

FII ATENT! SOME NOTES ON COPING WITH ROMANIA'S SECRET POLICE

In the mid-1970's, I lived in Romania conducting social science research. Like the other American scholars, I too was warned, instructed and told stories about the Romanian secret police, the securitate. In this short note I would like to share my own views on how the securitate work in order to help other Americans to cope with them so that their time in Romania leads to a minimum of aggravation. These remarks are based not only on my initial year in Romania but from continuous visits to the country, conversations with foreigners, embassy personnel and many Romanians. My personal experiences with the securitate has been rather benign. I did not have my fingernails pulled out and I was accused of being a spy only once. To my knowledge, none of my Romanian friends suffered severely. But my own experiences are irrelevant in this context. You will without doubt hear a gamut of "amazing tales" from embassy personnel, other grantees and Romanian citizens. Most of these tales will leave you with an image of a highly effective organization. Very few will leave you with an image of incompetence, irrationality and inefficiency.

The point of this memo is very simple: do not confuse an organization that can be anywhere with one that is everywhere. It is this fundamental distinction which the securitate itself tries to gloss over, and which the many stories of their mythical effectiveness tend to forget.

The securitate (security), is a part of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Officially they are termed "organele de securitate" (security organs), but in slang they may be known as secu or "baietii de la secu" (boys from secu), or as one member called "banditii asteia" (those bandits). Some Romanians will refer to securitate by a gesture, flicking up the underside of their collar; presumably, undercover agents have a small pin or mark on the underside of their collar indicating they are securitate. In situations where they hang out in hotel lobbies together with money changers or black marketeers, a flick of the collar can indicate to approaching police who they are. Securitate personnel normally dress in civilian clothes but they have various ranks similar to the armed services or police. A member of the organization may be known as an ofiter de securitate (securitate officer) or simply securist.

The purpose of the securitate is to protect the political, economic and ideological security of the Romanian state. Enemies of Romania are both in the country (Romanians and foreigners) and

Hence, the securitate is considered to be active outside Romania, especially among Romanian emigre groups in France and in West Germany. In attempting to protect the integrity of the Romanian state, the securitate's mission revolves around ~~guaranteeing~~ ^{preventing} foreigners from discovering "state secrets" or ~~preventing~~ ^{preventing} Romanians from willfully or inadvertently exposing these secrets to foreigners. The Romanian definition of "secrets" is quite broader than our own. Most activities of industrial enterprises are considered secret de serviciu or "working secrets". Much statistical data of social and economic nature is either classified "secret" or pentru uz intern (for internal use only). Military affairs and political intrigues are considered top secret and not publicized in the official media. This cult of secrecy means that Americans who seek to uncover what for us is innocuous information may appear suspicious to a Romanian citizen or securitate agent.

The cult of secrecy gives rise to a "culture of suspicion". People are assumed to have hidden or private motives buried beneath their public or official facades. This culture of suspicion is part of everyday life in Romania--both in villages and in the intellectual community. People will easily be able to say one thing in public (at work, at social affairs, at official meetings) and something quite the opposite at home or with friends. Romanian schoolchildren may be taught to hail the communist party in school, while hearing their parents condemn it at home. This gap between the public and private sphere is known in Romanian as dedublarea (duplicity). The notion of duplicity carries over in Romanian relations with Americans. Romanians may assume that our public demeanor is only a facade, masking hidden motives. The securitate may assume that each American researcher has some kind of "secret plan" hidden beneath the official job or research task. The embassy cultural officer is really CIA. The grantee doing archaeology research may really be surveying military installations. The literature professor may be imparting "ideological pollution" to dissident intellectuals. The problem with these suspicions is that they can always be confirmed. There are instances where Americans acted suspiciously, where their behavior constituted a (miniscule) threat to Romanian security (as seen by the securitate), where research was done covertly, or alongside ~~an~~ official research. These exceptional cases can thus become the grounds for treating all Americans as potential spies. One might say that according to the securitate, the American is a spy until he or she proves him/herself otherwise.

security organs is overrepresented with individuals from rural areas and small towns. Entering early and building a career within the organization (it has a very difficult examination procedure), these individuals may also become somewhat provincial in their outlook. This applies especially to ^{views of} foreigners: ~~such persons~~ ^{we} work alone instead of in formal groups; ~~they~~ ^{we} represent themselves and not necessarily the opinions of their home government; ~~they~~ ^{we} can travel freely. This provincialism among the securitate personnel often leads them to ask the question "Ce caută ^{ai} aici" (What's this guy looking for here?). Perhaps it is a typical question of the small country against the large one. ~~However,~~ ^{What} reasonable motive could an American have to teach in, work in, or live in a small, underdeveloped country like Romania? Using this logic leads to strange conclusions. Frequently, from the provincial point of view, the country (or village) is thus assumed to have some fantastic strategic military value. If the American is here among us, ~~we~~ ^{we} must be very important. Hence we must watch what the American is doing. To explain to Romanians that the number of Americans interested in Romania is extremely small would not be sufficient. Unless proven otherwise, many Romanian security organs simply assume that the American's motives are suspect.

The culture of suspicion does not arise purely from the side of the securitate, however. It can be perpetuated by the activities of the most innocent Americans. For example, many researchers must alter their work plan or research tasks in midstream. They may abruptly change locations, snoop around, seek out archives which they aren't sure exist, make contact with others besides the official contacts, and do all the things that the confused doctoral candidate or research worker is not supposed to do. Such confused behavior conflicts with the securitate's image of Americans as knowing exactly what they are doing. These random actions become evidence of the American's "secret plan". By the logic of the securitate, the activities lying outside the official tasks are suspicious, and constitute evidence that the individual is some kind of danger to Romania.

To protect Romania's security and inhibit the divulging of secrets, the securitate uses a variety of methods. It can read official publications or papers written by the "suspect". It can conduct overt or covert surveillance. It can bug the phone or the apartment. It can open, read and photocopy your mail. It can search your house. The most important method, however, is to debrief the Romanians with whom you are in contact. This method is much easier than arresting

or retaliation by the other side against Romanians. The securitate can learn about you and your activities by interviewing those Romanians with whom you are in contact: your maid, your advisers, your friends, your neighbors. Most of the time the debriefing is conducted in a civilized fashion. They are asking other Romanians to carry out their patriotic duty and tell the security organs about a potential threat to the Romanian state. Other times the debriefings can be intimidating or unfriendly. Oftimes the securitate agent comes to the individual's home or workplace, an experience which most Romanians find extremely uncomfortable or embarrassing. Frequently they are called back for interviews "downtown" several times.

Given the "culture of suspicion" and the normal cultural/language gaps which exist between an American researcher/worker and a Romanian ~~resident~~, it is quite probable that these Romanian individuals will have quite divergent opinions on who you are and what kind of work you are doing. One person knows you at home, another at work, a third during your free time. If you are not straight with these people, the slightest difference may be magnified into "suspicious behavior" in the securitate agent's report. Hence the importance of keeping your story straight, of having one and only one REAL research design, of not telling your advisor you are an historian while your friends know you as a political scientist, of not giving ~~several~~ instances of "suspicious behavior". For the researcher, it is very important that people know not just what you are researching on, but WHY. This can be of practical help to you: for example, a Romanian hearing about the existence of a certain office or archive will better realize that you should know about its existence. More importantly, if Romanians know WHY you are doing the research, they can help provide the securitate with their most essential information: your motives for why you are in Romania. Since they either do not know or do not accept the American's official motives for research, they must induct these from the many Romanians they question. This is all the more important for the researcher, since most probably it is lower ranking and more provincial agents who are checking him out. The implication of all this is simple: if you yourself do not know what you are doing or why you are doing it, it may have negative consequences for your image among the securitate.

The securitate's method of debriefing Romanian informants coexists with the many laws which prevent or inhibit Romanian contact with foreigners. By law, foreigners may not overnight in a Romanian home except by special permission (usually granted only to near relatives).

Without this permission, the Romanian hosts may be fined several thousand Lei for even one night's visit by a foreigner. In official discussions, a third person is supposed to be in the room to prevent divulgence of any unauthorized information. Romanians are also formally required to fill out written reports of any contact with foreigners. In ~~some~~ ^{some} institutions, these reports are often filled out seriously. Othertimes they are taken as a joke. In recent months Romanians have again been warned about unauthorized contact with foreigners and the requirement to fill out reports. For the American, it means to be aware that the third person in the room may be your colleague's best friend, but he also be a jealous ~~colleague~~ ^{careerist}.

The securitate organization does not exist everywhere. It works principally through a system of paid and unpaid informants. Most of the paid informants are black marketeers who, in return for feeding some information to the securitate, get to keep some of their illicit earnings. The principal network of informants are the unpaid personnel in each office or institution. One person in each office will be the contact person for the securitate officer who has responsibility for that office (or factory, apartment block, village). This person will be asked to report any strange occurrences or validate any observations by the securitate. Through this network of informants the securitate has the ability to reach anywhere, to compile dossiers on everyone. The informants, it should be remembered, are not always unscrupulous. They may be kind, generous, friendly people ^{who} are compelled to furnish the securitate with information. These individuals probably do not report all their information, for otherwise their colleagues at work would ostracize them completely, making them bad informants. The informants themselves also play the game of public and private face. They may feed securitate with tidbits while withholding others. Hearing that the securitate officer is interested in a particular person, the informant may decide to tell that person to "fi atent" (watch out). In this sense, the informant system of the securitate is an accurate reflection of the gap between public and private spheres which pervades Romanian society.

Of all the organizations in Eastern Europe (with the possible exception of the USSR), the Romanian securitate seems to have the most respect from the population. Its effectiveness and pervasiveness seem to border on the mythical, as if it is a kind of unseen spirit prying into every room and listening to every conversation. Western journalism and popular discussions often assume that Romania carries

6
on solely by virtue of the oppression and effectiveness of its secret police. I would argue against this assumption. Securitate is a large bureaucratic organization, just like many other large bureaucratic organizations in Romania. If it throws all its resources at a specifically defined goal (e.g. a suspected agent), it can achieve miraculous results. But like other organizations, it can also be riven with inefficiency, corruption, sloppiness and false information. The securitate is a mirror of Romanian society.

This means that like other organizations, the securitate has a plan. To demonstrate its effectiveness, to demonstrate that it is needed, it must in some way achieve its plan. Hence, if there are no real spies among the foreign grantees, for example, they may create one using the evidence from dossiers. Romanian informants and surveillance. This kind of behavior may be particularly visible in those towns lying outside Bucharest. What appears to be irrational behavior from our point of view may be quite rational from the view of the low-level securitate officer who wants to rise in the ranks. If, for example, the number of foreigners coming to a provincial town drops, then the effort to find a spy or detect "moral pollution" must increase. Otherwise, the organization will seem redundant. In this sense, the securitate is like any large organization which seeks to justify its existence. This task has recently become easier due to the current climate of tension between the US and Romania. More international tension clearly fuels ~~the fire of~~ the culture of suspicion.

The distinction between being everywhere and anywhere is crucially important for understanding the Romanian securitate. All Romanians and most Americans (especially diplomats) have stories of being harassed or followed by the securitate. These stories may be true, of course, but they distort the situation. It is in the interest of the securitate to make you and all Romanians think that they are everywhere, all the time--that they are opening every single letter, listening to every single phone call, bugging all the apartments, interrogating all your friends, that they are out after you. It certainly gives one a strange feeling of importance to find (as I myself did once) not one but two cars trailing you, throughout the day. By tailing someone openly, they create the image of being everywhere, and with impunity. Yet in such cases we are talking largely of image-making. Anyone openly followed is unlikely to do anything suspicious or to visit friends. The securitate, in a sense, is actually trying to protect you in such situations. Here they

5/7
they really wanted to find out what you were doing, they would not follow you openly.

The stories of being followed and having phones bugged, and the many instances in which Romanians are told by the securitate what they said in "private" conversations, are all used to perpetuate the image of their being everywhere. However, the securitate cannot be everywhere at once. It has neither the resources nor the interest in following everyone or monitoring every conversation. For every instance of someone being interrogated, trailed or monitored, there are literally thousands where nothing happens--where there was no talk, where the phone call discussing sensitive information resulted in no interrogation, where people "got away with murder".

For the securitate, it is much more efficient for them to make you think they are everywhere than for them to actually be everywhere. Stories of their effectiveness circulate widely. The negative instances, however, those where they should have been there according to their logic of suspicion, are usually forgotten. For most of us--Romanian and American alike--no amount of reasoning can assuage us into thinking that the securitate cannot be everywhere. For there is always the possibility that they will pop up unexpectedly. Like all organizations, ^{there} is a degree of ^{mis-}information and an element of unpredictability and irrationality. The securitate cannot be everywhere, but it can indeed be anywhere. It is this element of unpredictability that makes them so respected among the Romanian population.

Because of this unpredictability, most Romanians (and many foreigners) are perfectly justified in being paranoid. It is especially so among Romanians who have contacts with foreigners, since it is they--and not the foreigners--who will receive the brunt of the securitate's interrogation efforts. The element of randomness means that an American who has been regarded as "clean" for 2 years in Romania may suddenly find himself being harassed or followed. This may be the result of the securitate's periodic efforts at "image-making" (to show they are there), or from an officer's campaign for self-promotion, or from a long-term inquiry that suddenly reveals you as a suspicious person. And if you become a subject, the Romanians you have as colleagues and friends also become subjects.

The ~~myth~~ ^{presumed} of securitate's efficiency must be considered as a myth. Romania being Romania, why should the securitate be any more efficient than other large organizations? Even if it does have more resources at its disposal, why would we assume that their microphones (if

4/4
they are Romanian-made microphones) are always working? Why should we assume that if they are using foreign-made microphones that they have installed them correctly or have enough spare parts to maintain them. Many securitate functionaries are just like the rest of us: just doing their jobs. They may be bored, they may simply be curious about foreigners; and some may be rabid believers in defending state secrets. It is said that the securitate has high quality psychologists and sociologists who work for them, carrying out investigations and deciphering the mood of the Romanian people so as to hold down tensions. If this is so, they have not done a very good job. Any visitor to Romania--short term or long term--sees a society riven with social tensions, economic problems and morale problems. Apparently, even the highest quality experts have not been ~~able~~ to be successful. They seem to suffer the same problems as experts throughout the world.

The securitate is said to influence society by keeping people off-balance. One method is by the periodic rumors of social, economic and political nature, few of which can be verified, but all of which are believed. Rumors function as diversions, keeping people at each others' throats and preventing social action. In a society where information is restricted, rumors (like jokes) become a prime source of amusement. The continuous shortages of consumer goods function in a similar fashion: the sudden appearance of pork signals the disappearance of eggs; the reappearance of eggs comes with the disappearance of cooking oil. Such manipulations of the market (no matter how justified by objective factors of climate or export needs) are well timed to keep people looking out for goods rather than asking why the continuous shortages. It makes the securitate's real job that much easier.

What is the moral of all this? First, the securitate is an organization like all other Romanian organizations. It can be both effective and inefficient. Do not overestimate its effectiveness. Second, the securitate has a high degree of unpredictability and caprice built into it. Trying to decipher their "secret strategy" may be useless. Third, being sometimes incompetent, uninformed or irrational, the securitate can be enormously dangerous. It can turn innocents into spies, integrate Romanian friends and destroy careers. Do not underestimate its powers. Fourth, the securitate thrives on paranoia--about them, and ~~about others~~ ^{among ordinary} people. Don't let them get to you. Don't let them make you think that everyone has hidden motives for contacting you. If the securitate makes themselves visible to you, it means that you are not all that dangerous. They can be anywhere but they are not everywhere. Fifth, paranoia should not mean carelessness. If things go bad for you, you can always leave. Romanians cannot. I conclude with a familiar piece