

Motherhood in Romania under Communism: A Personal Perspective

Mihaela ARSENE

Bucharest University of Economic Studies

Department of Modern Languages and Business Communication

Bucharest, Romania

mihaela.arsene@edmerica.ro

This will highlight some personal anecdotes of motherhood in Romania under communism. If the anecdotes at any point signal the hypocrisy of the system and the inconsistency of its policies, this is in no way accidental.

The personal experiences to be detailed in this text document the agony of motherhood in a regime of imposition, inadequate health care, pain, humiliation, and shortages. As such they sadly resonate with the many-fold experiences that Mihaela Miroiu and Otilia Dragomir brought to the fore in their volume of 2010 *Nașterea. Istorii trăite* which spans the interval 1955-2009. The topic can be productively approached also by men when they choose to research women's experiences under the communists and coordinate a comprehensive volume focusing specifically on the 1970's and 1980's: *Tovarășe de drum. Experiența feminină în comunism*, with Radu Pavel Gheo and Dan Lungu as editors.

A different type of personal experiences, this time more oblique, is available in *Cartea cu euri* by Calin Torsan et al, as the volume highlights the children's recollections of motherhood in communism through the experiences forced upon their own mothers which these suffering mothers distilled and simplified when sharing them with their children.

The concept of sharing the quintessential personal experience of motherhood finds a poetic representation in Ioana Nicolae's *Cerul din burtă* which adds a contemporary dimension, unfailingly enhancing - though her poetical gift - the joys and concerns of Romanian mothers, that is mothers still trapped in an inadequate health care system.

The above works approach birth and motherhood primarily as a personal experience. Adriana Teodorescu - in her recently published volum *Maternitatea in spatiul romanesc. Mecanisme si reprezentari socio-culturale* - chooses to take a dual perspective and investigates it from an intertwined biological and cultural angle.

This is the background against which I will now share my relevant experience. By way of introduction to my personal anecdote, I will mention the length of the maternity leave that the communist regime allowed in order to promote its pro-natalist programme: 112 days of maternity leave, all inclusive so to say, that is 112 days to be used before or after the baby was born. Difficult pregnancies that required the women to be bed-ridden for weeks and months would eat into this 3 month-period, to the prospective mothers' anxiety. Even with a perfect pregnancy, things were not easy: as I was counting on the full 112 days to spend with my baby when she was born, I went to work until the very last day, big and buoyant.

And then the magic day arrived. I had submitted all the official documents in due time to demonstrate that I qualified for a C-section. C-sections were a topic of endless controversy under the communists and the authorities discouraged women to resort to the procedure for a number of economic/economical and ideological reasons.

Economic reasons because the section was costlier than giving birth naturally and the country's resources had to be channelled to its economic development and larger-than-life projects, as all prospective mothers and loyal citizens of the communist state knew only too well. After all, the second largest building in the world was being raised in Romania at the time my baby was born. At the same time Romania's foreign debt was being fully paid, to the infinite pride of the Romanian communist leader and the pain and horror of the nation that was experiencing severe food shortages and shortages of all kinds, power cuts, no heating and the like, in order to help pay the foreign debt.

The ideological reasons against the C-section were that any woman who had a C-section, will have the subsequent two pregnancies ending in C-sections as well. However, the huge appeal of the C-section to Romanian women under communism lay in the fact that after 3 C-sections women would qualify for legal abortions performed in hospitals. To people who did not live through the communist experiment in this country the lines above may mean little. To women who reached their reproductive years anytime between 1966 and 1989, the C-section was perceived as the much-needed lifebelt in a world of ideological imposition, indifference and criminal disregard of women's lives.

While to the communist authorities the C-section was harmful in that it put a cap on the number of children a woman undergoing the procedure could subsequently bring to life for the nation, to women it was a vision of paradise: a legal medical procedure conducted in hospital, by

professional people, with the right equipment, and in the right environment. As opposed to having the procedure at any cost, that is in a horror environment, with improvised equipment, and conducted by unscrupulous people who would financially thrive on the women's despair at their own inability to terminate an unwanted pregnancy. Plus major health hazards and the prospect of going to jail for undermining the state policy, if reported to the authorities.

Under the circumstances, little surprise that the C-section was any woman's dream. Mine included, considering my mother's 20 illegal abortions that I was aware of, all performed in the most bizarre circumstances. Therefore my request for the C-section was well documented and finally granted. I still recall, as I was lying on the operation table and gently sliding into the induced sleep, how the surgeon who was going to perform the operation was conscientiously telling the other medical staff involved: "This C-section is being performed because the patient has a severe eye condition, etc." Indicative of the overall suspicion and lack of trust besetting the best society ever built for man.

The literature about the reproductive policies in the Eastern Bloc repeatedly mentions the state provisions made for encouraging multiple births. What I experienced first hand was very different, despite the fact that the baby was born in the capital city, in a university clinic ranking among the best. In retrospect, my interpretation is that the long string of unfortunate events that accompanied my single ever maternal experience is that in the last years of the communist regime in Romania the system was imploding as it was being undermined by the corruption that the chronic shortages of everything, from food to toilette paper to soap and detergent, soon helped to trigger.

So, the baby was born. Perfect baby, perfect Apgar score: 10. I never saw her in the next 4 days as nobody brought her to me and I could not walk the huge distance - around 400 meters - to the new born babies' ward. Since we two met so late, breast feeding was compromised. Although I was allowed only a few minutes with the baby, according to the hospital regulations, I was still able to notice she had developed an eye infection. It soon proved the infection was due to poor hygiene standards on the part of the medical staff. The infection required massive doses of antibiotics. She was 4 days old and had been a perfect new born. Two days later she caught a cold. Colds then came with a clogged nose and 6 day-old babies with a clogged nose will not be able to eat as they would use the mouth to breath. What do you do with a new born who is losing weight

under medical supervision? You give her a blood transfusion. Which is done with multiple needles into the scalp. And this is what she went through.

The perfect new born never fully recovered in the state hospital set up by the state that promoted pro-natalism and offered mothers the best conditions for their children. She was going from bad to worse, underfed and poorly treated. At the time, mothers with C-section would commonly be released from hospital any time between day 6 and 10. On day 16, we were still in hospital enjoying “dedicated” medical care: the baby was still struggling and her hospital-induced malnourishment turned her into a skinny, painfully frail little girl with a painful look in her eyes and wrinkled, sagging skin all over her little body.

I was a novice mother in helpless despair. The surgeon himself was so concerned with the unfortunate developments and with what seemed to be the constantly worsening condition of the baby that he advised me to take the baby home. Away from the 24 hour dedicated medical care! The hypocrisy of the system requested me to petition the hospital and to sign a release request in which I explained that I assume full responsibility for the subsequent developments in my baby’s condition and that nobody in the hospital was to be held responsible for her unacceptable and dangerous hospital-induced condition.

The reconstruction work started at home when the baby finally had the attention she had missed in hospital. I still wonder what the reason for this severely bad start in life was. I may have looked not grateful and appreciative enough to the nurses who handled the babies, therefore they chose to neglect my baby, when the communist system guaranteed free health care. Whatever the reason, to me it was a clear disregard of the rights the communist regime was promoting. What an almost deadly blow in the face the whole experience turned out to be!

References

- Gheo, Radu Pavel, Dan Lungu (eds), *Tovarășe de drum. Experiența feminină în comunism*, Polirom, 2008.
- Miroiu, Mihaela, Otilia Dragomir (eds.), *Nașterea. Istorii trăite*, Polirom, 2010.
- Nicolai, Ioana, *Cerul din burtă*, Polirom, 2010.
- Teodorescu, Adriana, *Maternitatea în spațiul românesc. Mecanisme și reprezentări socio-culturale*, Institutul European, 2017.
- Torsan, Călin, Cosmin Manolache, Sorin Stoica, Roxana Moroșanu, Ciprian Voicilă *Cartea cu euri*, Editura Curtea Veche, 2005.