

## Book Review

June 30, 1991

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## Romania's Big Bamboozle

**THE HOLE IN THE FLAG***A Romanian Exile's Story of Return and Revolution.*

By Andrei Codrescu.

249 pp. New York:

William Morrow &amp; Company. \$21.

By Alex Kozinski

**L**IKE the panorama of life in post-revolutionary Romania, which the poet and essayist Andrei Codrescu describes with both awe and revulsion, "The Hole in the Flag" is a work of great complexity and subtlety. For everyone who watched as the Romanian revolution unfolded, Mr. Codrescu provides a gripping political detective story.

Mr. Codrescu, a regular commentator for National Public Radio who had been fiercely critical of the Ceausescu regime, arrived in Bucharest with a radio crew in the days of the December 1989 revolt. On one level, his book is a travelogue. In crisp, often humorous detail, he describes his experiences and reactions on returning to a land he had left as a teen-ager.

We learn a great deal about the harsh conditions in Romania that induced Mr. Codrescu and his mother to leave their homeland, and about the subtle and not-so-subtle changes brought about by 25 years of Ceausescu rule and a few days of revolution. These observations provide the background against which the other, more unsettling, themes of the book are woven. Foremost among these is the dark and still-unsolved mystery of what exactly did happen during those eight fateful days when Nicolae Ceausescu was toppled and a new Government took control.

Like most everyone else, Mr. Codrescu starts out convinced that the Romanian revolution was the result of a spontaneous popular uprising by an oppressed people against a tyrannical, narcissistic dictator. Early chapters describe the images of the revolution as portrayed in the media: a peaceful protest in Timisoara; machine guns firing into a crowd of unarmed civilians; the flight, capture and execution of the Ceausescus; a protracted battle between the Army and the shadowy forces of the Securitate; the deaths of tens of thousands and destruction reminiscent of World War II; the defeat of battalions of fanatical Ceausescu loyalists; and the final victory of the people under the benign leadership of a spontaneously created caretaker Government. A euphoric and ingenuous Mr. Codrescu — like much of the rest of the world — accepted this melodrama as the revealed truth.

Having skillfully carried us with him, he starts planting seeds of doubt by pointing out inconsisten-

cies and improbabilities in the official account of the revolution. He winds up dissecting it event by event, image by image, assumption by assumption. The glorious, pure, idealistic vision of the Romanian revolution gives way to an ugly and misshapen thing, the product of a grotesque masterpiece of deception, "a process of mass hypnosis."

Everyone, of course, recognizes tyranny in a monster like Ceausescu. But Mr. Codrescu explores the ways in which government can accomplish its tyrannical ends by misdirection, without need of force. He argues that the revolutionary Government bamboozled the Romanian people through its control over the country's only television station. By manipulating televised images, Mr. Codrescu believes, members of the new Government managed to etch themselves into the minds of the Romanian people so deeply that no other party stood a chance of dislodging them. Much of the evidence the author marshals to support his thesis consists of deduction and speculation; it will be up to the reader to decide which vision of the Romanian revolution to believe.

What seems unassailable, however, is Mr. Codrescu's touching, painstakingly accurate description of Romania and its people, the good and the bad, the pristine and the hideous. Romania is one of the most beautiful places on earth. With a loving eye, Mr. Codrescu fills his book with the rich texture of Romanian culture, from the noble, turn-of-the-century buildings of Bucharest to the peasant shrines of his Transylvanian birthplace. He contrasts these with the unsightly rows of boxcar apartments built by Ceausescu and the ghastly pollution generated by mindless industrialization.

**T**HE Romanian people, too, present a series of disquieting contrasts. They are portrayed as generous, friendly, cosmopolitan and politically savvy, and as mean-spirited, grim, ethnocentric and politically naive. Drawing from the country's violent and often tragic history, Mr. Codrescu explains how the contradictory images are both accurate. Indeed, one cannot understand Romanian society, or grasp the magnitude of the problems it faces on its way to a Western-style democracy, without understanding paradoxes such as these in a country that has guarded the gateway to Europe for two millennia.

The most significant lesson of the Romanian experience may be that he who controls the media controls the course of events. This underscores the conviction that the ultimate guarantee of our own freedom lies not in our system of checks and balances, nor in our constitutional protections against unreasonable searches and seizures, nor in many of the other protections afforded by the Constitution — important though they all be — but in the First Amendment, which puts private individuals, not the Government, firmly in control of our political and social discourse. It is a lesson well worth keeping in mind. □

Alex Kozinski, a Federal judge in California, emigrated from Romania in 1961, at the age of 11.