

MARTOR



Title: "Rumours, gossips and opinions"

Authors: Petru Munteanu, Viorela Popa, Raluca Mitroi

How to cite this article: Munteanu, Petru, Viorela Popa and Raluca Mitroi. 2005. "Rumours, gossips and opinions". *Martor* 10: 17-23.

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/>

Martor (The Museum of the Romanian Peasant Anthropology Review) is a peer-reviewed academic journal established in 1996, with a focus on cultural and visual anthropology, ethnology, museum studies and the dialogue among these disciplines. *Martor* review is published by the Museum of the Romanian Peasant. Its aim is to provide, as widely as possible, a rich content at the highest academic and editorial standards for scientific, educational and (in)formational goals. Any use aside from these purposes and without mentioning the source of the article(s) is prohibited and will be considered an infringement of copyright.

Martor (Revue d'Anthropologie du Musée du Paysan Roumain) est un journal académique en système *peer-review* fondé en 1996, qui se concentre sur l'anthropologie visuelle et culturelle, l'ethnologie, la muséologie et sur le dialogue entre ces disciplines. La revue *Martor* est publiée par le Musée du Paysan Roumain. Son aspiration est de généraliser l'accès vers un riche contenu au plus haut niveau du point de vue académique et éditorial pour des objectifs scientifiques, éducatifs et informationnels. Toute utilisation au-delà de ces buts et sans mentionner la source des articles est interdite et sera considérée une violation des droits de l'auteur.

Martor is indexed by EBSCO and CEEOL.

Rumours, gossips and opinions



Well, the '90s span till more or less '95-'96 because that's when everything happened. Afterwards... one can't tell: what's 2000, what's '98! That's what I think. (woman, 42, designer)

I remember that there had appeared many political parties. Shooting up like mushrooms. Everybody started developing political opinions, discussing politics everywhere, including at work. Nobody could tell how much of it was work and how much was pure talking. Each person was the smartest in what he was saying and everybody was arguing. There was a point where you could either shut up or argue. And I remember a moment during a family meal when everybody was fighting on politics and my mother-in-law said she wasn't interested in all that stuff and that she liked Ion Rațiu¹ because he was wearing a bow tie. (woman, 42, designer)

When a dissident happened to arrive from abroad, he was accused of not having eaten soy salami, soy food. (woman, 51, secretary)

There had appeared this slogan that everybody knows: 'If you hadn't eaten soy salami, shut up' or something along the line. (woman,

42, designer)

Because of the de-industrialization, people had been warned to undergo professional reorientation but some went hedge and ditch because they were too smart. For example, a friend's neighbour would walk up and down an alley... walking and dangling. The man had attended three faculties, among which Law and Philosophy, but he went crazy because he had nothing to do, no place to work. There were others too who were setting themselves on fire in front of the city hall or of the government... (man, 23, student)

In schools, uniforms ceased to be used, which lead to conflicts between well-off and poor parents during consultations: 'My child doesn't have to wear a uniform like others do because I have money... why does he have to look like all the rest? He has to stand out. We don't mix with the communists and with the poor.' Then, children reacted: 'I won't go to school dressed up like that. Give me money to buy heaven knows what shoes, jeans, blouse or mobile, because everybody would laugh at me for not having what they have and then would think I'm down on my up-

¹ Presidency candidate in 1990, from the opposition.

pers. (woman, 51, secretary)

It was in 1990, right after the Revolution, during the second semester. I had to go to school; I put on my uniform, got dressed and automatically tied my pioneer tie around my neck. I stood out in the hall to put on my shoes, to take my coat and my mother saw me and asked me where I was going with that tie around my neck: 'Now, with the tie? Haven't you heard on the radio that the communist party is gone, the eagles, the pioneers, the UTC (YCU-Young Communist Union) all is gone?'

I replied that I couldn't go without the tie because they would send me home and mark down my grade for bad behaviour. 'Take that tie off because you will make a complete fool of yourself, nobody else will wear it' 'I won't take it off because I don't want to come back home again to grab it'.

Finally, she took off my tie and hung it in the hallstand and I took it back and went to school. On the way, I watched my classmates to see what was going on, how they were dressed. When I reached school, there were several mates with the tie, but few. We didn't need it anymore. (woman, 27, psychologist)

Right after the Revolution we received some guarantees on our salaries, which had been previously deducted on a monthly basis in order to become social parts in the company. I got 7000 lei which meant a lot of money and which I used to buy a washing machine, not automatic, like those today. (woman, 42, designer)

Everything was marvellous. From scratch and total interdiction, to free access to everything. It was pure madness and we enjoyed all the crumbs we were thrown. The shops were full, but full with junk, and it was only later that I realised it. Right during the summer after the Revolution I went to the seaside and made friends on the beach with some very nice Italians but who told

me that we were 50 years behind. I got really angry and I replied: 'How come, can't you see that shops are loaded with things and they look great?' I was really having a go at them, how was it possible for them to say such things? Then I learnt they were right. (woman, 42, designer)

After the printing houses were privatised and started mushrooming, I remember that everybody was reading bad literature, sob stuff like that written by Sandra Brown. (woman, 26, student)

After the '90s, a book almost meant two kilos of meat. (woman, 51, secretary)

When Sandra Brown appeared, my mother wouldn't let me read, because she was saying that those weren't books for my age, but she bought them and all her neighbours and everybody had one of her books at home. So, one day, when my mother was at work, I searched for the book and I read it up on the library, to have time to put it back in case she returned. I had been doing it for two days and I don't know if I liked it or not because I was dead scared not to get caught. After that, I bragged in front of all my friends that I had read Sandra Brown... I was the coolest of all for a while. (woman, 25, fashion designer)

After the '90s the rockers came forward. Everybody was either a rocker or a depeche-fan¹. Those were in open conflict with the punkers. I remember I once got caught in the middle of one of their rows, when coming back from some friends' place, somewhere between Universitate and Romană, because they used to gather around Romană. I remember that they were quite exclusivist people and used to set up takings and if other kiddos would show up to take round the plate they would pick on them for being on their territory. (woman, 25, fashion designer)

¹ Depêche-Mode fan.

The first issue after the '90s was that people ceased to go to the theatre... and to the opera. There appeared TV channels, privatised cinema halls which determined the price of the tickets to go high, yet the main phenomenon remained TV and video. We used to go to all sorts of cheap thingies to rent a video and back then we thought it was a blast. We managed to get our hands, as many other people also did, on many video and audio cassettes. To be honest, they were quite low-quality stuff, all pirated and doubled, but we managed to get very many at the time. And we still have the majority of them. I know because I went abroad and I came back with some money. That's when I bought our first colour TV set, around '92. (man, 50, physicist)

They used to broadcast all sorts of news on TV, one freakier than another, but true, about how corpses of the victims of the revolution had been taken to the morgue and then found in common pits together with unidentified people. There was also news about soldiers on duty who were asked to act and then killed. Now I couldn't tell why. Did they know something? Had they done anything? It was a tragedy anyway. (woman, 42, designer)

I guess that around the fourth grade it happened for me to get a computer as a present, if I'm not mistaken an HC-90, a computer manufactured by ICE FELIX. There and then everything came upside down: a new Radu was getting born. I received it full of excitement, enthusiasm and anticipation: 'I had a hard on', even if I ignored the meaning of the expression back then. And I loaded the first game, feeling that my heart would leap into my mouth. The first game that I had was kind of like the 'worms' on Nokia, that with the dew warm which has to eat all kinds of junk and which keeps on growing bigger and bigger. Of course that back then you needed a shoebox-sized computer and a TV to play that game but it was something! (Radu P., 23, student)

There used to be people who could have had initiatives and ideas during the '90s, yet, if the system didn't back them up, it was very difficult. You need support. Take agriculture, for example, which could have been a real success in our country, but since we are not given free hand on the matter and we are imposed all sorts of restrictions... it is difficult. (man, 50, physicist)

There had appeared those crooks who used to go to Turkey to buy things that they brought back and sold in the country. They seemed extremely beautiful to me, but in fact they were mere crap. We had some neighbours who used to do it and whom I once asked to fetch a pair of trainers for our boy, but good stuff, because we had bought others before and they fell apart after a month. They told me they couldn't do it because they had to buy only bad merchandise, because it was very cheap so that Romanians could afford it. And everything which was good and valuable was retained by the custom officers at the border anyway. (woman, 42, designer)

In my high school, there were colleagues who became lady-escorts, who would get to school by car together with their friends and other colleagues would go to Ioanid Park to smoke weed, marijuana. (woman, 26, student)

I remember the time when there had appeared those women pictures on the panty packages, the strongest porn photos of the time. I would always buy my mom panties for a special occasion because I knew she wouldn't need the boxes and thus I could keep them! It was very funny because I even started to exchange boxes with the block neighbours. Well, I only exchanged the doubles! One of my friends had an aunt living abroad, Italy I guess, and she used to send his mom hotter panties than those you could find in the country and the photos on the boxes were ten times better because they would show the full feminine splendour. Probably my mom ig-

nores the real reason for my inclination to buy her panties only even now. (man, 23, student)

There had appeared foundlings and dopers. And a friend, who wanted to test the feeling, beat one of those to take his aurolac bag. (man, 23, student)

You know that dumb head Nichita, don't ye? That who became a big singer and writer. Well that, around '97 was my girl, didn't squeak! I took her from a canal. She was stuffing 'er face in a bag. I be damned, but if I hit her phizog she was on all her four! After wining the jackpot, she would walk down Roman? street, across McDonald's, with say five gorillas on a motor bike and would beat people if looking don't know how at her. (woman, 40, matron)

With these peelers around here there is something else, 'cause I know 'em all, they're my boys. Let them mess with my girls or with me 'cause I give them zip. Look, do you see that down the corner? He pays us a visit every two days. We know each other very well. Tell him about Lulu and he'll lick your feet. (woman, 40, matron)

My daughter got married at eighteen with an Italian boy and of course that they went to live there. I felt embarrassed to say this at work, because everybody was narrow-minded and they would ask me how I could let my child leave the country, because it was a shame and that real Romanians didn't leave their countries. (woman, 42, designer)

So, in my case, I very strongly registered this change that occurred by means of a, let's say, liberalization. Before, there was no discussion about going abroad, to communicate with other people, so you were very restrained. In what regards work, I used to work before, that is projects for the Institute were many as well and from this point of view that was a big change. After the

'90s there appeared the visits abroad, business trips, of course. I travelled more or less all around the world: Europe, America, Asia. It was a time when I used to travel three times a year to three different places: Switzerland, America and Japan. (man, 50, physicist)

The first thing that put a mark on me after the opening of the borders was that my cousins from Kiev, Germany and America popped up. They came to see how 'we were hanging on'. And I tried, at my turn, to leave but I didn't get the US visa. I had been invited there but I just didn't get the visa.

Anyway, then you could openly state that you had relatives and friends abroad, without any impact on your profession, without staining your file or things like that. So I could overtly and without fear admit that I had relatives in the States, relatives in Germany, friends in France, that is everywhere. I got rid of a huge stress. (woman, 48, lawyer)

Those working for a private company, for a boss, had always earned more than those working for the state. And of course that people, seeing this situation, considered that working for a private company was more appealing than working for the state because it was better to graduate from high school and to get a job at a company right away than to go to university.

This is on the one hand. On the other hand, I know people who, lacking certainty in a company, being afraid of it getting closed down or Heaven knows why, still preferred to work for the state. (man, 50, physicist)

After the 90's or so a significant accent has been placed strictly on the economic, material, practical side, such as Law, Business and things like that, to the detriment of Humanities, therefore to the detriment of those who want to become teachers or men of letters or... everybody has to do many things at the same time in order to pay for maintenance, food or who knows what

other things. In a way, you are forced to undertake intellectual prostitution or something along the line.

You can't do the things you really enjoy because you can't support yourself financially. You end up working for all kinds of companies which are far from your professional background. Listen, for example I met a taxi driver who attended various faculties but who couldn't support himself, so he somehow decided to go for such a job. (woman, student)

Along the fourth grade my parents bought themselves a car, because after the Revolution it was easier. Before that, not everybody had a car. Of course we are talking about a Dacia which made me really proud! It seemed the coolest car on earth to me so I became a car driver more or less around ten: I used to drive the Dacia through the orchard dragging the tow away after me! I was a real slick. (man, 23, student)

I recall the college years, this being around 1999-2000, when I used to stay in a hostel which belonged to the Business University, near Obor and I discovered that in a students' hostel you could make money out of anything: it was important to have imagination! For example, my roommates and I had learnt from the elder students how to cash in on Romtelecom telephone cards!

We used to gather money and buy four or five telephone cards worth one hundred thousand or two hundred thousand lei and, because there was a public telephone in the hostel, we used to rent them!

And the business really worked because many people needed the phone, but, out of various reasons, they thought that a phone card wasn't that necessary since they weren't using it all the time!

So, those who wanted to use the phone and had no card would rent one from us, as follows: paying for the conversation, plus half the amount extra. And with the money gathered by the end of the month we used to buy goods necessary for ev-

eryday living like soap, detergents, juices, cakes etc., and the rest we would share between us! There weren't big amounts but we used to get the double or triple of the sum invested by each of us! (woman, 25, euro-councillor)

I also remember a different type of business also unfold in the student hostel and which had to do with the one-cent-per-minute-week-end Connex subscription! The persons who owned such a subscription would play their minutes for all their worth: and if you wanted to talk to somebody on Connex and you had no mobile phone or you were on a different network, you would go and pay 3000 lei per minute and you would thus speak your lungs out. Well, on certain limits, because the number of minutes of the cent-Connex subscription owners wasn't limitless, they had only about 500 per month!

Another business which used to run pretty well but only during certain times of the year, more precisely during the summer when the hot water used to be cut off for the three-week revision, was that with the electric boiler.

We had a mate who got the brilliant idea of investing in a boiler and who got pretty nice money out of it!! 10 minutes of hot shower would cost 30000-40000 lei but I can say that people were queuing for his boiler!

This mate had to bring partners in the business because he had the disadvantage of not living in a room close to the bathroom, so he had no plug socket: thus he made a deal with those living in the room next to the toilet to give him a plug socket and current... Well, the current was for free anyway, regardless of what you were using because it was included in the rent but the plug socket was on a different territory so he had to give a quarter of the profit to the people providing electricity! (woman, 25, euro-councillor)

When the water meters appeared we felt really happy because we could finally see who was using those huge quantities of water we all had to pay for.

We used to have endless rows in our association because nobody seemed to understand why we were paying for so much water and each of us was trying to blame somebody else.

I used to believe that the Braşoveanu family, because of their two big dogs, was using more of it than us, the old people, and that is why I said that they should extend their maintenance costs and pay for the animals as well!

Now, with the water meters, things have changed! Yet, in the first month, everybody tightened their belts, at least that's what I think, because everybody wanted to prove that they had always used very little water and that others were thriftless.

My wife used to heat the cold water in a kettle to do the dishes because cold water was cheaper. Yet, I once saw one of my neighbours, Mr. Petrescu, from the fourth floor, that is the last floor, taking hot water out from the heating pipes with a bucket. That's how I realised why our calorifiers weren't too warm and why they provided so little heat.

Of course that I laid a claim to the association and Mr. Petrescu was threatened with a raise of the maintenance costs if he made a bloomer again... but who knows? He may do this during the night as well, because who would play the guardian during midnight?! (man, 72, pensioner)

I remember that around '97-'98 I couldn't sleep at night because I desperately wanted a mobile phone and all my night dreams used to revolve around it: how I would receive one or how I would find one down the street. The first mobile phone which appeared in Romania was a brick, a 509 Bosch I guess. But I can say I desperately wanted that brick! Yet, I received a trifle of an Ericsson for my birthday, with only one text line on the screen. But I used to brag about it because nobody had one in my class.

Honestly speaking, it was useless: 'But that's not the point, the point is that I had it.' I used to call Customer service or ask my mom to call me

once in a while from the house phone!

Then after my best friend got a mobile, we used to beep each other because calling would have cost too much!

When around girls, we just wanted to look loaded. I remember that I once received a phone call from somebody... my mom I guess, while pretending to talk on the phone. Then I can say I felt really embarrassed and I think that history would have repeated itself even today if I hadn't grown up in the mean time or if they hadn't invented the enclosed minute subscriptions! (man, 24, student)

Another thing which crosses my mind and which has also changed my life, even if I am not sure that for the better, has been the remote control TV set. My son has been living in England for about seven years now and a year after he left he came back home with money and he bought a remote control TV set for me and for my wife. We, being old, didn't want such a TV set because we had heard that it could cause damages to your eyes, thing which actually happened because ever since we've had it, I've had surgery done on both eyes because of the cataract.

Yet, our Sirius had broken down and couldn't be fixed anymore. So, as I was saying, my son brought us a remote control TV set. Well, my wife can't pronounce this word even today. She calls the remote control the little box with buttons! The truth is we don't really use it, for fear it should break down.

We didn't even take it out of the plastic bag, we just keep it like that on the TV set and we only use the buttons from the TV. My wife has recently started to turn on the TV because she would not even touch it before. Now I have stuck two coloured papers on the buttons for her to know what to press to turn it on and how to switch the channels. (man, 72, pensioner)

Before, during '91, '92, many businesses have started like that, with videos. They used to bring them from abroad, from everywhere and they

used to cost you an eye here. Many, very many people have started their business like that. And they used to cost around 300-500 dollars and around that time the exchange rate for the dollar was 22, 25 lei... I don't have the old passport anymore. Ah, before, when going to the exchange house, they used to note everything I exchanged on my passport and there was a limit regarding the sum. I know that after the '90s you were allowed to exchange as much as you wanted, not until 50 dollars as before. And I am telling you this because I also had a few dollars and I was shrilled to have been able to exchange the sum into lei. (woman, 48, lawyer)

Damned capitalists for handing me a lemon big time with their FNI (NIF)¹! I sued them dozens of times, waited in longer queues than those during the communist regime, cursed everybody and nothing. Only the big fish got their share and us, the mumpers, swallowed the bait. (woman, 70, pensioner)

After the '90s one may have had the chance to, on the one hand, get these cars, articles of luxury, and on the other hand, complain about how poor you were and how many things you lacked. The '90s triggered a very significant gap. That is you get down on the street and you encounter

people complaining about their misfortune while wearing ostentatious clothes and driving an Audi. Is it normal? It's Balkanic, I may say. One cannot tell where we are. Is it in the middle of the road, at the bottom or on the top? (woman, 48, lawyer)

In the past, if women had a condom, a sterilizer, well, that meant going to jail. Or the curettage. Both you and the doctor would go to bat. I was pleasantly surprised and it was also a great relief to discover the contraceptive pills, the tampons, the nappies for mothers. I know because I had a curettage done right after the '90s. It happened, what could you do about it? Well, I was dead scared but not of the complications. Of the prospect of clapping me by the heels. See, my mind still preserved the idea that you weren't allowed to have an abortion. After that, it has been a real relief.

This freedom of speaking your mind, of doing anything, have been a greater gain than having more and more money, only that people, unfortunately, take only the material side into account. (woman, 48, lawyer)

Interviews done by **Munteanu Petru, Popa Viorela, Raluca Mitroi**
Translated by *Raluca Vîjüiac*



¹ The National Investment Fund.