

LETTER FROM BUCHAREST BY VĚRA MURRAY



**Despite the putrid stench of tear gas,
I could not take my eyes off the spectacle
unfolding below: on one side, police armed
with shields, standing motionless in close order.**

On the other, slogan-chanting demonstrators provoking them with rude gestures or attempting to put flowers down the backs of their uniforms. The situation is volatile. Suddenly, orders are given, and for a few minutes the crowd is shoved and jostled, then hit with electric cattle prods. No one really seems to get hurt, and then it starts all over again.

This sort of demonstration seems to define the current Romanian regime. It is April – just a few days after the visit of French President, François Mitterrand who thereby becomes the first head of state to effectively endorse those in power here – and this team which has a reputation to defend, has not quite succeeded in shaking off old repressive habits. The regime symbolizes, beyond question, the end of Ceausescu, but not the end of communism.

The throngs of students who went into the streets during Mitterrand's visit carried banners with very direct messages: "Mitterrand, your presence legitimizes this criminal regime!", "Long live François Marchais!"*, "We haven't enough money to throw eggs at you!", and, alluding to the Romanian head of state, Ion Iliescu: "We don't want a bolshevik president anymore!"

The Romanian revolution of 1989, though initiated by the people, was soon engulfed in lies and pretence. Iliescu, an old communist, came to power through palace intrigues, and not on the basis of the popular uprising which moved us all on television. He has since then put himself, "above the law, by sending the miners in to brutally disperse the student demonstrators in Bucharest." These are the

words of Doina Cornea, one of the best known dissidents during Ceausescu's time, and who today is part of the opposition to the current regime.

The demonstration I can see from my balcony, marks the first anniversary of the seizing of University Square by the students on 22 April 1990. Fifty-three days later on 13 June, the government brought in trainloads of miners to Bucharest – good workers prepared to beat up a few intellectuals – to clean the place up.

These children are the product of the government's campaign against birth control – the most monstrous brainwave of the "genius of the Carpathians"

The president of the students' union, Marian Munteanu, who was roughed up by the miners and arrested in June, claims that he is still followed, that his phone and apartment are bugged, and that his entire family receives frequent threats. How does he hope Romania's future will unfold? Coming from a student, his reply underscores the fact that the Balkans are a separate world which Westerners have for forty years quite wrongly placed in the same mental compartment as central European countries. "The best regime for Romania is a constitutional monarchy led by King Michael," he says. The old king lives in exile in Switzerland.

Hundreds of people converge on University Square in the early afternoon for the demonstration of 22 April. An immense cross made of flowers lies on the ground in commemoration of those who died during the revolution, and for those wounded in the many demonstrations which have since taken place

here. Groups of people are in lively debate all around the Square.

Some take advantage of the situation to do a little black market business. I see several people selling disposable syringes – in a country where the incidence of AIDS among infants is very high because of reusable needles, the disposable ones are worth their weight in gold. A line of flowers strewn on the ground forms the limit beyond which a group of policemen already waits. Two old men stand on guard close to the line with baguette sticks in place of rifles.

Three weeks ago prices went up two to three hundred percent. A litre of milk now costs 10 lei, a kilo of boneless beef, 270 lei: the average wage is 3,500 lei and in-

unemployment could reach half a million this year, out of a population of twenty-five million. The trade unions claim there are one and a half million people out of work.

Every day, scores of children spend the night in the Bucharest's main railway station, Gara de Nord, on cardboard mattresses; they represent a tiny fraction of the 130,000 children abandoned since Ceausescu's demise. They survive by panhandling and prostitution, and cushion themselves against the hunger and cold by sniffing glue. These children are the product of the government's campaign against birth control – the most monstrous brainwave of the "genius of the Carpathians" – which led to the disappearance from the market of all contraceptive devices, and made abortion a criminal offence.

Since last autumn, hundreds of Western couples have arrived to adopt children. They often "buy" directly from parents in the most deprived rural areas in the north where large families are still commonplace. A rabble of shady intermediaries makes a fortune in this trade.

Romania has received very bad press in the last year: the betrayal of the revolution, Iliescu's repressive measures and now the trafficking in babies. Many intellectuals I talked with in Bucharest consider international criticism of what has happened since Ceausescu unfair. They say the government has passed at least two "very valuable" laws on land reform and privatization. "The trouble is, because Iliescu is so identified with the previous regime, the changes are difficult to judge," they lament. "Romania faces an arduous task ahead," concludes one. "Nowhere else in this part of Europe has communism left such deep spiritual wounds." □

Věra Murray is the Moscow correspondent for the Québec magazine L'Actualité.

Translation by Veronica Baruffati

* The real Marchais, Georges, is the head of the French Communist Party.

** On the black market the lei trades at about 200 for 1 US dollar.