

Not So Liberal Rumania

Donald Kirk

The stream begins in a park near the military school on the outskirts of the medieval Saxon-built town of Sibiu. It burbles through grassy meadows and pine forests as nearby roads turn to dirt tracks and dignified nineteenth-century homes yield to occasional thatched huts and sheds. On a sun-dappled Sunday afternoon families play in the park. From time to time lovers vanish down the path, escaping from prying eyes in the rows of gabled houses and shops within a double ring of huge stone walls that were thrown up seven centuries ago to ward off the Tatars. "People here are afraid," says the young woman, a schoolteacher. She is perched on a walkway atop one of the outer walls. Beneath us ancient churches and towers shadow the town's twisting streets. "You don't know our rules."

It is a refrain one hears constantly in Rumania—so often that one wonders if Rumanians aren't hyperbolizing with a flare for drama that reflects the Latin heritage in which they take such deep national pride. "People here are tormented," says the woman. She eyes suspiciously the occasional knots of uniformed cadets, the slowly moving Dacia taxicabs (built under license by Renault and named for the colony settled by the Romans on this same soil eighteen centuries ago), and a man strolling by with a dog. "The security police are everywhere. You never know. All the people in the hotels are working for them." She speaks almost breathlessly, lending a piquant edge of danger to a walk through fragrant woods. "If they catch me with a foreigner, they will send me to the morals police." A foreigner cannot help but laugh. She does too, although not very convincingly.

Like the SAVAK in Iran or the KYP in Greece, the *Securitaté* in Rumania casts a dark shadow over families, schools, offices, and factories. Tough-looking men in drab suits demand money—and information—from prostitutes and black market money-changers in leading hotels. Bureaucrats must assume "colleagues" are reporting on them to superiors whom no one ever sees, much less knows. "Someone may be following," Rumanians warn foreign friends, asking them not to speak too loudly in public, not to talk at all in taxis. They decline invitations to private homes and refuse to enter foreign embassies in Bucharest for fear they will later have to explain whom they are seeing and why.

Western diplomats and businessmen, whom officials assiduously court in pursuit of investment and trade, agree the regime is the most repressive in Eastern Europe—comparable in controls only to that of the Soviet Union. There is, however, a certain difference. "The

Securitaté is pervasive," says a senior diplomat who served in Moscow before his transfer to Bucharest, "but down below the society is much more bugger-all." Almost by rote he adds the ritual qualification: "They are Latin at heart."

Rumania's actual Latin origins are somewhat obscure, for the region was virtually lost to recorded history for a millennium between the end of Roman and the onset of Turkish dominion. Although the Turks never ruled the land directly, as they did Yugoslavia to the west and Bulgaria to the south, they won the battles and collected taxes for each self-governing principality—and kept the Austro-Hungarian Empire from encroaching beyond the northwestern region of Transylvania.

The concept of a Rumanian nationality as "a Latin island in a sea of Slavs" did not surface until a couple of centuries ago in the Reformation and Enlightenment that had swept across Western Europe. Even then the Turks exercised ultimate sway over a Frenchified élite until the principalities, less Transylvania, were united as one under the Treaty of Berlin in 1878. The Byzantine spirit of the Ottoman Empire lingers today in the swirling marketplaces of the capital, in the Orthodox churches that dot the countryside, in the obscure power struggles over which Nicolae Ceausescu, the benign-looking son of a shoemaker, presides with the aplomb and ruthlessness of a sixteenth-century warrior prince.

In a sense the rise of Ceausescu from peasantry to presidency fulfilled the thesis of the nation's most prolific historian, Nicholas Iorga, who was tortured and killed by members of Rumania's Iron Guard in 1940. The peasants represented the "soul" of Rumanian civilization, Iorga maintained, for they had instinctively preserved the Ruman tongue and clung fiercely to the land while the upper classes dabbled in the languages and styles of other civilizations, sometimes Greek, sometimes German, most often French. Steadily enhancing his power since his elevation in 1965 as the seemingly "liberal" successor to the autocratic Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej, Ceausescu has adopted the preservation of narrowly Rumanian values as an underlying rationale for his own harsh dictatorship. The fact that his government may wink at rampant corruption and nepotism often conveys a preliminary impression of looseness if not freedom in a Western motif. In the first family, Ceausescu's son leads the nation's youth movement, his brother serves as a general and military historian, and his wife, Elena, holds the titles "doctor engineer" and member of the Academy of Sciences. On the streets near the massive palace of government (once the palace

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of kings), managers of government shops routinely pocket tidy percentages of profits and filter bribes into the hierarchy.

One soon discovers, however, that any appearance of real freedom beneath a veneer of easy-going corruption is illusory. On a return trip to Sibiu, some 150 miles northwest of Bucharest across the southern Carpathian mountains, my aging host and hostess impart a sense of the fear that engulfs their lives. We are in the midst of a long lunch in their home when a friend calls from downtown and warns that the *Securitate* has picked up my name from a list of airplane passengers and wants to know where I am spending the day. I must leave that evening or the family will be in violation of a law promulgated two years ago that bans overnight visits by foreigners. Theoretically, my host risks prosecution or harassment for breaking yet another law that requires Rumanians to report conversations and private meetings with foreigners.

The despairing couple spend the rest of the afternoon debating what to do, worrying about loss of jobs, rehearsing me on how to answer if the *Securitate* asks where I have been. With a disbelieving sense of adventure, I promise not to give them away but stubbornly demur when one of them hysterically begs me to rip up my notes. Finally, they look warily up the placid street to see whether any strangers are watching and bid me farewell at a side entrance with a final plea that I say nothing when I check in for the return flight to Bucharest. "They have no souls," says my host, apologizing now for the disruption. "It is easy for you. You can leave. We must stay."

The prospect of an airport frisking, much less a grilling, seems altogether unreal in the current atmosphere of U.S.-Rumanian relations. Ceausescu paid his fourth visit to the United States last April, and he is anxious that nothing mar his image in America as a "liberal" among Eastern bloc Communists. More specifically, he wants the U.S. to extend its most-favored-nation (MFN) agreement for trade with Rumania on a permanent basis rather than run a gauntlet of critical congressmen with vexing questions about "human rights" annually when it comes up for renewal.

Ceausescu and President Ford signed the first MFN agreement in August, 1975, in the Carpathian resort town of Sinaia, once the retreat of Rumanian aristocracy. Guaranteeing the same tariffs and quotas for Rumania as for America's non-Communist trading partners, MFN has worked out well on both sides. Trade between the two increased from \$322 million in 1975 to \$492.7 million in 1977, with the U.S. enjoying a balance of \$26.1 million, by exporting mainly agricultural products and raw materials in exchange for crude oil and gasoline, clothing, shoes (purveyed in the U.S. under American labels), and other manufactured products. Rumanian and American economists predicted that the overall figure in 1978 would reach \$600 million, 4 per cent of Rumania's total, on its way to a goal of \$1 billion by 1980.

Equally important, ever since President Nixon visited Bucharest on his first trip to Eastern Europe nine years

ago, Washington has viewed trade and cultural exchanges with Rumania as a clever device for penetrating and splitting the Warsaw Pact. The fact that Rumania still does 20 per cent of its foreign commerce with the Soviet Union, its largest trading partner, and could hardly produce anything without Soviet iron ore only fortifies Washington's desire for rapport with Bucharest.

For his part, Ceausescu looks upon good will in Washington as proof of his flexible foreign policy, also borne out by equally close ties with China and by diplomatic relations with both Israel and the Arab states, including the Palestine Liberation Organization. Amid such lofty considerations, his government would not relish an "incident"—or even a rude confrontation—with an American journalist.

At the airport the police check me for bombs and weapons, as they do all passengers on domestic flights. The *Securitate* no doubt notes my departure but asks no questions. My passport provides privileges to which few Rumanians could ever aspire.

Outside my hotel in Bucharest a bearded man with hair to his shoulders slips me an envelope. An American diplomat has given him my name and that of another journalist, he mutters in a heavy, barely intelligible accent. I tell him I have never heard of the diplomat. "Here it is very dangerous," he says. "Cannot talk." Could I meet him in half an hour across the street? Abruptly he turns and disappears in the shadows of a stone wall. I go by the smiling doorman and clerk, who ask for the identification cards of all Rumanians entering the hotel, and open the envelope in the men's room. It contains a "manifesto" and a list of signers, carefully printed in ballpoint ink on scraps of notebook paper.

"Dear Sir," it begins, "We are a group of 7 men and we write you praying to help us to quit this country forever, country where the rights of people are blowing in the wind. We have been knocking at the passport office door for months asking for a passport which could offer to us the pleasure of visiting the values of a universal culture, but instead of the passports we get a spanking, lies and we are lied over all the time we are lied. Those misters instead of solving our problems, our demands, they are kidding about us. Here, where all the newspapers write about nothing but democracy, there is democracy only on the paper, not in reality. It's forbidden to have long hair, beard, to wear what you like, to love what you like, to read what you want, to do what you want, to go where you like." The constitution says "the people is his own master, and he's got all the liberty and the power in his hand," the manifesto goes on. "There's nothing more unreal than those articles in the constitution. Maybe only the liberty of dying." One of the signers, it adds, "because he had asked for the passport, was joint [sic] to the army immediately . . . and works seven days in a week beside of the jailbirds."

When I leave the hotel another, younger man is also waiting for me. They suggest I walk about fifty feet behind them and lead me to a park down the street. I follow them past benches crowded with lovers and into a restaurant that blares an American rock tune. We order a round of beer but cannot talk over the din, and we

leave for an apartment complex a block away. In the half-light of an entry they hurriedly rasp out their grievances, lapsing into silence only when someone walks in to use the elevator. "We have the right to the passport, but it is only in the papers," says the first man, Petre Negreanu, author of the manifesto. "When we say, 'this is my right,' they say, 'You haven't this right.'" He shows me the consequences of his defiance—bruises on his arms and legs where the police have beaten him with their nightsticks after arresting him for letting his hair grow longer than shown on his I.D. card.

One of the first penalties for applying for a passport, except when endorsed by a state enterprise or institution, is dismissal from work. Fired as a lathe operator in a factory near Bucharest, Negreanu survives as a part-time sound technician with a musical group. The other man, Sergiu Ionita, after losing his job as a paper-handler for the state publishing house, depends on his family. "They ask my father why I want to go to the West," he says. "They give him a paper and tell him to sign a pledge that I will not go. If I go, they say it will be a problem for him." Several days later Negreanu and Ionita give me a longer list of passport applicants. They say they will demonstrate on the broad cobblestoned square between the palace of government and the Communist party headquarters, carrying signs reading, "Passport or Death." They talk excitedly about setting fire to their clothes and staging "a hunger strike until we get not the promise but the passport."

On the weekend before my own departure for Budapest they again summon me from the hotel, this time to say they now have between forty and fifty followers and will hold the demonstration in the heart of the capital. I look for them at the appointed hour but see only clots of policemen and hard-eyed men in suits or slacks and leather jackets—*Securitate* garb. The police block off the sidewalks in front of both the palace of government and party headquarters, forcing pedestrians to walk through the center of the square. Later I learn they had arrested one of the organizers early the same morning and probably picked up others.

I do not see Negreanu and Ionita again, but they are not necessarily in such deep trouble as their disappearance might imply. There have been at least six instances in the past year in which groups of persistent passport-seekers have finally "gotten out," usually after having been imprisoned or sent to the onerous Danube Canal project for bypassing the Danube delta to the Black Sea—the equivalent of Siberian exile since the era of the toughest police-state tactics in the 1950's. (A dozen were known as the "Praila group" after the name of the site at which they worked.)

Western diplomats, beseiged for visas and help by passport applicants, have observed what one diplomat calls "a standard process." First the Rumanian authorities "do everything possible to make them lose their nerve," he says. "They on the other hand believe the more attention they get, the higher their chances. Sheer persistence will get them out." The regime might not yield at all, he notes, but for the nuisance of the annual MFN review by the U.S. Senate

and House trade committees. Rumania's deep-seated objections to the loss of any of its citizens reflects a peculiar sense of chauvinism and national inferiority. In speech after speech Ceausescu has berated those who want to leave, telling them: "You are Rumanian. This is your home. This is where you belong." That seemingly simplistic reminder assumes disturbing complications, though, when applied to the ethnic minorities, 12 per cent of the nation's 22 million people.

Rumania's largest minority, between 1.7 and 2 million Hungarians, clings strongly to ancient roots in Transylvania, acquired by Rumania after the breakup of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1918, despite resentment of Rumanian rule. For members of the German and Jewish minorities, however, emigration often seems to offer the only promise of release from what they too regard as a tightly exclusivist system. Some 70,000 Germans have migrated to West Germany under terms of a formal agreement between Bucharest and Bonn, Rumania's largest Western trading partner, that permits 11,000 of them to go each year. The Germans began trickling out in the 1950's to rejoin family members who had served in the Nazi army during Rumania's wartime alliance with Hitler and had been afraid to return after their release as war prisoners. Now fewer than 400,000 Germans remain in Rumanian towns and villages settled by their Saxon ancestors as long ago as the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

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The pattern for Rumania's Jewish populace, reduced from nearly a million to some 400,000 by Nazi pogroms in the final year of the war, has been quite the opposite. For years they left with relative ease, usually for Israel but sometimes for Western Europe or the United States. As the number of Jews declined to between 10 per cent and 20 per cent of the immediate postwar figure, however, the government imposed increasingly stringent conditions. Now Rumanian Jews may be sure that they, like ethnic Rumanians, will lose their jobs if they apply for passports. They must appear before local people's councils to explain why they wish to go and then endure a series of bureaucratic appeals that may last for months or years. As a result, emigration of Jews has fallen from some 4,000 in 1972 to 1,300 last year. "Nothing compares with the Soviet Union," says Jacob Birnbaum, director of New York's Center for Russian and East European Jewry, "but people can get out of other coun-

tries in Eastern Europe without so much difficulty if they really want to."

A New York attorney, Cyrus Abbe, has twice visited Rumania to interview and assist Jewish passport applicants, most recently last spring on behalf of Birnbaum's organization. "Most of these people were frightened, desperate, and didn't want to talk to me," he says. Inevitably, police interrogated those to whom he spoke, and customs officials at the airport confiscated letters that some of them had asked him to carry out and mail to relatives. "We develop a congressional campaign for each person," says Birnbaum. "It's a real pain. You have fifty congressmen bothering the Rumanian ambassador." One man, who had married an Israeli girl in a ceremony not recognized by Rumanian officials, got his exit visa only after writing a lengthy letter of protest to his government and giving a copy to Abbe to circulate in Washington. Under the circumstances, Abbe wonders if the regime would really like to hold the entire Jewish community as hostage for permanent MFN treatment.

The government can, with considerable truth, attribute its stand partly to economic problems. Since the end of World War II Rumania has experienced a vast demographic shift of young men from farms to factories, leaving only a third of the work force, notably old women and children, in the countryside. At the same time, the population is rising by less than a per cent a year—not enough to fill a labor pool for a nation whose gross national product has gone up an average of 8 per cent annually since 1965 to more than \$30 billion for 1977. The government has outlawed abortions for unwed as well as married women, makes divorce an arduous ordeal, and gives bonuses to mothers with more than two children.

Such emphasis on quick economic growth fosters discontent if not exactly revolt, for the regime insists on pouring 34 per cent of the profits back into industry and development—a higher percentage than any other country in Europe. Workers and low-level managers alike lead highly circumscribed lives, often with no chance of advancement, on less than \$100 a month. "It's indirect enslavement," says an American businessman after guided tours through a couple of factories. "The downtrodden are in perpetual misery. They could end up in revolution."

Despite all security precautions, Ceausescu confronted just that kind of dissent in August, 1977, among coal miners in the western Carpathian mountains. As many as 35,000 of them—no one can confirm the figure—staged either a strike or a slowdown in the same area in which "revolutionary" heroes burned up a capitalist mine in 1929. Government spokesmen blandly deny there was any strike at all, but sketchy reports on what was happening spread among knowledgeable Rumanians after Ceausescu flew to the scene to negotiate personally with labor leaders.

Although the miners settled for better pensions and working conditions, including more supplies and hot lunches at the pithead, the strike dramatized grievances of one sort or another everywhere. Rumanians complain that they never see their best-made products, reserved

for export to the West. ("The Russians get their crummy machinery," says an American.) They have to wait in line for necessities ranging from fresh bread and vegetables to bicycles and radios or else pay bribes for goods hidden by clerks and managers. Free medical care is a myth, for underpaid doctors extract extra fees for full and fast treatment—sometimes including hastily done abortions at serious physical and psychological risk.

The implications are clear. "People are getting less and less satisfied with nationalism," summarizes a Western diplomat. "Now the inadequacy of it is affecting larger and larger classes. First they ask for more consumer goods, and then comes the question 'Aren't we sacrificing too much?'" Ceausescu, too, was asking questions after widespread reports of inefficiency at all levels. Last winter he transferred the two top bureaucrats in his ministry of interior, along with a score of others, and then a couple of weeks before his American trip revealed what appeared superficially as a sweeping plan for decentralizing the economy, the most controlled in Eastern Europe. Freely admitting that "excessive centralism" was "hindering smooth economic activity," he said that each production unit or enterprise beginning in the second half of 1978 should assume responsibility for profits and losses and reinvest on its own.

Foreign economists point out that Rumania, for all its "liberalism" in trade, is the last nation in Eastern Europe to undertake major economic reform and they wonder if Ceausescu can really bring himself to do it.

Regardless of how far the regime may go in economic reform, the prospect of Ceausescu's jeopardizing any real power seems unthinkable. Protests of passport-seekers are trivial indeed when compared with the impassioned pleas of dissidents in Poland's underground "flying universities" or with the signers of Czechoslovakia's "Charter 77," suppressed though they were.

Rumania's most celebrated dissident intellectual undoubtedly is Paul Goma, author of three novels of social protest published in West Germany and two more in France after Rumania's state publishers had rejected them. Unknown in his own land except for his broadcasts over Radio Free Europe, Goma and some twenty or thirty of his sympathizers got their exit visas in 1977 after Ceausescu had first denounced them as "traitors," placed most of them under house arrest, and cut off their telephones. Their offense was to circulate abroad a protest against "psychic, moral, and intellectual oppression" in Rumania. Goma also wrote Ceausescu an "open letter" asking him to support the Czech dissidents. His countrymen, he said, were afraid to speak out since they "think only of what they stand to lose when the security police hear about it but think not of what they stand to gain despite the security police."

Ceausescu's decision to let Goma and his cohorts leave (some of them signed Goma's protest for that purpose) illustrated his skill at ridding himself of his critics and still avoiding more than a few unpleasant commentaries in the West. Now writing in Paris, Goma grants occasional interviews but has no power for molding opinion in his own country. In retrospect, his letters

appear to Rumanian intellectuals a childish effort at exploiting the Czech protest in order to share in the glory.

If the government has seriously failed in coercing or intimidating or in somehow buying off the malcontents, it is in its dealings with the large Hungarian minority. A proud people with a rich and cohesive cultural tradition, the Hungarians have for centuries looked with contempt on the poor Ruman peasants of Transylvania whom they once excluded from schools and jobs and banned from entire towns. In the past year or so an important Transylvanian Hungarian Communist leader, Karoly Kiraly, has emerged as an international voice for a minority now seething with pent-up frustration and anger. The problem is especially ticklish because of Hungary's own interest in Transylvania, which Hungarians believe is rightfully theirs. Transylvania could have repercussions beyond Rumania and Hungary. In one speech Ceausescu railed snidely against those serving foreigners "for two pieces of gold or two of silver, for a mess of potage or goulash"—a reference to what Rumanians believe is the daily diet of both Hungarians and Russians. Whatever they may think of their leaders, educated Rumanians are convinced the Russians are secretly encouraging Kiraly, who has studied in Moscow, as part of a scheme to play Budapest against Bucharest and divide and rule both of them.

Ceausescu owes his longevity in office in part to his finesse at fostering this fear and still coping with the Russians. Rumanians often tell me the country needs him as a symbol of strength and unity against the might of the Kremlin, which withdrew its troops from Rumania twenty years ago. At any sign of weakness, Rumanians keep saying, the Russians will come again, as they did in Hungary in 1956 and in Czechoslovakia twelve years later. (In the first moments of panic during the devastating earthquake of March 4, 1977, many Rumanians assumed the Russians were attacking. Some did not abandon that view until they had seen pictures of the severely damaged Soviet embassy.)

Thus sophisticated Rumanians tend to accept the sight of Ceausescu's picture on the front pages of their newspapers every day over articles either quoting his speeches or extolling his accomplishments as part of the price for national survival. The personality cult surrounding this otherwise bland, unprepossessing man reached a climax of sorts on his sixtieth birthday with an outpouring of fulsome greetings and speeches and the opening of a "permanent" exhibition depicting his good works.

Even so, Ceausescu has shown a sensitivity that belies real confidence. On the overnight train from Budapest to Bucharest two Rumanian customs officials and a man who calls himself a "tour guide" enter my compartment and demand to see all my papers. The "tour guide" reads them to a jowly customs major, who keeps copies of my own articles, newspaper clippings, and statements by Goma and Kiraly. (Luckily they miss the passport-seekers' handwritten "manifesto," buried in an inside pocket of my jacket.) "You have written lies," the major shouts

through the "tour guide," who is fluent in both English and French. "Where did you get this material?" they both ask repeatedly. "These people are crazy," says the major. "They do not tell the truth about Rumania. Why do you write about this problem? Do you tell the truth?"

They order me off the train at 2 A.M. at Cluj, the first big stop inside the frontier, and then keep me waiting for seven hours in the station. I am demanding the return of my passport, when a brown-suited official and a young interpreter in sports shirt and sunglasses summon me into the station police office. The official berates me for "interfering in Rumania's internal affairs" and disappears into a cluttered back office. "This could be serious," the interpreter laconically advises me. The bars on the windows have begun to look very confining by the time the official reappears with a cheerful smile.

He has been on the phone to Bucharest, it turns out, and he can now speak decisively: "You will get your passport and be free to go anywhere as soon as you sign a statement." He gives the interpreter a copy. It is an itemized list in Rumanian of all the papers they have seized. The interpreter reads it and asks if I would like to make corrections. I say I cannot sign it until I have seen a copy in English. The official assures me I will get one and disappears again while the interpreter chats genially. "Though we are from different systems, we breathe the same air," he says with disarming warmth. "You know we have a Rumanian saying, 'We have fourteen tons of dynamite over our head. Anything could set it off.'" He murmurs something about "the situation" when I ask what he means. He would prefer to discuss my articles, which he was called from bed three hours earlier to read. "Anyone is free to leave Rumania," he says. "They need only apply." He is sanguine about the Hungarian problem too. "I play them in football," he says. "We fight, but we are brothers."

The brown-suited official again emerges. I ask to see a copy of the list that he wants me to sign, but he shrugs it off. With a knowing smile, the interpreter suggests that perhaps I plan to use it in an article. Instead the official gives me a receipt for "33 documents" that says they were seized after I failed to declare them—a nonexistent regulation. "You are free to go anywhere you like and write whatever you wish," he announces, returning my passport, "only we hope you will write the truth." As I am leaving I ask these men who they are and whom they represent. They state politely that they cannot answer either question. I now understand why Rumanians fear them. I have suffered the kind of harassment that many of them have come to expect in their daily lives—with none of the personal danger. Since Ceausescu has been wooing President Carter, Bucharest has instructed my interrogators to adopt a tone of sweet reason.

In four weeks in Rumania I have lived in a womb of safety that Ceausescu denies any Rumanian except under immediate foreign pressure. He has yet to get permanent MFN treatment from the U.S. or all the investment he thinks he needs. Those are the great prizes in a bitter struggle in which the Rumanian people are the pawns.