

LIVED STORIES. TOLD STORIES.
PERSONAL NOTES ON COMMUNISM/POSTCOMMUNISM

A Personal View and Timeline of Women's Sexual and Reproductive
Lives in Romania¹

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I am one of the Romanian women who survived communism and even laughed, one who has evolved from having no idea of women's reproductive health and rights to advocating for other women's and from having no notion of contraception to teaching my own mother.

¹ This account is based on an invited keynote address at the 32nd Annual Psychosocial Workshop on March 30, 2004 in Boston, Massachusetts, USA and published on http://www.prochoiceforum.org.uk/psy_ocr9.php

Fifty-one years ago, Romania's president, Nicolae Ceausescu, dealt a crippling blow to women when he banned what we now call "abortion on demand" or "elective abortion". His reason: concern about the low rate of population growth. He wanted to impose his plan to increase the country's population from 23 to 30 million by the year 2000. He began his campaign in **1966** with a decree that virtually made pregnancy a state policy. "The fetus is the property of the entire society," Ceausescu proclaimed. "Anyone who avoids having children is a deserter who abandons the laws of national continuity." The policy introduced a number of measures to increase the fertility rate. These measures made abortion legally available only in certain limited circumstances, restricted access to contraception, and increased allowances for large families. Abortion was legal if a woman was over 40, if she already had four children, if her life was in danger, or, in practice, if she had communist party connections. Otherwise, illegal abortions cost the equivalent of two to four months' wages. If something went wrong, the legal consequences were enough to deter many women from seeking timely medical help.

The law gave us the right to have an abortion if we were bleeding heavily. If we didn't bleed heavily enough, we couldn't get the abortion. It was tricky, though, as the degree of bleeding was either a salvation or a curse. In more serious cases, a commission of three physicians was formed with the approval of the prosecutor's office. If the woman was suspected of having induced the bleeding she was submitted to interrogation and threatened with imprisonment. I believe there is no harsher punishment for a woman than to feel her blood flowing, while wondering if she is still going to be alive after it is over.

Usually women were so terrified to go to the hospital that by the time they were taken there it was too late. Often, they died at home. Almost 10,000 women (9,452 to be exact) died because of the demographic policy of the communist regime in Romania in the 1966 - 1989 interval².

Except for abortions performed to save the life of the pregnant woman, a legal abortion had to be performed within the first trimester of pregnancy by a specialist in obstetrics and gynecology in a specialized health-care unit, with the approval of a medical board. Women who obtained an illegal abortion, as well as the persons performing it, were subject to fines and imprisonment. The sudden imposition of severe restrictions on access to legal abortion and modern

² VOICES OF ROMANIAN WOMEN: Perceptions of Sexuality, Reproductive Behavior, and Partner Relations during the Ceausescu Era – ADRIANA BABAN, University of Cluj, Romania & HENRY P. DAVID, Transnational Family Research Institute, Bethesda, MD

contraception had an immediate if somewhat short-term impact on fertility levels in Romania. At first, Romania's birthrate nearly doubled. The crude birth rate increased, and the number of abortions declined sharply from almost one million in 1966 to less than a quarter of a million one year later. However, the birth rate began to decrease once again in 1967 and reached the 1966 level in 1983 (14.3 births per 1,000 population). Poor nutrition and inadequate prenatal care endangered many pregnant women. The country's infant-mortality rate soared to 83 deaths in every 1,000 births (against a Western European average of less than 10 per thousand). About one in 10 babies was born underweight and newborns weighing 1,500 grams (3 pounds, 5 ounces) were classified as miscarriages and denied treatment. Unwanted survivors often ended up in orphanages.

Ceausescu made mockery of family planning. He forbade sexuality education. Books on human sexuality and reproduction were classified as "state secrets," to be used only as medical textbooks. With contraception banned, Romanians had to smuggle in condoms and birth-control pills. Though strictly illegal, abortions remained a widespread birth-control measure of last resort. The law only forbade abortion; it did nothing to promote life. Despite government restrictions on abortion, the abortion ratio also began to increase in 1967, due, in part, to the existence of an underground illegal abortion network.

Let me tell you a true story dating back to those times: Ana, a Romanian university teacher, found out that she was pregnant. It was February **1967**, the year after the new abortion restrictions were imposed. She was desperate. Ana was a beautiful 30-year-old woman, but a single woman in a small town. How could she be a single mother in a small town, where everybody knows everybody? And how could she have a child with someone she did not love? She did not dare speak to any doctor in town, because she knew that they were too afraid to break the law. They risked their freedom and professional license. That is why she tried to solve the problem by pushing her cupboard around the house, by taking hot baths and by jumping around like a fool. Time passed, and nothing happened. She took leave of absence and went to the capital city, but no doctor accepted to risk his situation for an unknown woman. So, she went to another town. She was willing to spend more than the equivalent of two salaries just to get rid of her problem but did not find a doctor to save her. She lost all hope. Fortunately, Ion agreed to marry her, and so their daughter had a father. Ana divorced her husband two years later. She was single for the rest of her life.

Many Romanian women shared the same kind of story during that year. 1967 was a peak year for births of the so-called “decretzei” (babies born as a result of the 1966 decree which banned abortion), but the number of births decreased in the following years because women discovered how to “cope with” the situation. How? Usually by using a small “pipe” (in Romanian “sonda”, like for drilling oil, a derrick in English), a thin medical catheter through which they introduced into their uterus different liquids, such as alcohol, water, distilled water, tea, or plants, such as stork’s bill or oleander. These were supposed to dislocate the fetus and induce an abortion. Generally, educated women used distilled water or alcohol and the undereducated used plants. Even a young doctor, the wife of a famous actor, used a soap and water mixture, which caused her death. That practice was so frequent that there was a joke during those miserable years, which went like this:

- *Which is the richest country in the world?*
- *Romania.*
- *Why?*
- *Because every woman has her own “sonda” (English = derrick)!*

Romanian women’s reproductive health status worsened with every passing year, despite the fact that - ironically - the very first population conference on planet Earth was held in Bucharest, the capital city, in 1974, a year when the dictatorship controlled people’s minds by leaving them in complete darkness and cold. The government's enforcement techniques were as bad as the law. Women under the age of 45 were rounded up at their workplaces every one to three months and taken to clinics, where they were examined for signs of pregnancy, often in the presence of government agents - dubbed the "menstrual police". The same was done to high school students.

Let me tell you my own story: I will never forget my first imposed gynecological exam in high school in **1970**. They made us girls stand in a row and go into the medical office to be checked by a male gynecologist. The purpose, they told us, was to get some kind of medical document necessary to enroll for high school graduation and university entrance examinations. How come the boys didn’t need it, we were wondering in vain? I remember some girls were offended, some ashamed, but all of us were afraid. Afraid of the unknown, unfathomable reason for that kind of check-up, afraid of that first encounter with the gynecologist, afraid we might find out we were pregnant because we had been holding hands, or, worse, kissing with our boyfriends. Afraid of

what our parents might find out and afraid of what the school officials might do with that kind of information about us. That was the first instance when I felt my dignity snatched away from me by strange people who controlled us without our own or our parents' consent. The second time was before the entrance exam to university. By that time we were aware of the danger of getting pregnant with no way to prevent or get rid of it. All while our free-world "sisters" were enjoying their newly acquired freedom of making love, we were being held hostage behind the iron curtain.

It was against this background that the first population conference was organized in Romania, the country whose president killed women and children by denying them their right to contraception and abortion. Prior to the conference, Ceausescu took steps to look good in the eyes of the world leaders who attended the conference: he lowered the age of legal abortion to 40 from 45 in 1972, only to increase it again to 42 before the next population conference in 1984.

Now, let us go back forty-two years and remember what was happening to me in Romania in **1974**: I was a university freshman at that time, studying English and French as part of the Germanic languages department and that is why I had the privilege to be an interpreter for the UNICEF representative during first World Population Conference. That was the first time I heard about family planning, contraception, HIV, AIDS, single-use syringes or non-governmental organizations. I had no idea what I was translating. And how could I, when my own experience was the opposite?

Like most Romanian women my age I, too, had an eventful first abortion, according to the same pattern: first I had lots of shots containing some kind of painful mixture that was supposed to induce an abortion. Nothing happened after a week, so one horrible evening I was taken to a lady who took me to a sort of medical woman, who lived in a country house far, far away. She asked me to get up on the kitchen table, where she tormented me for what seemed to me forever, with all kinds of sharp metal instruments she kept boiling on an ancient stove. She took great precautions not to let me make any noise by putting a rag in my mouth and asking me to bite on it when it hurt. I left that place with the conviction that I was never going to have sex again. Later on, though, I got worried because I continued getting morning sickness despite the ordeal I had gone through. So, someone else took me for a secret check-up, which proved I was still pregnant. How could that be? How could one have an abortion and still be pregnant? I was lucky I was taken to a real doctor this time, who finished the job on another kitchen table. Need I tell you more?

Ten years later, in **1984**, the year of the Mexico City conference and policy (the so-called “Gag Rule”, which is still in force), seeing that its demographic policies had been ineffective, the government of Romania began a new campaign to increase the birth rate and restrict abortion. In practice, this meant that women of reproductive age were required to undergo regular gynecological examinations at their place of employment. Pregnant women were monitored until delivery, doctors were required to report all women who became pregnant and gynecological wards were under continuous surveillance. A special tax was enforced on unmarried persons over 25 years of age, as well as on childless couples who did not have a medical reason for being childless, the so-called "celibacy tax". Furthermore, investigations were carried out to determine the cause of all miscarriages.

In **1985**, access to abortion was further restricted. The minimum age required for a legal abortion was increased from 42 to 45 years. Similarly, having four children was no longer considered sufficient grounds for obtaining an abortion on request. Decree Number 411 of December 26th, 1985 stipulated that to qualify for an abortion, a woman must have given birth to a minimum of five children that were currently under her care.

Here is a journalist’s 1985 story: <My name is Irina. When I found out that I was pregnant, I didn’t know what to do. I was desperately in love with my boyfriend and looking forward to having a child with him. A friend of mine took me to her trusted gynecologist, a retired doctor. He confirmed the pregnancy. “What can I do, doctor?” I asked in a whisper. He shrugged his shoulders. I begged him to help me. He said he was too afraid and that, besides, he didn’t have the instruments. He told me to call him in two days. When I did he told me to come to his place, so he could share the “good news” with me. He had spoken with a former colleague who promised to lend him the instruments from the museum of the medical school. He asked me if I accepted an abortion performed with 100-year-old tools. I did, of course. But where could we do that? Not at his house, he was too afraid; not at my place, where I lived with my mother and sister and another family. Then where? My friend offered her small kitchen table in her apartment. The doctor came with a plastic bag full of strange looking knives. He boiled them on the stove for half an hour. Then he told me: “I have no anesthetic. If you utter one sound, we’ll go to jail.” Paralyzed with fear, I lay on the kitchen table. He inserted a sort of corkscrew which produced a horrible pain. Then he used a sort of a knife, which added another kind of pain. But the most terrible thing was the noise - a sort of sound like when you peel carrots. I remember I thought it lasted forever. When

it was finally over, I kept on hearing the same noise...Fortunately, I had no infection, no hemorrhage, just the horrible pain in my body. And my heart. Because my boyfriend told me that this pregnancy had made him discover that he didn't love me after all...>

The issue of having children when you wanted and not when it “just happened” became a national problem. That is why on December 26th **1989**, the first day after Ceausescu's death, the famous decree - issued on December 26th 1985 - was abolished and, along with that, contraception reinstated. That was when Romanian women felt liberated and took maternity hospitals by storm. In fact, abortion became a regular exercise of freedom and a good source of income for gynecologists. **1990** made Romania more famous than all those previous years of draconian restrictions put together. All of a sudden, Romanian women became the talk of the demographic and reproductive health world. We should probably even be included in the Guinness Book of World Records with our almost one million abortions recorded that year.

As a result of the restrictive reproductive health policies enforced in Romania between 1966 and 1989, maternal mortality reached heights unprecedented in Europe. The maternal mortality ratio rose from 85 deaths per 100,000 live births in 1965 to 170 in 1983. Moreover, illegal and unsafe abortion was the major cause of maternal mortality, accounting for more than 80 per cent of maternal deaths between 1980 and 1989. Furthermore, unofficial estimates suggest that nearly 20 per cent of women of reproductive age may have become infertile because, on average, a woman may have undergone at least five illegal abortions by age 40.

1994, the year of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), has probably been the best year in Romanian women's reproductive health history so far, because not only did the abortion rate go down to less than half what it was in 1990, but also the family planning programs began to pick up speed. We also produced a first sexuality education curriculum that was the basis for the compulsory healthy-life styles education programs in public schools at that time.

In the next ten years things changed for the better in Romanian women's reproductive lives, though not enough. Some women still did not know that contraception was available and abortion was legal and they even had unsafe abortions. When they finally got to the hospital, bleeding and in pain, and with high fever, doctors would ask them what they had done to themselves, in order to know how to treat them, but they did not admit to having done anything. They were still afraid of the police...

Twenty-three year-old Valentina Lucaci died in December **2003** after having induced an abortion with a stick. She was supposed to go work in Spain, like many other young Romanian women during those days and even today. Her husband was already there, waiting for her.

One year later, in **2004**, a newspaper first page headline read: “More Abortions than Births in Romania: the Romanian Ministry of Health said that abortions in the country continued to exceed live births in 2003. However, the number of terminations declined in comparison with previous years. In the first nine months last year, there were nearly 170,000 abortions - about 8,000 more than the number of births - according to the ministry. The abortion rate has gradually declined since 1990, but it remains the main means of birth control for many women, given the difficulty of obtaining or inconsistency of using reliable contraception. Regarding contraception the ministry said the number of women using contraception remains very low. The government has allocated 35 billion lei (\$1.1 million) this year to improve access to family planning services. According to the health minister, infant mortality is three times higher than in the European Union. Out of every 1,000 babies born, 16 die before the age of one. In rural areas the infant mortality rate is even higher - rising to 24 per 1,000 births in the northeastern province of Vaslui, one of the poorest in the country.”

Romania, which in 2004 had a population of about 21.7 million - down almost one million according to the 2002 census - is one of the poorest countries in Europe. That was the bad news. The good news was Parliament had begun debating the first reproductive health policy in the history of the country that is being avoided by the stork. That policy was taken to fruition years later, only to expire in **2015** and never to be seen or heard of again...

It has been 14 years since the time we almost had a national sexuality education program in schools starting in second grade, as a result of a memorandum of understanding between the ministries of education, health, youth and sports, under the auspices of the government. All packed with a curriculum, training for teachers to aim for sustainability, as well as trained peer educators. Unfortunately, the new leaders have no clue of what happened before their reign and are not interested in fixing the problem of their country proudly ranking first in the EU in number of adolescent pregnancies. Moreover, they signed a pact with a religious Coalition for the Family opposing sexuality education and everything related to reproductive health and rights, except for abstinence and having sex just to procreate. So, here we are, in **2017**, headed back to the dark ages thousands of women and children were not lucky to survive.

The concept that “...all couples and individuals have the basic right to decide freely and responsibly the number and spacing of their children and to have the information, education, and means to do so”— first agreed to at the World Population Conference held in **1974** in Bucharest — is still an unrealized ideal for many teenagers and women.

History, like memory, is not just an indicator for the past, but also for the present and the future. That is how we can understand the impact of the demographic policy imposed by the Romanian communist regime. That is how we can also understand the stigma, the cross Romania must carry to this day, since it is known as the country with the most terrible films about abandoned, institutionalized, and handicapped children. The abortion-related decree is the indicator that Romanian women had no right over their own bodies.

In closing, please allow me to reiterate that deaths and morbidity from clandestine and dangerous abortion practices remain a serious public health issue in countries where abortion is illegal and unsafe, just the way it used to be Romania. Writing this today allows me to pay a tribute to the thousands of women who died or can no longer have children due to the unsafe abortions they had to have. Let this be a warning for governments regarding the women who are now being denied their right to reproductive self-determination!

References

More information about the situation in Romania can be found in:

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RT - Romanian revolt: Shadow of bloody uprising:

http://www.dailymotion.com/video/xupazs_romanian-revolt-shadow-of-bloody-uprising_news (min. 11:46-12:12)

Sexy Vlog #7_ Sex Education, Same Sex Marriage, Abortion, Contraception - by Liana

Buzea: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N6AhdeCTRIs>

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