

Ceausecu's Plonk – An Extract from 'The Bumper Book of Vitali's Travels'

At Vrancea winery, not far from the Romanian town of Focsani, I was offered a tasting of Galbena Odobesti, a locally produced sweet white.

'This is our best-selling brand, the so-called "*grand cru*", although you might not like its taste,' said the winery's director, somewhat apologetically. 'Before the revolution, we made only small quantities of it for the VIPs. It was the favourite wine of Ceausescu, Romania's communist dictator, and we used to send regular consignments of it to all his residences. We had to do it secretly, because Ceausescu never drank in public and tried to portray himself as ascetic and teetotal. Galbena is very popular in Romania now, because it is cheap and also because in people's minds it is associated with Ceausescu's lifestyle. We sell one hundred thousand bottles of it a day. Shop owners come here pleading for it, and it brings us a lot of profit.'

I was not in a hurry to take a sip from my glass. I already knew that the dictator's tastes in architecture and interior design were tacky, unsophisticated and reeking of megalomania. I was wondering what his favourite wine would taste like, and hoping that Galbena's amazing popularity in the impoverished post-communist Romania had more to do with its low price than with Ceausescu himself. After a guided tour of 'Ceausescu's Bucharest' several days before, I was finding it hard to imagine that anyone in Romania could feel nostalgic about him.

We had started with the House of the Republic (also known as Ceausescu's Palace), the world's second-largest building after the Pentagon, although much uglier.

The Italians have an interesting way of conveying the size of an object with the help of suffixes alone. For example, '*casa*' is a normal house, '*casetta*' or '*casino*' is a smallish house, '*casaccio*' is a huge house, and '*casuccio*' is a huge, ugly house. The Palace of the Republic, which jumped at us in all its mind-boggling monstrosity at the end of Bucharest's Unirii Boulevard, was an archetypal casuccio. The 101-metre-high building was the shape of a giant wedding-cake disfigured by drunken guests (Ceausescu had copied its design from a much smaller palace of the North Korean dictator, Kim Il Sung, in Pyongyang). For six years, twenty thousand workers and four hundred architects toiled twenty-four hours a day on its construction. Only Ceausescu's execution in December 1989 stopped him completing the project.

Next to the Palace of the Republic, stood the somewhat smaller Palace of Science, housing the National Institute for Science and Technology, of which Ceausescu's semi-literate wife, Elena, a virago with a passion for French champagne, American fur coats and expensive jewellery, had been president.

Even after their death, the vicious Ceausescu couple dominated Bucharest's city-scape, if now only in stone.

I was surprised at the entry charge to the Palace of the Republic: 3,000 leu (\$1) for the locals and 15,000 leu for foreigners, who were also allowed to use photo- and video-cameras inside the building for the additional fee of 100,000 lei. Charging people for looking at the excesses of Romania's recent tragedy did not seem right and was made even more bizarre by the fact that the post-Ceausescu Romanian government had made the palace a venue for conferences, receptions

and other state occasions. To me, this partially explained why democratic reforms had not taken off in Romania: how could the government take reformist decisions in houses swarming with the ghosts of the country's not-so-distant totalitarian past?

'Welcome to the Palace!' said an unsmiling female guide, addressing our small English-speaking group, which, apart from Cornel and myself, consisted of two bewildered Indians with camcorders.

Leading the way along the 150-metre-long, eighteen-metre-high neo-Baroque gallery, with marble floors and mahogany walls, she bombarded us with astounding statistics. The total volume of the palace's interior was 2,500,000 cubic metres, more than that of the largest Egyptian pyramid. The 330,000 square metres of flooring were covered with 220,000 square metres of handmade Transylvanian carpets. Three thousand massive crystal chandeliers, on which Elena Ceausescu had been especially keen, hung from the ceilings. The foundations of the palace, which was connected by underground tunnels with numerous Ceausescu residences around Bucharest, were 500 metres deep, and housed an earthquake-resistant bomb-shelter. A special underground mini-train was always ready to take Ceausescu and his wife to their private airport in case of emergency.

With a touch of pride in her voice, the guide informed us that the Ceausescus were the palace's main architects and interior designers: every single detail had to be approved by them.

'How many rooms are there in the palace?' asked one of the dumbfounded Indians.

'No one counted,' she answered.

The interiors of the sumptuous palaces of the Russian tsars, of which I had seen many, looked like barren peasants' huts in comparison with this cornucopia of tasteless extravagance. With disgust, I looked at tacky golden roses hanging from the chandeliers, at curtains embroidered with gold and silver, at columns made of pink marble, at flowery patterns on the carpets, repeating in minute detail the ornamentation of the ceilings above them. The crude 'little girl's' hand of Ceausescu's overbearing wife was felt everywhere. If architecture was indeed music in stone, the palace was a dull and pretentious cacophony played by a madman. It was the world's biggest monument to wasteful, aggressive and authoritarian kitsch, created by imbecile parvenus. The illusion of the Ceausescus' ominous presence was almost complete under its lavish ceilings. Being there was like conversing with the horrible couple at a pompous and meaningless reception.

Feeling tiny and humiliated, I looked out of the window. Debris and devastation were everywhere. In front of the palace, the building of the former Radio Centre lay in ruins, its dark glassless windows gaping at the world like empty eye-sockets. Next to it stood the iron and concrete carcass of an unfinished fast-food factory, another crazy project of the Ceausescus, who had ordered that dozens of such factories, popularly known as 'starvation clinics,' be built in Bucharest (one could still see their abandoned stone skeletons with protruding fittings here and there). The idea was that people would pop in there after work to buy pre-cooked and pre-packaged warm meals, which they would consume in their dark, cold flats, thus saving precious energy. Under Ceausescu, Romania, which had supplied the whole of the Luftwaffe with petrol during the Second World War, was able to offer its citizens water, heating and electricity for just two hours a day. All the country's resources went to accommodate the perverse needs and tastes of the Ceausescus – rulers whom the Romanian people did not deserve.

'Have a good stay in *my* country!' the guide said with a scowl and with emphasis on 'my.' It made me start with recognition: her farewell remark could have been borrowed from Dracula,

who, in Bram Stoker's book, ended one of his letters to Jonathan Harker with 'I trust that you will enjoy your stay in *my* beautiful land!'

'You know why I don't want to take my two sons to the palace? I don't know what to tell them.' Cornel, my Romanian escort, said to me, back in the car. 'They will ask me, "How come all this money was wasted? How come you, Daddy, were a member of the Communist Party? How come you kept silent all those years?" I don't know what to say.'

We were heading for Ceausescu's last abode: two cubic metres of solid earth – and no chandeliers. His wife, Elena, was buried in the same cemetery. Only a couple of weeks before my tour of 'Ceausescu's Bucharest,' the vicious couple were joined there by their wayward son Nicu, an alcoholic and a skirt-chaser, who had died of cirrhosis of the liver in a Viennese hospital.

I felt as if I had known the Ceausescu family for years. It all started in Moscow in the late eighties, when, quite by chance, I bought several English books, printed in the US, from a drunken Soviet ex-diplomat. One of them was called *Red Horizons*. It was written by Ion Pacepa, Ceausescu's closest adviser and former head of the Romanian intelligence service, who had defected to the West. For many years, General Pacepa was a trusted confidant of the Ceausescu family and was able to observe their everyday life from behind the scenes. The stupidity, grotesque drunkenness, nepotism, scheming, brutality, greed and corruption described in the book were hair-raising and bordering on wild fantasy, even for someone like myself, hardened by many years of life in the USSR, which did not look half as terrifying as Ceausescu's Romania as portrayed by Pacepa.

The self-proclaimed Romanian president, referred to by his underlings as 'the Comrade' (what an irony), was shown routinely ordering assassinations, masterminding global terrorism, dancing with anger when things went wrong and drinking unchilled wine in generous quantities. He wore his suits only once, fearful that devious Western intelligence services would impregnate them with a cancer-inducing agent. He made his beloved black Labrador, Corbu, a colonel in the Romanian army and gave him his own car and driver. And so on ...

Elena, officially dubbed 'The Romanian people's most esteemed daughter,' was portrayed as an alcoholic, a nymphomaniac, a devious ignoramus and a compulsive hoarder, who was firmly in control of her weak-spirited husband and, through him, of Romania. It was not she who was Ceausescu's second-in-command, but the other way round.

The most disgusting real-life character in Pacepa's book was Nicu, who spent his time carousing at nightly saturnalia, smashing whisky bottles against walls, abusing everyone around him and screwing everything that moved.

My drinking trainer Evgeny Bulavin used to go to the neglected and run-down Kharkov zoo in the moments of despair which usually coincided with hangovers: the sight of the poor caged animals never failed to reassure him slightly. As he used to say, it was good to see living creatures whose lives were even more miserable than his own. Prior to getting hold of *Red Horizons*, I used to rely for the same purpose on the North Korean magazine *Korea Today*, readily available at Soviet news-stalls, after which a *Pravda* editorial read almost like an erotic novel.

Everything was relative indeed, and nothing could evoke the life-saving feeling of the relativity of suffering like Ion Pacepa's extraordinary book. It was one of the few treasured volumes of my Moscow library which I took with me when I had to defect to the West. It survived my numerous moves between Britain and Australia. Bedraggled and dog-eared, it lies on my desk as I am writing these lines.

A kiosk at the cemetery's gate was selling flowers and crude wooden coffins. I wondered what type of customers the florist-cum-undertaker could attract. Someone who wanted to buy a bunch of flowers to put on the grave of a loved one and suddenly decided to get a coffin, too – for himself? Or someone who came to bury a relative and forgot to bring a coffin?

Behind the gate, two rough types sat on a bench, taking turns to swig a brownish liquid that looked very much like the Biomedicine of my youth, from the all-too-familiar 'fire-extinguisher' bottle, the size and the shape of a surface-to-air missile. They turned out to be grave-diggers enjoying their break between burials. One of them volunteered to take us to the Ceausescu's graves, located in three different parts of the cemetery.

A simple stone cross with a red star on top stood on the grave of one of the twentieth century's vilest dictators. The cross was half covered with flowers and faded wreaths. 'Ceausescu Nicolae 1918-1989' was written on it. Half a dozen grave-faced and black-clad women huddled around. They crossed themselves frantically and stuck burning candles – a sign of respect – into the mellow soil.

'He was a very good man,' whispered one of them, and her eyes under her black kerchief filled with tears.

How much suffering do people have to go through to reach the point at which they stop worshipping their dead tyrants?

A handwritten note on a sheet of paper from a school notebook lay under the cross. I asked Cornel to translate it for me. 'Personal experience is an expensive school. Those who are not very clever study at this school. Clever people learn from the experience of others,' it said.

This meaningful note on the grave of Nicolae Ceausescu, whose monument in the shape of the monstrous Palace of the Republic still dominated Bucharest and whose vicious ghost had not been exorcised from the country's mutilated soul, gave hope that the people of Romania would one day be able to draw the right lessons from their own tragic past.

Elena's grave was in the cemetery's opposite corner. Inseparable during their lifetime, the Ceausescu couple were finally separated in death. This arrangement corresponded to the popular perception of Elena as a manipulating witch, who held the main blame for Ceausescu's crimes. At least in death Nicolae was spared the constant presence of his dominating wife. There were neither mourners nor flowers at her grave, which was decorated only with a bare stone cross. It was strange to see crosses on the graves of the couple, who didn't believe in anything but power and made sure that hundreds of Romanian churches were blown up. Was it a truly Christian attempt at forgiveness of the atrocious sinners who had died unrepentant and as such were impossible to forgive?

On Elena's grave, there was a note, too. 'Oh, Mother, sweet Mother, when leaves fall down from the trees, you are calling for me. Your beloved son, who has made lots of mistakes in his life.'

The fresh grave of Nicu, the Ceausescu's maverick son, was overlaid with wreaths, most of which hadn't had time to fade, and was surrounded by a crowd of mourners.

'Nicu is widely perceived as his parents' victim and a good guy,' explained Cornel. 'Tens of thousands turned up at his recent funeral.'

Standing at Nicu's grave, also decorated with a cross, though only a wooden one, I remembered a scene from *Red Horizons* describing a state banquet, at which drunken Nicu, 'a good guy,' was enjoying himself in his habitual manner. I knew it almost by heart:

A waiter came in with a silver platter full of oysters. 'Put it here, in the middle,' ordered Nicu, pointing toward the table. 'Is there any seasoning on them?'

'They are just fresh and raw, Comrade Nicu,' replied the waiter.

'They need seasoning, you idiot ...'

He precariously climbed up on to the table and started urinating on them, careful to 'season' every oyster. 'Come on, comrades. Let's have an oyster,' he urged the guests ...

'Nobody's eating? Who doesn't like my seasoning? Nobody? Then I'll wash them off.' And Nicu started squirting with a siphon bottle over the oysters and over the rest of us sitting around the table ...

We left Nicu pushing a waitress toward the edge of the table while tearing off her blouse. 'I want to f-- you here. Right here on this table, you slut.'

Having had to share a Moscow communal flat with the drinking and womanising son of a top Soviet functionary for several years, I knew how correct this seemingly improbable description was.

Unlike the mourners, I didn't feel like paying my respects to Nicu Ceausescu, simply because I didn't have any.

Having paid the grave-digger off with enough leu to allow him to buy another surface-to-air alcohol-fuelled rocket, capable of briefly propelling him and his colleague-in-spade away from the earth they had to dig, we drove to the Memorial Cemetery of the victims of the 1989 revolution, during which eleven hundred people were killed in Bucharest alone. Romania's recent history went hand-in-hand with death.

The fresh burial ground in north Bucharest was surrounded by hideous beehive-like apartment blocks. It was deserted, except for packs of hungry stray dogs scouring among the graves, pissing and copulating on them.

The 'victims of the revolution' were mostly teenagers, brutally killed by the Securitate during pro-democracy demonstrations in November-December 1989. Their faces looked reproachfully out from mass-produced obelisks (not crosses), as if saying, 'What have you done to us? We do not belong here. Our photos should be in school albums, not on tombstones.'

They could now communicate with this world through epitaphs only.

'I didn't leave this life because I wanted to. What I am now, you will become. My dear parents and brothers, please forgive me for leaving you when I was only 13. Octavian Burcioaila – "Tavi" ' (a young bespectacled boy, with a know-it-all look on his face, who was probably bullied at school as a nerd).

'His train of life had only two stops – Revolution and Death. Stan Bogdan, 1970-1989' (a rugby ball lay on his grave).

'She was killed by the tyrants of the Ceau clan when peacefully demonstrating for free Romania. Gabriela Popescu, 1968-1989' (what a stunningly beautiful girl she was).

'We thank you and wait for you to be born again – sister, mother, father. Elin Marinescu, 1976-1989.'

'I loved my country. Vali-Valeriu Miu, 27 years old. Student. Died December 1989.'

I wished the nagging Swedish wine writer with whom I had had dinner on my first night in Bucharest were there with me. But he was elsewhere – probably eating lunch, paid for by his Romanian hosts, and complaining of the lack of toilet paper at his hotel and of the abundance of

unwashed cars in the unswept, dirty streets. He didn't realise that it was not dirt that the cars and the streets of Bucharest were covered with. They were soaked in human blood.

Nursing a glass of Ceausescu's favourite drink in the tasting room of Vrancea winery, I recalled another passage from *Red Horizons*, in which Ion Pacepa described a typical drinking evening with Ceausescu in one of the dictator's personal wine cellars:

Before we were able to reach a table, a waiter in black tie materialised out of nowhere holding a tray with a newly opened bottle of wine and one large glass. Known as 'Odobesti Galbena' ['Odobesti' means 'Yellow'], it is Ceausescu's favourite, a flavourful wine of the same colour and consistency as sunflower oil, which is made in very limited quantities in Odobesti, a Moldavian village renowned for its wines. Ceausescu downed two glasses on his feet, then sat down in his favourite easy chair beside a heavy, round oak table. The waiter refilled Ceausescu's glass and set the bottle down beside him in an ice bucket containing no ice – Ceausescu does not want his drinks cold, in order to protect his vocal cords.

When I finally tasted the drink, I realised that Ceausescu's favourite wine was indeed similar to sweetened sunflower oil, not just in 'colour and consistency' but in taste as well. If the kitsch interior of his Palace of the Republic could be somehow liquidised and expressed in wine-making terms, it would result in Galbena Odobesti.

My Prague-based friend Igor Pomerantsev was right: wines – just like humans – could be immoral.

'Can you find me a spittoon, please?' I asked the winery's director.

The Bumper Book of Vitali's Travels
Thirty Years of Globe-Trotting (1990 – 2020)

by Vitali Vitaliev

Published by Thrust Books



Coming soon for the Amazon **kindle** and in paperback.