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Biographical note

Lucian Vasile is a PhD researcher within The National Council for the Study of Securitate Archives, whose studies are focused mostly on exile, opposition and political repression. Also, he worked several years as a researcher for Pitești Prison Memorial Foundation, contributing to the permanent exhibition and the recently established Museum of Communism for Children. Since 2021, he is a part of Zaiafet team, one of the main educational YouTube channels for Romanian audience, writing the scripts for many video materials such as “Pe Vremea Tovarășilor” (*In The Comrades’ Time*), a history of Romanian communism.

THE TRAIL OF SUFFERING AND HOPE. ROMANIAN REFUGEES DURING THE FIRST YEARS OF COMMUNISM

Lucian Vasile

Abstract

My research will examine the flow of Romanians that, from the late 1940s to the early 1950s, fled the country. In the first part of my paper I will discuss on the one hand the terms that I will use throughout my research and, on the other, I will challenge the previous categorizations of Romanian political refugees, advancing a new demarcation within the group, underlining the differences between those who fled in the first years of the Cold War and those who fled the country later on. In the second half of the study, I will dwell on the reasons why people fled in the late 40s to early 50s, on the preparations required, the methods they used and the places of interment they chose, not overseeing the deep human dramas each and every one faced. Some crawled through barbed wire. Others swam the treacherous Danube. A few hid in the ships that departed the ports. The daring ones seized planes and flew beyond the Iron Curtain. All of them hoped to escape Communist Romania. Those who succeeded faced the harshness of being a political refugee.

Keywords: Romanian exile, political refugees, Cold War, Communism

1. Introduction

The end of the Second World War left Romania in the USSR's sphere of influence. The change of alliance in August 1944 led not just to the fast occupation of the territory by the Red Army (and thus the acknowledgement of the eastern provinces, previously ceded in the summer of 1940), but also to the legal re-entry of the Communist Party of Romania, a minor political entity with very little popularity in the Romanian society. Having the massive and the direct support of Moscow, the communists in Romania launched a rapid political takeover and, after the three governments of August 1944 – February 1945 led by generals Sănătescu and Rădescu,

at the 6th of March 1945, managed to install the first pro-communist government, led by Petru Groza, a former bourgeois who understood which way the wind was blowing. Shortly after that, the new authorities started a purge of administration and other key institutions like Police, Army and Secret Services, removing any person viewed as undesirable (a label that covered not just those who worked for the fascist regime of Ion Antonescu, but basically anyone with anti-communist views) and replacing them with new and loyal employees. Faced with the quick rise of the far-left, the democratic opposition tried to conduct an active campaign, but the major figure that led the institutional opposition to communism in 1945 was young King Michael, who started a “royal strike”, a move that had a large popular support. The failure of the act of resistance represented the first sign that the Romanian Communist Party enjoyed a strong grip of power. However, the Romanian society, at that moment having deep anti-soviet/Russian, conservative and religious feelings, was convinced that the future elections would eventually lead to the communists’ removal from power and then the country would return to democracy and a stable connection to the West. The intimidation of the democratic opposition, marked by arrests and violences, and, mostly, the forgery of parliamentary elections from 19 November 1946 caused a shock in the Romanian society, which started to realize that Communism may not be a short and temporary setback, but a consolidating regime that will lead the country to another totalitarian political experience. The final blows to the country’s political and constitutional establishment were dealt in 1947: firstly, key members of the National Peasants Party (the main opposition party) were arrested in July, while trying to flee the country by airplanes (in the so called Tămădău Affair), and immediately after the party itself was banned and the leadership arrested and convicted (after a show-trial) to heavy sentences (Iuliu Maniu and Ion Mihalache, the two leaders of the party, were to die in political prisons). Meanwhile, the old part of the National Liberal-Party ceased its activity (while the “young group” was governing together with the communists) and the social-democrats were either absorbed in the new Workers Party (February 1948) or forced to abandon their activity, while their leaders were also imprisoned. The epilogue of the forced communization of Romania was the abdication of King Mihai I on December the 30th of 1947, followed a few days later by the departure of the royal family, and subsequently the establishment of the Romanian People’s Republic. All in all, at the end of 1947, the communists held all the power in Romania.

On the other hand, the Romanian society was still, as a whole, profoundly repugnant to the communist ideas, and that led the authorities to unleash a vast political repression against any form (real or imaginary) of opposition or any individual who by his/her belonging to a social group considered undesirable in the society-to-be or who, due to his/her political activity from the interwar period represented punishable elements in the eyes of the new power. Confronted with a sudden and radical change of the society, people had different approaches. Some tried to resist, by setting up clandestine organizations or by joining the armed resistance groups from the mountains that were waiting, like the vast majority of their fellow countrymen, for a new war, between the West and the East, that will inevitably conclude with the victory over Communism. Many others resigned themselves to the unpleasant political context, just trying to survive and adapt.

And a small part fled the country. Among them, extremely few (but they did exist) had the chance of a legal departure from the country. Many others were forced to find ways to cross the border clandestinely. Out of those who had no other choice but to take this deadly risky gamble, a significant number crossed the land border to Hungary or Yugoslavia, evading the sentries and patrols, crawling through the gaps made in the barbed wire or desperately running while bullets were flying all around. Others plunged into Danube's cold and treacherous waters, swimming quietly towards a shore where they hoped to find their salvation, dodging the vedettes patrolling the river. Those who had the opportunity hid in the ships that departed from river or, especially, maritime ports. The most courageous ones hijacked planes and headed them to Turkey, Greece or Yugoslavia, flying under the high risk of being caught up by the fighter planes of Romania or other socialist countries.

Some were caught by Romanian border guards or by Securitate. Other managed to reach the other side of the frontier. Even though I will refer briefly to those from the first category as well, my paper will focus mostly on those who managed to cross the border. Because those refugees didn't simply pop up on the other side of the Iron Curtain. They were actually the survivors of a traumatic experience that never received the deserved interest from the Romanian historiography. Crossing the Romanian border was not the whole drama, but it was just the first stage from a long trail of suffering endured while crossing the border, being incarcerated in refugee or labor camps and finally getting into the western world. It was often an unexpectedly long and difficult journey, marked by uncertainties and

dangers, in which what mostly kept them going was the hope of reaching the other side of the Iron Curtain.

Therefore, the thesis of the present paper is that there was a constant and distinct flow of political refugees from Romania in the first years of the Cold War, people that, by *choosing freedom*¹, went through a traumatic experience until they managed to reach the non-communist part of Europe. After presenting the political and institutional context in Romania starting with the second half of the 1940s, I will further analyze the terminology applicable to those who fled the country and explain why I prefer the term “refugee” instead of “exiled” or “emigrant”. Then I will challenge the conventional divisions of those who constituted the Romanian exile during the communist period, advocating for a new demarcation based on statistical analysis of data compiled by the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Thus, I will emphasize why political refugees from the first years of the Cold War represent a separate category in addition to those who fled later on. Having set this, in the second part of the paper, I will present and analyze the preparations of the escapes, the routes and the chosen approaches, the places of interment and, briefly, what happened to them immediately after reaching the other side of the Iron Curtain.

In terms of sources, the research is based on the interviews and volumes of memoirs of those who managed to cross the border and reached the other side of the Iron Curtain, on reports created by Western institutions, such as Radio Free Europe, CIA, Arolsen and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, but also on the sources created by the Bucharest authorities: files from the Securitate archive created for the follow-up of those who fled the country or for those who were brought (by force or willingly) from exile to Romania in the 1950s and also databases from the 60s and 70s. The documents will be discussed in their historical context and will also be related with various articles published in recent years by historians and scholars in social sciences. From a methodological point of view, I will incline to a mixed approach, trying to identify patterns and general lines of understanding of the historical phenomenon while giving a considerable attention to individual cases. That’s because many of the biographies evade the general patterns, thus making it hard, if not impossible, to fit them into certain templates of understanding, and underlining the complexity of human decisions in the context of historical turmoil, uncertainty and danger.

2. Defining terms and analyzing patterns

When speaking of those who left communist (or on-the-way-to-Communism) Romania in the first years of the Cold War, the most used term is “exiled”. One of the prominent leaders of the last phase of the Romanian exile, the liberal politician Dinu Zamfirescu, who left the country in 1975, being “bought” by his brother-in-law from France, advanced a terminological differentiation between the people who left, legally or clandestinely, communist Romania, settling on the other side of the Iron Curtain. According to him, the *exiled* is

“that person who has left his country of origin for political reasons, *i.e.* fear of persecution or in protest against the political regime in his country, and who, settled in another state, continues to have political concerns or, in the case of the Romanian exile, to demonstrate against the regime in Romania.” (Zamfirescu, 2013: 7)

Adjacent to it is the *emigrant*, that person who

“has left his country, settling permanently or temporarily in another country, forced by more general, social-economic circumstances, and who, in his new residence, has no other concern than professional one and integration into the new society.” (*ibid.*)

It is a view shared by other historians of the Romanian exile like Andreea Iustina Opriș (Corobca, 2020: 997) or, with some differences, Ion Calafeteanu. The latter considers the exiled to be the person forced to leave the country as a “forced and imposed option, the alternative being the loss of freedom or even life”, but who is not settled with the break from his native country and regards the exile as a limited time of suffering and hardships until the inevitable return when the political regime that had caused the break would be removed. It is a view somehow similar to Monica Lovinescu’s who considered that “the exiled is the person who cannot return to the country from which he had departed without endangering his freedom” (Calafeteanu, 2000: 24). Moreover, Lovinescu considered that the exiled should regard this time as a “bracket to his existence” (Lovinescu, 1999: 49). However, those definitions may not be flexible enough, as there are cases that evade the patters, showcasing their fitting limits. For example, Ion Antonovici, a sculptor who, after a period

in which he joined the Legionary Movement, abandoned his far-right adhesion and joined the National-Peasant Party. Fleeing the country in 1947 or 1948, fearing an imminent arrest, Antonovici initially stayed in Paris, getting involved in various anti-communist propaganda actions, but in 1951 he withdrew from any activity against the Bucharest regime and emigrated to Canada, where he settled with his wife, integrating into Canadian society (ACNSAS, 329902 a: 540-541). Therefore, using the definitions given by Zamfirescu, Antonovici may be regarded both as an exiled (he left for the fear of political repression and, for a short period of time, manifested against the communist regime in Bucharest) and an emigrant (once crossing the Atlantic Ocean he gave up any political activity, focusing solely on social and economic integration). On the one hand, his experience also matches the definition given by Lovinescu, because in the case of a potential return to Romania, his freedom could have been put into question, while on the other hand, by his commitment to enlist in the new society, he did not regard the time spent on the other side of the Iron Curtain as a simple pause in his life.

Therefore, those definitions, though useful in portraying certain perspectives of those who decided to cross the border and to escape the communist state of Romania, are not sufficient enough to cover the diversity and the complexity of the cases. I would rather refer to the Romanians who fled the country in the first years of the Cold War as refugees, using the definition given by one of the main international institutions that dealt with this category of people, according to which “refugees are persons dislocated by war or persecution, in search of asylum and livelihood” (Holborn, 1956: 8). In order to reach a deeper understanding of refugees, I will go with the definition stated by G.J. van Heuven Goedhart in his report published in the early 1950s. As a High Commissioner for Refugees, he was tasked in May 1951 by the United Nations to compile a report regarding the vast number of people who found themselves, by different reasons, living outside their countries in the first years of the Cold War. In finding a proper definition to label those people, he starts from the core principles: (1) the refugee status is the result of “events arising out of the relations between a State and persons or categories of persons who are either nationals of that State or resident in its territory” (Vernant, 1951: 3) and (2) the person must find himself/herself outside the State of his/her citizenship. Therefore, as van Heuven Goedhart states, a refugee is “essentially someone without a home, someone who has been cast adrift; he is a helpless casualty, the spiritually diminished, pathetic and innocent

victim of events for which he cannot be held responsible" (Vernant, 1951: 3). It is not only a much more inclusive term, but it also includes "an element of emotion" (Vernant, 1951: 3), a layer of empathy which I consider necessary in order to deeply understand the traumatic experiences that covered the whole process of preparations made in order to leave the country, crossing the borders, travelling through other states, being incarcerated in refugee camps or prisons and eventually, reaching the other side of the Iron Curtain. Taking into consideration that most of the general framework of the process was triggered and fueled by the radical political transformations that Romania faced in the late 40s and early 50s, I will refer to these persons as political refugees.

Dividing those who left Romania and constituted the Romanian exile during Communism into specific groups was something that preoccupied both members of the exile and researchers in social sciences. Maybe the most popular is the one suggested by Neagu Djuvara, a former diplomat who left the country in 1944 and settled in France at the beginning of the Cold War, becoming an important voice of the community, both by helping the new comers and by joining active resistance organizations against the regime in Bucharest (Vasile, 2022: 456-570). In his memoirs, published after his return to post-communist Romania, Djuvara considered that initially the political refugees were divided into three groups. Firstly, the diplomats that left the country legally, but after the changes of the political regime, refused to return (Djuvara, 2002: 29-31). This group included both diplomats like Viorel Tilea, the former ambassador to London, who assumed this status when Romania left the alliance with western powers and joined the Axis in 1940, and other employes of various diplomatic offices that left the country in 1945 and 1946 and refused to return to a fully controlled communist state. The second group was represented by the members of the Iron Guard that departed after the failed January 1941 Rebellion, when general Ion Antonescu removed them from power and unleashed a general repression against his former ally. And the third and most numerous consisted of the people who fled the country after the first pro-communist government was installed, whether they were actual victims of political persecution or people who simply didn't want to live in a totalitarian regime and thus, like many other Eastern Europeans, had chosen freedom. It should be pointed out that in his analysis, Djuvara takes as a reference the year 1948, but his approach is somehow implicitly extended to all the political refugees that formed the Romanian exile during Communism (Opriș, 2020: 997-999). His

perspective is shared by Ion Calafeteanu, who goes even more into details and divides the first category into the diplomats gathered around Tilea, who rejected Antonescu's regime, and the group called "tătărăscienii" (named after Gheorghe Tătărăscu, Groza's minister for external affairs and the one who decided to send abroad a newly hired generation of political personnel, mostly with anti-communist views). Moreover, Calafeteanu takes the credit for outlining the group of soldiers and officers captured by the Germans in the last months of the war, after Romania joined the Allies, and who, after being released from PoW camps, refused to repatriate. However, in this category, even though not mentioned by Calafeteanu, are also included those who fled the country together with the withdrawing German troops or, as were the cases of Ion V. Emilian and general Platon Chirnoagă, deserted into enemy lines (Calafeteanu, 2000: 27-28). Even more interesting, because no analysis takes them into consideration, is the group of the few hundred military personnel that had been sent to the Reich for military education and were caught there by the sudden change of alliances and, thus, in the impossibility to return to the country (and many decided to stay in West Germany after the end of the war).

3. A different approach on the Romanian political refugees

All the above analyses are valid and showcase the diversity of the Romanian exile during Communism, that was far from being a monolith built in opposition to the communist regime. As a matter of fact, even if the diplomats who in the autumn of 1940 decided to remain in exile and the Green Shirts who fled the country in January 1941 were separated by just a few months in their break-up and had the same common enemy (Antonescu's regime), they did it for different reasons and the relations between them were antagonistic. Moreover, the members of the Iron Guard who were in exile after 1948 (regardless of whether they fled after the Rebellion or in the post-war years) were not accepted in the Romanian National Committee that was established in 1949 as a sort of government-in-exile under the legal authority of King Michael I.

Yet those divisions belong rather to the first phase of the Romanian exile, because, just as the communist regime can be divided into two distinct stages that, despite some obvious continuities, have significant differences, the Romanian exile mirrors a similar demarcation. On the one hand, there are those who fled the country in the first part of the communist

regime, mostly in the years of the establishment of the regime led by Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej, and those who left the country during the time of Nicolae Ceaușescu. My thesis is that this is the main separation line of the Romanian political refugees during Communism, and all the groups suggested by Djuvara or Calafeteanu are actually sub-divisions of the first category. To demonstrate it, I processed the data compiled by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and published in *Au ales libertatea*, a volume edited by Dumitru Dobre and Veronica Nanu. The biographical notes represent a vast historical resource very useful for understanding the Romanian exile by mentioning details of the refugees like name, birth date, birth place, gender, profession, year of departure and the country where they settled. Unfortunately, other details like studies, social origin or political affiliation are missing. However, the data is sufficient enough for a statistic analysis that showcases the clear separation of political refugees in the general framework of Romanian exile. The analysis below is based on 800 entries (out of a total of 7434) from letters A, B, C, E, I, L, M, N, S and Z.

Thus, analyzing the moment when people left Romania and remained outside the zone of Soviet influence, there are two major waves (beside the first one, which is not caused by the installment of communism, but by the war): one between 1946 and 1949, extended maybe to 1952, and a second one between 1968 to 1970, with a prologue starting from 1965 (Fig. 1).

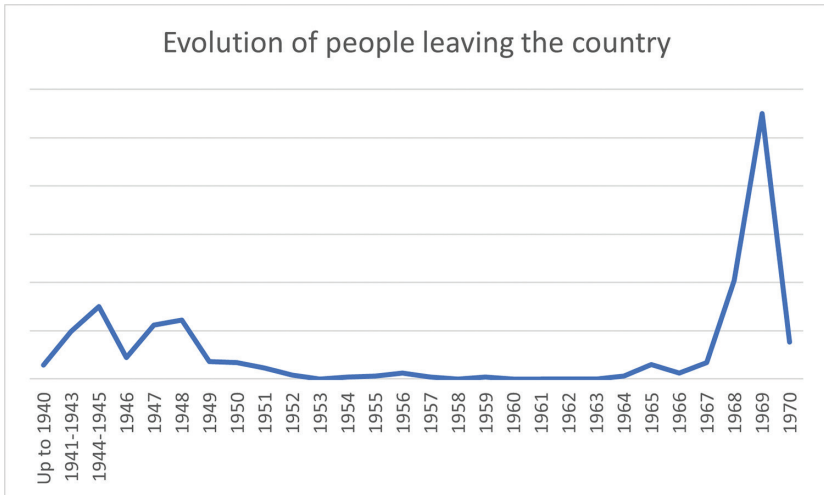


FIG. 1

It must be clearly stressed out that the records made by Securitate used in these statistics go up to 1971, so they do not include the situation from the early 70s to late 80s. These two decades recorded a relatively low level of successful attempts, many people being arrested or shot on the border², with the significant exception of the last years of Ceaușescu's regime when, due to, on the one hand, the rapid downfall of the living standards and the increasing paranoia of the leader, and on other hand, to the change in the Hungarian authorities' attitude regarding Romanian refugees, a sudden and high rise of refugees was recorded, but those are not to be discussed in this paper³. The first wave, of 1946-1952, was the direct consequence of Communism's installment: people fleeing the country fearing for their lives, chased by Securitate (some even arrested or incarcerated briefly). There are people opposing the new regime installed in Bucharest with the support of the Red Army, people who are involved in clandestine organizations and who, after being revealed, have no other option but to flee the country and reach the safety of the other side of the Iron Curtain. They are also former members of the democratic parties who, with the elimination of political pluralism, found themselves in a dangerous situation, risking an imminent arrest. Thus, the only option is leaving the country. The political turmoil is the same reason that triggered the decision to flee the country for those who, beside the political preferences, couldn't continue working in their fields. It is the case of the officers that are removed from the Army or the former pilots who are forbidden to climb into the cockpit of an airplane. Or of those who were not able to practice their profession according to their will, like lawyers, journalists or architects that found themselves dangerously limited in their domains. Moreover, once they reach the free world, most of them get engaged in different political, cultural propaganda or even clandestine actions against the communist regime. Thus, in the first years of the Cold War, different organizations appeared in the Romanian exile that not only represent forms of political coagulation, but also professional ones, as alternatives to those established in the country. For example, in the late 40s many associations of Romanian students, journalists, medics, lawyers etc. are set up and next to them there are the cultural ones, like the Freiburg Library or Carol I Cultural Foundation, and the political ones like the Romanian National Committee and the League of Free Romania. And actions go as far as forming organizations fighting directly the communist regime, such as the Intelligence Service of the Romanian Military in Exile, an intelligence structure led by former officers from the Royal Romanian

Army, or the Association of Ex-Combatants, which aimed to bring together all the former soldiers, having the aim to create an army corps in North Africa that would come into action in the event of a war between the Americans and the Soviets.

Although the majority of those who fled the country in this first stage did it as a stance against the installment of the communist regime, not all of them fit into this pattern, showing once again the complexity of the phenomenon of refugees in the first years of the Cold War. For example, D. Alexandrescu (b. 1929) stole a large sum of money from his workplace and, in 1947, in order to escape the consequences of his crime ran to Yugoslavia, and later to a western state (Dobre, 2015: 16). It is the same case for I. Andreescu (b. 1918) who, for the same reason, took the same decision and route a few months later, in 1948 (ACNSAS, 500902: 1). Basically, both of them, for non-political reasons, took the same path as the political refugees and, once reaching the other side of the Iron Curtain, were perceived as exiled Romanians, not only by the other Romanians, but also by the communist authorities in Bucharest. Another case that slips out of the standard template of political refugee, but was regarded as such from both sides of the Iron Curtain, was a border guard, D.M., who in 1951, after hearing that his fiancée got married with someone else, got drunk and, being intoxicated, didn't realize that he crossed the border. When he acknowledged that he is on the Yugoslav territory it was too late to return to the border post where his absence was already noticed and he would have faced the consequence of desertion or even charges of treason. Therefore, he had no other choice but to try to start a new life as a refugee, hoping to reach a western state, a goal he eventually managed to achieve. Maybe the most intriguing example is the one of another young border guard, Mihai Mandache, who, in 1952, decided to become a monk in one of the monasteries in Athos, Greece. Instead of waiting to end his military service and to enlist in one of the Romanian Orthodox Church's monasteries and later to apply for a transfer, via the Church's connections, to a monastery in the Holly Mountain, Mandache decided to reach his goal as fast and direct as possible, a decision that put him in conflict with the regime. Although his action was not politically motivated, he fled the country, reaching Greece, where he was labelled as a political refugee and received the proper legal treatment (Opriș, 2016: 65). All these specific cases were obviously influenced by the political context, but the main reason that determined them to run away was not political.

It should not be believed that between 1952 and 1965 the phenomenon of political refugees from Romania ceased to exist. There continued to be successful cases of border crossings that eventually ended up on the other side of the Iron Curtain, but their number has dropped dramatically due to a combination of factors. By far the most important was that the border security had been considerably strengthened. Firstly, the Romanian-Hungarian border was extensively fortified, the number of patrols and checkpoints increased substantially, and the barriers became more difficult to cross: barbed wire, land freed from any obstacle and tillage for detecting tracks on the ground. Even so, the situation on the Hungarian border (the gate towards Austria) was no match for what was done by the Romanian communist authorities at the border with Yugoslavia, after the Tito-Stalin split from June 1948. The border zone was almost transformed into a war zone, with heavy deployment of troops and equipment, and enforced by a massive control of the movement of the local people (Drăghia, 2014: 243-260). The strictness went up to severe measures like forced relocation to the Bărăgan plain for tens of thousands of people who lived near the border, because the regime simply did not trust the locals. On the other hand, those who were in danger of becoming direct victims of the repression either already fled or were incarcerated in prisons or labor camps. And last but not least, the guides who were willing, for a considerable fee, to smuggle people from the country, methods very popular in the late 40s, had disappeared from the *market*, being either captured and arrested or killed at the border or they simply gave up this extremely dangerous job. This does not mean that attempts of clandestine border crossings no longer existed, and the significant number of political prisoners arrested at the border (so-called *frontieriști*) are concrete proof of these attempts⁴. Moreover, *frontieriști* represented a special, dynamic and protesting group within the prison space in communist Romania – the most important act of collective rebellion in a Romanian political prison, the 1956 Gherla revolt, was the action of those men.

The second wave, from the beginning of Ceaușescu's regime, is the direct consequence of the loosening of control over society and the opening towards Western countries, in a debatable distancing from Moscow. If until then the borders were sealed off and the possibilities of getting out the country severely limited, at the end of the 60s, Romanians were able to travel again, within certain limits, for tourist purposes or to see their families in other countries, usually on the other side of the Iron Curtain. And a significant part of those who left the country never returned

to communist Romania, a phenomenon best illustrated by jokes such as “what is a Romanian quartet of musicians? A philharmonic after a tour in the West”.

Unlike those who fled during the first years of the Cold War, those from the second wave generally do not aim, once they have reached the other side of the Iron Curtain, to get involved into actions against the Bucharest regime, but rather to integrate as quickly as possible into the new societies. They have social and economic goals, as opposed to the predominantly political ones so common among the first wave of refugees. This discrepancy causes astonishment and even consternation among the old refugees still active in the propaganda against the Bucharest regime. That is why, from the beginning of the 70s, articles and brochures begin to appear in which they try to convince the new commers of the necessity, and even the obligation, of a fight against Communism, and one of the clearest examples is the book *Letters to the New Refugees*, published by Faust Brădescu in Madrid, in 1974, that summed up articles previously published in the *Carpații* newspaper. According to Brădescu,

“They cannot be considered exiles in the positive sense of the word those who have nested somewhere and mind their own private affairs. Nor those who do not show, in any way, their disapproval of the situation in the country and the communist regime there. [...] The exiles are the soldiers of this invisible army, who stand forever on the barricades of the national struggle for liberation. Young or old, old exiles or new comers, they have no rest in the activity they carry out. Each one, with the means at his disposal, does his duty without reluctance and without fear.” [...]

“The exiles are therefore the bearers of these flamethrowers and the souls ready for sacrifice to save the nation. Only these are the real exiles, because only they believe in victory and fight to destroy the regime that has nested in the country and pushed them on the path of exile.” (Brădescu, 1974: 11)

The differences between the two groups of political refugees are also noticeable in other characteristics, not just in when they left the country or their attitude beyond the Iron Curtain. The average age of those who fled in the first stage is 28 and four months, which can be explained by the fact that the crossings were mostly clandestine, involving considerable physical effort and a huge risk of being shot or arrested. In fact, the peak of this period is in 1948, when the average age reaches 30 and three months, a change explainable by the fact that then it became clear that the political

struggle is impossible from the country and the only alternative is from exile, so a series of politicians or people with professional experience and political connections choose to flee communist Romania. On the other hand, in the second stage the average age exceeds 36 and three months, being especially people who had started a professional career and who understood better the limitations of a totalitarian state or people who had started a family and wanted a better future for their children.

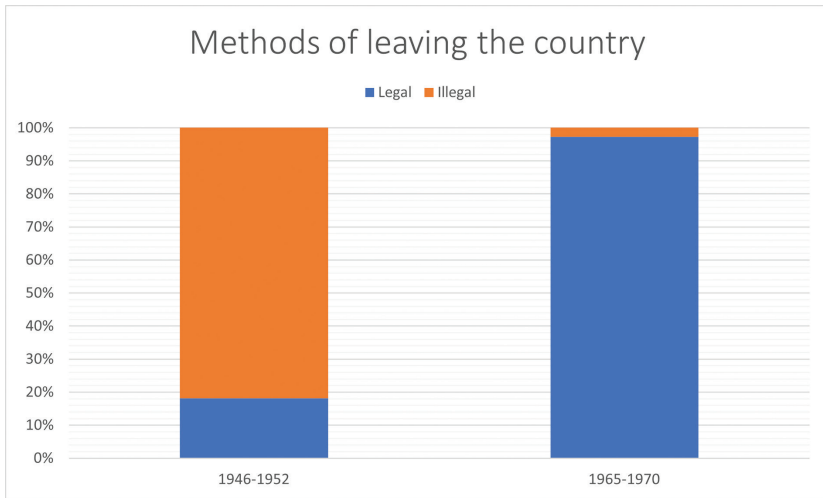


FIG. 2

But, most importantly, there are people who had the opportunity to legally leave the country (Fig. 2). Political refugees from the second half of the 60s left the country legally (as tourists or to visit their relatives in countries beyond the Iron Curtain) in an overwhelming percentage of 97.3%, clandestine crossings being thus the exceptions. It is radically different from what happened at the beginning of Communism, when, in order to get out of the country, 81.9% of refugees took the risk of a clandestine border crossing, facing all the dangers of the action and the hardships of refugee camps. It might seem strange, however, that there were still 18.1% people who legally left an increasingly closed country. From a chronological point of view, the first is the group of students who left the country in the fall of 1947 as scholarship recipients of the French state (as was the case with Monica Lovinescu) or of the Italian state, on the

Catholic path (such as the future Greek-Catholic priest Vasile Bărbat). In the same period (1946-1947) there was also the channel of those who left legally to Czechoslovakia (also a state in the sphere of Soviet influence, but from which it was still easier to get out to the West than from other Eastern European countries).

One of the most consistent was the group of diplomats who legally left Romania as representatives of the state, but who, as a result of the political changes in Bucharest, gave up their jobs (either through resignation or were dismissed), and did not want to return, preferring to remain in exile. Of these the vast majority are the so-called *tătărăscieni* mentioned above. However, there were even loyal communist diplomats who decided to change the sides and to assume the status of a political refugee. Such an interesting example was Teodor Andreescu, an old communist from the interwar period (when the party was banned and the actions of its members severely punished), who became the press attaché of the Romanian Embassy in Paris in 1947 and moved a few months later as *chargé d'affaires* for the diplomatic mission in Hague. Three years later, in 1950, he quitted his job, and then applied for and eventually received the status of a political refugee in the Netherlands. The reasons behind his apparently unexpected decision emerge from the lines of an explanatory letter sent to Ana Pauker, the Ministry of External Affairs. Andreescu reiterates his ideological commitment, but he implies that he fears that he might at any time be labeled as outside of the official line and thus fall victim to widespread repression. As had happened, only two years before, with Lucrețiu Pătrășcanu, arrested and then liquidated by his old comrades, a case he explicitly mentions in his letter to Pauker. In other words, Teodor Andreescu remains a communist, but he prefers to be a communist in a capitalistic and democratic country (ACNSAS, 291295: 148-165). And he is not the only representative of the regime that somehow prefers the other side of the Iron Curtain. In 1949, two Securitate officers from the Criminal Investigations Department in Oradea, Ilie Rada and Toma Elekes, embarked on a plane to Bucharest, but instead of heading to the capital, they landed in Yugoslavia, together with a significant part of the archive of the regional Securitate Department. Eventually, they continued their journey west, settling in France (Vasile, 2022: 470-476). Members of the Romanian delegation to World Festival of Youth and Students, held in Berlin, fled to the West, like doctor Epstein (Dobre, 2015: 327). Or Vasile Dumitru, another officer of Securitate, who, after taking part in a cross organized in 1954 by the leftist newspaper *L'Humanité*, refused to

return to Romania, becoming one more member of the Romanian Exile (*Le Monde*, 2015). It is not a hemorrhage of the communist system that may affect it, but it is a phenomenon to reckon.

Similar in terms of numbers were the sailors, who legally boarded ships departing from the sea ports of Constanța or the river ports of Galați or Giurgiu and who, once disembarked, simply refused to return on the Romanian-flagged vessel. This is how Romanian political refugees are registered as “fleeing” from Romania directly to countries such as Denmark, Cyprus, Egypt or Great Britain. And, last but not least, we must also mention those who left Romania with a legal passport obtained either through external pressure, usually members or descendants of families from Western countries, or through influential people from the power circles of the communist regime. An eloquent example of the second pattern is Constanța Olariu (Magoș), a true bourgeois, who received the passport directly from Teohari Georgescu in 1948, as a favor for the treatment that the newly installed Minister of Internal Affairs had received during the war from the engineer Dumitru Magoș, the woman’s husband, who had run a factory in Târgu-Jiu where the political prisoners from the camp on the outskirts of the town also worked, including Georgescu (Vasile, 2020: 55-58).

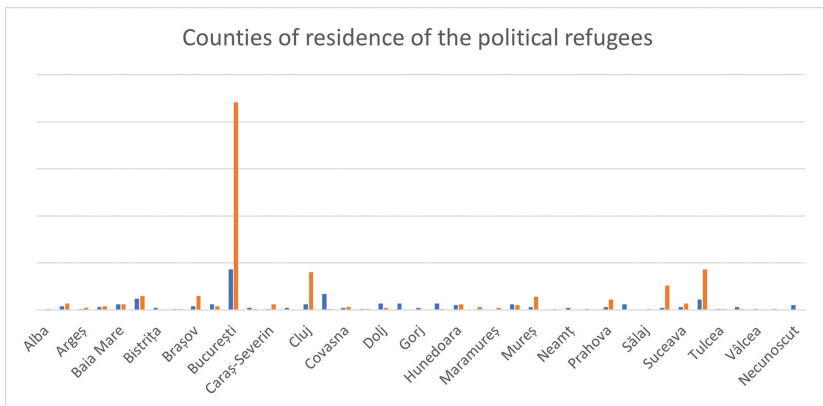


FIG 3 (Blue represents the first wave, while orange the second one)

The discrepancy between the two waves of political refugees is also underlined by the counties of residence of those who managed to flee the country and crossed the Iron Curtain (Fig. 3). In the period 1946-1952,

as the opposition to Communism was generalized in the Romanian society, those who fled were from every county, there being a fairly even distribution of those who chose freedom. There is, of course, a peak of 23 percent in Bucharest, explained both by the high percentage of inhabitants in the capital (almost 1.1 million inhabitants out of less than 16 million people in the country), but also by the significantly higher mobility than in the rural areas or even among other cities. Moreover, values above the average are recorded in Constanța, Bihor or Timiș, where there were ports or were border regions. Instead, in the first years of the Ceaușescu regime, the situation is much more polarized. Almost half (more precisely 49%) of those who left Romania and remained in exile had lived in the capital city until that moment. Urban mobility and cultural and professional openness in the capital are determining factors in this significant weight increasing. If in most counties the values are very low, significant percentages are still recorded in Timiș (10%), Cluj (9%), Sibiu (6%), followed by Bihor, Brașov and Mureș each one with 3 percent. They are all regions with noticeable ethnic minorities, German or Hungarian, people who wanted either to live in a free society or to be reunited with their families. Another factor that prompted those changes in mobility was the social status. In the first stage, there were people from all sort of backgrounds: from officers, lawyers and politicians to peasants, turners and tailors. In contrast, most of the refugees of the late 60s were specialized personnel, like medical doctors, engineers, architects. People who were acutely aware of the differences in professional development between East and West and, moreover, who could integrate much more easily in the labor market of another state.

I left for the end two particular discrepancies between the two waves of refugees. One was the country of final destination of their journey. According to the records compiled by the Ministry of Internal Affairs, of those who left at the end of the 60s, and about whom reasonable data was identified, the majority settled in Europe, over 63%, the preferred countries being the Federal Republic of Germany, Austria, France and Sweden. Of course, the immigration policy and the local attitude towards political refugees also mattered: many people just wanted to integrate into a free society, in which they sometimes already had relatives. In contrast, among those who fled Romania in the first years and there is also reasonable data on the country in which they lived, only 50% chose Europe. The rest chose either the North American continent (26%) or, as was the situation in one in four cases, even more distant countries such as Brazil, Venezuela, Senegal, Australia or New Zealand. The choice of rather

exotic destinations for a people without a tradition of emigration emerged from the fear of a possible spread of Communism. People simply wanted to go as far away as possible, where the influence of far-left ideology, in relation to Moscow, would be less likely to have an effect. Or, as Neagu Djuvara clearly stated:

“I’m not ashamed to say it: we were afraid. In the camps in Germany, Austria, Italy – and even in France – there was only one thought among the refugees: to emigrate as quickly as possible across the ocean, to the United States, to Canada, to South America, to Australia, to put the ocean between them and the Soviet wave that they thought could only be stopped by the Atlantic Ocean.” (Djuvara, 2002, p. 26)

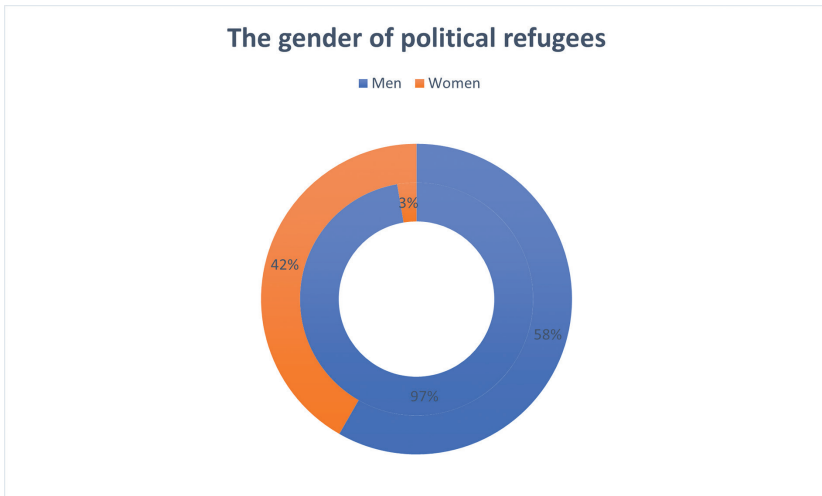


FIG 4 (The interior line represents the first wave, while the exterior one the second wave)

The last was the gender of the refugees, where the discrepancies between the two waves are even more striking (Fig. 4). During the late 60s, there is a close difference: 58,3% of the Romanian refugees are men and 41,7% are women. The explanations lie in the fact that legal departing from the country was theoretically possible to anyone and therefore both men and women applied to exit the country for tourism or for visiting relatives from other countries, and those were the methods used by most

of the new refugees. The context is almost completely different in the first years of Communism, when escaping the country was a dangerous and challenging endeavor that required training, stamina and, in some cases, a military-like approach. The situation of the Romanian political refugees somehow mirrors the situation of the anti-communist armed resistance groups in the early years of the Cold War, which were predominantly male, with women being present to a much lesser extent. But there are other reasons for this discrepancy: at that time, pilots or sailors were almost exclusively men, so women did not have physical access to these means of travel that would allow them to leave the country by hijacking a plane or by deserting a commercial or military vessel. Also, border guard troops were made up entirely of men, so women did not have this possibility of fleeing the country either. But the reason that weights the most is that of the anti-communist activity: as the men had held political, administrative or military positions, or had been part of resistance organizations directly against the regime, it was predictable that they would be the ones targeted by the Securitate, being thus forced to flee the country. Therefore, in the period 1946-1952, the gender distribution for Romanian refugees is very unbalanced: 97.4% are men and 2.6% are women.

4. The crucial preparations

Because of the huge risks, clandestine border crossing was an action that, in most cases, was preceded by a thorough preparation that took different forms, depending on the direction and the method each individual used. As crossings through Hungary or Yugoslavia (where there were both a land and a river border, represented by the Danube) were the most common and few had knowledge of the geography of the land, research of the area's topography was necessary. Thus, the acquiring of maps, already absent from the market, was essential for reducing risks and identifying portions favorable to clandestine crossings. For those who decided to swim in the waters of the Danube, training was essential: many frequented the swimming pools or lakes during the summer to improve their swimming performance, which they could then put to the test during the actual action.

Such an approach required not only physical qualities, but also the procurement of adjacent equipment: small inflatable boats or other rubber-like capsules for storing some clothes or personal belongings that were dragged with a rope by the swimmers. There were remarkable

cases in which those waterproof materials were used not to drag all sort of objects, but persons who didn't know how to swim. Such was the case of Traian Nițescu, a medical doctor and excellent swimmer, who dragged his wife through the cold waves of Danube, while the woman was hanging on two life belts (Agora Press, 2017).

Beside the preparation of the crossing itself, those planning their escape faced a difficult question regarding what to do with their savings, their furniture and other belongings. Some tried to sell as many goods from their homes as possible, trying to obtain some money that may prove useful at some point or which they hoped to be able to exchange to foreign currency (Vasile, 2017: 279). However, such an approach was dangerous, as it could raise the neighbors or relatives' suspicions, which could lead to alerting the Securitate and, eventually, the arrest for "preparatory acts for border crossing". A much safer alternative was to abandon everything, as was the case of the lawyer Nicolae Băciu, who had to give up his apartment located in an elegant building in Bucharest:

"You should leave your apartment as it is, Victor had told me. You don't have to remove anything. The building is large and you would quickly raise suspicions if you act otherwise. It's a pity for what you're leaving here, but you'll have to get over it." (Băciu, 1991, 64)

But not all border crossings were the result of planned action. Some were simply a decision taken on the spot. For example, Gelu Belu, a former officer recently removed from the Army, was awakened one autumn night in 1947 by Silviu Crăciunaș, a guide who had just been discovered by the Securitate and had to flee the country before being captured, and instantly accepted to accompany him, thus leaving immediately, through Hungary, to Vienna. Even more improvised was the case of Iuliu Simandan and Mircea Pădușăreanu, who met each other in a bar in Arad (some 45 km away from the Hungarian border) and, after a few drinks, both decided to flee the country, succeeding a few days later (Vasile, 2022: 18). Undoubtedly more spectacular was the case of three men who represented the crew of a small boat that made tours on the Danube. The group they had taken over in August 1948 consisted of two families who had previously negotiated the clandestine passage to the Yugoslav shore, but the captain of the boat, with whom they had talked and paid for his help, had been replaced by a relative who was a devoted communist. The three men, however, considered it a chance they would never meet again

and, with the help of the passengers, managed to defeat the captain and steer the boat to the Yugoslav shore, thus fleeing the country (*Memory of Nations*, 1). Therefore, although clandestine border crossings were particularly dangerous and required extensive preparation, there were also numerous cases in which these capital decisions for someone's life were made on the spot, in some cases with tragic consequences, but also with successful results.

At least for those who managed to reach the other side of the Iron Curtain. That's because, for the families of those who succeeded, the consequences were almost every time tragic. At his last family visit before fleeing the country, Ilie Rada looked at his younger brother and all that he could say was "you have no idea what awaits you" (ACNSAS, 632268: 208), before, inexplicably for everyone else, bursting into tears. It was obvious that the repercussions would be harsher in the case of the desertion of a Securitate officer, but, in general, the families of those who fled were taken under surveillance: the letters were secretly checked and informants were recruited from the relatives or neighbors.

Regarding the routes of those who left illegally, there were three main directions: towards Turkey (where one could reach either by plane or by water), towards Hungary (and further to Vienna, the closest safe haven for the political refugees) and, the most popular from 1948 onwards, towards Yugoslavia. I shall discuss each route separately.

5. Turkey: The unlikely destination

For political refugees, Turkey was not a frequently used route, for obvious logistical reasons, but it stood out due to the spectacular actions taken by the refugees. For those fleeing to Turkey by plane, there were three imminent dangers: the first was the presence of the regime's personnel who could physically or at gunpoint prevent the hijacking of the aircraft. Approaching them in advance and possibly involving them in the secret action was a major risk that could lead to the unraveling of the conspiracy and, implicitly, the failure of the attempt. Therefore, they were either prevented, under various excuses, from boarding that particular flight, immobilized and disembarked in case of an intermediate stop, as was the case with the plane piloted by Ion Profir, that carried 10 former officers to Turkey in the fall of 1947 (Profir, 1996: 152-157), or immobilized and ending up, against their will, in exile, from where they immediately

repatriated. Their quick return did not exempt them, for sure, from possible repressions by the Securitate, as was the case, for example, with the pilot Vasile Ciobanu who on July the 25th, 1947, at gun point, was forced to divert the plane to Turkey and shortly after returned to Romania, only to be taken into investigation for the suspicion of secret ties with the Romanian exiles in Turkey and eventually being arrested in 1949 and sentenced to heavy detention (Lupu, 2015: 12). There were also cases in which the crew members who opposed the hijacking were shot, and the same group of three former soldiers can be mentioned, who, while hijacking Ciobanu's plane, killed the flight mechanic; also, there was the group that hijacked a mail plane on October the 15th, 1948, at Turnu-Măgurele, but these are isolated cases (Turturică, 2014).

The second risk was that the hijacked plane would be intercepted by Romanian, Bulgarian or Soviet fighter aircraft and shot down, but, at least so far, no such cases have been identified. A possible explanation is provided by the characteristics of the detection technique and the performance of the aircraft: until the authorities identified a possible hijacking and mobilized the fighter jets, and they reached the plane that was moving towards Turkey (the nearest non-communist country), the hijacked plane was already in international airspace or even in that controlled by NATO. Thus, a possible military action could have triggered a diplomatic scandal that would have put the Bucharest authorities in a bad light, which, after such aerial evasions, limited themselves to issuing protest notes and requesting the return of the planes.

But the main difficulty was getting the necessary fuel for such a long flight. In fact, the communist authorities were well aware that a significant part of the pilots were against Communism and that flights were a real temptation for fleeing the country, so they had severely limited the amount of fuel with which airplanes used for internal travel or for various institutions (*i.e.*, meteorological research) could take off. The measure had not only discouraged those who were thinking of fleeing the country by plane, but it would actually prove productive such in the case of 15 October 1948, when the mail plane hijacked by three young men forced landed in Bulgaria, from where the group was brought back to the country, interrogated and killed under the pretext of trying to escape again (Turturică, 2014). Any request for extra fuel could have raised suspicions and even the withdrawal of the permission to fly the plane, so obtaining the fuel had to be done carefully and under different pretexts. The interesting fact is that air escapes began as early as September 1944,

only a few weeks after entering the alliance with the Soviet Union, the first successful action of this kind being that of the fighter pilot Petre Cordescu (Gheorghe, 2023). The peak was reached in the autumn of 1947, when three favorable conditions were met: the growing appetite for fleeing the country, due to the growing political power of the communists, the existence of a sufficient number of active pilots with anti-communist views and the inability of the authorities to restrict possible attempts. From early 1948, the old pilots were replaced by new flight personnel, and the Securitate increased its ability to control the flow of air transport.

Similarly dangerous and difficult was also the other option to arrive clandestinely in Turkey: by sailing the seemingly endless Black Sea. The risk came not only from the increased security of the area and from the control exercised by the Securitate through informants recruited among fishermen who could be approached as guides by potential refugees, but also from the difficult navigation conditions that could easily lead to shipwreck. However, there have been cases of people fleeing the country and eventually arriving in Turkey. One such case was reported by the Turkish press in August 1947:

“On the night of July, the 30th, we got into two boats, which we had spotted on the shore. We moved away, noiselessly, from the shore of Constanța. The sea was quite rough, and the waves crashing against the boats could at any moment swallow us all. But we would rather drown than fall into the hands of the communists. Our trip lasted three days and three nights. During this time four of my comrades fainted from hunger and thirst. Finally, on the 2nd of August, in the early hours of the morning, we managed to reach the Turkish shore. The coast guards, seeing the depressing condition we were in, received us very politely. The first thing they did was to nurse our sick comrades and give us food and drink. I was crying with joy. The 14 comrades were hugging and kissing each other.” (Dobre, 2005: 276)

Even more spectacular is perhaps the case of the two Vasile Antemia (father and son having the same name) who by themselves and with an improvised boat finally reached the Turkish shore in 1948 (Arolsen, 1950; CNSAS, 776984: 11). The number of Romanian political refugees who reached Turkey in the first years of Communism is relatively small: some tens of people, no more than 200. Once arrived in the Turkish Republic, they were taken over by the authorities, who had a rather benevolent attitude towards the Romanian refugees, whom they interrogated and then interned in a semi-open regime camp in Istanbul. From this point,

the refugees came under the supervision of the leaders of the Romanian exile in Turkey: Petre Vasilache and Aurel Decei. They interrogated them again, trying to get social, political, economic and military information to sell to Western intelligence services, and helped them with food, clothing and accommodation. For Romanian political refugees, Turkey was just a stop on their way to the West, almost all of them leaving the country after a few weeks or months, arriving in Italy and from there to France or other destinations.

6. Hungary: the shortest route

Looking towards the West, the closest western-controlled point for any Romanian trying to run away from Communism in the late 1940s was Vienna. A direct line from the Austrian capital to the Romanian border stretches out on a bit more than 400 km. However, this line faces some major challenges: it runs through the length of Hungary and requires the crossing of two heavily guarded borders: one with Romania and one with Austria. And despite all of that, it was a line walked by hundreds, if not thousands of Romanians in the first years of the Cold War.

People took this route because it was the most practical, being the shortest way to the West. Furthermore, in the early post-war years, the border, which had changed during the War, was not so tight and well-secured, so border crossings could be accomplished with an ease that would seem unimaginable just a few years later. As the conditions seemed to be favorable and there was a demand for border crossings, the *market* reacted quite quickly and after 1945 the supply of guides also appeared, people who knew the border area, where they had local help, had established shelters in different cities inside Hungary (especially in Budapest, where, being a big city, the new faces could have gone easily unnoticed) and were willing to take risks for the right price. This is how older persons, who lacked the physical condition for other clandestine border crossing channels, were taken out of the country, persons who would play notable roles in the life of the Romanian exile. These cross-border channels were particularly flourishing in 1946-1948, being operated by both Hungarians and Hungarian-speaking Romanians. Besides, the knowledge of the Hungarian language was a real obstacle and a constant danger for those who tried, on their own, to flee the country through Hungary.

Crossing the Hungarian-Romanian border became more difficult with the increase, in 1948, of security, both on one side and on the other, a process that led, along with the Tito-Stalin split that I will discuss below, to the significant decrease in the number of political refugees coming through Hungary. This did not mean, however, that the phenomenon stopped, the Romania-Hungary-Vienna route being constantly used by the few guides that remained active after 1949, but also by the secret agents sent overland to Romania by the Western secret services. At the same time, people continued to try to cross the border to Hungary on their own: only on one summer night in 1950, 14 people were captured by the Romanian and Hungarian border guards, and another four were killed during the attempt (Vasile, 2022: 288), showing that the route was still being tested, but with tragic results. And it would remain so throughout the communist period.

7. Yugoslavia: “The land of the Green Horse”

Fleeing the country through Yugoslavia was a popular path from the very first years after the Second World War; this is partly because there was a traditional Romanian-Serbian cultural link, marked by the existence of a Serbian community in the Romanian Banat, and a significant Romanian minority in the Serbian Banat, and also because the cross-border channels of clandestine crossings had been used since the end of the 1930s by members the Iron Guard who fled King Carol II’s dictatorship. However, Yugoslavia became the main route for the political refugees after the Tito-Stalin split that occurred in 1948, which nourished the hope that Yugoslavia was something other than a communist state and that, on the premise that the enemy of my enemy is my friend, the refugees would benefit from the benevolence of the authorities in Belgrade. These expectations that, once arrived on Yugoslav territory, not only would they not be returned to the Romanian state, but it would facilitate their way to the West, were also reinforced by the propaganda carried by Radio Belgrade or other media channels of the regime led by Tito, as well as by a self-perpetuating illusion among Romanians who wanted to flee and still needed to pin their hopes on something. On the other side, as a political refugee described the situation in 1951, “in Romania it was nothing but fear; here there is a drop of hope” (Baciu, 1991: 132).

But before reaching that drop of hope, it was the biggest test: crossing the border. Romania and Yugoslavia shared both a terrestrial border and a fluvial one, and each had its challenges. Both of them became heavily fortified, after the sudden and dramatic rise in tensions between Tito and Stalin; thus, the border became “a virtual war zone” (Drăghia, 2014: 251), with armed troops in the area, having numerous military equipment and carrying out constant patrolling. At the land border, rows of barbed wire had appeared, the vegetation had been cut down for tens of meters, and the land had been leveled so that possible tracks could be easily seen. Despite all these obstacles, there were political refugees who passed through this section, often helped by local people who earned money from this dangerous activity as guides. This was the case of doctor Ion Claudian, who fled in the summer of 1950, and his situation was even more complicated, because he was sick and coughed frequently. Thus, in order not to be discovered, one of the other two in the group buried his head in the ground, so that the coughing would be muffled (Vasile, 2022: 299). Moreover, the land border has a winding path, which could be misleading: this was the case of Ilie Rada, parachuted into the country in 1953 as a spy and the only survivor of an encounter with Securitate. Arriving close to the border, he crawled to the barbed wire fence, which he jumped, and after a few tens of meters he found another fence. He skipped that one too and then found a pack of cigarettes with Romanian writing on the ground. Realizing with horror that he was still in Romania, he continued on his way to a third fence, which he jumped, and then found another pack of cigarettes, but inscribed in Cyrillic characters, which proved to him that he eventually arrived in Yugoslavia (Djuvara, 2002, 89-90).

For those who decided to cross the Danube, there were two options: by boat or swimming. There were few locals willing to risk their life and liberty to carry people in their boats, so these are rare cases; as is the situation of the boats of the Romanian border guards who crossed the demarcation line and docked on the other side, the only case identified so far is from 20 June 1950, when three officers, a border guard and two civilians came to the Yugoslav side. There are also cases that combine the two options: people who boarded transport ships and, after neutralizing or avoiding the on-board security, jumped into the water and swam the rest of the way to the Yugoslav shore. These actions succeeded at the end of the 1940s, but with the increase in the number of guards present on board and, above all, benefiting from the loyalty of the sailors on the ships, these attempts failed

in the following years, although they continued taking place all throughout the 50s⁵. The option least dependent on other factors was swimming to the Yugoslav shore. After training in the previous months, those trying to cross the Danube carefully prepared their action: they had to identify a place with vegetation as close to the shore as possible and find the right interval between two patrols of the guards. As the river water was cold, and the currents strong, people smeared their bodies with fat, put their documents and expensive objects in rubber bags that they attached to a tight belt on their body and the rest of belongings in the small rubber boat they dragged behind.

However, reaching the water was just the overcoming of the first danger: the river was constantly guarded by search lights and boats and the guards had the order to shoot immediately. Therefore, the refugees had to swim as soundless as they could. To make the matters even worse, the low temperatures, constant tension and small sand islands (that may disorientate the swimmer) could have jeopardized the attempt. Reaching the Yugoslav shore may have been a psychological relief, but there the refugees were usually confronted with a near-hypothermia status. As Petre Rosetti recalls, "when we got to the other side, we were shaking like epileptics and even after three hours we couldn't do our buttons" (Guțanu, 2018).

Not reporting in short time to the local authorities could have brought the suspicion of being a spy sent from the other side of the frontier, therefore the refugees who were not discovered by the Yugoslav guards almost always turned themselves to the mayor or the police station of the nearby village; there were rare case of small groups of refugees who continued by themselves the journey westwards (Țîcu, Boguș, 2022: 121-140). Romanian refugees were confident that they would be welcomed maybe not with open arms, but with a certain benevolence. However, the reality was different: the authorities in Belgrade were not willing to grant favors to those who fled from Romania in order not to antagonize the other communist countries in Eastern Europe and also not to fuel the Soviet-sponsored propaganda that portrayed the Tito's regime as "sold to the imperialist powers". Yet the most striking discrepancy between expectations and reality was the political stance itself: Yugoslavia was indeed in strained relations with the rest of the Eastern bloc, but it was still a communist state. And the refugees were people with anti-communist options who arrived in another communist state, that could not look at them other than as enemies of the people (CIA, 1953: 1). Therefore, the

Romanian refugees were arrested and initially assimilated to common law detainees, being interrogated in Kladova, Kikinda, Zrenjanin or in other detention centers. Here the Romanian political refugees encountered not only the shock of the discrepancy between the expectations they had towards the Yugoslav authorities and their reaction, but also the complete unpredictability of their fate that lied in the hands of the same Yugoslav regime, that eventually led to the popular statement among the refugees that Yugoslavia was “the land of the Green Horse”⁶. Even the CIA, in its reports regarding the flow of Romanian political refugees through Yugoslavia, concluded that the processing took “an arbitrary period of time” (CIA, 1953: 1) after which the people were sent to different prisons where they received different treatments.

Many of the Romanian refugees that fled to Yugoslavia in 1947-1948 were interned in Kovacića camp, situated at some 55 km away from Belgrade. The complex, dedicated exclusively to Romanians, consisted in an old two-stories building in the middle of a muddy courtyard, surrounded by a high fence with barbed wire and heavily guarded by machine-gun posts. On the ground floor were the administration offices and three detention rooms, while the first floor had six rooms, all for refugees. Each of these had an area of 20-25 square meters and was used by about 30 people (men, women and the few children who had fled with their families; the youngest was a three-year-old girl) raising the total number of inmates at around 200. Sometimes there was some freedom of movement between the rooms, and people could organize themselves: for example, on Sundays a religious service was held for the liberation of the country, the health of the refugees and of the King in exile. On the other hand, the living conditions were particularly difficult: there were no beds and everyone slept as they could, the windows were missing and there were no stoves, the food was insufficient and, last but not least, the guards were hostile and aggressive, but did not use physical violence. The camp began to empty in the fall of 1948, when groups of people were formed by those who accepted the authorities’ offer to go to work in the mines of Yugoslavia. Many refused, fearing that accepting such a contract, which would have removed them from the camp, would have blocked their possibility of leaving for the West at some point.

Amidst this increase of mistrust and tension, a series of tragic events occurred. First, a young man who had boasted that he wanted to get to America was executed on the grounds that he was a spy. Shortly afterwards, a young former judge managed to escape, hiding behind a well at the time

of the evening call, and once the refugees were locked in the cells and the guard relaxed, he jumped the fence, managing after a few months to reach Austria. His success triggered other similar attempts, Baciú remembering that "the idea of an escape became such a powerful obsession that I could barely sleep" (Baciú, 1991: 146). Another successful escape led to the tightening of detention measures, which in turn caused a widespread hunger strike in the camp, prompting the Yugoslav authorities to close the Kovacića camp and disperse the inmates.

Another major point in the geography of the detention of Romanian refugees in Yugoslavia during the first years of the Cold War was the Zrenjanin camp, a former factory transformed after the war into a prison for German military personnel (mostly officers) captured in 1945, used for political refugees after their release. While Kovacića, being smaller, was intended exclusively for Romanians, at Zrenjanin they occupied only one of the three levels of the main building in the complex (another floor was entirely intended for Hungarian refugees). Although the guard was also particularly severe and the food was insufficient, there was the possibility of real medical assistance, as there was also a hospital nearby. Ingrid Fotino was a little child when her family was transferred to Zrenjanin, but the image of the place was deeply forged into in her memory:

"In the camp things were more relaxed. In the men's quarters there were tables with chessboards, where they played chess. And there were people who tried to go to the hospital. [...] I really did get sick: I had a fever, the symptoms of appendicitis. They took me, put me in a cart and took me to the hospital in Zrenjanin. A small, white, clean hospital: enchanting! They took me there, put me in a very, very clean bed. Very nice doctors came to examine me. They let my mom to stay with me, while my dad was waiting outside. I'll never forget when they brought me food: there was a plate, on the plate there was some meat among other things. I hadn't eaten meat for such a long time! And my mother asked me: 'Do you think I could give a little bit of your meat to your father?'. My dad was waiting outside. I could see him through the window. He looked like a beaten hound. And there was a terrible struggle inside me. I told her: 'Yes,', but it hurt and I felt so guilty about being hurt because of that little bit of meat (weeps)." (*Memory of Nations*, 2)

Zrenjanin was closed in August 1950, after a series of conflicts between the administration and the inmates, but there were several other refugee camps like Pancevo (where the complex was shared between refugees

and former soldiers of Draža Mihailović), Jagodina, Kragujevac, Cuprija or Bitolia (close to the Greek border), but what completes the prison network through which the Romanian refugees passed are the labor camps established close to different mines. One that appears often on the routes of the Romanian refugees is the labor camp from the Mladinovatz marble quarry, where, in the two isolated barracks on top of a hill, the Romanian refugees replaced the German PoW. But even more important was the labor camp at Banovići-Tuzla, consisting of three carefully guarded buildings, which served a coal mine. The approximately 250-300 refugees (both men and women) worked alongside dozens of German prisoners in hard labor conditions and with barely enough food, as Rosetti recalls: "soup, a piece of bread, and rarely some goat meat that was miserable and stinky, but he had to eat it" (Guțanu, 2018). Initially, those interned in Banovići-Tuzla enjoyed a small degree of freedom, being allowed to leave for the city on Sundays with the obligation to return by sunset. In this way, many refugees managed to send letters and contact their relatives. However, as was the case in Mladinovatz, escapes happened which led to the tightening of the detention regime and the elimination of the small advantages enjoyed by the prisoners, but that did not stop the breakout attempts.

This is largely because there is a strong uncertainty regarding their future and how the Yugoslav authorities will relate to the refugees' situation, being even rumors that they would be returned to Romania in exchange for different goods offered by Bucharest. This unclear approach could be inferred from the way the refugees were treated: some were allowed to continue their way west, the Yugoslavs simply turning a blind eye to them, while others seemed to have been forgotten in the camps. Some were allowed to reach the western border only to be arrested, others were taken to the border and allowed to cross it. Some who escaped were caught and only brought back to the camps, others, as was the case with the students Tutoveanu and Oroveanu, who tried to escape from Tuzla in the winter of 1948-1949, were captured and executed. The most tragic was the case of those taken to the border and lured that they would be allowed to cross it, only to be executed and robbed, as happened in January 1950 with a group of 20 people that included Elena and Narcis Economu and their children Liliana and Sandu:

"This group, with Economu family, left as they let them out of the window, the window where we were sleeping. One by one they passed through the window, the last one was a young student, who turned to my dad and

said: 'What should I do, Mr. Popa? To go, or not to go? I don't even have shoes to walk through this mud', and my father said: 'Look, I have some shoes left from a priest' [...] he had one pair of shoes left and gave him the shoes and he left.

And we went to bed, as you can imagine, dreaming of Greece. They were going to eat oranges, sardines, olives, what a dream...

When we got up the next morning, it was a beautiful day and again we were thinking what they were eating that morning, how lucky they were... and the peasants came to work and told us that they were called during the night to dig a hole to bury a group of twenty or so people and they described their clothes to us and I knew it was the group that had left the night before. Finally, [...] they said: 'Yes, it's true, we had to kill them because they tried to run away.' 'But *you* got them out of here!' 'Well, the proof that they tried to escape is that they went out the window.' [...] So, they made this montage, and everything was just lies." (AOH-ICSC, 2012)

The truth is that, in the first years of the Cold War, and especially after the Tito-Stalin split, the Yugoslav authorities really did not have a clear approach to the flow of political refugees from Romania. Only by the end of the summer of 1950, the Yugoslav regime, trying to improve its relations with the Western Powers, tackled the problem. Firstly, it recognized the existence of the Romanian political refugees, separating them from common inmates or prisoners of war, and thus giving them a new status set up by a newly created department for Romanian Refugees within the Ministry of Internal Affairs. One by one, the old camps were closed and new ones, with better conditions, were opened (yet the labor camps near the mine would continue to function throughout the 50s). Most of the refugees were allowed to continue their journey towards the West, drastically reducing the number of Romanian political refugees still in Yugoslavia, while those kept in custody were to be used propagandistically. In 1950 UDBA (the Yugoslav political police) tried to establish a pro-Tito committee of the Romanian Refugees, led firstly by a man named Stănoiu and later by Constantin Alimănișteanu, but both projects failed. The idea was resurrected two years later, in 1952, under the direct supervision of Dušan Magoša, a Romanian-speaking Yugoslav general, who tried to convince the 70 Romanian refugees from Jagodina camp to elect a political committee to advocate for the "liberation of Romanians under Yugoslav guidance" (CIA, 1953: 2). Obviously, the attempt had little popularity; nevertheless, such a group was finally elected in July, under the leadership of Constantin

Ghinea, a former political commissar of a Romanian aviation unit who had fled to Yugoslavia a few months before. The committee was ineffective and short-lived, as the tensions between Yugoslavia and Romania scaled down very quickly after the death of Stalin and the income of new refugees had been very low since the early 50s.

8. On the other side of the Iron Curtain: the first grasp of freedom and many difficulties

Reaching the other side of the Iron Curtain was the relief moment for almost every refugee, the fulfillment of an aim for which they had abandoned their past existence, risked their life crossing the border and suffered in camps and prisons, regardless of whether it was Yugoslavia, Turkey or Hungary, or endured the hardships of other long roads to the West. Although speaking solely about Trieste, the description given by a representative of Radio Free Europe is illustrative of the feeling felt by the political refugees once they were on the much-awaited side of the boundary between East and West:

"The first sensation any refugee has as soon as he reaches Trieste is a feeling of great relief. He immediately finds that humane treatment and freedom of speech, thought, and action which was denied to him in his own country for many years. He feels secure, protected and taken care of. [...] And when he goes to town for the first time [...], he finally feels like a free man, like all the others; he feels that he is no longer followed [...], he can speak freely and openly express his opinions without being afraid of being arrested or confined. His eyes shine when he sees all the beautiful things displayed on the windows of all the various shops, this abundance of small and big things the existence of which he had almost forgotten under the long years of communist regime and after the many years of a life with continuous deprivations, sacrifices and terrors." (RFE, 1953: 7)

Yet the situation was a bit more complicated than the black-and-white portrayal from above. The suffering, thus much diminished, was far from over, because the refugees were basically thrown into a new and different world, having little to no resources to start a new life. Depending on the routes they have chosen to flee and the period of time in which they managed to do it, their journey on the other side of the Iron Curtain was different.

At the end of the Second World War, there were millions of refugees and displaced persons in the West that needed rapid and vast assistance. Therefore, hundreds of camps were established (in some cases in the former Nazi facilities) in the western occupied areas of both Austria and Germany, with major ones in cities like Linz or Landek. From April 1946, the majority of those camps were put under the administration of International Refugee Organization (IRO), the intergovernmental organization designed to deal with the massive waves of millions of people affected by the Second World War and its follow-up, the incipient Cold War. Although Romanian political refugees were encamped in different centers, their number was fairly low. For example, in September 1947, out of the 19430 Romanian-origin refugees that were taken care of by the IRO, 18539 were in fact Jews that were wither survivors of the Holocaust in Central Europe or people trying to emigrate from Romania to Palestine (Holborn, 1956: 358). Putting this ethnic minority aside, that leaves less than 900 people that were actual refugees due mostly to the establishing of Communism in Romania. Those hundreds of Romanian political refugees from the camps in Austria and Western Germany enjoyed a decent standard of living due to the material support given by IRO and other Western philanthropic associations and foundations, and their great degree of freedom that encouraged them to integrate in the new societies. Moreover, medical assistance was provided, as well as education for children and professional training for the adults, and the refugee could even organize themselves in distinct forms of association.

Still, what really helped them in this final stage of the process of fleeing the country was the support provided by certain individuals who were already in the West or by different organizations. In the first category there were, on the one hand, people who acted disinterestedly (most noticeable being the Greek-catholic priest Vasile Zăpârțan (CNSAS, 7747: 77) who was visiting the camps in search of Romanians in need and helped them on religious grounds everyday), and, on the other hand, there were also some who had a subtle pursuit. As the Cold War had begun, the Western secret services were particularly active and every new political refugee represented a source of new data from inside communist Romania. Thus, cells of different secret services (French, American, exiled Romanians working on their own) operated in the late 1940s in different areas where political refugees arrived, especially in the occupation zones of Austria. They needed information not only for their own agenda, but also to sell it for profit to other Western secret services that were interested. In exchange

for handing in statements or long interrogations, political refugees could receive shelter, food tickets and even free pass to other states like France.

At the same time, aid organizations also appeared, established by Romanians already living in the West. Notable roles were played by institutions such as The Romanian Relief Committee in Salzburg or the Section Roumaine du Service Sociale of the Occupational Forces in Innsbruck (Petraru, 2014: 230), but the main organization supporting the refugees was Comité d'Assistance aux Roumains, shortly and most commonly known as CAROMAN. Established in the spring of 1948 in Paris, with the great support of the French authorities, CAROMAN was the project of Nicolae Caranfil, a remarkable engineer who played a significant role in the fast urban modernization of Bucharest in the 1930s. Under his guidance, the committee provided basic material help for the new comers, like clothing, food tickets for specific restaurants and short-term accommodation, but also assistance in obtaining the legal documents for settling in France or departing for other countries. Rocked by corruption accusations, some of them being apparently true, CAROMAN had to replace its board: Caranfil was briefly replaced by Raoul Bossy until Maria Brăescu assumed the leadership (Djuvara, 2002: 42). An undeservingly downplayed role in helping the refugees was the one of different religious institutions. The most important one was the Greek-Catholic Romanian Church from rue de Ribera, in Paris, which had, beside the chapel, a dormitory and a canteen, thus becoming a hub for the Romanian refugees in their struggle to organize themselves. Other important institutions were the Orthodox Church (that similarly played an important role in keeping the community together), the Catholic Relief Fund for Romanians or other several protestant philanthropic associations (ACNSAS, 329902 b: 328). All of them provided help without asking for proof of religious affiliation, thus allowing many people to receive it, as was the case of Mihail Țanțu who, in Vienna in 1949, remembered how, for lunch pretended to be a Baptist, for dinner an Adventist and for staying overnight a Catholic (ACNSAS, 233937: 24).

While the refugee camps in Austria and West Germany had quite decent living conditions and were a rather short stop in the journey of the refugees that fled through Hungary and Austria, the camps in Italy, used mostly by those who fled through Turkey or Yugoslavia, were a bit different. The major camps were in Frascati, a suburb of Rome, and in Bagnoli, a former facility established by the Fascist regime, which operated from 1945-1946 up to the early 50s. They had been designed as process points until the refugees from

all Eastern Europe were processed for further departing, but the conditions were relatively poor thus affecting the inmates (Vasile, 2022: 409-415). But for the most refugees coming through Yugoslavia, the entrance point was inevitably San Sabba camp, a vast complex functioning near Trieste, a free territory with a particular situation in the post-war context. The main part of the complex consisted in an old building redesigned into having forty cells per floor, each room being assigned to a family or a group of 3-4 people. The living conditions were relatively good, with sufficient food and a vivid cultural life of each ethnic group of refugees, but it lacked other goods like clothes or hygiene products. Moreover, the reaction of locals was mixed: while some manifested sympathy and compassion for the refugees, others were skeptical or even hostile to the people perceived as a threat for a local job market already strangled by unemployment. The number of Romanian refugees in San-Sabba camp was low comparing to the other nationalities: according to the research conducted by RFE, in late 1953, out of 4235 refugees encamped only 229 declared themselves to be Romanian (RFE, 1953: 1).

9. Conclusions

As time passed by, all the Romanian refugees left the camps and tried to integrate in the new societies, coming to the conclusion that their exile may not be a short bracket in their existence. Most of them integrated well in the Western cities they ended up in, while a few of them refused or simply could not do that, resulting in either suicides (like Ion Profir) and unclear deaths (Djuvara, 2002: 52-56) or in repatriations to Romania after the communist regime published an almost all-forgiving decree to anyone who wanted to come back from abroad. The feeling of longing for their native country marked the rest of their lives in various degrees. Some tried to reestablish a connection with their families and even with the Romanian authorities, while others tried to preserve their identity by preserving the language and religion and passing them to their children. But for most of them, the whole process of fleeing the country was somehow a blind spot in their memory, a missing piece lost between the stage of trying to escape the communist Romania and the one fitting into the new society and starting a new life. It was actually a trauma that was rarely discussed and, eventually, a trauma never healed.

Endnotes

- ¹ Expression coined by Viktor Kravcenko's book *I Chose Freedom: The Personal and Political File of a Soviet Official*, published in 1947.
- ² Impressive research focused on the victims of the illegal border crossings to Yugoslavia, in the 70s and 80s, was done by Johann Steiner and Doina Magheti in their two-volume book *Mormintele tac. Relatări de la cea mai sângeroasă graniță* published at Polirom in 2009 and 2017.
- ³ An in-depth analysis was done by Roland Olah in the article "Prețul libertății. Frontieriștii condamnați pentru trecere sau tentativă de trecere ilegală a graniței de vest în anii '80" published in IICCMER's 2022 yearbook.
- ⁴ The failed attempts led to arrest and convictions and a useful analysis for the women that were arrested while trying to cross the border is available in Florin Soare's study "Tentatia libertății: 'frontieristele'" in Constantin Vasilescu (coord.), *Morfologia (ne)vinovăției. Alfabetul detenției în comunism*, Litera, 2023.
- ⁵ Relevant for this situation was the movie-like attempt of five young ethnic Germans on *Cernavodă* ship on the 6h of March 1959 discussed in my article „Spre adevărata libertate. Grupul Mihai Roth și deturnarea vasului *Cernavodă*” published in 2015 IICCMER's yearbook.
- ⁶ This view, quite popular among the refugees, came from a truly depreciative Balkan saying: "who has ever seen a green horse or a smart Serbian?".

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