

A Romanian Story

By: Roxana von Kraus

It was still communist Romania then. We shared the small apartment with cousins, aunts and complete unknowns. Life as usual. And I was seven years old, with short bangs and knee high white socks embroidered by someone. I have started school that year, in the small building next to St. Michael's Orthodox Church and the old chestnut tree. The communists closed the church but could not stop the tree from blooming over the school. Every fall the green spikes would cling to our rubber soles during the pioneer assemblies and the wild soccer games in the back yard. The first day started with a starched white shirt, still warm from the pressing iron, and a navy blue pleated skirt over laced up walking boots "They keep your ankles straight and they will make your legs beautiful" my father wished. I was not sure if he planned future beauty benefits or just could not find shoes for me. On the table he left the gifts of writing - a leather pencil case that opened with a silver clasp. Inside three yellow Pelikan crayons and a transparent eraser. All to go with the papier mache book holder with shoulder straps that made me look like I was carrying an upside drawer on my back. The classroom smelled of autumn and fresh paint. The books were stacked, waiting. Ceausescu, the party leader, looked at us from the large portrait framed in gold and nailed over the blackboard.

We shared the desks, two per each unit. The top would open up to swallow our books, cahiers and occasional Yonatan apples and feta cheese crumbled on dark bread. We started to learn Russian before we knew how to write. To supplement the French taught at home by Madame Coulon, an old maid recruited by my mother for the mission. The home tutor wore her gray hair braided on top of the head and she looked like a walking bowling pin, trailing behind a white cloth bag full of Tin Tin adventures and Maupassant's short stories. I did not learn much from Madame Coulon who was already defeated by life, communism and melancholia. She raised my interest not with her conversation but with her madly arthritic fingers, long pale vines that would embrace the pencil so tightly that the knuckles turned white, when writing those irregular verbs in plus que parfait.

By the end of June both Russian and French fell into summer vacation. I received the first prize for academics - Fennimore Cooper's "The Last Mohican" in exchange for a large bouquet of red gladiolas given to Mrs. Bayer, my first grade teacher. The soccer game moved from the school yard to the street, the boots were replaced by tennis shoes, and the apartment windows were covered in navy blue paper. By September those dark sheets would be scorched to white, with minute drops of color left behind the silver tacks. The asphalt melted and remembered our shoes. The theaters closed and the movies moved out into the wire fenced gardens with large screens in the front and grilling meats in the back. Men smoked Carpati and played chess in Cismigiu gardens. The women were watching. A perfect Bucharest summer. And then it happened.

On the bright morning of August 21st, the news of the Russian tanks entering Prague found me in the kitchen, eating peaches. To settle the air, my father brought to the table the world atlas, a large heavy book published before the communists invented the political geography. In our house, whenever in doubt or fear we would look at maps. It was reassuring, like math. He cleared the moist plates full of rolling pits and clinging knives, opened the book and showed

me the places he traveled to - here was Czechoslovakia where he saw the puppet shows in Wenceslas Square , “that is where the Russians are now”, next came the guns of Gibraltar, wind-swept Patagonia with little men living off the sea, ‘Darwin saw them too but never liked them’ , Easter Island guarded by blind stone men with their backs turned to the ocean, “the threat must have come from the mountains.” The Gobi Desert is full of bats and rabbit-eared foxes, hedgehogs and owls, Australia has opossums and kangaroos. And Guam is wrapped up in birds' droppings like a Christmas gift. “Who would have guessed you can make money out of shit?” he wondered.

I was mesmerized. The Russian tanks rolled out of my mind, and I touched the maps, dreaming of faraway lands and hidden seas. Every day of that hot summer of 1968 I asked for more stories, the “Meridians of the Heart “as he called them I was so proud of my father’s adventures that I could not stop telling all my friends about them. One Sunday morning at the beach, on her way to the solar my mother overheard my enthusiastic conversation. She turned around and dropped the white towel with a flip “*Your father never left the country, the communists did not trust him with a passport*”

Like Father, like Daughter

The communists did not trust me either and I was never allowed to travel East or West. *If you want to travel you can go to Moscow*, they said.

I stopped thinking of the official exit and revisited the alternatives: a night swim over the Danube to Yugoslavia or the marriage proposal from the Norwegian businessman, who was older than my father and had a daughter my age. By the end, when the irrational cleared and I turned twenty five, I decided to settle for the most impossible route – *to write my way out to freedom*; write letters to everyone, from the president’s office to the United Nations and the Vatican. So I became the dissident Shaharazad, telling stories not to delay my execution but to invite it. Ceausescu never answered but two Securitate agents parked a black Volga in front of the house and started to watch. I am not sure what they expected to see. And I doubt they ever read Plato’s Republic where someone tells Socrates that people behave ethically only if they think they are being watched. By those standards the Romanians would have made the most ethical society in Eastern Europe.

The Pope replied, supremely detached and serenely inefficient. When I received the Vatican missive, visibly censored by the Romanian officials, my father refused to touch the letter but asked for the stamps. He placed the envelope corner in a glass of warm water till the cerise images started to float. Lifted them carefully with a pair of tweezers and placed them between the pages of Encyclopedia Britannica, for safe keeping.

After college I got a secretarial job at the American Embassy in Bucharest, where I discovered the IBM electrical typewriter. A heavy machine with a beige metal cover and a black electrical cord fit for a lawn mower. The keys made a click sound when touched and the letters came flying on the page. In 1975 when President Ford visited Romania I wrote him an *immigration letter*, saying that *the entire country is my prison and I want to leave*. Both the letter and the intent were completely insane in a communist system where people were afraid even to breathe.

But somehow I escaped arrest and two months later I received a passport and an exit visa for Germany. On the morning flight to Frankfurt I asked the Pan Am stewardess to tell me when we cross over the border. *Which one*, she replied.

In two hours I was in Frankfurt, free. When the plane landed, everybody left but I did not dare move. My life so far has been “on remote control” and I was so used to following instructions that I was waiting for somebody to give them to me.

But nobody did. When the Pan Am captain and crew debarked looking back at me with surprise I took notice and followed them. Years later I would run through Frankfurt airport from one terminal to the other, connecting to the world, but on that December day I stopped. The noise, the shops, the people, and most of all the light!! That is what shocked me the most – the light. That morning I have left a Bucharest of darkness and could not possible imagine that such brightness exists, somewhere else. The flight that brought me to freedom also lost my luggage. Not that I missed much. You were not allowed to leave Romania with any documents, including birth and marriage certificates, driver’s license, school diplomas, work records, even family photos. You were leaving like a non- person. With no past and a questionable future. Maybe for the better. You start anew.

I Want to Go to America

I arrived in Frankfurt on December 22nd, 1975 and went straight to the American Embassy to ask for political asylum. The consular officer was surprised *You are free now. Why do you want to come to the States? You have nobody there.* My answer came fast and to the point *I want to be as far away from Communism as possible. And the United States is the last place it will come.* He almost fell off the chair laughing. I remember his face. I saw it ten years later on the list of American diplomats taken hostage in Iran. On March 1st, 1976 I arrived in New York to start my other life. David, the American sponsor, waited at JFK airport. A happy man, who looked like Hardy from the Laurel and Hardy duo, dressed in a beautifully tailored cashmere coat welcomed me to the new country. *David, why did you sponsor me? You have no idea who I am ...I may turn out bad....Well, I took my chances with you Roxana I was born in Germany, my mother is Jewish and my father German. I know what it means to be an immigrant and to need help.* We drove like in a dream, through long tunnels, suspended bridges and wide parkways to end up in Brielle, an elegant South Jersey town. The house was large, spread like a red quilt on a bright lawn. The edges were marked with white birch trees, while the front curved gracefully to encompass a small fountain and a blooming garden. Surrounded by expansive glass walls the house seemed to float in the light.

David’s family was waiting inside. His wife Eileen, an exceptionally beautiful woman with dark eyes and skin of porcelain. Kathleen, the ten year old daughter and little David six. Wilma, the maid, an illegal immigrant from Dominican Republic completed the picture. I was given her room. *My first private room, ever.* I sat on the borrowed bed, and started to cry.