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**BEING THERE.
AN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL PERSPECTIVE
ON THE 1989 REVOLUTION IN
ROMANIA**

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ABSTRACT

This article revisits the question of what was revolutionary about the events in December 1989 in Romania from an autobiographical perspective. The author spent part of December 1989 and January 1990 in Romania, observing and attending events tied to the collapse of the communist regime and provides this person recollection of what she saw as radical changes during those four weeks.

KEYWORDS

- *revolution*
- *Romania*
- *fearlessness*
- *autobiography*

What was 1989?

What is a historical fact? Is it something observed by all around as the fact being described in documents (visual, aural, or written), or is it something historians, as experts about the past, sort out from a variety of testimonies and eventually define? What about events taking place in our lifetime? Are perspective and witnessing different from fact and experiencing? If at stake were questions such as “was the military standing with the people or against them when the government fell from power,” we might try to separate between seeing with one’s own eyes and the global reality of the military’s command and actions, to suggest that perspective and fact are not the same thing.

What about the claim that in 1989 we witnessed a revolution? Ever since 1789, European historians have argued with and past each other about the nature and meaning of the events that took place in France that year. I will not rehearse those debates here, as they merely serve to remind us about the ultimate inability to reach a solid consensus even 200 years after the event (Spang: 2003), (Davies: 2006). With 1989, however, we have both eyewitness accounts by the millions, as well as the luxury of being able to return twenty-five years later to the places where these developments took place and observe the people, the habitus, and the political institutions in comparison to what was there in 1989 (Siani-Davies: 2005), (Deletant: 1999).

Predictably, the perspectives scholars have produced on whether a revolution took place in 1989 in Eastern Europe and how one might define it have continued to differ, depending on what sorts of events and transformations they have in mind as measurement

(Sebetsyen: 2009), (Tismăneanu: 1999), (Kenney: 2002)^[1]. There are those who, in the case of Romania, believe that what happened in December 1989 was a palace coup under the cloak of street protests. In this narrative, the dramatic images people have about students marching in Bucharest, protests in Timișoara, Cluj, Brașov, and other urban centers, were all a convenient cover for the transfer of power from the Ceaușescu clan to a small coterie of communist apparatchiks and secret police officers, in some scenarios under orders from Moscow^[2]. There are also those like Richard Hall, who contacted me upon learning I was giving a presentation about being in Romania during the 1989 events and provided information he considered necessary for me to read ahead of time, to become more aware of the actions of the Securitate in provoking, brutalizing, and covering up violent counter-revolutionary activities during those weeks. Hall embraces the notion of 1989 being a revolution, but has followed closely the question of these reprisals as something that has never been properly acknowledged in post 1989 Romania (Hall: 2013). His criticism centers on the absence of a transparent and thorough process to bring to justice those who were responsible for the deaths and other human losses during those weeks. He has a personal website dedicated to pursuing the details of these activities^[3]. For those interested specifically in the activities of the secret police and law enforcement activities overall, these are important documents. They suggest the lack of breakdown of order and discipline among law enforcement institutions, and a continuation of brutal repression after December 21st.

However, I am interested in showing a different aspect of those events and their meaning a quarter of a century later. As someone who grew up under the Ceausescu regime, I want to follow the meaning of the events of December 1989 from the perspective of the average person who came of age at that time, has a personal memory of the events, and has a stake in a personalized history of those events with the distance of twenty-five years between then and now. My definition of the revolution and its impact on Romanian society is less about the Securitate's specific activities of brutality and intimidation or the actions of the National Salvation Front (NSF), and more about the ways in which average people chose to act in the face of brutality and intimidation. I am not interested in the political elite or the law enforcement institutions, though I fully appreciate the important role they play in framing and constricting the range of impact of spontaneous street actions. I am interested, however, in what engineers, doctors, teachers, bus drivers, etc. did or did not do in those days and how December 1989 changed or didn't change their way of living their lives since then.

My thesis is straightforward: 1989 shattered a half-century of internalized fear throughout Romanian society. Fear didn't dissipate overnight, and there are both continuing and new forms of blackmailing and intimidating people adopted by government institutions. But the generalized sense of fear and paranoia about one's safety, about the powers of the police state to make or break one's life at will are gone from Romanian

¹ For an on-line interactive resource with a number of scholarly essays and interviews, see <http://chnm.gmu.edu/1989/> (accessed October 15, 2014).

² See, for instance Ion Coja's blog: <http://ioncoja.ro/textele-altora/atacul-terorist-din-decembrie-1989-asupra-romaniei/> (accessed October 16, 2014).

³ <http://romanianrevolutionofdecember1989.com/2014/04/13/25-for-2014-25-things-you-should-know-about-the-romanian-revolution-on-the-25th-anniversary-of-the-fall-of-nicolae-ceauscus-communist-regime-5-timisoara-podul-decebal-evidence-suggests/> (accessed October 16, 2014).

society. The government still has the capacity to sack those who don't support it^[4]. But firing is not the same thing as placing in jail without due process. The citizenry has the ability to contest such actions on the part of the government, and an independent anti-corruption directorate ensures no interference by the government when investigating such charges^[5]. Ultimately, getting a passport and leaving the country is something that anyone is able to choose, and the state doesn't attempt to keep all citizens in the country, unable to travel overseas.

Because I was lucky enough to witness the events in Romania in December 1989 up-close, I am presenting my own recollections of those days as an auto-ethnography. It is the experience that has marked me vocationally more than anything else. I decided to become a historian after living through these events. It is also the closest I have come to experiencing military violence repeatedly and to fear for my life. Finally, it is the closest I have come to see the impact of hope on a society on a mass scale, an exhilarating experience that changed me. So I bring this story to you as a subjective, personal one, not as documentation of orders to shoot, incite, or camouflage events. The revolution in Romania, I contend, happened at this subjective, personal level, and narrating my own recollections is my way of showing the remarkable changes that happened to the population at large in that country in just a few days.

The Events.

I was seventeen when I left Romania in 1985 and twenty-one when I returned in 1989, having visited Romania twice since my departure, in 1987 and 1988. I had lived in Romania for most of my life and the reality of living in the United States and, after September 1989, in London, was something I was still getting used to. I negotiated my understanding of life in these places slowly and through assumptions grounded in my years growing up in Romania. After I had left, I was in a long-distance literary love-affair with a boy in Romania and spent a lot of my time thinking about that relationship, reading Romanian literature and poetry, and overall living in my head in close connection to Romania. At that time there was no question in my mind that Romania was my homeland, even though I had relocated permanently with my parents and brother in the US. My grandmother, who had raised me and with whom I was very close, still lived in Romania. I had more friends in Bucharest than I made in my two years at Georgetown or in my three months in London. So when I got on a train in London at the beginning of December 1989, with the destination Bucharest, I was going home for Christmas. I was terribly excited and anxious like any college kid going home for the holidays.

My arrival on a train at the Romanian border, just west of Oradea, on the night of December 17th was pure coincidence. I wanted to surprise my boyfriend by arriving in Bucharest a few days before the date I had indicated to him in my last letter. What I had

⁴ See for instance the case of Cristi Citre, who was recently fired from the Digi24 television station for criticizing Prime Minister Victor Ponta on his Facebook page: <http://www.revista22.ro/digi24-jurnalistul-cristi-citre-dat-afara-dupa-ce-la-criticat-pe-premierul-ponta-pe-facebook-45380.html> (accessed October 16, 2014).

⁵ The National Directorate on Anti-Corruption has played a crucial role in this process. Though constantly under political pressure, this body has acted in a truly independent fashion to investigate charges of corruption. Its activities have been somewhat protected from political pressure through the open support shown by the United States for its leader, Laura Codruta Kövesi, who received a major award from the State Department in spring 2014. See http://www.realitatea.net/laura-codru-a-kovesi-premiata-de-ambasada-sua_1418554.html (accessed October 16, 2014).

with me was cash (\$10), a passport (Romanian citizen living overseas), a US green card, an address book with a bunch of numbers, inclusive of Amnesty International offices and connections in several places, and clothes.

I was on an overnight train sleeping on my berth. In the middle of the night I heard a hard thump on the door. I was alone in my compartment, so I jumped out of bed frightened. The lights would not turn on; I was completely disoriented when I opened the door. In the doorway was a soldier pointing a gun at me, asking for my passport in Romanian. I couldn't figure out what uniform he was wearing, but I deduced we had to be at the Romanian border and this was passport control, even though the uniform didn't seem to fit what the customs personnel usually wore. I showed my passport, he took it, looked quickly at it, then told me to take my stuff and get off the train.

All sorts of things were going through my head: I was going to jail, this was clear, and I had no way to get out of this situation. I had no money to bribe these officials; I had information on me, in my own handwriting, that linked me to both Amnesty International and also human rights activists in London and Washington, DC; I had a record of having tried to bring Amnesty International propaganda in the country and, despite all logic, I was convinced the people taking me off the train knew about that incident from 1987⁶. I was struggling to figure out a good lie about those addresses in my knapsack, as I fully expected I would be searched thoroughly.

Adrenaline was pumping through my veins and I was trying my best to fake a sleepy and calm demeanor—basically playing possum—when I realized that a whole bunch of other people were getting off the train at the same time, and there didn't seem to be anything similar about all of them. I calmed down and my fear of being imprisoned and raped subsided. But the soldiers had my passport, and that was the most important fact to keep in mind.

Once I arrived inside a building next to the train, I realized there were a few dozen other people who had been evacuated from the train and were being kept as de-facto prisoners, as our passports had been confiscated and we couldn't go anywhere. Nor was anyone coming by to give us basic information, such as where we were (Romania? Hungary? No-Man's-Land?), where the bathrooms were, and under whose authority we were being kept there.

Without any reliable information, people started to talk among themselves. We were ethnically Romanian, Hungarian, and even French; with my exception, everyone else was a non-Romanian citizen. I started to think that this detention was not about me being Romanian with unacceptable connections overseas, but rather about all of us being foreigners of sorts. The group was also extremely heterogeneous in terms of why we were travelling to Romania (business, family, vacation), as well as what sort of social standing we had (peasants, university students, factory workers, an engineer). I landed next to two other college kids, both attending first year at the Sorbonne, who had decided to spend their Christmas vacation watching communism collapse. They were taking a side-trip through Romania as the most exotic and least prepared country for a revolution, and wanted to go to Prague for New Year's Eve. They spoke nothing other than French, so I ended up being their translator. We spent a lot of time together in the next four days.

After hours of waiting in the cold stairwell, we were given back our passports

⁶ In December 1987 I had tried to smuggle Amnesty International reports into Romania and was subjected to a strip search at the airport.

without much explanation other than we were not permitted to enter Romania at that time. I was desperate, somehow I had hoped that would not be the outcome, even though it was quite predictable. I had \$10, a one-way plane ticket from Bucharest to London on Tarom Airlines, and no other way to get back from Romania to England. So, as the soldiers were shoving us onto a train back to Budapest, I cried, begged, screamed, and did all I could to convey that this was not acceptable to me. When a Romanian soldier became impatient and pointed a gun at my head, the two French guys I had just met took me by the sleeve and said: “We’re not sure what the problem is, but it’s not worth having a bullet through your head. Come with us to Budapest and then we’ll see what happens next.”

I lucked out. They were both gentlemen, they lent me some cash to be able to survive until I could get some money from the States via the American Express office downtown Budapest, and they provided the sort of distraction I needed at that point not to go crazy.^[7] I didn’t know why we were being sent back, but clearly something bad was happening in Romania. No journalists were being allowed in so there were no reliable reports in the languages I could read—English and French. On top of that, the main news in the international media revolved around the Panama Canal invasion by U. S. forces taking place at the same time^[8]. The only somewhat reliable sources were the Hungarian media (but I spoke no Hungarian, and the only language I was able to communicate in with Hungarians of a certain age was Russian) and Radio Free Europe (RFE). I had no access to RFE for a couple of days, so I walked to all the addresses connected to Romania—the Embassy, Consulate, Residence of the Ambassador, the Tarom Airlines offices—and found out that I did need to be concerned about Romania, because there was absolutely nobody representing the Romanian government anywhere at any of those residences. The flag was still there, soldiers stood in front of the official buildings guarding them, but everyone else was gone.

By the evening of December 21st I was able to piece together a few important things and I had become convinced it was no use trying to get to Romania. Timișoara was under military siege from maps of Romania and the word Temesvár flashed on the Hungarian evening news, and all I could think about was Tiananmen and the tanks rolling over those poor students.^[9] From afar it looked like Ceaușescu was doing the same thing to the people demonstrating in Timișoara. My new French buddies bought me a ticket to accompany them to Prague and spend Christmas there in a free and happier place, away from my worries.

We were waiting for the train to pull into the station when I heard someone behind me speaking slowly but clearly in English, with a heavy Hungarian accent: “The students are marching through downtown Bucharest and occupying University Square.” I turned around and on the bench behind me a young Hungarian woman was listening to an RFE report on the radio and simultaneously translating it into English to an American guy. I introduced myself after apologizing for butting in and soon found out a few important things that altered my plans to go to Prague.

The young woman confirmed what I had obsessed about over the past four days:

⁷ In December 1989, American Express was the only money transfer office in the Eastern bloc.

⁸ See, for instance, <http://www.nytimes.com/1989/12/21/world/fighting-panama-president-transcript-bush-s-address-decision-use-force-panama.html> (accessed October 16, 2014).

⁹ The Chinese student protests and brutal crackdown by the communist authorities on June 3-4, 1989, had been prominently featured on the news that summer; for me they represented a warning for anyone trying to challenge an authoritarian regime such as Nicolae Ceaușescu’s.

if the events in Timisoara could be contained, then those poor folks were done for. If the protests were to spread to Bucharest, then it would be far more difficult to squash them, given the size of the population, the geography of the city, and the presence of too many foreign eyes. University Square was close to several major embassies and consulates, among them the American Embassy, the British Embassy, and the Italian Embassy. So I couldn't imagine large demonstrations going unobserved and unreported in the international press and human rights circles. I knew I had to get there. Fortunately for me, the Hungarian translator didn't want to leave Budapest; she had gotten out of Romania a few years back and was relieved not to be there, even as she was translating this amazing news. The American guy turned out to be a freelance journalist with the *Christian Science Monitor* and the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, and he needed a translator for his trip to Romania^[10]. I am not sure how professional I looked (not very likely), but I was desperate, I had the linguistic skills, and he didn't have anyone else. So in a split second I struck a deal with Mr. Russell Baker. He would take me to Bucharest and I would translate for him.

The train we were waiting for was pulling in. It was coming from Bucharest, and my companion wanted me to inquire with passengers getting off the train about their impressions from Bucharest. So our job was to chase after scared passengers getting off a train likely peppered with Securitate informers and to inquire about the protests in Bucharest and Timișoara. Needless to say, we found out nothing from their mouths, though the eyes of the passengers spoke of fear and in some cases relief.

I spent the next twenty hours running around Budapest to figure out a way to get to Bucharest—no trains nor airplanes were allowed in, and it appeared that every single rental car in Budapest was already taken. Russ did an interview with the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation in the afternoon of the 22nd, while Ion Caramitru and Ana Blandiana were reciting poetry and called for calm in Palace Square; all I can remember is that I started crying uncontrollably.^[11] The whole thing was completely beyond my powers of imagination or hope.

After some efforts, we finally figured out that the place to get a ride to Romania was Forum Hotel, where all the major media outlets were parked. There I ran into Romanians I knew from the States, all playing translators to ABC, CNN, etc. In the end we found a ride with Berna Gonzalez, the journalist from *El País*, and her translator^[12]. We were driving a VW Golf, white, Budapest license plates, standard transmission. By 8 p.m., December 22nd, we were on our way to the border, with a trunk full of medical supplies and an improvised red cross on each side of the car. Someone had told us it was safer to have the medical supplies cover for safe entry into Romania. The Romanians didn't seem fond of foreign journalists.

¹⁰ Here are a couple of relevant publications from that trip: <http://www.csmonitor.com/1989/12/29/osecu.html>; <http://russbaker.com/2010/08/04/celebration-and-rage-in-bucharest-january-5-1990/> (accessed October 16, 2014).

¹¹ Ana Blandiana had become a persona non grata for the communist regime after she published several poems critical of the Ceaușescu regime in the 1980s. To me her voice sounded like a bird announcing spring and rebirth—unexpected and invigorating.

¹² Berna Gonzalez's articles from that trip include:

http://elpais.com/diario/1989/12/21/internacional/630198002_850215.html;

http://elpais.com/diario/1989/12/24/portada/630457202_850215.html;

http://elpais.com/diario/1989/12/22/internacional/630284403_850215.html;

http://elpais.com/diario/1989/12/26/internacional/630630001_850215.html (accessed October 16, 2014).

By the evening of the 22nd, events in Bucharest were becoming completely chaotic: Ceaușescu had fled; the NSF was meeting behind closed doors to decide on the next steps; the Securitate seemed to be operating according to some secret plans; it was completely unclear where the army stood as an institution, and whether the leadership of the army was actually in control of all the regional forces; and rumors about ‘terrorists’ were flying everywhere. As we drove to the border, we could first listen to RFE, and subsequently to Radio 1 Bucharest. I am pretty sure I cried for several hours, I couldn’t stop: Ceausescu was gone. It seemed like a dream. I just couldn’t process the information. The rest of what we heard seemed rumor based and self-contradictory, so we were very unsure of what we were getting ourselves into.

When we got to the border, the Hungarians pulled us in and asked candidly: “Do you really want to go there?” pointing at the TV screen everyone in the room seemed glued to. The revolution was being televised^[13]. The same Caramitru from the Palace Square was now on TV, looking disheveled and intense, calling for all citizens to keep calm, while a soldier behind him hovered protectively, looking wildly in every direction. What was happening outside that frame of Caramitru’s speech could only be speculated, and everyone agreed it was a bad idea to continue. Except for the *El Pais* journalist, whose mantra during the whole trip to Bucharest was “I have a reservation at Intercontinental Hotel tomorrow night, I intend to be there,” and me. I couldn’t imagine any other place I wanted to be. So we continued.

On the Romania side, things were quite different, and the events we were hearing about on the radio all of a sudden became much more real for me. We pulled in and everyone placed their passports under mine. I was the one person with an entry visa from the Romanian government in my passport. A boy a couple of years my junior (he was most likely eighteen, serving his year-and-a-half obligatory military service), pointed his gun at us as we pulled in, but he was clearly hesitant, unsure of what he was really supposed to be doing. I spoke to him in Romanian and explained we were going to Bucharest with medical supplies he was welcome to inspect in the trunk of the car. Because both journalists had only photo cameras, easily concealable as normal touristy stuff, I kept quiet about that aspect of our trip. He was befuddled by the four different nationalities we represented—Spanish, Hungarian, US, and Romanian—so he took the passports to his officer on duty. It was déjà vu all over again for me...

We waited and waited in the car. It seemed like ages, and we were afraid to turn on the radio, so we just sat there in the dark. After fifteen minutes or so, the soldier came back to take me inside to the officer on duty. I had managed to get a bunch of \$20 bills from my companions and held that in my pocket. We walked into the main hall, where all that was left of Ceausescu’s perennially present portrait was the outline of the frame and a hook. I couldn’t believe it. Ceausescu WAS gone. My heart beat faster.

Upstairs, everyone had the TV and radio on, and they were all watching the unfolding of the events in Bucharest to figure out what they were supposed to be doing. It didn’t seem like anyone was in charge. I went up to the service window where our passports were resting on the counter, the officer on duty watching TV to figure out his next move—imprison us, send us back, let us go? I tried to play cool and put all the money I had in my pocket folded up in the middle of the passports, when nobody else was looking, and said

¹³ The border crossing that night was at Nădlac, south from the first attempt I made to get into Romania on December 17th, at the Borș crossing.

to him: “I know the other folks don’t have a visa, but if you are able to put a stamp in our passports, we don’t need a receipt”¹⁴. The man pulled the passports close, put the money in his pocket, stamped our passports, and growled “get out of here” at me. We left in 30 seconds sharp. Later I learned that a friend from London tried to cross into Romania at the same spot 30 minutes after us and was turned around. I guess timing is everything.

As we sped into the night, afraid someone would catch up and shoot at us, we turned the radio back on. The University Library was on fire. The University Library: its location made it vulnerable, but nobody could understand why anyone would set it on fire. All of a sudden, that event and other violent incidents became connected through the mysterious ‘terrorists’. As we drove through small, pitch-dark villages, ghost like figures stood in doorways watching us. It seemed that everyone had been listening to the radio, watching TV, and was waiting for the next scene in this surreal film. We got to Arad around 2 a.m. and saw military equipment and soldiers being brought into town. We figured out a route around the city and kept going, though our fear of being accosted and ending up dead was becoming more real with every report of shootings and kidnappings broadcast on the radio. And the stories about the ‘terrorists’ kept getting more and more fantastic, now accompanied by tales about Ceausescu’s special troops, his ‘children’, who were apparently out there on his orders trying to rescue him and wreak havoc among the population. I tried to translate these reports as they were coming in, but I am not sure I was able to convey the unreliability, the sheer chaos of these news as vividly as I was feeling them.

By 6:30 am we made it to Sibiu, a large city with a street layout that made it impossible to go around downtown in order to get on the road to Bucharest¹⁵. The streets were unusually busy at that time, but no buses and cars were on the road, and everyone turned their head when we went by. At one point, several people jumped in front of our car at a stop sign: “You can’t go any further. It’s not safe. You are in a foreign car, with a Budapest license plate, they will shoot you. You look like terrorists.” I was driving, Ms. Gonzalez next to me. She repeated her mantra: “I have a reservation...” I knew better than anyone else in the car that Sibiu was a dangerous place: Nicu Ceausescu lived there and the Securitate in Sibiu was as strong and vicious as in Bucharest. But I simply refused to believe that they would just shoot at us. And I didn’t want to be in a strange city, with other people’s fear anchoring me there. I translated the situation as best as I could and got a nod of ‘keep going’ from the rest of the group. Within seconds, we were driving through a deserted road, which made me even more concerned for our safety. I thought it best to go at the regular speed limit and observe all rules, but all of a sudden, we could hear and see bullets ricocheting off the walls of the buildings around us. There were people on the top floors and on top of the buildings shooting either at each other or at us. I couldn’t understand why and all I could think was I needed to get out of there as fast as possible. I floored it and didn’t slow down until we were on the Olt Valley, a few dozen km outside Sibiu.

The drive through the Olt Valley was out of a movie. It was a cold morning, a beautiful blue sky above us, the sunrays shimmering on the river’s surface. No cars—I’ve driven many times on that road, but never felt like I owned it, and that is what I felt on

¹⁴ This trick worked for my dad at the Greek Consulate in Istanbul when he fled Romania in 1983.

¹⁵ There were in fact some back roads we could have taken, I later learned while doing research in Sibiu, but I didn’t know them in 1989.

that brilliant morning. It was like we were the last (or first) people on earth. I felt an uncontrollable surge of joy and almost crashed the car as I was singing and driving.

Once we got to Calimănești, signs of the events in Bucharest surfaced. Groups of men were milling around, some wearing a tricolor armband. We got stopped several times on the same road and asked for our papers and then interviewed about our destination. Some were sporting rifles and acted like they were in charge, even though it was apparent from the redundancy of these roadblocks that nobody was in charge. My Romanian passport and native speaking abilities got us out of trouble time and again. Nobody could figure out how we got through the border crossing with our set-up—the foreign car, license plates, the foreigners with dubious credentials.

At one point, Russ got out of the car and tried to take a couple of pictures in front of a factory in Râmnicu Vâlcea, just as some men were taking down a huge “Long live the Romanian Communist Party!” sign.¹⁶ Several guys lunged at him, ready to rip off not only his camera, but also the arm carrying it: “What are you doing here? What is your business here? You can’t take any pictures!” I gave them our cover story in Romanian, thanked them for being such good patriots, then we got in the car and I asked Russ to stop trying to get us in trouble in this vulnerable situation.

It was early afternoon on December 23rd when we finally made it to Bucharest. We had the radio on, with contradictory news about the ‘terrorists’ amplified during each new report: they were occupying the Otopeni international airport; they had infiltrated through secret underground passage ways and were preparing a takeover of the NSF; they were searching for Ceausescu; Ceausescu had been spotted in Targoviste; the army was with the people; some of the army was against the people... During the previous extraordinary night and morning we had huddled closely in our tiny band of adventurous intruders at the edge of this revolt. But as we were approaching Bucharest, everyone resumed the focus on why they had travelled to Bucharest. Berna had her reservation at the Intercontinental; Russ was looking for a telefax machine to wire in a story; and I just wanted to get to my boyfriend’s apartment. At this point I was a few days behind my scheduled arrival and I was sure he was very concerned. I also had not told my parents what I was doing after my initial plea for money in Budapest, so as not to worry them. They thought I was in Prague. I had not slept in days, was craving a familiar place and ready for a bath.

We first stopped at the University Hospital to drop off the supplies, where nurses and young volunteers with tears in their tired eyes thanked us. Things had been so chaotic there for several days, that the sight of strangers dropping off needed supplies was like something out of a dream. We then headed for the Intercontinental, but we were diverted along the way: there was shooting around that area, and no cars could get through. We parked around Zero Km and Berna tried again to get to the Intercontinental by foot. I asked several people, everyone advised against it, as apparently the Securitate and ‘terrorists’ were active in that area. So I suggested we get into tram 21, which would take us to my boyfriend’s apartment, and there, if the phone worked, everyone could call their embassies and the hotels to get more accurate information. On the tram, a surreal scene: people getting on, validating their tickets like any other day. We sat down in this fishbowl on tracks and I became more and more aware what an easy, slow-moving target we were in

¹⁶ It was one of the “Trăiască P.C.R.!” huge banners you could see on the façade of most factories around Romania, with the emblem of the P.C.R. in the middle.

this vehicle for any shooting going on in the street. Within minutes, we passed by Hristo Botev Boulevard, and we could hear guns being fired. I thought, “this is it.” We had no place to go, the driver had closed the doors, if they couldn’t open anymore, we were stuck there like prisoners and anyone who wanted to take aim at us, could. Of course, nothing of the sort happened.

We got off at Mihai Eminescu Street and went over to my boyfriend’s apartment. Everyone at home was amazed I had made it, and even more about the rest of my travelling companions. Tea, coffee, and cozonac made their appearance in seconds, while my two journalist buddies were busy taking turns on the phone to get in touch with their connections in Bucharest. Berna called the Spanish Embassy and the Ambassador picked up the phone, having evacuated the place for safety reasons. He knew her and couldn’t believe she had made it this far. She gave him our address and he was there in a little while to take her and her translator to a safe place. They thanked us and I never saw them again. Russ called the American Embassy and asked if it was safe. In return, whoever answered put the phone close to the window, and all of us could hear guns being fired. It sounded like the Embassy was under attack. The Intercontinental was kitty corner from the US Embassy, so there was no way Russ could make it there. So he tried the British Embassy, which was a bit closer to our location, reachable in 20-25 minutes by foot. Someone answered, said we could come by, their telefax was working and they were glad to provide a place for journalists to crash.

My boyfriend and I took Russ to the British Embassy through the quiet streets of the neighborhood around Galati Square. We kept to the back roads, and there was an atmosphere of joy in the air. It was sunny, really warm for the season, with very little traffic anywhere. When we got to the Embassy, we were welcomed by a motley crew of staff, their families, pets (the Ambassador’s two huge golden retrievers were pacing around the whole time), and then others like us—looking for a story, a place to seek refuge, or a thrill. We quickly met the Military Attaché, who invited us to have lunch with him in the cantina. As we ate a delicious bowl of traditional Romanian white bean soup, he recounted his experiences over the past few days. On the 21st, they got wind of the events at University Square pretty quickly, and he went out by foot to see for himself what was happening. He didn’t get too far, because he could see tanks, heavily armed personnel, and soldiers shooting at civilians in the street. Around 3 a.m. he went out again, this time in an armored car, and by then the crowds had been dispersed where he drove. It seemed there had been a cleanup. But when he got back to the compound, he looked at his tires, and they were caked in blood. He showed us the vehicle and I gasped. I will never forget that image. He seemed hypnotized when he said that over and over.

The Embassy was like a busy beehive, and everyone seemed very unsure of what might happen next, but there was a lot of excitement in the air. After a few hours, my boyfriend and I left Russ there. He seemed in his element. He then relocated to Intercontinental, where I saw him a few more times, and then he went around Bucharest and a few other parts of Romania with a newfound translator. Russ, Berna, and the many other foreign journalists who made it to Romania over those days played an important role in the few weeks of street protests and turmoil. They brought international visibility to this crisis at a time when the attention of most media outlets was turned to other topics. In some instances, these were the first foreigners with whom Romanian citizens were speaking. So it is hard to overstate the novelty and significance of this opening

for Romanians in communicating about their experiences of fear and oppression. The reports foreign journalists provided, though, barely scratched the surface of the breadth and depth of what life under Ceausescu had meant and what people were experiencing after December 21st. And while some of the larger outfits, especially television news channels, stayed around into mid-January and beyond, the attention of the international mass media shifted to other crises around the world.

Christmas was like no other I ever experienced. The much coveted oranges and bananas from my childhood had appeared in many stores otherwise empty, together with delicatessen such as Sibiu salami and Swiss cheese. People lined up to stock up for the holidays, but I saw over and over unprecedented scenes: just days before, if bananas would have appeared at a store, a mob would form in front, people would carefully and jealously guard their place in line, and everyone, everyone would buy the maximum allowed at that particular location. So unless you were one of the lucky first few hundred, your chances of getting anything after hours of waiting in line were virtually zero.

This is not what I witnessed during those days: everyone smiled in line, they talked about the ‘terrorists’ (always ‘them’), looked behind and not just in front, and bought strictly what they needed for the festivities coming up that evening, rather than hoarding. I saw people give bananas to parents with kids waiting in line at the end of the queue, when the store ran out. I saw people walking up to young soldiers and offer them oranges and bananas and thanking them for their service. That was not the country I had grown up in. There was no fear and anxiety on the faces of any of the people I waited in line with. Those were the main emotions I knew from my own experience with these interminable and frustrating queues. But after December 23rd, people seemed relaxed, joyful, hopeful, and courteous. A new society was being carved out in front of my eyes.

Christmas morning was remarkable and every aspect of that day stayed with me for a long time in my dreams. I woke up to the smell of fresh cozonac and sausages being cooked. The soundtrack was also magical: bells tolling throughout the city, and the Christmas service at the Patriarchy being broadcast for the very first time on T.V. The news about the Ceausescus’ having been apprehended and in the custody of the army had everyone waiting on the edge of our seats for the next move. The fear of whether the freedom we were tasting for the first time would be short lived had evaporated.

I remember even more vividly my reaction to the broadcasting of an edited version of the trial and execution of Nicolae and Elena Ceausescu. It was shown on TV on December 26th, and I think you could hear a pin drop across Romania. Everyone was glued to the screen for confirmation of the news we had already received—that the two most feared and hated people in the country were dead. My first reaction was that of embarrassment: how small and frail they both looked, two old delusional people. Elena, in particular, was furiously yelling at the tribunal with disbelief and utter disgust on her face, while Nicolae looked anxiously at his watch. The few seconds they showed of the execution, with their bodies mangled like a trash pile, were simply awful. I was embarrassed to have seen that display of hatred, I was ashamed about the cheers I heard when they showed that scene the first time. I had nightmares of those images for more than half a year after the event, almost every night. I found no relief in those grotesque images.

By December 27th, everyone was smiling and relaxing. The New Year was coming, and New Year’s Eve was a fantastic celebration of life and new beginnings, even as more

news about the continuing violence and growing numbers of confirmed dead kept coming. I spent the night of December 31st with my closest friends, most of them musicians, and a handful doctors. The party started like the burst of a dam, all of us singing and dancing with abandon. But by 11 p.m., stories of violence and death in the streets were repeating themselves over and over again, weighing us down. There were those who had been in University Square on December 21st and had felt that surge of ‘no more’ grow with the numbers who joined the protesters over the evening. The participants were still high from that amazing night, but some had also seen bodies laying in the street, young people run over by tanks. And there were those young medics who had tended to the survivors, and who were equally traumatized by the cruelty reflected on the torn bodies of those brought in the emergency room in the early hours of the 22nd.

That night I also found out about an upcoming meeting of the newly founded Students’ League. The representatives from the old Communist Youth League from various institutions of higher learning, including the Conservatory, where my friends attended, had been invited, and they asked if I wanted to tag along. A few days later we gathered in one of the large amphitheaters at Bucharest University and a fellow named Marian Munteanu showed up to discuss the principles and goals of the League (Kennedy: 1995, p. 199). A couple of tall guys flanked both sides of the door when we got there and were checking I.D.s. With all the rumors running around, and given the practice of checking people’s I.D.s from the past, this somehow didn’t feel out of place. They gave me a second look, but my friends assured them I was a harmless friend, so I got in. I was sitting with people who were not particularly political in their inclinations, they were more interested in playing the piano, violin, or trombone, but they had gotten caught up in the excitement of the events after December 21st and wanted to see where this was going.

Munteanu’s persona and language were arresting from the start. He was full of pathos, and with the emotional swings of the past two weeks as our backdrop, many in attendance seemed eager to take part in a student movement and an organizations that would ensure ‘the revolution would not be stolen’—a phrase repeated many times that day like a sacred pledge. Some volunteered to become spokespersons of that movement on the spot.

I found Munteanu and his guardsmen increasingly annoying and off-putting as the meeting went on. He spoke about himself as the movement and he seemed in-love with his own charisma. The notion of a grassroots movement with many participants, growing organically and formulating ideas, goals, and structures as it gained more participants was not what he was talking about. A strong leader, a top-down structure with many representatives anointed and trained by a pre-vetted group of leaders was Munteanu’s idea. I scratched my head and turned to my trombonist friend: “Hmmm, he sounds a lot like the leader of the Communist Youth League... just using different names for the organization and its members.” He smiled and nodded. We all left a little later, having had enough of the demonizing language Munteanu kept using.

The end of my trip to Bucharest came soon after January 12th, when violence erupted in Victory Square and it became increasingly clear that at least two strands of events were taking place simultaneously around me: on the one hand, a transitional government trying to assume power over all aspects of state governance; on the other hand, a grassroots mass movement facilitated by the holidays and the great weather. We kept watching the NSF and doubting its credentials and willingness to radically alter Romania’s future, even

though certain changes, such as the legalization of abortion, signaled some significant changes in social policy. Between December 17th and the end of the year, many people were killed in the protests and someone had to be held accountable for that, with the Ceausescus out of the way. The figures oscillated greatly among different reports, from hundreds to tens of thousands of victims, but they were high enough and visibly present in every discussion, so there was pressure on the NSF to respond. In the meantime, with more dead bodies surfacing, more and more funerals were turning into opportunities for spontaneous street demonstrations.

On January 12th, 1990, we heard a massive demonstration was in the process of coming together, in part addressing this issue of accountability, and in part mourning the dead from the nights of December 21st and onward. January 12th was declared a national day of mourning, and thousands of people took to the streets to commemorate the fallen. Eventually, many among these huge crowds marched towards the sites that had been important on December 21st—University Square, Romanã Square, and Palace Square. Many of them continued north towards Victory Square, which was where I joined the crowds. When we got there it was already dark and the enormous space of the square seemed unevenly occupied by different groups of people, some chanting, some singing, some standing around. The atmosphere was pretty intense, but still peaceful. There were those who shouted angrily at the building across the way, where the NSF was meeting at that time. But it was neither a large nor a representative group. The event, as I lived through it, was in fact completely disorganized. After a while, we started hearing and seeing that violent clashes were taking place closer to the government building than where we were standing. There were also people who had brought alcohol and were now getting inebriated, so the whole thing was starting to look seedy and even potentially dangerous. My boyfriend looked at me and said, “let’s go home.”

At home, his parents were completely unaware of what was happening in Victory Square, and didn’t believe us when we described various scenes. None of the marches had been shown on TV. The next day, images of drunken men fighting was all that people saw on television, a complete distortion of what had been going on overall the previous day. The NSF was being depicted as a vulnerable institution, under attack by hooligans. The report managed to equate the street movements with disorderly conduct overall. Some, like my boyfriend’s family, choose to believe what they saw; others, like us, understood that plenty of media manipulation was continuing at the Romanian TV station, now in the hands of the NSF. My heart sank.

I had been in Romania a week longer than I had intended before these extraordinary events happened, and I had to make a decision about what to do next. I was overdue for my second term at the School for Slavonic and East European Studies, and yet I couldn’t imagine anything a history professor could teach me there that was more interesting and important than what I was living through in Bucharest. By the same token, that effervescence of the first two weeks after December 21st was dissipating into thin air. People’s desire for hope and ability to trust public figures were being severely tested by the actions of the NSF and the unstoppable rumor mill of all media outlets. After a couple more days I decided I was better off returning to school so I could complete my study abroad program and left Romania on January 17th. The next time I went back to Romania was 1992.

Fear Doesn't Live Here Anymore.

When I left Bucharest on January 17th, 1990, my heart was heavy with anxiety about Romania's future. The events of January 12th made me fearful again of the ways in which the government and state institutions it controlled, especially law enforcement, would resume control of the population and street movements through violent suppression. But at the back of my mind I was also aware of the fearless attitude of so many people I encountered in Bucharest during those weeks. The last time I had been in the country, I was taken into questioning by the customs policy for bringing in information about human rights abuses in Romania. This time, despite a scare at the beginning, I made it into the country unscathed.

People my age and older were gathering out in the open to talk critically about the abuses of the communist regime, about specific individuals to be considered enemies of the people due to their actions in the recent and more distant past. We walked through streets that before 1989 had been closed off to regular pedestrian traffic due to 'safety' concerns. The Dutch Ambassador was able to openly invite to his residence any of the writers who had been secretly in contact with him over the previous decade. This was all behavior none of us had been able to witness or engage in for several generations.

In my seventeen years of growing up in Romania I had never seen people in uniform (police, military) engage in any interpersonal contact with average people in any other way than as absolute authority versus powerless civilian. The uniform inspired fear and unquestioned powers. Not anymore. In my month in Romania I saw countless interactions between soldiers or police guarding public places, for instance the Museum of Art in Palace Square, and civilians. These interactions were overwhelmingly unlike anything I recognized: the people in uniform often smiled. They looked human, not cocky and unapproachable. Civilians would come up and talk to them, offer them oranges, flowers, or other signs of solidarity and thanks. This didn't signal any necessary link between the face of these institutions and the decision-making processes inside. But when people walked up to these uniformed individuals and treated them like human beings as fallible and in need of a smile, they also signaled something about themselves—they were no longer afraid of these uniforms, they could see beyond them, into the humanity of those who had taken on those roles as tools of the regime. I saw not only fearlessness, but also forgiveness in those gestures and in the eyes of the people walking up to the uniformed soldiers.

Another important aspect of the events in 1989 in Romania was the lack of a visible dissidence movement before 1989. There had been no underground serious samizdat; no flying university; no Solidarity (Kenney: 2002). Intellectuals were not in the lead in 1989. Students and workers, average folks were the heroes. Writers and actors showed up like everyone else for the massive beginning of the unraveling and were caught as unawares by the swiftness of the collapse of the Ceausescus as anyone else. The visibility of poets, film directors, and actors in politics after December 21st did not reflect a leadership role in the development of civil society, and that became clear at the founding of the Group for Social Dialogue^[17]. The intelligentsia's moral imagination and ideas about reform began

¹⁷ A history of the Group for Social Dialogue awaits its authors. The group was established on December 31st, 1990, and has continued its activities since then, many documented on the GDS website: <http://www.gds.org.ro> (accessed October 16, 2014).

to take shape after the events in December started, as a joiner to the street developments.

What stood out for me above all during those weeks was the boundless appetite for being out in the open, for gathering, for speaking out, for being part of a large, public community of interest. It all took place spontaneously, bottom up, and it seemed unstoppable, regardless of the designs of the NSF and law enforcement institutions around them. Romania had had its share of forced voluntarism and marches for victory and peace every May 1st and August 23rd for decades. We knew what it meant to be brought into Palace or Victory Square by our workplace or school. A lot of resentment about these sorts of performances accumulated over time, and the fact that the events in Bucharest started from a gathering staged by the communist regime is an important indicator of how radical a change December 21st was. Regardless of the purpose of that gathering and of who exactly started the noise during Ceausescu's speech, everyone I spoke with who had been in the Palace Square that day presented the events as an almost miraculous volte-face (Siani-Davis: 2005), (Băcanu: 2009).¹⁸ If there ever was a real-life “emperor's clothes” story, this was it. Thousands of people found the strength to move from resentful peaceful mobilization to active protest in seconds or minutes, at a point when everyone was aware of the presence of the secret police in their midst, in other words of the likelihood violence would ensue and they would be punished, maybe severely, for their actions. Nobody manufactured or orchestrated that. It was a truly momentous event, a revolutionary moment.

The students marching through the streets of Bucharest at night, peacefully, without any weapons, in protest against the regime was also a real and unprecedented event. There had never been such a large grassroots protest on the streets of Bucharest, during or before the communist regime. What emboldened them to act then, when they had never acted before? Seeing is believing: For anyone who has participated in large events, the behavior of a crowd generates certain communities of interest among the participants that individuals might not be aware are even possible before the event (Edwards: 2014). The events both in Romania and in other countries around the Eastern bloc were all signs of cracks in the police state and, for those who held some hope for the future, they offered the possibility to dream a different outcome than that predicted by the regime and one's own fears.

Though I was not in Bucharest on the night of the 21st, I recognized that sense of hope in the conversations I had with my friends starting on the 23rd. I saw the impact of those actions already in the eyes of the Military Attaché at the British Embassy, who was ready to get involved in the events, if his government position had allowed him. Still, there were some who expressed fear, and there was a clear generational gap between those under forty and those older, who were generally more cautious.

The founding of the independent Students' League days after the December 21st protests is also a strong indicator of this appetite for new forms of communities and the development of a civil society. Regardless of Munteanu's personal intentions, his ideology, and style, his call for a Students' League brought out many young people. When I looked around the large amphitheater at the University, I didn't see in this group opportunists seeking to catch the new flavor of political power. Neither were they necessarily enthralled

¹⁸ Some of the versions of that event—who called the meeting, who started shouting against Ceausescu, to what extent the Securitate was involved—are included here: <http://jurnalul.ro/campaniile-jurnalul/decembrie-89/unitatile-antitero-au-fost-inlaturate-din-piata-palatului-527278.html> (accessed October 15, 2014).

by Munteanu's charisma. They struck me as individuals actively searching for new ways of understanding the chaos around them, of communicating with each other, and who realized that spontaneous street protests had a lower chance of getting traction than organized forms of protest. All of these reactions were unprecedented in my lifetime. It really felt like a veil had been lifted and now everyone could simply ask different questions and imagine themselves playing different roles as individual citizens in their country. This was a revolution of the mind.

However exciting these developments were, my hopes were tampered by the far less revolutionary reaction of the population to the rushed trial and execution of the Ceausescus. People were very divided in the way they expressed themselves vis-à-vis seeing the infamous video. Some were like me—troubled, embarrassed, even ashamed, and sorry for that dehumanizing ending. Others jubilated—they felt revenged by that ending, and somehow relieved of an enormous fear of what would have happened if the Ceausescus had not been killed summarily. I could certainly sense the relief myself; but with the cost of that relief viewed so divergently by different people, it became clear to me that one important victim of the communist regime in Romania had been a moral compass for the citizenry. What 'common good' could have been and what our individual roles were in relationship to it had been completely thwarted by the regime's ideology and public displays of 'socialist humanism'. That sense of common good was just starting to be defined in the days after December 21st, one civil society group at a time, and with various degrees of toleration towards other forms of protest or goals for Romania broadly. Twenty-five years later, it is still more of a goal than a reality.

January 12th could have been the beginning of a tough and irreversible backlash, giving the shallow roots of the protests and ideas for moving forward. But it wasn't. The large crowds, who stood in Victory Square and saw what was happening versus what was reported later in the press, were witnesses to both an event and its cover-up¹⁹. They still stand today as witnesses of that and some became vocal afterwards about the cover-up. New generations of journalists, scholars, and filmmakers, have brought to today's generation different accounts of that protest and of the embattled protests that continued throughout 1990, especially the University Square encampment. The NSF couldn't control that performance of resistance, and its role in the crack down and cover-up and is public knowledge today.

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¹⁹ See the open letter to Ion Iliescu published by Mihaela Grădinaru on Facebook: <http://www.b1.ro/stiri/eveniment/scrisoare-deschisa-catre-ion-iliescu-moral-ati-facut-pipi-cu-bolta-de-la-trambulina-pe-democraticie-si-pe-popor-a-ucis-cu-sange-rece-civismul-91861.html>(accessed October 15, 2014).

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