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The Parallel Bucharest of the 1980s. The Memoirs of a Memoirs' Keeper

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ABSTRACT

This article attempts through a self-reflective process to present the author's own research conducted in the field of oral history during the 1980s. The result is a coherent mosaic of the everyday experiences of the subjects interviewed together with that of the author.

KEYWORDS

Oral history, multicultural Bucharest, demolition, marginality, food shortages, survival strategies

I have often been invited/ summoned by younger colleagues to provide a detailed written account of how I used to conduct oral history in Bucharest during the 1980s. Some of these invitations also insinuated comments about the difficulties caused by the regime, the risks associated with the activity of conducting interviews and the fear of being investigated, etc. This is not the time and place to describe this experiences of a quarter of a century ago, but I acknowledge: my younger colleagues' interest is justifies, given how the discourse of fervently anti-communist historians and journalists has created a homogeneous image of the communist regime, as if all those 50-55 years represented a penitentiary regime, or, at best, one of continuous house arrest. Yet, this regime was extremely differentiated taking under consideration the periods, the social, professional, ethnic and religious, etc. status of the groups involved. Beyond the established, visible power relations, the 1980s also featured a relationship of probing, of silent negotiation even, between the formal (official) and informal sphere. Without admitting it, the authorities applied a differentiated tactic of approval, toleration and interdiction towards the activities of different social groups.

In the circumstances that changed during the final decade of socialism there was no question of there being a sustained program of oral history. It was an extremely new method, thus it was neither promoted nor forbidden –

in fact, it was virtually unknown. Few people from the academia world were aware it had been validated by the International Congress of History, held in Bucharest in 1980, which had a strong section dedicated to it. I was fully aware that all scientific research had to be approved by the party structures, especially those involving interaction with a large numbers of people. But since I was not even a collaborator of any research institute I was unable to apply for any kind of sanction.

As a mere editor for a cultural magazine functioning in Casa Scânteii, I thought it best to talk to friends and colleagues about my intention to experiment, in my own free time, with this new interview technique, rather than work in secret. Furthermore, I tried to convince sociologists and historians of my generation to embrace the method. I convinced no one. However, Septimiu Chelcea, who was putting together a book on sociological methodology and a great fan of social biography, appreciated my enthusiasm and included my study entitled "Social Documents and Oral History" (Chelcea, 1985, 61-77), the first study in Romania on this subject. In circumstances I fail to recall, I was also invited to the Nicolae Iorga Institute, where, in the winter of 1985, in a large, unheated room, I gave a talk on oral history. The majority of those present agreed with what I had to say, but none would take seriously the cassette recorder as a research tool. Aware of the importance of conducting an oral



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history of the Bucharest Sociological School, I even spoke with the person in charge of sociology at the Academy of Social and Political Sciences (ASSP). While not explicitly turning me down, he told me they worked according to the UNESCO model, which approaches the history of sociology from the perspective of the sociology of science. I did not mind the refusal; I just wanted them to be aware of my intentions.

With this “cover” ensured, I could get on with my project in peace. My strategy had worked perfectly. No one envied me, oral history not being considered to have any future in 1980s Romania. It was also a very demanding technique, provided you adhered strictly to the methodology: recording without intervention the subject’s life story, transcribing the conversation word for word, and then producing the necessary explanatory notes... Not to mention the fact that all researchers knew the stories of the “has-beens” were out of season. A colleague once told me frankly that he only wrote books which are likely to be published. It is actually what he did.

Despite my deliberately amateurish air, I tried to respect to the letter all of the methodological and deontological rules specific to oral history. Aware that its success depended on mutual trust between the parties involved, in each case I would approach a subject via a relative or common acquaintance, who would vouch for me. I never mentioned any institution and I would always emphasize that my interest in his or her history was of a personal nature. When, at the beginning of the 1980s, I undertook my first research project, which I called “Multicultural Bucharest” (i.e. I identified subjects according to different ethnic and group cultures), I didn’t seek out “a German” or “an aristocrat,” but a friend or close acquaintance from among the Germans or aristocrats. As for the research on the Bucharest Sociological School (which I will not discuss in this article), my long standing connections to the professors Mihai Pop and H. H. Stahl afforded me access to the subjects I was to interview.

My interest in the daily lives of the people of Bucharest was motivated by two factors: a)

being from Transylvania, I, involuntarily, considered myself as being “in the field” while in the capital; and b) I was interested in the stories of daily life told to me by older people of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Consequently, these conversations were, in fact, part of my daily life; to be more explicit, part of my free time, given that my work as an editor for a weekly publication (A Hét) had very little to do with oral history.

And this interest was strongly influenced by the manner in which I conducted oral history interviews. I neither used questionnaires, nor did I tell the subjects what it was interested in. Rather, after becoming comfortable with each other, I would ask them to tell me their life stories, saying that I would interrupt them only if I did not understand particular decisions, events, or if I wanted a more detailed narrative of some facts recounted too briefly.

Conducting these interviews in my free time rendered me under no financial or editorial pressure; my search for new contacts and my interviews became a kind of everyday hobby. On my days off and during holidays I would record the memoirs of people from Bucharest in their 80s and 90s, ordinary people and sociologists who had been almost or even entirely forgotten. It was truly enjoyable to conduct oral history in the 1980s, as the life stories shared with me really transported me away from the daily routine of the crumbling capital city. It was harder during the winter, due to the catastrophic standard of public transportation and the unheated rooms. But perhaps the hardest task fell on my wife, who transcribed the recordings according to the strict methodological rules. Without her patience and help, my books – and therefore this article, too – would have never been published. Oral history was a “family business”.

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Coffee and Russian Paska

One of the most frequently cited shortages of the 1980s was food. I cannot say I starved, but

it involved some effort to access to the informal economy and develop connections so as to procure food. Foodstuff was a common subject of discussion, because “getting hold” of something was considered even a matter of pride.

I interviewed the poet and lawyer Anastase Nasta because he was an Aromanian, who was born in Greece, and settled, together with his family, in Romania. Before beginning to share his life story with me, he mentioned his “daily coffee.”

– [...] *How you get hold of coffee: Here, up on the 5th floor, there lived a Mrs. Șendal, who moved away afterwards. Two years ago, when you couldn't find real coffee, my neighbor told me: “Mrs. Șendal has some. You should give her a call. I called her and went up to her flat – she moved away because her husband was at the British Embassy and she'd moved there. I got coffee from her a couple of times [...] I didn't call her now, as I got hold of this instant coffee, there's a man who gets it for me here, at a food store. The day before yesterday, I was at the local medical plant shop and I see this nice young, sporty-looking women, carrying this large bag in front of her. And she takes something out of the bag and shows it to the shop assistant – who's actually more like a pharmacist. “Do you want some?” she asks. “Do you understand?” And she shows her an empty coffee wrapper. It says Arabic coffee in French and German. “No, no, I don't need it,” says the shop assistant. I have a look: “What's that? 200 g for 120 lei. How come?” “I take 250 g... 150 g,” I say, just for making conversation. She does her sums and I take it straight away: 600 lei a kilo.*

– It's not expensive.

– No, it's not.

– Especially if it's roasted...

– Yes, it's roasted and very good. And I say to myself, I'll take some. I had 20 lei on me. “I have it,” says the shop assistant. “Look, go get it and I'll be back.” And I got this coffee. “And it's true that it tastes better than South American coffee. It's not hot anymore, 'cause my wife made it before she left. So it's not very hot; but you're supposed to drink coffee while it's hot and it has

cream.” (Rostás 2002, 344).

Maria Roth was a retired physical education teacher and, despite her German name, came from a family of high-ranking tsarist army officers. She was born in Russia wherefrom her family fled by ship to France, and later settled in Romania. She told me about celebrations in the family, when I asked her an innocent question?

- *What’s Russian Paska like?*

- Ah, Russian Paska is unique in its own way. It’s made only of best quality cheese, best quality butter, eggs, cream, vanilla, and this kind of conserved fruit. It’s prepared in a special way so that they all melt together... You put it in trays that have been blessed – ours came from Mount Athos – and which are in a pyramidal shape, the four sides are decorated with three tulips, a Christian cross, a dove, and something else, I’m not sure what it is, that has a hole in it like a flowerpot. You wrap the cheese in some cloth, so that any extra juice drips out. And then you get this yellow pyramid – with an amazing taste! I stopped making it, as you can’t find cheese anymore. You need ten packs of cheese, and they only give

you one. If you can get hold of some cheese before Easter, you are my guest, for I myself miss it... (Rostás 2002, 363).

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The Party

For the generations that reached maturity after December 1989, the communist party probably represents the ultimate evil. The rhetoric of the communist press about the unity of the party continued in the post-communist period through the condemnation en masse of all party members. In these circumstances it is almost impossible for young people not to view membership to the communist party in black and white terms.

I met Eduard Korn through the Lutheran church. Son of Austrian immigrants who came to Romania during the time of Carol I, he was a member of the German Evangelical community in Bucharest and worked his entire life in insurance.

[...] when I held these top union positions, and they asked me – always a Hungar-



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ian, his name escapes me, who was head of the cadres – why I hadn't become a party member. I said "Mister, no one told me. No one told me! When I wanted to join the party, our application disappeared. I mean the secretary took them, put them in a drawer and forgot about them." My wife was a party member. Yes. And she... she worked well there. So when that secretary was appointed head of one of the insurance companies, they opened the drawer and found our applications there. But it was too late, the party did not accept the applications and so I never became a member. But I was still vetted by the party. I was always being vetted by the party! Because I held important positions, because they needed me, and... In fact I was even summoned before the president of the Trade Unions Organization, who said to me: "Comrade Cornea, you hand out hundreds of rest and recuperation packages, but I never see your own name on the list." I say: "They're not for me, they're for the others. I've never been, not even once, I say: when I'm on holiday, our office has a rest house in Predeal, and I go there." "No, time you're going," he said. Of course, he had his own reasons. "You are sick, send me doctor so-and-so... Doctor,

write a recommendation for Comrade Cornea according to which he suffers from rheumatism." I don't remember his name, I only remember he had one leg... "I'm not sick, I say...," "Yes, you are, and you're going to Băile Felix.

- *And did you finally go?*

- Yes, I went to Băile Felix. But what was behind it all... They wanted to check up on the attitude of the doctors and people working there. And they were right, they didn't care a bit, things still weren't as they are now." (Ros-tás 2002, 151-152).

A more generalised form of daily activity was party education.

I met Leonida Merlaub, who worked as a low-ranking clerk at the Cinematographic Centre and later at the Federation of Jewish Communities of the People's Republic of Romania, at one of the Community's homes for the elderly. Cheerful, a good observer and narrator of details of everyday life, he gave me a comprehensive account of the distance between the local, ethnic society and the communist regime.

Well, the years drifted by and here I am today in the current regime. Because I was a full time employee, I was sent on party courses. I

wasn't a party member, but all full time workers were obliged to attend these courses, I forget how they were called at the beginning, it was back in '45... I still went to church. I remember one basic course called 'Current political affairs', where we'd read Scânteia every morning. At work. Even if one wasted an hour there, the party came first. Later, after I finished my first courses, I was sent on more and more until I reached the Party Learning Centre, where they gave more advanced courses on dialectic materialism. And I spent a year or two there, as long as it took, and I studied, I learned all the subjects, I could answer the exam questions. But nothing out of all of these courses caused me to lose my belief that the church is the house of God and that the priest at the altar is God's representative; and I still hold this belief. And sir, even after taking part in all those political meetings, and after all the 1st May, 23rd August and 7th November celebrations, when we marched and shouted slogans, as we all did, nothing shook my faith in God and the priest as his representative on earth." (Rostás 2002, 203).

During the 1980s "party life", "ideological education," and "political information" existed more in regulations and official declarations than in reality. In most of the newsrooms from Casa Scântei, for example, party meetings were rare and ideological education courses rarer still. However, the archive of the local party branch was maintained religiously. On the eve of submitting the archive to the Party Committee, the secretaries of the local branches would invent reports and minutes of meetings that were never held.

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Collectivisation

Given the substantial number of Szeckler women working as servants in Bucharest both before and after the war, I also sought out an interviewee from this group.

Vilma Kovács' life seems typical to me. An orphan, she came to Bucharest to work as a servant in the 1930s, and married a construc-

tion worker. Together they saved enough to buy a house and a few acres of land in the village of Atid in Odorhei county. After the death of her husband she was left alone to raise their child. As for many others, the real nightmare began during the 1950s.

[...] That's when the collectivization started. What happened then? Do you remember?

- Of course. I was the last one from the village to join. They took everything... They made me sleep in the council building.

- That was '62, or was it earlier?

- My older brother, Lali, had died... it was around that time it happened... I'm not sure... We'd just planted the trefoil... around '59, or was it '69?... What year was the collectivization? [...] Actually, the reason they detained me then was because I'd helped the kulaks... I had a lot of grain on my property; it wasn't all mine, though I had my share, too, but other people... from the village... would store theirs with me... Then that man came, what's his name, to ask whose it was; he said it belonged to the kulaks. Then he found a tub full of wheat in the cellar – I'd bought that separately, I didn't mix it with the new harvest. He said that also belonged to the kulaks. They took it all and scattered it over the field of freshly harvested potatoes. I told him, "Look, in the newspaper they say we should gather every last grain of wheat, and you throw everything I have to the wind? They came with 14 carts and took away all the wheat. And then they took me there... and that man, with his sour face, was walking around with a stick in his hand... and he kept on asking me: "So, are you joining or not? I told him: "Go and feed the cows, I didn't have time, you took everything. I managed to get away to feed the cows and then came back..." They told me to sign up! I refused to sign up... I was the last one to join..." [...]

- So how long did you work on the collective farm in the end?

- Not long... I couldn't stand the sloppy work and the underhand dealings that went on there. I helped with the harvest, I worked hard, I bound the sheaths, but then when it came to the weighing, nothing added up. I also hoed the fields, I got a lot done, but I never counted how

much I'd done. In the end I left and went to Sovata, to look after the teacher's children..." (Ros-tás 2002, 189-190).

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Demolition

I heard about the retired factory technician Alexandru Săsăreanu from a colleague for whom he had repaired some taps.

Alexandru Săsăreanu worked his whole life at Malaxa, later known as the 23rd August factory. In his old age he moved in an apartment block at Obor, in Bucharest, and supplemented his pension by doing repairs for people in the block or nearby. His life story was centered around his dream of having a house and the subsequent loss of this house.

- Yes, I first built a small house. I had 180 square meters available, and opposite me my sister had a large garden and a large house. My sister lived in Bucharest, at Vergiliu, and she built her house as somewhere to retire to, but she never got to live there in her old age. The house was meant to be big from the beginning,

and it took a lot of money to finish it. She made it all red, I mean from bricks. And the garden was big, too, and right opposite from me. I'd look at it from my yard: it just stood there empty, deserted. And other people had their eye on it, especially after the war – the children's nursery and others. To stop them laying their hands on it, I said to myself I'd plant some trees and make a nice garden out of it. And that's what I did. I didn't mind the extra work, I'd come home from my job and do a bit of gardening, and it went on like that for a few years. But the house was never finished. I sold my little place and bought the apartment on the upper floor from her. But then came the demolition. I didn't get a penny, not a single penny. They came with their system, they started at the end of Line 14; I don't know if you know where it is, just, before the 23rd August factory, at the end of the Pantelimon road. That's where the villages of Pantelimon, Brănești and Călăraș start. That's where it began. I thought they'd start from Iancului, meaning I'd have time to work something out before they got halfway. But that didn't happen, they started right there. And they didn't even evaluate the house, what with it having new



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bricks and woodwork, too, top materials had gone into it, glass partitions and all. But it's true, there was nothing on the lower floor. So, they didn't give me anything; "We need the land," they said, "Who gave you the idea to build a house?" "I built it, I said, that's the way we do things, isn't it?" [...]

- Where did you move to after they demolished your house?

- Yes, they demolished my house. Demolished it, demolished it. My wife was ill.

- In what year was it demolished?

- In February 1973. Demolition day was approaching, but what to do? I never knew until that day, Mr. Zoltán, where my heart really was. I just didn't know. I was completely overcome, I didn't know what hit me or where I was. And I knew this guy at the 23rd August factory, which used to be Malaxa, heaven knows where he is now, I can't even remember his name. I am sorry. And he sent for me. Everyone was leaving, they were being moved to Drumul Taberei or Berceni, who knows where. And my wife kept saying "I'm not moving, I'm not moving. If I don't move somewhere close by, they can shoot

me, but I'm not moving." "Well, I say, but then if everyone's moving out then you might as well move, too. Let's see what comes of it. "I'm not going," she says, "they can shoot me and that's that." She was very – how can I describe it – attached to the place, if you spend your whole life in the same place you get very attached to that place or the country or... Then, one day, after many of the others had already moved out, there were just a few of us left in the neighborhood. Well, they came after us with special warrants. But as I was saying, I can't remember that man's name, I think he's with the Central Committee today. He was at Malaxa, the 23rd August factory, working in the armature section, at the pumps; he was a smart guy, an engineer. And he told me to come and see him. I found him walking around in front of the yard, where I had a high iron fence that I'd bought when they demolished the royal palace – my brother-in-law was an artist at the Romanian Opera in Cluj and he knew people, and I don't know how but he managed to buy part of the fence from the back of the palace. I don't know whether you remember, but it was a nice fence, with square



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bars, and he got 20 meters of it. He put it up in front of the house; it had two large gates and one small one. Everyone would look at it. Anyway, every time this guy in charge of demolitions passed by, whoever he was, I forget his name, he asked who lives there. "Mr Săsăreanu." "And why hasn't he moved out?" "He's still waiting." "What's he waiting for?" "He says he wants to sell." That's how it was back then, if you hadn't paid for an assessment of the value of the house – 100 %, 50 %, 30 %, 20 % – then they just gave you a percentage. Let him have his house and I'll take the land. And for the land I'll give 50 bani. But I didn't even get that much. After a while I saw that everyone was selling and selling, the peasants, demolishing, buying, so I sold what I could, and the fence was sold last. And he was back again, asking around, wanting to know if I'd sold the fence. I told him I had. "What did you get for it?" "Around 15 thousand lei," I tell him. It was a bargain as the fence was worth 60 thousand." And it wasn't my money, it was my sister's, my brother-in-law's money. "You got a good price," he says. "That's the best offer I got," I say. And he left. And let me tell you that they left a real mess after the first demolition. Later they introduced a system. They did assessments, you might have a terracotta stove, for example, or whatever. But for us it wasn't like that.

- And when did you receive your flat?

- In 1973, I came straight from there to here.

- And did you buy the flat?

- No, I didn't buy it, because I no longer needed a home, Mr. Zoltán. I put my heart into that place, I grew tomatoes like that ashtray there. Tomatoes. I grew them myself. I did the digging, the planting, I collected the seeds. So I no longer need a garden, I no longer need... It discouraged me, it, disheartened me, completely demoralized me. I no longer needed anything. Age probably has something to do with it, too, but I was really demoralized.

- I can't have been the age, you can go on working until...

- Isn't that true? I just was totally demoralized. And then there was no point anymore. Let me tell you why. Because here I've got eight dif-

ferent stairwells. Eight. When I got here they were looking for a mechanic and they found me right away. And me, since I missed my work and I didn't want to forget my trade, as that's an important thing in life, isn't it Mr. Zoltán?

- Yes, of course.

- I'll tell you the truth, I get up at six in the morning and I go to bed at nine or ten at night. And I sleep an hour or half an hour at noon, but at least I know I'm alive. When you retire... you'll see, you're still young... when you retire, just going to bed, waking up, going out for a walk... that's no life. It's no life, I tell you. In life you have to work in moderation. In life you have to live in moderation, to drink in moderation, and every kind of life, just like the life of Christ, everything in moderation, if you want to have a good life. Sitting on a bench in Cișmigiu park – that's no life.

- When did you retire?

- In '71.

- So, you found this work within two years?

- Yes. I spent a year back there, doing gardening, and a year and a half later they hired me. And I said, as a pensioner – for I had real difficulties here; all kinds of big administrators came and said "You have a pension and you want a wage too? What do you do with your money, keep it under the mattress?" To which I say "And what about you? Do you have kids? You do. Do you help them? You do. So what do you do with your money? And if I save it, what's wrong with that? What do you want me to do, burn it?" And I say "I'm proud not to have to worry about tomorrow. But don't worry, I won't be taking it with me to the grave! As you're able to work..." For example, I used to get 600 lei, but I can also work for 300 lei. 300 lei! Later they issued some regulations for tenants' associations. A janitor, a cleaning woman, etc. etc. Something had to be done, I tell you, I know that's not what we were talking, but something had to be done. There's this apartment block and let's say you move in there. Then the snow comes, and God knows what else, and you go outside and start digging and sorting things out, and then the people look down on you from

above and start laughing. That's not right. You have to have a janitor or a cleaning woman, you simply have to. As an old man once said: it's been that way since the world came about. There's always been someone to help the captain take off his boots. It'll always be like that, there's no other way. It's the same with the apartment block. Everyone is entitled to their own view, but I think there's no other way. Some things need to be done. An apartment block or house will fall apart if you don't look after it. If you don't take care of it, it'll end up filthy and who knows what else! For example, in my profession... if there's a tap leaking you're going to waste an awful lot of water. If a pipe bursts, the damage is horrific. Not to mention what it can do to someone's home. So some things just have to be done. ICRAL does what it can but it can't keep up. We still haven't developed a system where when a pipe bursts or something is broken you just go to a specific place and report the problem. This doesn't exist. They turn up a week later. Am I supposed to let the water run for a whole week? It's not right. There are certain things I see that need organizing. And so for the last ten years, since I moved here, I've been helping with the apartment block. Maybe I wasn't paid properly for it, but then it's kept me alive, it kept me healthy. If I'd been sick, I wouldn't have been able to do anything. And if I was healthy, but only sat around doing nothing, then I'd be dead by now" (Rostás 2002, 325-328).

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Society ladies

During one of my frequent visits to Mihai Pop's home, either to solve editorial issues or simply for the pleasure of spending time with this special family, I spoke about my Multicultural Bucharest project. The professor was enthusiastic about the project, while the inimitable Mrs. Pop, who frequently took part in our discussions, offered to introduce me to Mrs. Elisabeta Goga, née Odobescu.

We met in a double attic that you reached via a dark, narrow and steep staircase. I won-

dered how Mrs. Goga, 93 at the time, managed to climb and descend those stairs. If you read *Secolul Coanei Lizica* you will know that my visits to *Bunătaea Samariteană Street* did not take place out of any sense of obligation, neither on my part, nor on Mrs. Goga's. We began talking, as usual, about her parents and her childhood. She spoke a lot about her family, but even more about the lives of the young ladies she knew in her youth. As a digression from the main topic of conversation, however, she also told me about her daily constant and imperturbable occupation during the socialist period, an occupation that did not change throughout the period of Stalinist terror, the subsequent relative relaxation or the new restrictions that followed.

[...] For 30 years I earned a living. 30 years of giving lessons. It was something I enjoyed. I gave French and English lessons.

- When did you begin?

- When they took everything from me. When I was left like this. I didn't want to have to depend on anyone, so I started teaching in '49. I worked until '79. Then I stopped. I really used to enjoy giving lessons, I'd teach a lot of doctors from the *Cantacuzino Institute*. There was one doctor who was passionate about genetics who worked in the morgue, I forget his name. There were so many. Then there were the final year students. I should mention that I much preferred boys to girls. The girls were so incredibly prosaic, while the boys were interested in all sorts of other things beside their studies. They were into literature and music; they were eclectic.

- In the '50s, western languages were not fashionable...

- Not so, English was extremely popular. Extremely popular! Every doctor wanted to learn English!

- Even back then?

- Yes. Absolutely. I think I had over 30 from the *Cantacuzino Institute*. I remember one group had a teacher, a proper teacher, who taught them like you'd teach a class of children. I, as someone who can't stand grammar, I wouldn't teach them any grammar, I'd teach

them the language and vocabulary instead... The verbs were the only bits of grammar I taught them. And after two months one of these doctors came to me, and I told him to bring some articles he was interested in and we'd read them together.

- They were learning English so they could read the medical literature?

- Yes, and that's what that woman didn't understand. He brought me an article. He was over the moon. Naturally, he didn't understand everything, but it helped him a lot. If he didn't know a word, he'd write it down. Slowly, more and more of them from that group would come to me. And I sent a message to their teacher that she should have them read more medical literature.

- Where did you do your teaching?

- I'd go to them. I'd go to Grozăvești, for example, where I had a few students. But generally I divided them up into neighborhoods; otherwise there was no way I could get from Grozăvești to Dudești. That was the difficult part, all the traveling. I'd give 8 or even 9 lessons a day. I earned well, but I never paid taxes. It was all under the table, it was clandestine work. [laughs].

- So you did clandestine work for 30 years?!

- I think they turned a blind eye. That's what I think. Anyway, sometimes I'd take the tram or the bus, other times I'd go by foot. I had about 4 pupils nearby, on Tunari, and about another 5 on Polonă, so I could combine them.

- So was this all your idea...?

- Yes, but it was probably my calling, as I really enjoyed teaching. And it also allowed me to learn new things I knew absolutely nothing about.

- The other society ladies of your generation, what did they do?

- Most of them went to work in hospitals as nurses. But many of them also taught. That is, apart from my cousin, Marie Florescu [laughs], who was a kind of messenger for some society. She'd even clean the floors, and she'd make all her deliveries by bicycle until she was nearly 80 years old. She was known and liked by all the

policemen in the street. One day she was talking to a policeman and a lady came up to her and said: "Are you by any chance the famous Madame Mița the Cyclist? [laughs]. She was something... always caught up in adventure.

- That's impressive.

R.G. : Yes, there were people who did absolutely anything.

- And many became nurses. Dina Balș was a nurse, Geta Brăiloiu was a nurse, Mrs. Crăiniceanu, too; there were many. They carried on what they had been doing for the Red Cross. Ileana Cerchez, Mrs. Pop's sister, was also a nurse. And a good one, too. But others taught, a lot of them taught, French and English, like me. German was less in demand, English was the most sought-after. Because they all wanted to go to America, I think that was the reason. So I had a lot of pupils from the Cantacuzino Institute and from the Pasteur Institute, too.

- Wasn't there any question of leaving the country after the Second World War?

- Oh yes, I think the entire country would have left if they could. But many said, if they allowed us to travel, without all these restrictions, it wouldn't even have crossed our minds to leave. My nephew told me that if he had had a decent place to live he would have not left. Many left on these grounds.

R.G.: There were people who were judged as criminals or who were arrested for some absurd reason.

- Yes, absurd. For example, if you read Maciu (?) you'd get a few years in prison. There was Lisette Bălțeanu. She was sent to prison. There was this man, I don't know his name, who gave philosophical talks at her place. About Plato, and others. And some of those attending the talks were put in prison, including Miss Lisette Bălțeanu, who [laughs] read the reason for her imprisonment on her sentence: "For tea with Plato!" She had tea with Plato! You can imagine [laughs] how she laughed! And then there was my nephew's grandmother and another lady of a similar age, and others too, they were also handed six-month prison sentences for visiting the British Library. They were sent to the Danube Canal, to clean potatoes, what with

their being 70-80 year old women.

- My Goodness, even women of that age?

- Yes, they picked them up just as they were leaving... But it was an official library, it wasn't something clandestine. If it had been clandestine... but it was open to the public. And my son-in-law was also sent to the Canal for three weeks for the same thing. But, probably because he never went there, I used to go there to get him architecture journals, so when they saw his name wasn't on the register, then they let him go. He was also sent to the Canal, like those ladies. Many died there. Many peasants, priests, soldiers, lots of them. And even important people were locked away for a few years for listening to Radio Free Europe or other things like that. And then, when the Hungarian revolution happened, for example, people were ready to show their support. At that time lots of students were sent to prison. Here as well as in Cluj. Lots of people." (Rostás 2004, 109-111)

This world was not unfamiliar to me. As a high school pupil in Târgu Mureş I used to visit a countess of Scottish origin, who used to give English lessons. I used to enjoy those lessons, but most of all I enjoyed the stories told by the countess, who had been a respected writer and, in particular, a patron of Hungarian literature and theatre in Transylvania. His stories were like short essays, told with humor and with no reference to the situation of his family. I realized sometime later that the people of this class were mostly allocated dwellings in attics or basements. It was in Bucharest as in Târgu Mureş.

From the accounts above it would seem the everyday lives of my interlocutors (subjects of older generations as well as my own) were afflicted by general shortages, lack of heating at home and at work and horrendous public transport system. For me, however, oral history has never represented a means to take refuge in the past, but only a modern and interesting form of research. My older subjects did not see these conversations as something out of the ordinary, either, for the telling of life stories is a social practice. In the 1980s, the communist regime had become so formalized

that society would self-regulate without colliding with the authorities. The latter were by then no longer interested in performing witch-hunts, their main concern being to protect public space from "alternative manifestations." Although I knew there was no chance of publishing oral history, I nonetheless tested the vigilance of the cultural authorities, inquiring as to the chances of publishing a book entitled Youth of Yesteryear? I received a prompt and unequivocal answer: Comrade Rostás should better write a book about the youth of today, the builders of multilaterally developed socialism!

And yet, how good it was in the 1980s!

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