

Images of the Romanian Society during the Early Years of Communism in the Memoirs and the Press Articles of Marius Mircu

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DUBBED “THE senior writer in Romanian from Israel,”¹ Marius Mircu ranks among the most prolific journalists, whose activity covers two centuries. Practical by nature, with a strong logic and emotionally well-balanced, a fine sense of humor, the journalist knew how to enjoy the beauty of life, which he described in vivid pictures.

He began his journey through life in Bacău, at the beginning of the 20th century (9 June 1909) in a modest family. Political restrictions (initially he wanted to become a doctor and for that he left for France to attend university there), but also the desire to discover the world took him to faraway lands (Algeria, Morocco, Madagascar, etc.). These journeys provided the raw material for his writings, igniting the imagination of his readers for whom such trips were impossible dreams in those days.

Marius Mircu enchanted his readers in the interwar period, which he thought was “a great multicolor holiday,” while later, against all restrictions, he continued to publish during WWII and under communism. In contrast to his volcanic interwar activity, the perception of the reporter on the journalistic landscape under communism is not flattering: “I lived through the press life of that time, but that was not white-water rafting, but rather on a pond.”² He kept on writing till the last moments of his life for more than 100 publications, like *Realitatea evreiască*, *Unirea*, *Revista cultului mozaic*, *Ziarul științelor și al călătoriiilor*, *Minimum*, *Revista magazin*, *Națiunea*, *Dimineața copiilor*, *Jurnalul copiilor*, *Viața capitalei*, *Universul*, *Gazeta*, etc. A simple glance at the variety of titles he published reveals the harmony in terms of his dual cultural identity, as his works appeared in both Romanian and Jewish publications. The fact that he had a dual cultural personality is reflected also in the nature of the pen names he used and which provide, as the writer put it, “an extra proof of total integration in the Romanian press, in the Romanian spirituality”³: B. Carmella, Dănuș, Carmella Marius Mircu, A. S. Mircu, I. Rosidor, I. Sever, I. Scarion, etc.⁴

The information provided by his books and articles describes a Romanian society of the 20th and 21st centuries dominated by the colonial spirit imposed by the Soviet

Union, as the national communist leaders were more concerned with catering to the new rulers of Eastern and Central Europe than with the welfare of their peoples. In this study we will analyze articles published in *Națiunea* (1946-1948) and *Jurnalul copiilor* (1946-1949), along with information found in *M-am născut reporter!* and *Dosar Ana Pauker*. It is our purpose to present some snippets of the communist regime seen through the eyes of the journalist and writer Marius Mircu, one of the Jews of Romanian extraction who spoke openly about Jews and their role in the establishment of communism in Romania, who disclosed the Jewish names of those who had their names changed and who had the honesty to admit that he was one of those who worked for the establishment of communism in Romania up to a certain moment.⁵ On the other hand, the involvement of minorities influenced “the ideological content of the party competition”.⁶ A reporter par excellence, he was right in the middle of these events as they were unfolding. The public meeting organized by the National Democratic Front on 24 February 1945 remained engraved in his memory as “one of the greatest [...] ever held in the capital city,” while on 6 March 1945, when the Petru Groza government was installed, he “lived the euphoria of the street,” the moment “when this power was going to implement democratic changes, economic and social, to set the ground for the socialist revolution”. Apparently, the people were thrilled by the entrance of the Russian troops in Bucharest.⁷ Later on, though, he was going to admit that the people did not want a communist government, and that this was imposed by force in the presence of the army.⁸ As Mihai Cirjan noticed in the review to the book *The Left Side of History: World War II and the Unfulfilled Promise of Communism in Eastern Europe*, the lived-through politics combined with the personal experience offers a complex image of society, which may contribute to “better understanding the dynamics of developing a critical social movement in Eastern Europe today.”⁹

In the book dedicated to Ana Pauker, Marius Mircu portrays her as a romantic communist, kind and generous. He manages to do that by stitching together some circumstances in her private life. One example is her reaction to the news of the death of her husband, Marcel Pauker: “‘The news knocked her right out,’ [...] she couldn’t believe it, but she couldn’t afford to deny treason! She cried and shivered (something she never did), but in the end party duty won and, in tears, she made the report.”¹⁰

The minorities (Hungarian and Jewish) stepped into the limelight of politics as the traditional parties were balking at the idea to serve with the communists. Marius Mircu argues that this happened because the Romanian majority refused to cooperate with the communists, who needed broad support to consolidate their power and make it look legitimate. A possible explanation of the Jews’ attitude towards communism is that they hoped for a better life “as their salvation depended on the victory of anti-Hitler forces.”¹¹ Here it is a statement of Marius Mircu in regard to the involvement of the Jews in setting up a communist government: “They were called upon to help: they committed themselves, body and soul, with deep conviction that the implementation of communism will bring the Romanian people a better life. [...] Both in the first stage and in the second, many Jews saw it as a friend, and then they turned against it when it became toxic. The Jews embraced it as a mirage in its romantic stage of heroism, when it looked like the only way out of their misery of the large masses of all over the world.

They embraced it passionately, they died for it; but when the times became twisted and they were kicked out, they passed it on to the Romanians, or other promising people.”¹² The author confirms that those close to the party were also the beneficiaries of some privileges that came with the job, himself included: leadership positions (secretary general at *Națiunea*; editor at *Jurnalul copiilor*, deputy editor-in-chief at *Pionierul*), no hurdles in publishing his works, and prime housing in central Bucharest. Raphael Vago explains the inability of the communists to integrate the Jews into the new regime, the Jewish leaders being considered “cosmopolitan” and consequently “purged as unfit to enjoy the benefits of living in a new Romania.”¹³

The negative reaction of the population to communism was the reason for a massive political propaganda, which was used for two reasons: to consolidate their power and to control the public opinion. They implemented different strategies in order to achieve their objectives.¹⁴ Even an experienced journalist like Marius Mircu bought into it: “On 5 March 1953 the sky turned dark in plain daylight, as if a total eclipse of the sun had hit a great part of the world: it was announced that Joseph Vissarionovich Stalin was dead. I was so indoctrinated [...]; I was convinced that the end of the world had come and that mankind would not survive without Him.” But almost immediately he remembered the time when the monarchy had been abolished, and when people “worried in silence,” but just a year later he saw that “people had gotten used to it, they had totally forgotten about the monarchy, the country didn’t perish; on the contrary, it had begun to flourish...”¹⁵ A primary target of the manipulation were the children. The materials published in *Jurnalul copiilor* had to match perfectly the direction and goals set by the communist leadership. The children were supposed to learn that “only those who work deserve to live and reap the joys of life,” but also that all working people are equal without any discrimination.¹⁶ Generally, children were kept off the beaten path during the election campaigns, but more often than not they were asked to contribute. The idea was that “educated people in this country have the duty to convince all those who were still in doubt to be part of the elections”. The catchwords used in this ploy were chosen to have a big impact on the conscience of the young, like “heroes,” “records,” “your forces are very important,” “we challenge all readers”.¹⁷ In his memoirs *M-am născut reporter!*, Marius Mircu inserts propaganda messages, eulogizing the sacrifice, initiative, and dedication of the communist party: “They set out without hesitation toward new, immediate objectives: the alliance with the anti-Hitlerian forces and the democratization of the country,” or “again the communist party pushed to stimulate evolution. [...] the Romanian Communist Party becomes the dominant political force in the country, engaging in the great battle against oppression and exploitation, for a truly democratic regime and the socialist transformation of the country.”¹⁸

Marius Mircu presents the image of a society in disarray, underdeveloped, with a large poor population, a country in great need of urgent reforms. Apparently, the communists were working to provide a minimum level of survival, intensely promoting the egalitarian principles. They established the Service for Social Assistance, whose employees were supposed to evaluate and help those with limited resources. The shortcomings of this service and its lack of professionalism are the topics of a series of articles, *Among the heroes of the winter*.... The heroes were the poor people. Some of them were so

poor, they couldn't afford the pen and paper to write their petitions.¹⁹ The lack of information on these social issues is in total contrast to the boisterous propaganda eulogizing the progress of the regime. Knowing that the citizens had no idea how to apply, the journalist writes a comprehensive article, explaining the whole process.²⁰ Unfortunately, most of the applicants couldn't read or write.²¹

Public transportation was one of the nightmares people had to put up with daily. Grossly underequipped and understaffed, plagued by power blackouts and frequent mechanical breakdowns, the public transportation system topped the list of dysfunctions under communism. In postwar Romania, while paying war reparations to the Soviet Union, amid widespread poverty and the chaos created in the economy due to the nationalization of the industries, the only way to get to work for meager wages was public transportation, which was not only an adventure; it was scary, "one of the most frightening adventures."²² An aspect that shouldn't be ignored was the attitude of adults toward children. Getting on a bus at rush-hour time was like winning a wrestling match, in which children were treated as adults.²³ The struggle to get on a bus is no excuse for the adults' behavior, as Marius Mircu seems to suggest, saying that such a trip "tended to change people's social manners": "People riding the bus get some sort of a fever once on board until they get off [...]. As proof we can say that seconds after they get off they become the same people, nice and polite, but the fever comes back again, in the afternoon when the battle begins anew."²⁴ With great humor, the journalist announces the solution of the authorities: to hire more conductors, responsible for pushing the people up into buses. What was going to happen when passengers had to get off at stops was anybody's guess. Thus, the journalist suggests that some staff should be hired, "strong, muscular men—preferably from the champion wrestling team"—about four for every stop—to stay on the bus, in charge with pushing people off at stops.²⁵

Keeping the city streets clean is another issue that comes up even in articles dedicated to other topics (travel impressions, for example). This series reveals the foibles of the sewer system that, in combination with inadequate sanitation, made city life unbearable because of the dust in the summer time and flooded streets in the rest of the seasons. He quips that mother nature is lending a hand to authorities when during floods that rendered the streets impassible, a sudden freeze returned the streets to daily traffic as the water froze and, in the spring, when the ice melted, instead of unclogging the sewers, the authorities waited for the water to be removed by pedestrians who carried it on their shoes either home or elsewhere.²⁶ A good example came from the city of Iași, whose mayor had the ambition of making his city the Capital of Romania, and had set up a "cleaning month," while, ironically, in Bucharest, the mayor had declared a "dirty month."²⁷

In postwar Romania, the communist government faced a serious problem: an unprecedented rise in crime. Most articles dealt with petty crime, committed by beggars, scammers, and corrupt people. One of the very common tactics to get to the hearts of passers-by was to use children as runners of the scam. For example, a girl used to impress people by crying that she had lost the money for her mother's medication and she was afraid to go home.²⁸ This was going on all over the country, under the eyes of the law

enforcement. This was the case of a man in Iași whom a fortune-teller talked into leaving his family claiming his destiny was to be with another woman.²⁹ If some of these crooks were acting out of vice, there were people who did it out of desperation, driven solely by survival instincts. Take, for example, the case of a man in Bacău who robbed a store with a toy gun wanting a loaf of bread, but tried to pay for it with ration stamps instead of money.³⁰

A few words on how the justice system worked in those days are enough to understand the authorities' inability to tackle the crisis: not enough judges and understaffed courts, which had to handle huge numbers of cases, skillful defense lawyers who dragged cases forever on technicalities, and trials that lasted even 12 years.³¹

Some of the most important topics in the Romanian society of those times are the drought in Moldova and the famine that followed it, and the government-ordered literacy campaign. The government-driven campaign to eradicate illiteracy was publicized by the media. *Jurnalul copiilor* was engaged in it: "We should have a lot more schools and a lot more teachers so that all children could learn, and every man in this country should know how to read, write and count."³² Poverty forced schools to recycle books, children were asked to use them carefully because at the end of the year they had to be passed on to the next generation.³³ Printing three million books was a clear sign that the government was very serious about illiteracy.³⁴ Bringing children to school for free was not necessarily an act of charity. In order to sell propaganda, people must know how to read and write. The Ministry of Education issued new norms to stimulate learning, included benefits such as "tax exempt higher education, stipends, free room and board in student dormitories, and admission in universities without proficiency tests!"³⁵ This way students from poor families got the chance to move up into the world. As a result the Romanian families went through a process of complete transformation (structures, functions, gender roles, etc.).³⁶

In spite of rampant poverty and disease, the population of Romania held on to its Christian values. A success story was the massive campaign to help Moldavia, stricken by postwar poverty, a cause embraced by adults and children. The population there was so poor that they got to eat things never heard of, such as weed paste or acorns, corn stalks or borscht made from chestnut tree leaves or beets.³⁷ Children also helped by donating their pocket money made during the "trick or treat" season³⁸ and from their piggy-banks.³⁹ An article tending towards propaganda tries to push the image of a united society, with no conflict among minorities, like the Magyars in Transylvania, who, in spite of their inability to speak Romanian, "were happy to offer comforting love to the children from Moldavia." Once the breadbasket of Europe, Romania was in such a big trouble that it had to import food: corn from America and "wheat from our soviet neighbor, Russia" where "he had seen so many wonders."⁴⁰

Even in hard times, people were able to keep a modest level of comfort and entertainment. Besides the quality of an actor's performance, both the organization and the behavior of spectators left a lot to be desired. Marius Mircu listed some of the problems: the shows never started on schedule, and the spectators were never seated before the play started.⁴¹ Other alternatives to spending one's free time were the public parks and swimming pools, 80 in total, private or public.⁴² Cișmigiu Gardens was depicted

as a fairy tale landscape “clad in an immaculate white [...] picturesque and magnificent, classy and silent, rain or shine.”⁴³ The residents of the outskirts of Bucharest were not that lucky. Because the Capital was booming with construction, the children’s playgrounds were shrinking every day. The front or backyard of their homes had become their playgrounds, which often were filthy due to the garbage dumped there.

For closing arguments we would like to quote Marius Mircu, who, in 2001, almost a quarter century after the fall of communism, said: “Do I plead for communism? No. But not against it either. I barely know it. Very little. And I’m not the only one.... I know it from theory. It wasn’t given a chance to show its virtues or not. Communism was not compromised. Compromised are those who snatched it.”⁴⁴

Conclusions

IN HIS works, Marius Mircu outlines the image of a politicized country, in which of utmost importance was the manipulation of the public opinion, a country with severe social problems, like the poor quality of social services: social assistance, public transportation, inefficient justice system, sanitation, public recreation parks, illiteracy, disease, poverty and a spiritual crisis generated by the transition to a new system. Education, one of the government’s priorities, was supposed to churn out generation after generation of loyal party followers, but something went wrong along the line and, in 1989, the people of Romania chose to change course at any cost.

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Notes

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2. Marius Mircu, *Am visat că sunt scriitor* (Bat-Yam: Glob, 2002), p. 19.
3. Ibid, p. 37.
4. Mihail Straje, *Dicționar de pseudonime, alonime, anagrame, asteronime, criptonime ale scriitorilor și publiciștilor români* (Bucharest: Minerva, 1973), p. 573.
5. Marius Mircu, *M-am născut reporter!* (Bucharest: Cartea Românească, 1981), p. 470.
6. Jan Rovny, *Communism, Federalism, and Ethnic Minorities Explaining Party Competition Patterns in Eastern Europe*, in *World Politics*, vol. 66, issue 4, October 2014, p. 669-+.
7. Marius Mircu, *M-am născut reporter!*, p. 477-481.
8. Marius Mircu, *Ana Pauker și epoca ei*, (Bat Yam, Horodnic de Jos: Glob, “Ion Prelipcean,” 2001), p. 133.
9. Mihai-Dan Cirjan, *The Left Side of History: World War II and the Unfulfilled Promise of Communism in Eastern Europe*, in *European Review Of History*, vol. 23, issue 1-2, p. 227-228, special issue: SI.
10. Marius Mircu, *Ana Pauker*, p. 111.
11. Ibid., p. 129.
12. Ibid., p. 3-4.

13. Rapahael Vago, *The Unexpected Cosmopolitans – Romania’s Jewry facing the Communist System*, in *European Review of Jewish History*, 2010, vol. 17, issue 3, p. 491-504.
14. Ute Michailowitsch, *Propaganda and Censorship in Socialist Romania: Structures and Efficiency*, in *Transylvanian Review*, vol. 24, issue 1, spring 2015, p. 3-15.
15. Marius Mircu, *M-am născut reporter!*, p. 510.
16. J., *Cel mai frumos întâi mai*, in *Jurnalul copiilor cu știri din toată lumea*, Year I, no. 4, 3 May 1947, p. 1-2.
17. *Cititorii noștri iau parte la campania electorală*, in *Jurnalul copiilor*, Year II, no. 49, 20 March 1948, p. 1.
18. Marius Mircu, *M-am născut reporter!*, p. 475-477.
19. Mihail Bistrițeanu, *“Fost” student la litere... Cedez loc la ușa unei biserici! Domnul director are treabă*, in *Națiunea*, Year II, no. 243, 13 January 1947, p. 1-4.
20. Marius Mircu, *Ce nu știu mulți dintre cetățenii nevoiași ai Capitalei. “Se acordă: lapte, lemne, ajutoare în bani...”*, in *Națiunea*, Year II, no. 245, 16 January 1947, p. 1-2.
21. Marius Mircu, *Un petiționar orb până acum câteva zile... O femeie a adus un inger bolnav... De șapte ori pe masa de operație*, in *Națiunea*, Year II, no. 244, 15 January 1947, p. 1-2.
22. Mihail Bistrițeanu, *Dar dacă n-ar exista tramvai?*, in *Națiunea*, Year I, no. 219, 9 December 1946, p. 1.
23. J. C., *Copiii întârzie la școală din pricina tramvaiului*, in *Jurnalul copiilor*, Year I, no. 32, 15 November 1947, p. 1.
24. Mihail Bistrițeanu, *Tramvaiul cu afurisiți*, in *Națiunea*, Year I, no. 227, 19 December, 1946, p. 1.
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26. Mihail Bistrițeanu, *Copiii învață geologia ... pe zăpada din București!*, in *Națiunea*, Year II, no. 273, 20-21 February 1947, p. 1-2.
27. Mihail Bistrițeanu, *O altfel de “Luna”*, in *Națiunea*, Year II, no. 296, 19 March 1947, p. 1.
28. Marius Mircu, *Sute de femei cărora le-au “fugit” bărbații ...*, in *Națiunea*, Year II, no. 246, 17 January 1947, p. 1-4.
29. Marius Mircu, *Se poate ghici viitorul!*, in *Națiunea*, Year II, no. 345, 22 May 1947, p. 1.
30. Mihail Bistrițeanu, *Un hoț cu cartelă*, in *Națiunea*, Year I, no. 218, 8 December 1946, p. 1.
31. Marius Mircu, *Procese care durează ani de zile... “Lipsa de proceduri”*, în *Națiunea*, Year II, no. 363, 14 June 1947, p. 1-3.
32. *Câte școli, câți învățători și câți școlari sunt în România*, in *Jurnalul copiilor*, Year I, no. 10, 14 June 1947, p. 1.
33. J., *Ce faceți cu cărțile de școală?*, în *Jurnalul copiilor*, Year I, no. 10, 14 June 1947, p. 1.
34. *Pentru noul an școlar*, în *Jurnalul copiilor*, Year I, no. 25, 27 September 1947, p. 1.
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37. Mihail Bistrițeanu, *Știți cine e Domnu’Cars?*, in *Națiunea*, Year II, no. 318, 13 April 1947, p. 3.
38. Mihail Bistrițeanu, *Interviul cu cinci copii de Anul Nou*, in *Națiunea*, Year II, no. 236, 4 January 1947, p. 1-4.
39. Mihail Bistrițeanu, *Știți cine e Domnu’Cars?*, in *Națiunea*, Year II, no. 318, 13 April 1947, p. 3.
40. Marius Mircu, *1000 de copii nătați cu trenul*, in *Jurnalul copiilor cu știri din toată lumea*, Year I, no. 1, 12 April 1947, p. 1-2; Marius Mircu, *Trimis special. Din amintirile unui journalist* (Bucharest: Cartea Românească, 1974), p. 239-240.

41. m., *Nu mai merg la Național*, in *Națiunea*, Year I, no. 172, 10 October 1946, p. 1.
42. Marius Mircu, *O zi la strandul Ciurel...*, in *Națiunea*, Year II, no. 380, 4 July 1947, p. 1-3.
43. Mihail Bistrițeanu, *Împărăția poezilor din... Cîșmigiu*, in *Națiunea*, Year II, no. 254, 27-28 January 1947, p. 1-3.
44. Marius Mircu, *Ana Pauker*, p. 4.

Abstract

Images of the Romanian Society during the Early Years of Communism in the Memoirs and the Press Articles of Marius Mircu

The period of communism was a time of contradictions. Some of the Jews saw in the establishment of communism the opportunity to start a new life. Marius Mircu was among those who cooperated, in the beginning, with the Communist Party, leaving to posterity an impressive volume of documents. Born in 1909, he began his publishing activity at age 16 and only his passing away stopped him from writing. A disputed volume is the one dedicated to Ana Pauker, in which the author outlines a positive image of the controversial communist leader, insisting on her kindness. The purpose of this study is to reveal the way Marius Mircu perceived the communist society from the point of view of a Romanian-Jewish journalist.

Keywords

Communism, Romanian society, Marius Mircu, image, Jews