

**BOOK COLLECTING AND READING IN BRASOV,  
ROMANIA UNDER COMMUNISM**

Maria Bucur  
Indiana University



The National Council for Eurasian and East European Research  
910 17<sup>th</sup> Street, N.W.  
Suite 300  
Washington, D.C. 20006

TITLE VIII PROGRAM

### **Project Information\***

<b>Principal Investigator:</b>	<b>Maria Bucur</b>
<b>Council Contract Number:</b>	<b>817-19n</b>
<b>Date:</b>	<b>March 1, 2003</b>

### **Copyright Information**

Scholars retain the copyright on works they submit to NCEEER. However, NCEEER possesses the right to duplicate and disseminate such products, in written and electronic form, as follows: (a) for its internal use; (b) to the U.S. Government for its internal use or for dissemination to officials of foreign governments; and (c) for dissemination in accordance with the Freedom of Information Act or other law or policy of the U.S. government that grants the public access to documents held by the U.S. government.

Additionally, NCEEER has a royalty-free license to distribute and disseminate papers submitted under the terms of its agreements to the general public, in furtherance of academic research, scholarship, and the advancement of general knowledge, on a non-profit basis. All papers distributed or disseminated shall bear notice of copyright. Neither NCEEER, nor the U.S. Government, nor any recipient of a Contract product may use it for commercial sale.

---

\* The work leading to this report was supported in part by contract or grant funds provided by the National Council for Eurasian and East European Research, funds which were made available by the U.S. Department of State under Title VIII (The Soviet-East European Research and Training Act of 1983, as amended). The analysis and interpretations contained herein are those of the author.

## **Abstract**

In the summer of 2002 I took twenty-one interviews with readers, publishers, librarians and bookstore managers in Brasov, Romania. The interviews explored the relationship between the book as finite cultural product and the reader. What interested me most was how people became attracted to books and what particularities this process had under a communist regime. I was also interested in how the passion for reading and collecting has changed since the fall of communism. Do people read more or less, now that there is so much more freedom to publish, and so many more titles are available? Does a free market mean cultural growth from the perspective of book lovers? This paper uses the results of the interviews to address these questions.

## **Introduction**

In the summer of 2002 I took twenty-one interviews with readers, publishers, librarians and bookstore managers in Brasov, Romania.<sup>1</sup> The interviews explored primarily the relationship between the book as cultural product and the reader. What interested me most was how people became attracted to books as an object of intense preoccupation (collecting them, reading them), and what particularities this process had under a communist regime. In other words, I was interested in the relationship between cultural activities such as reading and the politics of a totalitarian or post-totalitarian state. A connected question was to inquire about how the passion for reading and collecting has changed since the fall of communism. Do people read more or less, now that there is so much more freedom to publish, and so many more titles are available? Does a free market mean cultural growth from the subjective, personal perspective of book lovers?

### **Who were the subjects?**

I had hoped to select the subjects on strict generational and educational criteria. I wanted to interview those who were educated entirely under the communist regime, especially the early years of that period, and were between 45 and 65 years old. I also wanted to hear the stories of those who loved to read, but did not do this professionally. I did not want to interview teachers, university professors, book editors, and authors. But I had a difficult time finding subjects who fit these criteria. There was reluctance on the part of many people who did read but would not be interviewed talking about this subject. Many people were also busy, under great stress at work, and did not want to take the time to talk about what I thought was a pleasant pursuit, but what to them seemed like a waste of time.

Even this discrepancy, between my expectations of accessibility and interest and the reality of the difficult and stressful life of professional and working-class people of this generation, was very

---

<sup>1</sup> For this project I also worked with a group of students from Universitatea Transilvania (13) and with a research assistant from the Museum of the Romanian Peasant in Bucharest. They took an additional 78 interviews. Not all of these interviews have been transcribed yet, so the findings discussed here still need to be confronted with the materials that are forthcoming.

meaningful. I had hoped to find people willing to spend time talking about books, as I myself remembered many people had when I was growing up in Romania in the 1970s and 1980s. But few of the same people who would have loved to chat about books back then were willing to speak of such issues now.

In an informal discussion with old acquaintances of my parents (engineers in their early 60s), I discovered that the unwillingness to be interviewed was connected to various factors. To begin with, many people of this generation have had a hard time keeping their economic status over the past decade. The aging population is being pushed out of the workplace; those who retired are trying to find employment again, because of the low pensions they receive. For those who are economically strapped, the loss of both economic and social status since the fall of communism is a heavy burden to bear. In addition, though books are more readily available than ever before, they are also far more expensive than before 1989. Many of the people who used to collect books and depend on them for both intellectual sustenance and a sense of social status, cannot do that any longer. Thus, instead of open, relaxed and engaging conversations, many of my encounters with potential subjects were tense, opaque, and dominated by a sense of embarrassment and resentment.

Despite my initial disappointment, this was a useful lesson. The unavailability of targeted subjects also forced me to look to other places – both to younger audiences and also to people who participated in the sales of book (bookstore owners and managers). In the end I interviewed two librarians, two bookstore managers, two publishers, and fourteen readers, some with higher education, others with only a high school diploma. These interviews cannot be taken to indicate “trends”, as they do not represent a sufficient sample, but they do suggest important possible paths for understanding the subjective elements of book collecting and reading in communist Romania.

### **Availability of books**

To begin with, there seemed to be a great deal of consensus among readers about the availability of books and the importance of reading under communism. Whether highly educated or not, critical or

not of the communist regime itself, most readers acknowledged that it was easy to purchase books under communism, and that books were generally very affordable. Some went so far as to say that it was, indeed, one of the policies of the regime to make books readily available to all. The same book collectors stepped back to dispel any notion that they were in fact praising the communist regime.

When asked about the availability of certain types of books, most acknowledged that the regime had some political priorities in publishing propaganda books and that everyone knew that. Everyone saw Nicolae Ceausescu's publications, for instance, and ignored them. Yet most people did not speak critically about the unavailability of specific kinds of books. For most, since European and American (North and South) "classics" of literature were available in translation, the absence of other books did not appear like a great loss.

One respondent described a system of buying books through the "syndicate" (i.e., the official Communist Party labor union) at his factory. Every two weeks, at payday, local booksellers representing one or several bookstores in town, would set up a table at the entrance to the factory and offer books for sale through a layaway/installment plan. The titles available at the stands were generally the same kinds of books available in all bookstores in town, but probably not the very "hot" items that would usually vanish before they made it to the stands.

A union representative would be present to write down the amount owed, and that amount would be deducted from the worker's pay in small installments, without any interest, over the next few months.<sup>2</sup> It wasn't clear to me whether the union was paying the price up-front and then receiving the money from the workers; from the perspective of the individual buying the books, this was an extremely advantageous method. The system seems to have worked very well, as it continued throughout the communist period.

The interlocutor expressed some nostalgia for this system, especially given the now exorbitant price for books, which makes it impossible for him to feed his passion for reading. In light of the difference between the arrangement described above and the current situation, it is not hard to understand

---

<sup>2</sup> This description was confirmed by the person who set up this system. I had an interview with the person in charge of book distribution and sales for the Brasov County [*iudet*] for most of the communist period.

why some working-class people interested in reading and collecting books look upon the changes of the post-communist period critically, and see the current regime as less concerned with the welfare and cultural life of workers.

Other respondents, who fall in the category of highly-educated readers, also described the availability of books before 1989 in positive terms. Even one unusual collector, a doctor interested in yoga and transcendentalism, while acknowledging that it was difficult and, at times, forbidden to read and possess such titles, emphasized that he was able to acquire books on the subject, either through acquaintances or through secondhand bookstores. He acknowledged that people were afraid to discuss such topics or share such books openly in public. But, at the same time, he stressed the ease with which, on becoming part of the informal group of avid readers on such topics, one could have access to as much reading material as one liked.

How can one interpret such stories – as proof that cultural life under communist Romania, the hated and demonized Ceausescu regime, was in fact not as bad as we previously had thought? This is not the case. My respondents were often careful in their statements about the communist regime, showing that they were concerned that they might convey too positive a message. The degree of criticism towards the communist regime did, however, vary between workers and more highly educated professionals.

In the two examples offered above, the working-class reader was able to satisfy his interests simply through channels offered by the communist regime, and directly due to special arrangements by communist officials (the union). In the case of the doctor interested in yoga, his ability to find the texts he was interested in was due to his own resourcefulness and the availability of an underground network of like-minded individuals. What is interesting in his case, however, is that he never got caught, in spite of the claims of the Romanian communist regime to have informants everywhere, and also the obsession with identifying and “disarming” all the transcendentalists in the early 1980s. This opens up questions

about the thoroughness of the secret police, something various historians are starting to investigate by looking into the files kept by the Securitate.<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, my research confirms the assessment of other recent studies on the cultural dimensions of the communist regimes in Eastern Europe.<sup>4</sup> The post-totalitarian state was both more permeable and open to consumer interests than previously thought, even in the extreme case of Romania, which has generally been considered the most dictatorial of the eastern bloc regimes.<sup>5</sup>

Another statement by the same respondent also suggests another important dimension of reading culture under communism. He stated at one point that people “knew how to read each other.” In other words, more often than not, he and other book lovers figured out how to avoid the eye of the secret police and potential informers. The informal book circles formed through common forbidden interests remained small and relatively closed. For those individuals, reading became an elite, insular activity, the consequences of which can still be observed today in the behavior of the intelligentsia.<sup>6</sup>

If these interviews show that book lovers could generally satisfy their interests through official channels and informal ones, what can one make of the stories often told (I grew up hearing this all the time) about how much of an accomplishment it was to secure “forbidden” books?<sup>7</sup> I myself remember growing up in the 1970s and 1980s with the knowledge that books were a precious commodity, something to be cherished and shared only with special friends. One explanation might be that people liked to embellish stories about their ability to secure any cultural goods in an economy of scarcity, as

---

<sup>3</sup> See Marius Oprea, *Banalitatea raului. O istorie a Securitatii in documente (1949-1989)* (Iasi: Polirom, 2002) and Marius Oprea, ed., *Securistii partidului. Serviciul de Cadre al P.C.R. ca politie politica. Studiu de caz. Arhiva Comitetului Municipal de Partid Brasov* (Iasi: Polirom, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> Susan E. Reid and David Crowley, eds., *Style and Socialism. Modernity and Material Culture in Post-War Eastern Europe* (Oxford, New York: Berg, 2000).

<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, R.J. Crampton, *Eastern Europe in the Twentieth Century and After*, 2d ed. (New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 354-56.

<sup>6</sup> See Sorin Matei, “Secretul sanatatii sociale: intre grupurile de prestigiu si piata,” at <http://matei.org/indexpatap.html>

<sup>7</sup> I will address the question of what constituted “forbidden” books later on in the paper.



Romania was in the 1980s.<sup>8</sup> This perspective might have changed in the post-communist period, when inadequate revenues, rather the lack of goods, made books inaccessible.

Yet some answers in my interviews also reflected an inability to acquire certain books. For instance, when asked specifically about reading and owning forbidden books, such as the political novel *Delirul* by Marin Preda, most readers mentioned that these books were difficult to obtain. Some collectors also talked specifically about cultivating good relations with the bookstore managers, in order to procure special books. Acknowledging such difficulties seems to contradict the earlier statement that readers seemed satisfied with their ability to procure books and nourish their interest in reading.

People who read books as a passion, rather than a profession, were consumers with a limited scope in their choice of materials. They might have been frustrated in finding a particular book they had heard about and desired, but, since such reading was not an essential good for their professional development, they could turn to other more readily available books, to satisfy their interest. If *Delirul* was not available, they could read other books by Marin Preda, like *Morometii*, or novels by other excellent Romanian or foreign writers.

The frustration of the passionate reader was of a different nature than that of a professional writer struggling with censorship, or of an intellectual who depended on the specific literature of his or her discipline, which would not have been available through official means of book distribution. This is an important, if somewhat obvious finding. Censorship, though in existence and extremely heavy-handed under the communist regime in Romania, seems to have weighed more lightly on the shoulders of those who were not professionally invested in the publishing and reading of books.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> See Katherine Verdery, *National Ideology under Socialism. Identity and Cultural Politics in Ceausescu's Romania* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

<sup>9</sup> The most prominent Romanian writer on this topic is Adrian Marino, who is currently working on a history of censorship in Romania. His work has appeared primarily in Romanian, but a short English-language article on censorship appeared in Derek Jones, ed., *Censorship. A World Encyclopedia. Vol. 3 L-R* (London and Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 2001), pp. 2043-2048. Like other writers, however, he also focuses exclusively on the significance of censorship for the production of culture in general and literature especially. He does not delve into a discussion of censorship and the public.

### Access to “forbidden” books: the bookstore as gatekeeper

Another important aspect of book acquisition/collection was revealed by answers about the procurement of “forbidden” books. These books can be divided into several categories: (1) books that were published during the 1968-1972 period of cultural liberalization; (2) books that made it through the watchful eye of the censor but were later “recalled,” when the author became a *persona non grata* (usually by defecting to the West); (3) books that made it through censorship, but were later found to contain “undesirable” content and removed from the bookshelves of libraries and bookstores; (4) photocopies of foreign books or titles published before 1945. Most subjects spoke about “forbidden” books in the first three categories – those books that had been available at some point through official channels.

My interlocutors, in most instances, identified the people who helped them get such books and talked about their relationship with these people. A bookstore manager was the person usually responsible for procuring such books. Avid readers cultivated these relationships, in the same way they would have cultivated relationships with other “gatekeepers” of inaccessible goods, such as shoes, abortions, or meat.<sup>10</sup>

In fact, bookstore managers became persons of authority in the cultural life of provincial cities like Brasov. There were few bookstores in town<sup>11</sup>, and most readers were aware that each bookstore received a small number of titles, so that it was important to find out about releases early and try to have copies put aside. Anthropologists will readily identify this process as a very old form of exchanging gifts.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> See also Gail Kligman, *The Politics of Duplicity: Controlling Reproduction in Ceausescu's Romania* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), for a discussion of the much more gruesome favor exchanges practiced by abortion providers.

<sup>11</sup> From my interviews and other research I concluded there were between six and eight bookstores in town during the communist period, while the population of Brasov soared to over 300,000 during the same period.

<sup>12</sup> Caroline Humphrey and Stephen Hugh-Jones, eds., *Barter, Exchange, and Value. An Anthropological Approach* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Terje Lensberg, *A Cross-Cultural Study of Reciprocity, Trust and Altruism in a Gift Exchange Experiment* (Tilburg, Netherlands: Center for Economic Research, Tilburg University, [1998]); Aafke E. Komter, ed., *The Gift: An Interdisciplinary Perspective* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1996); Marcel Mauss, *The Gift. Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies* (Glencoe,

But what were readers able to offer the bookstore managers? This proved to be a difficult question in my interviews, for while some readers acknowledged openly participating in this kind of barter, others only spoke about it in the third person, and did not even represent themselves as witnesses to such exchanges. Bookstore managers/attendants were even less inclined to speak about any such exchanges, as something that they considered "improper."

The most prevalent exchange seemed to be intangible. The readers spent time talking with the bookstore attendants, cultivating a personal relationship with them, and by doing so, reinforced their authority. Bookstore employees were often women without higher education, who had landed the position as either a lucky means to remain in the city and not have to work a menial or hard-labor job, or through some family/personal connections at the level of the local party organization or people in the regional book distribution hierarchy.<sup>13</sup> These women often arrived on the job without much knowledge about books (both as consumer goods and as intellectual/cultural products) and were often less educated than their customers. Receiving attention and engaging in conversations about books with readers enabled them to both become better trained (or demonstrate their training to other bookstore personnel), and to elevate their status in the intellectual social hierarchy. After all, they would often offer advice to the readers on what was a good new book.

Other exchanges included some material goods, often flowers. But I have not encountered any direct admissions by any readers or bookstore personnel of gift exchanges that amounted to significant monetary value. The question of gift exchange is certainly one of the important aspects of book acquisition and circulation, in general, and needs better development. I hope to follow up these questions with more research in the next stage of this project.

---

Ill: Free Press, 1954); Daniel Miller, ed., *Material Cultures. Why Some Things Matter* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

<sup>13</sup> I do not have statistics on the gender ratio of employees in the bookselling trade, but in all the bookstores I visited repeatedly there were only women attendants present. When speaking about bookstores during the communist regimes, bookstore managers also made reference only to other women employees.

### **Interpreting books: double-talk**

One important aspect of the relationship between reader and book that interested me is the question of how readers interpreted the books, especially those considered forbidden or subversive. These two terms were used interchangeably by some interlocutors, suggesting that they considered what was forbidden as automatically subversive. However, from my previous description of forbidden books, it is clear that not all interdictions were connected to subversive content. Some books were pulled off the shelf because of the personal history of the author, and not necessarily any particular messages in her or his work. This link between “forbidden” (as defined by the regime) and “subversive” (as defined by individual interlocutors) seems connected to my subjects’ perception of the communist regime as totalitarian.

In fact, it was interesting to see interlocutors deconstructing their own assumptions about subversive books: they initially spoke about forbidden books as being subversive, only to acknowledge later on their disappointment when reading some of these books. They sometimes found little in these texts that challenged the ideology and values of the communist regime.

How did people read between the lines, the famous double-talk mentioned many times by historians and writers?<sup>14</sup> There has been little work, especially from a historical perspective, on how readers “de-coded” criticisms of the communist regime in literary works. In my research I included specific questions about how readers approached censored texts and how they read between the lines. But the responses I received were less than satisfactory. My subjects were unable to articulate a clear response about their strategies of interpretation. After a few attempts, I concluded that I might need to retool my questionnaire and ask them to respond more specifically to questions about particular texts that they were likely to have read.

---

<sup>14</sup> One important book in this field is by Nancy Ries, *Russian Talk. Culture and Conversation During Perestroika* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997). Her research, however, focuses on oral communication, rather than relations between readers and texts.

One book whose system of references respondents did discuss somewhat was *Delirul*.<sup>15</sup> This book, from Marin Preda's series of novels about the Moromete family, focuses on the history of interwar Romania, up to the Second World War. Among other themes, it explores the legionary movement and brings into discussion the actions of Ion Antonescu, Romania's dictatorial ruler during the Second World War and the military leader called to deal with the legionary rebellion in 1940. He is presented here as a humane character, troubled by the choices available to him and with human qualities that soften some of the edges of his public persona.

Some interviewees talked about the relevance of the Antonescu character in the book as an important, potentially subversive element. Some viewed this character as an attempt to re-historicize the Second World War in direct reaction against the official discourse about the war. Antonescu, thus, became a tool for questioning propaganda. They also interpreted the ability of Preda to publish the book as a function of his relative stardom, international reputation, and position as director of Cartea Romaneasca, the publishing house where the book appeared. In other words, he was able to "get away with it" by having the book reviewed in-house, by censors who presumably looked the other way. Such views were not based on any hard evidence, but they showed a particular understanding of the official discourse as being critical of Antonescu, and of Preda as a privileged writer and publisher, who had somehow managed to preserve his integrity. These were readers who also considered themselves able "detectives" in identifying fact from fiction, historical truth from propaganda, and collaborators from opponents in the process of communist production of culture.

Other readers, however, spoke skeptically about *Delirul* as a forbidden or subversive book. Some expressed disappointment at having found the book less interesting, less daring, than they had originally thought, and also less creative, less polished as a work of fiction. Others simply stated that the book, with its references to Antonescu, was not a product that made it on the market despite censorship and the

---

<sup>15</sup> Marin Preda, *Delirul*, 2d ed. (Bucharest: Cartea Romaneasca, 1975). There were 100,000 copies printed in the second edition of this book.

official propaganda, but rather because of it. These readers saw *Delirul* as a symbol of the renewed radical nationalism of the communist regime, with rehabilitation of Antonescu as its hallmark. In this reading, not only was *Delirul* not subversive, but the image of Marin Preda as a daring writer with important oppositional elements in his writings was completely destroyed. According to these readers' interpretation, Preda was in fact making himself the tool of such rehabilitation efforts, in a pact with nationalists of the Ceausescu regime, rather than courageously struggling against censorship.

Even this one example suggests powerfully how much division and confusion there is among readers about what constituted double-talk and oppositional writing under communism. In fact, the richness of the various interpretations described above, which were sometimes contradictory, shows how difficult it is to write about the impact of dissident or subversive writing beyond the small circle of writers and intellectuals.<sup>16</sup> These divergent interpretations also indicate how weak the impact of such writings was likely to have been in generating any broader debates or changes in the political culture of communist Romania.

#### Access to books since 1989

In evaluating their relation to book collecting and reading, most respondents indicated a great deal of frustration with their ability to obtain and actually read what they are interested in since the fall of communism. Some acknowledged readily that, indeed, there is a great deal more available, in principle. More books have been published and anyone can purchase them, regardless of connections with the "right" bookstore. Yet two problems came up again and again in terms of how actual access to books has become more difficult. Everyone indicated the cost of books as the greatest impediment to reading as much as they wanted to. Within a few months after the fall of communism, the price of books more than

---

<sup>16</sup> The literature on the impact of dissident writing on the intelligentsia has been the subject of more historical analysis. Important scholars on the subject include Verdery, *National Ideology*, Miklos Haraszti, *The Velvet Prison. Artists under State Socialism* (New York: Basic Books, 1987), Geoffrey Hosking, *Perspectives on Literature and Society in Eastern and Western Europe* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989).



tripled<sup>17</sup>, while the cost of other necessary items also rose, and unemployment or under-employment was becoming a problem.

The other issue some readers, especially highly educated individuals, brought up is the quality of the books. Bibliophiles are unhappy about the technical/aesthetic quality of some of the books in relation to their price. Others complained about the quality of particular editions. With thousands of publishers on the market, and without a good system of enforcing copyright laws, often one can find the same book published in two or three editions. Having been used to the seventeen state-owned publishing houses from before 1989, readers have had a hard time differentiating a “good” edition from a “bad” one.

Some respondents also believed that, although there is so much more to choose from in each genre of writing, the quality of the choices available is greatly inferior to what was available before 1989. This is especially the case for translations of fiction. And without the equivalent of a New York Times bestseller list or “Oprah Winfrey Book Club” available to avid readers, there is little guidance for the average reader as what to choose. The few literary journals published weekly are important for the more educated readers, as some respondents indicated. But the vast majority of readers do not use such publications to choose books.

One interesting question that surfaced with regard to changes in reading patterns since 1989 was whether people read less now. Most respondents said that they did read less now. They gave various reasons. To begin with, they now have more stressful, strenuous jobs, often two or three, and simply do not have as much leisure time for reading. This problem echoes that of most people in post-communist Romania: having leisure time has become the privilege of the few, especially those who amassed great fortunes in the early post-communist years. For the working classes and educated middle classes, free time has become a luxury. These people may be expressing an indirect nostalgia for the communist regime, but not in a naïve, undifferentiated manner. They are critical of the new lifestyle, in which being

---

<sup>17</sup> I am referring here to the actual value of the book, taking into account the hyper-inflation of that period.

overworked is the norm. For these people, free market and the freedom to publish anything does not necessarily translate into a richer cultural life.

Having less money to spend on books was a reason for reading less that others gave me, though that response struck me as less convincing than other reasons. After all, libraries are important resources for book lovers, and there was little indication many of the readers who complained about money actually turned to libraries as a cheaper alternative for getting books. Another important resource for cheap books are the second-hand bookstores, where one can find relatively new books, as well some collectible gems from the interwar period, for a fraction of their initial price, well within the range of most working-class people.

A third reason was the availability alternative resources for entertainment, especially for those who are able to make more money now. Some spoke about spending more time in front of the television, watching movies, and even using the Internet for reading and spending leisure time. Access to the Internet is still difficult, not so much because of price (an hour at an Internet café was as little as 10 cents in Brasov this summer), as because of the inaccessibility of Internet hook-ups. Most schools don't have them yet, and there are few Internet cafes, located mostly in the center of town. But this is likely to change dramatically over the next few years, and most people seemed confident of this trend.

The perception that people read less and that young people, in particular, have turned away from reading towards other forms of entertainment, may not reflect reality, however. This summer I was able to do one interview with a librarian at the Municipal Library in Brasov and another with a "neighborhood" librarian at a local branch of the County Library.<sup>18</sup> Both interviewees reported that they had not seen a drop in the number of patrons. On the contrary, the number of young readers had risen significantly since 1989, especially at the Municipal Library. This is a partial view of the broader phenomenon of reading and may not reflect the total number of dedicated readers in Brasov, much less in

---

<sup>18</sup> This was a so-called "biblioteca de cartier," an invention of the communist regime. Each neighborhood had a small collection of both popular fiction titles and also important books for students of all grades (one to twelve), to help with school work and also provide local avenues for spending free time. These libraries developed especially



Romania at large. But it suggests that more work has to be done to see whether there is a generational turn towards using libraries more intensively than before 1989. The availability of Internet resources and information about educational grants abroad at the Municipal Library might be partly responsible for this surge in library attendance. But patrons also borrow more books, according to my interlocutors.

### **How was the passion for reading acquired?**

I asked all of my interlocutors to tell me how they acquired their passion for reading. In most cases, they told a story about people who were responsible for turning their attention towards reading as an important and rewarding activity. The reading mentor was often a family member – a parent, an older sibling, or another close relative (aunt, uncle) – who had first purchased books for the respondent, had read to him or her, or had made books available at home or in a friendly, open environment. There were several respondents who included teachers among their important influences, but teachers were seldom the respondent's only mentor.

It would be interesting to research whether the political context of communist Romania made the relationship with teachers significantly different than in other non-totalitarian countries. One disadvantage of the oral history methodology is that it provides little concrete evidence for such comparisons. I would advance one speculation, however. Even though, in the case of communist Romania, students had intense interaction with teachers, most teachers were not trained as independent intellectuals, but rather as faithful bureaucrats/apparatchiks of the communist regime. Often teachers were afraid of what students would communicate home to their parents, so they rarely engaged in courageous intellectual discussions. There were mentor-disciple relations, but they were often built on the premise of the parents' support for such learning experiences. In those cases, the role of the family was again crucial to the student's intellectual development.

---

in cities that grew exponentially with industrialization. They were an effort at educating and urbanizing the new proletariat, many of them first-generation city dwellers.

A few respondents stated that they became book lovers in spite of, not because of, family members and teachers. One interlocutor, whose socially “unhealthy” background made him undesirable in the eyes of the communist authorities, studied for his university examination for many years and was rejected every time for political, rather than intellectual reasons. His experience of rejection by professors and teachers turned him into a bitter critic and a lonely reader, who rejected the advice and criticism of others, choosing instead to develop his own system of values.

### **Shaping tastes**

The story of the lonely reader in the previous section introduces another important issue regarding the socialization of readers. How were their preferences shaped? Who contributed to this process and how did it develop over time? Three trends were evident in my interviews. First of all, readers were influenced by recommendations made by other people. Some seemed to listen primarily to recommendations made by family members. The kinds of books available at home, gifts from parents, book collections available in the homes of relatives when on vacation – these were all important sites for shaping the reading choices of my respondents.

Some singled out people who directly influenced them. Parents or older siblings had initially steered these readers towards specific genres of books. One respondent had been fascinated with scientific descriptions (geography, botany, astronomy), because of the types of books his father had made available to him as a child. In another case, an uncle had given detective stories to another young reader, who grew to enjoy that type of writing above all else. But most respondents also acknowledged that their tastes had changed over time, both in response to suggestions by others they deemed figures of authority, and also as a result of their own curiosity.

Some respondents, in fact, wanted to emphasize the degree to which they had been free of any influences in their choice of books. Their statements were more assertions of independence than realistic descriptions of how their taste in books evolved over time. These narratives of *suis generis* reading preferences generally came from individuals who had encountered problems in their early attempts to

read (such as the mN whose parents forbade him to read), and who became book collectors and readers in spite of family and school influences. They were less likely to give intellectual credit to other individuals, as their very own identity seemed closely linked to the books they had read and collected.

Other respondents represented their independent choices as somewhat linked to outside forces. A few of my interlocutors identified literary reviews such as *Romania Literara* as one of the sources for choosing books. In identifying these sources, they were asserting their status as discerning readers. *Romania Literara* is generally considered an elite publication. During the communist regime it was a status symbol to be seen walking around with it, especially among people of higher education. At the same time, they were representing themselves as active choice-makers. The literary magazines offered good choices, but it was up to each reader to first pick up the magazines and also choose from among those books what seemed interesting.

### Sharing ideas

One of the issues that interested me about book collectors and readers was whether this was a solitary passion or a communal one. Most of my respondents seemed to be solitary readers. They may have gathered information about books from other people, but they didn't engage in discussing books with others, outside of school-related activities. In answering why that is the case, it is difficult to disentangle the political from the personal. On the one hand, one can see why in a society where books are censored and reading certain titles forbidden, people would be disinclined to talk about their reading interests. Many people were afraid of any kind of discussion in public gatherings, due to the threat of informants. These fears seem to have been confirmed by recent revelations about the informing activities of prominent intellectuals.<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> The most prominent case is that of Stelian Tanase, a dissident historian and writer, who recently published his secret file from the Securitate, revealing the informing activities of a supposed close friend and prominent intellectual, Dan Oprescu. See Stelian Tanase, *Acasa se vorbește în soaptă (dosar și jurnal din anii țării ai dictaturii)* (Bucharest: Ed. Compania, 2002).

One the other hand, it is very possible that the choice not to communicate with others about books had to do with how people chose to enjoy books. Some of the respondents indicated that consuming books was a private pleasure, an escape from reality. To talk about books might destroy the imaginary edifice readers built up for themselves. In addition, in a culture that emphasized community participation and values over individual, private ones even before the arrival of communism, it is not surprising that readers found the privacy of reading more pleasurable, more rewarding than the communal experience of discussing a book. Finally, the education system had never encouraged discussion. Rote learning, memorization and repeating the "right" answers were the fundamentals of Romanian pedagogy since the beginning of modern education. Such an education system did little to emphasize the intellectual rewards of discussion, or to train students in the practice of debate.

There were a few interlocutors who did mention reading groups, especially during school years. Some had been part of reading circles in high school, sometimes formalized (a literature teacher would often oversee such activities). Such circles were unlikely to lead to the discovery of "forbidden" books and discussions of subversive topics. They simply meant discussing books that were part of the reading lists offered in school. Others talked about having been part of reading groups in college. In this case the groups were more autonomous and more likely to encourage alternative reading choices, often focusing on genres and titles that were forbidden. For instance, a respondent who had been interested in transcendentalism and spirituality had been steered in his reading choices and interpretations of texts by an informal, small group of like-minded individuals. He was able to get some of the most influential texts from members of this informal group.

Most of the older respondents criticized the younger generation for reading less than they had when they were young. But in fact, almost all of my respondents acknowledged reading less than they used to when they were in school. For most respondents, the pinnacle of their reading passion was in school or in their young adult years. Those who had attended college saw that as a crucial period in forming their reading habits and also familiarizing them with more titles than ever before or since.

## Conclusions and further questions

The findings offered here are based on a rather small sample, which I intend on expanding through a future collaboration with the Institute for Recent Memory in Bucharest; the sample will be amended upon receiving the rest of the transcriptions of interviews taken by my collaborators this summer. This research has offered me the chance of identifying more closely important issues that need to be explored further, in order to formulate better hypotheses about various aspects of book collecting and reading under communism.

One of the important findings, so far, is that my respondents generally did not want to focus front and center on the politics of the communist regime. Fear may be one explanation for this attitude. But I do not believe this is the case any longer. In fact, my subjects were not troubled by having to sign a release form for the interviews, a sign that the culture of fear prevalent under communism has changed. A more likely explanation is that reading was an activity that brought normalcy to people's existence; it was a joy they wanted to cherish. Thus, they may be reluctant to combine discussions about this activity with broader criticisms of the communist period, towards which few of my respondents seemed to express any kind of nostalgia.

But many questions remain to be further elaborated. To begin with, I was unable to get much concrete information about censorship. I hope to address this issue in future interviews with authors, publishers, and, if I am fortunate enough, ex-censors. In a second stage of this project I also want to explore the written sources about censorship, in the Ministry of Internal Affairs, Ministry of Culture, and the archives of various publishing houses. A related question, from the perspective of the readers, would be how aware they were of specific taboos in publishing. I would like to compile a list of such items and include a question about taboos in my future interviews with readers.

What I have not been able to find out, in addition, is how writers were able to communicate their metaphoric "codes" to readers. The few interviews I had with authors (three) suggested that writers sometimes were constrained by censors in their ability to use metaphors, and that double-speak was effectively shaped by the actions of the censors in a very direct way. Writers also did not indicate that

they had considered the question of whether readers would be able to interpret the double-speak as intended. On the contrary, one writer mentioned that he was surprised to hear from readers certain interpretations that were more political than what he had intended. This question of semiotics is a significant one for anyone attempting to analyze the power of censorship and the significance of written text for any type of active or passive cultural resistance. I hope to find better ways to approach it in the next stage of this study.

I also want to understand better the relationship that developed between readers and the “gate-keepers” of books – bookstore employees and librarians. I would like to include more questions about this relationship in future interviews with readers and to also interview more bookstore attendants and owners, as well as librarians.

Finally, one weakness of this study was to not have been able to speak with more members of ethnic minority groups. Some of my collaborators this summer were able to interview a few ethnic Hungarians (I also did one such interview), and a few ethnic Germans. From these few interviews it is very difficult to extract significant comparisons with ethnic Romanians. One question I would like to pursue further, for instance, is whether the availability of books in their respective language enabled ethnic minorities to shape a more private, sheltered culture of reading. The one interview I did with a Hungarian man suggested that there were books that appeared in Hungarian that would not have made it past the Romanian censors. This opens up the question of whether there was a culture of resistance among censors and publishers in the Hungarian and German language publications, which the regime was not aware of, or whether the regime actually allowed such publications to appear, by virtue of their small scale and inability to circulate widely among the population of Romania.