

# Kiss the Hand You Cannot Bite: Three Oral Histories from Communist Romania<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract.** These oral histories focus on the personal experiences of three participants during Ceausescu's rule, from childhood until the revolution in 1989. I conducted a series of interviews with each participant, and the results are startling. As children, they were taught patriotism above all else; as adults, they reject their indoctrination, but can do little against the might of the Communist Party and its tool, the Romanian secret police. The participants described how they adapted to their environment, how they connected with others who shared their opposing views, and how they were treated by the secret police. Their experiences are contrary to the common belief that communism is ideal.

## ***Introduction***

A popular belief about communism in Eastern Europe seems to be that communism is a good idea in theory; it simply has not worked in practice. Few know the details of the deprivation and suffering of the Romanians under the Communist Party. My family is Romanian, and they know too well the cold, the hunger, and the loss of hope that was prevalent during those times, particularly in the 1980s. Pilon (1976) considers it as a “quiet desperation” – it is an apt description.

Marculescu, (2007) declares that the previously stated belief about communism is wrong, it is not a good idea even in theory. It is unreliable economically, but it is excellent as a method of social control (Marculescu, 2007). The tools of social control – which is how this ideology survived for so long – were terror and the *Securitate*, the secret police. The secret police, it seemed, were everywhere. They record public conversations, especially conversations with foreigners; in fact, all conversations with foreigners must be formally reported (Pilon, 1976).

Other literature about communism in Romania says very little about the day to day lives of average people. Mary Ellen Fischer (1981) describes the “cult of personality” that surrounded the Communist Party leader from 1965 to 1989, Nicolae Ceausescu. He was an idol: his portraits adorned the walls of public buildings and his speeches were published as a “Communist Bible”; he was presented as omniscient (Fischer, 1981).

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<sup>1</sup> This research was conducted and this paper written for a course in Qualitative Research Methods in Criminology (Crim 321) offered at Simon Fraser University by Dr. Ted Palys. Copyright belongs to the author.

## 1 | Three Oral Histories from Communist Romania

It is well known that Ceausescu had a need for public adoration (Fundatia Academica Civica, 2008). This need was sated partially by large public assemblies, where comrades were expected to clap and cheer joyfully (Fundatia Academica Civica, 2008). In addition to this, the media – controlled by the Communist regime – had daily news of the then-president (Epuran & Turgeon, 2001). In the 1980s, the few hours of television presented more of the same (Epuran & Turgeon, 2001).

In addition to this, when Ceausescu himself was interviewed, his responses were either outright lies – for example, in response to the question, “When will the shelves be full?” he declared “The shelves are full.” – or convoluted non-responses (Pintea, 1990). Certain answers that appeared in Western newspapers were noticeably absent in Romanian papers, which were, of course, heavily censored (Pintea, 1990).

One of the few things that is known about ordinary people in Romania is that a vast amount of time was spent waiting in line, often outside in the cold and rain (Hale, 1971). The people had to line up for hours for basics such as bread, milk, or cheese. Meat was very difficult to obtain, so many Romanians ate fish often. There was very little to buy – and what was for sale was often of low quality – but there was a physical as well as monetary cost for available products (Hale, 1971).

I plan to conduct an oral history on three participants: my mother, my father, and another individual that I have known for a long time who wishes to remain anonymous. The focus will be on my participants’ personal experiences growing up in Communist Romania: how they came to distrust the State, how they adapted to the increasingly miserable conditions they lived in, and whether it was at all possible for them to fight back.

### ***Methods***

The data was gathered over a series of one-hour interviews with the three participants. The participants are my mother, Maria, my father, Bobby, and a third individual, a relative, who requested that I keep their identity confidential. Throughout this paper, I will refer to this person as Spencer. I chose these particular people due to our close relationship, my belief in their integrity, and the fact that all three of them have willingly discussed this topic with me in the past and consider it important.

The interviews were semi-structured; each interview focused on one aspect of life in communist Romania. I did not have a strict list of precise questions; instead, I made sure to cover a number of points in each interview. For example, the first interview I had with each participant covered their childhood and teenage years, what they were taught about the communist government at home, and how their perception of the communist government changed throughout those early years.

The interviews were all recorded, and in addition to this, I took notes by hand. Furthermore, the interviews with my parents were conducted in the apartment that I share with them, to

ensure their comfort. I conducted my interviews with Spencer over the phone, as he lives too far away for an in-person interview. Due to the fact that my participants and I are bilingual, the interviews were conducted in both English and Romanian; that is, they mostly communicated in Romanian, and I in English. It is thus important to note that any quotes in this paper are rough translations, not direct quotes.

Confidentiality is a concern in this study. My parents did not consider it an issue and allowed me to identify them by name. However, the third participant of this study would only let me include a personal story that they shared if I guaranteed confidentiality. In addition to this, I have informed consent from all of my participants. All three of them are adults and they are all aware of the purpose and extent of my research.

My main concern in this study is validity. I have chosen participants that I am close to, I have known for a very long time, and that I have no authority over. I know that all three of my participants are honest and trustworthy, and that all three of them took these interviews seriously. The answers they gave me were well thought out, not flippant, one-word responses. My similar background and close relationship with my participants promotes validity.

However, my close relationship with my participants can also be a hindrance. Because my parents will remain authority figures even after these interviews, they may engage in censorship, and omit information that may diminish that authority. My parents had a tendency to give responses that were somewhat vague, and had to be prompted to provide concrete examples. My father in particular would speak in general terms, rather than use “I” statements. This was less of a problem with Spencer, who has only rarely acted as a parental authority; because we were on a more equal footing, he shared an experience that he has never shared with any other person.

## **Results**

Two participants were born in small towns, while the third grew up close to Bucharest. All of them lived and worked in Romania until the revolution in 1989, after which my parents chose to emigrate. They were born in the early to mid 1950s and were raised by both parents. All of my participants have a five-year University degree; when my parents moved to Canada, these degrees were declared equal to a Masters. All of them are employed as computer programmers, all are married, and all have between one and two children. Since their situations in life are remarkably similar, so are their experiences.

I consider the information they have given me to be valid because I have known my participants for a long time and consider them trustworthy, and I have heard many similar stories from other Romanians. In addition to this, the information was verified by a number of other sources: books, articles, and a “take away museum” DVD bought from the Sighet Memorial, which is a memorial for victims of communism and political resistance.

### The Early Years: Childhood and Adolescence

The early years of all three participants were very similar, with regards to their perception of the communist government. It is important to note that when my participants were young, there was less deprivation and slightly less nationalism. At school, they heard only the positive ideals of communism and were taught that a capitalist society was negative and an exploitative way of life. The indoctrination was frighteningly successful. Of this, Spencer said the following:

When I was a kid, I thought communism was great. It's what I was told at school. But I heard about all these people that ran away, escaped to Western Europe – I didn't get it, I didn't understand why they would want to leave when it was so good here.

None of my participants were exposed to opposing views at home or in any other private situation. It would have been difficult to explain to children why the government is bad, but why they should say nothing about it in public. My mother explained what she learned from her family:

Some parents told their kids that this situation wasn't good, that it could be different, it could be better. That somewhere else, it's different and it's better. But we were not told this. We weren't raised with the idea that in another place, the situation is different and much better, and that in Romania, our situation is awful and nothing can be done about it. We were raised with the idea that this is the country you were born in, this is where you'll be raised, and this is where you'll live and you should try to make the best of it. My parents thought there was no reason to criticize communism when they could not offer us an alternative. It would only make us hate the country we lived in. So I thought everything was perfect.

Indoctrination, however, was not limited to school. Patriotism and love of the communist government was prevalent in other aspects of their lives. All of my participants were required to join mandatory clubs; they learned at school that they should be proud to join. There were regular meetings in which children were told about their history or their government, and the importance of patriotism. From age nine to fourteen, the participants were Pioneers, and from fourteen to eighteen, they were members of the Teenage Communist Union. After that, they had the option to become members of the Communist Party.

However, despite the pervasive nationalism and lack of criticism of the State, children noticed some strange behaviour. My father shared one of his experiences, in which he learned one of the few ways to openly oppose the State:

I remember the first time I went to a soccer game. I went with my parents. I was less than five years old – almost five years old. The team from my hometown, *Petrolu*, was playing ... against the team of the Romanian Security<sup>2</sup>, *Dynamo*. And I didn't understand then, but I did understand later, when our team scored a goal, the entire stadium erupted, everyone yelled at loud as they could. And for a kid like me, it was a terrifying experience. I started to tug on my mom's dress and yelled, as loud as I could, and asked her why these people were screaming at such a volume.

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<sup>2</sup> The Romanian word for the Secret Police, "Securitate," directly translated means "security." This is how I will refer to it throughout this paper.

My father, like Spencer and my mother, was exposed to the communist propaganda at school and in society, but by the age of thirteen, he passionately hated the Communist Party. He was influenced not by his family, but by an elderly man who tutored him. “Because he was old,” my father says, “he didn’t care so much about the government. He felt free to say what he wished to me.” He told my father about people who suffered needlessly, about the lack of freedom (freedom of expression, among other things). In addition to this, my father listened to foreign radio (particularly *Europa Libera*, or “Free Europe”). It was difficult to hear much of what was being said on foreign channels, due to the overlapping noise, but there was music, politics, personal stories from former Eastern European political prisoners and other escapees, and current events that were hidden from the public.

On the other hand, Spencer and my mother, who both grew up in small towns, did not have such negative feelings towards the communist government. Spencer was largely indifferent to politics. My mother, however, was extraordinarily sheltered. It was not until she left for university in the seventies that she was exposed to opposing opinions. Even then, she assumed any negative experiences were isolated incidents or irrelevant.

### **Adulthood: Deprivation and Political Struggle**

At the age of eighteen, due to her high grades at school, my mother was presented with the honour of becoming a member of the Communist Party. She thought it was normal to be given a political reward for being top of her class. Spencer also eventually joined the Communist Party. However, my father had no interest in such a thing:

I had a bad file because an uncle on my dad’s side had been a prisoner of war in Russia. And after a year of that he spent six months in jail ... in Romania. This only because he had been a prisoner in Russia. He had been in the Romanian army. And I had an uncle, my mother’s brother, who fled to Sweden. These were black marks on my file. ... Because of this, I could not become a member of the Communist Party.

Those who did not join the Party faced certain disadvantages. They could not advance at work – they would not be given managerial positions or any position of authority. However, there was little even low-level members of the Party (such as my mother and Spencer) could do.

Spencer said that as an adult, Romania felt like a prison. Streets were named after notable Communist leaders. My mother grew up on a street named 21 December<sup>3</sup> – Stalin’s birthday. You could not leave the country; you needed permission to go on vacation, even in other communist countries, and only those with incentive to come back could leave<sup>4</sup>. Any communication with strangers was to be reported to the Security. Romanians were professionally isolated – they could not build products with materials made outside Eastern

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<sup>3</sup> It was later changed to 22 December, the date of the revolution.

<sup>4</sup> Family was a common incentive. An entire family could not go on vacation together – one member could leave, as they were more likely to come back if they had a spouse or child waiting.

Europe, so they fell behind. They lacked access to new ideas in their professional fields. They lacked bare necessities: food was scarce, everything was rationed, and apartments lacked heating and hot water. A good part of their day was spent waiting in line in the cold and wet, and many times, they came home with nothing to show for their efforts.

All of my participants stated that their entertainment options were somewhat limited. They could read, they could go to the theatre or cinema, they could play sports; however, books, plays, and movies were either pro-communist or politically neutral. By the eighties, Romanian television was two hours of political propaganda, with prominent news of their Communist leader and his wife. My father continued to listen to foreign radio. “When you walked into an apartment building, you could hear this buzzing,” my father said, “it was everyone listening to foreign radio, which was difficult to hear because of the noise.”

Romanians, however, are surprisingly resilient and even somewhat creative. To heat up an apartment, leaving the stove on was a common occurrence. However, as stoves were gas, this was dangerous. Spencer built an interesting contraption using a stove, a pressure cooker, and pipes which went through holes he had drilled in the wall in order to heat his bedroom from the kitchen, while keeping the door of the kitchen closed for safety. When light was not available in his apartment, Spencer used a device he made from a car battery. He learned many tricks like this from a magazine called *Tehnium*.

My mother used the black market as frequently as her salary would allow. She’d buy baby formula, coffee, or the occasional clothing item. On the black market, merchandise was ten times more expensive. My mother also received items from her mother, who frequently visited the same shops and would give the salespeople gifts (my grandmother could knit and sew); she would then receive dairy products or other things in return. My mother stated:

People used whatever advantages they had. Doctors expected cigarettes or coffee for their work, salespeople only sold some of their supplies and kept the rest for friends and family – if you gave, you got in return, but you always felt like you didn’t give enough.

In addition to the deprivation, there was fear. My father said, “You were scared to speak out against communism even in small groups, because you never knew who to trust. It was always a risk.” It was sometimes difficult to know who worked for the Security and who was privately opposed. One had to read between the lines. My dad spent most of his adult life attempting to access foreign materials and dreaming of life in a free country. Since both he and my mother had a sense of self-preservation, and did not openly fight back, they were not often bothered by the Security. Spencer, however, was not so lucky:

I had a good file, no black marks on my record. At work, I did my projects well. I was a member of the Communist Party. My only problem was that I was consistently late to work – and I was honest about it, I didn’t sneak in through the back, I let the guard know who I was and that I was late. Once, I was called in to see my boss, who just fired me out of the blue because of my lateness. I thought this was ridiculous, and I argued – they, my boss and some other higher-ups in the company, held a meeting to tell me that I wasn’t fired, but was strongly encouraged to find a

new job. I told them no thank you. I was, a few days later, approached by a member of the Security – they offered me a job, said I’d just have to pass along some information. I said no, and their reaction was “With your situation at work, you shouldn’t be telling us that.” I still did not want to join, and told them so – but I had a clean record, I was a member of the Party, and they thought I was the type to help them. I think they either took advantage of my situation at work – or, more likely, they just created it. Because they didn’t fire people for lateness. They wanted me to be a member of the Security, and I didn’t want to.

After that, Spencer, like my parents, was largely ignored by the Security because he too was too frightened to fight back or attempt escape. All of the participants continued their routine of working, waiting in line, and wishing they were somewhere else until the revolution of 1989.

### ***Conclusion***

When I started this study, my goal was to better understand my family and a significant part of the history of my country of origin. The impression I got from all three of my participants were constant feelings of terror, particularly of the Romanian Security, of desperation, and of hopelessness. Their childhoods were for indoctrination, for accepting the Communist Party as supreme authority and idolizing Nicolae Ceausescu. Their adult lives were spent in miserable conditions: they waited in lines in hopes of obtaining low quality food, their work was unsatisfying, and censorship and the Ceausescu cult polluted their media. They tried to adapt, but they could not openly oppose the Communist regime. They did not see any way out.

And while the literature about the everyday life of ordinary, working class Romanians during Ceausescu’s era was quite scarce, the literature that did exist matched my results. The “cult of personality” was documented (Fischer, 1981; Fundatia Academica Civica, 2008; Epuran & Turgeon, 2001). The low-quality, insufficient products and the physically exhausting methods of obtaining them was frequently described as a staple of everyday life (Fundatia Academica Civica, 2008; Hale, 1971). The rule of the Romanian Security and the fear they instilled in the Romanian population is mentioned in literature as well, if not as frequently (Fundatia Academica Civica, 2008; Pilon, 1976; Marculescu, 2007).

Pilon (1976) said it best when he summarized the population’s response to the entire Communist rule as a quiet desperation, with no end in sight.

### ***Discussion***

I set out to learn about my family’s experiences in Communist Romania – what their childhood beliefs were, and how those beliefs were dismissed and replaced by staunch anti-communist views. I believe this analysis has provided numerous examples of the miserable, hopeless conditions which drove my participants to reject Communist ideology and the Communist government. Many experiences my participants have shared – the realization that they had been brainwashed as children, the atmosphere of terror created by the Romanian Security, the

censorship and limitations on their personal rights and freedoms – shaped their anti-Communist views.

One of the major strengths of this study is that I included multiple participants. Interviewing three individuals, rather than just one, was a good way of showing that these experiences and feelings were not unique among the Romanian population. One person can be an anomaly, but multiple people indicate a pattern. In addition to this, I used direct quotes and specific examples in order to humanize the participants and their experiences. The Communist regime in Eastern Europe is often dismissed as a mistake, and the Romanian population regarded as a faceless mass. Humanizing the participants' experiences legitimizes their suffering.

On the other hand, the number of participants is also, in a way, a limitation. It is difficult to summarize thirty years of experiences into half a dozen pages. It is even more difficult to summarize such a long period of three individual's lives into such a small amount of space. Unfortunately, not every relevant experience or sentiment could be included. Had I interviewed only one person, more details about that period of their life would have been presented in the analysis. Considering how similar the participants of this project were, perhaps interviewing only one of them would have been a better plan.

However, the participants may not have been a good representative sample of the population, since they had such similar backgrounds and personalities (that is, none of them considered that openly opposing the Communist Party was "worth it"). Perhaps I should have chosen a sample with greater variation with regards to levels of education, future goals, age, family background, and so on. For example, had Spencer actually become a member of the Romanian secret police, his experiences and perspective would have been in contrast to my mother and father.

Another aspect of this study which is both a strength and a limitation is the close relationship I have with two of the participants, my mother and my father. Since they would remain parental authorities even after these interviews, I have reason to believe that they may have omitted some experiences they are not particularly proud of. On the other hand, our close relationship also helps guarantee validity. I know my parents to be honest and trustworthy, and in order to retain my trust, they would not be dishonest.

Due to the fact that Spencer is a fairly close relative but not a parental authority, I believe we had the best relationship for this research. We were close enough to promote validity, but not so close that he felt the need to protect me or himself by not revealing certain experiences.

I have learned many things while conducting this study. If I were to repeat it, I would make the following changes. I would interview only one individual, and focus more intensely on why they engaged in certain behaviours or adopted certain beliefs. I would not choose an individual who is in a position of power or authority over me, and might feel that they may lose some of that authority by revealing too much. I would better prepare this participant for the interview,

which would increase their level of comfort and hopefully provide them with more incentive to disregard social desirability.

I believe it is fair to conclude that, ultimately, the Communist regime in Romania was destructive. This is supported by the results of this study, by the fact that the participants were ordinary citizens rather than privileged members of society, and it is also supported by the number of outside sources that have been previously mentioned in the introduction and conclusion.

Perhaps my conclusion is correct but limited. That is, Communism in Romania may have been damaging for the people and for the country, but Communism in other Eastern European countries may have been less so. Communism outside of Europe may be entirely different. I speculate that perhaps other Eastern European countries may have enjoyed a more civilized revolution, but the citizens of these countries would not have access to more privileges in their everyday lives.

Clearly, further research is necessary. Day to day life in other Communist countries should be studied and compared with the deprivation and hopelessness that was so pervasive in Romania. Research on other Communist leaders would also be useful: did the cult of personality, and a ruler obsessed with adoration, negatively affect the powerless population? Most importantly, is Romania an anomaly among Communist nations?

If it is, then perhaps there is hope for a country where everyone is equal, nobody is in need, and opportunities are not so strongly limited by finances. If, however, the Romanian experience of Communism is the norm, then it is time to forget the Communist ideology and attempt to find equality among individuals another way.

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