

# MARTOR



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## The passport

Petre Popovăț



One of the first measures taken by CFSN<sup>1</sup> was to reopen the borders and implicitly to grant each citizen of the “New Romania” the right to own a passport. This meant that anybody (almost anybody) could own and store in their desk’s drawer a document that allowed them to (theoretically) travel **at any moment** to any destination in the world. I had been haunted by the strong desire to travel throughout the entire communist period, when I wasn’t at all allowed to leave Romania. I wasn’t trustworthy and the authorities were afraid that I might not come back. And they were so right in their suspicions! I had tried several times to cross the border as a “tourist” to Switzerland, where I had been invited by some friends who at the same time had managed to get me a job which would have become available for me as soon as I had inevitably signed the request for political asylum.

So, in February of 1990 I rushed to the police precinct in Luigi Cazzavillan Street where passports were issued for the people. I wasn’t exactly hoping to go abroad soon – my friends wouldn’t invite me now. “You are free now, so it’s your business to find means to travel if you want to see the world ...” - , but I couldn’t help the urge to hold in my drawer the long-awaited

passport which turned me into an equal of any Western citizen. I knew that in order to go through the entire procedure you had to stand in line. A queue! ... That was a phenomenon characteristic of the years before the Revolution. We had queued for hours to buy meat, milk, gasoline and even cigarettes. One more queue (the last one, perhaps) would not make much difference.

I went to the respective office and found out that they had already made a list with several hundred names of those who wanted a passport, a lot more than the logical limit of those who stood any chance of submitting their papers before closing hours, even if the schedule had been adjusted significantly. The next day I went back and, although it was before sunrise, I put my name on the list in a rather worrying position: I wasn’t sure I would be able to squeeze myself into the clerks’ timetable. This fear continued to cast a shadow on my joy for 14 hours, the time I spent queuing. It was the first time in my life when I was crammed up in the same room as hundreds of other people, considering that the room couldn’t accommodate more than fifty or sixty, who were leaning against one another, stepping on one another’s toes, breathing the al-

<sup>1</sup> The Council of the National Salvation Front.

ready stuffy air, but feeling the same kind of special emotion that made you forget all hardship. All you had to do was count down the 114 ... 79 ... 43 ... 21 people in front of you, and you would be the happiest man on earth. You simply forgot the inhuman and perhaps even humiliating conditions you were forced into, you forgot other queues you had experienced trying to get the necessary documents. One more step and you would be ... a free man! A couple of days later (I can't remember how many, but I know I counted them down) I queued again (for just 2 hours this time) and finally! I was holding the object without which my life made no sense anymore. I was so happy that I wasn't bothered that on the front cover of my passport there was still the old emblem of the Socialist Republic of Romania defying me ...

### **The first trip abroad**

Three months after I had got my passport, I received a phone call from Switzerland saying that a Mazda was waiting there for me to drive to Romania. The car was for free, the customs was virtually inexistent (they had issued a law stipulating that, until the 30<sup>th</sup> of December 1990, any product, from needles to the Queen Mary II, that was brought to Romania through customs would be tax free), I had my passport in my pocket and I didn't have to ask for anybody's permission to get on board a plane to Zurich. I got the Swiss visa in 24 hours (which was unbelievable!!) and ... here I was, at Otopeni Airport. It was the first time I had ever stood on the other side of the ugly wall made of frosted glass which separated those waiting for their friends to arrive from the happy ones who were leaving. My first impression was of an incredible mess, of the arrogant customs officers and of the moustache of the woman in uniform who threw a disgusted look at my still virgin passport. I hate to travel by plane but that particular morning I was convinced that God hadn't promised me happiness only to brutally take it away in a plane crash.

After a two-hour flight the plane landed on the Zurich Airport, on the land of freedom ... A couple of potholes in the concrete run way made me keep my enthusiasm in check. Nothing is perfect! This impression held until I entered the airport building ... The flowers sold there overwhelmed me with their multitude of colours. In Romania I would only see carnations, 3 lei each, which you could find in all flower shops. Well, here the countless kinds of flowers had no name (I wouldn't have known them by name anyway); they had been shipped in from all over the world and they smelled divine. Next, fruits on sale ... I couldn't believe my eyes that on the 9<sup>th</sup> of May I could buy fresh strawberries, fresh melons, fresh pineapples (the only form in which I had ever tasted it was that of Chinese or Cuban preserves), fresh papaya, mango, and grapes, not to mention the common apples which had suddenly ceased to be so common – I had never seen so many different sizes and colours gathered in one place. Small stands selling books, clothes, “Officier Suisse” pocket knives, spirits, cigarettes, and so on were also present in the little Garden of Eden where I had just set foot. I felt the most wretched of all men, as I had no money to do some shopping; I should have been a millionaire to do so anyway because I couldn't resist any of the marvels on display all around me. Besides, I was in quite a hurry to get down the escalator and to catch the train to Lausanne. Zurich Airport, as I later found out, is the only one in Europe which has both an airport and a railway station. I had bought the tickets in Bucharest, but, because I was too excited and I wanted to look more like a true-blue Swiss, I took them to the ticket stand (I wasn't alone there) to check their validity and see if everything was alright. A most unfortunate urge! The clerk politely and in a cold voice told me that the tickets were valid alright, but from Zurich Station to Lausanne, so I had to pay 17 more Francs for the tickets from the airport to the city. I could have bought 2 pocket knives for that money! And to crown my misery, no ticket collector asked to see my ticket

during the few-kilometre journey.

Finally ... The Swiss trains. To get on a Swiss train you take a step directly from the platform, without climbing steep steps meant for basketball players, and then you reach the luggage compartment. Here you find, in a perfect "Swiss" order, all the passengers' suitcases which they collect as they get off (each passenger takes his or her own piece of luggage, of course). The wagons have no compartments, but they form one long hall with all the necessary comfort, air conditioning and clean windows. Once in a while, a lady passes by struggling with a cart laden with coffee cups, tea, cold and tempting soft drinks which I could barely ignore; I had just wasted a good 17 Francs I had considered safe. At the end of the aisle there was a public phone which you could use at will, even when the train was moving, to call people in Canada if you knew them and you had change. Never before had I seen a public phone in which you could insert different coins which, if you didn't use them all, were returned to you. I still had a lot to learn ... In Romania we would still insert small disks resembling the coins used for public calls (1 or 3 lei coins), which had been made at various workshops. It appears that many years before, these small disks were pierced in the middle and a thread had been tied up to them so as to allow one to pull it out as soon as the call was over.

For the next 2 and a half hours my nose remained stuck to the window pane of the train taking me to Lausanne. There was Switzerland! The Switzerland I had dreamed of, the Switzerland I had seen in my daydreams, "my" Switzerland! I saw ploughed fields criss-crossed by multicoloured lots drawn as if with a school ruler, but lacking any human presence, houses, and loads of them, which I watched from behind because nobody would even dream of building a house facing the railway. Well, I don't think that the people whose houses stood so close to the railway were the richest in the village. Still ... Behind these houses there were tools, ladders and

wheel barrows stored up. All seemed brand new and unused; I could almost catch a glimpse of the store labels still stuck in a corner. But I was especially impressed by the cement factory built near (2-300 metres away from) a couple of houses with squeaky-clean windows. I couldn't help myself but think of our Comarnic where the cement factory had turned the roofs, the windows, the leaves, the few remaining flowers and probably the people's souls into a uniform grey surface. I couldn't for the life of me understand how the Swiss had managed to build such effective filters and to keep the buildings so clean.

When I got to Lausanne I felt a little as if I had arrived in Bucharest: a flat (nicer than ours, though, but not too good looking), a Romanian family, Romanian food, Romanian words spoken about Romania. That was my impression until I got out in the street and into the first shop. I was familiar with other people's experiences and I tried to keep my emotions and tears in check at the sight of shop windows filled with meat. I was weak, though ... I could hardly conceive that everything there was available to regular customers who did not need special permits and tags. We still didn't have supermarkets in Bucharest, so I was for the first time in my life faced with such an avalanche of different goods, one more tempting than the next and, fancy that, even affordable! Then the long walks through the city ...

Well, my favourite pastime was to "visit" all pub toilets. It wasn't because I couldn't curb it or something. I just considered the whole thing as a sort of sport. I won if I was able to figure out the flushing system in the shortest period of time. I crowned myself champion, as each time I was able to guess that I was supposed to press a certain tile in the bathroom floor with my foot, or that I had to clap my hands or whistle a certain tune or other such nonsense that replaced (uselessly, I'd say) the classical chain in the wall or the common button. (After a few years they marketed an improved system which, after flushing, activated a sponge dipped in a chemical solution which was placed on the toilet seat, and

the toilet seat started spinning round as it disinfected itself automatically. One day, pressed by a certain torturing necessity, I entered a toilet and discovered that my “predecessor” had forgotten to flush. I did that for him, and one second later, I flung myself on the toilet seat. Somebody with a weaker heart would have dropped dead if they had felt that something was pocking them vigorously in the back and the seat underneath them started spinning round all by itself. I had completely forgotten that the system was turned on automatically.) My visits to public toilets had one other purpose: washing my hands and consequently getting to use the most exquisitely perfumed liquid soaps which would charm my nostrils until the next corner where I would again find a restaurant with a toilet and more liquid soap and ... Still, once I almost got into trouble. Literally and metaphorically ... I found that there was no water tap. Thinking myself cleverer than the system, I concluded that it was a photo-electrical cell activating the water flow and, in order to avoid splashing too much of it, I placed my hands as high as I could, close to the pipe where the water would gush from. The result was the one I had anticipated but it was 70 Celsius degrees hot water that came out. The lower I stooped, the cooler the water became. That was a precious lesson for me and since then, I’ve limited myself to rational hand-washing, namely only when needed.

One other thing that delighted me was to see people smiling in the streets, in stores, in restaurants or in the lifts of blocks of flats. I went down with one person in the morning, who was a complete stranger to me, and I got a smile and a “bon jour” and, after helping the person with the lift door, I got another smile and a “bon journée”. I was doubtlessly in another world. I don’t know whether it was better or worse, nicer or nastier. The only thing I knew was that this world which was completely new to me and which I had just begun to explore, after the initial shock had passed and I was beginning to somehow adjust, offered me a feeling of freedom

and peace of mind. My fellow men didn’t step on my toes anymore; I wasn’t aggressed in any imaginable way. My God, why hadn’t they given me the passport back in 1981?!

### **The second trip**

As my girlfriend at the time was on a study trip in France, I suddenly found myself all alone, with money in the bank, with a car and a holiday I hadn’t taken yet. I decided to take advantage of all these and to run away on a short trip abroad. The decision, which had taken me exactly one minute, made me feel not lonely but free. I was a free citizen in a free country, as they say. I weighed all my possibilities: Yugoslavia, Hungary or Bulgaria, and from that point, over to Turkey. These were (except from the USSR) our neighbouring countries and I didn’t need a visa to get there.

I chose Bulgaria (the border with this country was the closest to Bucharest) and, if I felt like it, if I had money and time, I would even go for a visit to Istanbul. The problem was getting petrol in Bulgaria, where Romanian cars needed special cards, which I didn’t have, but it turned out that nobody there really made much fuss over them but they wouldn’t sell any petrol to you either. There was another reason why I chose Bulgaria ... In 1965 I received a visit from 4 Mexican friends. The days I spent with them positively delighted me but we eventually had to say good-bye. As they were headed to Istanbul, I suggested that they took me to the Giurgiu customs by car (just to spend another hour together) and, from there I would hitchhike back to Bucharest. Then I had no idea that the sight of the barrier being lifted to let them pass and to brutally stop me would be so painful. I watched their car disappearing into a world where I obviously did not belong and I remained standing “alone and miserable”, tears of spite in my eyes, and realizing how helpless I was. As they said, “What would have cost me to go with them?” They couldn’t understand what it was that made

them so special compared to me and what allowed them to enjoy an elementary right which was forbidden to me. Well, in 1991, I was set on taking my revenge on fate and to experience the feeling of seeing the barrier between Romania and Bulgaria being finally lifted for me too! In the end I decided to leave Romania through the Vama Veche customs because I was especially interested in the Bulgarian seaside.

The road to the customs checkpoint was the same as the one I used to take (by motorbike, and then by car) each year when I went to the seaside. The only difference was that for the first time, I had to drive a few hundred kilometers to get from the village to the customs checkpoint. The joy only a pioneer to unknown (and even forbidden) lands could feel was significantly diminished in my case by the sight of the long line of cars waiting to be checked and allowed (or not) to leave the country. The check was tighter because of smuggling problems, as hundreds of persons were resorting to this solution in order to scrap together a small capital that would allow them to set up a business of some sort. Most had previously been honorable individuals who had never done anything illegal. They would take huge quantities of produce out of Romania (it was usually fruit stolen from can factories) that they knew would sell well in other countries and they would bring back equally large quantities of goods (they had been legally bought) Romanians were so eager to buy. It was an illicit business, masked as an “innocent frontier trade”, but which was liable to bring a huge profit in record time. This profit included of course the bribe one had to give to the customs officers. So, a queue at the border ... I smoked standing by the car, chatted with those in front of me in line (I felt a tinge spiteful because they were a little closer to the target than I was) and with those behind me (this time, I felt a little superior).

The vehicle in front of me was a minibus overloaded with people, men and women who looked like a bunch of accountants or high school teachers. They didn't seem at all to be

smugglers. A lady in her mid-forties came over to me and asked rather bluntly what was that I was transporting. I didn't get her question and answered that I was driving to Bulgaria and, if possible, to Turkey. “That's very nice”, she said, “but what are you transporting to Istanbul?” “What do you mean by that? I'm transporting myself and my luggage.” I noticed that I had offended her and I couldn't for the life of me understand why. She had just turned her back on me when I insisted, “Madam, I am just a simple tourist”. She didn't believe me and asked me to prove that I wasn't hiding anything from her. I opened the trunk where I was carrying one rucksack with two or three shirts, some underwear, socks, a warmer coat, a rain coat and a portable toilet kit. She couldn't believe her eyes. I watched her as her eyes were searching every corner for an ingenious secret compartment where I could have hidden bearings, taps, the dismantled parts of God-knows what piece of machinery which I might have traded for blue jeans, carpets, leather jackets or Turkish gold. Her suspicions disappeared only after she had lifted my rucksack and felt how light it was. Then she remarked in an extremely disgusted and spiteful voice, “Sir, but you are really nothing but a simple tourist!” And she left giggling and in a hurry to bring the amazing piece of news to her colleagues. From the Vama Veche customs building I could hear a roar of laughter.

### **The importance of owning a passport ...**

I had a Ford, a big, powerful, beautiful car which, at the same time, was also very old. It spent more time in repair shops than on the road. That had been its fate until the mechanic told me that I had to change the pistons. If I had had more money, the whole thing would have been very simple: there were a lot of specialized stores selling brand new spare parts which, nevertheless, must have been a lot more expensive than the 300 Swiss Francs I had paid for the whole car. The solution (in my case) was to find

the necessary spare parts in a workshop selling dismembered cars. That was how I got my solution. Or at least so I thought because, once I got to the workshop, I found that the spare parts were not compatible with my car. I was lucky, though, because the workshop owner accepted to have them back and gave me the money I had paid for them. Still, I panicked: my holiday was already in sight and my good-for-nothing car was useless. Then I had my moment of inspiration! Instead of traveling back in forth through Bucharest looking for spare parts, I rushed back home, I packed the things I would strictly need in a rucksack, grabbed my passport, dashed to Gara de Nord and got into a coach headed to Istanbul.

I'm not familiar with how things are nowadays but in the mid-nineties there were numerous Turkish companies transporting people on the route from Bucharest to Istanbul every one hour. And the coaches were never empty! I left Bucharest at 4 o'clock in the afternoon and arrived in Istanbul at 6 in the morning the next day. Waiting for the stores to open, I took a breath of the Bosphorus air (which I was already

familiar with and which I had been in love with since my first visit there). Then I went into a store and bought the spare parts I needed at a symbolic price because they were made in Turkey and not in Germany. The Turks made under Otosan license the exact brand of Ford Taurus 2000 that I owned. The price, road cost included, was much lower than the one I would have had to pay in a Bucharest second-hand store. I was thrilled, so I skipped a 10-dollar-per-room night in an Istanbul hotel I had checked in on previous occasions and got straight into the next coach leaving for Bucharest at 11 am. The first thing I did the next morning, without even going home first, was to go to the workshop which I left in the evening driving my car. The exhaust pipe wasn't blowing smoke anymore. Then I realized the advantages of owning a passport. Istanbul had become an extension of Bucharest: if you couldn't find the goods you needed in one district, you just went looking for them in the next one. Or in the next country ...

*Translated by Alina Popescu*

