

Freedom's Scents: A Romanian Remembers

By ALEX KOZINSKI

As I watch the television images of East Germans streaming past the dreaded Berlin wall, my mind is filled with images of my own passage through the Iron Curtain, even as the wall was going up 28 years ago. Not that there have been many days since then that I have failed to think about the event; but the *feelings*, dulled by the passage of time, are rekindled. I wonder, can anyone born outside the Eastern bloc really know what it's like to cross the Iron Curtain to the West for the first time?

I am eleven and a half years old, a small boy, trained by years of fear to be quiet and disciplined. I sit silently, watching the blizzard hit the window of the moving train. I must do nothing, nothing at all to give Them any excuse to question us or stop us, or, God forbid, take away the precious papers that allow us to leave Romania.

I know, from bitter experience, that little boys can get their parents into trouble by what they say. I was only about seven when I was overheard asking, impishly, why there was a newspaper called Free Romania when there were so many people rotting in jail. My father got a stern talking to and almost lost his job, or worse. I won't let anything like that happen today.

We are among the very lucky ones. After almost four years of waiting, during which my parents were fired from their jobs and otherwise harassed and intimidated, the magic letter had arrived. Ordinary Romanians would never be given such permission but we are Jews and Romania has started allowing a trickle of Jews to emigrate. So my parents decided to risk everything in order that their only child might grow up free. After four grueling years, the risk had paid off; Vienna and freedom are just a few hours away. I bite my lip and sit quietly; I don't even go to the bathroom.

As we approach the border with Hungary, uniformed police start marching through the railroad car, looking. Every time my stomach turns. They are going to take us off the train, I am sure, and tell us it was all a mistake. We reach the border around midnight and the police check papers and luggage. We don't have much: a suitcase each, no cash, no jewelry, nothing of value. My mother is called into the next compartment for a body search, but they find nothing.

Suddenly, my father is gruffly pulled off the train; I see him arguing with police on the platform. This is it. But my father returns, suppressing a smile. They have confiscated the four cartons of cigarettes he had hoped to sell for a little cash in Vienna. Some border guard will smoke for a while at our expense, but we are in the clear. Slowly, the train begins to move and I realize that I am living the unthinkable: Romania disappears in the darkness behind us.

Freedom. It turns out, has a taste, and it has a smell. The taste is that of Bazooka bubble gum, large wads of it stuffed in my mouth until my cheeks jowl out. And of chocolate, fragrant and creamy, and, amazingly, available. And of Coca-Cola, drunk through a straw just like in American movies, the syrupy liquid filling my mouth with the taste of Western decadence. Careful though: Coca-Cola, we had been warned, is addictive—better not have too much.

The smell is that of grocery stores filled with coffee and cheese and fresh pastries. And of department stores stocked with leather shoes and bottles of perfume and about a thousand other things I don't even recognize. With so many things to choose from, how do people know what to buy?

And freedom has a feel. It is the feel of the open horizon. Knowing you can move in any direction, go as far as you want without running into guards who will shoot you. And knowing you're not being followed or watched everywhere you go, that what you say will not be reported to the *securitate*, the secret police. Will I ever learn to stop glancing over my shoulder when I walk down the street?

It all comes back to me in front of the TV set, as I watch East Germans wander bemusedly around West Berlin, Czechs demonstrate in Prague, and Lech Walesa address the U.S. Congress. I wonder, will Romania be next?

I dare to hope so, but I fear not. The Romanian government has been far too efficient in stifling dissent far too long. A country where typewriters must be registered with the police, lest they be used to disseminate subversive literature, provides a soil too barren for a freedom movement to take root.

Nor does Romania have a strong tradition of freedom to fall back on. Situated at the gateway to Europe, Romanians have spent much of their history subjugated by Tatars and Turks. Local rulers, during times of independence, were legendary for their cruelty. Vlad Tsepesh, the Impaler, who summarily executed thousands by having them tossed onto pointed stakes, is a national hero, the law-and-order man of his day. The sad truth is that even today many, perhaps most, Romanians, are comfortable with a totalitarian regime, afraid that freedom leads to crime and anarchy.

Yet Romania is a laboratory example of the evils of communism. It is a country blessed with an astonishing wealth of natural resources—oil, coal, minerals, timber, rich arable land, mighty rivers, access to the open sea—whose economy has been laid waste by bizarre, destructive centralized planning. And it is a country where children can aspire to nothing better than a lifetime of standing in queues waiting for the necessities of life while looking over their shoulder for the ubiquitous men from the securitate. Surely Romanian parents will not be satisfied to observe events in East Germany, Poland and Czechoslovakia without trying to change the future for their own children, as my parents dared and risked for my future.

One can only watch and hope.

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