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ROMANIA

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Memories of a Recent Communist Past: Much Talk, No Action

By Cristina Merrill

MARCH 13, 2005

BUCHAREST, Romania — Life may not be a bowl of cherries for women here during the year, but ladies have recently feasted on sherry and bonbons, so to speak. Good Orthodox Christians that they are, Romanians meticulously follow a calendar full of saints, martyrs, births and deaths, good and bad deeds (all of which supposedly influence their fate). As a result, women have developed professional event planning skills to manage a dizzying array of fasts and bacchanalias. For this alone women ought to have their day. During Communism, comrades had two days dedicated to them. But in the last month alone they have had *four*. Men whose pockets have emptied in the process have transition to thank for the upping in gallantry.

A combination of commercialization and anything-goes attitude, typical of this period, has brought together otherwise quite disparate traditions. Flowers, red hearts and love-filled cell-phone text messages (many from marketers) started flowing around Valentine's Day, which to my surprise has landed here as well, after having conquered most of Western Europe. These self-proclaimed descendants of the Romans like to emphasize that this day dates back to Claudius' time, and as such is part of their heritage, but of course they are honoring it with all-American, Hallmark-card pomp and circumstance. The one difference from the way we do it back home is that men mostly give and women receive, as it's expected in this traditional society. Passion was in the air a few days later as well, on February 24, during "*Dragobete*," or Lover's Day, an ancient Romanian custom brought back after Communism's fall. In old times, young boys and girls, especially in the countryside, were encouraged to court one another and plan marriage on this date. It is said that the couple that doesn't kiss *on Dragobete* doesn't stay together.

I was waiting to see whether March 1, a date I used to cherish while growing up here, had survived the end of the old regime. Maybe because it was devoid of ideology, this old custom related to the coming of spring was actually sanctioned by Communists. The time is associated throughout the Balkans with decorative twists of fine red and white threads — it is said that hundreds of years back, peasant folk displayed red ribbons or attached them to farm animals to welcome a new crop year. Called



The martisor women wear on March 1 is a symbol of spring, love and good luck and an invitation to be as creative as possible.

"*martisor*," after the name for March, the twists are worn by women on their lapels or wrists. Men and boys give this *martisor* to the women in their lives (mothers, wives, sisters, girlfriends and even colleagues) on the first day of March. The special Romanian take on this custom is a charm attached to the thread, an invitation for artists of all ages to be as creative as possible. Since the turn of the 20th century, city-dwellers, in particular, have outdone one another creating and wearing these mostly hand-made trinkets that represent luck (in the shape of clovers, chimney-sweeps or horseshoe) or love. But they can be everything from crafted ladybugs to tiny masks ornately dressed miniature dolls.

I wasn't disappointed. A week before the start of March, street vendors filled Bucharest with *martisoare*, sold at prices ranging from 30 cents to a couple of dollars. Two large fairs were organized, from morning to night, to display and sell these trinkets. Women proudly displayed their prizes on jackets and blouses. Women also get spring flowers on this day (typically snowdrops or hyacinths). Indeed, the capital became awash in color, as cellophane-wrapped bouquets and single strands caught the light from a timid spring sun and reflected it softly on the honorees.

Flower shops went on full alert March 8, International Women's Day, another day Communists made their own. Flower Day would be a more appropriate name. A friend's husband opined that the word "international" ought to be taken out. "I don't want to share you with the world, you're mine," he told her jokingly, perhaps hoping to get out of buying her snowdrops. In any case, carrying flowers around was the order of the day, not unlike old times. Before the collapse of Communism in 1989, men's work-and life-partners were rewarded for their equal contribution to building a revolutionary socialist society. Today, women are being celebrated for being unique (and per-



On International Women's Day, this young man gave away flowers in the hope of receiving spontaneous smiles.

haps unequal?), an appreciation that is a strange mix of respect in the traditional sense (for women as mothers and wives) and adoration of them as sexual beings. City guides listed ladies'-night events, beauty contests and "dirty-dancing" parties. I wonder if many of the late-night revelers turned into Cinderellas after midnight, since March 9th, a date on which Christian martyrs were commemorated, was a big baking day. Either I must be getting old or I'm not Western enough, but I turned down a March 8 invitation to an "Italian Dream Boys" men's strip-club party featuring "Mister Europa 2004."

Romance is not finished, it seems. I noticed a young man holding many single, individually wrapped, flowers. I stopped him to ask whether he had that many girlfriends. Stefan Musat, a second-year sociology student, said the flowers were for interesting women he was hoping to meet that day. "I'm looking for that elusive, spontaneous smile." Each flower carried a sweet poetic quotation. He had started the day with his arms full and, had it not been for the wintry weather (the quotation slips turned runny from sleet), his mission would have been a total success. He was refused once, which hurt, but on the whole Romanian women seemed receptive to an unusual gesture at a time when being trendy is everything — but individuality is still not encouraged. Romanians understand democracy as simply changing uniforms, I'm afraid.

Elisabeta Rizea: Unlikely hero

It will be interesting to see what will happen to all these celebrations of women, and whether a Western type of feminism, with a different kind of rhetoric, will change the symbolism. Will there be a need, in a truly



egalitarian society, for four days of flower-giving in a single month? I couldn't help noticing, for instance, that gypsy women were the sellers of flowers — as they are every day of the week. This time male companions were there to help with the extra workload, but they were also ordering women around.

One woman receiving a great deal of attention nowadays is Elisabeta Rizea, a peasant from a village called Nucsoara (which translates as "little nutmeg") that borders the Fagarasi mountains in the southeast, not far from Bucharest. She became the victim of Communist torture in the late 1940s and defied her oppressors for over a decade while helping to provide food and shelter for her fugitive husband and his friends who had fled to the mountains — a feat that became known to Romanians only after 1989. Communists managed to suppress not only rebellions but also information about acts of resistance. The fact that nobody dared speak out worked to discourage potential revolts, to maintain the status quo for four decades, and to perpetuate a feeling among Romanians that they lack backbone.

Ms. Rizea, who died in late 2003 at the age of 92, is an unlikely idol, especially in a society that places emphasis on youth and outer beauty and where heroes are men. She had neither. She possessed a great deal of strength and character, by all accounts. From the time her ordeal started in the late 1940s, once Communists accused her husband and his *haiduk* friends of plotting against the system through armed resistance, she never gave up. Her husband's group was one of several mountain-based movements formed in the late 1940s in reaction to Soviet-inspired farm collectivization and nationalization. Most leaders and their families were caught a decade later. If they weren't executed, they were beaten, tortured and had their properties seized.

Accusers took away the Rizeas' house and, hunted them ruthlessly, and eventually jailed and humiliated them. Ms. Rizea served 12 years in prison, her husband 14. The more she refused to reveal fugitives' hiding places, the more torture she received. Sentenced to death and later condemned to 25 years' forced labor, Ms. Rizea was beaten often — once in her hospital bed — and even hung by her hair from the ceiling. She lost both hair and teeth in prison. But she never once gave away names or compromised her conscience. She was "discovered" in the early



Anti-communist fighter Elisabeta Rizea has become a symbol of moral conscience and more for Romanians.

1990s, when her story was told as part of a TV series called "The Memorial of Pain." Museographer Irina Nicolau, who visited her around that time, published the interview in a short book that continues to touch Romanians. "If I had three days left to live, I'd like to know that the world is becoming clean," she said, an affirmation that makes the rounds in media and political circles whenever Romania's condition — especially corruption — comes up. The publicity has brought scores of visitors to Nucsoara, including Romania's former President Emil Constantinescu and former King Michael.

A monument to help change the "poor" relationship Romanians have with the past

About a year ago, the civic-minded satire weekly *Academia Catavencu* launched an appeal to raise money for a monument in honor of Ms. Rizea ("a monument dedicated to a monumental woman"). It's supposed to be built by the beginning of fall in front of Free Press Square (where most national newspapers are still headquartered, as during Communism), in a place where Stalin's statue once stood. The publication and Liviu Mihaiu, one of its editors and founding members, have campaigned regularly for the monument. "Our initiative seeks the building of a monument for a simple peasant heroine, symbol of anti-communist resistance," read one appeal, adding that the Free-Press-House location was ideal because "Elisabeta Rizea came first, and then came freedom of expression." So far, \$10,000, or about a tenth of the needed sum, has been raised. Mr. Mihaiu uses all means available to him, including a daily radio show, to promote the initiative. "With the money we have now, we can only start creating the pedestal and her shoes," he quipped one day. He has managed to enlist the support of the newly appointed culture minister to help in the matter.

I've admired Mr. Mihaiu's drive to push Romania out of the darkness of Communism, so I made a point to seek him out. After several weeks of trying, I was able to see him briefly. It was a Wednesday, the day his hard-hitting publication comes out, so he had to spend time fending off calls from at least one angered politician whose name had appeared in an unflattering story. Dressed in army greens that clearly said Che Guevara (his radio station is, called Radio Guerilla), Mr. Mihaiu, 40, enjoys the role of rebel. This country is in great need of nonconformists like him, so I'll even accept a Hollywood version of the Marxist fighter (most recently mythically revived in "The Motorcycle Diaries") as a role model of sorts.

I asked Mr. Mihaiu why he and his colleagues have chosen for martyrdom a simple woman out of the two million or more Romanians believed to have suffered at the hands of Communism. High visibility surrounding Ms. Rizea in the early 1990s brought jealousy from villagers, many of whose families had also suffered at the hands of Communism. It is said that the Romanian secret police employed more people per capita than any-

where else to investigate and hunt down Nucsoara's "bandits" and that half of the village's residents suffered some sort of punishment between 1949 and 1958.

So why Elisabeta Rizea? "There have been many intellectual dissidents in this country," he said, "but nobody took as simple and non-ideological position against Communism as Elisabeta Rizea. She fought against collectivization, but she was also a person of great character who said everything she believed." He added that in a country where monuments are dedicated to men only, creating a statue for a woman could serve as an example. After all, he added, "women are the center of a family's morality." Mr. Mihaie also said that it's about time a monument of this sort be raised. "Romanians have a poor relationship with their past, not just when it comes to Communism. But in this case much has been talked about and nothing has been done [in the last 15 years.] If there is something we can pride ourselves on in the last fifty years it's this resistance fight that lasted for more than a decade. People need to know this. Romanians should believe in themselves."

Elisabeta Rizea: A symbol on many levels

Indeed, there is something for everyone in the symbolism of this ordinary hero. Ms. Rizea is already a monument to moral conscience, even before having a monument dedicated to her. Communism, and before that nationalist leaders, filled Romanians' pride and history books with epic tales that only now are being revisited. In the confusion that is just beginning, as historians attempt to separate myth and reality in the nation's memory, the psychic burden that many are carrying around (and refusing to discuss) is the assumption that it was lack of courage that allowed the last regime to exist for so long. Making stories such as Ms. Rizea's known can serve to lighten that burden and in turn break the wall of silence and ignorance that Communism forced on people. Recently, history texts have been changed to include chapters about repression during the Ceausescu regime, although still all the way at the end of the books. As a young Romanian pointed out to me, these chapters are often skipped because teachers somehow don't get a chance to get through all the material before the end of the school year. "Hard to believe, but understandable, is the fact that almost nothing was known about the drama taking place in Nucsoara," writes historian Aurora Liiceanu in a book called *The Wounds of Memory*. "The 'mutism' that became a well-kept secret was one of the consequences of the violence with which the secret police acted to defeat partisans and their supporters."

Elisabeta Rizea can also serve as a moral compass for a time when the magnetism of immediate gratification is often irresistible. Actress and producer Rodica Mandache, a theatre and movie personality I recall from my childhood here, thinks the martyr can be a cure for the "ethical destruction" of the Romanian people. Mandache says that when she saw the TV documentary

on Ms. Rizea in 1992, her own "vector" changed. After the peasant woman died, she decided to write a play based on her life and Irina Nicolau's book, a play she finally produced last year, after many tries, first at a former political prison-turned museum, in Sighet, then for Romania Radio Cultural. Ms. Mandache plays the role of Ms. Rizea. A total of nine live performances have been staged — I saw one of them last summer, at the Museum of the Romanian Peasant. I had never heard about Elisabeta Rizea before that time and yet I found myself crying, along with many in the packed auditorium. Ms. Mandache's soulful timbre made memorable her character's lines, as in: "My teeth have fallen out, I have lost my hair, they have made me a cripple, but I won't shut up." Or: "God has emptied the world of good people."

I met Ms. Mandache for an interview on one of those bad-Bucharest days, as a friend calls them, a day best spent indoors. Recent snow, which had not been removed, caked into thick ice because of cold weather. Danger lay on the ground as well as above, with ice stalactites from pokey roofs threatening to fall at any time. Ms. Mandache had suggested we meet near her apartment, and as we struggled to advance without slipping to the entrance of her building, we noticed that her entire street had been closed to pedestrians because of icicles hanging from homes nearby. In the time it took to fence the area and write the signs, someone could have climbed up and removed the icicles, I thought. Ms. Mandache probably thought the same, since she kept muttering, "There are no more ethics left."

We felt better once we had our first cup of coffee in promotional Milka-chocolate mugs. As she brought mine on a tray, Ms. Mandache spilled a little and told me it's a sign of good luck; supposedly I'm due to receive money soon. Despite the inescapable sterile Communist architecture of the place, she has turned her centrally located apartment, filled with books in Romanian and French and tasteful decorative touches, into an artist's dwelling. Here, away from the madness of a world turned upside down first by Communism and then by chaotic transition, it feels safe to think freely, to create and be a little bourgeois.

Ms. Mandache worries about the problems of modern Romania — and sees Elisabeta Rizea as a possible solution. "She had something cosmic about her, she was one of our great visionaries. She understood evil in a chaotic world. She loved her nation." Ms. Mandache talked about how today's Romanians lack unity and patriotism. "Why is it that our country cannot succeed in being unified? Why is there so much jealousy? Nobody knows what good values are anymore."

She sighed as she talked about the few good things that Communism instilled, both directly and unintentionally. For one, Communists invested in culture, especially theatre. "Culture has always been one of our most potent weapons. It's true that during Communism we walked around looking down all the time. It was a harsh,



Actress and producer Rodica Mandache finds Elisabeta Rizea a life-changing source of inspiration.

horrifying reality that we lived. We had no access to the outside world. We couldn't see American movies. But at least I felt I was respected [as an actress]. Now I feel disrespected. Back then we were united in front of the big evil [communism]. Now, we're living in a great rupture amongst ourselves. At this time, patriotic sentiment is entirely missing."

Ms. Mandache, with whom I've become friends since, talked about her acting in a show last year honoring former Romanian ruler Stefan the Great — a 15th-century leader who during Communism, and under the leadership of former President and former Communist party member Ion Iliescu, took on epic proportions. Some artists and historians are, in fact, accusing Communists of having used this medieval ruler to promote a false sense of nationalism to serve their own propaganda. For all his faults, Mr. Iliescu, Ms. Mandache said, is an admirer of Stefan the Great, as well as culture — when she performed the play, Mr. Iliescu made a point of coming over to recite verses by Mihai Eminescu, Romania's national poet. Ms. Mandache said that young people nowadays do not know Eminescu verses by heart, nor do they care about leaders like Stefan the Great. "At this hour, patriotic sentiment invites enmity."

Romanians, she said, are so ashamed of themselves that they flee the country in droves. Once abroad, they don't look back. To help change that, she is proposing to take her play and role about Elisabeta Rizea on a circuit here and abroad, in order to help mend the "rupture" between expatriates and the mother country. With Elisabeta Rizea, Ms. Mandache is finding a new calling. "As an actress it's hard to find the right roles. I'm neither beautiful nor ugly, neither old nor young." She recently had an audience with the culture minister, who has agreed to put one of her key aides in charge of Ms. Mandache's project. One idea is to stage the play as a fundraiser for Ms. Rizea's monument in Bucharest. Ms. Mandache is playing German governess Charlotta Ivanovna in Chekhov's "The Cherry Orchard." (The actual translation of the play into Romanian or Russian is "The Sour Cherry Orchard," sour cherries being popu-

lar fruit in this part of the world — used in baking and juice making — and an acquired taste for foreigners, as well as English translators, it seems.) In its ambivalence, this play about new beginnings is a fitting one for her and for Romania in transition. The fact that Madame Ranevskaya and her family have to abandon the ancestral estate and a way of life they more or less take for granted, can be interpreted as a tipping point to action. Critics have been divided in calling the play tragic and hopeful. Nostalgia and the feeling of victimization, so prevalent in these parts of the world, are cultural manifestations that cannot be changed overnight. But at some point, Romania will have to start looking ahead and take charge of its orchard. Ms. Mandache is poised to help make that happen.

Fifteen years of talk inertia: Too little, too late

The explanation for why Romania's inertia has lasted 15 years is more complex than critics make it out to be. I have heard all sorts of opinions from Romanians who either dismiss themselves as innately lazy and corrupt or claim that this nation has been more disadvantaged than other former Soviet-Communist-satellite states that are now part of the European Union (such as Hungary or the Czech Republic) — whether for historic reasons or pure geographical proximity to Western borders. I rather think that once they fully understand an accurate version of their history — not the one force-fed to them by Communists — Romanians will be able to emerge from the fog.

Perhaps they needed this much time to talk about what happened, to reconcile conflicts on their own terms. Romanians *love* to talk. As Mr. Mihaiu said on radio recently, "This is how it is with us in the Balkans, we talk more than we build." In this regard, they kept all the Latin and Turkish influences. Getting together to have a cigar, a cup of coffee (or a beer) and a good session of "*taifas*," a word derived from Turkish and loosely translated as a prolonged and unhurried "chat," is a popular pastime here. It can take the place of organized activity — an invitation to sit around for a *taifas* or the mere coincidence of running into a friend or neighbor on the street can end up taking the better part of a day. Once trapped into social reconnaissance, one doesn't escape easily. In fact, Romanians welcome any occasion to chat, so strangers can become fast friends over something as ordinary as, well, the ripeness of the sour cherries they bought at the market. The sunglasses I keep handy at all times are to be used, especially when I'm in a hurry, as protection against this kind of friendly fire.

As I understand it, Romanians talked a lot about their Communist past right after the 1989 Revolution. I wonder if Hungarians or the Czechs did as much talking — and if they didn't, did they spend their time building nations instead? The topic of the past regime surfaces in a number of papers and TV talk shows here. One big story has been the delay in declassification of files formerly in the possession of the secret police and their transfer to

CNSAS (Council for the Study of Security Archives), an institute formed in 1999 whose mission is to study them and make them public. It seems that many important files are missing or have been destroyed by the former Communists who came to power after 1989 and stayed for much of the last 15 years, while the rest have languished in various ministries. It was only this week, however, that the first shipment of intelligence files — some 500,000 documents containing dossiers on 20,000 informers — were shipped with big fanfare to the institute. Next to come will be files of those spied upon. “We’re celebrating the first step of our entrance into normality,” said a member of CNSAS. He added that the documents will help redress injustice and teach Romanians “how not to be.”

Some say that handing over these documents is not enough. Constantin Ticu Dumitrescu, president of the National Association of Former Political Prisoners (AFDPR), is unhappy about this declassification as well as the way the moral process of communism has evolved in the last 15 years. An outspoken critic of Communism and a former prisoner who spent 11 years in jail under the old regime, he is a tireless defender of the rights of the survivors of what he calls “the odious communist tyranny.” His organization, which at its launch in December 1990 had 98,700 members, has been reduced to just about half that number, mostly because of a high rate of mortality.

Mr. Dumitrescu is one Romanian with no time for *taifas*. He keeps up a grueling travel and media schedule to fight for change as well as air his “uncomfortable” views, as he calls them. A former Senator belonging to the first party founded after the Revolution (the National Peasant Christian Democratic Party, which recently changed its name to the Popular Christian Democratic Party), he is fighting a battle on many fronts. For one, he is more concerned with the files that *aren’t* being handed to CNSAS for reasons of national security — he insists that the public has a right to have access to those important dossiers as well. “What national security can there be when we’re talking about a system that supposedly went down 15 years ago?” he asks. He is the proponent of the law that established CNSAS and a main supporter of a 15-year-old proclamation signed in the city of Timisoara, where the anti-communist Revolution began, to clean Romania’s leadership of former Communists.

I managed to pin down Mr. Dumitrescu for as long as he allowed — less than 30 minutes, the day after he had gone to Timisoara to celebrate the anniversary of that proclamation, along with Romania’s President Traian Basescu and former King Michael. Like many Romanians in transition, he is always on the go, perhaps making up time for the decades this country has stood in place. His office is at the headquarters of AFDPR, which rents the second floor of a former aristocratic villa that, like many similar Bucharest mansions, is in great need of repair. I waited outside his office for a while, since he was busy scribbling an opinion column to be published next day in a national newspaper. A golden chandelier missing the

central piece hung from high ceilings, gracing a room mourning its bygone lustre. Furnishing consisted of a few old wooden desks, chairs (one of which had fallen apart), and pictures of Romania’s royal family. Mr. Dumitrescu doesn’t use a computer, so from time to time he called out to his secretary to pick up his handwritten notes, type them out, and later input several corrections. His two office assistants, both women in their fifties, tip-toed around this man who gives orders with the sureness of a commando. Could it be that they were afraid? Is it possible that Communism managed to instill even among its victims and martyrs an air of intolerance and cult of personality that is not always democratic?

Once in his office, I waited some more as he took a phone call about his upcoming appearance on TV, along with former Romanian President Emil Constantinescu, to discuss the presence of Communist-trained secret police who remain at the helm of the nation. He did find time, however, to autograph for me a glossy book that he recently helped write on behalf of AFDPR about various political prisons of the last regime. According to this organization, between 1945-1989, Communists ran at least 130 prisons and gulags and arrested, imprisoned or deported more than two million Romanians — up to 20 per cent of victims were killed or exterminated. Of course, people like him are still fighting to obtain all the documents that could expose the extent of the Communist tyranny. Knowing how tight his foundation’s funds were, I offered to pay for the book. He declined, saying it was given as a gift. For the better time of our meeting, Mr. Dumitrescu, a man of short build yet made of steel (he often lifts his pointer finger often to mark important phrases) enumerated his actions of the last 15 years. When I tried asking questions he stopped me by saying we had “five minutes left, please allow me to finish my ideas, and take notes.”

I can excuse his directness, most likely an expression of exasperation. His continued battle against Communism and its memories has produced only a few fruits. The fact that some former secret-police files are being made public is due in large part to his efforts. However, as he pointed out, the most important documents have yet to be released. For the delay, he blames former Communists in power until recently, calling former President Ion Iliescu, who is likely to be elected head of his Socialist Democrat Party of this spring and thus remain in politics, “a curse on our people.” Mr. Dumitrescu is also dissatisfied with the way the new administration has kept former Communists in charge of key posts, such as intelligence and police.

He is asking the new government to do what hasn’t been done in 15 years: start rectifying the wrongs committed under Communism, through words and, most important, deeds. First on his list is requesting that President Basescu and his leadership ask forgiveness on behalf of Romania to “the hundreds of thousands who lost everything they held dear in the red genocide” of Com-

munism. Mr. Basescu recently made a trip to Washington and shed tears at the Holocaust Museum. "I especially want to remind [Basescu] now, after he bowed at the Holocaust Museum in Washington, and saw how others know to honor the memory of those killed in the Nazi holocaust, what we have also asked him," Mr. Dumitrescu said. "We too ought to learn from Jewish people, who even today are hunting down their killers, at least how to honor the memory of those killed." In addition to the courtesy apology to victims of Communism and their families, Mr. Dumitrescu is asking the government to help bring to fruition a Monument to the Fight and Sacrifice against Communism, a monument which was approved some years ago but never built.

Americans make monuments out of trees — while Romanians talk

Romanians often refer to the Holocaust Museum as a successful example of honoring victims and as contrast to the glaring absence of anything similar built in remembrance of Romania's recent history of Communist repression. "Americans manage to make monuments out of trees and we lose whatever we have," said Micaela Ghitescu, the former political prisoner and magazine editor I interviewed for the last newsletter. She meant to compliment American people for their ability to mobilize when necessary, but she implicitly bemoaned Romanians' own lack of leadership. Ms. Ghitescu and the foundation that supports her magazine, *Memoria*, tried without success to establish a museum on the site of a former prison (where she also served time) just outside Bucharest. Bureaucracy, lack of funds, and general inertia proved insurmountable, she said. Besides a museum built on the site of a former political prison in Sighet, in the far northern part of the country, virtually nothing else has been erected to memorialize suffering under Communism. As well-known print and TV journalist Robert Turcescu wrote recently in a weekly column, "For the adolescents of years past but also for the foreigners who arrive in Romania, communism and its troubles are marked only in the pages of some of our history books and through the architectural horror called 'House of the People [now known as Palace of the Parliament.]' For reasons that probably have to do with our character and stupidity, we simply cannot gather under the same roof the hundred of thousands of proofs of our suffering that lasted over dozens of years."

The gift of gab, a Romanian and perhaps Balkan trait, has also stood in the way of constructive remembrance, in my opinion. They already adore most things American, so when buying Nikes perhaps people here should also learn to apply the "Just do it" pragmatism that comes with the shoes. The problem hasn't been the absence of ideas or discussion. Every day I read or I hear opinions about what ought to be done to avenge victims of Communism. Just recently, a proposal from a congressman to turn an expensive wing of the Palace of the Parliament that now serves as an often-empty Museum of Modern

Art into a Museum of the horrors of Communism died a sudden death. This was, of course, a subtle jab by this member of the party now in power at the former leadership whose idea the art museum was. "This way, the hundreds of thousands of dollars spent for the building of the [art] museum will gain an uncontested utility for Romanian society, now and in the future," the politician's press release said. As Mr. Dumitrescu and Ms. Ghitescu will attest, many other, less politically motivated, proposals have come and gone. And the memory of the recent past is regularly fueled by passion-filled articles, books, autobiographies (Mr. Dumitrescu will launch a memoir soon) on the subject.

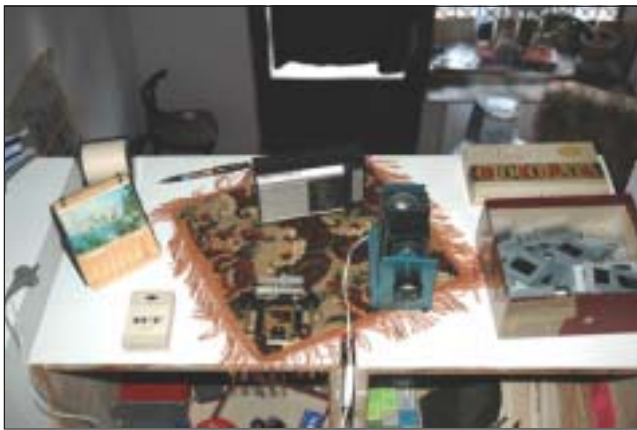
Talk can be therapeutic but sometimes it isn't enough of a healer. Removing the political and passionate rhetoric may be what Romanians need in order to move forward — and perhaps a helpful exercise in building a future. Creating a monument, or a building of any sort, involves many important steps, including analysis, perspective, consensus and projection. My fear is that Romanians haven't gotten to these steps yet. A construction is a statement of sorts, and yet Romanians may not know what to say at this point.

One of the more effective and interesting exhibits about Communism to have taken place here was one briefly displayed last fall under the auspices of the Young Artists Biennial. Organized by a 24-year-old social anthropologist with the help of a group of artist friends, the small show featured objects illustrating the private lives of Romanians during Communism. Called "Domestic Red," the show gathered objects from that era, including photos, newspapers, cosmetic items, even an abortion kit (because of dictator Nicolae Ceausescu's draconian anti-abortion laws, many pregnant women performed abortions on themselves) to recreate Romanians' daily life. The artists, all under 30, recreated a dwelling with objects available on the market (records, books, Romanian-made creams and lotions) and those from abroad that were hard to get, such as Kent cigarettes, Pepsi-Cola, Pampers diapers, oranges or Ballantine's whiskey. In the exhibit, these objects were placed on an upper shelf, to show that they were out of reach for ordinary Romanians. During Communism, contact with foreigners and visits abroad were heavily monitored and often forbidden,

The organizer, Gabriela Cristea (a dark-haired young woman with daredevil eyes who also hosts a short morning segment on TV on Romanian folklore), said that the show was not meant to be negative. "We weren't trying to send a unique message. Those who entered the room chose to see significance in their own way, according to their own experiences." Ms. Cristea, whom I met recently, said that the "perspective that dominates in Romania [regarding the Communist era] is an overly nationalistic and accusatory one. "We talk about the public space, intellectuals and others who were made to kneel but nothing about the experience of the ordinary man. And nobody's experience was alike. We cannot treat everything as if it

were white or black." Ms. Cristea said that people of wealth suffered a lot more than those of fewer means, certainly in the beginning. She explained that the social class would thus have a different take on the period. During that time, proletarians and poor peasants, for example, received better education and housing, all at the expense of the bourgeois — the latter would obviously be more embittered by the last regime. "It's different for people like me. My parents came from the countryside to study at university. Their perspective is along the lines of 'if the Comrade [Ceausescu] hadn't been around to get them into university in the city, they would have been left behind holding the hoe.'"

She said that unfortunately, Romania doesn't have a long tradition in museography, nor many books on how to create exhibits. She got the idea for this "anthropological" style of exhibiting Communism (and creating meaning by letting carefully arranged objects, instead of rhetoric, do the talking) after visiting other European museums on Communism, especially the House of Terror in Budapest, which displays Nazism and Communism side by side, and the Centrum in Berlin. In Budapest, she watched people coming out of the museum and



A recent exhibit about private life under Communism was small but effective" photo credit, Andreea Drogeanu.

thought that they didn't get much out of it. They didn't ask questions, apparently, which Ms. Cristea said is a "dangerous thing, because Communism wasn't just about terror and blood. "Germans have a different way of showing it; they display objects mostly. It's a more nostalgic perspective. There is an ethnography of the objects — tea cups, mugs, TV sets..."

The theme of the Biennial had been violence in images but she and her exhibit colleagues thought it would be more interesting to illustrate Communism without images of violence. Even so, some visitors refused to enter the show because they were overwhelmed by painful memories. A woman in her seventies told Ms. Cristea that she "wasn't ready" the first time she tried but that she would come back at a later date. She never returned. Others who came were touched by nostalgia as they took in the objects. And some were repulsed, as was a friend of her mother's who said that she got a "bitter taste" just by looking at the "poverty of the objects."

Ms. Cristea said that her own perspective on the show leans towards the nostalgic. "As young people, we all got caught up in what probably looks like a museum of our childhood, with childish objects. Our teacher said that this is not an exhibit about communism, it's a phantasm, because we cannot know everything that happened." The name for the exhibit reflects that soft focus as well. The show included old photos, games, toys and music records from that time. "Red here is a domestic red, warm and cozy, because in the house, as in the kitchen, it was warm. Mother was cooking all the goodies on earth. She came home from work at 4 or 5, not at 10, the way it happens today."

At the end of our meeting, held at my apartment, Ms. Cristea asked me to help her obtain a Fulbright scholarship to study ethnography and museography in the United States. "Here is what I need from you," she prefaced the request. Her question, at once innocent and brazen, surprised me. I appreciated her initiative, however. I told her that I can only help with advice but that if she were able to go abroad on a grant, she should learn as much as she could and then come back. Romania needs her. □

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