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Exile as Inadequacy

Constantin Eretescu
USA

Inadequacy is the basic state of mind of any emigrant.

From the first day, after leaving the country “for good” as the expression went back then, I was struck by the lack of adequacy of our co-nationals relative to the space they had gotten to. Everything started from a minor incident, slightly irritating, that kept on occurring every evening. Near the Dina Pension where we were staying and waiting for our entrance visa for the USA, there was a small neighborhood pub. A tavern. Since it was in the summer time, the owner had taken the tables out on the walkway and was waiting on the clients outside. Among the regulars of the place there were a few Romanians. The group leader was a relatively young guy, in his thirties, tall, thin and unshaved. He had an unforgettable face. One couldn’t miss him. He always looked restless, gesticulating in an ample manner, jumping from his chair when he wanted to underline a narrative detail in his stories. He was doing all that while speaking a strange mixture of Romanian and Italian. Romanitalian, I would call it. Or was it Italromanian? It’s hard to tell. His table buddies kept on changing, but he was always at the same table, gesticulating, tossing incomprehensible words to the women passing by, roaring with a piercing laughter. This was happening every evening. He was not from the group we had come with. After a while I understood that he was staying in the Latina emigra-

tion camp. That was a place where one could wait for a visa years in a row. Most of them were trying to get by, working on the black market, doing all sorts of things and trying to learn how others were getting by and managing. He was the one who draw my attention to this peculiar, almost indefinable state. It is mostly the lack of the ability to adjust to the generally-accepted behavior of the group. It is very much like being a violinist who plays in a different key while being in an orchestra differently tuned.

After that I had encountered that state many times and in many places, in that period included. I remember our co-national who had probably been told that all Italians were thieves. As a consequence, he decided to take safety measures and he put on a huge padlock on his door. He forbade the cleaning lady to enter. Because of the lock his roommate couldn’t enter and had to wait for the owner of the lock to return in the evenings and let him in. The intervention of the superintendent was unsuccessful, because every involved party was obstinately refusing to speak any other language but its own. I also remember the family who had took possession of one of the two upper floor bathrooms. They forbade anyone else to use it, in spite of the torrid summer. In order to make sure, they were taking turns in guarding the door of the toilette. Among many stories, Paul Miron is retelling the case of an economist who got to Germany. He put on the

top of his roof a mechanic doll dressed up in a traditional Romanian costume. Every hour the doll, which was holding a Romanian flag, was spinning and singing, to the astonishment of the neighbors, the Romanian national anthem – *Unity Stands Written on Our Flag*. I ended up considering it rather a form of eccentricity, in the sense of estrangement from the center as the standard behavior, than a form of pathology of the spirit. It can be seen as a lack of sensibility in what concerns the way the ones around you evaluate situations, doubled sometimes by the perception that the new language you must express yourself in is a form of servitude. How else can one explain the fact that a comparative literature Harvard professor of Russian origin, a renowned scholar, established in the States for thirty years, has been having breakfast in the same place for years and every time he orders he lifts two fingers and says “Amliet”. It is impossible to believe that he didn’t have the time to learn the correct pronunciation of the English word for omelet.

One way or another, the state of inadequacy touches all of us living outside the culture in which we were forged. Some even get to be entirely possessed by this state. I even got to formulate a theory. The first rule of the theory would be this: adult, male, single emigrants established in an alien cultural environment have the tendency to suffer of inadequacy. Up to a point this rule applies to the married subjects as well. Compared to men, women, married or not, have an increased mobility of the mind, higher degrees of flexibility and adjustability to the mental design of the new society. This is the reason for which the number of women in this situation is relatively small. And a sort of a second rule: time is not a cure. Acute inadequacy doesn’t go away as time goes by. It becomes chronic. There are several kinds of inadequacy, in various degrees and which can take the most unexpected shapes. There is cultural inadequacy, but also inadequacy to the climate, human environment, technology or language. The area of inadequacy is so extensive that, in spite of my good-will, it would be impossible to even start outlining the

phenomenon. I will just give some examples that come to my mind. Before that, I need to acknowledge the fact that this is not happening more or more often or more intense to Romanians than to other people who had been willingly or unwillingly taken out of the bedrock of their own ethnic group.

I would start with a literary case. Vladimir Nabokov, one of the important writers of the last century is, among other things, the author of a novel in which the main character is an exiled of this kind. We must mention that Nabokov was himself an émigré and he had met many of his co-nationals scattered all around the world. Born in Petersburg in an aristocratic family, he left the country shortly after the victory of the Bolshevik Revolution. He first settled in Germany, went then to the United States and spent the last moments of his life in Switzerland. The title of the novel I am referring to is *Pnin*. Pnin is the name of the hero of this novel. Pnin is an intellectual, a professor in a small college on the East Coast of the United States. In the few years spent there teaching Russian, he manages to gain the reputation of a strange man. During the lectures he delivers in an approximate English and which are attended by just a few of students, he enjoys making puns and recounting literary anecdotes, such as the story about the words Puskin’s wife was telling to the poet while he was reading his poems to her. He is the only one enjoying these puns. His students had no idea who Puskin was and they knew even less about his wife. Otherwise, he is a meticulous guy. Due to the fact that life had played tricks on him before and things hadn’t turned out the way he wanted them to, he always took the necessary precautions in order to avoid surprises. Oddly enough, surprises keep happening to him, as if he is haunted by them. Once, after carefully examining the train timetable, Pnin goes to another city to deliver a conference. But something comes up. The timetable he had checked was outdated. The train didn’t stop in the city of the conference anymore. He realizes that later, when he is already on the train. He finds out that he can get off and take a bus which could take him to the

desired destination. And he does so. Because he's running late, he decides to leave the luggage at the train station and take a walk in the park. When he returns, the clerk he had entrusted the luggage to was no longer on duty. His colleague refuses to give him the luggage without seeing first a receipt. Useless to mention that at the conference, when he takes the floor, he realizes that he had brought with him the wrong text. The same happens with everything he does. He doesn't take his driver's license because he refuses stop in order to make sure no vehicle is coming from the opposite direction. The instructor tells him that he should have stopped. Pnin's answer is that one must be an idiot to stop when it is clear that there is no car coming. The otherwise common-sense comment doesn't help him in any way. With a smirk on his face, the professor in the house of whom Pnin lives retells to all the other colleagues in the department how Mr. Pnin refuses to accept that his wife's name is Joan and has been calling her John for over a year. The unintentional errors accumulate and the poor professor cannot shake them off.

In a way, Pnin is the prototype of the archetypal exiled. He is trying hard to make things work. He wants to be liked, to adjust, to keep a low profile, to stop being a pain in the neck for the others. It's useless. Nothing he does comes out right. His efforts are not rewarded.

Things are different for those who don't lose sleep over such trifles. An enthusiasm close to lunacy takes possession of them and takes them through life. Its wing equally touches the celebrities and the nameless. Paul Miron, one of the writers of the Romanian exile, described such human types. One of them is Costache, a sergeant in the Second World War. He got all by himself to Germany and got to be a trader of synthetic fuel on the Oder. He is disguised as a bartender and is selling fuel, by the quarter of a pint, to the American soldiers. After his activity is found out he is forced to go down for a while. He loses himself in the wide world and the one who is retelling the story meets him on a Corsican beach. Naturally he went and talked to him: "*Costache, remember me? Costache,*

Roumanie..." He was silent, scrutinizing the dance of the waves. "Dad doesn't talk much" said one of his daughters. And then whispering, "He is a Caucasian prince, you can tell it, can't you?"

The feeling of personal grandeur troubles the peace of many of us, the exiled. In 1991 I was in Montreal. There was a congress of the Romanian-American Academy. The workshops were over and it was the time of the farewell banquet organized in the restaurant of one of the fanciest hotels in town. The guests were starting to arrive. Before the official opening of the banquet they were chatting in small groups that kept on recomposing. In a corner, on a sofa under a chandelier one could see a massive man sitting. He obviously was a Church person, dressed up in a purple surplice and with a massive gold cross on the chest. He was all alone. He was looking around with the serenity and detachment of a saint. I was wondering who that person could be. I hadn't met him during the congress. He looked familiar, though. I had seen him before. Later, and completely by chance, I figured it out. Undoubtedly he was Constantin Virgil Gheorghiu. But why was he disguised as a bishop? I couldn't answer to this day and the former clergyman went to Heavens meanwhile. All I know is that the writer cultivated his difference. I found an accurate description of what I saw in Paul Miron's *Past Imperfect. The Short Stories of Policarp Cutzara*. The book was published in 1998. "*Picturesque character, the writer notes, dressed up in a large, Greek Surplice, with a big gold cross hanging on his neck, C.V.G. can be seen in many places of civic clustering. These outings are sometimes fatal. For example, during the 1968 student protests in Paris, seduced by the TV mirage, the Devil made him get in an argument with the protesters who had occupied the Sorbonne. The result was that he got beaten up black and blue and had to recover in bed for days. In his house he built a chapel where he was officiating various divine services, always assisted by his faithful verger Cocutza.*" After the success of his novel *The 25th Hour*, the famous writer was invited to discuss about the



future of the western world. He was always in the company of his wife. We were in the beginning of the 50's. The Iron Curtain had just split the European continent. The war had ended a few years ago, but there was talk of a new one starting. This was the context in which, the Romanian exiled would express his opinions in one of the classrooms of the Paris University. *"Is there any chance left for us? Ask the humble interlocutors. C.V.G. asks for the permission to consult with Cocutza. They talk for a while and then he proclaims in a sweet Moldavian-Wallachian accent "Pas de chance" (No chance at all!). The audience moans, notes our biographer.*

In the 80's, when I was editor of the American version of the newspaper *The Struggle* I met a Romanian from New York. He was about fifty years old, born somewhere in Bistrița-Năsăud. He was recommending himself as a theater per-

son and he was sending me dramatic reviews of the performances of Romanian artists who had gotten to the States. But his greatest desire was to get in the Guinness Book of Records. He had also discovered the means to do that. It was quite in handy. He just had to do it. He was to set the absolute world record at poetry declaiming. Said and done. He started recording poems. Most of them, if not all, were from Romanian authors. He was keeping a strict record and was comparing it to the successes of his forerunners, such as Caruso who had interpreted throughout his lifetime tons of songs. As a proof of his record he was sending copies of his tapes to the Library of Congress and to other cultural institutions. All these institutions, according to the Anglo-Saxon rule, were confirming the receiving of the tapes and were formally thanking him. He also sent me a few tapes. It was hard to listen to them, not

only because they were done with a non-professional installation, but also because they were done in his extremely noisy apartment which was just above a subway tunnel. After the tapes, he sent me a file with copies of all the confirmation and thank you letters he had received. He was demanding me to publish them in the newspaper. We were in those years when the press in Romania was printing full pages of thank you and gratitude telegrams sent to Ceaușescu. No doubt that he had been inspired by that. Like any true artist he thought that he had the right to a similar treatment. Because I was unfair and unjust enough to point that to him, the reciting champion repudiated both the newspaper and me. Years passed and I am still wondering if our theater person managed to get in the book of records after all.

A dramatic, I dare call it, case of inadequacy affected a quarter of a century ago the entire ethnic group of the Hmong Immigrants. The Hmong population, originating in Asia, counts a few million people. They are a semi-nomadic group which migrates in the border region between Laos, Vietnam and Thailand. In the past three decades, about three and a half million returned and settled in China, the country they had left a century ago. They were a backward population who didn't know writing and who practiced a primitive form of agriculture. During the Vietnam War, the American military commander used the Hmongs in order to keep an eye on the permanently changing position of the North Vietnamese troops. They were also used in order to recuperate the pilots of the choppers shot down by the enemies. The promise was that the ones who would suffer from this collaboration would be relocated in the United States. After losing the war, the Americans forgot about their promise. They were reminded of it by the exodus of the Hmongs who had started being persecuted by the victorious Vietnamese. That was why, years later, approximately a million Hmongs found a new home on the North American continent. The problems occurred only after that. The newcomers hadn't heard of electricity and they couldn't figure out how to use

the water installation. For a long time the rice was washed in the toilet can, the fridge was kept as a decorative object and nobody touched the light switches. At the same time, various group members could be seen hunting squirrels and pigeons or planting their vegetables in the parks and vacant lands of the city. The degree of alienation resulted from the cultural differences was so high that the social services workers thought that their adaptation to the general level of the American population was impossible. Things were very serious because, due to the fact that they were from a traditional society, the group cultivated respect for the elders. They were taking the decisions for everybody and they had to be obeyed. But it was precisely the elders who were against the new. Fortunately for them, things changed for the better once the new generation developed. With small changes, the state of initial inadjustability is still present in the elder.

In its various degrees, from eccentricity to lunacy, the state of inadequacy is not, God forbid, an absolute feature of the exile. We would be unjust towards the ones who remained behind, in the country. It is just that in exile it touches much more many people. Otherwise, people like them can be found in the country as well. In a book by Vintilă Mihăilescu (*The Fascination of Difference*) I find the following description of the apartment of the executive manager of the marketplace from a little mining village in Romania. We are talking about a newly-built block of flats. "*I entered a hallucinating room, in the shape of a cave from painted plaster. It had everything: stalactites, stalagmites and all. In a corner there was a bar shaped like a tree hollow, made out of brown plaster. On the ceiling there was a blue sky with bronze stars. On the table, on a plush doily, there was the picture of Alain Delon. The frame of the picture was fretwork with traditional models.*" This occurs frequently in the case of change of environment. Unprepared changes from the rural to the urban are usually accompanied by such confusion. The one who is in such a situation doesn't have the instruments needed for the perception of the cultural differ-

ence. The behavioral inadequacies and the feeling that everyone is free to do anything derive from here. The quoted example is typical. It could also be interpreted in a Freudian manner as an unconscious aspiration to primary spaces, cave, maternal uterus. There are not many differences of behavior between the peasants who become overnight inhabitants of large cities and those who leave their ethnic group and enter a foreign culture. This doesn't happen in homogeneous groups and societies where individual behavior is permanently validated by the others.

Political inadequacies are a different thing. I remember very well the way I received, about three decades ago, the news that a Jew who emigrated from Romania to Israel had joined the Communist Party from his new country. "He's out of his minds" I decided back then. "If he wanted to do that he didn't have to leave the country." However, things are much more complicated and it took me many years to convince myself. Given the life conditions in Communist Romania, it was not even eccentric to be in a state of political inadequacy. That was the general state of the population. Eccentrics were the ones who shared the politics and the policies of the regime. However, the ones who had the guts to make known their opinions were very few. Looking from a different angle, this was precisely the reason for which, years in a row, the ones in power considered them alienated or, as the expression of the ultimate humiliation, even turned them into patients of psychiatric hospitals. But let's go back to the one I was accusing of madness for joining the Communist Party. Analyzed from the point of view of my exile ex-

perience, the case doesn't seem out of the ordinary. First of all, that happens because an opposition party forms its electorate on the basis of a democratic platform. Things change once they get to power and they are faced to the situation of turning their electoral promises into reality. Of course, our man could be reproached that had left a country where Communists were already in power, that he already knew what was going to happen and that was the precise reason for his leaving. But, the conclusion is not that the exiled unanimously and unconditionally choose the political regime of the country in which they emigrated. Most of them do. It is a normal reaction in part, if we take into consideration the fact that the majority left because they were in conflict with the political regime in their countries. Unexpectedly, paradoxically we could say, they adhere to restrictive regimes and they prefer the right-wing. In spite of their declarations in favor of democracy, they identify easier with a familiar system. Very few choose to swim against the current and resist the temptation of going with the flow. Just like in the Romania they had left, these ones get to the conclusion that they cannot adhere to the standard political behavior. Thus they get to live a feeling of inadequacy somewhat similar to the one they experienced in the country before they went into the wide world. Our co-national who became a communist after leaving the country must have experienced such a state.

The inadequacy of emigrants requires a thorough study. I wonder if there is anyone who will do it.

Translated by Cora Moțoc