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Author: Mihai Popa

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## Fleeing the Country

Mihai Popa  
*France*

The whole thing started on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of August 1982 at 5:20 a.m., when Silvia woke me up. The alarm clock had rung, but I didn't hear it. I had to pack my bags and everything. The whole thing had to be done inconspicuously, because my cover up story was that I was going up in the mountains. Had I packed in the evening I would have maybe put something in my bag that could have given me away. I didn't want everybody to know what I was up to. The persons who knew about it were Dan, Gheorghita (who also had to take me there, but turned me down. Because of that, for a long time, I gave him the cold shoulder. That was until my old man died. In that situation he behaved very well and helped me a lot and I forgave him, even if in fact it is very hard to forgive a thing like that. You know how he broke the news to me? „Man, I'm not taking you because... I am not taking you!“ He was supposed to give me a ride to Herculane, which was „ground zero“ of the operation.) Dănel's brother in law took me there, instead.

So, the persons who knew about the whole thing were Silvia, Ruchi, Dănel and Dan. And Gheorghita, of course. They all knew and they were one too many! I was worried about it and about many other things, but in the end everything turned out just fine.

So, on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of August, at eight in the

morning, Dănel's brother in law, whose name was Bebe, came with his Trabant and took Silvia and me to the point I had in mind.... Oh, also my cousin Dori knew about it, because I had gone there with him beforehand, in order to map the location. I didn't want to get in any trouble, to move through an inhabited area and be spotted or anything like that.

The ride there was O.K., but longer and more complicated than planned, because there were meetings for the 23<sup>rd</sup> of August all over the place. Since there was no highway there, we had to pass through all kinds of cities and towns and wait for the crowds to pass and all.

In the end, we reached Herculane and I went into the woods. I looked around and I waived goodbye to Silvia and to Bebe. You see, this is an image that sticks with you forever. My backpack on my back, I moved deeper into the woods.

The crossing...I had a very detailed topographical map from a guy who was working with me at TLS and who had some military maps. Hell knows how he got hold of them, but I swear every pebble was on that map and it helped me a lot because I ended up exactly where I wanted to. I also want to say that during my trip all the mosquitoes and all the bugs in the world ate me alive. I also saw some huge turtles. I am not exaggerating. I never saw turtles like that in my entire life. They

had the shells of at least half a meter. I also saw countless rabbits. The good part was that, every step of the way there was some spring or some kind of waters. So, from this point of view, I was all set and I didn't have to worry about it.

At a certain point I got to a road that was not on my 1954 map. I guess it was a military trail built afterwards. It looked almost like a highway and I shitted in my pants when I saw it. This road was blocking my access to the promontory. I wanted to get to a peninsula, which was stretching out deep into the Danube and which was very bushy. This way, I thought, I was going to be less visible. So, I went there anyways. Right on the spot, there was this guy who was picking blackberries. I go: „Hey, man, which way is the Danube?“ (I didn't know very well). He says: „Just a few steps away, over there“. I started walking there, but at a certain point, I don't really know why, curiosity mostly, I turned around and looked back. I saw that guy running with his blackberry jar, towards his house. I saw the house had two phone wires and I said to myself: „I'm so fucked!“. I decided to go exactly the opposite way. This was my first adventure because in five minutes a military jeep with four soldiers appeared and they went straight to the Danube. I went back towards the forest I was coming from. After half an hour the soldiers returned, got in their jeep and left. That was close!

After that, I made it to the peninsula I was talking about. To my surprise it was full of houses! I sneaked into some bushes and I sat there waiting for the evening to fall. There I was, 600 kilometers from Bucharest, which was already to the right of the meantime zone. That 23<sup>rd</sup> of August, because of the meantime zone and of the daylight saving time, at ten in the evening there was still a lot of light outside. Around ten in the evening I saw two soldiers from the border patrol. They didn't have any dogs. Well, it was not dangerous anyway, because the wind was blowing from the Danube towards me. When I got up to put my backpack in a plastic bag, I saw a comrade on the trail. I immediately got on all fours, but he

was heading my way. I didn't know what to do. To kill him, I couldn't. I had an underwater hunting knife Fredone had given me. It was a pretty serious hunting knife, maybe you remember it. It was a combat survival knife, with a leg strap. But I couldn't kill him. What could I do, fight him? What the hell could I do? And to my relief, one meter away from me (I was in the bushes) he turned left and went away about his business. This was the second unpleasant thing and a great relief at the same time.

I put my backpack in a plastic bag and I went, as calmly as I could and stepped in the water. There I almost drowned because of my boots which I had completely forgotten about. And because of my pants. The boots were military type, very heavy, with a thick rubber sole. I was going down under like a cannonball, because of them boots. I barely made it out of the water. I took them out, and I threw them away and remained in my shorts. I was wearing my shorts and a shirt (I still have that shirt). For safety reasons, I put my documents in my shorts in a sealed plastic bag. One can never be cautious enough.

I was pushing my plastic covered backpack (where I had my other belongings) and I was slowly swimming across the river. I mean, I was not afraid at all, because I was more than very well trained from this point of view. What I didn't know was the fact that on my map the width was of 4 km. In reality, it was of 12 km, because meanwhile the storage lake had been made.

The water was very warm. I swam from 11 to 5 in the morning. That is about six hours. I was very calm, holding on to my backpack. I had no problem. The problem appeared when I saw an aviation searchlight, somewhere in the horizon. I didn't know what it was. When I put my ear in the water I didn't hear too much, but I heard something. It was getting closer, unbelievably fast. It was a motorboat, the „Everglade“ type, with a propeller on the outside and with a searchlight that was sweeping the entire surface of the water. I said to myself: „Man, these guys can clearly see me...“. I took the knife out and I cut the plastic

bag. My backpack went under with everything I had, except for the IDs and the money I had in my shorts. In fact, these were the only items that mattered.

I was buck naked, I mean: shorts, shirt, watch and IDs. I went underwater. I could see the searchlight, but I had no problem. Those guys passed me by, in great speed, and gone they were. I kept on swimming, but without the backpack. And, little by little, I got on the other side. When I got to the bank I saw another motorboat coming. This time it was a normal one, you must remember the type, with a long spindle. It was a wooden boat with a long spindle and with a shitty military engine. It barely moved. There was one drunken officer and four soldiers – they themselves drunk like pigs. They also had a searchlight but not as fancy as the one of the Everglade boat. I saw three other Romanians coming out of the water and trying to hide in the bushes. The jackasses in the boat shot at them. Of course they were not allowed to do that because they were in the Yugoslav territorial waters. I never found out if the other three Romanians got shot or not and I have no idea who they were. One thing is for sure – we didn't do time together. Of course, one minute later the entire the bank was packed with border patrol guards. I was so well hidden that one of their dogs sniffed me immediately. They caught me and off to jail I went!

The first night in a jail cell... Man, the fleas ate me alive! I cannot even begin to tell you about that! All I wanted to do was sleep and I couldn't because of the damn fleas. In the morning I was spotted like a Dalmatian. Only that my spots were red. There was a wooden bed with a blanket on it, it was warm, I was carefree, but the fleas nearly killed me. I practically didn't sleep at all.

In the morning I got up and there was this policeman who spoke Romanian with a funny accent but perfectly understandable. He bought me a pair of pants (I still have them, of course), a disposable razor and all sort of shit I, of course, kept over the years. And then I went to trial... the trial was held there in the village, Negotin was its

name, in a small room at the Village Hall. I was explained that the jury convicted me to one-month prison for illegal trespassing of the border. And this is how I got in jail... I knew – because I would have never left otherwise – that, at the time, there was this UN convention which forbade them to surrender the Romanians who crossed the water. Otherwise I wouldn't have done it, because I already knew some pretty sad stories about people who got beaten up black and blue for doing what I did. As Rudi used to say: „If you make it, it's worth it. If you don't, it's not!“

About the Negotin jail... We were six in a room: two Hungarians and four Romanians. I don't know what has become of them. Of course we promised to each other that we would keep in touch. But nobody saw anybody afterwards.

And so, my month in jail started...very calmly, very quietly, with a lot of bromide in the tea, since I didn't have a hard on in a whole month! But, whatever, *c'était aussi mal que ça!* The only bad part was that I had just been operated of hernia and we had to unload entire wagons of cement sacs pretty often. I cannot say I could not do it, but 50 kilograms of cement on the back of someone operated of hernia six month before, are a little too much. But this was, if you want, the only bad part.

Meanwhile, Adrian's mother in law, the German woman who worked at the German Consulate, pulled some strings for me. After the month in prison when we were not sure whether they were going to send us back or not. This was the only thing that really bugged me. For the rest, how can I say, I was high on prison. I was eating well, in the sense that everybody would get half a loaf of white bread, exactly like that one that cost 2.20 lei, only tastier. We also had soup, three times every day. It had a lot of ham in it and it was very nourishing. Once in a while, the policemen would give us a piece of sausage each. We were, in a way, the aristocrats of the prison. Crossing the border was a noble crime and we were treated as such.

Who were the other guests of the Negotin jail?

Negotin was a wretched village, but what crowned it all was the fact that it had a prison. It was just across the river from Turnu Severin, only a little upstream. There was this guy who had shot his neighbor's pig, because the pig had entered his cornfield.

The life standard was beyond comparison with Romania, even there in Negotin. I mean, there was the village cooperative general store where you could find whiskey, American cigarettes... Incomparable to 1982 Romania. I mean, it was a real capitalist country. I was amazed. I had a rather „feutree“ transition from Romanian communism to absolute capitalism going through Yugoslav communism, which was a wonderful type of communism. I would have loved Romania to be like that! As I was saying, at the village cooperative general store you could find anything: liquor, cigarettes, sprays – anything we didn't have back home. It was full of Yugoslav brandy. I forgot its name, but we really liked it (**n.b. viniak à la konjak**). Food was plenty. Meat was an item. Going back to the clients of the jail. One of them had shot the pig that entered his crops. Another got drunk and had driven his car straight into the village pub. He drove around the tables, killed nobody, but smashed the entire bar. Others: endless fights at weddings and stuff. In the evening we had the right to watch TV. There I saw the movie „The Dacians“ with Serbian subtitles and, I guess, something of the BD series, with the late Caragiu.

After that month of prison, they put us all on a bus. Dismissed! We were 14 Romanians. They took us all to Belgrade. In Belgrade they took us to a more stinky jail than the one in Negotin where we had been six in a room and it was pretty cool! I mean, they had good beds. Here, we were leaving in the morning and returning dead tired, in the afternoon. We could run away any time because the guards were in the pub all day long. They were drinking, while we were working. But they knew that it was pointless for us to run away. They would make sure to give us some beer and a melon each. If they saw a carriage with

melons passing by, they would take a few from the peasants. And the peasants did not mind. They were giving them away smiling. We thought they would be pissed off, but they were smiling. We were in a state of euphoria because we had fled. The only thing I was worried about was the rumors that there were still cases of repatriated Romanians, in spite of the Geneva Convention. And it was true. Hadn't it been for that shit, which was really bugging me, it would all have been like a summer camp.

I was the only engineer. The rest were natural born rednecks. They could barely talk, but they were OK. And since we were in the same shit, that wasn't a problem.

The prison in Belgrade was a huge room in a sort of old military barracks. It was very old and it had very tall doors, up to the ceiling, in metal, very heavy, if you know what I mean. It was clear to me that originally it had not been a prison. We were all staying in a huge room, as big as a sports hall, with mattresses on the floor. We had showers with cold water. I got to this prison on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of September.

There were a couple of guys who had been there for a month or so and who were improvising small theater moments. They would play Ceaușescu and his wife. What can I say, the atmosphere was almost bearable. The only thing was that I didn't know what was coming my way. I knew that I didn't have to worry because the mother in law of Adrian, my cousin, had pulled some strings for me. Ever since I left I knew that, so I was not too worried.

I was extremely bored and I was doing math problems as a pass time: analysis, all sorts of graphs and other stuff just to kill some time. I was the only one who knew a little English and a little German. There was this German guy who had gotten drunk and wanted at all cost to kiss the wife of a Yugoslav minister who was at a nearby table. He so that drunk that he wanted to kiss her on the mouth. He went straight to jail and the guys from his embassy said: „Keep him there a month or so. He will get the booze out of his system and

he'll stop being such smart ass". So, there was this German guy, some Afghans, some comrades from Iraq, how can I say, all sorts of peoples. I was the only one who talked to them, both in English and in German.

The most interesting was a guy nicknamed „The Commuter“. He was there for the 3<sup>rd</sup> time. He only came and went illegally, swimming across the Danube. He was about 40 years old, thin, his muscles all fiber. He seemed a little like the lights-out-but-nobody-home kind of guy. He had left once and then returned for his wife. She put her on an inflatable mattress and swam with her across the Danube. Then he returned again, I don't remember what for. Anyway, he was a star and they called him „The Commuter“. Every evening, this guy was telling us his adventures. Once, he crossed with a tin boat with electrical engine. He had built that engine with three batteries, an engine from a starter or something like that. His boat also had a propeller that broke down in the middle of the Danube and he finished his trip swimming.

So, the Belgrade jail lasted for three days. Every morning there was this policeman who was reading a list with 5-6 persons who left and never returned. On the 25<sup>th</sup> of September I was first on the list: Popa Mihai. When I heard my name I said: „That's it!“ They told me to take everything I had. We went outside. They put us all on a bus, and they dropped me in front of the German embassy. „Well, what do I do from here?“, I asked. „Well, you go inside“, the policeman told me. Of course, like anything in Communism, outside at the gate there was a boot with a policeman inside. I said: „ Good afternoon, I would like to enter“. He said: „Name, please!“ – „Popa Mihai“ – he checks his list – „Yes“, he says, „go to room...“ These were the strings pulled by the mother in law of Adrian. She had worked at the German embassy, without being a member of the secret police (Securitate) or an informer Well, I went there. There was this guy, a very nice fellow who had a form already filled in: name, surname, and the address in Romania... I only had to add a couple of

things. He said: „Sign your name here!“ and took a picture of me. He did my passport in front of my eyes. I cannot describe the whole thing, Popovăț! It is a once in a lifetime thing. I am sorry that you didn't get to live it. I thought that the happiest moment of my life was when I got on stage with „Sphinx“. It was not. The happiest moment of my life was when that guy was filling in my passport. Right there, in big capital letters there was my name on that ID: Popa Mihai. And it was a German passport with the famous vulture on it and everything. He told me „Unterschreiben Sie, bitte!“ and I signed it. He gave me 500 DM. He said: „When you get to Nuremberg try to find a job because you must pay back this money a month from today“ (It was money given by Frau X, that is Ilse, my cousin's mother in law)

I went straight to a bar and I got a small whiskey, which cost me a fortune, a regular pack of Pall Mall cigarettes – I was smoking back then – then a beer ...you know, life's little pleasures like that.

I went to the train station and I had a direct connection to Nuremberg. I couldn't believe my eyes when I saw it. It was scheduled to leave in two hours. The people were dressed up nicely. They were cheerful, not with bleak faces and carrying bags... The windows of shops were full of marvelous things. What can I tell you, true capitalism. It made me feel alive, because it was not like back home, where in 1982 you could not find butter and coffee (that is why I left) and it was getting darker and darker. No, man, Yugoslavia was heaven on earth. You could feel that people were alive, that they enjoyed life more than we did. Probably they didn't yet have the chronic problems of capitalism with jobs and unemployment and other stuff.

So, I went to the station and I rang up my cousin Adrian. However, in two hours I had to go through seven ID verification routines or so. It was clear to me that it was full of comrades from Romania and elsewhere who were passing through in their way to Germany, in order to get to Capitalism. Where could they be from, but

Albania, Bulgaria, Romania?

The train left...I got a first class ticket. I was alone in the entire carriage! I switched in Vienna with a Transeuropean Express. Back in Belgrade, the first train was listed as a direct connection to Germany. But we had to switch in Vienna. The second one was even fancier and more comfortable than the Yugoslav train. This time I was not alone in the carriage, but still I was alone in the compartment. I couldn't sleep, of course. I was sitting and looking out the window. At the break of dawn, around 5, for the first time in my life I saw endless fields; they looked like in paintings or like in the postcards – all trimmed and not a soul on them! I saw nobody, all the way! And it was in the middle of autumn, in September, when there are a few things one can do in the fields...

At 9 in the morning a broad came. Without a word she put a plastic tray with some round plastic things with tinfoil caps on the table. She put them there and wanted to leave. I said: „How much does this cost?“ She said „Nothing. They are included in the price of your ticket“. It was a kettle with hot water, a small jar, covered with

plastic where there was instant coffee, another one with sugar, another with milk and a cup. I made myself a coffee and I drank it with infinite pleasure. I was saying to myself: „Look, I am going to keep all these plastic recipients as a keepsake of my road to capitalism“. Exactly when I was getting on the heights of ecstasy, the stupid broad come again, grabbed the tray with all my toys and threw it in a big plastic bag. I cannot tell you how much I suffered after she took my pretty toys! Man, we, Romanians, used to keep things like that in plain view, for others to see. That is if we ever got hold of stuff like that. This was the first shock: consumerist society. As Bula was saying in one joke: „This would have lasted us for another 10-15 years...“

I was looking out the window and I could not believe my eyes what wonderful things I could see: clean houses, nice cars, roads, stuff. And when we entered Munich and I saw that 500 meters TV tower, which could be seen from a distance I said: „Man, I am in capitalism!“ And then I said to myself: „This is it, I made it!“

Translated by Cora Moțoc

