so as to avoid questions... Not because of the shop, but of the people I had brought there – they used to come to me, we used to sit together... Even the teacher I mentioned used to come to Jeni and she would give her invitations for the Opera House and for the shows her daughter used to be in, as a ballerina...

And I was such a sucker! At that time they had started to do away with the stalls in Bucharest and they were all trying to find a commercial area. But because I am a gentle person, if I had decided upon a sum, I wouldn't dare to change it! I asked for \$ 1.000 for seven rows of shelves that I had left there, for the alarm, for a wall built there, for a desk, for a dividing wall. The wall alone had cost me one million. I didn't ask for too much. It was a trifle. And he gave me the money with difficulty and he didn't even greet me when we met again later. He was a sales agent for Colgate. He received a shop he painted, and when he opened it, it became a very busy and profitable place... We had freezers we had obtained only after selling for a few years, after we had gained trust...

For five years, as long as I had the shop, I had tried to buy it. And I couldn't. Maybe I didn't have the suitable people... I couldn't even find out whose place it was. Nobody knew who the owner was: it didn't belong to ABC, it didn't belong to I don't know what Food Store, it didn't belong to the Bread Factory; it was nobody's! I couldn't find the owner! And how hard I had tried!... I used to pay the rent for ABC, but they didn't even talk to me, as they didn't have the slightest interest to sell it. They lived off the rents, and that meant a lot.

That was how I left after five years, because I had become tired... The guy who came after, a well-connected youngster bought it after a little more than one year, paying \$ 12 000! 38 mp, but what a place! When he decides not to work, he can rent it for \$ 400-500 a month. That is, my rent for all these years!

The Miniş Market. I gave up the shop when the stall was doing well. For example, I could earn at the stall as much as I earned at the shop, from only one business, a fact that had never occurred to me: nobody in the whole market had a percolator, with drip coffee. I didn't want to use one, I said, could I know what those people would sell and what they would do while I was away all day long? And I started shyly with the coffee business, and slowly people started to give me one hundred, two hundred, three hundred thousand a day...But, as I wasn't there all the time, I couldn't possibly know what was exactly happening, I took for granted what they gave me. At a certain moment some new shop-assistants came to me – they were husband and wife. She was the one who worked, and he would only come in the evening to help her. I realized that after a short period of time those people bought tyres for their car, they were doing well! I don't know what had got into me once: I took once a shop-assistant from the shop and I brought her to the stall, because there had been something wrong with the one working there. I was amazed to see the amount of cash she had made from selling coffee! It was only then that I understood

the story: she gave me almost half a million a day, and the others three hundred, only because I couldn't control them. And the shop-assistant from the store made better coffee, but I still didn't keep an eye on her, because I couldn't.

In the end the girls ended up making three-four millions lei every day, only from coffee. From this sum, two/three million represented your share, for a third is the expenditure, and after paying the taxes I still had one million and a half. And I didn't carry as much as I used to at the shop. And that was why I was pleased to stay there. I didn't find a shop-assistant to leave at the end of the day with less than 400 000 a day. But there was nothing I could do about them, I wasn't strong enough to stay there all day long. I didn't have the time, I was in a hurry, always on my toes. Only this year I realized that in the evening I used to prepare six types of coffee, two litres each! Can you understand what madness there was in the morning! And slowly, another one got a drip coffee machine, and then another, and I earned about 400 000 lei a day! The shop-assistants, the accountant, the rent, the rates, taxes, profit taxation, with all these I am left with 10-12 million lei a month. I can't agree with less.

You know, some buildings have been demolished, my profit has increased a little bit during the last six months, but there's yet another cad-dishness: about five years ago, the market was granted by the Town Hall of District 3 to a firm, under the condition that they improve it in one year or two. They came and raised the rents up 18 times over. I hoped and hoped to build some shops, so as to live in more civilized conditions, but they did nothing, and there has been a long time since they only took the money for rents. A huge price! I pay about four million for only a square metre every month. The stall being very little, we take the goods out. I wouldn't take them out, but the neighbours do this, and I wouldn't sell it otherwise. So I take the goods out and I pay 60 000 extra every day for the little table outside. Then, they ask 100 000 for garbage, so that makes two millions a month.

But the trick is another one: opposite my stall there were three stalls, they made them pull them down, there are only two left (...)

The stall was OK for about three or four years after I had taken it. Suddenly a stall opposite mine was sold. The girls told me to buy it, but I can hardly manage this one, so I said no. And a young man of 32 came, with a huge power to work, a man with his wife, brothers and all types of boys, and they are always carrying something. He comes from the wholesale, he has all the connections he needs with those people, he had a warehouse and put here all the goods, for sale; he sells them at the stall and has destroyed us all. He sells, there are people queuing up, and all we can do is watch. I can't afford to do what he does: a bottle of Bergenbier is brought for 11 000 lei, I sell it for 13 000 lei, he sells it for 11 000 or 12 000 lei, because he went there and took 300 boxes and received 50 for free! He is young, and this is the real financial power: the strength to carry things! There are products brought in boxes, he has got a warehouse, he can carry, I can't. So, he can afford those prices, and all the people go to him. He has already ordered a shop for himself, he told me it was worth about 300 million. He's also got strange customers, you could bring as many quality products as you want, they usually buy what's cheaper, worse on the market...

From one astonishment to the next, all these years. The worst period was the beginning of 1991. In May-June, when we started producing in the house from Pieptanari., I earned 6000 lei and the rent was 6000. As long as we hadn't obtained that three-phase current piecework, the machine wouldn't work, there was no production, and I was still paying the rent to the man, because my rent was his salary. And I couldn't make both ends meet!

There were a few months when I had no income. I was crying! Once I broke my glasses... I remember that happened in December...and I didn't have money to go and make another pair! But a few colleagues I had never talked to – we

weren't angry at one another, I have never quarreled, but they had the feeling that I was proud, somehow, that I hadn't paid any attention to them, but, oh, you can't be friends with everybody – it was they who gave me the money! I remember I took very many days off in November-December to arrange the problem with the three-phase current... I also received a bonus for Christmas! In life, you receive things when you least expect it!

Whenever I needed money, someone happened to help me. My mother had a very good friend who lent me money whenever I went and asked her for it. My sister was amazed: "You, there, she has never let you down!" She gave me as much as I asked for! Of course, I didn't return the money the way I had taken it: I also knew the interest given, when to give it, and I used to give her more than that interest, every time. I was so glad that I had support; I had a place to go... Or, another friend came and asked me: „Violeta, don't you need money? You see, I'll give it to you... I have to receive some money back and I don't need it...." Some special people... I was deeply affected by all those things. Astonishment, one after another, all these years. And she asks me: „Violeta, if you want, I'll give some more to you..." I said, "No, I can manage." I couldn't believe it. At that time my parents did have money, but they were frightened, they were afraid... And, in order to avoid discussions, I took it from such friends, I knew I could cope with the situation, and, if it was going to be all right, I could give the money back!

When I had rented the house from Pieptanari and I was beating the air, mother started to cry: "Give up the snacks business, God knows what else could happen!" Months were passing by, and I couldn't solve the problem. „This is not OK!" she used to say. I told her there was no way back for me. If I stopped, bankruptcy was the word for me; I couldn't have paid my debts... On the other hand, going ahead meant the end of the road, I say: "It isn't possible!" These were the facts, I was so patient... And I was so disappointed...

I had money only when the machine for snacks worked, but I used it to pay for the car! If I had continued business as it had been settled in 1990, if everything had been fair with that colleague of mine, I would have had money indeed! He had bought so many things...it was meant to happen!

I paid all my debts only in 1991-1992.

After that I was able to gather money and I bought the minibus. Then I could arrange the shop, then the machines for juice... I used to work every day, from seven o'clock or so till about 9-10 p.m., also on Saturdays and Sundays. A huge period of time. It was terrible work, like Sisyphus.

The machine now worked, now it didn't, on Saturdays and Sundays we had to go to the mill, at the market to buy maize, we had to buy maize flour. Then we gathered too many bags with salted chuff: tens a week, something had to be done with them. So we went back to the market and got rid of them... We ourselves were like machines...

There were many customers who bought especially from our shop. The firm is called Roberti CS and I put its name outside. But all of them used to come "at Jeni's", she was one of the shop/assistant, a very pleasant one. Men were sent to Mrs. Jeni by their wives! And at a certain time I thought of changing the name, from Roberti to Jeni... You enjoy hearing such stuff... She was kind to them and, in spite of being extremely fat she was always nicely dressed, perfumed... She was rather pretty; she had a nice head... The prices were like those in other shops, but many used to come only for her. She succeeded in winning people's hearts. I had her at the market, too, and people were also coming for her sake. Such a human being is difficult to find.

It seemed strange to me when, after working for me for seven-eight years, having a work register, she suddenly decided to go. No comments.

And I have my own pride, if she didn't mention the place, I didn't ask, either. But she still calls me, we meet, she comes with flowers. She said she wanted to be free; she had worked since she had been 15-16. And I guess she lives into an ill-famed company. She has a good friend, a former dancer in Japan, who had returned with a lot of things and business... anyway, I know they wandered about a lot, she taught her things.... I don't know what she did, finally I heard she was away in Spain, she worked there for a couple of months, and then she returned. Her friend threw herself out of the window, they say, God knows what had happened to her in Japan... Then, Jeni went to Italy...

Opposite my block of flats there's ten-storey one. Very few go to work in the morning. Has everybody stopped working these days? I don't know, but I can see that very few people work. In 1990 people were more relaxed; they were even in a better mood... They felt differently, they already saw themselves in the West. There was much money... Now they are winthdrawn, you can see they are worried. They forget their goods on the shelf, deep in thought, disappointed (...). Those years were very beautiful. Now we have become strangers. Then we used to say that parents and children became strangers, that they didn't have a home, that we didn't have food for them. Now it's worse. People are strangers to one another (...).

What was beautiful about those years? But what am I saying? It was wonderful ! The fact that after so many years people call me up – at Christmas, on my birthday – they ring me to ask how I feel, to talk, to be together, for a short while. That means I was good to them. If I hadn't behaved nicely, they wouldn't have called, would they? It's just a thought...

Translated by Alina Popescu