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A Space of Forbearance
- **Ethnicity and Architecture in a small Romanian town –**

When I was nine my parents moved to Tulcea, a town of perhaps 75,000 people at the time, located at the very entrance in the Danube Delta, some 150 miles east of Bucharest in the Romanian province of Dobrogea (a sort of peninsula in between the final Danube and the Black Sea). My father a Romanian originally from Transilvania and my mother from a village of Ukrainian refugees located 45 km east from Tulcea, I myself was open, or at least prepared for ethnic diversity: two languages spoken in the family, two rounds of religious celebrations (my mother's sid' was observing the old calendar). In that respect, Tulcea was the grounds for solid training in ethnic, religious and cultural diversity. At first, we used to live in the Lippovan¹ district, where my father and then my mother were headmasters of the local School no.7, on 76, Libertatii (Liberty's) str². Tulcea used to be - and still was to some extent by 1974 - a rather cosmopolitan place, with a myriad of ethnic groups living together without any ample conflict in what was, before 1877, within the *limes*³ of the Ottoman Empire.

Church. Synagogue

On my way to high school, I passed the Catholic Church, catching timid glimpses of its interior and snatches of organ music when the door was ajar. I could then see a plaster statue of Christ in the half-shade of the vernacular gothic atmosphere. A little closer to the center, the Greek Orthodox Church followed; a towerless "temple": the cathedral of St.Nicholas right next to it had enough height for both of them.

I used to know the Greeks. One of my great-uncles married the daughter of a well-to-do merchant from Sulina (the easternmost town of Romania, by the seaside, also known as "Europolis"): grains, ships, olives and *lokum*⁴ (a sweet also known as "Turkish delight") were the topic of any discussion in their rather nice house, which they sold to a Gypsy family for virtually nothing when they moved into a block of flats in the 1980's. Everybody was leaving their old houses for fear of random demolishment (it was officially called "systematization of national territory") and followed the trend of becoming tenants to the state rather than owners.

In the city center there was a Bulgarian orthodox church: now that had a clock and - strangely fanciful for an Orthodox church - a Romanesque nave with, instead of a rosace, two weird, kidney-like windows which, the priest told me probably from the top of his head, "were" the tears of Jesus.

Very near to there I could see the synagogue, whose threatened demolition in the eighties - when everything else became an inferno in Romania - was averted at the last moment, probably due to the proper pressure from abroad. The Babadag street on which the synagogue was located (still is) "had" to be straighten up, according to one of the many "systematization" designs that erased the old cities and villages of Romania in the 1970's

but especially and violently in the 1980's. The genuine, ethically and architecturally diverse old houses were therefore demolished and replaced by blocks of flats with "national specificity" – the official style of the nationalistic communist rhetoric. In Tulcea there were very few Jews left and they were too old to protest, anyway.

In the same rather underground manner the local Jewish cemetery escaped the fate many other cemeteries (especially in Bucharest) could not: that of being erased, turned into a no-man's-land and then transformed again into a concrete desert of blocks of flats⁵ where children would grow wild and weedy, unsupervised by their proletarian parents always at work in long shifts.

One of the last of the Jews to leave for Israel was a watch maker whom I also knew well, because I used to pass by his shop and watch him as he was staring into the tiny mechanisms of movement and time. My father had bought from him my first watch – a cool Swiss-made *Coresa* – and also two bracelets for my mother and sister: the watchmaker was selling everything he owned in preparation for his emigration.

En route to my school – when we still lived in the School 7 headmaster house – I used to take a short-cut through the courtyard of the Lippovan church. The funeral of a venerable lady whom every called *Băbica* ("little old woman") was astonishing to a young boy who had never before encountered different religious practices: the priests read, whispering to her ears, uninterruptedly for two days from some old sacred books in Slavonic, a language not even the Lippovans themselves understand anymore; perhaps in the same way that the Tibetans recited *Bardö Thödöl*, their sacred book which contains instructions for the passage beyond, the dead woman was read in a dead language.

The Lippovan church was decorated in green oil-based paint outside, like many of their houses, and adorned with *crêpe papier* on feast days. Its icons were mounted in brass and silver: the golden nimbi and bearded faces of the saints barely visible from the depths of their silver cocoons. The Lippovan women, wearing gowns and kerchiefs in deliriously rich colors, walked in a stately parade behind their husbands, who wore *rubashka* (Russian tunics), with their beards hanging down to their belts. They were the same fisherman I knew because they sold us roe and fish, asking for "one more penny per pound" if it was still alive.

Then I would reach the bluffs of the Danube. It was a poetic setting: the river and the birds, and the rowing boats with their tarred ropes linking the bank with the cargo boats. For a would-be writer like me, nothing could have been more suitable to "inspiration", especially in the evenings.

To promenade on the bluffs (*faleză* in Romanian, but also *corso*) was to parade and to display your family status. Changes in wardrobe or marital status were made public and commented upon (t)here, during lazy strolls borrowing their leisurely pace from the exhausted river nearby. The bluffs were not only the spines of the town, but also its most interesting site. Social contacts, promenades, urban life – everything happened there. The *faleză* had its own almost private areas: high school and college students met at the "little graves" (floral spots inserted in the concrete path); the thugs had their "headquarters" at the Danubius restaurant. At the two extreme exits – one toward the Old Market and one

towards the Union Plaza – sat the perpetual retirees, putting all through the gossip grinder. Every gesture we, the walking “actors”, made became public and subjected to censorship⁶.

New civic centers

That was, of course, more or less until Ceaușescu started an ample program to change the administrative geography of Romania and, in the process, to kick-start the nationalistic discourse that would very soon have institutional and physical effects on the major cities. The rhetoric of Latin origins permeated the city structure.

Tulcea became the county “capital” and, as well as all the other forty, became a “*municipium*”. Now, any *municipium*, one knows from history, needs a “forum”. Therefore, an ample program to build the so called “new civic centers” was ignited in 1967 and lasted until 1987 (the last one finished and arguably the most flamboyant in Satu Mare, north-western Romania). Basically, every “*municipium*” in Romania saw its urban core demolished and rebuilt, with a major edifice for local party and administration headquarters, a “house of culture of the workers’ union”, a supermarket and perhaps several blocks of flats of better quality for the local political elite. It resembled Mussolini’s project that changed the central structure of several Italian cities in the 1920’s and 1930s (Brescia is to me the most relevant example of the opposition between the Medieval and the Fascist paradigms). Of course, bronze statues of certain major figures from the Romanian history would be enthroned in the new parade squares. On the second floor, every single party building – necessarily the most impressive in the respective city – had a loggia overseeing the otherwise empty square: Ceaușescu’s official visits in the counties were the only reason “the working masses of people” would gather (not by their free will, of course) to look at the president and to be looked at, (and supervised) by him and his court. In Tulcea, like everywhere else, the civic square was mostly empty: the real city center was the *faleză*, not this purposeless concrete surface deliberately built away from it.

There was another moment when, this time on their own free will, people gathered in the so-called “civic centers”: in December 1989, when they attacked and kept under surveillance the edifices of Communist power that symbolized the regime itself. They were never real public buildings, not even in the Habermasian sense⁷, as the state that produced them was hardly “concerned with the public, general goodness of all its citizens” (1990, 46). Now these squares are once again voids, blank horizontal surfaces without events to fill them, without life, passages perhaps from one interesting place of the city to another, but neither agoras nor forums, nor markets⁸.

The amplest surface of that kind is the one in front of the House of the Republic in Bucharest: the second amplest building in the world needed a square to match it. Ceaușescu did not manage to “use” it for mass parades that he would watch from the balcony of his distant house on top of the artificial hill that oversees the square. He was shot in December 1989, while one still works even today to finish the interiors of the House, only to observe that the already finished lower levels by now need restoration or, like the heating and plumbing systems, a complete change. There is no way this can be

done in the foreseeable future: therefore, we will see a contemporary ruin in the making, not being able to fix it (it's one unmanageable building) or demolish it, either (it's been designed to resist the strongest earthquakes and atomic bombardments). The square itself is more popular: every now and then, a big concert (like the one of Pavarotti during the eclipse in August 1999) is using the place, with the House as background; the Gypsy parties use it sometimes for their political rallies, as their elite is renting the House's restaurant for flamboyant weddings; oh, and yes, for the rare military parades. In any other summer day, it acts like a mirror to heat up the city's already furnace-like atmosphere. There are sort-of-fountains along the Victory of Socialism-turned-Union's Boulevard that leads to the square and house, but their obvious purpose is definitely to show off rather than work.

Mosque

Back in Tulcea, I am just about reaching my high-school - remembered - destination. At the extreme east end of the Danube bluffs is the great mosque of Tulcea, whose *minaret* (tower) no church steeple was allowed to surpass in height. That was the only religious restriction imposed on the Christians during the Turkish empire. The Turks, fanatics as they may have been in Istanbul, became meek on the edges of their empire; therefore, other religions were allowed to survive peacefully along the official Islam. Even more, churches and monasteries were steadily built in the first half of the 19th century; with modest means, of course, but then Dobrogea as a whole was never a rich spot – a barren land with few resources other than its chalky stone and its numerous sheep. However, since the mosque is located at the lowest point in the city whereas the churches are spread over the – of course! - seven hills of the town, it was not an easy task to match the height requirement until 1878⁹. Afterwards, all the churches raised their spires “against” the monumental mosque, which was still in use when my parents and I arrived in the city. The tall minaret tower dominated the broad amphitheater through which the city opens up towards the Danube, facing north.

Let's take a look at the outline of the city from west to east: first, the spires of the Orthodox Church in the Heroes' Cemetery, where my mother's little scholars would occasionally bring flowers to the old enemies lying together; then the Lippovan church near the Old Market; the Greek church and St.Nicholas Cathedral, then the two Lippova churches set next to each other on the Hora Hill; finally, the minaret of the mosque from where the muezin would still utter his calls when I was yet an adolescent: we could still hear his plaintive tone from the terrace of “Little Carnation”, a sweet shop where one could eat the best rose ice cream in the world; its recipe left this earth along with the Turk who used to make it, the previous owner of the shop before it was nationalized.

I used to have Turkish and Tatar friends among the girls and boys at school; later on, granted, they married amongst themselves. Back then, however, these rather distant events did not bother our friendship. I still dream today about the *baklava*¹⁰ made by one of my friend's mother – a true “paradislam”, if I am allowed this pun.

Built environment

Back then, architecture itself celebrated the same mutual forbearance. The neoclassical brick architecture of the 1851 Orthodox cathedral went along smoothly with the Ionian Greek church and with the sand stone of the mosque and synagogue. How and from where did this neoclassicism come to Tulcea, and furthermore to the Orthodox architecture, otherwise unchallenged in its Byzantine timelessness? Was it perhaps the influence of the cosmopolitan atmosphere, that drew French and especially Italians to work for the granite *carrières*, or open-cast mines? Was it because, due to its many ships, Tulcea was closer to other harbors in the “outer” world than to its “motherland” across the Danube? The earliest Baptist church in Romania is to be found in Tulcea. Gravitating around their respective churches, ethnic groups lived in their own neighborhoods for centuries. Many of their churches resembled the courtyards rather than some monumental prestigious artefact. Flower gardens among the few graves, then the priest’s own house by the church, with vegetables and chicken. The same painting was used to decorate the house and the church and, quite often, the same master mason might have built them both.

Reconstruction?

This model has in many ways become extinct in the last twenty years, a decade on each side of the events of 1989. The town did not improve after 1989. Sometimes towards the mid-1990’s, the two main plants built in the late 1970’s were shut down, leaving almost 40% unemployment behind them (roughly the same percentage of workers brought in the city all of a sudden in the late 1970’s from other regions of Romania). The built environment has changed so much for the worse by building blocks of flats right on the banks of the Danube, that foreign tourism – which, due to its closeness to the Danube Delta, would have been by far the most profitable option the local economy, and one that was a reality before the huge plants were built - is still not really seen by the local administration as a working, wholeheartedly adopted way out. There is a point here: who would want to see a ruined Communist town when one has Bucharest – a much better example in that respect, with its own huge “new civic center” and gigantic House of the Republic-turned-Palace of Parliament?..

Outside the minaret of the mosque, there were no daring verticals. The city used to live in peace, a slightly sleepy collection of ethnic groups at the margins of history, enjoying their *borsch*¹¹, *braga*¹², *tsatsiki*¹³, Turkish/Greek coffee, vodka and fish, visiting each other’s celebrations and comemorations, and just getting along. Only our memories can still recover some of the old city, but we, the younger generation, have deserted the place and would return only to visit our parents as long as they are still alive. Relatives and friends, speaking strange languages and thinking differently but all behaving decently to each other and unbearably nicely to each other’s children, have gone away or died. They did so only after they having indelibly shaped my being, my sense of togetherness and of lived space. The diverse architecture of their respective quarters, their churches and temples have marked and still populate the inner space of my memory, the only one left for my spirit to still wonder freely.

As in a hologram, the patched town architecture, with its low scale, domestic accretions of stone and adobe and with its monuments saying more about the *memory* that is built in the word itself than about *monumentality*, could still be reconstructed after the collapse of the absurd regime and its absurd use of that enchanted topography, of public and private space altogether. It is only twenty years away from here/now. It can reinvent itself along the same stable paths of coexistence and space domestication.

The reconstruction might require though some sort of kick-start: dynamite to get rid of the block of flats that block (what else they can do?) the natural amphitheatre that used to open up Tulcea towards the arched Danube; incentives for those who invest in tourism and services; support for the local stone, brick and adobe factories and for those who want to build or rebuild their own houses. Decent national politics, perhaps a little more curiosity and help from the Western world. And some patience.

NOTES

¹ The Lippovans are members of a Russian Christian sect persecuted by the Czars for refusing to “modernize” their religious rituals. Many of them immigrated in the last two hundred years to Romania, especially to the Danube Delta where they were in less danger of being caught and shipped back to Mother Russia.

² In fact, we were living *inside* the school, which had a 2 bedroom housing facility for the headmaster. The play between public (the school) and private (our home) would make a very good topic for a Habermasian paper.

³ Latin term for “margins” or “borders”.

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⁵ Probably the most aberrant “conversion” was that of a Bucharest cemetery turned into outdoor pool. That was too much: spooky stories about the ghosts of the place, malefic waters and a sort of commonsensical decency of a highly religious people prevented the place from being used. Even today is mostly deserted, in spite of the twelve years that have passed.

⁶ My parents did not really have to supervise my long walks: by the next day, they would know how I behaved, whom had I befriended, whom I had not properly saluted and so on. Walking along the bluffs with the significant other was more efficient than publishing betrothal bans; conversely, walking alone was the announcement of a drama, or perhaps of an opportunity. To stop walking on *faleză* meant either an exile from the public realm or death.

⁷ “We describe as “public” certain events when, unlike the closed circles, they are accessible to everyone, in the same sense we speak about public places and public houses. But even the simple debate on “public buildings” does not address exclusively their general accessibility; they do not even have to be at hand for a public traffic; they simply house certain state institution and, as such, they are public” in Jürgen Habermas, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1990), p.45 (Übersetzung des Autors aus dem dt. Originaltext)

⁸ The one in Bucharest, given its semi-circular shape, is being used for occasional mega-concert, like the Pavarotti one during the solar eclipse in 1999, as well as for military parades.

⁹ When the whole region of Dobrogea was united with Romania proper, following a Russian-Romanian-Turkish war of 1877-78.

¹⁰ Turkish pastry filled with hazelnuts, pistachio and honey.

¹¹ A sour beetroot and meat soup, frequently used in the Russian and Romanian cuisine.

¹² A malt-fermented Turkish soft drink.

¹³ A Greek entrée of yoghurt, cucumbers, mynths and other spices.