A Balkan Comedy

Politics and daily life in Romania since 1989 have been as strange, and at times as sinister, as they were during the 24-year rule of Nicolae Ceausescu. Three recent events—two weddings and a funeral—drew the author into the absurdist drama of postcommunist Romania.

by William McPherson

The marriage of Margareta of Romania and Radu Duda on September 21, 1996, marked a symbolic coming together of two former dynasties, royal and communist.

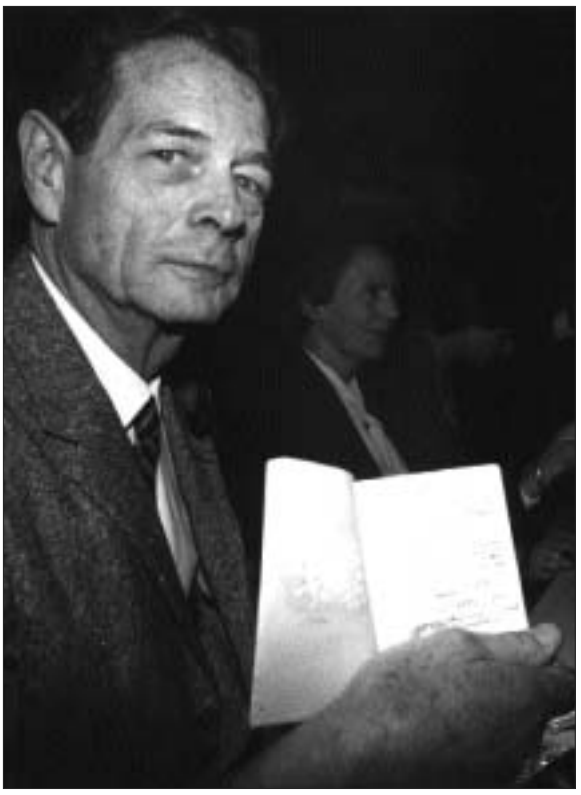
Comedies are supposed to end with a wedding, where this one begins. The funeral comes later. The wedding, a royal wedding at that, involves an ancient dynasty that was but has effectively ceased to be. And, in a sense, it was a royal funeral too, in an incipient dynasty that would have been but never quite was. But first the wedding, which could not have taken place but for the events that began to unfold some 50 years before.

On August 23, 1944, the tall and handsome King Michael of Romania—now the father of the bride—threw the country's pro-Nazi dictator into a palace safe and turned his country to the Allies, thereby shortening the course of the war by some months. The next year at Yalta, the Allies thanked him by ceding his country to the Soviets, who then betrayed him—a kind of double double-cross. The Americans gave him a Jeep and a medal. By December 30, 1947, the Communists had completed their takeover of his country. Under threat of gunfire, the popular king, then only 26, was forced to abdicate, hustled onto a train and into exile. He was the last Balkan monarch to flee his country.

And thus began the remarkable chain of events that culminated in the unlikely marriage in Switzerland on September 21 of last year of the king's eldest daughter and designated heir, H.R.H. the Princess Margareta of Romania, to Radu Duda, the son of a former member of the same Communist Party that had expelled the king 49 years before.

The party, of course, no longer officially exists in Romania. It expired shortly after the execution of the country's last dictator, Nicolae Ceausescu, on December 25, 1989. Nor does the throne. Still, by the standards of both families, that of the former king and that of the former apparatchik, this was an astonishing event. A few years before, it would have been unimaginable.

But in this postmodern age, love conquers even the differences between the Hohenzollerns of Sigmaringen and the Dudas of Iasi. Not to mention the queen of Spain, the former empress of Iran, the former king and queen of Greece, and the past and present highnesses of various principalities and powers, the dukes and archdukes, princes, princesses, and archduchesses, remnants of the great families that once ruled Europe who crowded into the small Orthodox church of St. Gherassimos on a pleasant if occa-



Visa canceled: One of King Michael's attempts to return to Romania after the overthrow of Nicolae Ceauflescu was blocked at the Zurich airport.

sionally overcast Saturday morning in Lausanne to witness the event. (Their beleaguered British kinfolk, none of whom was there, were reliably reported to be fretting over their own future at Balmoral in Scotland.) Except for Farah Diba of Iran, they are all cousins of one degree or another, and they do stick together. The Almanach de Gotha is a very cozy family, almost, one might say, bourgeois, even to the jewelry—except for Princess Margareta's. She wore a truly dazzling tiara from the vaults of Cartier in Geneva. The gold in the bridegroom's father's mouth was the real thing, too, not the ersatz variety around the throat of one of the archduchesses, as my companion, who has an eye for these matters, pointed out.

The man who captured the heart of the 47-year-old princess, Radu Duda, is an actor 11 years her junior from the provincial capital of Iasi in northeastern Romania. His father, René Corneliu Duda, is a professor of public health and management at the University of Medicine there. From 1992 until 1996, he served on the Iasi city council for the party that seized power in Romania in December 1989 and held it firmly until November 1996. That party's uncontested leader is a one-time high Communist official, former president and now senator Ion Iliescu, who seemed to regard the king as his nemesis, or one of them. He should have looked closer to home. Abandoned finally by the secret police, or so it is presumed, and dogged by seven years of corruption at the top and worsening conditions for the rest, Iliescu was defeated in the presidential elections of last November 17, the first Romanian head of state ever to pass from power through the polls. Easier lies the head that wore the crown than seized it.

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King Michael has never renounced his claim to be the legal constitutional monarch of Romania. For that reason among others, Iliescu was determined to keep him from ever seeing Romania again, to the point of using Kalashnikovs if necessary. He proved that on the king's first attempt to return to his country, on Christmas Eve 1990, one year after the still-puzzling events that put Iliescu and his group of former *nomenclaturisti* in power. After a few hours of fear and confusion, the king was forced back on his plane and for the second time made to leave the country at gunpoint. He tried to return several times after that, occasionally getting so far as the airport. The one brief visit Iliescu eventually permitted him, at Easter 1992, drew such vast and cheering throngs in Bucharest—some hundreds of thousands, by most accounts—that the Power (Puterea, as they say in Romania) was terrified, and the Iliescu regime denied all subsequent requests. Fear of another last-minute denial was the main reason the princess did not attempt to hold her wedding in Romania, where she has been many times since 1989. Of the family, only the king was forbidden to enter his country.

During last autumn's electoral campaign, one of the television advertisements for Iliescu and his Romanian Party of Social Democracy showed the face of his opponent, Emil Constantinescu, transmuting slowly into the face of King Michael. A vote for Constantinescu was a vote for the king. The majority of Romanians were not ready for that. This sophisticated, computer-generated manipulation of images smelled suspiciously like the work of the notorious American election consultants hired in secrecy by the Power. Whoever thought of it, however, the message was clear: if the king should return, the boyars (owners of the old landed estates) must soon follow. The boyars will seize your land, your houses and apartments, your factories and jobs. That message had served the party well in the national elections four years before. On the eve of those elections, an official of predominantly Hungarian Harghita County took me on a tour of his mountainous domain. "The opposition wants to bring back the king, and the king will bring back the boyars," he said, repeating, as if it were indisputable, the refrain I had heard many times before. Moments later, he pointed out what had been a collective dairy farm. After the revolution it was bankrupt, he told me. The farm had borrowed a lot of money for new milking machines, new barns. It was intended to be a model of a dairy farm, but after the revolution it couldn't pay its debts. "So the manager bought it exactly then, and now he rents its land and equipment to the peasants."

"The same manager?"

"Yes, of course the same manager. There was only one manager, so it had to be the same."

"I thought you told me that if the king returns, he will bring back the boyars."

Yes, he agreed. That is what he'd said, that is what would happen.

I gestured toward the farm. "But the boyars are already here."

The pattern was repeated throughout the country. In the months immediately following December 1989, the Communist managers, having sold what moveable assets they could from the enterprises they directed and already considerably diminishing their value, bought them from the state for a fraction of their worth. This was the beginning of privatization in Romania.

A dismal late November afternoon in Bucharest, 1990, the lobby of the Hotel Intercontinental, at that time one of the few warm places in the city. I am introduced to a man in his mid-forties named Paul.

"Paul?"

"Paul of Romania, of course."

"Oh, of course."

At the time I, and most Romanians, had no idea who this Paul of Romania was, although since the events of December everyone had learned about King Michael. What I did know was that one of the newspapers then controlled by the ruling party had published a letter from the Empress Elizabeth—another unknown—claiming that a Prince Paul, not Michael, was the rightful heir to the throne. The Power, although it disapproved of the throne, seemed to approve of that. Later I learned that Paul Lambrino was the direct descendant, two generations removed, of a very brief morganatic marriage by King Michael's father, a marriage that was almost immediately annulled and its child unrecognized. I never did learn

The would-be royals: Paul Lambrino, who claims to be the rightful heir to Romania's throne, marries Lia Triff on September 15, 1996.

who the Empress Elizabeth was, and as far as I know, having served the purpose of the Power, she was never heard from again.

She was not, in any case, at the wedding that took place in Bucharest just the Sunday before the wedding of Princess Margareta and Radu Duda in Lausanne. Paul Lambrino, now certified by a court in a small Romanian provincial town as His Royal Highness, Prince Paul of Romania (a small step on his way to the throne that isn't), was joined with great pomp and the blessings of two of Romania's richest businessmen and one titled German, to Lia Triff, the divorced fifth wife of the late San Francisco lawyer Marvin Belli. The timing was an unfortunate coincidence, the bride wrote in a letter of apology to Princess Margareta; her mother was facing major surgery and they wanted to have the ceremony before the operation. More recently a figure on the London social scene, the now-Princess Lia was fined $75,000 by the California Fair Political Practices Commission for dubious handling of campaign contributions when she ran for the state senate there in 1984. The Bucharest newspapers say she is of Romanian origin. The London newspapers say she is from Hamtramack, a working-class community near Detroit. They also say she bounced a couple of checks at a London stationer's.

In Switzerland, all that seemed to have been forgotten, or unknown to, or at least politely overlooked by the 180 guests who gathered for lunch after the ceremony under an extraordinary gauzy tent—the pearly light was soft as mist—at the Polo Club in Mies, outside Geneva. The toast was given by the bride's godfather, the former king Constantine of Greece, who still can't return to his country. "You," he said to the bridegroom, "are responsible for the future of Romania." A heavy charge, but the faithful cheered. Radu Duda, sitting between his princess bride and the Empress Farah Diba, smiled politely. The reaction of his father, René, flanked by Queen Anne of Romania (whose father, Prince of Bourbon-Parma, by curious coincidence was also named René) and the Archduchess of Austria, went unnoticed, although probably not by the queen, who is a keen and intelligent observer. A Romanian toasted the king. Politics seemed about to rear its awkward head. The skies burst and the rain poured down. The tent held up nicely. Margareta thanked her sister, the Princess Sophie, who had organized the event to its smallest detail—except for the Romanian royalist's toast. But that was in Romanian, so few understood. Radu Duda kissed the hand of the queen of Spain. No, he wasn't particularly nervous. "Perhaps my experience in the theater. . . ." The couple passed by each of the tables to chat with the guests, several of whom had been Princess Margareta's roommates at the University of Edinburgh, where she read sociology, political science, and international law; others were members of the board of the foundation she established in 1990 for charitable work in Romania. The rain stopped, there was a flurry of kisses to hand and cheek and air, the couple was driven off in a Rolls cabriolet, and the jolly party ended.

That evening there was a smaller informal gathering for family and friends of the bride and the bridegroom at Villa Serena, the king's spacious but unpretentious house in nearby Versoix—so informal, in fact, that the queen, a descendant of Louis XIV, was discovered washing dishes in the kitchen and the grandchildren passed trays of canapés ("Want some?"), and so unpretentious that the paint is flaking from the living room ceiling. Luxe it is not, but comfortable and friendly it is.

A principled, modest, and rather formal man, 75 last October 25, the king remains devoted to the country where he was reared and educated but which he scarcely saw in 48 years. At the time, he had little hope of seeing it again. Now, after the general elections of November 3, in which the ruling Romanian Party of Social Democracy (PDSR) with its allies lost control of the Parliament, and especially after the presidential elections two weeks later in which Iliescu was replaced by Emil Constantinescu, a former professor of geology and the candidate of the democratic coalition, the king is again able to return to Romania, if not to reign. Not the dream he had once envisioned, surely; not the dream of the most ardent royalists that faded this day with Princess Margareta's marriage to a Romanian and a commoner; but a kind of vindication for the long years in exile when the Communists were in power, and for the various humiliations inflicted since. Three months after the elections, however, the question of his Romanian citizenship and the legality of his abdication were still under consideration by the Ministry of Justice. A decision was expected "*imediat*," as every waiter in Romania says on taking one's order. Although his citizenship was finally restored, the more difficult issue of the legality of his abdication was not addressed. The restoration of the monarchy seems remote at best, but at least King Michael has at last been honored by his own people in his own country.

Emil Constantinescu, head of the democratic coalition, won last November's presidential election.

The Romanians have a proverb—the language seems made for proverbs—*Pestele de la cap se împute*—the fish rots from the head.

Did I know the rest of it? the king asked.

No, I had thought that was all of it.

"Dar de la coada se curata"—But you clean it from the tail. Romania has a population of some 23 million—a very big fish indeed.

One week to the day after the wedding of Princess Margareta, I arrived at the four-star Hotel Lido in Bucharest, where a modest single room costs $190 a night, then approximately twice the monthly salary of the average Romanian, and it was necessary to request towels and toilet paper. At the reception, I changed a minimal amount of money.

"May I have a receipt, please?"

"Receipt?" The woman, who speaks English, looked as if she had never heard such a request before.

"O chitanta."

"Da. Yes, of course." She produced a kind of receipt on a memo pad, without the usual official stamp and for 3,000 lei more than she had given me.

"I believe you owe me more money."

"Yes, of course."

Dar de la coada se curata, I thought but did not say. I said instead, "I'm glad I asked for the receipt." This produced no reaction.

The Hotel Lido, a fine old art deco building in the center of Bucharest, was bought from the state and spruced up by the PΠunescu brothers, who, adept in the ways of the savage capitalism that runs rampant in this country today and adept in the old ways of savage socialism as well, have become in a short time three of the richest men in Romania—and there are some very, very rich men in Romania today. Two of the brothers very close to

In December 1989, Ion Iliescu (hand raised) stands with other members of the National Salvation Front, the reformist communists who ousted Ceauflescu but kept their own grip on power.

then-president Iliescu acted as *nasi*, or godfathers, to Paul Lambrino and Lia Triff. (One of them, George, is now, after the elections, officially under investigation for corruption.) The role of the *nas* in Eastern Orthodox weddings usually involves support and protection for the couple, and certainly a substantial gift. Covering all bases, the brothers once offered hospitality to Princess Margareta. And just the night before, one of their planes from the first and only private airline in Romania bore home from Vienna, where he had died, the body of Nicu Ceausescu, the youngest, favored son of Nicolae and Elena, the presumptive heir to the dynasty that would have been but never was.

It was for the funeral of Nicusor—"little Nicu," as he was sometimes affectionately known—that I found myself arriving to the sulphurous fumes of Bucharest this particular afternoon. In its way, the death of Nicu Ceausescu of esophageal hemorrhages from complications of cirrhosis at the age of 45 was the final end of another dream, or a nightmare, depending on how you look at it. In Romania, this dream too has been a long time dying.

Nicu is a mythic creature here, part good old boy, part bad boy, part beast. Before the events of December 1989, the gossip about him among the *protipendada* was hushed, horrific, and incessant, tending to focus on the bestial rather than the better part. (May Communist-era Romanian-English dictionary defines *protipendada* as "*obs*. high society"; neither the word nor the society it denotes was ever obsolete in Romania.) Everyone knew he had killed a woman with his car on one of the boulevards of Bucharest when he was 18, and there was talk of another fatal accident a few years later. Everyone said he had forced the Olympic gymnast Nadia Comenici to be his lover. Drunk, he was said to have urinated on a plate of oysters (and then raped a waitress) at a dinner given by the man chosen by his parents to groom him for the dynastic succession, the one-time foreign minister fitefan Andrei and, until its dissolution with the arrest of all its members in December 1989, a member of the ruling Political Executive Committee, the PolExCo, Romania's politburo.

"Yes, I played the card of Nicu," Stefan Andrei once told me over a long series of vodkas—Stolichnaya, not his favorite but the best available—only partly relieved by the spicy grilled sausages known as *mititei* in the pleasant latticed garden of the Restaurant Select, favored before and since by the party elite. He seemed a little rueful. It was not, after all, a winning card. "Yes, I was more near to Nicusor." There was resignation, affection, even a kind of admiration in his voice; it does take some nerve, however depraved, to urinate on a plate of oysters, even for a Ceausescu. "But Nicu, his brother, his sister Zoia—they all have the [power] microbe, the gene of Ceausescu."

As a member of the PolExCo who remained with Ceausescu until the end, Stefan Andrei was infected by the microbe, too. He had been tried and convicted with the rest of the Committee, but his sentence was suspended for health reasons in November 1992 and he was pardoned by presidential decree in March 1994, six weeks before our meeting. He still lives in his

old villa near the restaurant, sitting in his library with his fine collection of books around him, thinking about the memoirs he is planning to write, and collecting his pension which, as he pointed out, was less than half of the bill for the vodkas and *mititei*. He took it from the waiter and checked it carefully before pocketing some cigarettes from my package and handing the bill to me. "You are paying, yes?"

Everyone knew, or at least believed, that Nicu simply took whatever woman he fancied, a Neanderthal machismo that plays very well in Romania. There is, as a counterintelligence officer told me a few days after the funeral, "much folklore in what he was said to have done." Doubtless true. Nonetheless, he fancied a lot of women, and however great his powers of persuasion may have been—he was a handsome young man—they were not nearly so compelling as the immense power of his name. "His real interests were drinking and sex," a former acquaintance told me. "Politics was only the means."

But once there had been another Nicu, or so those who knew him claim, a young man deeply in love with a classmate. When the girl was six months pregnant, she was seized in her house by the secret police on the orders of his mother, Elena, and taken to Elias Hospital, the hospital of the party elite, where an abortion—illegal under Ceausescu—was forced upon her. Nicu was then made to marry someone his mother found more desirable, though he did not. The story, widely repeated, was that he woke up the morning after his wedding and said, "Who is this cow in my bed?"

In the equivalent in Romania of a high school memory book, one of his female classmates wrote, "I hope you always remain as honest as you are now." He went to university and, like his older brother, Valentin, studied

On June 3, 1991, Nicu Ceauflescu, the dictator's youngest son, received a 20-year sentence for various crimes. He served two and a half years.

physics, though unlike Valentin he did not continue his studies beyond his undergraduate years. He chose a career in the party instead, or perhaps it was chosen for him. He was not an intellectual, as were his siblings. Partly because of this, several have described him as being tormented by an excruciating inferiority complex. As a boy, he was badly beaten by both his parents. He sucked his thumb until he was 22 or 23. For that reason and for many years, he was called "*Degetarian*"—thumb-sucker—but behind his back, of course.

A classmate who knew him from the age of six said after his death, "I don't think he was a cruel person—personally corrupt, maybe, but not personally cruel. Beria [Lavrenti Beria, the chief of Stalin's secret police] was a cruel person. He wanted to be feared. Nicu wanted to be liked, though he was erratic and sometimes brutal. Zoia once said he's crazy, and he was a little. But when he began to acquire power and later, when he was head of the Union of Communist Youth, he was always ready to talk to former classmates—you could just ring him up—and he would try to help with the problem."

That was the good Nicu, the Nicu of the high school memory book, the Nicu who later liked to play football with schoolboys on the streets of Sibiu, who always had a bottle of whisky in his desk drawer and packages of Kents for the members of his council there. (In Romania at that time, Kents were less a cigarette than a currency, and remained so until well into 1990.) And if he arrived a little late and a little hungover for the weekly council meetings, he always made a joke about it and passed around the Scotch and the Kents.

People liked him in Sibiu, or at least those I have spoken to said they did. He gave them food—a rather telling locution to the foreign ear. It was used daily in Romania to describe the government's largesse in handing out meat, milk, bread, water, heat—or, when the necessities were denied, its parsimony. They still say it.

There was a joke before the revolution. An American passing a long line of people in front of a shop asks his Romanian companion the reason for the queue. "They give us meat," the Romanian says. The American says, "I'd rather pay for it."

There is another Romanian expression, part of the folk wisdom:

Capul ce se pleaca∏
Sabia nu–l taie.

(The head that bows is not cut off.) There are two more lines, however, which make the point of the proverb. I did not hear them until much later:

Dar cu umilinta∫∏
Ea îl înconvoaie.

(But it is covered in humiliation.) The reason I hadn't heard the rest of the expression is that few Romanians seem to have heard it either.

Nicu's older brother and sister, Valentin, 48, and Zoia, a year or two younger, were rather more quietly pursuing interests in nuclear physics and mathematics respectively while their brother was moving quickly up the ranks. Valentin, in fact, studied several years at the University of London in the late 1960s and has a doctorate in nuclear physics from the University of Bucharest. Zoia was once, at least, a serious mathematician. She now lives a very reclusive life, though Valentin is still affiliated with the Magurele Institute of Atomic Physics in Bucharest, where his colleagues defended him at the time of the turbulence. Only Nicu chose a party career. The television news here the day after his death showed old family movies of Elena in happier times lovingly, tenderly caressing Nicu's face, and Zoia flirting coyly with her father. Valentin is standing a little awkwardly to the side. At that time, he was not particularly close to either his parents or his siblings.

Valentin, together with Nicu and Zoia, had been arrested during the violent events that toppled his parents in December 1989, but he and Zoia were released from prison after eight months; Nicu, the youngest, the party activist, had been sentenced to 20 years, charged at first with genocide, which was later reduced to aggravated murder, and finally to illegal possession of weapons. He had been arrested because he was an alternate member of the 15-member Political Executive Committee, as well as first secretary—a very important post—for the county of Sibiu, in the capital city of which some 90 people had been killed during the revolution, presumably on his orders. But as with so many things connected with the events of December 1989 in Romania, exactly who gave the order remains unclear. And as with the charges, the sentence, too, was reduced—from 20 to 16 years. Nicu served two and a half, the time for illegal possession, and was released in 1993—not, Valentin contends but as the government suggested, for health reasons, though he was seriously ill, but because he had served his time. All the other charges were eventually dismissed, as were the much lesser charges against Valentin and Zoia.

I did not know Nicu. I saw him a few times in the courtroom at his trial, a gaunt figure with a sometimes piercing gaze, and after his release from prison he was once pointed out to me behind the wheel of a car. But I do know his brother Valentin. I first met him in the spring of 1991, a few months after his release but before all the charges were dismissed. He came to dinner with a mutual friend in my small apartment in one of the thousands of blocks of flats his father had ordered built during the 24 years he ruled Romania. He seemed nervous at first, but then so was I. It felt very strange indeed to look across the coffee table and see his mother's features written so clearly on his face. But the nervousness passed, helped perhaps by the fact that I took very few notes, perhaps by the Ballantines, perhaps by his ease in English, which he speaks fluently and virtually without accent. In any case, he stayed until three in the morning. It was the 10th birthday of his son, whom he had not seen since December 23, 1989. He did not know his whereabouts nor that of his former wife, the boy's mother.

For reasons I cannot explain, Valentin and I became, I think, friends.

Some kind of friends, anyway, as they say here. It is hard to know how to be friends with the enigmatic elder son of Nicolae and Elena Ceausescu, whose power was near absolute in this country that they brought to ruin, whose increasing capacity for willful blindness and self-deception was at least extraordinary, and who were shot like dogs on Christmas Day 1989. I cannot imagine what it is like to be Valentin. I mentioned his parents' deaths that night, and he responded very briefly and without affect or inflection. Their trial itself was a joke. It lasted little more than an hour and was conducted by their former accomplices, including Ceausescu's deputy minister of defense, soon to become one of Romania's richest men and now with the change in regime formally charged with abuse of office, and Virgil Magureanu, who suddenly became and who remained until April 30 of this year—almost six months after the elections—the head of the secret police, the Romanian Information Service (SRI), the successor to the old Securitate in which he had served as an officer. All of them clearly wanted the couple silenced. The charge—another travesty—was genocide. Anybody anywhere who turned on the television that day saw their crumpled, bloodied corpses awkwardly splayed on the frozen earth, the camera closing in to show that Nicolae and Elena Ceausescu were not on their way to Paraguay or North Korea or China but were in fact dead on the ground, eyes glazing, in a courtyard in an undisclosed location in Romania. It was that image of Elena I saw when I looked at Valentin's face. Valentin did not see the tape.

The ostensible reason for this grisly bit of television was to stop the counter-revolutionary terrorists from shooting. Although everybody saw the terrorists, even grappled with them and turned them over to various authorities, after that, as Nicu said in a deposition published here the day after he died, "all were a little extraterrestrial." Units of the Army? Of the Ministry of Interior? The Securitate? No one knew, and those who might have known were not saying. The terrorists had simply disappeared. Like the fabled millions if not billions of dollars the family was supposed to have stashed in secret accounts abroad, which now seem more likely to have been government or party or Securitate treasure than a personal horde accumulated to maintain a life of luxury abroad in the event of a hasty forced departure. The Ceausescus were despots, their power was for all practical purposes absolute, but unlike Nicu they were rather austere despots, not in the Latin American or Caribbean mode. At the time, however, the new group in power was comparing them to the Marcos family—diamonds in the chandeliers, gold in the bathrooms, that sort of thing. After a couple of years of pro forma activity on the part of the government, the search for the money—like the search for the terrorists—was quietly dropped and the firm of Canadian accountants discharged, just a little short of finding at least some of the millions they believed existed. As to the diamonds in the chandeliers, which even Ted Koppel reported in early 1990, they turned out to be crystal, and the gold the same material as the archduchess's necklace.

The Epoch of Gold, as the Ceausescu era began to be described as it entered its grandiose dynastic phase, started with rather more promise than it ended. After the death of the Romanian Stalinist leader Gheorghiu Gheorghiu-Dej in 1965, Nicolae Ceausescu seemed liberal. In 1968, when he refused to support the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, he was in fact genuinely, hugely popular, both at home and in the West. For a time, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, conditions were better in Romania than in the surrounding countries. There was an abundance of goods in the shops and prices were low. Western governments courted Ceausescu as the "maverick" of the Warsaw Pact long after the by-then "Genius of the Carpathians" had ceased to display any maverick tendencies, which were questionable to begin with. (The greatest genius he evidenced was for attaining power and staying there.) Charles de Gaulle visited in 1968, Richard Nixon the following year, and Ceausescu and his wife made several state visits to the West—Buckingham Palace, the Élysée Palace, the White House (three times). As late as 1984, Vice President George Bush praised him as "a good Communist," although only the year before he had made possession of a typewriter subject to authorization by the police, with the requirement that a sample of its type be registered with them.

The state by this time was controlling the lives of its citizens to the most minute detail: how many calories they could consume, how much soap was needed to keep them clean, what wattage of light bulb could be burned, how high the temperature inside their flats should be. By 1985,

Before the revolution: propaganda in rural Romania extols the leader.

Ceauflescu—the "Genius of the Carpathians"—and his wife Elena visit New Orleans in 1978. Six years later, Vice President Bush called him "a good Communist."

Ceausescu's massive "systematization" program had been underway for several years. Hundreds of villages and churches throughout the country were destroyed and their inhabitants herded from their homes into almost uniformly dismal blocks of flats. In Bucharest, he had an entire quarter razed to make way for the gigantic Palace of the People and the Victory of Socialism Boulevard leading up to it. The boulevard is a little longer and a little wider than the Champs-Élysées. The building is larger than the Pentagon, and the scale of its vast halls utterly dwarfs a man. Petre Roman, the first prime minister after the 1989 overthrow and now the leader of the Union of Social Democrats, a major partner in the new power, once told me that it cost $6 billion to build. It is still unfinished, although part of it now accommodates the lower house of the Parliament. The salons the size of football fields are used for conferences and official events. By and large, the people seem proud of it.

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My mother loved me," Valentin told me the night we first met, "maybe too much." I think Valentin loved his mother, too. In the last period, separated from his first wife, whom by most accounts his mother despised, he returned to his parents' home, the sumptuous presidential villa known as the Spring Palace. Perhaps it was for that reason, after years of distancing himself from his parents and the regime—even living in a small apartment with his wife and son and, like every ordinary Romanian, going out in the morning for his bottle of milk and loaf of bread, if there were such to be had—that he allowed himself to be put forward as an alternate member of the Central Committee at the last Party Congress in November 1989, when communist regimes elsewhere were

crumbling and just five weeks before the regime crumbled in Romania, too. Or maybe he was just tired. He never explained.

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"There is no secret," Valentin said in a long and sometimes difficult conversation two days after his brother's funeral. He seldom smiles, and there are many pauses. He is not an easy person, nor does he seem a happy one. "People don't recognize what they see, that's all. These people"—he was referring to the Power—"have to hide a lie, and everybody knows it. They don't feel guilty. That's the first thing. Have you seen the tapes of Iliescu on December 22?"

Yes, I had. Not only Ion Iliescu but the entire leadership of the National Salvation Front, as the group in power was then known, were standing on the floodlit balcony of the Central Committee Building a few hours after the Ceausescus had fled by helicopter from the roof of the same building. Terrorists had been shooting all around them, resuming again when the front retired within. The other buildings in the enormous square were pocked with bullets for months. The old university library, repository of an irreplaceable collection of books and manuscripts, was destroyed by fire. The balcony went unscathed. The official toll of the dead, revised frequently with a final version released three years after the events, is 1,104; only 160 were killed before the dictator fled. Curious—if the figures are accurate—that the majority of them were killed in Sibiu. "A lot of effort," Valentin once said, "to kill these two old people."

The Palace of the People—larger than the Pentagon—was intended to crown Ceauflescu's sweeping urban and village renewal plan.

Two days after I first arrived in Romania, in January 1990, I was told, "Reality is a secret here. Everybody knows but nobody knows, and nobody knows exactly."

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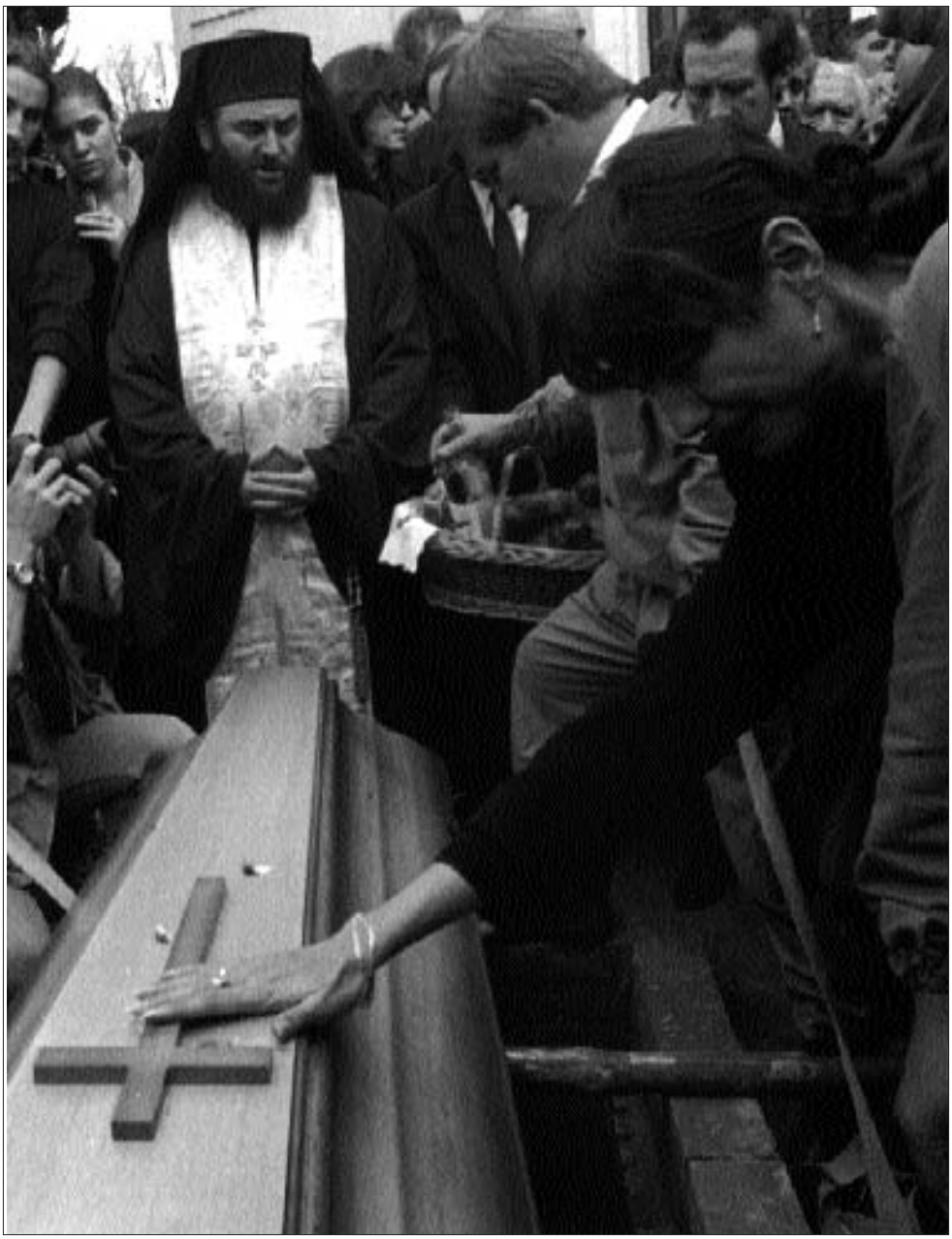
Some months after the Ceausescu murders, word was slowly spread—no one knows why or by whom—that they had been buried in unmarked graves a hundred yards apart in Ghencea Cemetery in southwest Bucharest. Almost seven years later, on the last Sunday in September, in a place of honor in the same cemetery, their youngest son, Nicu—Printisor, as he was also called, the Little Prince, his mother's presumed favorite, the putative heir—was buried under a pyramid of floral garlands rising nine or 10 feet into the autumn sky, while some thousands filled the cemetery from the doors of the pretty octagonal chapel to the entrance gates, clambering over gravestones (but carefully avoiding the graves themselves) and climbing to the roofs of mausoleums, jostling for a better view.

Journalists stood bored on the chapel steps, smoking cigarettes and waiting for the service to end, while babushkas, babies, smartly dressed women, young people, old people, hordes of security, and men in the traditional ill-fitting brown or gray suits that always seem associated with party congresses pressed around them.

"Who are these people?" Alison Mutler, the Associated Press bureau chief in Bucharest, who has been there longer than any other foreign journalist and seems to know everyone, asked her Romanian colleague Horia Tabacu. "I don't recognize any of them."

"*Fosti securisti, carciumari, si babe*," he replied. Former Securitate (Ceausescu's secret police), barhoppers, and old ladies. "Nicu's friends, except for the old ladies. You wouldn't know them." And, of course, the just plain curious.

Inside the chapel Nicu was eulogized by Adrian Paunescu (no relation to the brothers), the man who is most often described as Ceausescu's court poet, once a member of the Central Committee, after 1989 a senator in the new parliament, and at the time of the funeral the presidential candidate of the Socialist Workers' Party, the PSM, which had been until recently a member of the government's nationalist left-wing coalition. (He also represented Romania at the Council of Europe and until his electoral defeat in November held a seat on the cultural commission of the Romanian Senate. But then, Ceausescu's personal physician, who devised the country's "rational nutrition" program, was for a time minister of health in the successor regime.) Nicu was prayed over by two Romanian Orthodox priests, with music from two choirs, doleful folk music from the Left—Adrian Paunescu's old youth group called the Circle of Flame—and ecclesiastical chants from the Right—students from the Theological Institute. In Romania, the Left and the Right have a tendency to coalesce harmoniously under the tribal tent of national identity. An old colleague, the former secretary at the Central Committee for the Union of Communist Youth, now the prospering director of the giant construction and engineering company



Dana Radu touches the coffin of her husband, Nicu Ceauflescu, as it is lowered into the grave on September 29, 1996

Carpati, sent Nicu off with the old communist salute and a personal touch: "*Ramas bun, tovarase prim-secretar; adio, prieten drag si iubit!*"—So long, Comrade First Secretary; good-by, dear and beloved friend!

The coffin, draped in the postrevolutionary tricolor, was escorted to its brick-lined grave by his brother and sister, his father's surviving brothers and sister, by a sizeable contingent from the former Central Committee and the Political Executive Committee, and the newly rich in Romania who, in many cases are one and the same—the old and present *protipendada*, in a word, including the Paunescu brother, Viorel, in whose hotel I was staying.

Change at Last?

In the seven years of President Ion Iliescu, the gates in the walls of Cotrocenl Palace, the Romanian White House, were solid and forbidding. Since the election last November of President Emil Constantinescu and his prime minister, Victor Ciorbea, the fortress gates have been replaced by graceful wrought iron, affording a view of the drive, the gardens, and the fountains playing within.

More than the green and sunlit afternoons, the magnificent chestnut trees that bloom in May, and the buds on the fragrant lindens—all of which incline one to optimism—more even than the elegant new message on the buses urging Bucharesteans to keep their city clean, more than anything, in fact, the replacement of the gates seems to me an outward and visible sign of the changes beginning to stir within. Moreover, the message on the buses appears to be working: the center of the city is indeed cleaner—or at least remarkably free of trash. There is still plenty of dust from the renovation and new construction going on, and the fumes from the traffic are overpowering. But one of these years Bucharest will be a pleasant, even charming city, something like the "little Paris" Bucharesteans like to think their capital resembled in the 1930s.

There is, in fact, a kind of boom going on here at the moment. Share prices on the new Bucharest Stock Exchange increased an average of 97 percent from April 1 to May 22 on rumors that foreign money was coming into the market. Certainly the average Romanian, or even the above-average Romanian, was not driving up prices. The average salary here is 504,000 lei a month, which works out to about $70. A young doctor just out of medical school earns less than $30. A cabinet minister is paid 1.3 million lei: $185. A high executive earns 1.6 million ($230) after taxes. He could buy more in 1991 than he can today. Almost everybody could, in fact, and despite the shortages, most people were economically better off under the communist regime. Considering the salaries, food is now very expensive.

How Romanians survive is a mystery to me, and perhaps to many of them, but they have a term, *a se descurca*, which means to manage, to get by (or get around), to figure things out. This remarkable ability has so far stood them in good stead, allowing them to *rezist*—to survive despite the forces determined to crush them—even though one of them tells me fairly frequently, "I do not know if I can resist much longer." But he does.

After the service Ion Dinca, one of the most powerful persons in Communist Romania after Nicolae and Elena Ceausescu, was standing on the steps of the chapel, surveying the crowd. He too was arrested after the revolution, tried with three other highest officials for his part in the events of December 16–22, and sentenced to life in prison. Like the rest of them, he spent a little time there, and was released. At the time of his trial in January 1990, he said in the *limba de lemn*—the wooden language—of the party, "I recognize once again that through my passive attitude which lacked any resistance to the dictator that I had a role in the shooting of the demonstrators and in the decision of the dictator to choke off the demonstrations through blood." He was, however, the only one of the four to stand before that military tribunal and assume some responsibility for his actions.

Almost seven years later, he looks handsome and fit. His hair is silver; his brown eyes are striking but oddly cold. He hasn't changed his convictions much, and he still speaks in the familiar *limba de lemn*, though he has a little more spark than he had in 1990. "The old generation

He manages. Perhaps that explains the congestion in the streets despite the price of gasoline, and a lot of other things as well.

It might explain how Adrian Petrescu, once an intelligence officer in Ceauflescu's Securitate, the old secret police almost invariably described as "dreaded," has managed to remain in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, now as head of the North America desk. He worked for the Department of Foreign Intelligence in Romania and in the United States and Canada. I do not know Petrescu, but from the former intelligence officers I have met who hold or have held high government positions, I am sure he is an agreeable and pleasant fellow. So is the former lobbyist for Ceauflescu (and Mobuto Sese Seko and Saddam Hussein, and others of that ilk), the sometimes baron and sometimes *von*, Edward J. van Kloberg III, whom the Romanian embassy invited to its dinner for Princess Margareta in May. Same faces, different voices. Perhaps *descurca* also explains the agility with which these faces manage to switch sides when convenient: one day Ceauflescu, the next Iliescu, and now Constantinescu.

There does, however, seem to be one standard. "Treason is treason," a bright and capable official of the new government said recently, referring to those like General Pacepa, who defected in 1978, and others like Mircea R∏ceanu, who risked his life and almost lost it to oppose the Ceauflescu regime from within. Leading intellectuals and members of the press express similar sentiments: those who tried to save their country—and there were many—were traitors to it.

One wonders: Which side was history on? Do the Germans consider those who fought against Hitler traitors to Germany? Was opposition to Stalin a betrayal of the Soviet Union? Is the Polish colonel Richard Kuklinski, who in the 1970s revealed Soviet invasion plans for Western Europe and in 1981 informed United States intelligence of Poland's impending plans to impose martial law, a traitor to Poland? The Poles don't think so. He will return to Poland within the next few months to be decorated as an honorary citizen of Kraków.

But Romanians still seem very confused on this matter of fundamental moral importance. It's time they made up their minds on what treason is and who the traitors were.

—*W. McP.*
Bucharest, June 1

worked for the people," he declared, "and the new generation only destroys. Even if [the Ceausescus] had faults, they built things. What they built in 25 years, these people couldn't paint as much in 250!"

The crowd jostling us tried to explain, all of them, it seemed, simultaneously. "First, Ceausescu gives us homes. Second, he gives us food."

Dinca may be half right, at least. Ceausescu did build things. Later my taxi driver took me on a tour of some of the outlying areas of Bucharest, far from the older beaux-arts and art deco center that was attractive once—still is, if you've acquired the taste—and will be again some day. Out here in the urban wilderness is a vast, overwhelming wasteland—fields of dust, unfinished buildings, crumbling walls—an alienating lunar landscape, but somewhere in these partially finished blocks people are living, though none could be seen.

Forget about the paint. "Dinca has right," the driver exclaimed. "This

will take 250 years just to finish! Just this one building—Ceausescu killed half a quarter to make that, at least 60 houses!" Ceausescu intended to build six such leviathans around the city. Each was to have a huge supermarket of several floors. Only one of the supermarkets is finished, the driver said. It is called Delfinului, the Dolphin's. "All you can find there is onions."

"Life is better in prison," the friend with me said. "It costs one million lei a month (approximately $300 at that time) to keep a man in jail. He can play chess. He can eat. Maybe he is warm. He wants to stay there. My parents together earn 300,000 a month. What can they do?"

We [members of the PolExCo] are not ashamed of what we did in this country," Dinca said. "It is these people today who need to be ashamed." His sons-in-law are now two of the richest men in Romania. They own the ComputerLand stores there, Pizza Hut, and various factories and hotels. A daughter is said to live in New Jersey.

"These people"—and some of those people, too; perhaps they were the same people—were getting into their sparkling Mercedes, their BMWs and the Jaguars, and heading for Vox Maris, one of Bucharest's largest and most splendid casinos, for the traditional funeral feast. There are a lot of casinos in Bucharest. More than in Las Vegas, they say, but they say a lot of things.

The rest of the crowd milled about for a while, then, as the autumn light began to fade from the great yellowing oaks, slowly dispersed, leaving the pungent smell of burning wax from the hundreds of small yellow candles flickering on the graves of Elena, of Nicolae, and now of Nicu.

Valentin and I were having coffee in the Vox Maris, the same grand casino where the funeral feast was held. It was morning, two days after the funeral, and the crowds had not yet arrived.

"Nicu was never groomed to be the successor. That was [only] the rumor." He paused for a moment. "But rumors even become the reality."

"Yes. Especially in Romania."

"Maybe others in the party thought it would be a good idea. He could command a lot of sympathy. He always wanted to look tough and act strong, but he wasn't. He was more like a child than anything else."

"What about the 90 people killed in Sibiu?"

"He did not order the shooting. I know when he's trying to lie, and he wasn't lying. I knew immediately. That's why I defended him so strongly." He paused and lit another Pall Mall. "Have you noticed? All the heroes in Sibiu now are the militia and the Securitate—all the dead people, and now they are the heroes of the revolution."

"So the villains are now the heroes?"

"Yes."

And the heroes are now the villains. The death three weeks before of Grigore RΠceanu, an early Communist figure—an *ilegalist*, as they were called—who was one of six to sign the strongest letter of protest to come out of Romania before the revolution, went unremarked and unreported in Romania, perhaps because of his son, Mircea, who had been sentenced to death in 1989 for spying for the Americans and left the country in May 1990, after two attempts on his life. His sentence, which Ceausescu eventually commuted to 20 years, still stands, although the new government has been in power more than six months. The death sentence of Ion Mihai Pacepa, the former acting director of foreign intelligence who defected to the West in 1978, also remains in force, although, since the Washington visit of Romanian foreign minister Adrian Severin in April 1997, Pacepa's sentence is being reconsidered. The list goes on. Many sentences remain to be reconsidered.

The grave of Nicolae Ceauflescu

One more thing. The long-unmarked grave of Nicolae Ceausescu is now topped by a stone cross—with a red star carved into it. Valentin hasn't seen it.

April 30, 1997