

ASEEES PRIZES

*Emanuela Grama received the Ed A Hewett Book Prize for her book *Socialist Heritage: The Politics of Past and Place in Romania*.*

First of all, congratulations on your recent Ed A Hewett Book Prize for an outstanding publication on the political economy of Russia, Eurasia and/or Eastern Europe from ASEEES! Your book, *Socialist Heritage*, examines the socialist state's exploitation of the past to create its own 'heritage,' focusing on the transformation of Bucharest's Old Town. How did this book project come about?

Well, I never thought that I would write a book about Bucharest. I had begun my dissertation research in Transylvania, where I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in two locations looking at how claims for property restitution were being backed-up or justified via projects of built heritage reconstruction/preservation. In 2007, I received a dissertation writing fellowship at the wonderful institute “New Europe College” in Bucharest. During that time, I visited the Old Town neighborhood very often and became more and more interested in its history. I was particularly interested in finding the answer to a key question: how did the Old Town survive the radical intervention that the communist officials launched in the early 1980s in Bucharest, when entire neighborhoods were erased on a surface equivalent to the territory of the city of Venice (Italy) to make room for a new socialist city center (*Victoria Socialismului*)? After all, the bulldozers that destroyed most of the houses in these neighborhoods stopped right on the western border of the Old Town. Some people that I talked to during my time in Bucharest considered this simply a miracle--because, they argued, it is pretty clear that Nicolae Ceaușescu, the leader of the country, wanted the Old Town to disappear as well.



Photo by Bella DeSanctis

As it often turns out, the answer to this question is more complicated. I actually found that answer in a thick file of letters exchanged among archaeologists and architects regarding the debatable relevance of the Old Town. In the 1950s, a committee of architects led by Pompiliu Macovei, then Bucharest’s chief architect, tried to complete a master plan for the transformation of Bucharest into a modern socialist city. Soon they realized that their plans had to take into account not only limitations of resources and expertise, but also competing agendas of other professionals, such as archaeologists. The latter sought to persuade the state officials to reject any architectural intervention in the neighborhood of the Old Town, because, they claimed, such plans would lead to the erasure of some sites that they deemed to be of pivotal importance for national history. A key site was the ruins of the Old Court, a medieval palace built in the 15th century, but demolished in the early 19th century, with the site being parceled out and given to merchants to build new houses. This palace formed in fact the nucleus of the Old Town, as this commercial neighborhood emerged and expanded around the site of the Old Court. Eventually, through a combination of political maneuvering, wit, chance, and shifts in political agendas, it was the archaeologists that won this battle.

In my book, I argue that we can understand the survival of the neighborhood during the demolitions of the 1980s only if we took into account the sudden political relevance that the Old Court had gained beginning in the 1960s, through its full reconstruction in early 1970s (it officially open as a museum in 1972), and its becoming a key heritage site for the socialist state until the end of the communist period.

How would you characterize the socialist states' relationship to urban space? What makes urban space a compelling subject for study how the socialist states understood and related to the past? Is this useful only for the study of Romania?

In the book, I use this story to show that the Romanian socialist state viewed the urban space not only as a venue to produce and project an alternative socialist modernity, but also to build strategically chosen sites to represent the past. In the particular case of Bucharest, the Old Court became such a site: it stood for the medieval national past that allegedly preceded and enabled socialism to emerge as a particular political order (especially in the light of a Marxist theology that depicted socialism as a stage of economic and social development, preceded by "feudalism" and then capitalism). But this story must also be placed in the particular context of Romania of the 1960s, when the communist government started viewing nationalism as an increasingly appealing mechanism to gain legitimacy from the population--and to signal a subtle distance from Moscow.

What resources were most important to you in this project, whether a particular institution, funding source, methodological framework, or something else?

I often say that I would not have written this book, in this particular form about this particular subject, had it not been for a serendipitous trifecta: a file, a metal bookcase, and a brave archivist. The entire correspondence regarding the negotiations around the Old Court, and later, around the Old Town neighborhood is part of a thick file in the archive of the National Institute of Patrimony, in Bucharest. When I inquired whether there was any documentation about the Old Town, Mr. Iuliu Șerban, the then archivist of the Institute, went into the stacks and returned holding this file with a look of surprise and slight amusement on his face. He noted that somehow, he had never seen this particular file even though he had handled and assessed the entire collection when he reorganized the archive of the Institute in the early 1990s. This archive had belonged to the Division of Historic Monuments, active between 1952 and 1977. In December 1977, the communist authorities decided to "reorganize," which meant in fact to drastically curtail its personnel and funds. As Mr. Șerban told me, some of the employees tried to save the archive, so they transported it and deposited it in a room in the basement of the House of Spark, a large building on the outskirts of Bucharest that used to house all of the presses and newspapers during the communist time (including the newsroom of *Scînteia*, the Romanian Communist Party daily--hence the name). They thought that the archive would slowly disappear, but as luck would have it, a metal bookcase inside that room fell over and thus blocked the access door. The archive remained thus both abandoned and inaccessible for more than thirteen years, until the end of communism. The Institute was reestablished in 1990 as part of the network of state institutions of the postcommunist era. Soon thereafter, a team of employees, including Mr. Șerban, went to the House of Spark to check on the documents left in that basement, holding though little hope that they would be able to retrieve most of them. But they encountered the blocked door. They eventually broke in and found the documents all over the room, covered by a thick layer of dust but otherwise intact.

I love to tell this story because it captures so much about the special combination of chance and determination that could make or break so many research projects. I believe that we as researchers must keep an open-mind about our work, both in the archives and while doing fieldwork. Sometimes, a particular story that someone shares with us as an aside, or a document that we stumble across in an archive while searching for something else may lead us to eventually write a totally different book than the one we had initially imagined.

How would you advise junior scholars considering taking on a project which combines historical and ethnographic research?

I would encourage them to approach the archives as being as subjective a site as the stories one would encounter during the fieldwork. In other words, I would urge them to think about the ways in which files and archival categories are themselves products of particular political times, and what do these categories tell us about how specific organizations (and actors within those organizations) “think”; how they view themselves in relation to other institutions within one particular system. This is particularly relevant when one conducts research in archives of powerful institutions, ranging from political parties to corporations, who cared deeply about their legacy.

In the same vein, I would encourage junior scholars to approach the stories and observations that they encounter while doing fieldwork as “archives in the making.” Obviously, these stories must be anonymized to protect the privacy of the narrators--or of the actors engaged in actions that the researcher would witness. But the researchers must be fully aware of these stories as being foremost narratives--that is, subjective accounts that emerge through the particular relationship between the researcher and the narrator. Whatever someone chooses to tell you (or not) depends on so many factors: how they view themselves, how do they view you, what do they want to accomplish by telling those stories (what things do they want to do with their words, as John Austin would put it). When you are doing fieldwork, everything matters--from your age and gender to the kinds of shoes you are wearing and sometimes even your haircut! All that subjectivity should not only be acknowledged, but also viewed as evidence and research material.

Paying attention to details also is pivotal. Your book cannot be just a series of theoretical arguments; it must also tell a good story. The details of your fieldwork, from the shape of the streetlights, to the shoes people wear, the bags they carry in their hands, the kinds of cell phones they use, their clothing, the lack of parking spots--you must record everything in the notebook that you, ideally, should carry it with you all the time. Also, try to take lots of photos, if you can. Lots of photos and lots of notes will help you much later to retrieve the forgotten details of your fieldsite and to reconstruct that atmosphere in writing.

What are you working on now?

I'm returning to a project that I've left on the backburner for a while. It draws on earlier and more recent ethnographic research that I conducted in Transylvania regarding the debates about property restitution among the region's ethnic Germans and Hungarians. I focus on three specific case studies to analyze the ways in which these two ethnic groups appealed to their kin-states (Germany and Hungary, respectively) to support their claims and thus endow them with more visibility in the European Union--which, in turn, has given them more leverage in dealing with the Romanian state.