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ARGUMENT

Lumini și umbre în *Elev în comunism*

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FOREWORD

Lights and Shadows in *Student during the Communist Regime*

Luciana Marioara Jinga
IICCR

Eu sunt Nimeni

Maria Bălan
Școala Generală nr. 19, București

I am Nobody

Maria Bălan
Public School, no. 19, Bucharest

— Cine sunt eu să dau sfaturi altora? Eu sunt Nimeni. Nu știu nimic, nu pricep nimic, zice mama când nu-i mai încap toate la locul lor. Apoi se așază sfârșită pe canapea, închide ochii, se mai vaită încetișor. Să nu ajungeți în pielea mea! Închide ochii și tace strivită.

— Mamă, iartă-mă, dar nu te înțeleg! zic eu, împleticind cuvintele. Mă înroșesc de ciudă. Femeia asta nu știe să trăiască. E bolnavă (operată la sân) și, cu toate acestea, uite-o cum se zbate pentru fiecare bănuț! Plânge și îndură umilințe nemăsurate pentru 1 700 de lei lunar, pe care-i împarte cu o copilă — eu — și cu un pensionar — tata.

Aș face orice să n-o mai văd muncind la catedră, umilită de șmecheri bătrâni și tineri, neluată în seamă decât de unii elevi mai sensibili sau mai silitori. Cum o fi ajuns așa? Ce fel de om ești, tu, mamă?

— Eu sunt omul nimănui. Eu sunt Nimeni, ți-am mai spus! Și ce dacă am terminat Facultatea de Litere cu media 9,87? La ce mi-a folosit?!

În momentele de singurătate mă imaginez luându-i locul câteva secunde, despovărând-o de prezent, ștergându-i memoria calendarului. Iată-mă la catedră, predându-le pușlilor lirica lui Arghezi, a lui Nichita Stănescu... Nu, e prea mult! Prea mult sentiment, prea multă dăruire, prea multă cultură... Cum aș putea s-o înțeleg, s-o ajut? Privesc fotografiile ei de tinerețe. O făptură fragilă, aeriană, o vărsătoare autentică, licențiată în română și latină. Aici e în curtea interioară a Universității din București, înghesuită între șapte colege de grupă, înconjurându-și profesorul de greacă veche cu afecțiune, solidari cu toții.

Alta: în armată, la convocare, mărșăluind în pas de defilare pe arșița verii în veston și cu caschetă... Legătura cu apărarea patriei pare evidență..., dar cea cu studiul limbilor clasice? Dar cu româna? Unii spun că semănăm. Fragile, brunete, cu ochii negri — până aici merge asemănarea; rebelă — eu — supusă — ea. Așa să fi fost dintotdeauna?

"Who am I to advice others? I am Nobody. I know nothing, I understand nothing", says my mother when nothing fits around here any longer. Then she sits on the couch, completely exhausted, and closes her eyes, gently bemoaning her fate: "May you never be in my shoes!" She closes her eyes and dries up, contorted.

"Forgive me, mother, but I don't understand you!" I say, stumbling my words. I go red, spitefully. "This woman doesn't know how to live. Look at her disease (her bosom has been operated on), how she is losing heart over each little penny! She is crying and taking immense humiliation for 1700 lei per month, which she shares with a child — me — and a retired man — my father!

I would do anything for her to stop working in that school, humiliated as she is there by slyboots of all ages, and not noticed by anyone, except, maybe, for a few pupils who are more sensitive and industrious than others. How did she get here? What kind of a human being are you, mother?"

"I am someone who doesn't belong. I am Nobody, as I've already told you! Yes, I graduaded the Faculty of Letters with an average of 9,87. So what? What's been the use of all that, if I may ask?!"

When I'm alone, I fancy myself getting in her shoes just for a moment and taking the burden of living in the present off her mind, deleting her memory of the calendar. There I am, at the chair, teaching poetry, Arghezi, Nichita Stănescu... No, that's too much! Too much feeling, too much devotion, too much culture... How could I understand her, help her? I am looking at some photos of her in her youth. A frail, aery being, an authentic Aquarius with a degree in Romanian and Latin. Here she is in the courtyard of Bucharest University, surrounded by seven class mates, all warmly gathered around their professor of Old Greek.

Another photo: in the army, called out for a parade, in military coat and helmet, in the summer heat... her relation to the defence of our homeland needs no further evidence... what about her relation to the study of classic languages? What about her relation to the study of Romanian? Some say that we two resemble each

Să ne imaginăm: eu la sortat de cartofi în mirosul pestilențial de tuberculi descompuși. O grămadă uriașă și șaizeci de copii care aleg cartofii buni de cei răi, așezându-i în două, trei lădițe de lemn. Câțiva țărani aduc lădițe goale și un tovarăș pontator numără. Sunt nemulțumiți de randament, acuză incompetența copiilor, dar niciunul nu se urnește să pună umărul la activitatea comună.

Altă campanie, altă distracție! La cules de porumb: rupi știuleții și-i arunci în coșuri de nuiele; un șir de știuleți pentru fiecare elev de liceu; ți se înroșesc palmele, faci bășici, mănușile se rup, transpiri și miroși.

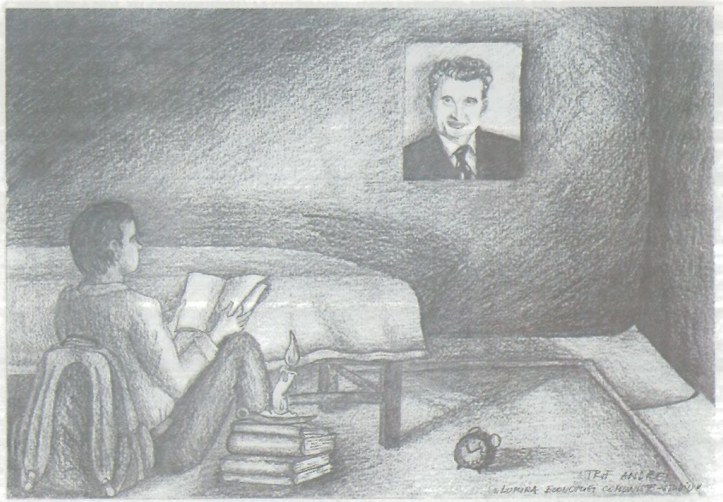
Gata, nu mai suport! Fug! Dar unde să fugi? Autobuzul vine să ne ia abia la patru după-amiaza. Vopsind cu var copacii din curtea școlii, demarcând terenul de fotbal, măturând clasele — o mătură la treizeci de elevi ridica praful cu rândul. Nu au bani pentru a plăti personalul de serviciu. Fac economii.

În practică, la subsolul Liceului „I.L. Caragiale", confecționând ciorapi cu mașina de tricotat: e zgomot, dar nu ai voie să părăsești locul de muncă — dacă se defectează mașina o iei de la capăt și nu mai termini norma niciodată. Mi-e foame. Scot pachețelul cu telemea și pe cel cu gem de caise, le mănânc repede, pe furiș. Fiecare se descurcă cum poate. Noi nu suntem descurcăreți, nu putem mai bine. Gemul îl face bunica din fructele care cresc în curtea noastră. După ce a murit bunica, ne-au demolat casa din Dorobanți (Vlădescu) și au tăiat caișii; prețul terenului în 1982 — 1 leu pe metru pătrat. Nu doar caișii au pierit, ci și prunii, vișinii, liliacul și irișii, casa bunicilor și a străbunicilor bucureșteni. Era de așteptat: toți „la bloc", numai câțiva „rătăciți" din vremuri „defuncte" la curte, proprietari mărunți cu case modeste, în stil neoclasic.

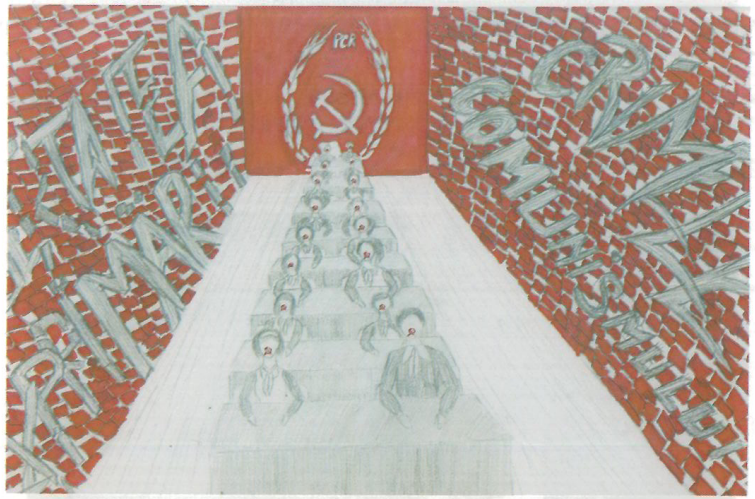
Eleva mamei, trezește-te! Sar în sus, mă înviorez, trag uniforma și sacoul la repezeală, îmi umflu servieta și-am pornit spre școală. La intrare șiruri, șiruri de elevi așteaptă înfiorați de răcoare să intre „în ordine", la control — bentița, fetițo, unde ți-e bentița? — numărul matricol, unde e numărul? — fusta, nu vezi cât e de scurtă?

Schinderman Gabriela, Palatul copiilor, Turnu Severin — Elev în comunism/*Student during the Communist Regime*

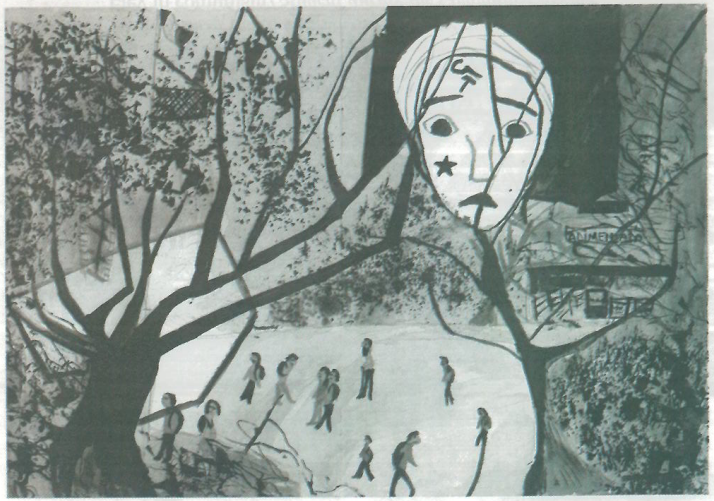
Trif Paul, Liceul de Arte Plastice, Timișoara — Practica agricolă/*Voluntary agricultural working*



Trif Andrei, Liceul de Arte Plastice, Timișoara — Lumina economiei comuniste–studiu/*The light of the communist economy–study*



Iacob Denisa Florentina, Liceul Pedagogic „Ștefan Odobleja", Drobeta-Turnu Severin —
Clasa elevilor în comunism/*A classroom with students during the communist regime*



Pașca Bianca, Liceul de Artă, Oradea —
Elev în comunism/*Student during the Communist Regime*

Țicu Viorel Paris, Liceul „Tudor Vianu", Giurgiu —
Elev în comunism/*Student during the Communist Regime*

Topârceanu Marian Bogdan, Liceul de Arte Plastice
„Nicolae Tonitza", București —
Sufocare în tonuri de gri/*Stifling in grey*

Iakob Ildiko, Colegiul de Ştiinţe „Grigore Antipa", Braşov — Greutatea comunismului/*The burden of communism*

other. Both of us frail, dark-haired, black-eyed — so far, our resemblance is valid; but I am a rebel while she is obedient. Might it always have been this way?

Let us fancy me sorting out potatoes in the miasmic odour of rotten tubercles. A huge lot of 60 children are sorting the good potatoes from the bad, putting them in two or three wooden boxes. A couple of peasants are bringing empty boxes and one of our fellows is counting them. Unhappy with our efficiency, they are blaming the children's incompetence but no one bothers to give us a hand.

New campaign, new fun! Picking corn: you tear the cob and throw it in the birch basket; a line of cobs for each pupil in the highschool; your hands turn red, you get blisters, your gloves go to pieces, you sweat and you smell. Enough, I can't take any more! I'm off! But where can you be off to? The bus is coming to pick us at four in the afternoon. Whitewashing the trees in the schoolyard, marking off the football field, brooming the classrooms — a broom for thirty pupils takes turns at raising the dust. They have no money to pay the cleaning staff. They are saving!

"Practică" hours in the basement of "I.L. Caragiale" High School, machine knitting socks: it's noisy but you are not allowed to leave your working place — if the machine breaks, you have to start all over again and never see the end of it. I am hungry. I take out my sandwich with cheese and the one with apricot jam and I eat them up quickly. Each of us does his best. We are not good at it, we can't do any better. The jam is made by my grandmother from the fruits that grow in our garden. After my gradmother died, they knocked down our house in Dorobanţi (Vlădescu) and cut down the apricot trees; the land price in 1982 — 1 leu for a square meter. Along with the apricot trees, there disappeared the plums and sour cherry trees, the lilac and the irides, the house of our grand and greatgrandparents from Bucharest. It was simply predictable: everybody was supposed to move into "blocks of flats", and only the "straying" few from "defunct" times could still afford to live in houses, modest owners of humble buildings, in neoclassical style.

"My dear pupil, wake up!" I jump up, get fresh, get into my uniform and put on my coat in a hurry, get my bag and rush out

Pentru aceste „delicte" trebuie să ies din rând, ceilalți râd, unii se sperie, cei mai mulți părăsesc locul, o iau pe furiș înainte, ocolind matroana care s-a încins.

Ajung în clasă, ora decurge normal; în pauză trag cu ochiul la cizmele din piele fină, cusute manual cu broderii, ale odraslei ministrului de la industrie ușoară; le-a primit din Italia. Eu am cizme de la Obor, după ce am căutat prin trei-patru magazine. Tata e medic, nu-și permite mai mult (și nu e ciubucar). Unele uniforme, ca a ei, sunt cusute din stofă mai fină — unicat, în timp ce altele, ca a mea, sunt de serie. Viața mea e predestinată a fi de serie. Viața e ca o uniformă, viața e ca un pat al lui Procust.

Dacă ești nesupus, suporți consecințele: mustrarea orală, scrisă, admonestarea la careu; ți se spun cuvinte umilitoare în clasă, ești somat la biroul organizației de uteciști. Nu poți să ripostezi, ei au dreptate întotdeauna. Tragi cu coada ochiului și vezi trecând escorta „principelui moștenitor" formată din cinci-șase lingăi; în timp, unul dintre ei va ajunge mare disident, oponent al familiei conducătoare: „Ce timpuri! Ce moravuri!" Toți prietenii mei sunt copii buni, dar frământați. Caută soluții, își fac relații. Numai cărțile îmi sunt fidele, mi le cumpăr cu evlavie. Ca să evadez, ca să cunosc prezentul și antichitatea, Miazănoaptea și Miazăziua.

Cărțile și prietenii sunt bucuria vieții mele. Dar ecoul îmi șoptește: „Eu sunt Nimeni. Eu nu reprezint un model. Statuia e sfărâmată." Învăț pentru că n-am altceva mai bun de făcut, pentru că oamenii comunică din ce în ce mai puțin între ei, pentru că viața s-a deșertificat.

Un exemplu: adunăm chiștoace, hârtii, bilete de transport în comun în stațiile de autobuz și troleibuz, „ca să-i educăm pe cei mari". Atingem cu scârbă mizeria de pe străzi. Oare cine o fi autorul acestei monstruoase inițiative? Colectăm sticle, borcane, într-o pivniță, cărând sacoșe pline, care ne îndoaie spinarea. Hârtie — de prin pod, mai veche, plină de praf. Cei mari o scutură și o fac pachet, o transportăm într-o cămăruță la subsolul școlii.

to school. At the school gate, lines over lines of pupils shivery because of the cold air are waiting to be checked "in due order" — the white headband, little girl, where is your white headband? — and your school name tag, where is your school name tag? — how about your skirt, can't you see how short it is?

These are "crimes" for which I have to step out of line while the others start laughing, some are alarmed, most of them leave their place and go furtively forward, by-passing the dame who is angry right now.

I get into the classroom, the class runs normally; during the break I peep at the handmade embroidered fine leather boots owned by the bantling of the light industry minister; she has got them from Italy. I have bought my boots from Obor, after I have searched in three or four shops. My father is a doctor, he can't afford more (and he's not a bribetaker either). Uniforms like the one she wears are tailormade of fine fabric — each a unique piece — while others, like mine, are bulk. My own life is destined to be a bulk one. Life is like a uniform, life is like the bed of Procust.

The disobedient will have to face the consequences: oral rebuke, then written reproof, then castigation in front of the school; you are told humiliating words in front of the class, then you are summoned to the "U.T.C"[1] office. You cannot respond, they are always right. You peep and see the escort of the "crown prince" made up of five or six yesmen (later, one of them was to become a big disident, an opponent of the leading family: "Oh, what times! Oh, what habits!"). All my friends are good children, but they are puzzled. They are searching ways out, making contacts. Only the books are still faithful to me, so I buy them devoutly. In order to escape, to get to know the present and the ancient times, the East and the West.

Books and friends, that's the joy of my life. But the echo is whispering: "I am Nobody. I am not a model. The statue is broken." I am learning because I have nothing else better to do, because people are communicating less and less with each other, because life has turned into a desert.

[1] U.T.C. = Young Communist League.

Pe țevi circulă șobolani, atrași de mirosul hârtiei. Dacă mașina colectoare întârzie, hârtia se depreciază: o rod șobolanii, urinează pe ea. Cine credeți că transportă aceste pachete legate și cântărite? Tot elevii și maistrul instructor care este un profesionist bun, condamnat să își risipească energia printre tonele de hârtie murdară.

Suntem poftiți să colectăm plante medicinale de pe marginea drumurilor, din parcuri, de pe garduri — măceșe, mușețel, coada-șoricelului. Unde să găsești așa ceva în cantități rezonabile dacă stai în București? Pui mâna pe murdării, plantele s-au prăfuit și înțeapă. Asta mai treacă-meargă, dar apoi sunt stocate într-o magazie neigienizată, cu mucegai pe pereți și fără aerisire. Tata e medic, mi-a explicat cum ar trebui să stea lucrurile corect. Dar cui să-i spui? Cine te ascultă? Autorii inițiativei pionierești nu au timp să viziteze școlile, să stea de vorbă cu profesorii, cu elevii. Ei conduc și atât. Original mod de a lucra cu oamenii! Cred că știu de ce n-au timp, dar să nu fim răi! Despre munca elevilor din școli presa nu suflă o vorbă. Știrile transmise la radio și televizor vorbesc exclusiv despre vizitele „tovarășului și tovarășei" în toate țările lumii, despre izbânzile agriculturii socialiste, despre construcția de blocuri pentru cetățeni, dar nicio vorbă despre aceste forme de educație, despre munca minorilor, despre îngenuncherea lor forțată. Ce-i drept, programa școlară nu e foarte încărcată, dar, Doamne, câtă muncă!

Săptămânal ținem ora de informare politică. Diriginta ne-a organizat alfabetic să decupăm pagina întâi și „cuvântarea". Nimic altceva. Apoi să citim și să comentăm. Noi citim, dumneaei comentează. Nu știe întotdeauna ce să mai spună, se enervează și trece la alt subiect. E de înțeles. Copiii se amuză, simțind impostura. Ora de P.T.A.P, mai merge, te mai înviorezi, dar teoria este inoperantă fără materialul didactic trebuincios; cine să aducă o pușcă sau un pistol-mitralieră printre elevi?! Este exclus. Încă o activitate de fațadă.

Peste noapte a apărut și cercul de ateism. Grupuri-grupuri, organizați pe clase, toți elevii trebuie să treacă pe la acest cerc. Unii, mai îndrăzneți, mărturisesc ortodoxia, argumentând că de

Here is one example: in bus and trolleybus stations we collect cigarette ends, pieces of paper, transportation tickets "in order to educate the older ones". We touch, with disgust, the dirt on the streets. Who could be the author of such a monstruous initiative? We collect bottles and jars and take them to a basement storage yard, carrying full bags which bend our back. Paper — from the attic, older paper, full of dust. The older ones shake it and pack it up and then we transport it to a small chamber in the basement of our school.

Rats walk through the pipes, drawn by the smell of paper. If the collector car is late, the value of the paper will decrease even more: because rats eat it and urinate on it. Who do you think is in charge with transporting these packages, once tied and weighed? It's again the pupils and the master instructor, who is a good professionist, though fated to misspend his energy among the tones of dirty paper.

We are asked to collect herbs from the roadside, from parks, from under fences — rose hips, camomile, yarrow. Where can you find these plants in reasonable quantities if you live in Bucharest? Besides, you'd have to touch all kinds of dirt, the plants are full of dust and sting. Well, let's say you do it, but then they put them in an insalubrious, airless store house with walls full of mould. My father is a doctor, he has explained to me how things should be. But whom shall I tell? Who would listen? The authors of this pioneer initiative have no time to visit schools and talk to teachers and pupils. They are just leaders, that's all. What an original manner of working with people! I believe I know why they don't have time, but let's not be mean! There is not a single word in the media about the work pupils do. The news we listen to at radio or TV are exclusively about the visits paid by "him comrade and her comrade" to all the countries in the world, about the victories of the socialist agriculture, the building of blocks of flats for citizens, but not a single word about these forms of education, about the work of the underaged and how they are kneeled down by force. It's true, the syllabus is not very difficult, but the work they ask us to do, oh my God!

We have a weekly politics class. Our class master has organized us in alphabetic order to cut out the front page and the

2 000 de ani, suntem un popor creştin ortodox. Ce ar putea să ne răspundă când întrebăm de mănăstirile Tismana, Sâmbăta, Curtea de Argeş, Voroneţ, Moldoviţa, Sucevița şi despre ctitorii lor? Cum-necum, au aflat că toţi oamenii mari de cultură şi-au afirmat credinţa, ce-i drept uneori tardiv, pe patul de moarte. Dar oamenii de ştiinţă?

Am citit recent despre fenomenul reducţiei de fază, despre funcţia de undă desemnată prin psi. „Poziţia ei, până ce intră-n atenţia experimentatorului, nu e deformată. Dar, în momentul observării, unda dobândeşte anumite particularităţi în cadrul cărora particula ocupă o poziţie definită. E ca şi cum particula ar deveni conştientă că o observă cineva şi nu ar dori să-şi dezvăluie tainele." (M. Rouze) Deschid discuţia, trecem la subiectul capacităţii paranormale a unor subiecţi de a strâmba tacâmuri prin concentrarea conştiinţei. Zadarnic. Materialiştii convinşi au venit cu acatistul lor.

Hai şi pe şantier, la Giurgiu! Profesoară tânără, conduc un grup aflat în practică de producţie pe un şantier de construcţii. Am douăzeci şi trei de ani, abia am terminat facultatea. Elevii şi elevele mele au optsprezece ani, sunt într-a XII-a, avem aproape aceeaşi vârstă. Unde credeţi că am primit repartiţia, cu media 9,87? În Popeşti-Leordeni, la Liceul de Construcţii din sectorul 5. Locuim în timpul practicii la un cămin de nefamilişti din Giurgiu. Fetele strâng molozul din încăperi, curăţă geamurile, servesc la masă. Seara se strâng într-o odăiţă, joacă cărţi şi beau bere, ascultă muzică la radio. Unele se întind pe pat, obosite şi îngrijorate. Nu avem telefon prin preajmă.

Doamne fereşte de-un accident! După ora 22:00, fetele pleacă să se întâlnească cu câte cineva pe străzile din apropiere. Nu mă opun, cu condiţia să fie înapoi, în pat, la ora 1:00. Aş vrea să merg cu ele la un club, să fiu pe-aproape, să nu li se întâmple ceva, pentru că apoi, eu aş fi răspunzătoare! Nu există localuri deschise la ora 22:00. Ştiţi dumneavoastră că aceste fete simple, liniştite, ascultătoare, lucrează ziua pe şantier cot la cot cu deţinuţi aflaţi sub pază, aduşi la muncă forţată? Doar suntem la Giurgiu, oraş portuar, ultima redută. L-am citit pe Soljeniţîn, sunt pregătită de orice. Dar nu mă voi umili niciodată plângând,

"speech". Nothing else. And then we should read and comment upon. We do the reading part, she makes the comments. She never knows what else to say so she gets angry and continues with another topic. It is understandable. The children are having fun feeling the imposture. The P.T.A.P[2] class is quite fun. You wake up a little, but theory doesn't work without the necessary visual aids; who could ever bring a gun or a machine-gun among pupils?! This is out of question. One more façade activity.

Soon enought, a new activity occured: the atheism circle. Organised in class groups, all pupils have to go there for a check. Some of them, more courageous than the others, confess to being orthodox, saying that we have been a Christian Orthodox people for 2000 years. What can they say when we ask about monasteries like Tismana, Sâmbăta, Curtea de Argeş, Voroneţ, Moldoviţa, Sucevița and about those who had built them? Slowly they have found out that all great cultural personalities have confessed their faith, even though sometimes tardily, on their deathbed. How about the scientists?

Recently, I have read about the phasis reduction phenomenon and the psi wave function. "Its position is not deformed until it gets the tester's attention. But, the moment it is watched, the wave aquires certain particularities within which the particle occupies a well-defined position. It is as if the particle suddenly becomes aware that someone is watching it and didn't want to reveal its secrets." (M. Rouze)

I start the discussion, we pass on to the paranormal capacity of certain subjects of bending flatware by concentrating their conscience upon it. It is all useless. Materialists have their own creed and they are fully convinced that it's true.

Let's go also to a building site at Giurgiu! As a young teacher, I am in charge of a class doing field work on a building site. I am twenty three, I have just graduated the university. My students are eighteen, they are in their last grade, we are almost of the same age. Where do you think I've been sent after having graduated with an average of 9.87? At Popeşti-Leordeni, Construction High School, district 5. During the field work period, we are living in a

[2] P.T.A.P. = Preparation class for youth ready to defend their motherland.

nici făcând compromisuri murdare. Într-o bună zi, soarele va răsări și pentru cei ca mine. Cine sunt eu? Eu sunt Nimeni, dar ei sunt Nimic.

— Ce fel de om ești tu, mamă?

— Eu sunt Nimeni. Nu reprezint un model, copilul meu! Înțelege ce vrei.

hostel for non-married people in Giurgiu. The girls collect the rubbish in the rooms, clean the windows, serve the food. In the evening, they all gather in a room, play cards and drink beer, listening to radio music. Some of them lie down on the bed, tired and concerned. There is no phone around.

God forbid if an accident happens! After 10 PM, the girls go out to meet their guys, in the streets nearby. I am not against it, on condition they are back to bed before 1 AM. I would like to join them, to be close to them, for fear something could happen to them, and I would be responsible for it! But there are no places open later than 10 PM. Do you know that those silent and obedient girls work everyday, side by side, with guarded prisoners brought here to do forced labour? We are at Giurgiu, a harbour, the last refuge. I have read Solzhenitsyn and I am prepared for anything. But I will never humiliate myself crying and making dirty compromises. One day, the sun will also rise for people like me. Who am I? I am Nobody, but they are Nothing.

— What kind of person are you, mother?

— I am Nobody. I am not a model, my child! Take it as you wish.

Everyday Life under Late Socialism

Student Packets

III. Women

The Communist Experience in the Twentieth Century

A Global History through Sources

GLENNYS YOUNG

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To the memory of
Reggie Zelnik (1936–2004),
and for Elaine Zelnik

PHOTO ESSAY

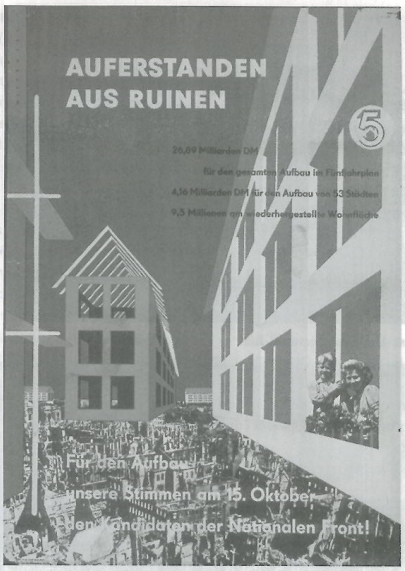
Everyday Life and Everyday Things Under Socialism, 1945–1989, and Beyond

Nationalizing a Factory Taken in 1949 in early postwar Romania, this photo depicts a worker who is covering up the former owner's name of the newly nationalized Tricorache factory.

The establishment of communist regimes in early post-war Eastern Europe brought the creation of the foundations of a socialist economy. By design anti-capitalist, socialist states did away with private property and privately-held corporations. They also developed the bureaucracies and institutional infrastructure needed by a state that differed from capitalist states—including post-World War II welfare states—in fundamental ways. In socialist countries, the state was the origin of all mass-produced goods, including those for consumers. It also owned all retail establishments, and was the employer of all involved in the production process—of both industrial and consumer goods.

Socialist states also presumed to dictate the price, style, and display of goods. State-owned stores, it should be noted, developed their own forms of advertising and ways of displaying products, as is apparent below in the images on page 301. Ultimately, socialist states did not manage to control all aspects of consumer consumption, and "black" or "grey" markets emerged.

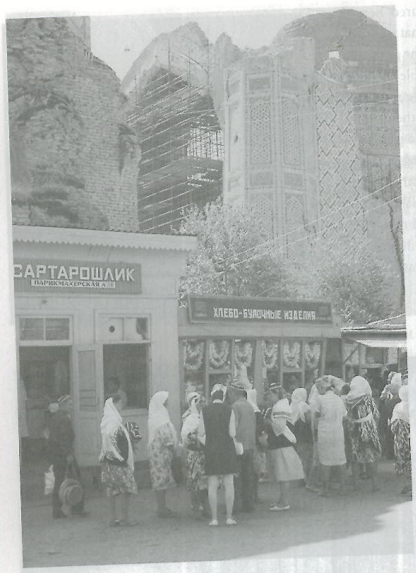
Courtesy of the Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.



Rebuilding from War Depicted in this East German election poster of 1950 is the socialist built environment of the future. This was an urban landscape in which a specifically socialist modernist style would dominate from the 1960s onwards. This occurred throughout the Soviet bloc, as well as in other socialist societies, such as Communist China. The poster depicts images of large, modern buildings superimposed over the photo of a city destroyed by war. It is an indication of how the East German state tied its legitimacy to recovery from the ravages of World War II. By emphasizing the slogan "Risen Out of the Ruins" ("*Auferstanden aus Ruinen*"), the election poster sought to convince voters that candidates of the National Front (an alliance of East Germany's political parties, in turn under the control of the Socialist Unity Party or SED) were uniquely capable of helping East Germany rise, like a phoenix, out of the postwar ashes. The slogan at the bottom of the image says: "For reconstruction, vote for the candidates of the National Front on 15 October."

A major shift occurred in the USSR and the socialist states of Eastern Europe after Stalin died. The post-Stalinist "thaw' coincided, as the introduction to chapter 8 emphasizes, with a period of dynamic growth in Western capitalism. One component of this was a new kind of consumer culture in which household appliances and electronics were an important element. Socialist states staked their own legitimacy on the quality of life that they could provide for their citizens, a trend that intensified over the decades of the Cold War (ca. 1945-1985). In the immediate post-World War II period, socialist states accorded their citizens the "right" to employment, housing, education, and medical care. But by the 1950s, and increasingly in the 1960s and beyond, socialist states sought to provide their citizens with the kinds of mass-produced consumer goods that Western, capitalist economies provided. Consumer goods, including household products, furniture, television sets, electronics, and the like, were "presented as signs of state munificence and caring for its subjects." (Quotes from Krisztina Fehérváry, "Goods and States: The Political Logic of State-Socialist Material Culture," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 51, no. 2 (2009): 431, on which this photoessay draws.)

Artist: Wittkugel. Published in Berlin. Issuing agent: Amt für Information. Courtesy of the Poster Collection, Hoover Institution on War, Revolution and Peace, Stanford University.



Standing in Line, Uzbekistan Taken in 1970, this photo evokes what it was like to be a shopper in socialist states. Here, people are standing in line in front of a street kiosk selling bread and other baked goods. The socialist shopper, unlike her capitalist counterpart, was not, according to the state's intention, to be subjected to advertising for unneeded products. In contrast to the deception and manipulation of capitalist advertising and display of products, socialist consumer culture was to be based on "transparency and truth." (Féhérvary, "Goods and States," 440.)

One example of such "transparency" was the standardization of the names of retail establishments, including those providing services. With few exceptions, the only differentiating element in the name of a retail establishment was its number. The smaller letters on the sign on the larger kiosk on the left say, "Hair Salon No. 36" in Russian underneath the larger Uzbek word, *sartaroshlik*, which also means barberhop or hairdresser. For some types of establishments, there was no differentiation whatsoever. The name given to the retail kiosk pictured here on the right—"Baked Goods"—would have been found everywhere throughout the USSR.

Photo by Peter H. Newman. Used by permission.

Buying Meat This photo was taken on 7 December 1991, not long before Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev resigned on Christmas Day, 1991, and the Soviet Union's formal demise came on 31 December of that year. The transition from a socialist to a capitalist economy made food scarce. In fact, the day before the photo was taken, Gorbachev had pleaded with leaders of Soviet republics to send food to Moscow. Here, Soviets are buying meat shipped from Germany. In general, shopping in socialist societies was a challenging and frustrating experience, even in the 1960s and 1970s, when socialist societies sought to provide more consumer goods to compete with Western capitalism. It was often the case that sales clerks were rude and deliberately unhelpful, often lording their power over the customers. In a symbolic display thereof, they were sometimes seated on a raised platform above the store floor. To be a consumer of everyday goods, then, meant experiencing one's vulnerability vis-à-vis the clerk.

Photo by Pavel Romanov. Used by permission.

Consuming Nostalgia Pictured here is a fascimile of athletic shoes made and worn by people in East Germany. These shoes are being produced for consumers who want to purchase—perhaps out of nostalgia—the kinds of goods made under socialism.

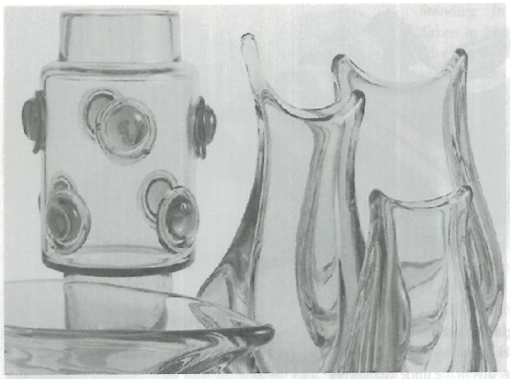
Despite the presumption that these facsimiles have fewer flaws than the shoes made in East Germany, consumers of socialist goods were often disappointed. The goods often fell short in the functions that they were supposed to perform, their durability, and basic design. In contrast, higher quality goods were available to Party elites or others having privileged status. Or, they were sold in Western capitalist economies.

Photo courtesy of ZEHA Berlin AG.

Manufacturing Toys East Germany was known for manufacturing high quality toys, such as the dolls pictured here. Produced around 1973, these "Sonni-Dolls" are made of porcelain and other materials. They exemplify that even as socialist shoppers often bought certain products that did not work or quickly fell apart, some socialist economies produced consumer goods of high quality and even exquisite design.

In fact, the favorable reputation of certain goods was known across the Eastern bloc. Toys made in East Germany, for example, were displayed in center city Budapest in the East German Cultural Center. (Fehérváry, "/Goods and States," 445.)

Photo by Klaus Morgenstern. Courtesy of akg/ddrbildarchive.de.



Designing Glassware Pictured here is another example of a high-quality consumer good produced in a socialist economy: glassware made in Czechoslovakia. In fact, Czechoslovakia, along with Italy and Scandinavia, comprised the "big three" of post–World War II glass design. All three countries were building on the strengths of the pre-war industry in glass design. Devastated by World War II, the Czechoslovak glass industry was rebuilt by the socialist state, which created its own educational system for training glass designers. While some of the more exquisite glass designs were exported to Western countries (bearing only the marking "Bohemian Glass"), everyday items such as plates, glasses, and cups were sold in state stores in Czechoslovakia and other Soviet bloc countries in Eastern Europe.

Hungarians would travel to Czechoslovakia to buy lingerie, linens, and glassware of higher quality than they could purchase at home. Travel in the socialist bloc was often about shopping!

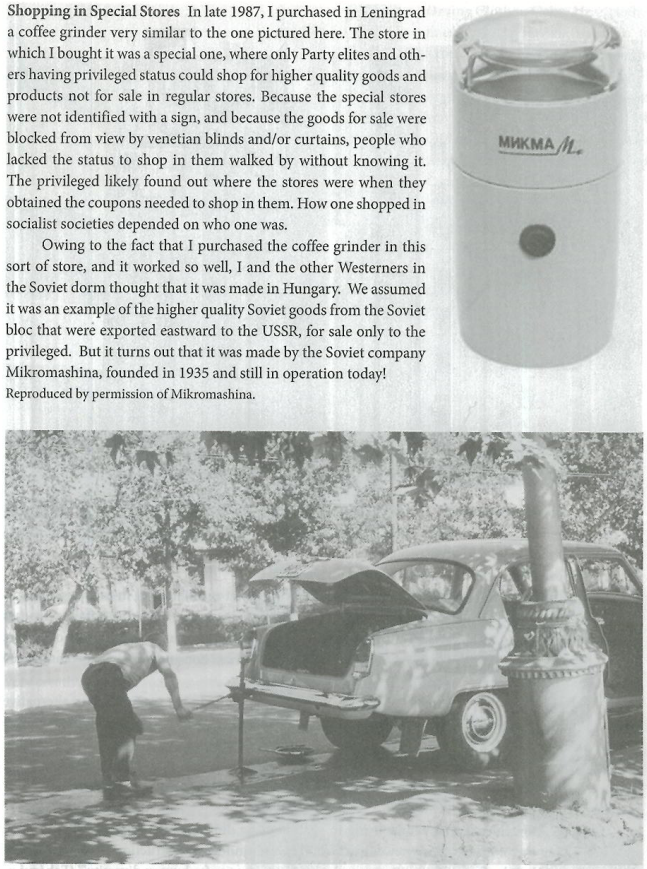
Photograph by Carolyn Barber.

Vending, Socialist Style Depicted here is a Soviet-era vending machine that was still in use in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan in 2005. Similar machines had been in use in Czechoslovakia and elsewhere in Eastern Europe. Among the ways in which this vending machine differed from those that dotted the capitalist West at the same time was that consumers were to drink the beverage (not Coke) from a common cup. The design of the vending machine privileged standardization of the consumption experience—perhaps down to the germs that one ingested in the drink!

Shopping in Special Stores In late 1987, I purchased in Leningrad a coffee grinder very similar to the one pictured here. The store in which I bought it was a special one, where only Party elites and others having privileged status could shop for higher quality goods and products not for sale in regular stores. Because the special stores were not identified with a sign, and because the goods for sale were blocked from view by venetian blinds and/or curtains, people who lacked the status to shop in them walked by without knowing it. The privileged likely found out where the stores were when they obtained the coupons needed to shop in them. How one shopped in socialist societies depended on who one was.

Owing to the fact that I purchased the coffee grinder in this sort of store, and it worked so well, I and the other Westerners in the Soviet dorm thought that it was made in Hungary. We assumed it was an example of the higher quality Soviet goods from the Soviet bloc that were exported eastward to the USSR, for sale only to the privileged. But it turns out that it was made by the Soviet company Mikromashina, founded in 1935 and still in operation today!

Reproduced by permission of Mikromashina.



Repairing a Car Pictured here is a Volga sedan, model GAZ-M-21, in Leningrad in 1970. (The license plate, however, identifies the car as having been registered in the Tula region, or a little over a hundred miles south of Moscow.) Another way in which Party elites and others having privileged status in socialist societies differentiated themselves was by having a car. Ordinary people did own cars in the USSR and in other Soviet bloc countries, but in general it was the privileged who owned Volga sedans. The one pictured is likely an official car driven by a chauffeur, which was the case with most Volgas. People with lower status had, if they were lucky, a Lada. Non Party-elites in East Germany owned, if they were able to obtain one, Trabants or Wartburgs. And analogues existed throughout socialist societies around the world. (I am grateful to Lewis H. Siegelbaum for identifying the car and providing information about it.)

Photo by Peter H. Newman. Used by permission.

Living in Socialist Apartments Pictured here are two apartment buildings in Petržalka, a mass housing project built in the 1970s in Bratislava. Comprised of hundreds of blocks, this housing district was built south of the Danube River. The building on the left was recently renovated to meet the standards of the European Union, while the one on the right was not.

In the 1960s and 70s, socialist states around the world built mass housing in the form of high-rises often clustered on the outskirts of cities. The style was "socialist modern," and one of the purposes of such housing was to make socialist citizens modern. Standardization of such housing was, of course, a key feature. (It should be kept in mind that such standardized, mass housing was by no means unique to socialism.)

What was it like to live in this kind of housing? Although touted as an example of an alternative socialist "modernity," the experience had its downsides. Apartments were often small and construction was not of high quality. But perhaps most frustrating was the fact that the design and construction materials went against what people needed to make the apartments their home. The cement walls in many such buildings meant that it was impossible to hang a picture without a power drill, a tool that was often hard to come by.

There is also evidence that people living in such housing did not appreciate the "gift" that the state was giving them. Rather, they viewed such shoddy and uniform construction as an example of the socialist state's lack of care for its citizens, and of its "'intolerance for human diversity.'" (Fehérváry, "Goods and States," 447.) Put more directly, the people who lived in these housing complexes found them not to be examples of socialist collectivism and efficiency, but of socialist anomie and shoddiness. There is evidence to suggest that residents found them to be "authoritarian, dehumanizing, and atomizing." (ibid.)

Photo by Graeme Stewart. Used by permission.

Drying Clothes, Cuba Here, clotheslines adorn a Havana street in the 1960s. Even though socialist states wanted their citizens to live in homogenized spaces, people found ways to use space creatively, thereby differentiating their living environments from what the state intended.

Courtesy of the University of Miami Library, Cuban Heritage Collection.

"Carrying" Fruit and Produce Taken in Samarkand, Uzbekistan, in 1970, this photograph shows a woman using her "headgear" in a very creative way. For many socialist citizens around the globe, the body was also a space to be personalized, despite state-imposed socialist styles and the lack of product diversity with which one could create distinction from others.

Photo by Peter H. Newman. Used by permission.

Smoking "Western" Cigarettes Western goods, such as the Kent cigarette the man is holding in his hand in this photograph taken in Samarkand in 1970, were denounced by socialist states as decadent and corrupting. Yet, from the 1960s onwards, and with increasing frequency in the 1970s and 1980s, socialist citizens had increasing exposure to foreign goods. Though hard to come by, goods that could be purchased on the black market included such Western consumer products as blue jeans, cassette tapes, and electronics. In some cases, socialist citizens obtained Western goods by having contact with foreigners (such as foreign scholars, including myself, who provided gifts). In fact, the photographer's mother gave the man the Kent cigarettes as he shared his mid-morning treat of vodka and tomatoes.

As the underground market for foreign products attests, socialist citizens prized such goods, in part for their qualities, such as brightness and elegance of design. Another reason that people living in socialist societies craved Western goods was because they came to signify a "Western" style of life. This was a life to which they ascribed all kinds of imagined qualities—not just "freedom," but celebration of diversity and constant affirmation of human dignity. For this reason, they used Western goods, including castaway objects, such as empty Coke cans or plastic department store bags, to decorate their apartments.

Photo by Peter H. Newman. Used by permission.

Wearing Soviet Internationalism Taken in Leningrad in 1970, this photograph features a small but important detail: the peace sign adorning the uniform (for Aeroflot, the Soviet, and now Russian, airline) that this guide for foreign tourists was wearing. This symbol, which in the 1960s expressed opposition to the US government, or at least participation in the anti-Vietnamese war movement, was valorized in official socialist material culture because it fit with the Soviet regime's projected stance of pacifist internationalism.

Photo by Peter H. Newman. Used by permission.

CHAPTER 9

Search for the Self and the Fall of Communism

The year 1989 was one of dramatic events that shook the world. Before January was even half over, the Communist authorities in Hungary had permitted the formation of political parties and trade unions. In March, the first competitive elections in the USSR were held for the newly reestablished Congress of People's Deputies: multiple candidates vied for each seat, and they represented political views beyond that of the Communist Party. But early in June hope for political liberalization in China was squashed when the Chinese Communists cracked down on student protests on Tiananmen Square and in other cities. Just a day or two later, in Poland, following "Round Table" talks during February through April between the government, Solidarity, and other opposition groups, elections resulted in an overwhelming victory for Solidarity, which had been banned since 1982. And several months later, in September, the first independent political organizations on a nationwide scale appeared in East Germany. On 9 November, the Berlin Wall, the icon of the Cold War, came tumbling down. Later that month, on 19 November, Civic Forum, the Czech analogue to East Germany's New Forum and other independent political organizations, emerged in Prague, Czechoslovakia. On 25 December Romania's Communist dictator, Nicolae Ceaușescu, and his wife, Elena, were executed following a precipitous implosion of the Communist system. By the end of the year, the Communist Parties of Bulgaria, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and East Germany had given up their monopolies on power and agreed to multi-party elections. Three months into 1990, the Communist Party of the USSR, the world's first socialist state, renounced its own monopoly on power. And these are but some of the political, social, and cultural milestones of 1989.

There is no shortage of interpretations of what transpired in the momentous year of 1989. Everybody, it seems, has a version of what happened, and why, not just in that year itself, but during what the year has come to stand for, namely the

By the same author

HOLOGRAMS OF FEAR

MARBLE SKIN

THE BALKAN EXPRESS

Slavenka Drakulić

HOW WE SURVIVED COMMUNISM AND EVEN LAUGHED

HARPER PERENNIAL

HARPER PERENNIAL

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CONTENTS

one up there, because, as she said, you can't drink your coffee alone.

2

Pizza in Warsaw, Torte in Prague

We were hungry, so I said 'Let's have a pizza!' in the way you would think of it in, say, New York, or any West European city – meaning 'Let's go to a fast-food place and grab something to eat.' Jolanta, a small, blond, Polish translator of English, looked at me thoughtfully, as if I were confronting her with quite a serious task. 'There are only two such places,' she said in an apologetic tone of voice. Instantly, I was overwhelmed by the guilt of taking pizza in Poland for granted. 'Drop it,' I said. But she insisted on this pizza place. 'You must see it,' she said. 'It's so different from the other restaurants in Warsaw.'

We were lucky because we were admitted without reservations. This is a privately owned restaurant, one of the very few. We were also lucky because we could afford a pizza and beer here, which cost as much as dinner in a fancy hotel. The restaurant was a small, cozy place, with just two wooden tables and a few high stools at the bar – you couldn't squeeze more than twenty people in, even if

you wanted to.

It was raining outside, a cold winter afternoon in Warsaw. Once inside, everything was different: two waiters dressed in impeccable white shirts, with bow ties and red aprons, a bowl of fresh tropical fruit on the bar, linen napkins and the smell of pizza baked in a real charcoal-fired oven. Jolanta and I were listening to disco music, eating pizza, and drinking Tuborg beer from long, elegant glasses. Perhaps this is what you pay for, the feeling that you are somewhere else, in a different Warsaw, in a dreamland where there is everything – pizza, fruit juice, thick grilled steaks, salads – and the everyday life of shortages and poverty can't seep in, at least, for the moment.

Yet to understand just how different this place is, one has to see a 'normal' coffee shop, such as the one in the modernistic building of concrete and glass that we visited the same day. Inside neon lights flicker, casting a ghostly light on the aluminum tables and chairs covered with plastic. This place looks more like a bus terminal than like a *kawiarnia*. It's almost empty and the air is thick with cigarette smoke. A bleached blond waitress slowly approaches us with a very limited menu: tea, some alcoholic beverages, Coke, coffee. 'With milk?' I ask.

'No milk,' she shakes her head.

'Then, can I get a fruit juice perhaps?' I say, in the hopes of drinking just one in a Polish state-owned restaurant.

'No juice.' She shakes her head impatiently (at this point, of course, there is no 'sophisticated' question about the kind of juice one would perhaps prefer). I give up and get a cup of coffee. It's too sweet. Jolanta is drinking Coke,

because there is Coke everywhere – in the middle of Warsaw as, I believe, in the middle of the desert. There may be neither milk nor water, but there is sure to be a bottle of Coke around. Nobody seems to mind the paradox that even though fruit grows throughout Poland, there is no fruit juice yet Coke is everywhere. But here Coke, like everything coming from America, is more of a symbol than a beverage.

To be reduced to having Coke and pizza offered not only as fancy food, but, what's more, as the idea of choice, strikes me as a form of imperialism, possibly only where there is really very little choice. Just across the street from the private restaurant, where Jolanta parked her tiny Polski Fiat, is a grocery store. It is closed in the afternoon, so says a handwritten note on the door. Through the dusty shop window we can see the half-empty shelves, with a few cans of beans, pasta, rice, cabbage, vinegar. A friend, a Yugoslav living in Warsaw, told me that some years ago vinegar and mustard were almost all you could find in the stores. At another point, my friend noticed that shelves were stocked with prune compote. One might easily conclude that this is what Poles probably like the best or why else would it be in stores in such quantities? But the reason was just the opposite: Prune compote was what they had, not what they liked. However, the word 'like' is not the best way to explain the food situation (or any situation) in Poland. Looking at a shop window where onions and garlic are two of the very few items on display, what meaning could the word 'like' possibly have?

Slowly, one realizes that not only is this a different

reality, but that words have a different meaning here, too. It makes you understand that the word 'like' implies not only choice but refinement, even indulgence, *savoir-vivre* – in fact, a whole different attitude toward food. It certainly doesn't imply that you stuff yourself with whatever you find at the farmer's market or in a grocery that day. Instead, it suggests a certain experience, a knowledge, a possibility of comparing quality and taste. Right after the overthrow of the Ceausescu government in Romania in December 1989, I read a report in the newspaper about life in Bucharest. There was a story about a man who ate the first banana in his life. He was an older man, a worker, and he said to a reporter shyly that he ate a whole banana, together with the skin, because he didn't know that he had to peel it. At first, I was moved by the isolation this man was forced to live in, by the fact that he never read or even heard what to do with a banana. But then something else caught my attention: '*It tasted good*,' he said. I can imagine this man, holding a sweet-smelling, ripe banana in his hand, curious and excited by it, as by a forbidden fruit. He holds it for a moment, then bites. It tastes strange but 'good.' It must have been good, even together with a bitter, tough skin, because it was something unachievable, an object of desire. It was not a banana that he was eating, but the promise, the hope of the future. So, he liked it no matter what its taste.

One of the things one is constantly reminded of in these parts is not to be thoughtless with food. I remember my mother telling me that I had to eat everything in front of me, because to throw away food would be a sin. Perhaps she had God on her mind, perhaps not. She experienced

World War II and ever since, like most of the people in Eastern Europe, she behaves as if it never ended. Maybe this is why they are never really surprised that even forty years afterwards there is a lack of sugar, oil, coffee, or flour. To be heedless – to behave as if you are somewhere else, where everything is easy to get – is a sin not against God, but against people. Here you have to think of food, because it has entirely diverse social meanings. To bring a cake for dessert when you are invited for a dinner – a common gesture in another, more affluent country – means you invested a great deal of energy to find it if you didn't make it yourself. And even if you did, finding eggs, milk, sugar, and butter took time and energy. That makes it precious in a very different way from if you had bought it in the pastry shop next door.

When Jaroslav picked me up at Prague airport, I wanted to buy a torte before we went to his house for dinner. It was seven o'clock in the evening and shops were already closed. Czechs work until five or six, which doesn't leave much time to shop. 'The old government didn't like people walking in the streets. It might cause them trouble,' said Jaroslav, half joking. 'Besides, there isn't much to buy anyway.' My desire to buy a torte after six o'clock appeared to be quite an extravagance, and it was clear that one couldn't make a habit of bringing a cake for dessert. In the Slavia Café there were no pastries at all, not to mention a torte. The best confectioner in Prague was closed, and in the Hotel Zlatá Husa restaurant a waitress repeated 'Torte?' after us as if we were in the wrong place. Then she shook her head. With every new place, my desire to buy a torte

diminished. Perhaps it is not that there are no tortes – it's just hard to find them at that hour. At the end, we went to the only shop open until eight-thirty and bought ice cream. There were three kinds and Jaroslav picked vanilla, which is what his boys like the best.

On another occasion, in the Bulgarian capital Sofia, Evelina is preparing a party. I am helping her in the small kitchen of the decaying apartment that she shares with a student friend, because as an assistant professor at the university, she cannot afford to rent an apartment alone. I peel potatoes, perhaps six pounds of them. She will make a potato salad with onions. Then she will bake the rest of them in the oven and serve them with . . . actually nothing. She calls it 'a hundred-ways potato party' – sometimes humor is the only way to overcome depression. There are also four eggs for an omelet and two cans of sardines (imported from Yugoslavia), plus vodka and wine, and that's it, for the eight people she has invited.

We sit around her table: a Bulgarian theater director who lives in exile in Germany, three of Evelina's colleagues from the university, a historian friend and her husband, and the two of us. We eat potatoes with potatoes, drink vodka, discuss the first issue of the opposition paper *Demokratia*, the round-table talks between the Union of Democratic Forces and the communist government, and calculate how many votes the opposition will get in the forthcoming free elections – the first. Nobody seems to mind that there is no more food on the table – at least not as long as a passionate political discussion is going on. '*This* is our food,' says Evelina. 'We are used to swallowing politics with our meals.

For breakfast you eat elections, a parliament discussion comes for lunch, and at dinner you laugh at the evening news or get mad at the lies that the Communist Party is trying to sell, in spite of everything.' Perhaps these people can live almost without food – either because it's too expensive or because there is nothing to buy, or both – without books and information, but not without politics.

One might think that this is happening only now, when they have the first real chance to change something. Not so. This intimacy with political issues was a part of everyday life whether on the level of hatred, or mistrust, or gossip, or just plain resignation during Todor Živkov's communist government. In a totalitarian society, one *has* to relate to the power directly; there is no escape. Therefore, politics never becomes abstract. It remains a palpable, brutal force directing every aspect of our lives, from what we eat to how we live and where we work. Like a disease, a plague, an epidemic, it doesn't spare anybody. Paradoxically, this is precisely how a totalitarian state produces its enemies: politicized citizens. The 'velvet revolution' is the product not only of high politics, but of the consciousness of ordinary citizens, infected by politics.

Before you get here, you tend to forget newspaper pictures of people standing in line in front of shops. You think they serve as proof in the ideological battle, the proof that communism is failing. Or you take them as mere pictures, not reality. But once here, you cannot escape the *feeling* of shortages, even if you are not standing in line, even if you don't see them. In Prague, where people line up only for fruit, there was enough of all necessities, except for oranges

or lemons, which were considered a 'luxury.' It is hard to predict what will be considered a luxury item because this depends on planning, production, and shortages. One time it might be fruit, as in Prague, or milk, as in Sofia. People get used to less and less of everything. In Albania, the monthly ration for a whole family is two pounds of meat, two pounds of cheese, ten pounds of flour, less than half a pound each of coffee and butter. Everywhere, the bottom line is bread. It means safety – because the lack of bread is where real fear begins. Whenever I read a headline 'No Bread' in the newspaper, I see a small, dark, almost empty bakery on Vladimir Zaimov Boulevard in Sofia, and I myself, even without reason, experience a genuine fear. It makes my bread unreal, too, and I feel as if I should grab it and eat it while it lasts.

Every mother in Bulgaria can point to where communism failed, from the failures of the planned economy (and the consequent lack of food, milk), to the lack of apartments, child-care facilities, clothes, disposable diapers, or toilet paper. The banality of everyday life is where it has really failed, rather than on the level of ideology. In another kitchen in Sofia, Ana, Katarine and I sit. Her one-year-old daughter is trying to grab our cups from the table. She looks healthy. 'She is fine now,' says Ana, 'but you should have seen her six months ago. There was no formula to buy and normal milk you can hardly get as it is. At one point our shops started to sell Humana, imported powdered milk from the dollar shops, because its shelf life was over. I didn't have a choice. I had to feed my baby with that milk, and she got very, very sick. By allowing this milk to be sold,

our own government poisoned babies. It was even on TV; they had to put it on because so many babies in Sofia got sick. We are the Third World here.'

If communism didn't fail on bread or milk, it certainly failed on strawberries. When I flew to Warsaw from West Berlin, I bought cosmetics, oranges, chocolates, Nescafé, as a present for my friend Zofia – as if I were going home. I also bought a small basket of strawberries. I knew that by now she could buy oranges or even Nescafé from street vendors at a good price – but not strawberries. I bought them also because I remembered when we were together in New York for the first time, back in the eighties, and we went shopping. In a downtown Manhattan supermarket, we stood in front of a fruit counter and just stared. It was full of fruits we didn't know the names of – or if we did, like the man with the banana in Bucharest, we didn't know how they would taste. But this sight was not a miracle; we somehow expected it. What came as a real surprise was fresh strawberries, even though it was December and decorated Christmas trees were in the windows already. In Poland or Yugoslavia, you could see strawberries only in spring. We would buy them for children or when we were visiting a sick relative, so expensive were they. And here, all of a sudden – strawberries. At that moment, they represented all the difference between the world we lived in and this one, so strange and uncomfortably rich. It was not so much that you could see them in the middle of the winter, but because you could afford them. When I handed her the strawberries in Warsaw, Zofia said: 'How wonderful! I'll save them for my son.' The fact that she used the word

'save' told me everything: that almost ten years after we saw each other in New York, after the victory of Solidarity, and private initiatives in the economy, there are still no strawberries and perhaps there won't be for another ten years. She was closer to me then, that evening, in the apartment where she lives with her sick, elderly, mother (because there is nobody else to take care of her and to put your parent in a state-run institution would be more than cruelty, it would be a crime). Both of them took just one strawberry each, then put the rest in the refrigerator 'for Grzegorz.' This is how we tell our kids we love them, because food is love, if you don't have it, or if you have to wait in lines, get what you can, and then prepare a decent meal. Maybe this is why the chicken soup, cabbage stew, and mashed potatoes that evening tasted so good.

All this stays with me forever. When I come to New York and go shopping at Grace Balducci's Marketplace on Third Avenue and 71st Street, I think of Zofia, my mother, my friend Jasmina who loves Swiss chocolates, my daughter's desire for Brooklyn chewing gum, and my own hungry self, still confused by the thirty kinds of cheese displayed in front of me. In an article in *Literaturnaya Gazeta* May 1989 the Soviet poet Yevgenii Yevtushenko tells of a *kolkhoz* woman who fainted in an East Berlin shop, just because she saw twenty kinds of sausages. When she came back to her senses, she repeated in despair: 'Why, but why?' How well I understand her question – but knowing the answer doesn't really help.

3

Make-up and other Crucial Questions

When I close my eyes, I can still see her, resting on our kitchen sofa on Saturday afternoons. It's spring, she lies there in semi-darkness, and in the dim light coming through canvas shades on the window, I see her face, covered with fresh cucumber slices, like a strange white mask. She does it every Saturday – after twenty minutes she will get up, remove the rings, and wash her face with cold water. Then she will put on Dream Complex cream, the only cream available in the early 1950s. When I touch her skin, it will be fresh and tender under my fingers.

Before that, she would wash our hair, hers and mine. Her hair is very long and brown; she washes it with Camillaflor powdered shampoo. It's the only brand that exists and features brunette or blonde on the paper package. She rinses her hair in water with vinegar so as to leave it soft and silky. My thin, blond hair has to be rinsed with the juice of half a lemon – its smell follows me the whole afternoon. And while she lies there, with a cucumber mask – or

By the same author

HOLOGRAMS OF FEAR

MARBLE SKIN

THE BALKAN EXPRESS

Slavenka Drakulić

HOW WE SURVIVED COMMUNISM AND EVEN LAUGHED

HARPER PERENNIAL

HARPER PERENNIAL

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3

Make-up and other Crucial Questions

When I close my eyes, I can still see her, resting on our kitchen sofa on Saturday afternoons. It's spring, she lies there in semi-darkness, and in the dim light coming through canvas shades on the window, I see her face, covered with fresh cucumber slices, like a strange white mask. She does it every Saturday – after twenty minutes she will get up, remove the rings, and wash her face with cold water. Then she will put on Dream Complex cream, the only cream available in the early 1950s. When I touch her skin, it will be fresh and tender under my fingers.

Before that, she would wash our hair, hers and mine. Her hair is very long and brown; she washes it with Camillaflor powdered shampoo. It's the only brand that exists and features brunette or blonde on the paper package. She rinses her hair in water with vinegar so as to leave it soft and silky. My thin, blond hair has to be rinsed with the juice of half a lemon – its smell follows me the whole afternoon. And while she lies there, with a cucumber mask – or

a mask made of egg whites, or a yogurt mask if it is winter, or a camomile wrap to remove puffiness under the eyes after a bad night's sleep or quarreling with my father – I imagine that one day I will be doing the same, and I can't wait for this day to come.

Afterwards, I know she will manicure her nails and apply make-up. That is, she will put on one of the two shades of lipstick that she bought in a pharmacy and outline her eyes with a kohl pencil – these are all the cosmetics there are. She will be happy if she still has some powder left, packed in a small plastic bag, the one that her mother was able to provide for her. Finally, she will put a few drops of *eau de Cologne* behind her ears and on her ankles, a yellowish water made up by the pharmacist himself. In her blue satin evening dress that she sewed herself, she will go dancing with my father at the Army Officers' Club. Years and years later, I will remember every detail of how beautiful she was at that moment, a magician who created beauty out of nothing. She ignored reality, the fact that there was no choice, fighting it with the old beauty recipes that she had learned from her mother and grandmother. After all, one could always make a peeling mask out of cornflour, use olive oil for sun-tanning or as a dry hair treatment, or give a deep brown tone to the hair with strong black tea.

The young communist states at that time – and until they ceased to exist – had more important tasks than producing make-up, tasks like rebuilding countries devastated by war, like industrialization and electrification. Lenin's popular slogan was that electrification plus Soviet rule equals communism. In the five-year central plans made by

men, of course there was no place for such trivia as cosmetics. Anyway, aesthetics were considered a superficial, 'bourgeois' invention. Besides, women were equal under the law, why would they need to please men by using all these beauty aids and tricks? However, even if hungry, women still wanted to be beautiful, and they didn't see a direct connection between beauty and state-proclaimed equality; or, rather, they did see one, because they had to work like men, proving that they were equal even physically. They worked on construction sites, on highways, in mines, in fields and in factories – the communist ideal was a robust woman who didn't look much different from a man. A nicely dressed woman was subject to suspicion, sometimes even investigation. Members of the Communist Party, for years after the war in Yugoslavia, had to ask for official permission if they wanted to marry a woman whose doubtful appearance would unmistakably indicate her 'bourgeois' origins.

But aesthetics turned out to be a complex question that couldn't be answered by a simple state decree. By abolishing one kind of so called 'bourgeois' aesthetic, not with a plan (except in China, where this kind of formal 'equality' was carried to the extreme in prescribed uniforms), but more as the natural result of ideology, the state created another aesthetic, a totalitarian one. Without a choice of cosmetics and clothes, with bad food and hard work and no spare time, it wasn't at all hard to create the special kind of uniformity that comes out of an equal distribution of poverty and the neglect of people's real needs. There was no chance for individualism – for women or men.

Once when I was in Warsaw, a friend told me about a spate of red-haired women: suddenly it seemed that half of the women in the city had red hair, a phenomenon that couldn't pass unnoticed. It might have been a fashion caprice. More likely, it had to do with the failure of the chemical industry to produce or deliver other kinds of dye. Imagine those women confronted by the fact that there is no other color in the store where they buy their dye and knowing that if there isn't any in one store, it's generally useless to search others. There is only the one shade of red. (I've seen it; it's a burgundy-red that gives hair a peculiarly artificial look, like a wig.) They have no choice – they either appear untidy, with bleached ends and unbleached roots sticking out, or they dye their hair whatever color they can find. so they dye it, hoping that other women won't come to this same conclusion. They don't exactly choose.

Standing in front of a drugstore on Václavské Náme'stí in Prague last winter, I felt as if I were perhaps thirteen years old and my mother had sent me to buy something for her – soap, perhaps, shampoo. The window of that drugstore was a time machine for me: instantly, I was transported into years of scarcity long past, years of the aesthetics of poverty. Even though I'm not an American, it seemed there was absolutely nothing to buy. In front of that shop window I understood just how ironic the advice in today's *Cosmopolitan* or any other women's magazine in the West is, advice about so-called 'natural' cosmetics, like olive and almond oil, lemon, egg, lavender, camomile, cucumbers, or yogurt. I still can recall my mother's yearning to buy a 'real' cream in a tiny glass jar with a golden cap and a fancy

French name, something she would have paid dearly for on the black market.

If Western women return to the old recipes, they do so by choice; it is one of many possibilities. Not so for Czech or Bulgarian or Polish women. I can see them arriving in Yugoslavia after days and nights in a train or car. They go to the market, put a plastic sheet on the street at the very edge of the market (afraid that the police might come any moment) and sell the things they've brought. Among them are professional black market vendors, women who make a fortune by buying foreign currency and then selling it back home for five or six times as much. But I also saw a young Polish woman, a student maybe, selling a yellow rubber Teddy bear, deodorant, and a green nylon blouse (the kind you can find only in a communist country or a second-hand vintage clothing store in Greenwich Village). I couldn't help thinking that she was selling her own things. But why would anybody in the world travel 1500 miles just to sell a plastic toy? And what if she sells it, what is it that she wants to buy with the money? Perhaps a hair dye that is not red . . . However, she is young, and there is hope that her life will be different. For my mother and women of her generation, it is already too late. If only they had had cosmetics, it might have changed their lives. On the other hand, it might not. But shouldn't they have had the right to find that out for themselves?

Once, when we used to play a childish adolescent guessing game, we would try to guess which of the women on the beach in Split were Polish and which Czech. It was easy to tell by their old-fashioned bathing suits, by their

make-up, hairdo, and, yes – the color of their hair. Somehow, everything in their appearance was wrong. Today I realize that women in Poland like green and blue eye shadow about as much as they like artificial red hair – but they wear it. There is nothing else to wear. It is the same with the spike-heeled white boots that seemed to be so popular in Prague last winter. It is the same with pullovers, coats, shoes: everyone is wearing the same thing, not because they want to, but because there is nothing else to buy. This is how the state creates fashion – by a lack of products and a lack of choice.

To avoid uniformity, you have to work very hard: you have to bribe a salesgirl, wait in line for some imported product, buy bluejeans on the black market and pay your whole month's salary for them; you have to hoard cloth and sew it, imitating the pictures in glamorous foreign magazines. What makes these enormous efforts touching is the way women wear it all, so you can tell they went to the trouble. Nothing is casual about them. They are overdressed, they put on too much make-up, they match colors and textures badly, revealing their provincial attempt to imitate Western fashion. But where could they learn anything about a self-image, a style? In the party-controlled magazines for women, where they are instructed to be good workers and party members first, then mothers, housewives, and sex objects next, – never themselves? To be yourself, to cultivate individualism, to perceive yourself as an individual in a mass society is dangerous. You might become living proof that the system is failing. Make-up and fashion are crucial because they are political. In Francine du

Plessix Gray's book *Soviet Women*, the women say that they dress up not for men, but to cheer themselves up in a grim everyday life or to prove their status to other women. In fact, they are doing it to show difference; there are not many other ways to differentiate oneself. Even the beginnings of consumerism in the 1960s didn't help much; there were still no choices, no variety. In fact, in spite of the new propaganda, real consumerism was impossible – except as an idea – because there was little to consume. Trying to be beautiful was always difficult; it involved an extra effort, devotion perhaps. But most women didn't have time or imagination enough even to try.

Living under such conditions and holding *Vogue* magazine in your hands is a very particular experience – it's almost like holding a pebble from Mars or a piece of a meteor that accidentally fell into your yard. 'I hate it,' says Agnes, an editor at a scientific journal in Budapest, pointing to *Vogue*. 'It makes me feel so miserable I could almost cry. Just look at this paper – glossy, shiny, like silk. You can't find anything like this around here. Once you've seen it, it immediately sets not only new standards, but a visible boundary. Sometimes I think that the real Iron Curtain is made of silky, shiny images of pretty women dressed in wonderful clothes, of pictures from women's magazines.' Fed up with advertising, a Western woman only browses through such magazines superficially, even with boredom. She has seen so much of it, has been bombarded by ads every single day of her life, on TV, in magazines, on huge billboards, at the movies. For us, the pictures in a magazine like *Vogue* were much more important: we studied their

every detail with the interest of those who had no other source of information about the outside world. We tried to decode them, to read their message. And because we were inexperienced enough to read them literally, the message that we absorbed was that the other world was a paradise. Our reading was wrong and naive, nevertheless, it stayed in the back of our minds as a powerful force, an inner motivation, a dormant desire for change, an opportunity to awaken. The producers of these advertisements, Vance Packard's 'hidden persuaders,' should sleep peacefully because here, in communist countries, their dream is coming true: people still believe them, women especially. What do we care about the manipulation inherent in the fashion and cosmetic industries? To tell us they are making a profit by exploiting our needs is like warning a Bangladeshi about cholesterol. I guess that the average Western woman – if such a creature exists at all – still feels a slight mixture of envy, frustration, jealousy, and desire while watching this world of images. This is its aim anyway; this is how a consumer society works. But tomorrow she can at least go buy what she saw. Or she can dream about it, but in a way different from us, because the ideology of her country tells her that, one day, by hard work or by pure chance, she can be rich. Here, you can't. Here, the images make you hate the reality you live in, because not only can you not buy any of the things pictured (even if you had enough money, which you don't), but the paper itself, the quality of print, is unreachable. The images that cross the borders in magazines, movies, or videos are therefore more dangerous than any secret weapon, because they make one desire that 'otherness' badly enough to risk one's life by trying to escape. Many did.

In our house there was an old closet where my mother would stockpile cloth, yards and yards of anything she could get hold of – flannel, cotton, pique, silk, tweed, cashmere, wool, lace, elastic bands, even buttons. Sometimes she would let us play with this cache, but it was her 'boutique.' She would copy a blouse or a skirt from pattern sheets from *Svijet (World)*, the only magazine for women, and sew it on Grandma's Singer sewing machine. Every woman in my childhood knew how to sew, and my mother insisted that I learn too. By the age of five I knitted my first shawl and embroidered a duck with ducklings that she still keeps. Later on, she let me use a sewing machine under her supervision, and by the age of fifteen I was making my own dresses, not because it was a woman's duty, but because it was the only way to be dressed nicely. When, for the first time, she went to Italy to visit a relative there, she came back dressed in a white organdy blouse, a black pleated skirt, and high-heeled black patent leather shoes. She brought back a mohair pullover, a raincoat made of a thin, rustling plastic (it was called suskavac and everybody wanted to have one, since it was a sign of prestige), an evening dress made of tulle, covered with sequins that glittered in the night. What fascinated me most was her new pink silk nightgown and matching silk overjacket with lace lapels. So light, almost sheer, hanging down to her ankles, with two tiny straps that would leave her shoulders bare, it was the finest negligée I'd ever seen. I used to tell her that she ought to wear it to the theater, not to bed.

Mother's nightgown was for me the very essence of femininity. This was the first time, in 1959, that I'd seen that 'otherness' with my own eyes.

My mother brought something special for me too: three dozen sanitary napkins made of terrycloth and a belt. The napkins had buttonholes at each end to fasten them to the belt, so they wouldn't slip. She would hand-wash them, then hang them on a clothesline in the bathroom to dry overnight. More than thirty years later, in Sofia, my friend Katarina saw my package of tampons in her bathroom and asked if I could leave it for her. I am going on to Zagreb and she needs them when she has a performance in the theater. 'We don't have sanitary napkins and sometimes not even cotton batting. I have to hoard it when I find it, or borrow it,' she said. For a moment, I didn't know whether I should laugh or cry. I sprinkled Eastern Europe with tampons on my travels: I had already left one package of tampons and some napkins, ironically called 'New Freedom', in Warsaw (plus Bayer aspirin and antibiotics), another package in Prague (plus Anaïs perfume), and now here in Sofia . . . After all these years, communism has not been able to produce a simple sanitary napkin, a bare necessity for women. So much for its economy and its so-called emancipation, too.

Rumiana is a Bulgarian movie director and a member of the international organization of women in the film industry known as KIWI. In Bulgaria, KIWI operates like a kind of feminist organization, helping women in different ways, for example, by taking care of the children of women prisoners, helping out girls in reform schools and orphan-

ages, and so on. Rumiana told me that she is 'in charge' of a reform school near Sofia. Every time she goes for a visit, girls there ask her to bring cotton batting. So she goes to a cotton factory, loads up her car, and then visits them. 'They are so grateful,' says Rumiana, 'even when it is something that they have a right to.' Today, when I think that my mother's silk nightdress doesn't necessarily have much to do with femininity, I still ask myself, what is the minimum you must have so you don't feel humiliated as a woman? It makes me understand a complaint I heard repeatedly from women in Warsaw, Budapest, Prague, Sofia, East Berlin: 'Look at us – we don't even look like women. There are no deodorants, perfumes, sometimes even no soap or toothpaste. There is no fine underwear, no pantyhose, no nice lingerie. Worst of all, there are no sanitary napkins. What can one say except that it is humiliating?'

Walking the streets of Eastern European cities, one can easily see that the women there look tired and older than they really are. They are poorly dressed, overweight, and flabby. Only the very young are slim and beautiful, with the healthy look and grace that go with youth. For me, they are the most beautiful in the world because I know what is behind the serious, worried faces, the unattended hair, the unmanicured nails; behind a pale pink lipstick that doesn't exactly go with the color of their eyes, or hair, or dress; behind the bad teeth, the crumpled coats, the smell of their sweat in a streetcar. Their beauty should not be compared with the beauty that comes from the 'otherness.' Their image, fashion, and make-up should be judged by some different criteria, with knowledge of the context, and, there-

fore, with appreciation. They deserve more respect than they get, simply because just being a woman – not to mention a beauty - is a constant battle against the way the whole system works. When in May last year an acquaintance of mine, a Frenchwoman, visited Romania (while there was still street fighting in Bucharest) she told me this about Romanian women: 'Oh they're so badly dressed, they don't have any style at all!'

Beauty is in the eye of the beholder.

4

I think of Ulrike this night in November

When I think of East Berlin, I can't help thinking of her first – twenty-seven-year-old Ulrike, tall, with long black hair, a strikingly white complexion, and two tiny, barely visible creases at the corners of her mouth that give her face a bitter expression. I think of the way she lifted her cup of coffee the first time I saw her, of my impression that she was not looking at me or at the street in front of us, but was turning her gaze inside at her own past, as if she were not really here, in Iowa City, in the States. She was there, in Berlin, it was obvious. But she didn't want to talk about it. Before Christianne, my West German friend introduced me to her, she warned me that Ulrike doesn't like to talk about 'that' – her escape from East Germany – and that I shouldn't try to press her. I didn't so much want to ask her how she escaped or how she had managed to end up here, in the middle of cornfields. I only wanted to ask her whether it is possible to forget, to change your life completely. Was there a new life for her? Ulrike