

## Nine

*This to inform you that on August 3 the ONT Litoral tourism office will be visited by Rosenblum Mort-Lee, an American citizen and a special correspondent of Associated Press agency and Urma Viorel, a Romanian citizen. Please take measures for positively influencing Rosenblum Mort-Lee and for his complex control, including (the use of) special means (to monitor) his activity...*

— Telex message from the Department of State Security to the chief of Securitate of Constanta, a port city on the Black Sea (Note found in my Securitate dossier, July 1983)

Golden Crown Hotel, Bistrita  
Summer 1983

I am traveling with Mort Rosenblum, one of the few AP special correspondents, to the Borgo Pass and the town of Bistrita in Transylvania, looking for Dracula.

I drive our office car, a Czech-made Skoda 120, which I affectionately (and cynically) nicknamed the “Swan of the Balkans.” Nicolae Paduraru, a Tourism Ministry official and guide, accompanies us on our odyssey.

Rosenblum, who in his distinguished journalistic career covered coups, earthquakes, and major political events across the world, is a first-time visitor to Romania. He plans to write several stories, one of them on Count Dracula—who has entered the American subconscious like McDonald’s hamburgers and french fries with ketchup. In Japan and the West, including Canada, the bloodsucker’s legend sells better than any of Ceausescu’s “selected works” about Romania’s forced industrialization. Let the psychoanalysts figure out why Dracula gets so much attention overseas, while at home most Romanians give the legend the cold shoulder.

Apart from the vampire, Rosenblum wants to do a story about Black Sea tourism in a time of food and gasoline scarcity (outweighed by an abundance of police presence) and rationed entertainment. The authorities had decreed that restaurants and nightclubs must shut down by midnight at the latest to allow tourists to get a good night’s sleep. In beds, people usually do other things than debating how to overthrow the government.

Years in the future, thumbing through my Securitate dossier, I came across a five-page, handwritten report signed M. Leonte. I was speechless for a moment. Paduraru signed off his info reports for the Securitate using this code name! I must say that he reported objectively about what we discussed and the sites we visited. His portrayals of Rosenblum and me were laughable, nevertheless.

In his report, “Leonte” mentioned that in the village of Livezile, in the Bistrita-Nasaud County, Rosenblum bought a typewriter made in the United States, circa 1910, and paid 1,000 lei (\$100 at the official rate of exchange). “The typewriter was completely deteriorated after spending years buried in the ground during World War II. It had not been registered with (Ceausescu’s) police,” “Leonte” dutifully noted.

This detail was extremely important. The rusty typewriter, past any possible use, was like a moribund political dissident: too old to be considered a threat, but still a dissident. The regime was obsessed with typewriters as much as Americans were fixated on Dracula. In my dossier, I found a dozen mentions that I was the first reporter to tackle the ultra-sensitive typewriter topic—and that pissed them off beyond imagination.

Rosenblum had bought the typewriter for his Tucson, Arizona, collection of world trinkets and souvenirs. He liked the typewriter’s history: it had been buried underground and kept there for a long time, judging by its corroded looks. And it was found in close proximity of the locales described by Bram Stoker in his book.

What else did the “Leonte” source inform about? “In Sighisoara, (where in 1431 the real, not the fictional, Dracula was born) Rosenblum took many snapshots and we had lunch.” The small house, right in the heart of the old medieval town, is now a bar and restaurant.

In Bistrita, at the Golden Crown Hotel where we spent the night, “on August 7<sup>th</sup>, comrade Alexandru Misiuga, director of the Bistrita County Tourism Office, offered Mort Rosenblum and Viorel Urma some *palinca* to drink and gave M. R. a table rustic lamp and a cup. M. R. in his turn offered a bottle of whisky.” Wow! These were important facts, a golden trove of information for the Securitate.

Claiming that all the rooms had been booked in advance, the hosts gave Rosenblum and me a sprawling suite—usually kept for important visitors at this hotel—where “bugs” were in abundance (if not in beds then surely in the walls). Perhaps they were curious to see if we engaged in some sexual activity and wanted to catch us *in flagrante delicto*. (Being gay in Romania could draw a sentence of up to seven years in jail.) If so, they were disappointed. We slept in two detached bedrooms, separated by a bathroom and a living room, without having any visual or sonorous contact.

Comrade Misiuga, who once was formally scolded for neglecting to pay his monthly dues as a Communist Party member, was known as a huge promoter of Dracula for foreign tourists’ consumption and carriers of much-needed hard currency. Whenever the Ambassadors for Friendship came from the United States on a tour of Romania, the young dancers and instrumentalists—most of them college students—stopped in Bistrita and stayed at this hotel before continuing on to the Borgo Pass and the Bran Castle.

We met a group of young Americans who were visiting through the foundation set up by Harry Morgan, a former *Reader’s Digest* editor. Stories were circulating that not a few female visitors, after consuming “Dracula Elixir”—a hefty mix of Transylvanian brandy and strawberry red syrup—had been “impaled” by mutual consent on location (not by Vlad but by their Romanian male hosts). Some were saying that Misiuga himself brought his own contribution to the pursuit of friendship and “closeness” between the United States and Romania.

As far as Count Dracula was concerned, the authorities were somewhat ambivalent. They wanted the vampire to bring as many Western tourists as possible; on the other hand, they tried to make a strict delimitation between the historical truth and the fictional Dracula as depicted in Stoker’s book.

The novel was banned in Romania, as were Dracula films, on the ground that they portrayed a distorted image of the real Dracula, the fifteenth-century ruler Vlad the Impaler—so-named because he impaled his Turkish enemies on stakes. Vlad was a national hero, and officials were reluctant to link him with the popular Western image of the bloodsucking count.

What did “Leonte” write in his five-page info report?

*Rosenblum criticized the poor services on the Black Sea coast and the shortages of gasoline for tourists who had to wait in line to fill up their tanks...but he said that the story “Dracula, Truth and Legend” for which he made the trip to Bistrita-Nasaud will be a positive one. We tried to demonstrate that we don’t want to destroy the romanticism of the legend, which we want to keep where Bram Stoker put it, but (we don’t want it) to interfere with history. Mr. Rosenblum said he convinced himself of this.”*

Here is his personal opinion about Rosenblum: “*Not married. Slightly asthmatic. Jew, with sensitivities to news about Jews’ fate. Moderate drinker, but a womanizer. He is aware of his power as a press man. He covers all the possible objectives.*”

How did he conclude that Rosenblum was “slightly” asthmatic and a womanizer? Was it true? I had no idea. It was cheap fodder for the Securitate. “Leonte,” alias Paduraru, no doubt tried to impress like a movie star.

Next there was a description of me. I almost fell off the chair with laughter:

*Type of aristocratic nature, with high opinions about his person and rather low opinions about the others. He wants to do everything by himself, because he doesn't trust the competence of other people. (He drove the car all the time; he changed the engine oil by himself.) When he drives he uses a pair of special gloves, and he waits for the other cars to allow him to pass. Impeccable behavior. Self-confidence and calm in conversation. In (the town of) Reghin he was fined for speeding (radar). He paid the fine without commenting.*

Man, how I enjoyed “Leonte’s” portrayal of my aristocratic nature and need for special gloves. Paduraru was so thorough with his details! They will remain in the Securitate annals for generations to come.

Regarding the fine for speeding, I have to say this: although they caught me in a speed trap, I had to keep my mouth shut, knowing that Paduraru would report all my comments. I didn't want to argue with the cops, and I wasn't really angry. I put the fine on my monthly expense account, so I didn't have to pay for it out of my pocket. AP did.

One day, nearly three decades after this episode, I was surprised to read this on the Internet:

*Nicolae Paduraru, founder of the Transylvanian Society of Dracula, passed away on May 4, 2009, in Bucharest, Romania, after a courageous battle with cancer.*

*Born on Dec. 6, 1937, Nicolae graduated from the University of Bucharest's English Department. He worked first as a reporter and later in the Ministry of Tourism, Department of International Relations. In 1991 he founded the Transylvanian Society of Dracula, a cultural-historical organization dedicated to scholarship and research centered on the two Draculas—the Count of Bram Stoker's novel and the fifteenth-century Wallachian voivode better known as Vlad the Impaler. In 1995, the Romanian TSD organized the first World Dracula Congress...Nicolae also founded the Company of Mysterious Journeys, a travel agency specializing in Dracula-themed tours.*

*Nicolae leaves to mourn his wife and one son, along with hundreds of friends, acquaintances, and tour participants both in Romania and around the world.*

I was really saddened by the news of Paduraru's death. He was an educated, affable, and polished person, who was very pleasant to converse with and who was very knowledgeable about world history and literature. His problem was that, through the nature of his job, he had to report his contacts with foreigners to the Securitate. If he refused to do it, he could have been demoted, or he could have lost his job. I am sure he had no pleasure in writing those reports, and he probably cursed the regime in his mind as everybody else did.

I am convinced that Paduraru didn't do any harm to anybody. Once, when we were passing in front of a church, I saw him crossing himself, quickly and discreetly. God rest his soul.

As for the telex from the Department of State Security in Bucharest addressed to the chief of Securitate in Constanta “please take measures for positively influencing Rosenblum Mort-Lee and for his complex control, including (the use of) special means (to monitor) his activity,” I am still laughing. How can you “positively influence” an experienced journalist who reports from all corners of the world and who sees and filters everything through his own mind and eyes, no matter what the authorities want him to believe?<sup>20</sup>

It's a mystery to me what the knotheads from “The Eye and Ear Cooperative” meant by “complex control.” The wiretaps in the walls of the *grande suite* at the Golden Crown Hotel? Paduraru's five-page written report I found in my dossier? The microphones hidden in the ashtrays at the restaurant? What a waste of time and effort. The Securitate had to give the illusion that they controlled everything, which was far from being the case. Most often, their means and methods were psychological. People had to believe that the Big Brother could hear their words. They had to be kept insecure and in fear to prevent them from expressing their critical views of the regime. Complex control, ha. More likely complex horseshit because what I discussed with Rosenblum only the two of us knew, just as was the case with other AP visitors and colleagues. There were no witnesses around to overhear our conversations.

A year after our trip to Bistrita, I left Bucharest to do a story about Hotel Tihuta, which had been recently inaugurated in the Borgo Pass, known as *Pasul Tihuta* in Romania. I had learned about it from Misiuga himself, who was very proud of his pet project—although the original plan had suffered changes. He wanted the establishment to be called Hotel Dracula, but the local Communist Party officials didn't approve it. The keepers of ideological purity also frowned on the idea of a fake graveyard next to the hotel entrance, as in Stoker's book. Instead of three towers, the hotel—seven years in the building—had only one, as the authorities wanted to economize on construction materials.

Even so, as an architectural feat, the hotel was quite a change from the usual socialist-Hiltonian types with cavernous lobbies where police informers were comfortably seated day and night, watching the human traffic. Unlike other state-owned guesthouses that had only two elevators (one of which was usually out of use), Hotel Tihuta had no elevators at all. Visitors could spend the night in a coffin, if they wanted. Few Romanians knew of the place because it was new and out of the way, located in a virgin forest on the road linking Transylvania and the northern province of Bukovina.

My first impression was that it was surreal—a surreal kitsch. The three-story hotel resembled a medieval stronghold, guarding a 3,600-foot pass where crosswinds swirled among craggy peaks—and into the lobby. The concierge's desk was on the second floor in the only tower available, and at the restaurant, white-gloved waitresses served Polish vodka to local shepherds. To make it even more Draculean, the hotel was equipped with a “torture chamber” in the basement, and Radu Varareanu, a cook, was the resident vampire. In the dimly lit chamber, there was a coffin and several skulls, which Misiuga said he had gotten for several packs of Kent cigarettes from a real cemetery in the area.

After lunch, the handful of hotel visitors was invited to the basement room where several candles were flickering. Then some of the candles snuffed out as if by magic. Our guide knocked three times on the lid of the coffin, which was swiftly removed from the inside. An apparition, covered in a black cloak stained with red paint and keeping a kitchen knife between his jaws, sprang out. The audience was terrified. I was impressed too.

The thrill was gone for vampire-cook Varareanu, who said he did the trick so often he felt like falling asleep during the wait in the coffin. Talking to the hotel hosts, I learned that an elderly woman from a group of Western visitors was recently overcome by horror and fainted when she saw the vampire jump out of the coffin with the twelve-inch long knife between his jaws.

After I went back to Bucharest, I wrote a story that got a good reception in the West, the proof being the newspaper clippings I received from Germany, Canada, and Japan. After several days, I was summoned to the Tourism Ministry and reprimanded for the story. I was reminded that the figure of Wallachian ruler Vlad Tepes was “not for sale,” and I was criticized for not paying enough attention to separating the historical truth from the legend. “You wrote a panegyric on Dracula and that hotel,” they said. It was a bunch of baloney, of course. What had really angered them was that Radio Free Europe had broadcast the story to Romania and everybody had learned about the vampire in the coffin and the old woman who had fainted. As long as only a few Western tourists on closed circuit knew about Dracula, it was fine. But when it became a subject for a larger audience, the authorities reacted angrily: “Romania is not for sale!”

The consequences were that the coffin was removed, the “torture room” was shut down, the vampire extravaganza was banned, and the cook Varareanu was fired. I knew these for facts. Several months later, I revisited the hotel with Larry Gerber, the AP Vienna bureau chief. We had to spend a night there since we were on our way to Oradea to do a story about a Baptist church that was rumored of being in danger of demolition by the local state authorities.

When they saw me at the hotel, their faces changed. “Here you are again,” the receptionist stated coldly.

“Why?” I asked.

“You don't know what happened?” she said. “You wrote an article that was broadcast by Free Europe, and that's what started the avalanche.”

I then heard about Varareanu's fate, which I regret immensely. I couldn't believe that the bloodsucking count still posed a danger. The danger was magnified after Romanians began referring to Ceausescu as Vampirescu or Draculescu.

After the anticommunist revolution in 1989, the torture room was reopened for the hordes of Dracula-themed tourists, and the hotel was renamed the name that Misiuga wanted to give it originally: *Hotel Castel Dracula*.

As a token of appreciation for his lifetime achievements, Misiuga was awarded the honorary title of Baron of the House of Dracula. He died in 2009, one day before turning 85.