

Group Portrait

The twenties

In the twenties, women in Romania could not legally own property, sign contracts, testify in court or be legal guardians to their own children. Whether they were educated or not, their access to most professions was quite limited and, in general, paid work was considered inappropriate for women. However, despite the prevalent perception that women were to take care of the family while men worked, in a country where the vast majority of the population lived in rural communities women *did* work all the time, as the livelihood of the family depended on *all* its members working in agriculture.

Feminist organizations begin to appear and develop, with a mission to win universal suffrage, civil rights for women, access to education and all professions and combating prejudice. Both conservative efforts (at the core of which was an outlook of women as “mothers of the nation”) as well as modernist ones (which emphasized the importance of women’s rights as citizens) came from an elitist perspective which overlooked class issues and did not identify with ethnic or religious minorities.

1923- The Constitution is revised. Despite ample protests from feminists, universal suffrage is not granted and women’s civil and political status remains unchanged – except for some formal declarations of equality between the two sexes.

1923- Irina is born, the oldest of the three children of a family in a small town in Transylvania.

1925- Constantina is born, fifth out of six children to a family in a village in the South of the country.

1927- Victoria is born, the oldest daughter of the eight children of a family in a village in the North of Moldova.

1929- The Law for Administrative Organization is passed. According to this law, women got the right to vote and to be elected in local and county councils, but only if they met certain criteria related to their studies and social status. These criteria kept the number of women who could vote at a drastically low level. Also, because of the largely held preconceptions about women voting, many women who met the criteria did not actually vote, in order to avoid bullying from male voters.

The thirties

In 1930, more than half of the women in Romania were illiterate (54,5%), while less than a third of the men were unable to read and write (30,8%).

1935- Irina goes to Sunday school and intuitively understands the role of social class and also how hypocritical religion is. While biblical texts talked about the superiority of spiritual over material matters, her colleagues from well-off families were evidently privileged.

Victoria is withdrawn from school after fourth grade so that she can take care of her younger siblings. Later she is sent off to work as live-in help for a well-off family.

Constantina attends school for four years, a period of time considered sufficient for her future life as a village woman.

The forties

1940- The extreme right Nationalist Legionnaire government is formed, 15 of its ministers being

appointed by the pro-fascist Iron Guard. Iron Guard representatives held the following positions: vice-president of the Council of Ministers, Minister of Home Affairs, Minister of Communications and Civil Work, Minister of National Education, the Cults and the Arts, Minister of Labour, Health and Social Protection etc. This government proceeded to implement the Holocaust of Jewish and Roma people.

1940- Irina works as a seamstress and also continues her high school education. She saves enough to buy her own sewing machine. She would have liked to continue her studies and become a schoolteacher – but for that she would have had to move to a different town and then she would have been unable to contribute to the family income anymore. She completes her high school studies in her hometown.

1941- Romania joins the war as a member of the Axis.

1942- Irina witnesses the deportation to Transnistria of a Roma family who lived on her street.

1943- Victoria returns home from the family she was employed with, to take care of her sick mother. On the way home, she bumps into a cousin who happily shares with her that she is about to start high school – and then asks her about her plans. Victoria could not answer. She choked but controlled her tears and ran all the way home.

1944- Romania turns against Germany and, through a coup d'etat, the pro-fascist government is replaced by a coalition which included the Communist Party. Three weeks later, Romania comes out of the war on the anti-fascist, winning side.

1945- The first pro-communist government, led by Petru Groza, comes to power.

1946- Sofia Nădejde, an important figure of Romanian socialist feminism, dies in relative anonymity. She was a journalist, writer and activist who, at the end of the 19th century, militated for the emancipation of women. Her activism was rooted in a class divide perspective.

1946- A first in Romanian history: an electoral law giving all women the right to vote.

1947- Monarchy is abolished and Romania becomes a Republic.

1947- George Călinescu, one of Romania's most prominent literary critics, wrote in an essay: "The woman is a satellite to man, who is her centre. (...) Her passions are subject to her instincts, who are violently practical (...). The woman is physical, man metaphysical."

1948 – The first Communist Constitution is passed, proclaiming full equality between men and women.

1948- A Law for the reorganization of the education system is passed. The system of education was designed to eliminate illiteracy and educate the labour force so as to meet the demands of intensive planned development. Women were targeted in these mass education efforts.

1948- Constantina marries. She was 23. Later, she talks somewhat proudly of how she was not concerned for still not being married at an age when most of the girls in her village were long married.

Victoria marries a man from a family of refugees from North Bucovina (annexed to the Soviet Union). His parents had been well-off peasants deported to Siberia. Victoria is proud to have married somebody

in a social class superior to her own, a situation which would not have been possible under the previous regime.

1949- Stela is born. Victoria decides she does not want more children. As she had raised seven younger siblings, she knows about life in a poor family with many children.

The fifties

1951- Irina marries. She gives up her job as an accountant and becomes a housewife. Her husband wanted a wife who would raise his children and put into practice his vision about a peaceful family life. He always said that Irina was the perfect wife.

1951- The title of “Heroic Mother” as well as the orders “Maternal Glory” and “Maternity Medal” are instated for mothers with numerous children.

Constantina has three children in four years.

1953- Delia is born to Irina.

1953- Aurelia, Constantina’s future daughter-in-law, is born.

Victoria continues to live in poverty. Her husband was not accepted to work on the new construction sites, he was persecuted for his social origins. Even though she had married someone in a superior social class, Victoria could not overcome her condition.

Constantina and her husband had enough land by the standards of the time but collectivisation had started and it was burdensome to own land, as collective quotas were paid depending on how much land you owned.

1955- Although they had been married for 4 years and they already had two children, at the family’s pressures Irina and her husband marry religiously in secret. Irina’s husband worked for the army and he would have been in trouble at work if his religious marriage had been discovered. Irina always referred ironically to “her wedding”.

1957- Romanian Democratic Women’s Union – the name under which was known the women’s movement – was renamed National Women’s Council and placed under direct subordination to the Central Committee of the Communist Party. The women who were active in the first years of the Council contributed to women’s emancipation (by eradicating illiteracy, integrating women on the labour scene etc), their personal beliefs coinciding with the Communist Party’s program.

1957- Abortion is legalized, following the logic of the new development strategies. In order to accomplish its radical social transformation program, the communist government had to take women out of their traditional role, related strictly to the family and the private sphere, and transform them into mobile people, capable of integrating in the labour sector. Nevertheless, men’s roles were not changed, as women remained the ones in charge of housework and care-taking. Also, in the wider scope of labour division, women were primarily hired in the light industry or education, health, culture and accounting, and they usually held inferior positions, while men were hired preponderantly in the key sectors of the socialist industry (heavy industry, state security) and they held leading positions to a higher extent than women.

The sixties

1960- Constantina's older sister, Ioana, the only member of their family who moved to town and did not marry someone in the village, offered the village children a Christmas tree and raffle with gifts for them. Constantina's children will always remember their aunt's gesture in sharp contrast with their austere and rough life filled with nitty-gritty work.

1963- Stela goes to the neighbouring larger village high school to register as a student. Victoria looks upon it with indifference.

1966- The Executive Council of the Central Committee of the Romanian Communist Party has a meeting at which it is resolved to ban abortions and restrict divorce, in the name of arguments pertaining to family reconsolidation and "communist ethics". The meeting was attended and the resolution was passed by an all-male membership. 9452 women died between 1966-1989 as a result of this resolution, according to official statistics. The real number is actually higher; doctors were instructed in case of death to record as cause the final complications that had led to the woman's death. Thus, the two most frequent official causes of death for women who actually died because they got an illegal abortion were "kidney failure" and "septicaemia."

One effect of Ceaușescu's pro-natal politics was that divorcees were considered less trustworthy than married persons. Divorce could be a social obstacle or an obstacle to career advancement, as it was considered a sign of moral dubiousness. This (together with the legislation passed to make divorce difficult) led to many couples accepting to continue to live together despite very serious conflict. In 1967 there was not even one divorce in Romania.

1968- Mothers had a maternity leave of 112 days. After this period expired, they could work a reduced load (6 hrs/day instead of 8). Fathers could not take paternity leave; it was considered that they could not replace mothers in child-caring.

Victoria's husband works in constructions in a different part of the country. Although Victoria does not want to leave her village, she does move with him temporarily when he needs to be taken care of.

1968- Stela gets a job in town. With her first pay check, she buys a Liubitel camera, an action considered by her parents as extremely eccentric and impractical.

None of Constantina's children remain in the village. They all move to town in search of work.

The seventies

1971- Aurelia leaves the village to go work on a large construction site. She was born at a time when it was easier to leave the village behind. The land had been collectivized, the only possibility to secure work was to join one of the numerous large construction projects or factories spread all around the country. She was an unskilled labourer at first, then an electrician – and she also went to evening class for college. She is the only one among her siblings who got a college degree. She meets her future husband on the construction site, with whom she will have 3 children. Aurelia's husband worked as an electrician all his life.

1974- "Guidelines for the implementation of Decree 770/1966" are published, "regulating abortions and incomplete abortions and aiming to improve the quality of medical care in obstetrics and

gynaecology". The document stipulates that "women in factories and institutions with a large number of women employees are to be submitted to gynaecological checkups biannually or annually." The objective was to boost birth rates by tracking pregnancies early, so that women could no longer get an illegal abortion, and also by tracking sterile women and treating them.

1974- Global Population Conference in Bucharest. Nicolae Ceaușescu announces his demographic strategy in the opening of the conference. His intentions were received favourably by the West, as they seemed to be aligned to international interests. Ceaușescu emphasized on the connection between population control and development strategies, as well as on the right to self-determination – which was the mark of his anti-Soviet politics.

1975- Stela meets her future husband on a work trip. They get married and she moves to his town.

1974- Delia is admitted to college and she moves to Cluj. For a while, Irina dreams every night that her sister has left for college, leaving her behind.

1976- Delia gets married. She writes in her diary that now she can confront the whole world because she is not alone anymore.

1976- Maria is born to Stela.

1977- Rodica is born to Aurelia.

1977- Anca is born. Her father would have liked Delia to interrupt her college studies and become a housewife.

1977- A law is passed to instate a monthly tax on all childless 25 year-olds and above, irrespective of their marital status.

Irina raises Anca. Later, Irina says that her life was always a wait: waiting to get married, then to have children, then to have her children grow up and go to college, so that she could finally have a real life, all to herself. But she offered to help Delia and postpone her "real life".

1978- Anca is baptized in an orthodox church, in a nationalistic gesture by Delia and Irina, who were indifferent to religion. Anca's father is Jewish; Delia and her family want to keep Anca as far as possible from this identity.

1978- Delia divorces and moves to Timișoara, where she is appointed as teacher. She refuses any further contact with Anca's father.

1978- Victoria's husband dies. Victoria never remarries. Stela's children will spend all their summer holidays with her.

The eighties

Even if she works the same number of hours as her husband, Aurelia has to do all the housework, take care of the three children, make all decisions regarding family organization and sort out all administrative matters at home.

Stela has an office job in a factory. At work she is appreciated as efficient, reliable, practical and

confident, in contrast with her submissive, timid and obliging manner to her husband and his parents.

Rodica admires her unmarried childless aunt a lot. In contrast with Aurelia, the aunt has control over her own life. The rest of the family, however, would be happy to see her married.

Constantina raises Aurelia's children up to the age when it is time for them to go to school.

1988- Delia's second divorce. Both spouses wanted a divorce and, although they had had no children together, they had to make an arrangement with a friend to testify that the husband had cheated on Delia – to speed up the divorce procedures.

1989 - The rebellion and riots of 16-22 December, especially in Timișoara and Bucharest, cause the fall of Nicolae Ceaușescu's communist regime. Stela was one of the people who took to the streets.

1989 - The second decree of the newly constituted government was to abrogate the anti-abortion laws.

The nineties

The price of transitioning from a planned to a market economy was paid mainly by women. The socialist system had given priority to men in the heavy industry. During the transition period, subsidies were granted mainly to the male-dominated branches of the industry: mining, metallurgy, the car industry. The economy was reorganized with women mostly in GDP-generating branches, while men in the now-gone industry turn into income consumers rather than generators.

1991- Rodica hears this line for the first time: "She is over 35, she is too old, who's going to hire her?!"

1992- Aurelia gets breast cancer and is operated in 1993. She enters medical retirement just when the factory where she had worked begins to fall apart. Thus, she does not have to deal with the corruption sinking the factory into bankruptcy, and she is also spared the experience of becoming unemployed. Later she says: "God gave me this illness."

1993- The factory where Stela works becomes bankrupt and Stela is let go. She finds another job.

1995- As her medical retirement pension is very low, Aurelia become the caretaker of a little girl.

Rodica spends all her summers in the countryside, helping Constantina and her husband to work on their lands – which they got back from the state.

1996 – Aurelia begins to take care of Constantina, who is finding it very difficult to manage after her husband's death.

1995- Maria and Rodica begin their studies at the Art College. Their families' modest financial situation was not a barrier in their decision to pursue studies at a college which did not offer premises for a stable future. Their colleagues came from diverse social milieus. Their generation was the last for whom tertiary education was entirely free for all the students.

1996- Anca begins her studies at the Art College in an atmosphere in which, though most students were women, the prevalent mentality seemed to be that women could not become true artists, especially if they wanted children. Also, there was the concern that what you created might be considered too "feminine". "Feminine" referred to everything that pertained to the private sphere, feelings, the

mundane details of the artist's life and work. The word "artist" was always used in its male gender form.

2000-2010

According to the Gallup Romanian Gender Barometer (commissioned by the Open Society Foundation in 2000), 78% of the respondents answered affirmatively to the question "Should a woman follow her man?" 83% said that the man was "the head of the family," and 61% considered the woman as "the lady of the house."

2000- Maria finishes college and gets a job as a teacher. The transition period was a difficult time and Maria could have used a job even in college – but the high unemployment rate made finding work very difficult.

2001- Maria, Rodica and Anca start h.arta group and they become friends. At the end of their college studies, they find themselves unequipped for the type of art they were interested in, an art that reflects the real issues of day-to-day life. The context of their existence is still marked by isolation: it is difficult to travel, to meet new people and see contemporary art projects. The three of them start h.arta group and space as an instrument of self-teaching.

2002- Constantina dies.

2003- A law is passed to ensure full equality of opportunities for women and men. Although women's rights associations had long blown the whistle about the inequalities between women and men in Romania, public institutions only included gender equality in their agenda during pre-accession negotiations. Meeting the standards in this respect was one of the European Union accession prerequisites.

Rodica, Maria and Anca become more and more interested in the ways in which art can contribute to understanding and changing reality. If at the beginning of their work the main question was "What is art?" now the question that becomes even more important is "What is art for?"

2003- Anca, Maria and Rodica organize, together with their friend Danica, a project called *Media, art and gender*. It was the first time they assumed publicly a feminist position, although feminist ideas were always there as intuitions looking for the vocabulary that would give them shape.

2005- Although Maria, Rodica and Anca begin to travel to international art exhibitions and to work in residence programs, they consider the Romanian context as their main source of inspiration. A Stockholm artist asked them if they thought they would have a difficult time readjusting to Romania after their residence finished.

2007- Romania joins the EU.

2007- Irina dies.

2008- Rodica, Maria and Anca live together and they constantly try to share their practical responsibilities and intellectual efforts as equitably as possible.

2009- Maria, Rodica and Anca earn their living exclusively from artistic projects and they live the

contradictory condition of the precariat (unclear boundaries between work and life, the impossibility to make any long-term decisions, uncertainty as norm.)

Aurelia is worried that Rodica does not have a clear life plan. Phone conversations always end with the question “Any news?” (her indirect manner of asking Rodica if she is planning to get married and have children.)

Because Anca, Maria and Rodica work with forms and formats that are more and more at the threshold between art and civic action, a Timișoara art historian once asked them: “And do you still do art?”

2009- Victoria dies. Stela had taken care on her in her last years.

2010- 2014

2010- Maria, Rodica and Anca write the text *Friendship as a model for feminism*. “In the context of our profession, which so often, same as any other field, is taken over by the ideas of success and competition, in the art field that is so often infiltrated by the ideology that makes people see themselves as individuals separated by their needs, fears and egos, in the context of cultural work that so often uses critique as an empty form that only reinforces the very structures that are critiqued, we consider that friendship is an important way to see yourself as an intrinsic part of a larger reality, to think of yourself in connection to others and, in this sense, to try to challenge the divisions and fragmentations that capitalist ideology creates. We consider friendship as a field of negotiation, as a complex mixture of emotions, conflicts, care, compromise and accountability towards the others, a powerful symbol for this struggle of unifying the theoretical clarity and ‘correctness’ of our discourses with the acts and attitudes of our everyday lives.”

2010- The National Agency for Equal Chances for Men and Women (A.N.E.S.) is dissolved. A.N.E.S. had been established in 2005, following a European directive. It granted labour and employers’ unions the competency to promote gender equality policies and to solve cases of gender discrimination, which marked an important first-ever. In the context of the financial crisis, maintaining the appearances of democracy has become unnecessary.

2012- A legislative project initiated by two members of the Liberal Democratic Party, with the support of pro-family christian associations, propose that women seeking an abortion should go through mandatory “crisis counselling.” This counselling would have included: watching video recordings of the medical procedure, exploring the causes which have led the woman to decide she wants an abortion, doing an x-ray of the pregnant woman’ womb and giving her a photo or video recording of the findings, explaining the risks of an abortion and presenting post-birth options, in case the woman does not have sufficient financial resources to raise the child.

According to the press release regarding this legislative project, the proponents were concerned by the “decline caused by the weakening of the family and the banalization of abortion.” The “decline” was presented against a backdrop of a “long demographic winter, from which we cannot come out unless we implement pro-natalist policies – or open the gates to massive immigration.”

2013- An extreme right group called the Autonomous Nationalists in Timișoara posted on their website an offer of 300 lei (approximately 70 euro) to each Roma woman in the Banat area who would present them with a medical certificate that she has undergone sterilization surgery in 2013.

2013- At a reunion of successful women managers organized by the magazine *Bussiness Woman*, Traian Băsescu, the Romanian president, declared that motherhood is a mission that women must carry

out in the name of patriotism. The president stated: “How on earth can a Roma woman keep five or six kids and a Romanian woman can’t? Oh wait, the Roma woman is not a manager (...) .”

Maria, Rodica and Anca constantly talk about the condition of art in these times which feel like the end of the world. They discuss the possibilities of analysis and critique that still exist in art, but also the necessity of sometimes renouncing to be an artist and deciding to simply be a citizen.