



(AN)ARCHIVE

CHILDHOOD, MEMORY, AND THE COLD WAR

EDITED BY MNEMOZIN



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Smearing the Portrait¹

Lucian Țion

The break was coming to an end. It was the long break—the one that all students had in the middle of the school day between 10:10 and 10:30 in the morning. They had just finished a short soccer game in the school yard before they started to go back to the classroom in a haphazard crowd. The game exhausted them, and even though the ball was almost flat and the ground covered in cement, as usual, the boys gave it all. Some were panting heavily from running, others were playing it cool.

When they entered the classroom the sun had just moved to the other side of the building, so the room felt a little bit cooler. The girls were sitting at their desks, or on their desks sometimes, as the boys reentered. And the usual haggling and teasing restarted immediately thereafter. That was the way school children had always amused themselves, they thought at the time, and this gave them a feeling of belonging.

The next class was math and comrade Stancu was a very strict teacher. Not the usual walk-in-the-park class as it was with comrade Ana, the drawing teacher or comrade Andrei who taught geography as if he couldn't care less whether the kids went away with any knowledge from his classes or not. Stancu had a pair of brown-tinted glasses and always wore the same slightly discolored brown work-gown. This gave him an intimidating air, and made math look like an enormously important subject in the eyes of the kids. They were all secretly fearing him, although, of course, none would ever admit to it. And they were waiting for him with a mix of anxiety and anticipation on that day, as well.

Only that day, for some reason, Stancu was late. Sometimes he would stay behind a little longer with the others in the teachers' lounge; other times he

1 This is a childhood memory produced as part of the Reconnect/Recollect project discussed in the introduction to this book.

would be busy marking papers until a few minutes after class would start. Or at least so he said. The kids didn't really care what the specific reason was: All that mattered to them was that he wasn't there on time, which meant a few extra minutes in which the boys could horseplay around, pulling their classmates' ponytails or simply picking their noses.

George was an unusual type. His long curly hair made him look like a girl, but the curses that came out of his mouth reminded one of the uneducated son of a garbage collector or a bricklayer. His uniform would always carry stains of some nature or another, while his pioneer's tie was so worn out as to actually look torn. And it was no easy feat to tear a pioneer's tie. No matter how many times the class-mistress threatened him with bringing his parents to school; and no matter how many phone calls she actually made to his parents, this didn't change. In a week or two, George's outlook would soon return to the dilapidated state with which everyone was familiar: that of a boy coming from a difficult social background that was making his way through life largely on his own.

That day, while Stancu was being unusually late, the boys in the back of the room—always the unruly ones—bored with teasing the girls who were starting to put up something of a legitimately powerful self-defense, were beginning to turn on each other rather than continuing to harass them. Soon enough the fight turned into a full-out war between five or six of the boys who were using everything that came within reach as projectiles to be thrown in the enemy's general direction. Pens, entire pen-holders, rulers, erasers and notebooks were all flying around with threatening speed, when George, catching sight of the sponge used for wiping the chalkboard, made a dash for the sink at the corner of the room.

Covered in chalk dust, the sponge soon turned into a heavy mush of white mud, which, when thrown with precision, could in fact become a quite dangerous weapon. The others had barely noticed George's tactics and continued to fight each other with more conventional weaponry when George raised the sponge above his head to draw attention to himself and the potential asset he was holding. Gradually, signaling to each other loudly, the others stopped playing, still holding onto the random book they were just about to throw a minute ago. Now they were all watching George and questioning themselves what was to be the boy's next target.

But George made an unusual gesture: Instead of picking a classmate he had a grudge on, he made an about-face, and, with the sponge still dripping colored liquid to the floor in the middle of the room, he stood facing the portrait of the

supreme leader that was hanging, as in every classroom in the school, on top of the blackboard. Then, without missing a beat, he arched his arm behind him and threw the sponge into the picture on the wall.

The water started to evaporate almost instantaneously when comrade Stancu entered, brown glasses and brown gown almost preceding him in the classroom. The kids made a speedy return to their desks, attempting to erase any traces of their game in the process. But as the seconds wore on, a grayish-dark splotch of freshly dried choke-water was becoming more and more visible on the portrait of the leader. Stancu demurred for a second, then, following what must have been the eye-line of the students, turned around to the portrait of Ceaușescu

By that time, the leader's smile had turned into a disgruntled frown.

In revenge for his punishment, which was a very low grade in general conduct and a long talk with the parents, George was gifted with the revolution: Only a few weeks after the smearing of the portrait, while school was out for vacation, the crowds gathered in the streets and removed the leader. As if by chance the first class after the holidays was math, and George was late, as usual, for the first day of school. Entering the classroom, he first bid Mr. Stancu 'good morning', and then, as if nothing in the world mattered more, he swiftly glanced in the direction of the portrait.

The spot where the leader stood on the wall was still visible, but the leader's face was gone. George felt an onrush of relief, but then, almost simultaneously, and unexpectedly, one of sadness. The feelings succeeded each other too quickly for George to pay attention. He was invited to sit without the usual reprimand and the class resumed, almost as if nothing had happened. And before he knew it, things were back to normal. As if the kids were just returning to school from a usual vacation; as if the outline of the leader's portrait on the wall had always been just that: nothing more than a simple outline.