Livia

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Two and half months after the execution of Ceausescu a camera team from West German Broadcasting in Cologne was filming the demolition of the statue of Lenin on the Square of the Free Press in Bucharest. A full shooting day had been allocated for the filming, but the work dragged on longer than expected. Soon after the first salvos of the pneumatic drill had echoed from the walls of the huge Press House, in front of which the 25 foot statue had stood for years as silent admonition and threat, the loudly cursing workers discovered that the giant figure was firmly anchored in the marble pedestal with unusually thick bronze struts. Lenin's fall became a test of patience. There was a cold wind coming from the south, blowing down Kiseleff Boulevard, where in the distance the triumphal arch emerged out of the hazy smog like a Parisian dream image. Every strong gust blew sand into the eyes of the onlookers, and gradually also made the cameras present at the scene dirty, lying on the lenses as a fine film. As evening fell, some passers-by crossed themselves at the sight of the pale flickering lights coming from the workers' welding equipment and power saws, which seemed to make Lenin's legs tremble. The next day, 6th March 1990, when, despite every effort, the statue was still standing there as solidly as before, two workers climbed up a firefighters' ladder and onto the head and placed a thick steel cable around its neck. Only an hour later everything was ready: With the help of the steel noose and the tractive power of a mobile crane, the seven ton Lenin was pulled from the ground and drawn into the grey sky to the applause of several hundred onlookers.

The statue was loaded onto a ship. Laid out on deck, it passed up the Colentina River as if in slow motion past rows of silent people, and the once visionary gesture, with which Lenin gripped his coat lapel, now resembled, as he lay there, a pleading, outstretched hand. Less than two weeks later, Petru Groza also had to take leave of his city. Bright yellow paint had been poured over him, the first Communist prime minister of Romania, a man with a high, wrinkled forehead and mask-like rigid features, where he stood near the medical faculty. A wit had hung a garbage can from his raised hand and a graffiti prophesied: *You will fall like Lenin*. As comrades in misfortune the two statues met outside Bucharest in the desolate corner of a palace garden, where brow to brow they survive as unburied corpses behind a low brick wall.

Left behind were the empty pedestals. Close to them the crew from West German Broadcasting interviewed passers-by on film, asking them what they thought should be done with the empty spaces. The answers gave them an insight into the country's state of mind: One man spoke with a hopelessly dismissive gesture of a monument to the freedom of the press, another demanded with a clenched fist, that political symbols be replaced with literary ones; a very nervous woman muttered, that she didn't mind what it was, as long as the provisional government didn't take the decision, and finally, before he, like the other nameless faces, disappeared forever from the picture, an unshaven, bleary-eyed looking man shouted into the microphone, that both statues should be melted down and recast as a Dacia 1300.

The three employees of West German Broadcasting (WDR) knew what a Dacia was, but with many other names they were dependent for information on their interpreter Anghel. Knowledgeably he explained to them who Mihai Viteazul, Mircea Dinescu or Mihai Eminescu were. Only once did the team not get an answer from him: When they asked about the name Livia, which had been mentioned by a number of elderly passers-by, Anghel said, it couldn't be explained in a couple of sentences. Instead he would tell them about Livia this evening, at their farewell dinner in the restaurant of the Hotel Capsa.

They had met Anghel in the Intercontinental, the city's most expensive and modern hotel, that had once been Ceausescu's pride and since his violent death was occupied by TV crews from around the world. In the hotel bar on the 16th floor, where informants, whores and interpreters offered their services to foreign guests round the clock in return for hard currency, they had got into conversation with him shortly after their arrival. At the bar he had dragged them away from a circle of wildly blathering Romanians and warned them against charlatans telling them fairy tales. Here rumours were taken more seriously than reality, that was an evil deeply rooted in Romanians. Their language had no less than a dozen conditional forms, and perhaps they even owed the victory over Ceausescu to their superstitious relationship to the word. Because even while the demonstrators on University Square were still shouting *We are a united people!*, while the soldiers were still undecided and the fighting still going on, some of the revolutionaries had gained access to the state broadcasting building and announced to the cameras, the country was already liberated. The Romanians had believed the TV message more than the reality on the streets, and that's how the Romanian revolution had come about. The three Germans shook their heads in astonishment and followed Anghel onto the roof terrace. After he had pointed out the panorama of the city to them, they quickly agreed terms: For a hundred dollars a day over the next two weeks he would provide

them with stories and pictures for a series of TV slots.
Trusting that he would show them the real Bucharest, the one hidden from the visitor, they followed him all through the city. Their hearts were in their mouths when he showed them a walled-up hole at the front of the Central Committee building and told them that this was the entrance to the country's unconscious, to the subterranean tunnel system of the still-active Securitate; whoever goes through the hole, comes out at the other end in the bedroom of the dictator himself, the scene of Romania's nightmares. He led them to the neglected villas of an old residential quarter, in whose overgrown gardens gipsy families had still been burning torn up parquet flooring only a week before; since a new rumour had turned the Ceausescu family into a Roma clan, these houses were empty now and the gypsies had disappeared. In the House of the People, now the Palace of Parliament, he led them through endless suites of rooms, through a labyrinth of passageways, secret doors and regal salons, whose pomp of marble and pillars, as he explained, was merely papered onto concrete, plasterboard and cavity blocks. They followed him to a big demonstration on Victory Square, whose aim and purpose remained incomprehensible to them; there he pointed above the heads of the demonstrators to the tall buildings all around, which were nothing but hollow backdrops, never-completed residential blocks with freshly painted facades. For their souvenir purchases he introduced them to the rules of the omnipresent black market, a monstrous product of the rampant inflation, which transformed every corner of the city into an endless bazaar of Balkan gesticulation and shouting. On the movable stands, the sales trays and handcarts, behind which men and women in caps stood, shifting from one foot to the other there was displayed everything possible and impossible from television tubes, light bulbs and batteries to uniforms, medals and other devotional objects of the fallen regime. At one of these stands Angel must have got hold of the old book, bound in blue imitation leather, which on their last evening together, at the farewell dinner in the Capsa Hotel, he placed on the table, saying that it was his own memento for his German friends.
With polite interest the three of them craned their necks to see the stained book. Only when Fechner, the editor of the WDR crew read the richly ornate title *Livia*, did their faces light up: Anghel, they remembered, still owed them an explanation of Livia. They moved their chairs closer to the table, leafed at random through the Romanian text and looked at the black and white photos in the middle of the book. Some pictures showed a pale girl with shoulder-length hair and a deep dimple in her chin; on others a majestic mountain landscape and wide meadows were to be seen, views of a village and of a small house with pointed gables: images of a world which Anghel now told them about.

Livia, he began, grew up three quarters of a century ago in a Transylvanian village, the daughter of a tailor and a dancer. Up there Romanians and Hungarians had lived peacefully together since time immemorial, proud of their community, and the fertile soil cultivated by the Vlach peasants. When it grew warm in April and the swans flew north, Livia ran to the river with the other children. One day she saw something gleaming on the bottom of the stream, and when she stretched out to reach for it, she pulled out a toy trumpet. The other children laughed and shouted, the trumpet belonged to the Prince of Kagran, and when he came to look for it, he would find Livia and take her home to his castle.

Not long after people in the village said, that a great war was over. The ministers of all the warring countries had met far away in the west, brought down the Kingdom of Hungary with a word of command, and declared Livia's village Romanian. It was not easy for little Livia to understand, why the Hungarian neighbours now flew their flag at half-mast every morning, why her father, the gentle tailor, was now quarrelling with his best friend Tamás and why her mother sat at home all day long and didn't dance. Livia was no longer allowed to go down to the river with her friends and so she remained alone in the attic and blew the trumpet of the Prince of Kagran.

One day Hungarian hussars rode up from the puszta. They cried, that one had to be for or against them, and whoever was against them, would be met with fire and death. The whole village was devastated in the battle, and when Livia ran out of the burning house with her parents, first her father, then her mother were hit by rifle bullets. Then Livia remained standing beside her parents, dumb with sadness and fear. In her despair she put the trumpet of the Prince of Kagran to her lips and blew as loud as she could. But no prince came to fetch her. Instead the hussars rode up, raced towards the signal on their wild horses and opened fire on the supposed enemy. According to the story, concluded Anghel, the villagers, outraged by Livia's death, joined together and put an end to the Hungarian uprising. So she and her trumpet became a symbolic figure of the unification of Transylvania with Romania.

Sounds like a fairy story, yawned Leitner, the crew's sound man. Anghel stared grimly at him. Of course, he conceded with some irritation, in time such stories turned into legends. But had not today's interviews at the pedestals of Lenin and Groza shown him, Leitner, that Livia had stayed in people's memories? Exactly. Her myth allowed her to survive her own death like a vampire. And it was especially now, explained Anghel, that Livia was a presence. Now, after the revolution, there was a similar situation in the country to that in Livia's day. The Hungarians in Transylvania were in a rebellious mood, other minorities

would soon follow their example, the Romanian state was in danger of falling apart. If they were really looking for a symbolic figure, a symbol for the current situation of Romania, then it was - he picked up the blue book and held it in the air - Livia.
Anghel looked at each of the startled faces in turn. His listeners were silent, and something was evidently at work inside in them. When Dahl, the camera man, quietly began to circle round a question as to the historical reality of the Livia story, Anghel interrupted him to suggest continuing the evening in a bar; he simply didn't feel comfortable amidst the dubious splendour of the Capsa. In Ceausescu's day, he whispered, bugs had been hidden in the candelabra and under the table tops. Their conversation was being recorded and transcribed in some distant office, for whatever purpose.
As they stepped out onto the Calea Victoriei, which from six o'clock, when the lights were turned off, was pitch dark, like the rest of Bucharest, Leitner turned up the collar of his coat and said goodbye to Anghel and to his colleagues. Tired out by the exertions of the previous fortnight, he left the other three and walked to the nearby tower of the Intercontinental. I looked back at them once more from the other side of the street, Leitner said in a statement weeks later. They were still joking with the doorman of the Capsa and then walked off down the street engaged in excited discussion and pulling the blue book out of each other's hands. The next morning I sat alone at the breakfast table for a long time. I was about to call up to their rooms, when they finally came down, fatigued and visibly the worse for wear from the night before. They wished me a safe journey home, as for themselves they weren't finished here yet. They wanted to extend their stay for another couple of days at their own expense, in order to shoot a piece about Livia. Anghel had offered himself as a guide in Transylvania, where Livia's village must be located not far from Sighisoara. Fortunately, Leitner concluded his statement, there was no more time left to talk me into it; because if I had joined Fechner and Dahl on their journey, I would probably not have returned either.

One month after Leitner's return from Romania, a dpa news item reported that he had been the last person to see Fechner and Dahl. Since then nothing more had been heard of them. Neither the investigations of the Romanian authorities nor the efforts of relatives, posters put up and passers-by questioned in Sighisoara and Bucharest, had produced the slightest clue as to their whereabouts. The two of them had vanished from the face of the earth.
Now, eighteen years after they had disappeared without trace a film tape arrived at West German Broadcasting in Cologne. The packet was accompanied by a

letter from the Béla Balázs House in Targu Mures asking for help. In the course of an audit of the archives, a film cassette with the WDR logo had been found, and what was on the tape was puzzling. Viewing the copy brought an unexpected reunion for Fechner and Dahl's old colleagues in Cologne, because as it turned out, this was the material shot on their last journey. It provides some information as to what happened to the two Germans on 19th March 1990.

The first thing to be seen on the tape is a station concourse. A sign with the inscription *Gara de Nord* identifies the place as Bucharest's main station. Even before we see him in the picture, we can hear the monotonous *Dimineata! Dimineata!* of a newspaper seller walking past two emaciated boys, dressed in dirty rags. The two of them are standing in front of the big board with the departure times of the trains and are loosening the pinned on letters from the lowest bars. A uniformed railway official comes towards them, threatening, warning, but they are so engrossed in their game with the letters, that they don't notice him. As he grabs the boys, the carriage door closes in front of the camera with a loud and almost animate sigh. There's a crack in the window pane which cuts the world now rolling past into a top and bottom.

After a little flickering, a broad river valley opens up; behind the long meadows rise steep, forested hills. Mist hangs over the forests, so thick and so white, it's as if these were mountain heights far above the ground. A flock of birds suddenly flies up from the impenetrable haze, a black cloud of giant flying monsters, flapping into the pale sky in a wild confusion of leathery gleaming wings. In the distance a medieval fortified church passes by. With its circular protective wall, its many round towers and fluttering flags, its gabled roofs pointing this way and that, it could come from a book of fairy tales. Then the landscape is swallowed by the darkness of a tunnel, and for a moment the pale outlines of Anghel's and Fechner's faces shine ghostly on the quivering glass of the train window.

In the next take, Fechner is standing in a lane of uneven cobble stones under a weathered stone arch. Anghel, our guide, has cleared off, he says into the microphone. He got his payment and then he vanished. Anyway, at least we're now in Sighisoara, or Schässburg an der Kokel, as the local Romanian Germans call it. Livia's village cannot be far away. Incidentally, our journey has taken us straight into the Middle Ages... Fechner turns round with a sweeping gesture, and the camera follows him through narrow lanes, steeped in a cold light, past ancient two and three storey houses, which seem rammed into the ground by the

weight of their oversized roofs. The walls are sloping and crooked, slanting towards the pavement or leaning oppressively over Fechner, who seems tiny next to them. As the camera circles round, a shadow slips across the wall behind him, grows to huge size, then turns and disappears. A moment later a blue wooden gate appears, bearing a golden sign. This is the entrance to a long covered stairway, a kind of tunnel above ground, leading up a hill to a church.

Fechner is standing with a boy and a girl at the church door. We're coming from a corpse, says the boy in the oddly old-fashioned sounding dialect of the Transylvanian Saxons. That's why our father has put us in our good clothes. But the corpse has stretched out, and now my hour has stopped as well. Where is your father, asks Fechner. The boy looks at him in amazement, and exclaims: Joi, he looks after the cemetery up there! And before Fechner can say another word, the girl points at a white butterfly and shouts: Look, the flutterby!, and runs out of the frame, followed by her brother.

Schässburg's clock tower rises dark and menacing above the heavy-set roofs whose window slits are like watchful pairs of eyes. Its chimes resound leaden and hollow above the town. The face of the clock is visible behind Fechner's head, the hands pointing to 5 o'clock. Figures, four feet high, the ghosts of the movement, carry out their daily labour as they have for centuries, and keep the hour. Realising that he is on film, Fechner smiles, he puts his hand behind his ear and says to camera: Sounds like Livia's clarion call, doesn't it? Wait, Livia! he calls up to the tower, laughing, the Prince of Kagran is on his way!
Then the world starts to turn: a colourful row of houses drifts slowly past, then a whitewashed church, and finally the camera comes to rest on Fechner, in front of a yellow house. Dusk is falling, an urn-shaped oil lamp flickers above a door leading down to a basement. This is the house of the Draculeshti, explains Fechner, pointing at a plaque on the wall of the house. Allegedly the famous impaler, Vlad Tepes, known as Dracula, was born here. However, we are more interested in the basement barr, for hours now we've been trying to find some people in this deserted town. He walks down the stairs, pulls the heavy door open and holds it for a while, then the blurred gaze of the camera follows him into a sombre vaulted cellar, faintly lit by candles and a feeble ceiling light. There are windowless walls, thick, exposed brickwork from which long-fingered hands, serving as coat hangers, protrude here and there. Braided plastic strings of garlic hang from the bar. It is very quiet, although several tables are taken.
An elderly couple at one of the tables is leafing through the book about Livia.

The woman points at the open page and says in an almost Bavarian-sounding accent, yes, it's true, these pictures are from a film every child saw back then. That's right, the man beside her confirms with a nod, as far as he knows, there never were any photos of the real Livia. Someone laughs out loud in the background, the camera turns, looks round, searches the room and finds a youngish man sitting by himself at a table by the door, a glass of beer in front of him. There never was a real Livia, he exclaims in a thick Hungarian accent, the only Livia that ever existed is the one in the film. He bends forward, lights his cigarette from the candle on the table and starts to tell the story. The film was commissioned by Gheorghiu-Dej and made in the late 40's by Morosow, a Russian student of Eisenstein. A propaganda film for young Romanians, a bout a good Romanian girl who is killed by the bad Hungarians in the country. It was a slap in the face for the Hungarian minority. You know, the Romanians had just pocketed Transylvania for the second time. The Hungarians responded to the propaganda piece be making an alternative dubbed sound track, turning the message of the film upside down. Of course, that version was banned, sound tape and film reel had to be kept separate, to avoid being caught. Laughing, the man blows smoke through his nose and asks to have a look at the blue book. I know something about films, he says. This is in every respect a dreadful film. Morosow never set foot in our country, he made the film in a Russian studio, travelling with his finger on the map. When the film became so successful that it created its own reality, the book had to stick to its false facts. It says something here about Vlach peasants, but the Vlachs live somewhere quite different, and it's news to me that swans fly over Schässburg in April. Just take a look at those photos! I don't suppose you've seen mountains like that around here, have you? These are nothing but studio sets.

A dark evening. In the background a plain concrete facade. Fechner, microphone in hand, is speaking to the camera. They are now at the final stop of their journey, he says. The building behind them is the Béla Balázs house in Targu Mures, a film museum with an excellent archive. Tonight a screening of the film "Livia" has been arranged for them... He interrupts his introduction. Loud shouting can be heard, off camera something is happening, which has evidently distracted Fechner. The camera briefly pans in the direction he is looking and shows an angry crowd passing by at a crossing further down the road. The crowd is accompanied by a camera crew sporting the logo of Romanian TV. The scenes recorded by TVR will remain engraved in people's memories all over the country: images of rioting crowds and fights in the street between Romanians and Hungarians, something no one had predicted. Pictures

of a mob, armed with clubs and staves, hounding a fleeing man, they form a circle around him, batter his limbs and smash his skull; pictures of crowds marching with burning torches, setting straw dolls alight, peasants raising the bloodied prongs of their pitchforks in the air; pictures of burning houses, of people covered in blood, staggering, collapsing, dying. Somewhere in the margins Fechner and Dahl must be visible too, as they walk up the steps of Béla Balázs House ignorant of the situation developing on the streets.

The last take shows a white wall. Echoing steps and the shuffling and creaking of chairs being moved, give an impression of the room in which the camera is positioned. A woman's voice says *igen*, *igen* a few times, the light goes out, a door is quietly shut, and the film *Livia* begins, preserved on Dahl's tape as a 30 minute recording of the screening.
The film opens with the camera panning slowly down the aisle of a lively village market, cutting through the hustle and bustle, moving past stalls loaded with fruit and vegetables. Only when the wide open mouths of the market traders are visible, does the viewer realise that the film is running without sound. For a long time the only thing audible is the even whirr of the projector, a creaking chair or the muffled cough of someone invisibly present in the room. Perhaps it is the palpable presence of Fechner and Dahl which makes the mute pursuits of the of the figures flickering on the screen so haunting. A group of women is dancing, one can see their imitation folk art skirts billowing, but there is no accompanying music. There are the Vlach peasants, deprived of their real home by the director, they are working hard in the fields and laughing, but no one knows the cause of their cheerfulness. Only half way through, when a uniformed man on horseback has arrived at the market place and delivered a silent message to the set around him, do sounds gradually find their way into the film. One hears the fierce shouts of the villagers, then the deafening shouts of anger as soon as the hussars in their costumes arrive. At one point, at a moment of complete confusion, heavy feet walk across the room, a window is closed with an abrupt screech, and instantly the noise from the street is barely audible in the room. The sounds one hears are the riots in Targu Mures, which have now reached Béla Balázs House a little to the north of the town centre. One hears the rampaging crowd, their chants and slogans, until a window is broken with a crash. Then silence. An explosion in the middle of the room puts an end to the screening of *Livia*. The last thing we see is the girl standing beside her dead parents. The camera zooms onto her pale face: the dimple in her chin, her mouth and her eyes recede into deep shadow. She raises her head and turns her face to a light source, the shadows on her face disappear and her expression of

sorrow gives way to one of determination. She raises the trumpet of the Prince of Kagran to her lips and in her mute world blows the clarion call. For a moment there is complete silence and in the rising sun of Communism Livia merges with the glaring light of the overriden camera.