

# A Reporter's Notebook: The Gloom in Bucharest

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BUCHAREST, Rumania, Dec. 14 — City winters always looked bedraggled after a while, but in Eastern Europe they are tired from the start. Bucharest has just dug and melted partway out of a 20-inch snowstorm, but the snow has not so much vanished as turned to mud, or evaporated into a persistent milky fog.

Because of the fuel shortage — Rumania produces oil, but its ambitious petrochemical industry requires it to import as much as it produces — lights have been turned off everywhere. The halls of the ministries are dark except at the stairwells, and there is just enough light in the restaurants to turn the food gray.

The other night, a two-section trolley bus, its red and yellow sides covered with grime, loomed out of the blackness. It was lit so dimly inside that the passengers were a single crowded shadow behind misted windows. The conductor hopped off to maneuver the overhead trolley onto a new line. A passer-by joked:

"Suddenly you'll see a flash of light."

"Suddenly," his companion rejoined, "you'll see no conductor."

It is not a happy season, in spite of the jokes, some weekend sunshine and the approach of the holidays. There is a sense of constriction, of things not working out right. It goes from the details of daily life, up through the political and social mood, and into a troubled international climate whose sneezes have always meant flu for this precariously assertive country.

Over the weekend, the crowds were out and about the stores and markets. Some of it was for fun: going to the movies, which start here at 9 in the morning, or doing some early holiday shopping. There is a bit of tinsel in most of the windows, but not much else that is attractive.

The clothes lack design and quality, and even the better things are displayed with discouragement. A jewelry shop on one of the main boulevards sets out some pretty copper rings in dirty plush boxes. Kitsch is not lacking. A large store that sells art objects has as its holiday special a large white cupid with a lipstick kiss on one cheek.

The most popular thing on the streets are the sausage stands. Each block or so, cauldrons are set up. The sausages, white, soft and enormous, are speared out on squares of paper and lie quivering while mustard is splashed over them. Men, women and children engulf them with an air of solace. It is a rest from the hunt.

"What do you do with your spare time?" a diplomat asked a young professional woman. "I go hunting," she replied. It is the hunt for eggs, meat, potatoes, sugar or whatever items are suddenly hard to find. Throughout the city there are queues. By 10 o'clock last Saturday all that was left in the butcher shops was frozen chickens and lard. At the Bizerica outdoor market, 150 people stood in line for eggs. The vegetable stands had carrots, cabbages, turnips and parsnips, but no potatoes or onions.

"There have always been scarcities of one thing or another, but it is getting worse," one woman said; and this seems to be a general feeling. When sugar disappeared from the shelves for two weeks earlier this year, Rumanians noted the rise in the world sugar prices and speculated that the Government was selling off domestic stocks to make a killing.

Times were hard here for a long time; in the late 1960's they got somewhat easier; now they are getting somewhat harder. It is not fierce hardship, but people are tired, harried, and above all, worried. They are beginning to hoard here and there. They put it down to the prospect of a grim winter, but the feared grimness is more than economic.

Rumania has always been one of the most rigidly controlled of the Eastern European countries, despite its partly independent foreign policy. For a few years after 1968, when President Nicolae Ceausescu found himself vastly popular because of his defiance of the Soviet Union over its invasion of Czechoslovakia, there was some marginal liberalization. In recent years, things have tightened up again.

There are exceptions. Broadcasts from Western Europe and the Voice of America are not jammed, and short-wave radios are sold in the shops. The Rumanian theater, which has a distinguished record — two of its directors, Andrei Serban and Liviu Ciulei, are working in the United States — has been allowed some limited independence. Last week, in fact, a first-rate production of an adaptation of Bulgakov's "The Master and Margarita," banned in the Soviet Union, was put on.

Films, television and books are enforceably dreary, however. And the daily, weekly and monthly press is rigidly controlled; so much so, that it is not hard to find officials who will privately deplore its cardboard quality.

Much of the cardboard is used to prop up the image of President Ceausescu and his wife, Elena, who is a First Deputy Prime Minister and the second most powerful figure in the country. The cult of personality is carried further here than anywhere else in Eastern Europe, outside of Albania, and it includes Mrs. Ceausescu as well. "In Russia, after the civil war, they had a period of proclaiming socialism in one country," the joke goes. "Here we have socialism in one family."

If anyone took the press for reality here, reality would consist mainly of travels and meetings. Mr. Ceausescu travels and is met; travelers come here and meet Mr. Ceausescu. Statements are issued afterwards. Mr. Ceausescu, the reader would think, spends much of his time sitting on a flowered armchair in the presidential palace, separated by a six-foot coffee table from a visitor in another flowered armchair. The world's work, the reader would think, issuing "Hello."

Those two chairs have done a lot of service on behalf of Mr. Ceausescu's foreign policy; one that seeks as much freedom of maneuver for Rumania as he can get away with. It means establishing close relations with Communist countries, such as China, that are not in the Soviet camp. It means maintaining friendly relations with all third world countries, even those that do not have them with Moscow. It means good relations with the West, and it means recognizing Israel.

Many of these things have irritated the Soviet Union, but so far Mr. Ceausescu has been able to gauge its temper and adjust accordingly. If he was hostile over Czechoslovakia, he was much more prudent over Afghanistan. If he boycotted a Paris meeting of European Communist parties early this year, he attended one in East Berlin later on.

It is recognized that his orthodox internal line has assured a degree of Soviet tolerance for his foreign policy. The diplomats here believe the Polish situation has created a special difficulty for it. Except for one attack by Mr. Ceausescu on Polish indiscipline, the Rumanian press has until recently been silent about Poland. If lately it has been stressing the need to let Poland's Communist Party do its own cracking down on the trade unions, it seems to be because Rumania is deeply worried about Soviet intervention.

For one thing, an intervention and the repercussions it would have on East-West relations would destroy the climate in which Rumania has been able to engage in a good deal of useful balancing; useful not only to itself. If Western Europe were to pull away from détente, it would damage Rumania's ability to conduct profitable relations with countries such as France and West Germany.

More immediately, though, it would raise the question of whether Rumania could continue its partial independence from the Soviet Union. Two years ago, a Western diplomat here was told by the Soviet Ambassador: "Ceausescu likes to think he is assembling a wide gathering of friends that will support him if there is trouble. But I tell you, if ever we decide to push the button, those friends will vanish."

Nobody has suggested that a Soviet decision to move into Poland would be followed by a move against the far slighter irritation provided by Mr. Ceausescu. But the question is on Rumanians' minds, according to diplomats here.

It is a difficult and depressing time for Rumania, and, given the mood of the Soviet Union and the state of East-West relations, the difficulty may continue for some time. As seen in the press, the public and private words of officials, and the continued tight hold on public freedoms, it accounts for the policy that one of the ambassadors here named: "patriotic silence."

His phrase referred to the extra sense of national caution of these past months. In fact, though, "patriotic silence" manages to describe quite neatly the mission that Mr. Ceausescu has assigned his countrymen ever since he came to power.