TRAVELLING BACK HOME

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Abstract

Scenographer, architect, gastrosopher, Sergiu Singer settled in Germany in the sixties. He returned after 1990, in constant travels to Bucharest, the city of some beautiful memories. He wrote about the city and took photos of the old buildings, publishing the books "Lavandă şi usturoi" [*Lavender and Garlic*] and "Pioneze şi hârtie albastră" [*Push Pins and Blue Paper*]. He travelled back to a city that once was his home and saw the world here through the eyes of his present, as well as through the eyes of his past. The distance between his memories and what he rediscovered is huge. And, though, something survived from the older day city. Hence, the travel was not only as a journey in space, but also a journey in time, to a world that no longer existed and that he rebuilt from cracks. Architectural, culinary cracks, commonplace or special memories.

Keywords: *Sergiu Singer, architecture, Bucharest, Germany, collage*.

I met Sergiu Singer in 2003, through a book. The volume had an interesting title, it was called *Lavandă şi usturoi sau murmurul caselor [Lavender and Garlic or Whisper of The Houses]*, it came to my hands by chance, in a way, Adriana Bittel had given it to me to write, if I liked it, a review on it. And I liked it a lot. It was an interesting book, a very interesting blend, which I never met before, a collage which brought something new: an object-book. I quote a fragment from the review I wrote then:

"I cannot decide if the juxtaposition of words – lavender and garlic – in the title of Sergiu Singer's book, which has just been published by Curtea Veche, is an oxymoron or a perfect compatibility, which becomes almost natural when the subject is used to the abutment and conciliation of contrasts – Bucharest between the two world wars, the reality and fiction of the memory, reconstructed in the pages of the book from words, present and past images, and, especially from

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culinary temptations. Because two laws mix in an pleasant way in the book. The laws of memory and the laws of cuisine. The formula is simple; the blend has a spontaneous refinement. A memory, going back to the years before world war two or immediately after it, years of the author's childhood and youth, and a recipe, connected to each other by the fact that the memory is also the story of finding the recipe, and, in a Proustian manner, the recipe is one of the ingredients of the memory. But you cannot say which the purpose is and which the pretext is. At the mid of this indecision subtly kept in the book, the image of a city with a discreet and diffuse charm appears, hesitating, just like the memory, between reality and fiction. "Bucharest – as Sergiu Singer says – is charming, and the secret of this long-lasting charm is deeply hidden. Trying to unveil this secret, you discover first an unusual light, which colours the trees and the roofs, overflowing on all the plans and giving flowers a magical glow".

Reality means a city that we all know, with buildings that are easy to recognize in the photographs of the book, fiction is gradually created from the juxtaposition of the pieces of reality. The memory rediscovers people and characters – the grandmother and the recipe book, Miss Filoteia, the one who finally puts on the author's menu the buckwheat soup, Vasile Palologu, the doorkeeper at the faculty, Mr. Apostolescu, an old high-toned bookseller... They are all brought in the book by a culinary memory and they all leave a recipe in the book. The reader discovers the gastronomic preferences of Sergiu Singer. A boyar-like taste for food, one might say, because elaborated recipes, smelling French refinery, and primitive recipes, improvised in an autochthonous spirit, but not lacking the Balkan pomp of preparation, with a spectacular taste and an unforgettable memory are put together naturally, without the hold-back always implied by a contrast. There is also something boyar-like in the gesture of telling the story. The pleasure of telling it, easily letting the reader guess the pleasure of listening, then the look that feels good at home, discovering after tens of years of absence that, despite all faults, the city did not change essentially. Is this discovery a reality or fiction? The construction technique that the author, an architect and scenographer, chooses is the collage. A romantic collage is the ideal he reveals on the first page, believing it is a sort of "making an artistic retransmission and by no means a copy without interpretation". The face of Bucharest is made up of faces of people, places, buildings, overlapping of ages, once real and changed by the laws of memory at their discretion. The city of Sergiu Singer has something of the conquering power, and also of the lack of tangibility of the smell of a well-cooked dish.

Shortly after the review was published, I got a phone call. It was the author who, although he has settled in Germany for some years, was in Romania. He had read the review and he wanted to meet me to have a cup of coffee together. About the author, I only knew what I had found out from the book, and the presentation made by Andrei Pleşu in the preface he had the

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ability to inhibit me at a first meeting, but, at the same time, to awake my interest: "the author is, in this case, much more than his own book: it was a pleasure to meet him, like the effigy of a type of humanity without which history would become uglier and life would fade. A distinguished man of the world without twig, refined without affectation, voluptuous, sentimental and ironic, Sergiu Singer has a therapeutic effect on his companion: he revitalizes the soul and rebuilds confidence in the future of the planet. With men like him, we could all live humanly…"

Several meetings with Sergiu Singer followed, with interesting dialogues, on his life experience in Germany and on the years before leaving Romania. I remember that, at our first meeting, he was somehow under the impression that he would meet an elder gentleman who closely knew, maybe even directly, the time that he described, and not someone who had just graduated faculty. He used to travel – he still travels – a lot to Romania, at least twice a year, and, for a while, he taught, as a guest professor, courses of scenography. As he confessed to me, Germany still remains home for him, he has been living there for more than 50 years.

Sergiu Singer was born in Ploieşti, in 1928. He studied architecture in Bucharest with well-known professors and he graduated in 1954. While he was a student, he met some of the Romanian avant-garde representatives and got close to them. After graduating the faculty, he worked in the field of theatre scenography, poster and book graphics. He was an employee of Toma Caragiu at Ploieşti State Theater and he received, as early as his first scenery, an important award. He participated in the UNESCO contest for the scenography of Hamlet in Paris and he was awarded a mention. A few years later, after he left the country, he found out, during a trip to Paris, that the money related to such award was taken by the communist state on his behalf. In 1962, he became a member of the Union of Architects, of the Union of Plastic Artists and he was employed as a scenographer at the Youth Theatre in Bucharest. He left Romania in 1963, for Federal Germany. Two years later, he made his debut in the Weisbaden Festival, after which he had collaborations with all the important theatres in Germany: Berlin, Frankfurt, Hamburg, Göttigen, Hanover, Oberhausen, Köln. From 1962, he expanded his activity to film and television. Then, from 1974, he opened a small romantic restaurant in Bremen, which was shortly after included in the Michelin guide. From 1986, he returned to architecture where he has used his experience gained in scenography for ingenious architectural projects.

The author admitted during our first meeting that his intention was not to recover an epoch through culinary memories, and that he has just written some texts, starting from his first journeys back to Romania, without the intention of publishing them, after seeing again Bucharest – following years of separation – and took photographs of the houses he remembered from the sixties. A literary critic, who also settled in Germany, was delighted with the result and encouraged him to publish the book. It was a photographic, literary and also a sentimental journey to a Bucharest which no longer existed.

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A few years later, Sergiu Singer published a novel, starting from the same principle, of collage. *Pioneze şi hârtie albastră* [*Push Pins and Blue Paper*] is a novel like a theatre play, where the scenery plays the role of the hero, and the heroes play the part of extras. Faces of people, places, buildings, which were once real, maybe, build up a fictional collage. *Pioneze şi hârtie albastră* tells the story of the ephemeral charm of the years before the war and of the fall which followed. There is always a house in the centre of the book. Many characters appear, unwillingly caught in a story that we may call History. A history schematized to a certain point, outside an exact chronology, even caricaturized here and there and, thus, tamed, exorcised of perception prejudices. The years between the two world wars, idealized at maximum, become frenetic, naive and pink. And the years of the fall after the war, seen by the eyes of a young man who came out of an "idyllic" teenage, are lived... well, however, although at that time people lived badly. The perfect summary of the book – ironic, cheerful and sad at the same time – is the long list of characters at the end of the novel.

> "In the end – as Cătălin Sturza writes about the novel –, Sergiu Singer has the courage of writing what was absent from our literature: a comprehensive novel of the communist period, seen from beyond the curtain which felt in 1989. He gathers details, makes atmosphere, throws in the game insipid characters who are always careful to keep their moral label at sight and leaves place for a single tri-dimensional protagonist: history, with its accidents and surprises. *Pioneze şi hârtie albastră* is a museum on the move, with living voices, images and happenings, which offers the viewer a show with an unexpected opening to the attic with forgotten things of the past. They may be seen, touched, moved from their place, while the wave of fiction unnoticeably wipes the dust of history."

On books and their construction, on Bucharest, the years of the war and the journey back, I discussed with Sergiu Singer in an interview recorded a little before the publication of the novel.

> *Cătălin D. Constantin*:
> "Here you are, again in Romania."
>
> *Sergiu Singer*:
> "I came at my usual pace. It's an interior time. I am working on a novel. It's the story of some characters from Romania of that time. It's the story of a house, of a family. A character who lives the years before the war, the war and the following period. But it's no good to explain the novel... It's not a biographical novel, but, of course, it is impossible not to include in it something of what I lived."
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> *Cătălin D. Constantin*:
> "How was life after the war?"
>
> *Sergiu Singer*:
> "Good, up to a certain point. This is an interesting thing. Because I also write about what happened after the war, trying to recall the things as they were and I realize

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that I did not had a bad living. I lived well ... living bad, because others were living even worse than me. I know that misfortunes happened, but they happened there, somewhere, and I am not the only one saying this. At a certain point, I had a discussion with Mircea Dinescu who was telling me about what happened in his neighbourhood, but no one was arrested in his neighbourhood. In my neighbourhood, some people were arrested... but this did not concern me to such a great extent. Life went on, with joys, sadness. My emotions back then were the emotions of a teenager, of a young man who starts to grow up. My priorities were different from those of my father, of my grandfather, who lived well before the war, aware of the fact that they were living well. A good bourgeois life. A family life and a life of families. But not a life of clique. The clique appeared after the war, there were also cliques before, but not in the post-war meaning, but a sort of *club*. People went there to meet. There was a pleasure of living well."

Cătălin D. Constantin:
"How was it in Ploieşti?"

Sergiu Singer:
"It was a town with gardens, with beautiful buildings, with a quiet life, it had its atmosphere, but also its troubles... which came from the oil. This is what I can remember, like in a mist, because I was a child then. I remember a peasant riding a nag who was throwing money around him. On his piece of land, which he had near Mislea, he found oil overnight. The land was immediately bought and he threw the money on the road. They used to get rich overnight and until the next day at noon they lost everything...

It was a family of merchants. My grandfather was in Berlin for many years, where he started as a roundsman and then be became a great merchant."

Cătălin D. Constantin:
"And after the war?"

Sergiu Singer:
"After the war I remained here for almost 20 years, but I felt them in a strange way. I felt that I was left alone. Everybody around me was leaving, for one reason or another. And I always had to decide alone. My parents had left. They told me to come, but the decision had to be mine. In that period "one paid for the animals per kilo". For a long time, I did not want to leave... The years when I was accused of having relatives abroad, when I was told that I am not trustworthy were gone. However, I made the decision with a lot of difficulty. Of course, there was also a certain psychosis. But it was a good thing to do. The story was a little different. I had snapped at a guy who was growing very fast. A guy who became very important. Once, a guy came at the architecture faculty – a guy who babbled... I told him something nasty. He probably would never remembered that, but all the persons who were present would, which was worse than if he remembered himself. Then I said to myself: This is the moment to leave.

When I came back to Romania, after the revolution, I did not come alone. Not because I was afraid… I don't even know why ... I came with a friend who wanted to see what was happening here, a friend who was a little younger and then I left as I came: quickly! It was '93. Back then, things were not good here, neither bad, but I saw the offscourings flying before my eyes. But I realized what a beautiful city Bucharest was. I knew that, but I understood that its inhabitants forgot it. Probably because they felt that it no longer belonged to them."

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Cătălin D. Constantin:
"Of course, the differences were huge."

Sergiu Singer:
"Differences? Far cry! I was discovering the old city... These old houses will disappear, I said to myself, no one has the money to restore them and, even if they had the money, my opinion as an architect is that – and I love them – there's no use restoring them, they no longer fit to the nowadays requirements. I took pictures and I know how to take pictures, I have a big archive, it is part of my professional training. But I did not want to make a simple album. I thought of putting a photograph with the entire history of the house. But it was too much. Then, the idea suddenly occurred to me, each house was in a way connected to a culinary memory and, then, I decided to tell the memory and, afterwards, to present the recipe. And that's how the book was born, a book, which, at first, I did not want to write myself. I talked to a friend of mine who could write it beautifully but, why hiding, he was lazy. Or maybe he didn't want to. And, one good morning – I had bought myself a computer and learned how to use it – I took one of the pictures and I wrote something. The first sketch. It was not great. I wrote one, I wrote two... I wrote about ten. And then I sent them to someone to read them and I had no answer. Someone who knew how to read... And one night, around two o'clock, he called me, told me that he was reticent at opening my envelope, because he received a lot of poems from people. He opened it at around 6-7 o'clock and he called me after midnight, as soon as he finished them: Keep writing, he told me!

The book is an object. This is what I always made: objects. When I was a scenographer, as well as when I was an architect. And of this book I made something that I wanted all my life: a collage of memories with a certain chronology, but not a perfect one, but which I think colours the past – each man has, for a certain period, a colour and a song."

Cătălin D. Constantin:
"Which is the field that best defines you – architecture, scenography, gastrosophy?"

Sergiu Singer:
"I do not have a profession. I worked in theatre, film, television, graphics, I was a dishwasher, I had a restaurant, I sold carpets – for one week – but I quickly realized that it was not a job for me. Every ten years, I changed by job. Probably, it was half my will, half chance. I say that there is a job that is mine: scenographer. In the broader sense of the word. A scenographer is a person who draws up the scene, prepares the scene. For this reason, I had problems with the directors. I do not believe that Shakespeare's words are better heard in nice costumes than in underpants. I don't say that it cannot be done, I do not think that it serves the purpose. Scenography is a thing that does not only deal with theatre. The film, television and architecture that I made were scenography. In the end, life is scenography."

Life is scenography. The scenography of a life took Sergiu Singer to Germany, where he had professional performances and where he was and is at home. When he talks about Bucharest, he talks about a different kind of home, a past tense home, a past tense of memories. But also at the present time, upon each journey back, home.

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