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It Was Freedom I Was Interested in

Coca N.
USA

It was in '77, when after three years of vain attempts of visiting France, I finally got a visa and left for Paris for a month. There, all by myself, I enjoyed everything so much. I understood a lot of things because I knew French quite well. I thought of my two daughters, whom I considered beautiful and clever. One had already been admitted to faculty and the other was in high-school and I thought of their „great“ future as compared to the future of my friends' or acquaintances' children there. It was my first journey to the West, as I had already been to Czechoslovakia and Hungary. This was what determined me, in fact, I thought bitterly and regretfully to the chances the children living there had and what a pity for my children whom I considered superior as being highly educated and informed, but I knew very well what a dull future they would have. That was all about. The decision was not made then because I have never thought I could leave the country. I knew everything from magazines, I knew them from discussions but living there, day by day, in the same house with a little girl being the same age with my elder daughter, I realized then that my daughters would have the right to something better.

It was only after four years, in '81 that I made up my mind to leave; it took me quite a

while to decide. I then came back from Paris, as a proof that I had never thought of leaving for good. I could have written to or I could have called my cousin in America and ask her to invite me there and to stay there for ever. Yet it took me such a long time to decide because there was something which worked somewhere underground, without being clear; it kept on working and suddenly, one day, it materialized. That was the way it happened.

The decision was made in the very last year. My husband had left for America thinking of not coming back, but he came back because he realized it was very difficult to be an immigrant being deprived of all the professional rights and to start from minus because we had nothing, we had zero. My financial position was good in Romania. It was a problem that didn't frighten me at all. I had completely left aside this idea. I remember a lady in America who, later on, did me a favor in Romania; she went to my house and returned being utterly taken aback and saying: *how could you leave such a house and such a position and come...* That is I had everything from a needle to what was well to do, because my husband would go to congresses abroad, things like these. I was living in Pajura then.

The decision had been working in my mind all the time because that's the way great deci-

sions work. For example, the same thing happened when I gave up smoking; I had thought for about a month that I ought to give up smoking and one day I didn't smoke any longer. I know the place and the moment. I had an altercation at home after my husband's coming back from America and that was the very moment when I thought: „It's now or never“. I asked for another invitation from my cousin. Nobody in my family knew about my decision until I got that invitation. It was then that they learned, that is I talked to the girls. I asked them if they agreed or not. Catrinel was to graduate faculty in a year or so and Nelida was graduating high-school. If they hadn't agreed I would have left just for a short visit and I would have returned to Romania but in one and the same voice they agreed. Catrinel was more reserved, that is wiser as she should have been. She is four year and seven months older than her sister. Catrinel told me: *If you think it is possible ,that you will succeed , stay there, otherwise, come back not to get ill... so she was very wise while Nelida said from the very first moment: Leave mother and don't come back...*

The thought of leaving had probably crossed their minds too as it had crossed the mind of any teenager, as of any child who, in spite of being the daughters of a professor, couldn't afford having ,I don't know what sono... equipment in the basement as Stefan Andrei, where they went to parties ,had. They went there because they were schoolmates learning in the same high-school, „Ion Neculce“ High-school. There they could see another standard of living but they were happy if they had a Pink Floyd record or...

Mother was a great problem for me because she was 70 years old and she was living in Mitropolit Nifon Street and I remember that the day I got the passport with the visa I went to her. I used to visit her especially on Sundays. I would call on her and we had lunch together sometimes, but then, on the way to my mother's place, having talked to my daughters, that is having their OK, I was thinking what to do, how to

tell her about my leaving because it was a great burden for me to lie to her and tell her: *I leave but I'm returning in a month or...* especially that only one year or so had passed since my father's death. So I entered and I put the passport on the table, then I put it in her hands and showed her the visa. She put her glasses on, looked at it, folded it nicely, put it on the table in front of her, took her glasses off, looked at me and told me: *Coca, leave! Please don't come back. Take these children out of the country.* I will never forget that day, it was the day with the greatest relief for me greater than anything else, the fact that she had accepted the idea and I told her: *Mother, if I am to stay in America, I will take you out too.* And she was the first one to come to America after a year and four months.

My cousin who is also called Coca, the one who invited me to America, had left officially, being married to an Armenian who had had the right of emigrating. The Armenians had the right to emigrate because they did not have a country any longer. They enjoyed preferential status, that is they could emigrate either to Russia or to America. She was a financial and moral support for me. I lived with her house for a year and two months until my mother came to New York. In fact, when I got to New York I was not quite sure that I would stay in New York or I would leave for Canada. I did not know English at all but I could speak French fluently. That's why I thought of leaving for Canada, but my cousin insisted that I should remain there and the fact that there was a little bit of a family made me decide to stay in New York.

Anyway, after a week, no, less than a week I went to the Emigration Office not to have time for a second thought. You have to drop it like a hot potato , you have no choice, if you know that you are left with something, the temptation of giving up is great. Moreover, I am fond of visiting museums and I did not go anywhere thinking that there was no reason of making haste, as I had not come as a tourist, I had to stay there for good and I had plenty of time to visit them.

It took a long time to be accepted, it was a very difficult trial, but I did not like to beat about the bush...The truth is that my family had been struck. I had two uncles convicted to the Canal, father had been a prisoner for eight years and there had been many other horrible moments in my life, being withdrawn from a house in 48 hours and so on. Finally we remained in our house with the help of a worker who had got a high job. But all these were the childhood dramas of a whole generation.

I belonged to the middle class in Romania, from a financial point of view. As all the people, you could save up money for a year and you could go to the seaside for a month and if you were luckier, you could go to Predeal too.

I couldn't complain that I had a bad position and that I left for America for a better financial position. It was freedom that I was interested in. That was what I told them but I told them about my political file too. Father had been a prisoner in Russia and that is the reason why I had troubles. My niece could choose when she was 14 from among the best schools in New York while when I sat the exam for enrolling with a high-school when I was 13, the education reform took place and I wanted to attend the Chemistry High-school – synthesis, plastic materials and rubber – which was in the building of the former French High-school in Batistei street. I got excellent marks in all the subjects, I got only nine and ten, but I found myself on the list of those who hadn't been admitted. I was quite a bold child for my age so I went to ask why I had been repelled and I was answered: *Would you like a dynasty of scientific chemists?* My father was a chemical engineer. And so they talked me down. These were the only reasons set forth. I didn't mention in the form the financial reason and I mentioned clearly that I wanted another future for my children. That was what I declared with the Emigration Office and I stated the same thing in my form which was afterwards even searched in my house in my absence by certain comrades over there. I was living in a poor dis-

trict, Richwood, where a lot of Romanians lived, small fish, little fish who were writing down informative notices. And I think that they had searched high and low this sheet of paper, to see what I had written when I placed my form with the Emigration Office. But I have read a lot of detective stories in my life and I stuck it on the bottom of the TV-set. I asked myself where I might hide it and I stuck it with sticking-tape on the bottom of the American TV-set.

Consequently I started work the next week. I accepted anything and I went to an Apral Pressing, that is a company where they pressed dresses and suits and sewed on buttons and where these were labeled as they were imported and after that they were distributed. It was there that I learned that a perfect dress got to Fifth Avenue, that another dress got to Alexander and that if it had a stain it got lower. So I could choose better when I went shopping later on. There were six very difficult months and when I could sit down it seemed happiness to me. My feet were like logs. Generally I stood about ten hours and I earned three dollars an hour which increased later on because I was a hard working lady. It was very little. Today it's minimum five dollars. Yet the people were very kind. The chief would talk to us but I could speak neither Hungarian nor English. The owner of the company was a Hungarian-Jew who had a group of Romanian ladies who had come from Oradea and could speak Hungarian with the owner. One of them, having been there for a long time tortured me like hell. She would be very pleased to keep me standing to check the clothes. The respective madam had been a shop assistant with a grocer's shop in Sibiu and she had a better financial position here got by marriage. Her great joy was the fact that she could keep a higher educated person and belonging to another social class under her thumb. Unfortunately this is a characteristic feature I have met with many Romanians unlike other nationalities. The Romanian helps you but asks for ever lasting gratitude for the favor he has done for you and besides he

would like to make a little bit of profit out of it. When stating this I refer only to a certain category of Romanians. I can not treat different people alike. Anyway I did it. I worked with them until Christmas Day.

I lived in Bronx, which was then beautiful and good and I would change two trains to Queens. It took me about an hour. Then I had the guts of going to school too and I got home at eleven p.m. I was not afraid. I had my own routes so well traced that I seemed to be a little robot that got on the... train, got off and changed trains. It was apocalyptic in the beginning, it was terrifying. I remember that one day I took a wrong platform and I could not ask anybody to direct me as I couldn't speak English. I was trying hard to learn at school but it was impossible because I was already tired. I understood but I couldn't speak. It was a free of charge school for immigrants near Columbia University. So it was very far away, on the other side of Bronx. It was a very nice and good school in Riverside Church. There were groups of beginners and advanced people. But I couldn't stand it too long.

Well, I will tell you something. It was so hot, stuffy in there. They worked with steam. Clothes were pressed. There was no air-conditioned. There were only some fans. Sometimes I felt sick. I would almost faint among dresses. Yet, I would tell to myself: three more dollars, three more dollars, another hour has passed, I looked at my watch, three more dollars, and I added them up in my mind because I knew I had to send them home. I had to help my children, didn't I? And I really don't know what I lived on.

I lived with my cousin and I gave her 200 dollars a month, because it was fair like that. In the beginning she didn't ask me for anything. She lived with her son. She had separated from her husband and she was alone. And I slept in the same bed with her for a year and two months. I gave her 200 dollars for boarding and meals. I earned 400. I had to pay the underground and it was 50 cents then.

That man, the owner, was so kind. I can't re-

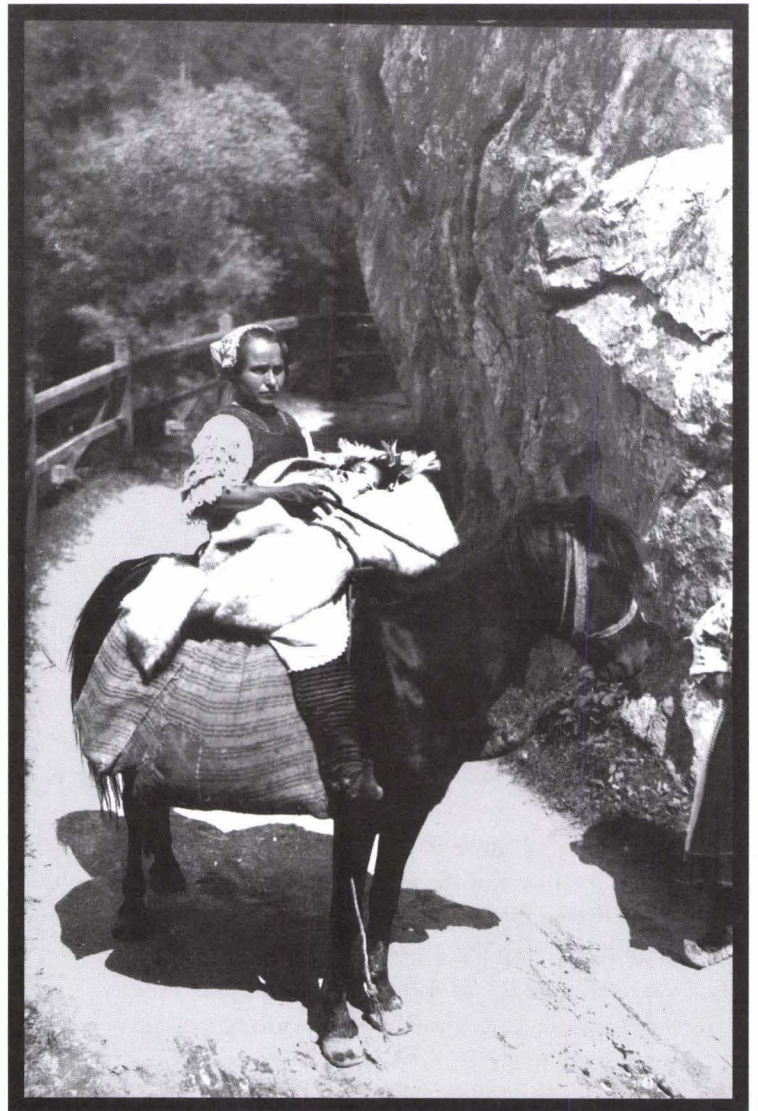
member his name. He expressed his regrets towards a Hungarian lady from Romania and he said about me: *I'm sorry and I realize that she can do anything else, she shouldn't brush clothes and I would need her at the office but she doesn't know English.* I stayed with this company which closed for four months every year, since Christmas till April and they kept me for six months, I had come on the 24th of December, to be able to consider me unemployed, they were so kind. It was official. I didn't work illegally, not for a day.

The fact that they didn't accept my political asylum is another long and hurtful story. That moment they asked me: *Would you like to bring your family here?* I answered in the affirmative and I applied for my mother, my two daughters and my husband. So they came here officially. They had the Green Card when coming here while I had nothing. So they kept me till then and then I went to enroll for the unemployment allowance. The first week is not paid. That was the law. I have a nice empty unemployed book from which one can see I was unemployed only for three weeks at the beginning of my activity. These events were so important for me that they have been left there deep down in my mind. Generally I have a good memory.

I have never told this story before but I have become a famous person. When it was about Emigration they rang me and sent different persons to me. I had become a kind of an advisor. I had my own golden age. None of my family has ever realized how difficult it was for me. They would criticize me, I seemed to be insane for them. I was lucky. A friend of mine, an Armenian lady, in fact a former sister in law of my cousin, a very nice lady was employed with a very big jewel company. She would go to Money Room, to Alexander too, because, having two children she needed some extra money. There was a chain of shops and she worked there at the cash desk for some hours and she recommended me too. I tried to go there but I didn't succeed in finding that cash desk and the Alexander and yet I had been in America for six-seven months. She

called me, asking me: *Have you managed to get there?* I answered: *It was closed.* I mumbled something, in fact I lied to her because I was ashamed to tell her that I had gone round and round the building not finding the proper entrance and so I had left. The next day she called me and told me: *Look, this is the address, Fifth Avenue, 43 Street 521 F.A, get on the train and come right away!* I got there, I was granted an interview and I asked for five dollars an hour because I had been advised how much to ask for. I had started to speak English a little and in the meanwhile in the six months when I worked with brushing clothes and sewing on buttons (that's why I haven't sown on buttons ever since) and I was happy that I could work sitting down, I had got 3.7 dollars an hour, that was a real progress. So I asked for five dollars an hour because they ask you there how much you would like to get when you sit an interview. The supervisor or manager liked me very much and sent me to the lie detector to answer truthfully because you couldn't have worked otherwise with Finley Fine Jewellery which was the greatest jewellery company and at that time it had about 900 departments covering the whole America. It didn't offer the jewels under its care but I might tell you that when I went for the interview for the Green Card and they found out that I had been working with Finley Fine Jewellery for so many years they took a look at the papers and said OK. The fact that you had been working there for several years was a guarantee. I worked with them for 17 years and a half. Nobody could be employed with the Finley without passing

the lie detector test. The one who goes there, he goes to work. They didn't make jewels there, they delivered them to different departments; the jewels came from all over Europe or America. So you opened parcels with jewels you walked among them. The truth is that the most difficult step in America is the first job. Why? Because you have to have gained American experience and it becomes a vicious circle. Nobody hires you if you don't have American experience and you cannot gain American experience because



nobody hires you. But I had American experience because I had worked there for six months. So I was unemployed for only three weeks, being paid only one week.

I had meals with my cousin's place. Clothing was interesting. My children started to send me clothes from Romania, because I had travelled light in May when coming here; I was afraid it would catch the eye of a customs officer. That was another problem too. If they had seen too much luggage.....So I traveled light as any common Romanian traveler to America who returns with stuffed luggage. They sent my own dresses little by little. When somebody left for Romania I used to send money and in exchange the children sent me my clothes. I sent money by different people. I was left with a little money too because I was saving up; I had only 48 kilos; I missed the children so much that I could hardly eat anything. It was something that had turned into a physical problem. I could not swallow.

The thought of returning to my native country did not cross my mind, but I do remember a hot July day. I was working at a very high temperature at that company where it was the hell on earth and when I got out I was struck by a wet heat. The pavement was melting. And I remember a certain day when I felt very weak and I wanted to sit down on the pavement, it was a shady place and nobody would have cared, it wouldn't have caught the eye, but I knew very well that if I had sat down I couldn't have stood up. I was failing. So I went on going on the bridge until I got to the underground station. It was excellent on the underground because there was air conditioned. My friends knew these very well.

I had once the chance of meeting some wonderful people due to some former neighbors from Romania. I called them to tell that I had come and their joy was great. They came that very evening and took me with my cousin. My neighbors in Pajura were very nice, very glad to see me although we were not real friends. They introduced me to some wonderful people and we

have been good friends for more than 22 years. That is our group of friends has been the same for 22 years, and something else I have always chosen very attentively were my friends.

I worked with that company for a long time. I didn't leave them. I would have liked to, because it would have been better from a financial point of view; it is better if you change jobs every other year. If you do so you get a better salary. However I had something else: I changed different jobs in the same company and this was a good thing too. Things were different with Radu within education, he has created himself a good position; things are different in business. I made friends with my fellow-workers. I sat the interview one day and I started work on Monday. Of course I couldn't get to work so easily on Monday as I had done on the first day so I was late. I felt very sad after two weeks of work because I found disagreements in the inventory of jewel parcels. There were always more or less jewels. And I went to look up sheets again and I was very sad. When I told my friend that it could happen only to me she said: *You clever lady, you can see the mistakes at first sight but three more months should pass for others to realize that.* And what I considered to be a disaster, it was in fact a credit for me because I was called after two weeks by the chief and she told me: *You are too good to work in this job. You know this, don't you? There is an opening with the statistics department. Go there!* And I went to the interview to that department. The very moment I entered and I saw a desk of my own, you can imagine what it meant to me. To have a desk where there were a phone, a computer, a desk lamp and what not, that is to have a desk in an office with carpet on the floor after you had brushed clothes standing and to be in the Fifth Avenue in the corner with 43 Street! Once, later on, talking with my elder daughter, Catrinel, because I had been offered a better job with another company she told me: *Mother, think twice if you want to give up the comfort you have here...*

I came to Romania for the first time after

eight years and I was terribly afraid because I was not an American citizen yet. The children were already there. But I might say that I experienced the most terrifying things until my returning. Mother came after 14 months. It was then that I moved in this district Richwood. I had a four-room house but it was pretty for two persons and I told to myself that no matter who was the first to come he would have a place to live. I had not intended that mother should be the first to come. In fact I had all sorts of problems with both the Romanian and the American authorities. The trouble with Romania was the fact that I sent immediately an application to the Embassy in Washington giving up the Romanian citizenship. And I sent a bill of 200 dollars. I still have that bill. I have both the bill and my first passport which I refused to give back to the Romanian Embassy. It contains the first visas I got for America and France. The Consul from the Romanian Embassy called me in two weeks, funny thing, I met him later on in Romania, and he told me: *Madam I have received your application but we advise you to give up. I have sent it back to you together with the check, that is the money order because we advise you to apply for a Romanian citizen settled abroad.* It seemed absurd to me. I wanted to forget about Romania and they... He added: *We recommend you to accept this situation if you want to see your family quicker.* And I realized there was something fishy about it, but I didn't know what. It might have been because of Negut, as he had a position in education, in research, he was an inventor, I said to myself. In fact the truth was that it was the year when Ceausescu made a speech in Helsinki and there should have been a number of Romanian citizens settled abroad. Later on I found out which the mystery had been. Of course I got my money back from the Embassy and I sent another application and the hostilities started later on. In the meanwhile things didn't move too quickly at the Emigration Office. It was state in state then. It has recently passed to the Justice Department. And I started... I went to

that office every other six months to have my right to work extended. In fact I went there just for a stamp. I still keep those documents, I have them, I couldn't part with them. These are souvenirs, that's why I keep saying that I can not provide data. I also keep some of the first things bought in America, there are some little animal knick-knacks in my china cabinet. There are also some other small things which seem very strange but which meant something for me: a trip, a small memory from somewhere. Anyway, I remember that the first money I spent for myself was to buy something from Woolworth shop (a D.I.Y. shop) which was then very popular and full of patterns for skirts, dresses and anything you would have liked and with the cloth next to it, with the suitable thread and everything you needed. The only thing they didn't have were the scissors. They were arranged according to sizes, to take just what was fit for you. That was my first investment, I paid about 20 dollars on an envelope like that and I made myself a dress. Meanwhile I was knitting myself a suit-skirt and jacket for winter. So I could change quite often, I did not have, I couldn't afford, anything else. The only and the first dress I bought from the company where I worked at the beginning was a natural silk dress, a superb one for which I paid 25 dollars and which is still worn by my friend.

My first going out was to a Romanian restaurant having been invited by my friends, the Banus family and Antonia. There was a Jew, Nicu Amiralu, who had a little pub in Queens and we ate „mici“ (special Romanian meat balls). It was there that I saw and listened to Constantin Drăghici singing. I had also a photo taken with him because Lavinia was fond of photos and she would carry her camera everywhere. The restaurant was always full of people and I went there as to a great, extraordinary event which I will never forget. Some other time, it was the fourth of July when we went to Coney Island and when I fired at a target, I bought teddy-bears and I ate candy floss. There is a great fair in Coney Island on the fourth of July. There are

fire works in the evening. Then I met some other people due to these friends and little by little my group of friends enlarged. A nice group of intellectuals. They were some very nice people.

Mother came after 14 months. She was permitted to leave earlier because she had a good inheritor pension on my father's death. She had a pension of about 2,000 ROL in '81. And they let her go without citizenship, because the old people who left could not adapt and wanted to go back. My mother had not a single thought of going back. She had been clearly told: *If you leave without citizenship, you leave now, if not, you will have to wait for another year or two.* She was 72 years old then. I have her stateless passport which was valid for... Mother came on the 23 September, I still remember very well because her birthday was on the 24 and there was, of course a great party, I could have hardly waited for, because we would work like slaves all week long, but on Sunday we would buy pizza or what we could and we had fun. We would all gather, we went somewhere, it was kind of a release after a week of hard work. I did not work over time then, in the beginning but shortly afterwards I needed the second and the third job because I was waiting for the children and I had not saved up money. I could only live from hand to mouth. I limited myself strictly to the money I had and I couldn't save up. But I was a housemaid to a lady who had come from Israel and who had a very big house in Brooklyn and I went to work there every Saturday, doing the whole house until my back hurt and I felt sick but I got 40 dollars and then she was very contented. It did not suit me when she proposed me to work on Sundays too. I did not tell my friends what exactly I was doing there. She was working, she had a Beauty shop. These were little things I had to do because the money I earned was not

enough. I did not mind at all. Let's go back to the 23 September when mother came. I took her to the Social Security on the fourth day and she got a number. She had come legally through Italy where she had stayed with Dina boarding house for two weeks. She was an elderly lady suffering from a heart disease, and when she told me on the phone that she might come with the next series because she had been informed so, I made a row. I showed her all the documents when I went to the Social Security and although she had not work for an hour in America they gave her a pension of 230 dollars which she even got retroactively. She was given the Green Card and all the rights. Each of us has adapted in his own way. They say that each person pays more or less for the American shock. Let me touch wood, I haven't gone mad. I have always kept my temper. When my daughters came I realized that there was a gap between me and them. They had their own conceptions... How clever, how educated, what great ideas they had compared to others... Radu had a Romanian soul which remained Romanian. He is the one who would tell Maia Romanian stories in the evening, he is also the one to have insisted very much in her bringing up, but I want to tell you that he had created mentally a family and a future in Romania, his soul had been left there. And that's not all. Radu is not a mere writer; he is a writer above all, a Romanian writer. But he is a university professor, a library manager and he specialized in another job in America. Radu combines the two worlds extraordinarily well. He is American till 5:30p.m. and then he goes to the Romanian Cultural Centre where he has to recommend a book.

Interview by Șerban Angheliescu
Translated by Mihaela Georgescu