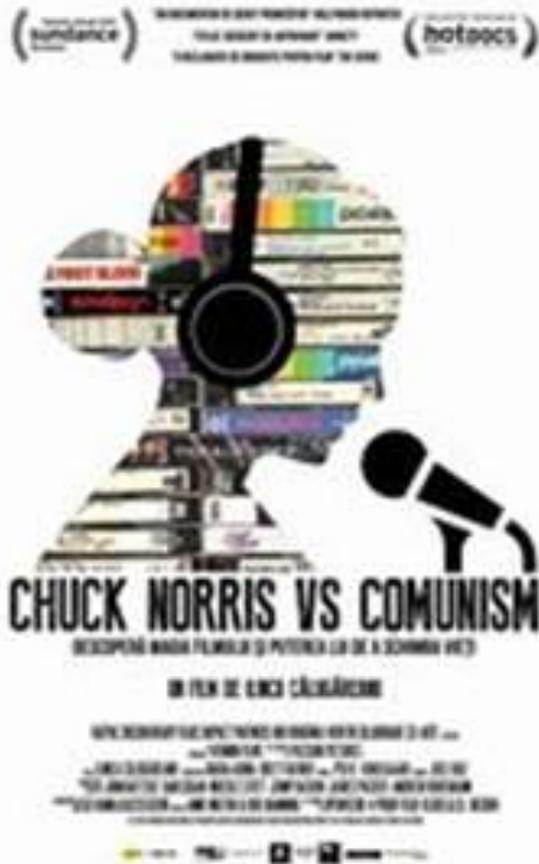


"Chuck Norris vs. Communism "and the entrepreneur Teodor Zamfir Any closed door has a "keyhole"

By Ileana Costea, 11/8-/2016

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Poster of "Chuck Norris vs. Communism" documentary

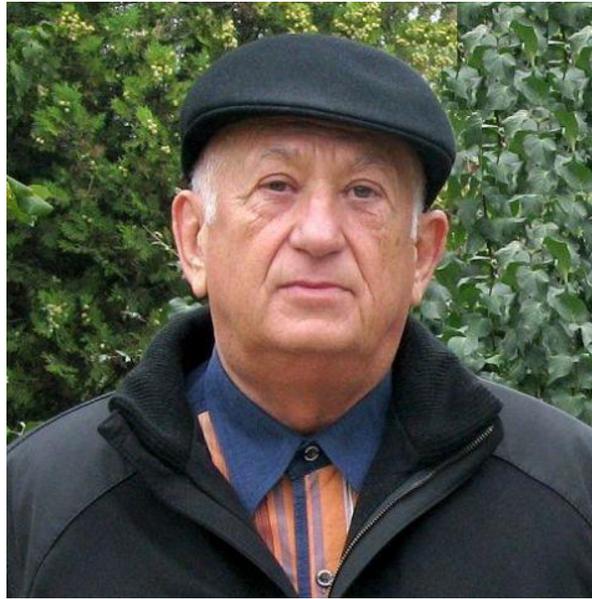
In January 2016 I received a call from a friend in Los Angeles to tell me that the public television channel PBS will present a documentary about Romania in the 1980's when videos of movies from the Western part of the world were distributed under the counter into Romania. The engine of this incredible smuggling action was Teodor (Dorel) Zamfir the brother of my good friend Maria Zamfir Bleyberg. Eager to find out more about that dark period that I did not experience because I was no longer living in Romania, and since I happened to meet Dorel, I was rather interested in seeing the movie.

Some 20 years ago, I led a delegation to Romania, from the California State University, Northridge (CSUN) where I am a professor. We were invited by the University of Targoviste, one of the many new universities which popped up after 1989. While in Bucharest for presentations at the (then called) Polytechnic Institute, I was looking for a restaurant to organize the "Good Bye" party. Maria told me "Go to my brother's Club Tezaal". We did and it was extraordinary: We were first invited into the bar in the basement which was skillfully decorated Dracula-style. We were served traditional plum brandy ("tzuica/slibovitz") and snacks by very classy waiters. A "royal" banquet followed. It ended with the

flame of the impressive French-type desert "Crêpe Suzette with Grand Marnier". At that point we were all asking ourselves how was Mr. Zamfir able to build and own this three story club in the elegant Bucharest district of the Cashin church. The documentary on PBS solved the puzzle of how Teodor Zamfir became a millionaire. A man of medium height, filled with initiative, very bright, with a taste for risk taking, and endless energy, Dorel Zamfir confirmed the opinion of my best childhood friend, Smaranda Schächtele-Vasilescu: "Men who are not too high are "essence" (like "perfume essence"). Tenaciously perseverant, boundless courageous, and with a great entrepreneurial spirit, throughout his life Mr. Zamfir had thrown himself into large scale risky endeavors. All this did not stop him from building a united family. He has two children and, now, many grandchildren.



Teodor Zamfir and his wife, Lydia, Bucharest, Romania, 2014.
Source: Private collection of Maria Zamfir Bleyberg.



Teodor Zamfir, the entrepreneur who smuggled into Communist Romania videos of movies made in the US and other countries on the Western side of the world.

Source: Private collection of Maria Zamfir Bleyberg.

The documentary feature film "Chuck Norris vs. Communism" put more emphasis on Irina Nistor, the translator from English and French into Romanian of about 3000 videos, than Teodor Zamfir, "the head" of this illegal "under the counter operation", which took place in spite of the hard watching KGB-like security ("Securitate") of Ceausescu's totalitarian regime. From an interview with the director of the documentary, Ilinca Călugăreanu, I understood that Mr. Zamfir did not want to be filmed, and he gave in with difficulty even to say the very few words he said at the end of the movie.

Living in the United States, I did not know anything about the existence of this network to introduce videos of interdicted movies in Romania of the 1980s. However, talking with acquaintances that have left the country later than me, I found out everybody in their neighborhood went to see these movies. Very few people in Romania could afford a VCR in those days. "Maybe 5 families per street had one", said my friend architect living in Paris, Irina Rosetti (known for the Predeal railway station). "And those who had a VCR were usually KGB-types ("securisti"). They were the only ones allowed to travel to the West, and, given their important status, border guards controlled their bags "closing their eyes" to what they were importing. The "Securitate" guys were those who had more money so as to afford the high cost of a VCR (as expensive as a new car). Those were the times when the Romanian TV station had only two hours of programs per day consisting only of communist propaganda and raising praise to the leading couple, Elena and Nicolae Ceaușescu. It is mind boggling that Irina Nistor, whom Teodor Zamfir hired to dub the pirated movies, was working for the National Television Commission of Censorship. There Ms. Nistor witnessed the mutilation of films from the Western part of the world. Examples are many: from cartoons like "Tom and Jerry" where the clips of a table with yummy goodies were removed, to Hollywood action movies, where well-known actors such as Chuck Norris, Sylvester Stallone, and Jean Claude Van Damme played, from which all images that featured swimming pools, luxury cars, wide streets, and skyscrapers were cut. Based on the fear of the leaders of the country had that Romanians will see the better life on the other side of the Iron Curtain, the Censorship imposed removal of scenes from foreign films, or actually prohibited the showing of some movies in theaters. Zamfir had movies copied and dubbed so that Romanians could watch them in their own language. He distributed the videos throughout the country where they were viewed "in secret" by groups gathered in the cramped

living room of a neighbor who owned a VCR. It was transmitted from ear to ear in the neighborhood, with whispers, that "Barbu is shown movies tonight at his place."



Dan Chiorean in the role of Teodor Zamfir.

Source: Internet, image from the Chuck Norris vs. Communism documentary.

The idea of being ready to take the risk of ending up in jail or lose the few goods they had for the pleasure of seeing the copy of a movie like "Mission in Action" or "Rocky", although badly copied might seem ridiculous. But for those living in Romania under communism it was a bitter reality. On the one hand, as Irina Nistor confessed, "the joy of doing even a small thing against the will of the leaders and their absurd laws gave one the feeling of a moment of freedom. "People need stories." And by their story movies have a magical power to give human beings a spark of hope in the dark depths of a gloomy everyday life, often shaping the way people think and act.

It is interesting that in an article by Noel Murray, an American freelance critic who keeps a movie blog, (December 31, 2015) the documentary "Chuck Norris vs. Communism " is placed on the list of nine films which reflect the magic power of the films. On that list there was also an Italian movie that I love, Cinema Paradiso - 1988 director Giuseppe Tornatore. A comment posted on the Internet at an article about the presentation of "Chuck Norris vs. Communism " at the Sundance Festival said that this documentary is a fascinating thriller about the magic power and ability movies have to change lives and that "Chuck Norris vs. Communism" is the most beautiful homage brought to movies, since "Cinema Paradiso".

The documentary by Irina Călugăreanu (director) and her sister, Mara Adina (producer) was presented at many festivals in the world: Sundance, at Edinborough in Yougolsavia, Los Angeles, Las Vegas, Miami, Florida. It was shown on cinema screens in England and now on HBO in Romania.



Mara Adina (Producer), Irina Margareta Nistor (translator and film critic), and Ilinca Călugăreanu (director and script author) of the documentary "Chuck Norris vs. Communism". Source: Internet.

At first the documentary raises attention by its exciting title, "hook to catch the fish." However, there is much more into it of interest, for the documentary is made as a thriller feature film, re-staging real situations from the time the smuggled videos were showing in Romania. The documentary keeps you as tense as the movies its action it is dealing with. Scenes showing actual situations from those days are interspersed with interviews of known or less known people, from those who attended the cramped sessions of illegal viewing in someone's apartment. Among the interviewees in the documentary, young in those video smuggling years, are the sociologist Marius Lazar; the film critic, Tudor Caranfil; the actor Doru Ana; and the TV celebrity, Silviu Prigoană; etc., as well as some who were only 7, 8, or 10 years old at the time – the radio show personalities such as Mihai Dobrovolschi and Vlad Craioveanu; the writer Marius Chivu; the actor Ștefan Tiron; and the film critic; Cristi Luca.

The director, Ilinca Călugăreanu, expresses in an interview her belief that seeing these films was the cause for more people to take to the streets in the 89 revolution. Personally I am not convinced that watching these foreign films sparked the 1989 Romanian revolution as advocated in the documentary. Of course this adds a dramatic element. Many people in the country knew the situation in the West from stories told to them by people who traveled abroad, and by listening illegally to broadcasts by Monica Lovinescu and Virgil Ierunca (established in Paris) on Radio Free Europe. Nevertheless, aspects of the real, better life in the world behind the Iron Curtain was known only in "audio" form and by people with more education. The videos with movies brought this "reality" more vividly with moving images, and thus touched the mass of the population. It is known that an image is more powerful than a thousand words! Watching these movies in groups has also made people know each other better, and this made it easier for them to assemble during the revolution.

Once you see the documentary you wonder how this smuggling action was not stopped ... because it is not possible that the Romanian KGB ("Securitate") and the government were not aware of what was going on. The documentary expresses an explanation for this, which is, I think, very valid. Mr. Zamfir had

the wit of the illegal entrepreneur and found the way to keep the eyes and mouth shut on those who could have reported and arrest him, Irina Nistor, the translator who dubbed the movies, and the others who worked for him. Zamfir created a complex network and he knew how, to whom, and when to constantly give this very tempting large bribe in films and videos dubbed in the language they understood. Because everyone in the "Securitate", all high-level, rich, totalitarian leaders and their families wanted to see these movies translated, because they would not have been able to fully understand and enjoy them otherwise. We might also recognize that the fact that these illegal smuggling of video operations were not crushed in Romania, actually falls under the umbrella of several similar cases, difficult to understand, but deeply embedded in the centuries of Balkanism that Romania went through putting the country apart from the stricter laws in the other communist countries.

"Chuck Norris vs. Communism" also has notes of humor. The unique shrill voice, without many intonations, of Irina Nistor who translated both female and male voices in every single of the smuggled videos became the best known voice in Romania, after that of "nea Nicu = uncle Nicu" Ceausescu, the President of the country. When she called a taxi, Irina's voice was immediately recognized. Her voice was hidden behind the microphone and Irina Nistor became a real legend in Romania. Nobody has ever seen her, and everybody was wondering how did she look: Is she blonde? Is she a brunette? Does she do all this dubbing in her kitchen while cooking?



A scene from the documentary showing Irina Margareta Nistor playing her own role in "Chuck Norris vs. Communism". Source: Internet.



Irina Margareta Nistor
Source: Wikipedia.



Irina Margareta Nistor, a scene from the movie. Source: Internet.



Image from the documentary. Source: New York Times, Internet.

The scenes in the documentary are well chosen, the re-enacted scenes are beautifully shot, the interviews have enlightening “texts”, tension making you stand out of breath, and humor add to the success of the movie. Documentaries are often very monotonous, and, I think, their directors have a lot to learn from the stimulating force achieved by Irina Călugăreanu in her movie. The Romanian director Andrei Zință (who currently lives in Los Angeles, known for his movies “Puzzle”, and “Stories from the Past” - after Ana Blandiana’s novel about deportations in the Bărăgan region), usually quite critical of other movies, when I asked him what he thinks about "Chuck Norris vs. Communism", told me he liked the film. He added that his daughter, born out of the country, said that this documentary has raised her awareness and helped her better understand what people went through in Romania during the communist terror. Thus “voilà” another important contribution this film makes: bringing a better grasp of that communist era to the younger generation.

This smuggling operation took place in a perfect moment: in the 80s. At that point in time the video technology made possible that movies be spread out to far corners of the world. It is true, Zamfir found a powerful “working” formula, but perhaps this is the secret of successful entrepreneurs: to catch the right moment and pass bravely to action. Not only the idea of doing what Zamfir did is great. Even more impressive was its execution which required procurement of equipment for copying and dubbing, and the building of a continuous supply and demand network able to keep away the Security enemy, loyal to the government.



Scene from the movie. Source: Internet.



Scene from the movie. Source: Internet.

Plagiarism is prohibited and unethical since, yes, authors lose huge amounts of money, but "evil for a good cause" must be judged with moral adjusted. In this case Zamfir has the merit of having been able to create that "keyhole" that allowed the Romanians, long kept in harsh isolation, to look at the world outside the Iron Curtain, to make them dream, to keep hope lit, to bring a ray of joy in the oppressed people's life, and may be even put the seed necessary to give them the strength to rebel.

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