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ROMANIA

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Memories of a Recent Communist Past: Part I

By Cristina Merrill

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BUCHAREST, Romania—Winter made a late entrance, causing fatalists to despair over lack of snow. The mythical still plays a role here in justifying events beyond Romanians' control: This could be a sign that Gods must be angry or that the new deity of capitalism has heated up Romania's own ozone to the point of depriving students of an extended Christmas vacation. Starting school late as a result of snow delays is a much-awaited ritual among children. The mild season affected adults as well, especially women eager to display their fancy, hirsute cold-weather wear — or whatever bourgeois dignity the Communist worker uniform hadn't washed away — that the folks at PETA would love to hate. Babushkas defied 50-degree temperatures in fur-lined boots, coats and hats, while younger women opted for a more modern, faux-animal-skin garb. "*Ou sont les neiges d'antan?*" a friend moaned.

Everyone's prayers were answered in the end. Snow finally came, with a Siberian vengeance. Thick, crisp and large-laced flakes draped the city for a whole weekend. The city wore the white coat well at first. Bucharest looked inviting, peaceful, blissfully eternal. Even the House of Parliament, that monument to greed and bad taste built by former dictator Nicolae Ceausescu for himself, looked inviting. But the reverie ended as soon as piled-up snow got in the way of driving, walking, shopping. Large streets were cleared eventually but the rest of the city (and much of Bucharest is made up of tiny streets) was left to Godot, who never came. Whether Romanians became overly Latin in their *laissez-faire* or overly democratic (during Ceausescu's time brigades of shovelers and broom-pushers



Even the tasteless Palace of the Parliament building that Romania's late dictator built looked inviting in the snow.

would have been sent by force on patriotic duty), little was done to clear sidewalks of snow, which soon turned to ice once temperatures dropped to zero degrees Celsius. For a second I considered using high heels as crampons.

I asked Bogdan, a Parliament guard, why nobody cared to clear the long street surrounding the building Romanians proudly claim is the second largest in the world after the Pentagon. This is my running route as well, so clearing snow here was a pressing topic for me. He shrugged his shoulders and said that the “gypsy cleaners” hadn’t showed up for work. I wondered if those poor children of India, so vilified in Eastern Europe and adored by the West, were responsible for the neglect of the rest of Bucharest. Even the National Theatre, the cultural pride of residents, was left *au naturel*. The night I went to a play, I saw an elegant woman slip, fall and hit her head on the pavement right in front of the entrance. In America, democratic revenge would have meant a big lawsuit against the theater.

And yet I’m willing to bet that civic action will become a reflex for Romanians, in time. For decades they have been forced by an authoritarian regime to sacrifice for a public good that was never theirs. In the transition phase since the end of the Communist regime in 1989, they have slowly learned about some things that come with a free society, such as a free press. Now they’re in the “greed is good” phase. “Don’t expect too much civic spirit from us yet,” said a friend in his early 30s, John Vranceanu. He said that people here are still out for themselves, offering another pearl of Romanian wisdom akin to our “dog eat dog” idiom, that translates as “whoever gets the chance to chew on bones, should do it” (“*Cine poate oase roade*”). Once life becomes easier, and bones more available, my assumption is that Romanians will give generously. It’s happening already to some extent. I was pleased to see that a celebrity-TV telethon, the first of its kind, was organized last month to raise money to help tsunami victims. Even poor pensioners chipped in. My landlady and her husband have decided to add to their natural family by adopting a baby from Asia, not necessarily because of the natural disaster, but in any event an encouraging development in overcoming stereotypes and racial prejudice and doing good.

Having lived here for nine months now, I now know that Romanians, a highly religious and spiritual people, are naturally very kind. They are “*milosi*,” (pronounced Mee-loash) a word with Slavic roots meaning “merciful” or “good and willing to please in a Christian way” and “taking pity on someone in difficulty.” For instance, after I dropped by mistake a heavy glass container of roasted peppers on a woman’s foot, she bent to pick it up and said she was glad it [the container] didn’t break! Another time, I left a bouquet of flowers at a hotel desk until after my meeting was over. I returned to find out that the girl at the desk had voluntarily kept the flowers in water the whole time, to prevent them from wilting. There is also the check-out girl at the corner shop who always has a smile and a kind word for the kids whose mothers are

waiting in line to pay — or strangers who have stopped to alert me, at one time or another, that my lipstick is smudging, my flimsy shopping bag is about to break or that dry cleaning is dragging in the mud. There are even more heart-warming acts I could add to the above that make me forget days when I have no Internet, hot water, cooking gas, or get taken on marathon tours of Bucharest by sly drivers bent on squeezing money out of me (“So, where in America do you live, “ they always ask first) — and see past the tough surface of today’s Romania to appreciate that her genuine humanity will help her prevail. I am hopelessly in love with an imperfect and sometimes perfectly maddening country. As my friend Cora Motoc quoted from a saying, “I am afflicted with Romania.”

Communism legacies: Fear, secrecy, suspicion

I know I’m stating the obvious when I say that four decades of dictatorship left deep scars on this nation, especially psychological ones. Communism enforced obedience, homogeneity and false nationalism, altering a nation’s individual and collective identity. It rewrote history with a heavy hand for the sake of self-serving propaganda, and it punished all attempts to discern truth from fiction, real from surreal. And this ended only 15 years ago.

Ceausescu haunts this country to this day. Last year, a report showed, his name was mentioned in 439 radio and television broadcasts. He ranked third in the number of times Parliamentary leaders referred to him. January 26, his birthday, used to be a dreaded time of endless parades, homages and endless articles written in his honor. There are still those who on this day convene at his Bucharest cemetery to bemoan the death of a man who would have turned 87 this year. One hundred nostalgics turned up at his tomb to mourn him. “Those criminals killed you!” one woman cried desperately. “You are the God of the whole of Romania.”

Others celebrate his disappearance. A band called “Dead Ceausescus” plays at endless parties this time of year. The satire weekly “*Academia Catavencu*” published a special pull-out section, under the big red headline “For Your Birthday, Daddy!”, a take on the Creator-like status Ceausescu had attained. The newspaper never misses a chance to refer to him as the “Shot One.” In typical *Catavencu* hilarious fashion, the section pokes fun at the propaganda language used before 1989, the kinds of celebrations people here were forced to attend, even the television program in honor of his birthday. For example, the evening schedule for Thursday, January 26, 1989, began at 19:25 with a documentary (“in color”) called “The great son of the country — high homage and gratitude from the people.” A musical show — “Hymn for the leader of the country” — began at 19:45. An hour later, a special one-hour production started: “With the people, for the people.”

Even after that long and dark period, Romanians



A recent exhibit about communism had Ceausescu as a central figure.

keep dipping into their Communist past for reference points, whether out of nostalgia (some spent a lifetime under Communism, others the sweetest years of childhood) or because they didn't know how else to view life. I spoke with a friend recently about the meaning of oranges and mandarins for people of our generation. These fruits were not available throughout the year, except during winter holidays — and then getting them was a real struggle for members of the family. Mothers, fathers, grandmothers and godparents were charged with waiting in lines to “procure” (a much-used word in this period that also meant scoring a small victory, or besting the tyrannical system) them for children. Adults typically went without. I still associate the fruits with Christmas. “Of course you do,” my friend said, “you’ll always be a Ceausista,” meaning that I have been marked by that time.

I must have had Ceausista written all over my face last month when I went to visit an exhibit called “The end of dictatorship” at the History Museum. A friendly guard nearby heard me sigh at the sight of Ceausescu’s framed portrait (omnipresent before December 1989) and came over to chat and share his own experiences with me: the lack of food, light, freedom. “This is why I get so mad when old people get nostalgic about Ceausescu. I screamed at them the other day when they started again with ‘how much better things were’ back then. We had nothing. By the end we couldn’t find sugar, flour and bread.” The exhibit was, I thought, too small to reflect the vast suffering of forced social engineering the Communists enforced between 1945 and 1989. Romanians, who are still learning about museography, have yet to come to terms with

displaying their recent painful past. On one side it showed pictures, documents and objects illustrating this turbulent period. On the other were pictures from December 1989, with some personal objects belonging to those who died in the revolution.

Noteworthy were the few files from the secret service documenting the recruiting of a young student informer who was to operate under the codename “Tantu.” “The young man is well developed physically and mentally. He’s well liked in his group and among colleagues.” Other interesting documents showed secret correspondence by intelligence officers about a famous dissident, Doina Cornea, who from 1974 on was overheard “making inappropriate comments” and taking “an enemy’s attitude and position” about the regime in her intercepted conversations. Officers proposed to “start legal action with the purpose of arrest for committing the offence of propaganda against the socialist order.” Also displayed were intelligence photos of a British journalist, probably suspected of having connections with dissidents and numerous letters sent to “Free Europe” by anti-Communist leader Radu Filipescu, deploring the “abuses” of the Ceausescu regime and urging the West to free a number of jailed journalists. I shuddered at the sight of four VCR-size machines, displayed here, which were once used to intercept telephone conversations.

Exhibit organizers chose to post a few reminders of



During Communism, devices like these were used to intercept private communication of Romanians and foreigners.

the Communist era: 1966, the law outlawing abortion. In 1981, limits on monthly gasoline rations to three liters, hot water to once a week and electricity cut off a few hours daily. In 1985, failing to report a conversation with a foreigner was deemed a legal offence. Organizers summed up “the Ceausescu era” by taping sheets of paper over a rug glorifying the dead leader, with each sheet carrying a single word: “Cold,” “Hunger,” “Terror,” “Rationing,” “Dictatorship,” “Secret Police,” “Lines,” “Marches,” “Arrests,” “Dark,” “Censorship.” No wonder my embittered father has chosen not to return to this country in 22 years. Memories of that time are hard to overcome.

Indoctrination

Reconstructing one’s true history in the recent aftermath becomes a very complex task. Begun right after the revolution, this process has taken many twists and turns but is far from evolving smoothly. Financial hardships caused by transition dampened initial euphoria. Also, for most of the last 15 years, former Communists have been at the helm. Save for the NATO and European-Union carrots that kept leaders from reverting to old-regime forceful tactics, the nation’s healing didn’t happen as fast as it should have.

Indoctrination cannot be washed away easily. It becomes a reflex over a long time. Of course not everyone believed the Communist propaganda against the “imperialists” and “fascists” of the Western world. Still, foreigners and expatriates elicit a strange curiosity from some Romanians. They look different, for one, and Communism preached sameness. Also, the tyranny of secrecy and isolation with which the old regime operated made for ignorance and shed suspicion on those who stood out. What if they were spies? Older people still share that view. My English friend Judy says that she noticed her landlady going through her family trash, looking for clues. Although I still don’t like it, I have come to expect, especially as an ICWA fellow, that people will look at me askance. My mother’s friend, in fact, told me she had thought of me as Mata Hari. (Beware the suspicious; I only swing to disco, not exotic dance as she did.) “You mean you thought I was a spy,” I asked Elena. “My dear, it’s not that I thought, I *think*,” she laughed, adding that she and her partner had often joked and talked about that.

As those close to me know first-hand, I had a spied-on meltdown soon after the holidays, when the lady whose newsstand I often visit for papers kept mentioning that I was being followed. “Haven’t you looked back, ever?” she would ask in her raspy voice. “Anyway, it’s good to have your own personal guard.” This came after a few disturbing incidents, including receiving voice messages on my cell phone with bits of recorded (uncompromising) conversations I’d had with friends. Was it real, was it imagined? I may never know, but suspicion



The Ceausescu Era meant “Cold,” “Hunger,” “Terror,” “Rationing,” “Dictatorship,” “Secret Police,” among other things.

in itself is maddening enough. It didn’t help that after the December elections, the press talked about the need to reform Romania’s relatively large and disorganized internal spy network. Maybe to justify his role, the head of the top intelligence agency announced that his people were tapping the phones of two Romanian journalists suspected of having connections with foreign intelligence services. Can anyone blame me for being paranoid? Actually, my reaction was an angry one over the stupidity of the announcement and the ignorance of anyone who believed it. What secrets would there be to reveal that haven’t been sold already, and probably not by journalists but by people in power? Three weeks later no such names of “spies” have been released.

The education of a little rebel by Vivi Anghel

One of the most damaging legacies of the old regime, as in most authoritarian societies, was the fear to be individualistic — the fear to speak critically, to inquire, to stand out, to think differently and to share information freely. Romanians have been afraid to talk openly about a history they still don’t know. During Communism, most people lived a tortured double life: a public one, doing the “duty” of the regime, and a private one at home, where they felt less censored — though often people refrained from saying too much there, out of fear that a neighbor or a friend might be an informer and turn them in.

It is said that one out of every three Romanians was an informer. It was assumed that everyone’s phone was bugged. Sometimes parents spied on their own children, even with the best intentions. A friend’s mother confessed recently that she had a friend who worked for the telephone company listen in on her teenage daughter’s conversations, to make sure she didn’t hang out with the wrong young men. The rite of secrecy, and fear, was passed on to children, who were often told to keep quiet in matters of politics, if they were even told anything at all. Some families simply didn’t discuss politics — or

pursued activities of an “illegal” nature, such as listening to Voice of America or Radio Free Europe, when children were not home.

My friend Liviu Iancu, 29, a journalist, grew up during Communism in a village outside Bucharest, the son of a school superintendent. Even though his parents never criticized the Ceausescu regime at home, Liviu rebelled against it at a young age. One time, he got in trouble for refusing to put on the red necktie young “pioneers” were required to wear as part of their uniform. Worse, he took it out and stepped on it in front of the school inspector. The Securitate, Romania’s secret police, warned his father to straighten out his nonconformist “sick” boy. After a few more similar incidents his father got arrested — and escaped severe punishment only because he’d known a powerful Communist general since childhood. Liviu eventually got kicked out of school in 12th grade, in November 1989, for telling jokes about Communism. Had it not been for the revolution that ended the regime a month later, Liviu would have been sent to a trade school or to hard labor on the Black Sea Canal, dubbed the “Channel of Death.” This grand project of Communists to link the Danube to the sea was where political dissidents were sent to work, and eventually die — 60,000 people apparently perished there.

Liviu’s “bad” influence had been his Romanian-language tutor, a writer who taught him about the “reality” outside the propaganda. The following is what Liviu told me about his beloved teacher:

I was 13, and a difficult, rebellious child. I had already put my parents in awkward situations when, after they tried introducing me to Romanian-language teachers, I would say I didn't like them and I had no interest in taking preparatory lessons [for entrance into high school]. The last solution, they thought, was Vivi Anghel, a young professor of Romanian language who was considered a daring critic of the Communist regime. My parents were afraid of his influence on me, but they were more afraid that I wasn't sufficiently prepared in Romanian language to pass the admission exam without tutoring. This is how I got to meet him. We shook hands, I introduced myself and we kept talking in the apartment where he lived along with nine or ten thousand books. We sat at the table and, the good child that I was, I took out the Romanian language manual for seventh graders.

“Open it to the first page,” said Vivi. I did, to the page where Ceausescu’s portrait was (as with all manuals), a fat, smiling and much younger Ceausescu than his 70 years (in 1988). “Who is this?” asked Vivi. “What do you mean?” I asked, puzzled, “It is Comrade Nicolae Ceausescu, the president of the Socialist Republic of Romania and Secretary General of the Romanian Communist Party!” I answered triumphantly, happy that memory was helping me remember all the titles of the man I then thought was the protector of all Romanians.

Vivi smiled, lit a cigarette and began telling me what Communism really meant, what Romania was like between the wars.

He told me about [famous writers] Cioran, Eliade. He told me about people in other countries who did not worry about having enough food, who could speak freely, and so on. I thought at that time, for example, that people in America constantly shot one another on the streets, that they had no work and had psychological problems, that American women were drunks like Sue Ellen in “Dallas.” After his stories, Vivi told me to take out a pen and began drawing horns on Comrade Ceausescu’s picture, with fangs and all. Alone with him in a small apartment in a provincial town, I realized for the first time that Ceausescu is not a god, but that he is a human being like the rest of us, and a very bad one. Following my meeting with Vivi, I left with a thought: to convince my school mates that Ceausescu is a monster. Months on end I told them during breaks what I learned from Vivi about America, France, about the Latin Quarter, and other places.

Vivi Anghel died a few years ago, of throat cancer. Liviu still mourns him as a man “too sensitive for the mercantilism that breathed down our necks. I don’t know anyone as close to Don Quixote as he was, anyone as naïve, gullible, eternally deceived and hopeful...He is, as I once told him after many drinks, an unlucky cross between Madame Bovary and Don Quixote...That’s how we Romanians are, anyway, but in him these characteristics were more pronounced than in the rest of us.”

Remembering the pain: Memoria

The confused and bizarre environment in which Liviu, I and Vivi Anghel grew up left deep imprints, some more visible than others. A child growing up in an authoritarian regime is forever marked, and more so if he realizes early-on a disharmony between private and public life. Alienation gets worse later, for the adult unable to communicate freely in order to learn about his universe and develop an inner compass. And that’s in the best of cases. Liviu and I were lucky not to have been beaten, imprisoned or tortured, but we know people who truly suffered. In addition to our own memories of life under the former regime, we also carry the subconscious burden of not having been able to avenge those who were unjustly punished. Call it collective guilt, or collective hopelessness. It’s not my place to assess parallels between the Holocaust and Communism, two sufficiently vast subjects on their own. But having claimed about 100 million victims (60 million in China alone), without counting the trauma experienced by friends and relatives, Communism can easily classify as one of the worst man-made disasters of the world. Unlike the Nazis, Communists didn’t keep detailed records of victims or their plans, which makes remembrance, and healing, more difficult. Manipulation of information, lies and secrecy were their weapons.

How to begin to collect the information in order to address the pain? Eager to uncover their recent history, Romanians researched and published many accounts soon after the revolution, detailing wrongs committed by Communists. The euphoria subsided once life in transition became a financial struggle. One of the first such ef-

forts, begun 15 years ago this fall, is *Memoria*, or *Memory: a magazine of arrested thinking*. Banu Radulescu, the now-deceased editor, also a doctor, respected fiction writer and former political prisoner, wrote a passionate first editorial in which he laid out the reasons for launching the publication: “Killing of people, arrests, deportations, exiles, dislocations, marginalizations, censorship etc., razing of villages, monuments, forbidding of books, trips abroad, cultural contacts; silence when it came to criticism of Communists’ works, and if not complete silence, falsification: of biographies and all other works: in brief, assassination of our people’s memory.”

The aim of the publication, Mr. Radulescu went on, was to “give back to people the physical function of memory. To allow it to breathe air and, with her natural strength, in the only natural climate, unadulterated.” The magazine, which still comes out four times a year, has fallen on hard transition times. Because of dwindling subscriptions and subsidies, *Memoria* decreased its run from 50,000 copies in the first year, to only 2,500 today. Mr. Radulescu gave it his constant loving care, even while dying. Since 1998, Micaela Ghitescu, a former political prisoner, has served as editor in chief.

I found Ms. Ghitescu, and the magazine office, on the second floor of the less attractive end of a building belonging to the Romanian Writers’ Union. The front, a majestic former estate, has been rented out to a casino — the juxtaposition says plenty about what society values in transition. *Memoria*’s one-room office on the second floor is cozy, however, a throwback to what I imagine an office may have looked like in post-war Paris: large windows, wooden desks, quirky fixtures, books everywhere. As a black and white photo, it could have been a Robert Doisneau *Éditions du Désastre* image. Inside, I met with Ms. Ghitescu, two other editors and an assistant, all over the age of 60. Ms. Ghitescu, a soft-spoken, kind and polite woman in her early 70s, beckoned me to sit down. Before our meeting, I had read through several back issues and discovered why the existence of this magazine is vital. The articles, written by contributors, cover a history up to 1990 unknown to me before — and I’m sure to others as well: personal accounts of imprisonment and torture, various suppressed rebellions, biographies of those who tried to fight a totalitarian system and lost (save for the remembrance in this publication), and stories about various detention centers across Romania. The oft-published map of prisons and extermination centers, or “the geography of detention” is frightening in itself.

This is a history I never learned as a child in Romania. “None of us knew too much, either,” Ms. Ghitescu said, quietly. I had planned to speak with her about the

history of the magazine and some of the topics it covered, but after hearing Ms. Ghitescu’s story as an unlikely political prisoner, I realized that she stands alone for what *Memoria* seeks to illustrate about Communism: it’s the scream in Edvard Munch’s famous painting, a cry deafening in its silence, unforgettable. I will try to do justice, below, to her story. And as I tell it, her cry is heard. I know I’m helping her, and others like her, heal. I’m still haunted by her calm and even voice, her kindness, her affability and timidity — a woman incapable of anger and resentment over her cruel treatment. I did notice the measured and conscious cadence of her speech, as if she still watched what she said. If there is such a thing as banality of evil, Ms. Ghitescu could be martyrdom in the simplest form.

Interview with a former political prisoner: the arrest

Ms. Ghitescu was a third-year philology student when she was arrested in 1952. As the daughter of a doctor, she was considered a member of the bourgeoisie and accordingly discriminated against. In this period, people of means had their ID cards (*buletine de identitate*) stamped with class-status rankings. My mother did, too. Being so marked affected job prospects and schooling — basically, proletarians and members of the Communist party had first dibs on all. In her position, Ms. Ghitescu and a friend of similar class were required to pay the highest annual school taxes —while Communism proclaimed free education for all.

Her fault lay in having corresponded as a teenager with the director of a French-language high school where she had taken lessons. Once Soviet occupation of Romania brought Communism in 1948, the French school, as were all bourgeois institutions, was closed down and the director, Marcel Fontaine, deported. He founded a radio



Micaela Ghitescu, editor of *Memoria*, one of the first Romanian publications to come to expose the recent communist past.

station in Paris covering the Communist occupation of Eastern Europe and served as chief of the Romanian-language section. Because of his anti-Communist editorials, Mr. Fontaine went on the enemies' list of Romania's new leaders.

Ms. Ghitescu was admitted to university in 1949 and continued corresponding with Mr. Fontaine and his wife, an increasingly difficult task given the Communists' paranoia over exchanges with the Western world. Anyone sending letters abroad had to bring an ID card to the post office, thus, leaving an official record of the correspondence that could make the sender vulnerable later on. She found a way to send letters through the French embassy. "But they were not spying letters, we just wrote to say all was well. I recall that we once corresponded during the holidays and he described the windows of shops, how lively they were compared to those in Romania."

She was arrested in October 1952, as part of the rounding-up of those who had associations with foreign embassies, and thus were believed to have spied. Twelve people from the French high school were arrested, mostly teachers and students. Included in the group of 100 French-connected arrestees was a woman who received knitting wool from her daughter in France! Another was a lady who had worked for the Romanian National Bank and who attempted to speak to the French ambassador to "let the West know" about financial abuses committed by the Soviets. The woman was sentenced to 20 years in prison. The accusation against Ms. Ghitescu was "crime of high treason," based on her monitored correspondence with an enemy "of the people," Mr. Fontaine, for which she was sent to prison for four years. She doesn't know which letter got her in trouble, but says that at one time she wrote to him about how school officials bent over backwards to give high marks to the daughter of Communist ruler Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej so she could obtain her diploma (even though the girl never attended full time). "Interrogators kept asking me whether I provided information regarding baccalaureate exams."

The inquisition

After arrest, Ms. Ghitescu spent 13 months awaiting trial at a prison belonging to the Romanian secret police, located on the site of the current House of Parliament. "For three years I had no contact with my family," she says. "They weren't even told of my trial in November 1953. I was given a public-defense attorney who took no interest in my case and looked at my dossier only just before entering the courtroom. He told me to apologize for whatever I did whenever my turn came. My father was a doctor, considered a self-employed professional and thus an exploiter [in Communist terminology]. In his pleading, this lawyer kept emphasizing in a shrill voice 'the daughter of a doctor,' which only hurt me in the eyes of judges instead of defending me."

I was surprised to hear Ms. Ghitescu say that each

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detention center had its good and bad points. She considered having a cell to herself during the time before trial in Bucharest a "studio-type" comfort, though a psychological torture. Her interrogation in this place lasted for four months, during which she never knew what to expect. Wake-up calls came at five o'clock in the morning, lights were turned out at ten.

"During the day you were allowed to sit on the end of the bed. You were forbidden to support yourself, by elbow or anything else — forget about lying down. You were allowed to sit at the end of the bed, or walk around the cell. They would bring me out of the cell for investigation at 10:05 p.m. and take me back at 5 a.m., a few minutes before wake-up began. Interrogation was always the same thing, same thing, same thing. I was never beaten. Each guard was responsible for five cells and they always looked inside. They had slippers so you couldn't hear their steps. And I couldn't see without eyeglasses. They didn't give me my glasses, I couldn't see what was happening. I never knew when exactly I was being watched. There were whole months, once inquiry was over, when I didn't know what was happening. In the last months life got better, I had my own bed, I could even lie on it during the day...I had air, meaning once a day I would be taken to another cell, without a roof. And food was better, three times a day. In the morning a weak cup of coffee, with bread and a bit of marmalade. For lunch the same thing, grains, cabbage. Twice or three times a day we were taken out on 'errands,' meaning to the toilet, and they were hurried up; everything had to be done quickly, quickly, quickly."

Three Jails

She was then sent to an infamous prison called Jilava, just south of Bucharest. Almost all political detainees passed through this subterranean prison, which served as a secret place of transit, forced labor and executions. *Memoria* unsuccessfully tried to turn it into a national monument of remembrance. She spent seven months here, in a cell with 80 other women. Men were forced to stay 200 in one room.

Ms. Ghitescu says Jilava had the hardest living conditions, with one toilet for 80 women. The winter she spent there was especially cold and humid, because of the thick layer of snow on the ground above. But she was glad to have more company than she had in the previous Bucharest jail. She even took her first Spanish lessons from another prisoner. Ms. Ghitescu is now a well known translator of Spanish and Portuguese literature.

"My best childhood friend, Mariana Ionescu, was also at Jilava. She died in prison. She was only 21. She developed an advanced case of tuberculosis at the secret-police prison in Bucharest. I remembered hearing someone cough day and night, but I couldn't tell she was the one coughing. It was a cough that obsessed me, it was frightening. She got worse at Jilava. We kept asking jailers to

send her to Vacaresti hospital. Finally, an assistant came to tell her she was going to the hospital. Mariana had the bed below and I had the third bunk up. This was the day they were taking us to bathe, which happened once every two weeks, I think. I wanted to go get something for her to take with her and I climbed too fast. I fell all the way down, hit my spine. I couldn't say goodbye. She died a month or so later. Afterwards I heard from someone else that Mariana kept hoping that she would be released in her mother's care. They never let her go home."

Ms. Ghitescu was then sent to Mislea, a jail for women, one hour from Bucharest. Here she enjoyed more free air but the work was harder. Inmates worked in three workshops. In one they made rugs, in another they sewed men's shirts and in another women prepared wool for rug-making. It was winter again, and very cold. Women warmed their hands with wool combs they heated on the workshop stove. "Food was better. They had to keep us alive, so we could work," she says. She and a group of other women were isolated for a month in a top-secret building nearby, after being accused of inciting a strike — all they did was begin their work shift a few minutes late and dare to ask for soap and cigarettes. One memory she has of this time is seeing mice climbing on her bed in the night. "In jail the light is always on, so you couldn't do anything. Well, they were *little* mice. I can see them now. They didn't bother me."

She was punished at another prison she was taken to, Gherla, in the north of Romania. She can't remember the reason. "At night they made me sleep on a damp carpet. Walls were wet and damp. There, every two days I would be given bread and water. There was a woman guard who took pity on me and brought me some sort of soup." One time she was taken to the infirmary. After giving her vitamin injections, the assistant let Ms. Ghitescu know in an indirect way that a friend of the family had sent the vitamins. Later Ms. Ghitescu learned that a doctor friend of her father's had made contact with the assistant and had sent her the medicine, as well as a chocolate bar — which she never received. "She was probably afraid to give me the chocolate," Ms. Ghitescu says, to excuse the assistant.

Release and Reintegration

She was released in October 1955, as a result of a provision of the Geneva Convention that gave amnesty and pardons to those sentenced for less than five years. She came home to learn that both her father and her brother had died. Even though she had a meager pension and could have used help from her daughter, Ms. Ghitescu's mother advised her to finish her fourth year at university, and her studies. She was unemployed for two years. Then she found work, but was let go after only nine days, apparently because someone who knew she had been to prison, and who was a member of the Communist Party, turned her in. She kept looking, and almost got hired again, until her "dossier" was produced.

She finally obtained work working for an institute of pharmaceutical research as a skilled worker, a technical translator. One day she got another scare. She was called in to see the head of the division who oversaw her office. "I had such emotions. The woman who I was to meet was wearing black mourning clothes. She had had a death in the family. She was more human because of that. I hadn't mentioned at my interview that I had been arrested but had been given amnesty. Anyway, at release I had to sign a document agreeing not to speak about it. The woman took out of my dossier a piece of paper on which someone, somewhere, had penciled in, without signing, 'Watch out, she has been a political prisoner.' This is the lowest kind of informing. She told me she couldn't remove the paper, since it was numbered, but she decided to overlook it. I stayed at the institute for some good years." For Ms. Ghitescu, Communism has cost most of a lifetime. □

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