WOMEN'S EVERYDAY LIFE IN COMMUNIST ROMANIA: CASE STUDIES[1]

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Abstract

Communist ideology and propaganda targeted women with their emancipation campaign. Women were portrayed as the embodiment of progress, as the primary force in the modernization of the country. Their daily life was meant to illustrate the achievements of women under the communist regime. However, the propaganda rarely fitted the reality. My paper aims to show the real life of women during communism as perceived by the women after the fall of this regime in Romania. It will focus on several aspects of women's daily life, such as education, work, family and leisure, in order to underline the gains and the losses (in terms of rights and achievements) experienced by women. The paper analyses 20 interviews I have conducted between 2015 and 2018 in Bucharest and in several other towns of Romania.

Keywords: *gender equality*; *state propaganda*; *communism*; *daily life*; *individual recollections.*

Introduction: Women's Status during Communism in Romania

No sooner did the Communists come to power in Romania than they made women the main target of their modernization campaign (Cârstocea 2003: 123). In view of their long history of legal and social discrimination, women

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were regarded as a social group in need of protection and emancipation. Lost in all this was the history of Romanian feminism, which had been an important presence during the interwar era, both domestically and especially internationally. The feminist associations disappeared; everything they had achieved was lost. In their place came the Women's Democratic Union (March 1948), which in 1957 became the Women's National Council (Cioroianu 2005: 79).

Gender equality became the regime's new watchword. This was reflected in legislation about voting rights and in the new Codes regulating family and labor. The full equality between men and women as regards the right to vote and to be elected in all state and party offices was enshrined in the 1948 Constitution, together with the principle of equal pay, including equality in terms of accessing vacations, retirement plans, and so on. Unfortunately, the undemocratic nature of the regime meant that all this legislation soon rang hollow. Legal emancipation became void of any real substance, owing to the communist way of life (Miroiu 1998: 253).

The misogynistic outlook of the Communist cadres not only hampered the legislative efforts for emancipation, but also took a toll on the social roles ascribed to women. Ultimately, women's path to emancipation ran through the traditional professional choices: chiefly the textile industry and the education and health sectors. Women continued to work predominantly under male superiors (Cârstocea 2003: 128). This narrow outlook on gender equality has been studied by Călin Morar-Vulcu in a discourse analysis of the articles published between 1956 and 1959 in the party's theoretical journal, *The Class Struggle* (*Lupta de clasă*). Women were encouraged to dedicate themselves to the education of the children and the care for the elderly. Their special skills in cooking, fashion, agriculture, and propaganda were highlighted (Morar-Vulcu 2002: 199). In sum, the party's view on women was that they were good at cooking, sewing, child rearing, and caring for the sick. Women also seemed destined for propaganda work, on the assumption that they were naturally talkative and shallow. For women, the party recommended such jobs as textile worker, teacher, nurse, and farmer. The feminization of agriculture became even clearer during the communist regime. This led to the perpetuation of traditional stereotypes about women, despite the communist egalitarian theories, as shown by Gail Kligman's research in Maramureş in the 1980s (Kligman 2005: 44).

For propaganda purposes, however, the communist achievements in gender equality were blown out of all proportion. Women were depicted as the embodiment of progress – driving tractors, piloting aircraft, and operating technologically advanced machinery. A few women even occupied leadership positions, holding such important offices as representative in the National Assembly or cabinet minister. Thus, at first glance, the equality looked real. In fact, research has shown that the communist emancipation of women was but 'a different kind of serfdom, doubled by self-deception' (Cernat 2001: 116).

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During this first, internationalist stage of the communist regime, the role models drawn from the communist social imaginary were meant to show women the path to progress. The models most actively promoted included the woman worker dedicated to the party, the persecuted Communist militant, and the androgynous heroine fallen in the line of duty, e.g., while piloting a war plane. In the communist imaginary, such women held the promise of undermining the bourgeois social structure by transgressing traditional social roles. The communist androgynous woman transcended biological constraints through her strength of character. The communist iconography became dominated by asexual adolescents that illustrated through their bodies the ideal of gender equality.

Ana Pauker, Romania's minister of foreign affairs, was the incarnation of the woman activist who dedicated both body and mind to the Communist Party (Pasca Harsanyi 1993: 42). Her official portrayal as an idealistic and asexual Communist made her the perfect example of the emancipated woman who sacrificed her private life in order to help build the new society (Petre 1998: 260). This epitomized what the party asked of women: to transgress gender roles and change society by renouncing the values of the traditional family.

The literature and art of the 1950s were enlisted in the effort to destroy the traditional family through women's emancipation. The novels and particularly the plays written at the time – since theatre was perceived as more effective in shaping public opinion – actively promoted the communist values. School textbooks also played their part in the communist effort to change Romanian society. Among the models fed to schoolgirls was Zoia Kosmodemianskaia, the extraordinary woman pilot who fought the Nazis. The Communists' love of Kosmodemianskaia went as far as naming streets and high schools after her. Ceaușescu even named his daughter after her.

Women fighters remained particularly popular all the way to the end of the communist regime. Romanian women were expected to identify with these historic figures, whose profile was adjusted to suit the regime's evolving needs. One such character was inherited from the interwar period: Ecaterina Teodoroiu, the virgin heroine (as her tombstone described her) (Bucur 2000: 46), was memorialized as a Romanian Joan of Arc – a comparison explicitly drawn by General Berthelot (Avram 2005: 111). During Ceauşescu's regime, this woman soldier was immortalized in the film 'Ecaterina, the Heroine of the River Jiu Battle'. Taking their cue from the interwar imaginary, the communist textbooks turned Teodoroiu into what one researcher has called 'a cyborg avant la lettre' (Manolescu 2005: 293).

Much has changed in communist policy during its forty-four-year oppressive reign over Romania. Episodes of state-run terror were succeeded by a period of relative liberalization; finally, the Soviet-inspired internationalist phase made room to nationalism, influenced in part by the interwar extreme

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right. By the 1960s, as the regime became more nationalist in tone, the earlier proletarian internationalism became obsolete. This shift in ideology and policies had a significant impact on the party's discourse on women: henceforth they would be viewed primarily as mothers.

The transition from the internationalist to the nationalist phase of Romanian communism can be seen clearly in the 1966 anti-abortion legislation. For Romanian women, it marked the moment when they lost to the state the control over their own bodies. This was accompanied by social discrimination: while women were destined to give birth and raise children, the state child-support subsidy was paid to the father (Pasti 2003:110).

During the period of national communism, when the woman-as-mother became the model stressed by party propaganda, the emphasis was not simply on raising exemplary children who as grownups would heroically defend the country, but by giving birth to numerous children, the mother would become herself the heroine. Her courage was shown by bringing into the world the many offspring on which the communist state relied for its advancement. Such heroic women, the mothers of several children, were to receive both praise and material rewards.

Women's daily life was meant to illustrate the achievements of women under the communist regime. However, the propaganda rarely fitted the reality. My paper tries to draw the picture of the real life led by women during communism. It will focus on several aspects of women's daily life such as education, work, family and leisure in order to underline the gains and the losses (in terms of rights and achievements) as perceived by women who experienced communism. Thus, my paper aims on the one hand to underline the difference between propaganda and reality as concerns gender equality, and on the other, to analyze women's perceptions of communism and its gendered policies.

Methodology

My interviews with women from Timișoara, Brașov, Târgu Mureș, Călărași, and Bucharest were conducted between 2015 and 2018. Bucharest is the capital of Romania, while Timișoara, Brașov and Târgu Mureș are major cities. Călărași is rather a small town, an agricultural and commercial hub[3]. Bucharest is a cosmopolitan city, while Timișoara, Brașov and Târgu Mureș are multi-cultural, multi-ethnic towns. All the towns I have chosen as research field were subjected to the same standardisation procedure by the communist regime, being transformed into industrial areas, an objective which brought about a change in the local ethnic composition, customs, traditions, inhabited perimeter.

[3] Before communism, Călărași also used to be a multi-ethnic town.

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Furthermore, the communist project of the standard urban settlement, industrialised and homogenised in terms of space, social life, culture, and human relations left its mark on the daily life of the inhabitants, but also on their perspective on communism.

When I have started my research in the framework of the project 'Regaining the future by rebuilding the past: women's narratives of life during Communism', I was helped to meet women by people knowing my expertise as a researcher in the field of memory studies with a special focus on political persecutions[4]. This has an important impact on my inquiry, as most of the women I have interviewed told me from the very beginning that they did not experience any persecutions and that they are not sure about theirs stories being of any interest! My particular approach to communism and life stories persuaded them, nevertheless, to open up for dialogue and reminisce! Due to my previous research interest, I ended up also interviewing women who were persecuted. Only few of the women whom I have interviewed were members of my family or close friends.

Furthermore, the majority of my interviews are done with women belonging to two cohorts (1939-1949; 1949-1959) and only few of them with women from cohorts 1959-1969 and 1970-1979. As I am born in 1977, we do not share the same experience of communism. I have experienced communism as a child, not even as a teenager! Therefore, women saw in me a researcher and someone that could have been their granddaughter or daughter. They felt the need to take up the role of grandparents/parents wishing to pass on a certain type of experience, but also to explain deeds and attitudes, to dramatize facts and figures, to explain themselves as well as to build through narration a life story of success and fulfilment as mothers and professionals in their respective fields.

The technique used during this research was the interview, based on a flexible questionnaire, flexible in terms of giving preference to dialogue and not to an interrogatory. The questionnaire provided me some points of discussion and not a mandatory plan to be followed. The witnesses had the liberty to present their life during communism according to their own narrative schema.

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[4] I have written extensively about women, former political detainees, discourses on communism and political persecutions in my Ph.D. thesis published under the title, *Vies menottées, paroles libérées. Témoignages des anciennes persécutées politiques roumaines*, Editions universitaires européennes, Saarbrücken, 2010 ; "Repression and Resistance. Women Remembering their Daily Life in Romanian Communist Prisons", 2012, in *Martor*, 17: 39-50; "Women Remembering Communism in Romania: Former Political Detainees Perspectives", in Kristina Popova and Nurie Muratova (eds.), 2011, *Women and Minorities Archives: Subjects of Archiving*, vol. 3, Blagoevgrad, pp. 42-58; "Ni héros, ni victime. La mise en patrimoine de la répression et les anciens persécutés politiques roumains", in Vincent Auzas, Bogumil Jewsiewicki (eds.), 2008, *Traumatisme collectif pour patrimoine. Regards sur un mouvement transnational*, Presses de l'Université Laval, Québec, pp. 331- 350, etc.

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Daily Life

Daily life belongs to the private sphere, in which stability, the natural, the familiar, habitual predominate and continuity in experiences, gestures, deeds and actions is preponderant. Daily life is, at the same time, the space in which the manifestations of dominant structures make their presence felt to a lesser degree. It is a place of intimacy which offers (or ought to offer) protection and security.

The communist regime has attempted and has succeeded – for the most part – to invade that space both at a subliminal level, through its ideology, and practically, through its various public policies. Controlling the private life of individuals was part and parcel of the social engineering meant to create the new man, the communist man, a communitarian individual, for whom collective accomplishments ought to have been more important than personal fulfilment. However, despite the attempt by authorities to wholly control the lives of individuals, resistance to domination has been a constant trait of daily life of Romanians throughout communism. During communism, not only double thinking, but also double existence was practiced (Boia 2016: 112), a parallel existence in which even prominent members of the Romanian Communist party found themselves.[5]

Initially, the invasion and control of the private sphere aimed to destroy the old world, the 'bourgeois' world, individualist, concerned with intimacy and focused on the needs of the individual. Annihilating it meant extracting individuals from their secure and familiar environment and throwing them into the unknown. The unknown could mean requisitioning a part of the family's residence, meaning that the family would be forced to share, depending on the size of the house, their intimate space with complete strangers, sometimes of outright dubious background; it could mean complete confiscation of the home, the owners being forced to find a new space to live in, most often in a limited amount of time (hours or days); it could mean deportation or, in the most unfortunate of cases, incarceration (Dobre 2018: 263).

Later, the meddling in the sphere of private life took on a tragic turn when the regime introduced legislation regarding reproduction. Decrees no. 770/1966, 53/1972, 411/1985, which outlawed abortions, with certain exceptions, as well as the measures to enforce said decrees have led to an increased presence of the political in the personal life of individuals, which spurred an even greater resistance in the private sphere against the domination imposed by the communist regime, sometimes with tragic consequences.

[5] Ceaușescu himself buried his parents according to Christian ritual, while most members of the nomenclature and party members continued to baptize their children, marry in Church, etc.

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The everyday life of women I have interviewed was focused primarily on their family, on the education of their children, on their work, and sometimes on leisure (as a means to meet friends and family). Analysing the interviews of my informants, I can argue that women took refuge in the household, in caring for their beloved one, in educating children. The private life gave them the stability, the comfort, and the satisfaction they could not achieve in the public sphere (despite the propaganda which advertised the opposite).

Family Life

Family was the center of all my informants' life. Parents were very much concerned with the education of their children. Traditions were kept, despite the difficulties while parties were held in order to celebrate religious holydays, birthdays or other family events or simply to meet friends. In the '80s, family represented also a means of survival, the members of the family contributing to the well-being of the household by queuing when necessary or visiting relatives in the countryside in order to receive food as an exchange for services or goods.

When speaking about women from the older generation, that is, the generation of their mothers, the interviewees informed me that, in most cases, they had attended high school or even university and had began their career before marriage. Nevertheless, in many cases they gave up work in order to dedicate their lives to raising their children and taking care of the family.

"My father came from a peasant family, he had healthy origins, and he was a railway technician. My mother came from a middle class family, she was actually an orphan raised by a rather wealthy family, my grandmother told me stories about her travels through Europe, to Paris, London, and I enjoyed imagining all those cities described by granny. My mother had to give up work in order to take care of me. … As my father earned a lot of money and my mother was a good housekeeper, we lived rather well. But I guess, my mother made a sacrifice to give up work"[6], recalls a woman from Brașov.

"I have always appreciated my mother who left her job in order to educate us", told me a lady from Brasov. "My mother attended the Commercial school in Brașov but had to give up work to take care of me… she could speak English and German and encouraged me to do the same", told me another.

Women of modest backgrounds had to work to support their family: "Grandma was a peasant and worked a lot. My mother was at school, she was the youngest, but she did not finish 8th grade because she came to Bucharest and got a job at the factory. She already had a sister, 10 years older than her, who was living in Bucharest, married to a German glassmaker. They had a house and

[6] The interviews were translated by the author.

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my mother came and stayed with them. … For my mother the radical change was the transition from village to town. From the work on the field to the city life. In the city, it was at the beginning of communism, she did a lot of voluntary work, she worked in night shifts, and she still had to take care of her three children".

Despite the hard work, families still enjoyed reunions, celebrations and holydays: "We had a lot of family reunions, but we always talked about the happy times and never recollect bad situations. We enjoyed life, we amused ourselves without looking back", added another lady.

The religious holydays were kept in all families, despite the attempts of the regime to hinder such celebrations: "We celebrated the main religious holydays, Easter, Christmas. We were not afraid to go to church. … Anyhow, nobody could say anything, especially during Christmas because it was my birthday, therefore, we always had parties. We pretended that we celebrated my birthday. Even when my pupils sang carols, we assumed that it was for my birthday. … As my father was a teacher, and I was a teacher too, we had another tradition in our family, at the end of the school year, the pupils came to our door and sang to us *Gaudeamus igitur*, it was a tradition among pupils from Şaguna High School", told me a lady from Braşov.

"We celebrated Christmas or Easter in a religious manner. We used to have a tall Christmas tree and Santa Claus used to come every year during my childhood. When 'Moş Gerilă' was invented, we adopted him as well. So, we welcomed Santa Claus on Christmas Eve and Moş Gerilă on New Year's Eve. It was another opportunity to give and receive gifts", told me another lady. "I used to take my pupils to the Easter service, I had never feared or experienced any inconvenience", she added.

Some inconvenient situations occurred when the family was involved in politics. "I could never marry in the church because my father-in-law was an important local party leader and we couldn't go to church. I had to baptize my son in hiding, not to be noticed at the church", a lady told me.

Another inconvenience arose from having friends living abroad or foreign friends, as one lady told me: "In 1988, we organized a New Year's Eve party here, in the living room. With a friend from Italy, one from Syria, a Turkish woman. I told this guy coming from Italy: 'Leave your car in Colentina and walk the rest of the way. I do not what people from my block to see your car with Italian plates. … We were afraid that someone could denounce you".

A few women believed that communism had a positive impact on their family: "If communism had not arrived in Romania, I think that my family would never have existed. My parents belonged to different classes, my father was from a poor family, from a remote village, while my mother from a wealth family living in Bucharest. They would have never been meant to meet if the communism had not appeared in our country, the communism demolished the social statuses and brought equality at a lower level. I mean it!".

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Some other women were born due to the communist policies, namely the anti-abortion law of 1966. "There were many unwanted children and I was an unwanted child myself. My parents had told me openly that they did not want children anymore. They already had two, a girl and a boy. My mother was at a doctor she knew and asked him: 'Doctor, I have two at home, I do not want another anymore.' And the doctor said to her: 'Do not be stupid, I had two children and one died while the other has gone abroad and now I am alone.' My mother listened to the doctor and so I came up. I did not bring much trouble, because they were accustomed to having many children in the family".

After 1966, when the anti-abortion law was passed, family life changed in many cases. Women were traumatized by the lack of contraceptive methods, by the fear of having an unwanted baby, by the possibility of going to prison (if they were caught having an illegal abortion) and so on. Still, in the discourse of my informants, abortion is a topic about which they prefer to remain silent. Only two women I have interviewed told me about that. The first one is a family friend, whom I have known my entire life, and the other was too young to have an abortion, therefore, she felt at ease to discuss the topic.

This lady friend told me: "Aside the '80's, this is the thing I will not forgive to communism. I had two abortions. I was between freedom and jail. I did it only with the aid of physicians, because my husband did not allow me to interrupt the pregnancy in bizarre conditions. I cannot express the fear, the emotion and the despair I have experienced. Women were desperate, so they did everything, that's why they died. You cannot force someone to make a baby, especially when you do not give them contraceptive methods. So many women died. … There were girls who died of illegal abortions, of septicemia. You had to find physicians risking their freedom, and they were also very expensive. Few people could afford to pay. Do you know how much they cost? 5000 lei for an abortion. It was more money than a normal salary. To find a physician willing to take the risk for you. … My mother-in-law talked to a colleague, who spoke to the physician. Everything was like a play so that the neighbors or others could not know. It could not be done at the hospital, they did it in a home, at your place or elsewhere. The physician took the forceps from a hospital. When he unwrapped a forceps kit for a legal abortion, he wiped another off. The kits were sealed after cleaning. There were several forceps in a kit. The prosecutor came in when the kit was opened. Usually, the physician only used one or two, and the others were used for clandestine operations. I had to do this. I went to the house, it does not matter where it was, with a bouquet of flowers, as the neighbors knew that there was a gynecologist there, and I was a foreign figure, and I could look suspicious to them. I was going with a bunch of flowers as if I was visiting. He welcome me and everything happened quickly. On a bed with minimal anesthesia and at the highest speed. When it was over, knock-knock at the door. Do you realize what we felt then? I felt like I was

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dying! Quickly, get dressed, the coffee was ready, and when the neighbor came in, we had coffee. After that, I had to go on foot to take a taxi and not to order it. The physician usually came home with his hands in his pockets. Another person brought the kit. It was a total conspiracy. These things are not forgotten. The woman from this point of view was oppressed and it was not worth it. You cannot force someone to have kids when you want and how many you want. There are also accidents. Leave the man, the woman to decide. From the point of view of a woman, of our conjugal life, of sex, it was horrible! People did not have sex anymore, they had problems in the family because of that. I was obsessed, I did not enjoy it. I also took some contraceptives. Being an educated woman, and because my husband was a pharmacist, I realized a month later that there were not good for me. It was like this at that time. Someone brought contraceptives from Yugoslavia and women took them. People did not know what else to do. It was a psychosis, the psychosis of being pregnant".

The other shared with me what she had seen or heard as a witness of that period: "We had a neighbor on our street who died from an abortion. Everyone knew that. And I've heard of many other cases. Before 1989, when I was working at the factory, I saw how women, my colleagues, were taken to the gynecologist to check if they were pregnant. They did not take me because I was not married. But I paid the 1% celibacy fee, I think it was introduced after 18 years old or after 20. If you did not have children you had to pay. … My sister made an abortion and she regretted it afterwards. She already had a baby and wanted to wait so she did an illegal abortion. Due to this abortion, later on, when she wanted to make more children, she could not have anymore. I do not know how it happened, because she did it clandestinely and neither her nor my mother would talk about this. There was nothing to talk about. No one was proud of this thing, and they did not speak after 1990. I also remember a few small talks at the factory, my colleagues complained about the lack of any contraceptive. I remember a colleague who had a husband who did not understand her at all and always wanted sex. And he beat her and she was having abortions all the time. … I had a school colleague who was a nurse and she was forced to call the Police to announce when someone had an abortion, even if it was a spontaneous abortion. An investigation was made and if you were still alive, they investigated what had happened and you had to say the name of the one who helped you to cause the abortion. I heard all sorts of stories about the methods of getting rid of an unwanted pregnancy: with a needle or a fork, drinking tea made of oleander which was poisonous in large quantities. Fortunately, I do not know much because I did not pay much attention to the topic".

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Education and Work

Empowerment of women during communism was made mostly through education. Education was free and compulsory until the age of 16. University was also free, but difficult admission exams had to be passed in order to become a student. As in other cases, although communists encouraged people to attend university, the very nature of the system which accepted a fixed number of students each year according to the needs of the production plans, limited the possibility of young people to follow their educational dreams. In the 1950s, another inconvenient criterion was added to the production needs, the so-called 'healthy origin'. In order to be accepted as a candidate for university, a young person had to belong to a family of poor origins. People from persecuted families had no chance to attend university until the beginning of the 1960s.

My interviewees attended at least high school, most of them graduating from universities. They were encouraged by their parents, but also by their teachers to learn, to pass exams and to work. All of them worked during communism and, depending on their age, after the fall of communism.

"I learnt foreign languages... and from the very beginning I knew what I wanted to do, namely to become a teacher … I think it was my mother's idea to guide me in order to have a career as a teacher", she added.

Work was seen as the main value through which communism was built in Romania. Women and men alike were educated for work. Having a career was not a goal per se, but a means to help the industrial production or to fulfill the needs of the communist society. Having a job and working hard were the main goals and not achieving prestige for oneself or to earn money and becoming a self-made woman/man.

Women at work was a strong communist slogan. However, despite the propaganda, women were encouraged to work as teachers, nurses, physicians and they were almost absent in some fields as 'the railway domain', as I could find out from one of my informants: "The high school where I used to teach prepared railways technicians, they were only men in 1975 when I started my work, and the school was like a military camp. [...] Later on, there appeared some girls, especially in telecommunications domain, but very few".

Most of the women I have interviewed were teachers for elementary or secondary school. Being a teacher, especially in the humanities, was not an easy task. The textbooks were highly ideologized, which demanded a lot of efforts from the teacher in order to attract pupils to learn, as one of my witnesses told me: "At work, we cooperated well and we supported each other. … Unfortunately, as an English teacher, I had to deal with the awful textbooks and the lack of interest of my pupils in learning this language they did not need to speak. But I used to attract them through music. I made them listen to American

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and British songs and to translate the lyrics together and thus to interest them in learning the language", she added.

Difficulties were faced by women from other domains, too. A woman who was an assistant pharmacist told me: "I was tired especially after a night shift. I also had many worries and fears. I was afraid because the pharmacy had a collective management, and there worked some people who were in the habit of stealing. We shared collective responsibility for the money and I had to pay two times from my own pocket when some money was missing, even though I had not taken a penny. When we returned to Călăraşi, for the night shift, we were terribly tortured by the Communist mayor, who had the idea that we had to stay in the pharmacy to be seen by the people. I lived much better after 1990 at the hospital pharmacy, where there was a room to rest. I had many fears during communism, some people became violent if they did not find any medicine for the child, although it was not our fault".

Salaries during communism were fairly good for the needs of those times, when there were few consumer goods to buy and not much else to do with money. "I had a good salary as a teacher. I could afford to buy things and to go on vacation. I even went to Czechoslovakia and Russia", one woman told me.

Living Conditions and Leisure

Living conditions were rather difficult during the first communist decade, improved in the '60s and became extremely difficult in the '80s. In the '50s, the locative issues were the most bothering for families. Most of my informants lived with their family in small apartments while they were children and teenagers, and sometimes the whole family shared a single room. "Our living conditions were awful until 1960, when my parents bought an apartment after selling my grandparents' house," remembered a lady from Braşov.

Another woman from Bucharest remembers that: "I had a beautiful but rather hard childhood in the sense that my parents were modest and the material conditions were precarious. For example, up to the age of 4, I lived with my parents in the same room, the room being inside a cellar. So it was pretty hard, but then it was better, my dad being a hard-working craftsman, eventually we could afford to move in a two-room rented apartment, the parents' room serving as living room and I had my own room where I was washing myself, and a kitchen. I was sleeping on a couch".

Living conditions improved in the '60s and early '70s only to become worse in the '80s. "I had the opportunity to experience the good times, at the beginning of the '70s, when I could go to the grocery shop and buy cheese or chocolate. I experienced also, the notorious queues in the late '80s. I remember and I will never forget that once I stayed in line for hours in order to buy

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something. I did not know what they were selling there but I stayed in line. When my turn came they gave me the skeleton of two chickens, the notorious 'Frații Petreuș'[7]. The chickens were so horrible to look at that I got sick and I said to my mother at home that I prefer to die than to eat that chicken", a lady from Bucharest told me.

Another one confessed to me that "in the late '80s, I was a teenager and I was interested in fashion. Therefore, I used to stay in line to buy clothes. Once I stayed in line to buy bras, I did not care about size or anything else. I was happy that I could buy such an item. Another time, I queued for some shoes which eventually fit me well and so I was able to wear them for a long time. They were usually advertised by the saleswomen as having been produced for export, but refused before shipping for various reasons. For us, this was a guarantee of a high quality".

The daily life of the women I have interviewed was difficult, despite the regime's propaganda. "What did they mean by 'equality'?! What conditions did we, the women, enjoy? When my sister wrote me [from Italy] that she put the laundry in the washing machine and left for school, I thought it was a figure of speech. In our community, we had a joke, that we had TROCADERO washing machines: you just took any old trough [in Romanian, '*troacă*'], adding detergent [in Romanian, '*dero*'] and the Party's programme. Did anyone get recognition for his merits? Very few people did. The first thing that mattered was to have a clean record... Those who worked at the butchery were well off, because they could steal meat!".

During communism, daily life was guided by the work schedule. "You know, we were pretty limited: we went to work, came home, took care of the kids, the TV program lasted only 2 hours and at 10 we went to bed," told me one lady. "I have learned the respect for others' work. My father had to work hard and my mother tried to keep a balanced family life", told me another.

Still, as many people during communism in Romania, most of my respondents enjoyed family vacations at the seaside or at the mountains: "We went each summer to the seaside, but my family could not afford a hotel room, therefore we were camping each time. We, the children, could not care less: we swam and played all day long".

These vacations were rather modest, but pleasant: "I did not really have holidays, I went mostly to my aunts in the countryside. We went into summer camps, on trips, but we were rather modest and most of the vacation I spent playing in the street with my friends".

[7] This was a running joke during communist times. Frații Petreuș, 'the Petreus Brothers', were two popular folk singers, who always appeared together on stage. Because they were very thin, this invited the comparison with the two skeletal chickens that were sold together in the same packaging.

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For another woman, going on vacation with her friends was the only escape from the burden of communism: “On Saturdays and Sundays, we were privileged to have our group of friends to meet, to go to the mountains. By the end of the communism we watched a movie on a VCR, especially in the evening. But otherwise, you did not have much to do. We went to the theater, to the Opera. We did not have any information. If you had friends going abroad, I had a friend whose husband worked abroad and brought us magazines like Paris Match, about fashion. When he returned home, we gathered there to browse the magazines, to read. We did not know anything”.

Political and Social Activities

Communism attempted to intrude in the daily life of women not only through their demographic policies, but also by imposing mandatory activities to people beside their regular work activities. The ‘voluntary’ work was everything but voluntary! Constantly women, men and children were summoned to take part in some kind of civic activities like cleaning the streets, picking fruits or medicinal herbs, to parades and all sorts of meetings.

“I have participated in all ‘civic’ activities of the time. It was mandatory to collect a lot of stuff for recycling… I had to join my pupils during the mandatory labor period in the fields of our region, we worked until the snow was falling”, recalls one of my interviewees. Another remembers that: “… as part of our civic involvement, we had to sweep the streets”.

Some others recall the exhausting days of preparing parades: “we stayed in the school courtyard or on a stadium for hours, under the summer heat, in order to repeat the moves. Boys were the happiest, they could admire the girls in short skirts moving around”.

Many of the women I have interviewed were members of the Romanian Communist Party (PCR) and that hindered them afterwards from getting involved in politics: “Because I had been a member of PCR, I did not want to hear about politics after the fall of this regime. I stayed away of politics”.

Some of them refused to join the Communist Party, which seems to have a great impact on their career: “I did not join the party, my father also refused, we were not interested in politics in our family. My father was punished for his refusal and he lost the opportunity to advance in his career”.

A few women whose families were persecuted or who experienced persecution themselves, got involved in political activities in the post-communist period: “After 1989, I became civically involved, by joining the Civic Alliance and later politically involved, when this NGO turned into a political party. I was disappointed with those who had to change things for the better in Romania. I gave up any political involvement and I took refuge in religion”, a lady declared

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proudly. "I converted to Greek Catholicism, because these poor souls are always being persecuted", she added sadly.

Conclusions

Analysing the life stories of my informants, I came to the conclusion that the main discourse difference concerning everyday life was between highly and less educated women. Highly educated women narrate their lives during communism in a logical and clear manner. Although paying attention to the main topics of my research, their life-stories focused on their fulfilment as daughters, mothers and eventually professionals. For women of modest origin or for peasant women with limited education, the main discourse concern was their family, or their family's losses or gains during communism.

Differences occurred also between age cohorts, but mostly in terms of experiences and not necessary in terms of values and feelings. These differences were due to the situation of the country, to the evolution of Romanian communism, to their family status and so on. In the '50s, the consequences of WWII and of the instauration of the communist regime in Romania left their marks on people's lives. The exploitation of Romania's economic resources in the name of the war debt imposed by the Soviet Union brought severe living conditions in the late '40s and beginning of the '50s. In the late '50s and especially in the '60s and early '70s, the life of people improved, but started to deteriorate again in the beginning of '80s, when Ceaușescu had the preposterous idea of paying back Romania's foreign debt in a very short time span. Drastic savings were enforced in all fields. Consumption was controlled and rationalized by the State Party[8]. In March 1989, the country's foreign debt was finally paid back, but the Romanians barely survived.

The abortion ban, as well as the pressure from increasing propaganda also impacted women's lives. The quest for Western products, the desire to go into exile, the constant surveillance by the notorious Securitate influenced people's lives, but also the discourse of my women informants. Being a mature woman, a young woman, a teenager or a child meant different life experiences in terms of education, fashion, sexual life and so on.

Some women consider that their hard work enabled them to achieve everything in life during communism and afterwards. They estimate that communism gave women some opportunities, but it was them who transformed these opportunities into successful stories.

[8] I speak of a "State Party" to underline the confiscation of the State by the Romanian Communist party.

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Analyzing the collected interviews, I can infer that: in terms of personal experience, women describe communism as rather a good period in their lives in the 1960s, but a dark epoch in 1980s. Their stories define at a "formal" level communism as repressive, and, at the same time, depict the entire period in a nostalgic tone, whose narration is made up of benchmarks defining success in life despite the difficulties encountered and successfully overcome.

Despite the recollections of the harsh conditions of the 1980s, it seems that the image of communism these persons transmitted to their offspring is rather positive. This can explain why in the last years we have witnessed the rise of a new type of nostalgia, one which aligns itself with a post-memorial trend. Many young people born in or around December 1989 express their appreciation for Communism in the public space. A poll among young people showed in 2010 that 38% of them considered Communism to have been a better or far better period than the present (Bădescu *et alii* 2010: 65). This attitude assesses the importance of "communicative memory" (in the sense of Assmann 2010) in passing on perceptions of the past.

To summarize broadly, ordinary women's opinion of communism is that this regime was both good and bad. It was good because women did not encounter barriers in choosing their educational curricula, their pay was equal to that of men, and they had access to goods and services without gender discrimination. It was bad because on the level of mentalities, they faced gender discrimination as traditional gender-role mentality still prevailed in society and among the members of the communist party and *nomenklatura*, and, in the '80s because of anti-abortion laws and of poor living conditions.

I may conclude that my interviews illustrate the ambiguity of any discourse on the communist period in Romania. An ambiguity derived from a dichotomy experienced by the entire society. On the one hand, people lived their lives trying to act normally and to give a sense of normality to their deeds, attitudes, habits, etc., and, on the other, they had to adapt to a regime out of normality, in which arbitrariness, controlling, repression, anxiety were dominant features.

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