HOW WAS CEAUȘESCU POSSIBLE?
THE TALE OF THE GRAND NATIONAL DECEPTION

BY VLADIMIR TISMĂNEANU

Watching those sequences from 1965, I recalled Ghiță Gheorghiu, the grandson of Gheorghiu-Dej (he is there, together with his mother, Lica, and his sisters Sanda and Mândra, who are also bidding their final farewell to the grandfather who had adopted them.) Their real father had been Marcel Popescu, ex-aide-de-camp of Emil Bodnăraș (a Soviet spy, one of the regime’s top leaders), Minister of Exterior Commerce, dismissed in 1959 when Lica decided to divorce, Until 1965, he was not even allowed to see his children, the role of the parent being reserved for the grandfather and for his replacement, the second husband, engineer Gh. Rădoi (propelled from the director of “Steagul Roșu” (the “Red Flag” factory) in Brașov to the function of Minister of Heavy Industry and Vice President of the Council of Ministers). I often spoke with Ghiță from 1974-1975 about Dej, Luca, Ana Pauler, Miron Constantinescu, Ceaeșcu. He had his own anxieties, especially in connection with the assassination of Lucrețiu Pătrășcanu after the frame-up in April 1954, he had “understood” many things. Today the Dutch ambassador has his residence in the house on Atena street (it was working for the cultural department of the “Tudor Vladimirescu” district, responsible for the libraries. My mother was a physician at the “Tudor Vladimirescu” district, responsible for school hygiene at IMF (Institute for Medical Pharmaceutics). Special uniforms (suits), made of softer fabric, signaled differences in the social structure. Ghiță (called Popsescu until then) had been the darling of the Party’s number one. Like his siblings, Valentin and Zoia, the third-child Nicu was just beginning to sense what it meant to have access to absolute power, to be restricted by nothing, the experience of a supreme ruler. As member of the Political Bureau and secretary of the CC of the RWP, Nicolae Ceaeșcu had been an obedient instrument of Dej’s commands. He had fully participated in constructing Dej’s cult, he too had fawned upon Lica Gheorghiu as an expert leading lady in, to use writer Milnea Gheorghiu’s expression, “inner-oriented acting”. In the ’70s, Lica suffered from obesity, she was depressed and for all intents and purposes no longer left her house. Ghiță was married to Alina Popescu, quadraelectron champion, the daughter of a soccer celebrity, who eventually became the president of the Romanian Soccer Federation. After the game with Switzerland, which was, I believe, in 1967, when Romania suffered a humiliating loss (7-0), Alina’s father was relieved of his function. Subsequently, I learned that Ghiță and Alina had separated. If my memory does not deceive me, Alina’s sister, Simona, was married to another soccer star, Alexandru (Sandu) Boc. In the meantime, Ghiță, and Nicu, as well as their good friend Zazone (Radu Ioanid, television camera man for years) had all passed away. Our classmate, Florin Cleper, is also gone, he was the first of us to go, he was an architect in Israel and perished during a campaign in Lebanon. He was the one with whom Nicu discussed Roman history and Napoleon’s campaigns.

45 years ago, on July 19th, 1965, the 9th Congress of the RCP (Romanian Communist Party) was opening (the scene appears in the film). In attendance in Bucharest were Leonid Brezhnev, Deng Xioping, Todor Zhivkov, and Walter Ulbricht. Dips Nusantara Aidit was also there, the president of the Communist Party in Indonesia. Only three months later was the coup d’etat attempt organized by pro-Maoist officers connected to the Communist party, followed by a repression of ferocious brutality. Aidit perished, together with hundreds of thousands or perhaps even a million other Indonesians. A celebrated film with Mel Gibson and Sigourney Weaver addresses this: “The Year of Living Dangerously.” The history of Romanian communism was entering a new era: RWP was re-baptized as the RCP (Romanian Communist Party), in a few months the Romanian People’s Republic became the Socialist Republic of Romania.

Though he was leader of the party, but not (yet) also of the state — the discourse proclaiming the new Constitution was held in August 1965 — just like Stalin in 1936, Nicolae Ceaeșcu was unequivocally confirmed as the true embodiment of power. Nevertheless, with great agility, he still played the card of respect for his colleagues of the “collective leadership.” He avoided antagonizing them, while meticulously accumulating the power and the glory. Elena, researcher and party secretary at the ICECHEIM (National Research and Development Institute for Chemistry and Petrochemistry), was spending her vacation, in the summer of 1965, with Marta Drăghici.
(the wife of the top Securitate boss under Dej) at Karlov y Vary in Czechoslovakia. A sumptuous residence was being built next door to the one, still being finished, of the Ceaușescu family (during those months they lived in a special Party hotel, located on Tolstoi street) for Alexandru Drăghici (released, after 13 years, from the function of Minister of Internal Affairs, that is the head of the “Securitate” (secret service police), “promoted” secretary of the CC, member of the Executive Committee and of the Permanent Presidium). Back then Nicu used to tell me that his father’s favorite maxim was “Cut off a cat’s tail and let it believe it’s still a cat,” that is, take away the source of someone’s pride and try to tell them they’re still respectable. Dialectical heights, indeed.

ANDREI UJIĆĂ’S FILM IS FORMIDABLE BOTH ARTISTICALLY AND POLITICALLY.

It is an aesthetic accomplishment because it succeeds in reconstructing the mechanisms of dictatorship without resorting to an omniscient narrator, that presumptuous possessor of the imaginary science of retrospective determination. It exposes the secret fabric of what sociologist Daniel Chirot calls the tyranny of certainty or, to use the only apparently ironic formula of political scientist Ken Jowitt, “socialism within one family” (1 and the overwhelming majority of the Romanians) had no way of knowing, in March of 1965, on the basis of official or non-official documents, what direction the new leader would take. The future was uncertain (for him as well). Everything seemed possible, at least on the surface. Or to be more precise, everything was possible, but democracy. The relaxation of the old terror’s grip, for which a fascist could no longer remain subject to the Soviets. He succeeded in hypnotizing not only the West, but also the world’s intellectuals, the champions of the creative Marxism and his wife (at the beginning, a feeble shadow, who then became more and more aggressive, a Messalina claiming to be Newton), were surrounded by a court of clowns, less dignified than the tin soldiers of our childhood. Amongst these, diverse crooks who, from Leonte Răduțu, Gheorghe Stoica and Alexandru Sencovici, to Ion Popescu-Puturi, Ghizela Vass and George Macovescu, Miron Constantinescu and Valer Roman, sung praises to the one who, as they knew all too well, had been nothing more than a fanatical militant of the clandestine Union of Communist Youth, not by a long shot the leader of a fictitious national antifascist movement. We see the scene from the Twelfth Congress in 1979, when, trying to cleanse the party of some of the disgrace of having committed so many crimes, the old Bolshevik Constantin Pârvulescu raised his voice against the re-election (predetermined through plebiscitary techniques) of Nicolae Ceaușescu to the function of Secretary General. At first speechless, then hysterical, the hall reacted as befits the discipline of the party, that nefarious discipline which Pârvulescu himself once promoted as president of the senator Commission of Party Control. One cannot forget to mention Dej’s barons, who arduously participated in the rituals of Ceaușescu’s glorification. We see Ion Gheorghe Maurer and Chivu Stoica, as well as Bărădeanu, Apostol, and Drăghici in the film. Each one eliminated, emasculated, after having performed his duty as loyal soldier of the Leninist sect. Without them, the catastrophe would have been less devastating, even if the delirium reflected the essence of the totalitarist system. Look at Emil Bodnăraș recommending Ceaușescu as the first president of the Socialist Republic of Romania. Watch the spineless collaborationist ex-social democrat Ştefan Voitec, the president of the Grand National Assembly, handing him the tokens accompanying the position, including the famous presidential scepter, the opportune moment for a congratulatory telegram from Salvador Dalí…

Those who still maintain that Nicolae Ceaușescu cut the umbilical cord to Moscow-style communism deceive themselves. His goal was one of autonomy, he aimed to consolidate his own space of manipulation, so as to no longer remain subject to the Soviets. He was, in fact, faithfully following Dej’s final line (though the latter didn’t practice the feudal masquerade). Ceaușescu was, in reality, more Stalinist than Khroushchev and his disciples. The same goes for his acolytes. I cannot erase from my mind the image of Politburo member Gogu Rădulescu at a party in Snagov (probably in May 1965), the air of joviality drenched with alcohol (novelist Petru Dumitriu, portrays him without mercy in Incognito, I am quoting from memory, “with his nose, be it a boxer’s or an heredo-syphilitic’s.”) This is the same Gogu Rădulescu who remained until the end by the side of the increasingly mad dictator, the same Rădulescu who stood dumbfounded, with a limp look of Asian deity next to a decapit Ceaușescu, when the “final proclamation” was read to the spell-bound crowd, condoning the bloody reprisals without a murmur. In the same way, it is an emblematic scene when, at the so-called Grand National Assembly, all the lackeys, all the sycophants from the mafia at the top are saying (we can read their lips, the scene is without sound) the word which expresses their complete surrender, their servile cowardliness in its entirety: “I swear.” They all swear: Mihăi, and Trofîn, and Dăscălescu, and Verdet, and Ştefan Andrei, and Răduțu, and Burtică, and Jânos Fazekeas, and Lița Ciobanu, and Virgil Cazacu, and Popescu—“God,” and Ion Dîncă.Passionately they swear, like exalted pioneers. Manea Mănescu and Emil Bobu. Ion Iliescu would also have sworn…

The people in this film are those who elected a statue to a blatantly neurotic individual, one possessed by the demon of revolutionizing the world and who coerced his subjects to be happy, in spite of themselves. Look at Charles de Gaulle quoting national poet Mihai Eminescu in Bucharest, in the spring of 1968, at the height of the Parisian student protests, without realizing what Pandor’s box he had opened: “We want a national state, not a cosmopolitan one.” What divine music to the ears of the national-Stalinists of Romania… Look at Ceaușescu in Prague, two weeks before the invasion of Warsaw Treaty troops. He sits at an electrifying press conference, with clouds of cigar smoke and awkward questions. In Prague, censorship had been abolished, there was free press, a pluralist political system was being created, civil society had been revived. It was a meeting of friendship with smiling workers sitting where they pleased, without agitators and stupid slogans. Alexander Dubček stopped those who had wanted to chant. Ceaușescu was somehow puzzled, not appreciating how a spontaneous gathering like that was possible, but he was nevertheless ready to support the reforming communists. Not because he shared their objectives, but rather because he could not stand the idea of a foreign power daring to interfere with his business matters (political, economical, etc.).

I do not believe Ceaușescu repeated any phrase more often than “non-interference in internal affairs.” With this sort of rhetoric he succeeded in hypnotizing not only the West, but also many of Romania’s intellectuals. Anti-Soviet Stalinism was the secret of domestic stability and foreign success of the regime embodied by Nicolae Ceaușescu. To which was added the support for radical movements, tiers-mondiste,
The ideology was one of a return to the primordial and primordialist symbols: mass gatherings (bains de foules) during which Ceaușescu, Mau-

rer, and Chivu Stoica shook hands with Dacia chief-tain Decebal and feudal prince Michael the Brave. These were clearly performances with incontestable symbolic implications, a dramaturgy which was not afraid of ridicule. The greater the pseudo-historical fabrications, the more pleased their beneficiary appeared. In this respect there is no distinguishing between him and the other sultans of Balkan Marxism: Bulgaria’s Todor Zhivkov or Albania’s Enver Hoxha. It is amusing that two decades later, the same Ceaușescu, exasperated with Gorbachev’s reforms, would deny the role of symbols in politics: “Symbolism may be nice for the arts, in economics and politics it’s not worth two cents.”

And yet he was obstinate about organizing “Potemkin villages,” desperately hung up on the megalomania project of the so-called Casa Poporului, the People’s House, the megasarcophagus intended to eternalize “the symbol of triumphant communism.” Bucharest became Paranoopolis or Ceaushima. Novelist Alexandru Ivasiuc captured the entire collapse in these words: “We are 22 million people living in the imagination of a mad man.” But it was a systematic lunacy that Ceaușescu exploited and exacerbated depending on his own narcissistic desires. Elena Ceaușescu used to say about the Conducător (Leader): “A man such as this is born once every 500 years.” Why not every thousand years?! Ceaușescu’s version of socialism carried once every 500 years.” Why not every thousand years?! Ceaușescu’s version of socialism carried an extreme what American historian Robert C. Tucker, Stalin’s outstanding biographer, calls the philosophy of a permanent transformation.

Nothing was allowed to remain unchanged. From the course of the Danube to human condition itself. Pay attention in the film at the way in which Ceaușescu looks at Mao, as an apprentice watching his omniscient master. Just like Mao, Ceaușescu envisioned a radical rupture from the old world, no matter the price for such a cataclysmic break. The leap into freedom’s empire...

In February 1983, I broadcasted via Radio Free Europa the essay “Nicu Ceaușescu and the Rise of Dynastic Socialism in Romania.” In 1985, I published a study entitled “Ceaușescu’s Socialism” in the journal Problems of Communism. In 1986, in the journal ORBIS (it is still published in Philadelphia, under the aegis of the Foreign Policy Research Institute), I wrote another study titled “Byzantine Rites, Stalinist Follies: The Twilight of Dynastic Communism in Romania”). Thanks to the revelations of General Ion Mihai Pacepa, the myth of Ceaușescu received a fatal blow in the ‘80s. There are remarkable works on the subject of the life and death of Ceaușescu (Mary Ellen Fischer, Pavel Câmpeanu, Edward Behr, Catherine Durandin, including also the recent journalistic reconstitution of Grigore Cartianu, to name a few of the contributions.)

In my opinion, Andrei Ujică’s film is the most complete and piercing investigation made into the mental universe of the man who led Ro-

mania between 1965 and 1989. It is truly the autobiography of Nicolae Ceaușescu. It is what he would have said had he managed to address the Grand National Assembly: how valiant he had been, how wise, how clairvoyant. How he had been betrayed by felons from the praeto-

rian guard, the hooligans, the bandits and the spies in the service of enemy agencies. How he fought, sparing no efforts and “did his utmost” for the cause of socialism and communism. Yet, the historical verdict would not have been different from the one made by the revolutionaries of December 1989: the Grand Deception had miserably collapsed, leaving behind an emaci-

ated individual, a senile, bloodthirsty, mono-

maniacal old man, frozen in the mirage of an apocalyptic predestination.1

Translated from the Romanian by Julie Dawson

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