FII ATENTI SOME NOTES ON COPING WITH ROMANIA'S SECRET POLICE

In the mid-1970's, I lived in Romania conducting social science research. Like the other American scholars, I too was warned, instructed and told stories about the Romanian secret police, the "securitate." In this short note I would like to share my own views on how the "securitate" work in order to help other Americans cope with them so that their time in Romania leads to a minimum of aggravation.

These remarks are based not only on my initial year in Romania but from continuous visits to the country, conversations with foreigners, embassy personnel, and many Romanians. My personal experiences with the "securitate" has been rather benign. I did not have my fingernails pulled out and I was not accused of being a "spy only once." To my knowledge, none of my Romanian friends suffered severely. But my own experiences are irrelevant in this context. You will without doubt hear a gamut of "amazing tales" from embassy personnel, other grantees and Romanian citizens. Most of these tales will leave you with an image of a highly effective organization. Very few will leave you with an image of incompetence, irrationality and inefficiency.

The point of this memo is very simple: do not confuse an organization that can be anywhere with one that is everywhere. There is a fundamental distinction which the "securitate" itself tries to gloss over. The idea being that the many stories of their mythical effectiveness tend to forget.

The "securitate" is a part of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Officially they are termed "organize de securitate" (security organs), but in slang they may be known as "secu" or "babi de la secur" (boys from the security). Some Romanians will refer to "securitate" as a gesture. Clicking the underside of their collar, presumably, undercover agents have a small pin or mark on the underside of their collar indicating they are "securitate." In situations where one's pockets are empty in a hotel lobby, together with money changers or black marketers, a flick of the collar can indicate approaching police who they are. Securitate personnel normally dress in civilian clothes but have various ranks similar to the armed services or police. A member of the organization may be known as an "ofiter de securitate" (security officer) or simply "securitate".

The purpose of the "securitate" is to protect the political, economic, and ideological security of the Romanian state. Enemies of Romania are both in the country (Romanians and foreigners) and outside it. Hence, the "securitate" is considered to be active outside Romania, especially among Romanian exile groups in France and in West Germany. In attempting to protect the integrity of the Romanian state, the "securitate" mission revolves around discovering "state secrets" or preventing Romanians from willfully or inadvertently exposing these secrets to foreigners.

The Romanian definition of "secrets" is quite broader than our own. Most activities of industrial enterprises are considered "secrets" (service or "working secrets"). Such statistical data of social and economic nature is either "classified" or "pentru us intern." Military affairs and political intrigues are considered "too secret" and not published in the official media.

This cult of secrecy means that Americans who seek to uncover what for us is innocuous information may appear suspicious to a Romanian citizen or "security agent." The culver of suspicion arises to a "culture of suspicion." People are assumed to have hidden or private motives buried beneath their public or official facades. This culture of suspicion is part of everyday life in Romania--both in villages and in the intellectual community. People will easily be able to say one thing in public (at work, at social affairs, at official meetings) and something quite the opposite at home or with friends. Romanian schoolchildren may be taught to hate the communist party in school, while hearing their parents condemn it at home. This gap between the public and private sphere is known in Romanian as "dedublarea" (duplicit). The notion of duplicity carries over in Romanian relations with Americans. The notion of duplicity carries over in Romanian relations with Americans. Romanians may assume that our public demeanor is only a facade, masking hidden motives. The "securitate" may assume that each American researcher is duplicitous.

The "securitate" may assume that each American researcher has some kind of "secret plan" hidden beneath the official job of research. The embassy "cultural officer" is really CIA. The granted doing "archaeology" research may really be surveying military installations. The literature professor may be imparting "ideological pollution" to dissident intellectuals. The problem with these suspicions is that they can always be confirmed. There are instances where Americans were suspected, where their behavior constituted a (miniscule) threat to Romanian security (as seen by the "securitate"), where research was done covertly or alongside of official research. These exceptional cases can thus become the grounds for treating all Americans as potential spies. One might say that according to the "secu," the American is a spy until he or she proves himself/herself otherwise.
security organs is overrepresented with individuals from rural areas and small towns. Entering early and building a career within the organization (it has a very difficult examination procedure), these individuals may also become somewhat provincial in their outlook. This applies especially to foreigners who work alone instead of in formal groups; some represent themselves and not necessarily the opinions of their home government; they can travel freely. This provincialism among the security personnel often leads them to ask the question “de ce sunt aici” (What’s this guy looking for here?). Perhaps it is a typical question of the small country against the large one. Hence, a reasonable motive could an American have to teach, work in, or live in a small, underdeveloped country like Romania. Using this logic leads to strange conclusions. Frequently, from the point of view of the country (or village) is thus assumed to have some fantastic strategic military value. If the American is here among us, we must be very important. Hence we must watch what the American is doing. To explain to Romanians that the number of Americans interested in Romania is extremely small would not be sufficient. Unless proven otherwise, many Romanian security organs simply assume that the American’s motives are suspect.

The culture of suspicion does not arise purely from the side of the security, however. It can be perpetuated by the activities of the more innocent Americans. For example, many researchers must alter their work plan or research tasks in midstream. They may abruptly change locations, sneak around, seek out archives in which they aren’t sure exist, make contact with others besides the official contacts, and do all the things that the confused doctoral candidate or research worker is not supposed to do. Such confused behavior conflicts with the security’s image of Americans as knowing exactly what they are doing. These random actions become evidence of the American’s “secret plan.” By the logic of the security, the activities lying outside the official tasks are suspicious, and constitute evidence that the individual is some kind of danger to Romania.

To protect Romania’s security and inhibit the divulging of secrets, the security uses a variety of methods. It can read official publications or papers written by the “suspect.” It can conduct overt or covert surveillance. It can bug the phone or the apartment. It can open, read and photocopy your mail. It can search your house. The most important method, however, is to debrief the Romanians with whom you are in contact. This method is much easier than arresting

or retaliation by the other side against Romanians. The security can learn about you and your activities by interviewing those Romanians with whom you are in contact: your maid, your advisers, your friends, your neighbors. Most of the time the debriefing is conducted in a civilized fashion. They are asking other Romanians to carry out their patriotic duty and tell the security organs about a potential threat to the Romanian state. Other times the debriefing can be intimidating or unfriendly. Often the security agent comes to the individual’s home or workplace, an experience which most Romanians find extremely uncomfortable or embarrassing. Frequently they are called back for interviews “downtown” several times.

Given the “culture of suspicion” and the normal cultural/language gaps which exist between an American researcher/worker and a Romanian informante, it is quite probable that these Romanian interviewers will have quite divergent opinions on who you are and what kind of work you are doing. One person knows you at home, another at work, a third during your free time. If you are not straight with these people, the slightest difference may be magnified into “suspicious behavior” in the security agent’s reports. Hence the importance of keeping your story straight, of having one and only one REAL research design, of not telling your advisor you are an historian while your friends know you as a political scientist, of not giving instances of “suspicious behavior.” For the researchers it is very important that people know not just what you are researching on, but WHY. This can be of practical help to you: for example, a Romanian hearing about the existence of a certain office or archive will better realize that you should know about its existence. More importantly, if Romanians know WHY you are doing the research, they can help provide the security with their most essential information: your motives for why you are in Romania. Since they either do not know or do not accept the American’s official motives for research, they must include these from the many Romanians they question. This is the more important for the researcher, since most probably it is lower ranking and more provincial agents who are checking him out. The implication of all this is simple: if you yourself do not know what you are doing or why you are doing it, it may have negative consequences for your image among the security.

The security’s method of debriefing Romanian informants coexists with the many laws which prevent or inhibit Romanian contact with foreigners. By law, foreigners may not overnight in a Romanian home except by special permission (usually granted only to near relatives).
Without this permission, the Romanian hosts may be fined several thousand Lei for even one night's visit by a foreigner. In official discussions, a third person is supposed to be in the room to prevent divulgence of any unauthorized information. Romanians are also formally required to fill out written reports of any contact with foreigners. In informal institutions, these reports are often filled out seriously. Others are taken as a joke. In recent months, Romanians have again been warned about unauthorized contact with foreigners and the requirement to fill out reports. For the American, it means to be aware that the third person in the room may be your colleague's best friend, but he also be a jealous troublemaker.

The securitate organization does not exist everywhere. It works principally through a system of paid and unpaid informants. Most of the paid informants are black marketeers who, in return for feeding some information to the securitate, get to keep some of their illicit earnings. The principal network of informants are the unpaid personnel in each office or institution. One person in each office will be the contact person for the securitate officer who has responsibility for that office. Some of these offices, especially those in small towns lying outside Bucharest, appear to be isolated and operate without the formal authority of the securitate. As a result, the number of foreigners coming to a provincial town drops, then the effort to find a spy or detect "moral pollution" must increase. Otherwise, the organization will seem redundant. In this sense, the securitate is like any large organization which seeks to justify its existence. This task has recently become easier due to the current climate of tension between the US and Romania. More international tension clearly fuels the climate of suspicion.

The distinction between being everywhere and anywhere is crucially important for understanding the Romanian securitate. All Romanians and most Americans (especially diplomats) have stories of being harassed or followed by the securitate. These stories may be true, of course, but they distort the situation. It is in the interest of the securitate to make you and all Romanians think that they are everywhere, all the time. In this way, they are able to open every single letter, listen to every single phone call, bugging all the apartments, interrogating all your friends, that they are out after you. It certainly gives one a strange feeling of importance, both (as I myself did once) not one but two cars trailing you, throughout the day. By tailing someone openly, they create the image of being everywhere, with impunity. Yet in such cases we are talking largely of image-making. Anyone openly followed is unlikely to do anything suspicious or to visit "friends." The securitate, in a sense, is actually testing to protect you in such situations. Here they
they really wanted to find out what you were doing, they would not follow you openly.

The stories of being followed and having phones bugged, and the many instances in which Romanians are told by the securitate what they said in "private" conversations, are all used to perpetuate the image of their being everywhere. However, the securitate cannot be everywhere at once. It has neither the resources nor the interest in following everyone or monitoring every conversation. For every instance of someone being interrogated, trailed or monitored, there are literally thousands where nothing happens — where there was no tale, where the phone call discussing sensitive information resulted in no interrogation, where people "got away with murder".

For the securitate, it is much too efficient for them to make you think they are everywhere than for them to actually be everywhere. Stories of their effectiveness circulate widely. The negative instances, however, those where they should have been there according to their logic of suspicion, are usually forgotten. For most of us --Romanian and American alike--no amount of reasoning can assuage us into thinking that the securitate cannot be everywhere. For there is always the possibility that they will pop up unexpectedly. Like all organizations, it is a degree of information and an element of unpredictability and irrationality. The securitate cannot be everywhere, but it can indeed be anywhere. It is this element of unpredictability that makes them so respected among the Romanian population.

Because of this unpredictability, most Romanians (and many foreigners) are perfectly justified in being paranoid. It is especially so among Romanians who have contacts with foreigners, since it is they--and not the foreigners--who will receive the brunt of the securitate's interrogation efforts. The element of randomness means that an American who has been regarded as "clean" for 2 years in Romania may suddenly find himself being harassed or followed. This may be the result of the securitate's periodic efforts at "image-making" (to show they are there), or from an officer's campaign for self-promotion; or from a long-term inquiry that suddenly reveals you as a suspicious person. And if you become a subject, the Romanians you have as colleagues and friends also become subjects.

The securitate's efficiency must be considered as a myth. Romania being Romania, why should the securitate be any more efficient than other large organizations? Even if it does have more resources at its disposal, why should we assume that their microphones (if they are Romanians--made microphones) are always working? Why should we assume that if they are using foreign-made microphones that they have installed them correctly or have enough spare parts to maintain them. Many securitate functionaries are just like the rest of us; just doing their jobs. They may be bored, they may simply be curious about foreigners, and some may be radical believers in defending state secrets. It is said that the securitate has high-quality psychologists and sociologists who work for them, carrying out investigations and deepening the mood of the Romanian people so as to hold down tensions. If this is so, they have not done a very good job. Any visitor to Romania--short term or long term -- sees a society riven with social tensions, economic problems and morale problems. Apparently, even the highest-quality experts have not been able to be successful. They seem to suffer the same problems as experts throughout the world.

The securitate is said to influence society by keeping people off balance. One method is by the periodic rumors of social, economic and political nature, few of which can be verified, but all of which are believed. Rumors function as diversions, keeping people at each others' throats and preventing social action. In a society where information is restricted, rumors (like jokes) become a prime source of amusement. "The continuous shortage of consumer goods functions in a similar fashion: the sudden appearance of pork signals the disappearance of eggs; the reappearance of eggs comes with the disappearance of cooking oil. Such manipulations of the market (no matter how justified by objective factors of climate or export needs) are well timed to keep people looking out for goods rather than asking why the continuous shortages. It makes the securitate's real job that much easier.

What is the moral of all this? First, the securitate is an organization like all other Romanian organizations. It can be both effective and inefficient. Do not overestimate its effectiveness. Second, the securitate has a high degree of unpredictability and caprice built into it. Trying to decipher their "secret strategy" may be useless. Third, being sometimes incompetent, uninformed or irrational, the securitate can be enormously dangerous. It can turn innocents into spies, infiltrate Romanian friends and destroy careers. Do not underestimate its powers. Fourth, the securitate thrives on paranoia---about them, and about other people. Don't let them get to you. Don't let them make you think that everyone has hidden motives for contacting you. If the securitate make themselves visible to you, it means that you are not all that dangerous. They can be anywhere but they are not everywhere. Pitch, paranoia should not mean carelessness. If things go bad for you, you can always leave. Romanians cannot.