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The Return of the Nonprodigal Son

Mihai Pascal
Israel

I was born in 1947 in the Țara Hațegului region, in Baru Mare to be more precise. My father was a Moldavian from Fălticeni and my mother was from Poiana Sibiului. They settled in Baru and they had a large family. They had five children altogether. Two of them died. I went to primary school in Baru Mare and I attended high-school in Hațeg. I applied at the Metallurgical Engineering College but I failed the admissions exam. Because I wanted to avoid being drafted, I got into a two-year technical college. Back home we were a very united family. My father and his brothers – all of them brave Moldavians both by extraction and by convictions – were nagging me about going to college in Iași. They were telling me all the time that Iași is better, that Iași this and Iași that. I listened to them and after I graduated the two-year technical college I went to the Polytechnics University in Iași. Afterwards I settled there and I got a job.

In 1971 I got married to Geta. She was a researcher at the Museum of Arts in Iași. We got an apartment and we passionately started collecting paintings. We had a close circle of friends and we had two children: a boy and a girl.

Leaving the country became an issue around 1982. A few years before, during some trips in Europe, I was thinking that I would have liked to

remain in countries such as Germany or Italy. Later I realized that, given the fact we were a mixed family, it would be easier to go to Israel where my wife had close relatives. The situation in Romania was getting darker and darker. Geta and I were feeling responsible for the future of our children. When we left Cristi was in 6th grade and Dana in 3rd. There was a new law that made emigration very difficult. Those who wanted to emigrate had to pay for all the years they had studied in the country, since education was for free only for the loyal citizens. We got green light in 1984 and we left for Israel.

Until we left Romanian authorities made us some problems, but we didn't encounter huge obstacles. I had to change the workplace because I have been retrograded due to my decision to emigrate. My wife didn't have big problems. It was just that her colleagues caviled at her in a small-minded, nasty way.

We both made up our minds for Israel because we could officially emigrate there and take along the entire family and a few of our belongings. On the other hand, my wife had relatives there, we had friends and we thought we wouldn't be all alone in a foreign country. We thought adjustment would be easier, especially for the children who were, in fact, the main reason for our decision to emigrate.

The relatives and the friends were very happy we came and they supported us in every way they could. We settled in Jerusalem. It was very hard in the beginning regardless of the warm support of our close ones. There were many unknown factors. The most important was the fact that we didn't speak the language. Then, there was the fact that we encountered a mentality radically different from the Communist mentality in which we had been born, brought up and lived until our departure... I didn't have any problem from the point of view of the religion. I am a Christian Orthodox. The social environment in which we were functioning was one of liberal, open-minded intellectuals. As time went by I realized that social conflicts could occur in an environment dominated by a different religion. It was not my case, however. The first obstacle and the toughest was the language. It was a completely new and strange language, different from all the language I had come into contact with until then. The Ivrit dialect is the old Hebrew. It is a dead language, as we say. It was brought back to life and adapted to the needs of a modern, dynamic and industrialized world. It is very hard to even get familiarized with the sonority of words and to start understanding a bit. It is completely different from other languages. It is not a phonetic language. You write something and you read it otherwise. I found it extremely hard to learn. After spending four month in an Ivrit teaching school I got a job and tried to manage with the few words I had learnt. I was surrounded by understanding people who made it easy for me to talk and to understand. I started working as a car mechanic and I had that job until I got familiarized both with the language and with the vision those people had on work and life. I understood that first of all one must be productive and efficient. Therefore I started with a job completely different from and under my qualifications of engineer. Slowly I understood how working hours are regarded and for what and how people lived. This entire process of understanding that was slow and difficult.

Now, here, I am surprised at the lack of efficiency, the slowness and the lack of meaning and purpose in the work of people. There I learnt it the hard way, but irremediably, that work is worth it only if it is efficient. Only then may it properly be remunerated. You can't steal your own goose!

For my wife Geta it was even harder than for me. She had the ambition of continuing her career as an arts specialist. There is an inflation of intellectuals in Israel. In the young generation, the ratio of college students is one to two. It is hard to find a job as an intellectual. It is even harder to find the specific thing you are looking for. You must be the best and very tenacious. Geta tried for three years until she could get a job as a specialist at the Museum of Arts in Jerusalem. She worked there until the end.

One year after we arrived we bought an apartment in a very nice house in the old city center. We had a small garden, a black dog named Țuf, a gazebo with a table and chairs. We were able to get all that due to a 25 year credit from the bank.

Everything was much easier for the kids. They assimilated everything easier because they were going to a school where everybody spoke only Ivrit. They adjusted quickly. We were pleasantly surprised to discover that the Romanian education system is much better than many of the so-called modern systems from other countries. Due to their high level of knowledge, Cristi and Dănuța could focus on learning the language and adjusting to the new environment. They both graduated high school without problems and with no private tutoring. They went to college and they also had jobs during their college years. Thus they became mature and independent just like all the other young people from Israel. They are very different from the over-pampered children in Romania.

When we left, I had left my entire family behind. Geta still had a sister in Romania who came to Israel after one year. Both of us had many friends in Romania. We kept in touch and

didn't break all ties with our friends back home. Once every year, sometimes twice, we were coming back home. Leaving the country was not a breaking off to me. It didn't mean giving it up for good; it was not like sealing a door behind me forever. I permanently knew what was going on in Romania. I was writing to my folks, we were talking on the phone, I was visiting once in a while, and I was listening to news bulletins about Romania. I never had the feeling of breaking off with my roots. I knew it all about the ongoing accentuated economic problems Romania was facing. I didn't erase with a sponge what I had left behind. In parallel with my struggle for adjusting to a new world, I was spiritually participating to everything I had left behind. Compared to my situation in Romania, in Israel I had visible material advantages from the beginning. Israel is a small country made out of emigrants. The accumulation opportunities had been smaller than if we had gone to the States or to Germany. But, anyway, there we could give our children a better future. That was the reason for leaving Romania in the first place. I was determined to overcome all hardship and to give my children an edge, a comparative advantage, a new horizon compared to the lack of any perspective in Romania. I admit it I never would have thought that the Communist regime would collapse so quickly after our departure. I never suspected it would.

The majority of my Israeli friends, from the beginning till now, are Jews of Romanian origin. It was with them I could speak Romanian. And I still am. They constantly keep in touch with Romanian friends, they care about Romania and they are preoccupied with it. On the way, due to work relations, I also made some friends of various other origins, both from European countries and from outside Europe. This is the interesting thing about Israel: people come here from all over the world. We all start with completely different mentalities and languages. Europeans are connected by a lot of common things, but the others... The Jews from the Mediterranean area

and the Jews from exotic countries such as Yemen, Iraq, Iran they have different ways of envisaging the world and their lives. They complete the European influence and bring to Israel the entire Orient.

Israel is a religious country founded in 1948 as a country of the Jews and for the Jews. Therefore religion has a great influence in the public sphere and in the attitude of the authorities. However, my not being a Jew in a Mosaic country was not an issue. I had my wife's relatives, many friends and I was living in a circle of tolerant, open-minded intellectuals.

During the time I lived in Israel, I worked in Jerusalem only one year. The rest of fifteen years I worked in Tel Aviv. I was a commuter. It took about 150 km or three hours by car, every day. My workday was starting with my leaving Jerusalem at six in the morning and it was ending with my returning home around nine or ten in the evening. I had this schedule for fifteen years, day after day. That was it! What else could I do? I had to raise the kids, to provide for the family, to make it good for them.

The fact that we lived in a circle of Romanian-speaking persons was half of an advantage. Maybe in a different circle we would have been forced to learn Ivrit faster and we would have started to manage on our own sooner. Who knows?

In 1989 my wife was detected with cancer and operated. The following months were dreadful and she didn't make it. I became mother and father to my children. It was tough!

In '89 I realized that „something“ was about to happen in Romania as well. Communism had already started to collapse in Europe. Its end was already clear in Poland and in Czechoslovakia. I knew something was going to happen, but I never imagined it was going to be that soon. Just like all the other Israeli interested in the matter I watched it all on TV. It was all broadcast live. I was very interested about what was happening with the country, with my family, with my friends. It was very hard to believe that it was

truly and finally happening.

In 1990 I came back to the country because I wanted to set the bases of commercial ties between Israeli and Romanian companies. My attempt to do so failed. It was too soon after the Revolution and nobody knew how things were going to evolve. After one year or so I decided to do something in Romania, while keeping my job in Israel as well. In '94 I set up a firm. The business was going well and I started coming to Romania more and more often. In spite of all hardship and initial difficulties, I was feeling this strong urge to return to Romania. I quit a good job in Israel and I came here and dedicated myself to my business here. The return happened in '98 when I decided to come back for good. It was my decision. Children were adult by then and they decided to stay in Israel.

The greatest personal gain after fifteen years spent in Israel was the fact that I completely changed my views on work. I also learnt to treat people differently than I used to. From material point of view I was well off in Israel. I had a good position. But my greatest gain was not material, but the one concerning mentality. When I came back to Romania, the mentality of people was almost identical to the one I had left with fifteen years ago. I realized that people in Romania were regarding life and work exactly as they did before '89 and that they weren't realizing that something had to essentially be changed. There were some basic and essential things that weren't yet understood. In my opinion, even if Ceaușescu fell, his regime hasn't fallen yet. In what concerns political thinking, fourteen years didn't bring a major change. The second tire of communists came to power. They have the same political philosophy. Just one person disappeared. It is exactly like this!

When I returned I didn't try to adjust back to the old mentality. On the contrary, I tried to impose my mentality to the collective I created. It was a new mentality. For Romania it was a new vision upon work. I was successful in the majority of the cases. Those who didn't adjust left my

firm. Slowly I created a team of young people and I managed to convey to them a new way of thinking and of working. Young people adjust and learn faster. Actually, not all young people do. I met many young persons while I was interviewing people for various positions in my firm. Some of them have a backward way of regarding work. You can see parents managed to transmit to them their own mentality. Unfortunately, one can still see situations which prove an old-fashioned and narrow-minded mentality. You can see it everywhere: in the street, at the firm, in the re-



lations with other firms. I tried to hire many young people who had graduated Polytechnics among the best. Many of them disappointed me. Those best who adapted on the fly are still with us, at the firm.

I also attempted to do something and failed. I saw that there were a lot of helpless, abandoned children. I offered some of them a job, a place to stay, food, money, and clothing. I tried to make some of them pursue higher education. I got them private tutors in order to have a fair chance in front of the competition. They didn't resist. The majority didn't even respond to my gesture, not speaking about my pretensions.

They were not used to put a continuous and constant effort into something that was going to pay off in the future, not immediately. This is it!

After fifteen years I had to readjust to some things, even if I kept the new mentality I got during the time spent in Israel. When I was in Israel I was thinking about and I was worried about my friends and relatives from Romania. Now, coming here means a new separation. This time I have both my kids in Israel, plus a lot of friends. I think of them and I worry about them. This is the truth. It was not easy and it is not easy still. This is the third time I am starting over.

In Romania I don't live in a flat. I remarried and we have an old house we're renovating. We have a big courtyard, four dogs, a small pond and a water source. We have a gigantic weeping willow, a vine bower on which we hung petunia pots. We also have a small hill with grass and flowers. This is at my wife's house where we

both live. I bought an old house on the top of a hill, close to the forest. I am trying to renovate it and to turn it into the house of my dreams. I am thinking that probably all the time I was away I subconsciously wanted to return to Romania.

I was not profoundly religious when I left. In the absence of the Romanian culture and traditions my interest and love for them and for the Romanian language grew stronger. I lived in the vicinity of the holy places of Christendom. I repeatedly went to visit them and I meditated upon their symbolism. I got close to the Romanian church in Jerusalem. Before I knew it I became more religious, even if due to the fact that Mosaic and Christian holidays are not at the same time, I couldn't miss from work on Christmas or Easter. The free day in Israel is on Saturday. Therefore I had to work Sundays.

In Romania I kept my hobby. I collect paintings. I also have a new passion for Romanian traditional artifacts. Traveling in Europe and in



Israel made me see the exquisite beauty and originality of the Romanian traditional art. I think that it is not put forward enough and definitely not invested in enough. A country which respects tradition respects itself. The more it knows itself better, the stronger its people grows. Israel is an emigration country. There is a lot of history there, but very few traditional things. That is because people come there from all over the world and they bring almost nothing. Coming back to Romania I feel the need for traditions and folklore. I am looking for traditional artifacts, I find them and I collect them. They are mostly from Hațeg, where I grew up and from Moldova and Bucovina, where I live now. I missed it all and now I enjoy it. I am a grown man now and I learnt to be selective and not let myself be fooled by appearances. You know the saying, not everything modern is beautiful and not everything old is precious. I listen to a lot of Romanian country music and I am glad when I can tell what area one song or another is from. I grew closer to traditional objects. I like them, the life in them. Every such object can tell me how people from various parts of the country lived and thought.

The political life of Romania is the biggest disappointment I had since I returned. There is the same mentality, nothing has changed: the bribery, avoiding the law, not valuing honest work, contempt of the powerful towards all the others and towards common sense all together. Corruption is in fact a continuation of everything before 1989. I have read a lot of books about the history of Romania and I learnt to rethink it. I understood that it is very important for us to have an external beneficial influence. For example, King Carol the 1st brought to Romania his German rigorousness and he is the artisan of modern Romania. Right now only the European Union can impose some drastic rules on us. Otherwise, it is impossible. This is the only chance for a real change in the future.

Anyway, life has changed after 1989. That is why I returned in the first place. There are new

perspectives one could never even imagine before. However there are still a lot of people who have a very hard life and who are extremely poor. It is intolerable that after years of work they don't have bread on the table. And this is happening only because the political class doesn't care about these people. Salaries are small, pensions are even smaller, and the taxes are huge. Firms don't have any facilities if they hire retired people who are still able to work and who want to supplement their pensions. It is very hard even to find a legal way to hire college students. There are very many restrictive laws who keep you from helping these people. These kinds of laws bring the life standard down. If you want to help out you must take money out of your pockets. How many people are able to do that? And for how long? The state should do more about this. In Israel, children and college students are hired over the summer. The employers only have to pay some taxes, but it's nothing like the enslaving taxation system from Romania. That is why you cannot do the same in Romania. It is because the costs would be too high for your firm. The same goes for the pensioners. It is a vicious circle and there are many sick people because of continuously decreasing life standards.

The children didn't come back to me. One year ago my son started working for my business, but he is still a commuter. I hope he settles here, but his decision depends on the way the firm will go. My children speak perfect Romanian. They consider themselves Israeli, because in the Mosaic religion it is the mother who decides the nationality of the children. They grew up in Israel and they are of Mosaic religion. They love it in Romania, although it is very hard for them to understand and to stand the old Communist mentality. We all had and we still have double citizenship: Romanian and Israeli.

It was harder for my boy when he came back here for the first time. In the beginning he couldn't understand the attitude towards work and many other things connected to the

outdated life conceptions. He needed a lot of patience and explanations. He had to remember his first childhood years spent in Romania, to get back in touch with his friends and his teachers. That was the only way he could adjust to the Romanian reality and tune it in with the European capitalist conceptions he got in Israel. He understood that not everything is black here and that not everything is pink over there. There is need of a lot of effort and of a lot of understanding. The good thing in Romania is the respect for books and for culture. The school system is good and it is respected. Teachers are respected as well. There is a lot of reading and thinking done in Romania.

Even if I was not in the country I kept in touch with my friends and I reconnected with them all. I don't see much of them these days because I am very busy, but I am happy every time we can get together. I don't have the feeling that I was absent for so many years.

When I left I was just another member of my family. Meanwhile, before I knew it, I have become a sort of „pater familiae“. I take care of all of them. In fact, ever since I left I never stopped thinking of them. I had an old mother and siblings. From the beginning I wanted to get better off in order to be able to help them out, because life was tough in Romania. I did all I could to help them. Now I am the oldest in the family and I still do whatever I can to help them. I brought them all to Iași. Both my brother and my sister are here. I talked my sister into going to University to Iași. We are all gathered here, together. We didn't sell my mother's place in Bara, even if we rarely go there. It is the way things must be. Our family's grave is there and we had

to keep a piece of what was left of the property, even if it is not a house, but an apartment in a flat. This is it!

I am surprised that nobody does anything to stop the brain-drain from Romania. Of course, everyone has the right to go wherever, but this country should offer the decent conditions that would make the people stay instead of go some place else. I am saying that because less than 50% of the people who leave are not able to lead a dignified, honorable life over there. It is a pity that very many fail because of the conditions and because of the unadjustability. This is what I see when I look at the Romanian Diaspora. It is not united, it is not strong enough to have a say in favor of Romania, at international or national level. They cannot positively influence things. Compared to the Polish or the Hungarian Diasporas, ours is split and powerless. Hungary is a smaller country than Romania, but it managed to create abroad strong groups and a united Diaspora. And the Hungarian state keeps in touch with it. Many Romanians leave in search for adventure. It is good neither for them, nor for the country. Why aren't they united? Because their mentality is the every-man-for-himself type. It's sad!

Returning to Iași after fifteen years feels like being back home. Had I settled in a different city it would have been harder for me. But here I found my own again. I am back home, together with the same people, in the city that forged me and which I know so well.

Interview by Vlad Manoliu
Translated by Cora Moțoc

