

MARTOR



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My supermarket

The first supermarket I came across had a slightly different name – it was a *supermarché*. I mention the name because the most powerful effect it had on me was at the level of sound.

I was a pupil and during the summer holiday before the 8th grade (it was in 1995, when we lived in Râmnicu-Vâlcea) we traveled abroad for the first time. It was a trip to France. It was a two-week trip organized by our class. Each of us would be put up by a French family in a little town called Brignole, one hour's drive from Montpellier. On week days we and the French pupils would have a common schedule focused especially on local sightseeing and on the activities organized by the school in Brignole. Weekends would be spent with the families that would put us up. This is why each of us, with the respective host family, ended up in a *supermarché* on the first Saturday after we had arrived.

The word was already familiar to me: during the previous week I had heard it a million times – that is why I mentioned that the word in itself had a very strong and immediate impact on me. Besides, two of us, two of the girls, had already been at the supermarket on two evenings during the week. From their discussion and from the stories they had told us we had retained the basic idea that “there was no such place back home”. Almost any conversation on this topic would end in a cheerful and anxious conclusion,

“They said we would go again!” We asked the family where we lived, the Barras, if there was a “supermarket trip” on our schedule too. On the Saturday of our arrival I met several of my mates and as soon as we laid eyes on one another, we began chatting enthusiastically in Romanian, even if we weren't that close friends. The most frequent questions were, “Have you been to ... yet?” and we would list the various departments: toys, wines, sweets etc. Now I remember less what I actually saw there and more what impressed me, the magic I felt when I uttered those words.

I don't doubt that going shopping at the *supermarché* was actually an ordinary event in the lives of the families where we lived. And still, I think that when they took us with them, they were well aware that it would all be new for us. It wasn't very difficult to imagine that, just as our teachers had told us, “Give them traditional presents: decorated pottery, traditional towels because they love them” and “get involved in all family activities”, our French colleagues and their parents had been told, “Take them with you everywhere, shopping too. It will all be new and exciting for them and they'll be happy”. Maybe that was the reason why going to the supermarket that day looked so festive. It soon became a routine, but I began perceiving it as being a routine activity only after we had moved

to Bucharest, a stone's throw away from Billa Supermarket.

Today, after so much time, I don't use the French word anymore. I assimilated or I was assimilated by the term *supermarket*. Yet, most of the times I only use the names of the respective places: "Billa", "Carrefour", "Cora". Where I used to live, in Titan, many people don't know the names of the bus stops. Instead they use old names, or reference points such as "the bus stop at the cemetery", "the Billa bus stop", "the 13th precinct bus stop", and the supermarket is such a reference point.

When I go shopping and I happen to notice certain things, I often wonder whether the old *supermarché* that I remember is but another reference point. Yet, every time I ask myself this I notice that comparisons are almost impossible. I put this situation down to the fact that what then seemed like a great "event" and an absolute novelty has meanwhile turned into a routine, and to the differences between the life experiences of a French buyer and those of a Romanian buyer (I now think of my childhood "expeditions" taken every fortnight to the countryside, 180 km away from Râmnicu-Vâlcea, in order to pick up the produce that would feed us for the next two weeks). Beyond the limits of these experiences I can guess a certain routine and a sense of logic in the general attitude of the people who queue up at cash registers and wait for a cart to become available during "shopping rush-hours", in the attention paid to various labels or in the glances used to ask for the spouse's opinion on one product or another.

There are also many funny things going on – children who are keen on riding a car-cart or on their parents buying a certain brand of chips,



couples who read the receipt left in the cart by the previous client ("Oh they bought minced meat for 123.800 to go with their beer; twelve cans of it!"), older people who won't leave their bags when they go inside, taking the wrong cart, the sudden gesture with which a leaking milk bag is thrown back on its shelf.

People in the area are not surprised to run into old acquaintances when they go shopping at the supermarket. Whenever I meet my neighbours we greet each other as if we hadn't just done that on the steps of our block of flats. But things are different when we run into a public figure shopping at the supermarket. Since I moved near the supermarket, five years ago, I've seen only one such character shopping at Billa, namely Marius Țeicu. I couldn't avoid looking at him because everybody else was looking in the same direction.

Two or three years ago I started running into old school mates among the girls who invite you to taste this and that or give you flyers. I would stop and exchange a few words while they went on working, and then I would leave myself. All the meetings that I've mentioned, regardless of their nature, make that place feel more familiar: I'm not intimidated and I don't feel insignificant. I like shopping in any supermarket, but I am at my most comfortable in my neighbourhood supermarket because I know where I can find each product and for approximately what price (once every 10 or 12 days we get a products "catalogue" in our mail boxes), the hours when the crowd is smaller and it is a place where I can find many familiar faces.

Translated by Alina Popescu