

An emigration story, “Exercises in not-forgetting”, and 3 ARA Congresses

Professor Ileana Costea, PhD

California State University (CSUN), Northridge, California, 91330, USA

Abstract: In this article Ileana Costea presents some highlights of her emigration, the two volumes of her book on “surprise-Romanian presence abroad” (“Exerciții de Neuitare”), the articles she published about the two most recent ARA Congresses (Pasadena, California, 2014, and Frascati, Italy, 2015), and the ARA Congress 1992 whose general local organizer she was at CSUN, Northridge, California. Some details on the cultural events at the 1992 ARA Congress (exhibitions, book fair, a concert) and the two art exhibitions are also presented.

1. Introduction

This article is an accolade to Romanian creativity which for years and years I was passionate to discover through what I like to call “surprise-Romanian presence abroad”.

2. My emigration

Like all of us, Romanian emigrants, each one has his/her own story. Mine happens to be a very romantic one. I left communist Romania in 1972, right after I graduated with a Master Degree in Architecture from the “Ion Mincu” Institute in Bucharest. I took off on a 7-day trip, to visit the castles on the Loire Valley in France, and those days were delayed until today. I left the group of “young people” (of which in fact the majority were way beyond the age of being members of the Union of the Working Youth, later called the Communist Youth – and this change in name gave me a lot of trouble with the immigration office in LA since they could not find this organization in their thick book!). With great difficulty I was finally able to obtain the approval to go on this trip, organized by the Tourist Office of Young People (BTT – “Biroul de Turism pentru Tineret”). Having the “burden” of a relative which was living in Chicago (my first degree cousin, the daughter of the sister of my mother, Alexandra Bellow, I was only allowed to travel the Soviet Block countries. After 5 years of filing for travelling to the Western side of the world, for the first time I was finally given the exit-visa. It was

through a mere luck: The Chief Visa-granting Officer happened to have a daughter, who like me was a student in architecture. Had I have been given the permission to travel to the West before, I would have returned to my country, since I was a child/a teenager. But now I was determined to leave my country, especially because I was in love with the man who will later become my life-long husband, Nicolas V. Costea, MD, professor of medicine. The two of us met briefly at a family dinner in Bucharest. He was sent by the American National Academy of Science to visit some hospitals in Romania, and he came to see his mother and brother who were left behind the iron curtain. It was in 1970. I was in the 5th year of my architecture studies. At a dinner given in the honor of Dr. Costea, I fell in love with him on the spot. It happened like in silent movies, when a bolt of lightning goes from the young girl’s nose tip to his... It was only in that direction, and not from his to mine too. We saw each other again in Paris, when he was traveling on another US National Academy of Science trip to Romania in 1972. He was kind enough to bring me a piece of luggage with clothes from my mother. My luggage was confiscated by the Romanian consulate in Paris when I escaped from the hotel where the BTT group was hosted. My love story was really like in the movies, and my dream to marry Nic came true. I arrived to Los Angeles on the 14th of February (Valentine’s Day) 1973, and we got married in April that year at the Santa Monica City Hall (at the same time and in the same hall where Dean Martin’s 3rd marriage took place).

In July 1972 when I arrived in Paris, I did not know anybody, and I only had \$10 in my pocket, and two packages of Snagov Romanian cigarettes and a doll in a national costume (“călușar”). I never smoked but selected these items from my luggage just in case I will need to give a little gift to someone who would help me. I will never forget that early morning, when at 6AM I left the room so that I did not have to turn in my passport to our group guide who announced that he will take our documents and keep them during our trip. The streets of Paris were waking up, and I was telling myself “I will succeed. How? I do not know. But I am sure I will succeed.” The lack of fear characteristic to young age. My story is long. My mother was called numerous times to the police and interrogated. They reproached her, a high-school teacher, that she did not know how to raise her daughter in the spirit of communist ethic. At that point I had two dreams: to find Nic, whose trace I lost, since he moved from Chicago, where he was a Professor at Illinois University to UCLA in California. When I left Romania I had the positive attitude of an optimist, rather than that of pessimist who always uses a negative. The joke goes: Pessimists said worst can’t happen in our country. I, in an optimistic way told myself: Of course worst can happen, as it indeed did in the last years of Ceausescu’s leadership. Mother was desperate. I was the only child, and both she and I thought we will never see each other “in this life”. Like all Romanian emigrants I know I was wishing I could go back to Bucharest, to see the places I loved, and grew up in, my relatives and friends. Like everybody else I knew, I had the customary nightmare that I return, then they arrest me, and I cannot get out of the country anymore and ask myself why did I go back? The acute missing of my country (“dorul”) kept growing and growing. But as the years went by it softened, especially with the arrival of my mother in LA to live with us. Through numerous letters to a senator we were able to get her out of the country. In 1992 it was because of her desire to visit Romania that I went back to visit.

3. “Exerciții de Neuitare” – discovering surprise-Romanian presence abroad

In 1998 I started my “exercises in not-forgetting” choosing my self-imposed mission of discovering and writing about surprise-Romanian presences abroad. Since then I published over 40 articles on

this subject in various Romanian magazines and newspapers of the Diaspora, as well as in Romania. In July 2015 I published my first book, Volume I of “Exerciții de Neuitare”/“Exercises in not-forgetting” published by Reflection Publishing, and which can be found on Amazon.

3.1 Volume I – “Exerciții de Neuitare”

My mission started based on my observation that Romanian culture and achievements are not well known abroad. Nevertheless, there are everywhere around the globe “well-kept secrets”, such as a skilled hand, an innovative idea, an extraordinary brain, and all have a Romanian origin. The Volume I of my book makes known some of these secrets. It presents representatives of Romanian cultural life in different parts of the world, Romanians established abroad (like the musicians Liviu and Ovidiu Marinescu, the fashion designer Smaranda Schächtele, the writer Livia Medilanski Grama, the photo-journalist Emanuel Tânjală, the radio and TV show creator Benoni Todică, the architect Dino Tudor, the sculptor Patriciu Mateescu) or messengers from Romania (like the Eminescu specialist, writer, poet, and journalist from Botosani, Lucia Olaru Nenati, the poet and actress Lidia Lazu, from Bucharest). In his preface to my Volume I, Ion Lazu says: Ileana Costea “smells them” from any distance (I am referring in this case to inter-continent distance) not only when a Romanian cultural messenger arrives in Los Angeles, but also in New York, Paris, Venice, and Düsseldorf. In Palm Springs the author raises our attention on a building holding the signature of a famous Romanian architect, Haralamb Georgescu, and in the State of Kentucky she discovers the museum dedicated to the painter Dimitrie Barea. The author also spots very young Romanians, such as the anthropologist Mihai Anghel who successfully combines computer science with statistics and applied art. The author’s articles also discuss classics of the Romanian art and culture, such as Eminescu, Blaga, Enescu and Brâncuși. She also writes about creators who are not of Romanian origin, but who are attracted by or got inspiration from Romanian culture, such as the New York artist Jerry W. McDaniel or the opera specialist William Toutant... The author is not only very well informed, but also has a tomographic way of penetrating through the skin of things to their kernel

and presenting them in very expressive, powerful, memorable ways.”



Figure 1. Ileana Costea, “Exerciții de Neuitare”, Volume I, Reflection Publishing, 2015. Cover design by Jerry W. McDaniel and Bogdan Alexandru Ungureanu.

3.2 Volume II– “Exerciții de Neuitare”

I am now preparing the second volume of the articles on surprise-Romanian presence abroad. Here are a few of the articles which will be presented: Part of the story of my remaining in Paris as a political refugee in 1972, as it appeared as a chapter in the book “Romanians, from New York to Los Angeles” by Emanuel Tânjălă and Dan Turturică; an interview taken of me by Ben Todică, during my visit in Melbourne, Australia in January 2011. It contains articles about writers (Bujor Nedelcovici, Ion Lazu, Lidia Lazu). I am posing a moment over the book “Refugiații”/”The Refugees”, written by Mihai Vasilescu/Edgard Shelaru, former BBC and Free Europe newsman, with whom my family shared an apartment in Bucharest where later Saul Bellow stayed during his brief visit to Romania, accompanying my cousin Alexandra. An article about the Class of 66 at Spiru Haret High School, “Amintiri din Școală – Promoția Spiru 66”, a book written through online

correspondence by Mihai Vasilescu’s colleagues, of the class one year younger than mine at the HS I too studied. Volume II will also contain articles in the field of art, music and movies. One article is about the Romanian-Cuban modern painter Sandu Darie, an interview with the heterogeneous American Artist Jerry W. McDaniel – painter with a Romanian flavor since he did illustrations for poems of Lucian Blaga (May 2008), and more recently (June 2014) for poems of Ana Blandiana. An article about the “last romantic in music”, the composer Eugen Doga of Bessarabia. More general articles on culture, such as “The City of Los Angeles pulsates with Romanian Art”, “Poetry, literature, history, and memory...”, about the visit, to the US West Coast in the summer of 2014, of Ana Blandiana, Romulus Rusan and Doina Uricariu, an article about the art exhibition called Salon ARTIS 2010, organized by the architect-& graphic artist Marina Nicleaev in Bucharest, an article about the Contemporary Art Fair of Chatou, near Paris. An article about two women scientists, specialists in child psychology, Florica Nicolescu and Florica Bagdasar, as well as articles I created or contributed to on the Wikipedia (Pericle Papahagi, Ioan D. Caragiani, Mihail Magiari); articles about books such as “Veneticii” by Ion Lazu, “Refugiații” by Edgar Shelaru, “In two Worlds” (“In două Lumi”) by Ben Todică, and a review made on Amazon on Andrei Codrescu’s book “A hole in the Flag”. Another article which will appear in Volume II is about a recent movie presented on the public television station PBS in January 2016 “Chuck Norris vs. communism and the entrepreneur Teodor Zamfir” – about the smuggling of videos with Western movies, especially American thrillers, during the harsh Ceausescu’s time - an incredible story.

4. Three ARA Congresses

Both volumes of my book end with articles about ARA Congresses. The first volume ends with the article on the 38th ARA Congress which took place at Caltech, Pasadena, California, 2014. Volume II will conclude with two ARA articles: one on the most recent ARA Congress, the 39th, which took place at the National Institute of Nuclear Physics, Frascati, Rome (2015), and the Congress I organized in 1992 at the university where I teach, California State University, Northridge (CSUN).

The latter was the 17th ARA Congress and took place while Dr. Maria Manoliu Manea was the President of ARA, and when ARA Congresses were attended by a very large number of people. The 1992 Congress had about 400 attendees, and it presented two exhibitions of art (coordinated by the sculpture CSUN professor Robert (Bob) Bassler, and arranged by Dinu (Constantin) Rădulescu – a sculptor from Romania, and Ioana Sturdza, an artist living in California then, now long deceased. A Book Fair was also held– organized by Georgiana Fărnoaga Gălățeanu who has taught Romanian at UCLA for several dozen years. Many well-known writers participated at that Conference, among which Augustin Buzura, Bujor. Nedelcovici, Petru Popescu. Several IREX, and SOROS scholars participated, among whom Gabriel Andreescu (Univ. of California, Irvine). A design/architecture exhibition had among the participants Romanian architects from California, Georgio Lupu and Dino Tudor, the Industrial Design UCLA Professor/Architect Nathan Shapira – deceased, and the Romanian architect from Târgu Mureș, Maria Dragotă. The CSUN newspaper wrote a praising article about the art exhibitions and placed a picture of a Hieronymus Bosch-like black-and-white drawing by gifted Romanian artist Marina Crainic, from Lausanne, Switzerland. There also was a beautiful piano concert where Lory Wallfish (Smith College, Northampton, Massachusetts - deceased), the soloist Julien Musafia (California State University, Long Beach), and the then very young pianist Virginia Munteanu performed.

4.1 ARA 1992 Art Exhibitions

A rich black-and-white Art Catalog was published on this occasion where Robert Bassler, well-known California sculptor and professor at CSUN wrote the introductory statement.

4.2 ART Catalog Introduction Statement – ARA 1992, CSUN

“I am pleased and honored to have been invited to host this unique assembly of accomplished artists from Romania. It is a wonderful opportunity to become personally acquainted with contemporary painters and sculptors who share the roots and history of a country and a culture so rich and diverse, yet have been subjected to severe deprivations of the rights and freedoms that we take for granted in the United States.”

Their works are aesthetically various, addressing personal spiritual and political concerns, and are definitely within established modernist traditions. I applaud them all for their talent and their courage.”

Prof. Robert Bassler
Dept. of Art, 3D Media

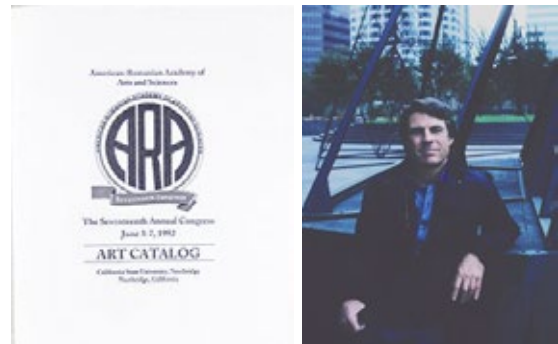


Figure 2 & 3. The black-and -white Art Catalog and sculptor Robert Bassler, coordinator of the art exhibitions at ARA 1992, CSUN.

The participants at the CSUN 1992 ARA Congress could admire on campus the beautiful modular sculpture of Patriciu Mateescu, known under the name “Love Flower” or “Carpathian Flower” donated to the University in 1985 by UCLA Professor Nicolas V, Costea, MD and CSUN Prof. Ileana Costea. The sculpture was later dedicated to the memory of Nicolas Costea, deceased in 2000.



Figure 4. Dinu Rădulescu “Cimpoier” (“Bagpiper”), one of the numerous pieces in the art exhibitions at ARA 1992.



Figure 5. “Love Flower”/“Carpathian Flower” by Romanian-American sculptor/ceramist Patriciu Mateescu, CSUN Student Union Courtyard, 1985. There are three sister sculptures of it, one at UCLA Sunset Recreation Center (yellow), and one at Cedar Sinai Hospital, Beverly Hills (white), and the most recent one installed in the main square in the Bistrita town in Northern Romania (red; launched in 2016).

5. Conclusion

The memory of the 1992 Congress still lingers upon me, since I danced “crazily” with my husband Nic and I had a quiet dance with the well-known Romanian artist Florin Piersic, who also attended that year’s event. That ARA Congress really marked the beginning of my life-long activities of making Romanian creativity and culture known.

References:

Ileana Costea, *Exerciții de Neuitare*, Reflection Publishing, July 2015.

<https://www.amazon.com/EXERCITII-NEUITARE-vol-I-romanesti-surpriza-strainatate/dp/1936629429>).

Ileana Costea, Los Angeles-ul pulsează cu evenimente românești

<http://melidonium.ro/2015/05/24/ileana-costea-los-angeles-ul-pulseaza-cu-evenimente-romanesti/>

Ileana Costea, *Românul Australian*, Anul 24 Nr. 225, Melbourne, Australia, Martie-Aprilie, 2016

Comemorarea a 7 ani de la moartea poetului Grigore Vieru - De vorbă cu scriitorii Ion Lazu și Lucia Olaru Nenati

Ileana Costea, *Românul Australian*, Anul 24 Nr. 226, Melbourne, Australian, Mai-Iunie, 2016

Chuck Norris vs. Comunism si Antreprenorul Theodor Zamfir

Alexandra Constanda, Mediafax, Documentarul "Chuck Norris vs Comunism", despre Irina-Margareta Nistor, printre filmele care trebuie vizionate la Sundance 2015

http://adevarul.ro/entertainment/film/documentarul-chuck-norris-vs-communism-despre-irina-margareta-nistor-printre-filmele-trebuievizionate-sundance-2015-1_54c2015a448e03c0fde0059b/index.html

Ileana Costea, Prezentări remarcabile de artă, cultură și știință românească la ARA 2015

<http://acum.tv/articol/75146/>

Ileana Costea, Al 38-lea Congres ARA, 23-26 Iulie 2014 Știință și artă românească minuat reprezentată la Caltech, Pasadena, California de Sud

<http://www.agero-stuttgart.de/REVISTA-AGERO/JURNALISTICA/ARA38%20de%20Ileana%20Costea.htm>

The 39th ARA Congress Frascati, Roma, July 28-31, 2015

<http://www.americanromanianacademy.org/#139th-congress-2015/c1vxd>

The 38th ARA Congress, July 23-27, 2014, Pasadena, California

<http://www.americanromanianacademy.org/#138-congress-2014/cqg1>

The 17th ARA Congress, 1992, CSUN, Northridge, California, General Local Organizer Professor Ileana Costea

Translation from Romanian by Ileana Orlich, of the article published in the *Universul* newspaper www.ic-art-gallery.com/ARA/1992Congress.html