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ESSAY

## One Could Not Have Survived Communism Without a Grandmother: Eating Stinging Nettles in 1980s Romania

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### Abstract

This reflection centers on the author's grandmother's cookbook as a catalyst for interrogating the incomplete memories of growing up in Romania in the 1980s during the 'golden decade' of Communism. During these times, oppressive policies restricted people's access to food and punished those who tried to eat outside the scope of the regime. Yet, through my grandmother's cooking of dishes such as sautéed stinging nettles, which is the focus of this reflection, the author's memories of that decade are of delicious, tasty, and nutritious meals, the best she ever ate. The reflection asks difficult questions around pleasure during oppressive times, as well as about the impossibility of recreating a dish outside of its own specific history.

### Keywords

**Communism; Romanian Foods; Cookbook; Recipe; *Bunica*; Nostalgia**

### *Bunica's* Magic is in her Cookbook

Have you ever encountered the unpleasant touch of the stinging nettle? I have, numerous times, as a child, playing in my grandparents' garden. But I also encountered the unique sweet-tangy-umami-esque taste of these wild greens. And the itchy red rash on your skin is a small price to pay for the complex and remarkable taste of nettles, cooked with just a little oil, onion, garlic,

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flour, and salt, served with fried eggs and grated fresh horseradish.<sup>1</sup> My grandmother (*bunica*), Olga Uncu, harvested so many nettles throughout her life that she would no longer have to pay the price of itchy red skin – at least this is what she was telling me as she was picking nettles with her bare hands in the backyard of her home in the village of Valea Călugăreasca, in South-Eastern Romania. This is just one of the many magical powers of my grandmother, alongside others, such as cooking six meals with just one (medium-sized) chicken or guarding her sour cherry tree from ravenous birds to be able to cook sour cherry pies and jams for the winter. My grandmother’s magic, alongside her culinary knowledge and wisdom, were captured in a family cookbook that she wrote in the 1990s, very soon after the fall of Communism around Eastern Europe.

Material belongings, such as my grandmother’s cookbook, which includes her recipe for stinging nettles, complicate the work of memory, and as such, in this reflection, I juxtapose *bunica’s* recipe with my own messy and incomplete memories from the 1980s, my first decade, which, coincidentally was Communism’s last. In this reflection article, I am reading *bunica’s* recipe for stinging nettles through two lenses/perspectives: my childhood memories, as imperfect as they might be and inevitably nostalgic, and my adult self-reflexivity about these childhood memories. My adult memory work is that of filling in the gaps with historical contextualization—the Communist’s regime oppressive and punitive food rationing in the 1980s, with discussions of my grandmother’s labor (often absent from my memories), and engagements with the possibilities of reproducing a ‘sticky’ taste of the past.

This reflection decenters normalized tropes about Romanians in post-Communism that rely on images of poverty, scarcity, and hunger, as well as simplistic renditions of what has been labeled as ‘post-Communist nostalgia.’<sup>2</sup> These tropes tend to be informed by state-led legislation designed to control people’s diets—decrees, laws and policies—and less by lived experiences of Romanians, such as myself and my grandmother (and the other members of our family). I thus center my reflections on eating during Communism on a material belonging—*bunica’s* cookbook—and the memories and stories that it carries.<sup>3</sup>

## The “Sticky” Taste of Nettles: Impressions

My grandmother had a very diverse repertoire of dishes, baked goods and preserves, and each of these could be the focus of this reflection. Yet, if I follow my memory trail, the taste that marks my culinary memories of that decade (the 1980s) is that of cooked stinging nettles. The taste generates complex emotions—longing, comfort, melancholia, loss, joy—and the warmth of having been loved, cared for, and nurtured. In *The Cultural Politics of Emotions*, [Sara Ahmed \(2014: 4\)](#) ‘tracks how emotions circulate between bodies, examining how they “stick” as well as move.’ In this reflection, I imagine this circulation as a bridge between past—1980s Communist Romania—and the present in the context of memory work<sup>4</sup> generated by an

1 Nettles are a common ingredient in Romanian and Moldovan cooking, with a long history pre-dating with many decades the Communist regime. Radu Anton Roman, Romania’s most famous culinary historian and writer, includes several recipes for nettles in his popular cookbook *Romanian Recipes, Wines, and Customs* (1996).

2 [Alin Savu \(2014: 50\)](#) explains that post-Communist nostalgia—feelings of longing for a Communist past—‘has often been projected as an indicator of national political culture, despite it being researched or presented in a superficial or reductionist manner.’ A volume that complicates and critiques assumptions related to nostalgia for Communism is *Remembering Communism: Private and Public Recollections of Lived Experience in Southeast Europe* ([Todorova, Troebst & Dimou 2014](#)).

3 I am very grateful to Romanian and Eastern European colleagues—fellow survivors—who have been talking to Romanians about their lives during Communism, focusing particularly on food. I am sure I will miss many, but I would like to highlight the work of [Dumitru-Alin Savu \(2017\)](#), [Claudia Florentina-Dobre \(2016, 2017\)](#), [Ina Ghita \(2018\)](#), [Catherina Perianu \(2008\)](#), and those who contributed to the edited collection *Remembering Communism* (2014).

4 I use ‘memory work’ loosely in this article to refer to the process of reflecting critically on one’s own memory, but I am inspired by the feminist qualitative research approach developed in 1987 by Frigga Haug and her colleagues (see [Lapadat et al. 2010](#)).

object, *bunica's* cookbook, that enables the presence of a taste and the complicated emotions attached to it. [Ahmed \(2014: 6\)](#) uses the framework of 'impressions' to connect 'bodily sensations, emotion, and thought.' Ahmed's intellectual journey towards 'impressions' serves a specific theoretical purpose—'I will use the idea of "impression" as it allows me to avoid making analytical distinctions between bodily sensation, emotion and thought as if they could be "experienced" as distinct realms of human "experience"' ([2014: 6](#)). I am attracted to this concept as it speaks to the connection that I feel towards the taste of nettles: the taste of nettles is impressed in my body, even if I have not tasted it in more than twenty years. I can still smell and taste my *bunica's* nettles with all its ranges of flavor, from sweet, to a little tangy, to an almost umami after taste. The range of emotions that this 'impression' provokes also inform how I recall the first years of my childhood: with little awareness that I lived under an oppressive dictatorship, mesmerized by the tastes of my grandmother's cooking, by the bounty of her garden, by the warmth of her kitchen and stove that was always bubbling with soups, cakes, rice puddings, and, of course, nettles.

As I reconcile my childhood memories with my grandmother's cookbook, the taste, or the memory of the taste, of sautéed nettles is more and more powerful on my palate. Yet it is very challenging to hold onto this taste as I am invaded with memories of how the world saw Romanians as they emerged out of Communism: standing in long lines, waiting for their rations of butter, oil, and sugar; surviving on meager meals of cabbage and potatoes; or children deprived of the joys of the global marketplace, tasting an orange and a banana for the first time after the 1989 Revolution.<sup>5</sup> Sara Ahmed's writings help me untangle these memories as well, which are a different type of 'impression,' one that 'sticks' as a form of othering. It's very easy to internalize how others perceive you, and I have been guilty many times, in telling my own story, of perpetuating these stereotypes. But in this reflection, I am holding on to the taste of nettles—this beloved 'impression'—to explore how everyday eating in Communism did not look like the scarcity that was intentionally created in the country by dictator Nicolae Ceausescu and his regime, and that how Romanians negotiated Communism did not reflect the obsessions of North American media with long lines or the absence of tropical fruits like oranges and bananas.

## Fears of Memory Work: Resisting and Embracing (Post-Communist) Nostalgia

Sharing these entanglements—between my childhood memories and my *bunica's* cookbook—comes with many fears, and as such, I must explain, with great clarity, what this reflection is not. I am not nostalgic for Communism as a political system. I use 'nostalgia' here aware of the complicated discussions around 'post-Communist nostalgia' ([Todorova and Gille 2010](#); [Todorova, Dimou and Trobest 2014](#)). For many Romanians struggling to cope with the post-Communist transition, which for many resulted in more acute scarcity and poverty at times of hyper-'westernization' ([Todorova & Gille 2010](#)) and loss of control, nostalgia for what looked like a more prosperous past was a coping mechanism with the difficulties of post-1989 Romania. [Svetlana Boym \(2001\)](#) reflects on nostalgia as 'a sentiment of loss and displacement, but [...] also a romance with one's own fantasy' (p. xiii). This fantasy—that life before 1989 was 'warmer, more human, safer, more moral' ([Todorova 2010: 18](#)) creeps up for many Romanians, but, as [Maria Todorova \(2010: 27\)](#) explains, post-Communist nostalgia is less about a return to a better past, and more about a 'claim upon a right to future self-determination.' Nostalgia as a way of coping with loss, change and struggle is neither linear nor uniform; but most importantly, it is personal and intimate. It is about accepting and overcoming all sorts of 'impressions' ([Ahmed 2014](#)) that are deeply individual. The memory of nettles cooked by my *bunica* and their taste occupy an uncertain place in contemporary discussions of

<sup>5</sup> A sampling of journalistic accounts of Communism's demise in Romania demonstrate the persistence of these two stereotypes: long lines of hungry Romanians; excitement for being able to taste bananas and oranges ([Longworth 1990](#); [Powers 1989](#)).

post-Communist nostalgia, and more work needs to be done by scholars and heritage professionals to center lived experiences and individual memories in considerations of nostalgia in Eastern Europe.<sup>6</sup> In my writing I might appear nostalgic for the taste of my grandmother's nettles which I know that I cannot recreate. But I am comfortable embracing these emotions of deep desire for the taste as I can be nostalgic for a taste without being nostalgic for a place or time of oppression.

This reflection is not imagining my grandmother as an activist nor interpreting her cooking of nettles as an intentional gesture of resistance or defiance of Communism. In fact, I would argue that every Romanian who found strength to wake up, go to work, cook, care for their family during Communism resisted the system—just being in the world was a gesture of defiance. Food traditions have been preserved through the daily work of women like my grandmother who resisted the Communist system every time she cooked nettles, every time she borrowed some milk from a neighbour, or any time she procured a pod of vanilla by offering in exchange her homemade wine or *tzuica*—plum brandy (both made illegally in my grandparents' cellar); her resistance was in her everyday rhythm, it was pure survival.

This reflection is not a romance of cooking during challenging times—in fact, I am confronting my memories so that I can make visible the challenges of feeding a family with little resources faced by many women. Significant planning went into ensuring that meals can be served with regularity, that us, the granddaughters, have meat, fresh milk, nourishing vegetables, and delectable home baked desserts. Even more labour went into procuring ingredients, via numerous routes, including harvesting wild greens, exchanging produce with neighbours, or hiding a few chickens to ensure constant presence of eggs.

Lastly, this reflection is not an overgeneralization or a claim to elucidate women's experiences in 1980s Romania. I am aware that my experiences of growing up during Communism are unique to me. I had loving parents who did the best to make Communism as smooth as possible for myself and my sister, and grandparents who had a beautiful home in the countryside, who mastered the arts of gardening, who owned land, and some animals (chicken, rabbits, ducks, a pig that would be slaughtered during the winter), were educators (my grandfather was a math teacher, my grandmother a kindergarten teacher), and lived in a village where informal networks of support allowed for some deviations from the aggressive machine of Communism.

## Romania in 1980s: Radical Rationings

The eighties were the final ten years of Communism in Romania, and the last decade of Nicolae Ceausescu's dictatorship, the harshest in terms of food restrictions, rationings, and food scarcity. Communism as a marginal ideology was present in Romania since the late nineteenth century, gaining political power after the Second World War, when the Soviet Union was extending its empire in Eastern Europe, with the Romanian Communist Party coming to power in 1947. In 1965, Nicolae Ceausescu became the leader of the Party, and later the President of the country, which he renamed the Socialist Republic of Romania. In December 1989, his dictatorship ended, he was captured, and together with his wife, trial-ed and executed.<sup>7</sup> Ceausescu's dictatorship, which he named 'the Golden Era,' was unique in several ways: it aimed and succeeded in separating Romania from the Soviet Union so that he can build his own type of dictatorship (inspired by China and North Korea), it was founded on a highly orchestrated cult of personality that created a series of mythologies around him and his wife (e.g. I remember that his portrait was included at the front of every published textbook, as well as in each classroom), and it reached a level of oppression in

6 Examples of ethnographic approaches to Communist memory, which include work with oral histories: [Savu \(2014\)](#); [Kligman and Verdery \(2011\)](#).

7 This is a very brief timeline of Communism in Romania, to contextualize the reflection. Several books can elucidate on various aspects of Communism: [Deletant \(2018\)](#) and [Ciobanu \(2020\)](#) are two great starting points.

the 1980s that is difficult to imagine (e.g. he forcefully demolished more than 40,000 homes, including our own, in the center of Bucharest to build the second largest building in the world, The House of the People).

One of the most repressive aspects of Ceausescu's oppressive eighties was his policing of Romanians' diets through a form of radical rationing disguised as science-informed nutritional intervention to the well-being of Romanians, who ought to have a strict caloric intake to protect them from diseases that could result from poor diets (Perianu 2008). As such, ingredients were restricted, as well as access to basic foods, such as sugar, flour, oil, eggs, and meats. At the same time, to ensure that Romanians could not procure foods through other ways (e.g. raising animals for meat, or chicken for their eggs), legislation was voted in 1984 to criminalize the slaughtering of animals by private citizens. Decree no. 94 (1983) outlined the sanctions for individuals who slaughtered their domestic animals (cows, pigs, sheep, horses) outside of official government-ran slaughterhouses: 'imprisonment up to one year,' potential fines, as well as forced labor, in some cases. All possible measures were taken by the regime to generate austerity and dependency on state food systems, while Romania was a top exporter of high-quality wheat, sugar, meat, and dairy. What was sold to Romanians in the dreaded *alimentara*<sup>8</sup> was what did not pass the quality test for exporting to Western Europe. Catherina Perianu (2008: para 25) researched the tactics Romanians employed to circumvent the 'culinary dictatorship,' uncovering the ingenuity of informal networks of food distribution. Borrowing from the land and adapting our diets to include seasonal wild edible plants were liberating for *bunica*, because these were spaces that were not sanctioned by the Communist law, and connected her with her own past, as nettles have been part of Romanian diets since at least the 1850s.

## A Recipe with Purpose: And Why Some Tastes Should Not Be Reproduced

Today, as I write this reflection from Tkaronto, Turtle Island, from a space of comfort and safety, I remember vividly the taste of cooked nettles that only my grandmother could achieve in her kitchen. I can almost smell and taste it—the stickiest of memories from my childhood. It brings me so much joy and pleasure now, and it fills me with love for my *bunica* that she gave me this gustatory gift. Harvesting nettles—as per her recipe, she needed close to one kilogram to feed the family for one meal—meant that *bunica* had to engage in a laborious process despite her reassuring words that brushed away her discomfort and per physical pain. My grandmother was a survivor, having barely escaped Moldova during WWII, arriving in Romania as a refugee in her twenties, without her family, the majority of whom were deported in Siberia by the new Soviet regime. In Romania, she worked on a buffalo farm before meeting Dumitru, my grandfather, also a refugee, and starting a life together in Valea Călugăreasca. My grandmother never talked about any of these struggles to us just as she never talked about her back hurting after hours of nettle picking, or her fingers stinging. The dish that brings me so much joy and warmth in the present—nettles—was my grandmother's coping mechanism with the traumas in her life, and with the powerlessness imposed on her by the Communist regime. In the 1980s, there was so little food on the market, that her garden and her very small stock of animals were what kept the family fed. Beyond what she cultivated in her garden, it was her knowledge of the land and of seasonality of wild edible plants – alongside how to handle and cook these—that impressed on me the joy and pleasure that I associate with childhood eating.

Since I left Romania in 2001 and moved to the United States, first, and then to Canada, I rarely encountered nettles,<sup>9</sup> and when I did, they never tasted like those cooked by *bunica*. My mother has nettles

8 *Alimentara* was a type of Communist store owned by the state, where Romanians could buy food products sanctioned by the state; in the 1980s, *alimentara* was the site of scarcity of foods and of long lines of customers.

9 Living in Turtle Island, I encountered stinging nettles in the cooking of Mariah Gladstone (Blackfeet, Cherokee) from IndigiKitchen, during a class on Foods of Turtle Island I took in 2022.



in her garden and cooked nettles recently for me – they were tasty, but they did not taste like *bunica*'s. The taste of my childhood nettles is stuck with me with incredible gustatory clarity—a presence, an impression from a past that was disruptive and destructive to Romania. Together with this gustatory clarity comes the awareness that I am not able to re-make the taste of this dish. And that is fine. This reflection was an opportunity for me to ponder upon why a taste that sticks in the present is also impossible to reproduce; it is, in fact, not meant to be reproduced. ‘Sticky’ memories such as the ones I shared in this article are not sticky because they offer themselves to re-making, they are sticky because they resist remaking; re-making my grandmother’s spring nettle recipe and seeking to reproduce that exact exquisite taste produced through cooking onion, garlic, and nettles would be a wrong approach to cherishing that memory. It would come from a point of privilege, of being a foodie or food adventurer (Heldke 1996) in search for a ‘lost’ taste. The taste of the nettle dish cooked my *bunica* was the taste of resisting the oppressive burden of Communism—it was salvation (even if just for a few fleeting moments) and it served its purpose – to get us, the family, through Communism (and nourish us properly along the way). That dish and its taste achieved their purpose.

## Conclusions

Until writing this reflection, I rarely asked myself: why would anyone need to harvest so many nettles up to the point when their skin becomes immune to the stinginess of this plant? There is a saying in Romania, that one could not have survived Communism without a grandmother. Despite growing up in what now I know to be the darkest decade of Communism—with excessive and unnecessary rationing, increased scarcity of basic foods, and high deprivations—I ate the best meals of my entire life during those times. These are the meals cooked by my *bunica*. To this day, I remain uncomfortable with the tensions of eating incredibly well during times of food scarcity (well, better said, absence of food), state-mandated radical rationing, and oppression. While people were deported, arrested, disappeared, and executed by the Communist *Securitate* (state police in charge with carrying out Communist ideology), while more and more Romanians were starved by absurd rationing measures, is finding pleasure in the taste of food a sign of treason, of ignorance, of compliance? Or is it a sign of survival, resistance, thriving? As a child of the 1980s, I was just eight years old when Communism fell in Eastern Europe. Yet, I was a child during the most repressive decade of Communism, and I am certain to this day that without my grandmother I would not have survived Communism. Because the reason why one harvests stinging nettles to the point where their body becomes immune to the venom on the nettles’ leaves is to survive. And even more that survival, my *bunica* harvested and cooked nettles to help her family thrive, be nourished and well fed. By cooking nettles, she also shared her knowledge of the land, of wild plants, of their nutritional value, and of what other ingredients made nettles taste their best.

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