

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Life in Romania

1940 to 1968

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JOHN DRAGOMAN

Interviewed

by

Daniel Flood

on

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YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

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INTERVIEWEE: JOHN DRAGOMAN

INTERVIEWER: DANIEL FLOOD

SUBJECT: Education, Celebrating Christmas, Communism,  
World War II, Dracula Legend, Freedom of the Press

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F: This is an interview with John Dragoman for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program on Life in Romania in 1940 to 1968 by Dan Flood at Mr. Dragoman's home, 3112 Burbank, Youngstown, Ohio, on February 29, 1976.

Do you want to start off, John, by just going back and telling where you were born?

D: I was born in 1936 in the village Streza-Cartisoara in the county of Fagaras. Now it is called Sibiv, they changed it. I lived with my father and mother and grandmother.

In 1941 my father was killed in the war so the family was then my mother, grandmother, and me.

F: What type of house did you have?

D: The house was a simple house, like a living room, kitchen, and a front room, and a bathroom. Usually, you used the front room only in the winter time when it was colder. In the summer time we usually slept in the first room or they slept outside in a barn or something.

F: What were some of the childhood experiences you had? Was it a farming type village?

D: Yes, it was a farming village. We had around sixteen hectares. One hectare is equivalent to a hundred meters by a hundred meters. You can transform that into meters or feet and find out how much that is.

F: Did you have animals on this farm?

- D: Yes, we had a kind of buffalo to do the work in the field. At that time, around 1940, 1941, or 1942 there weren't too many tractors. We grew all kinds of things: potatoes, grain, corn, and wild fruits. Everybody has fruit because usually they are not very big. We had all kinds of fruit trees: apple, pear, and cherry.
- F: You didn't live directly off of your own farm then, you had to trade with other people for other products? Did you go to town to buy food in the market and things like that?
- D: Sixteen miles from our village was a town where we could go. We could go and sell our products and buy what we wanted. Usually at that time, the businessmen came and bought your crop. They would give you the money and you would go and buy whatever you wanted. The thing is, the land over there wasn't too rich and you couldn't get much production. You just grew so many to help you and to sell a little bit to buy things.
- F: Did you use fertilizer on the farm?
- D: At that time we couldn't; we just used cow manure or what was available. During the war there wasn't too much fertilizer.
- F: As far as schooling, when did you start school?
- D: I started school when I was seven years old. I went two years, the first grade and the second grade, in a village. The third and fourth grade I went to the city and my mother had to pay for that.
- F: You lived away?
- D: Yes, I lived away. I moved for the third and fourth grade to the city.
- F: Was this all boys together in a school?
- D: No, it was mixed. We had boys and girls.
- F: The third and fourth grade you moved away then?
- D: Yes. In a village teaching didn't go that high, so my mother always thought that it was better for me to get a better education and helped me to get a degree. She started when I was young.
- F: What type of education was it like in the farm schools, everybody together?
- D: Yes, all grades were together in the same room because

- D: There weren't too many people. Our village was 250 houses, families. In a city school you have first grade separate, second grade separate. Every grade had its own teachers.
- F: Do you remember anything about the schooling itself as far as subjects that you were taking at various times?
- D: When you first went to school you learned to write and read, that was the first thing.
- F: Your reading and writing was in what language?
- D: Romanian. You had to know how to work with numbers. I think when you finished first grade you were able to know how to read and add and subtract. I think in the second year you learned a little bit of math, plus reading and multiplying. You started history then, but more like legends about what was in the past. I think in the third and fourth you had to know about plants. It was a lesson to make you curious about things.
- F: What about games, physical education?
- D: Starting from the first grade I think you have two or three hours a week, one hour one day and another hour the next week.
- F: What were the big sports?
- D: More like athletics, running, jumping, when you were young. We played tug-of-war also.
- F: As far as when you were a kid growing up, celebrating Christmas or Easter, things like this, did you have the same traditions as in the United States?
- D: Christmas was a very nice season. Before Christmas, on the 24th, in the morning the kids go to school and from there they start to sing on the streets and everybody comes outside with candy and apples, pears, and gives them to the kids. The kids go singing carols on the street from house to house, all over the village. This is for the kids, and for the young people in their twenties there are choirs. I don't know the date, but they go from house to house and sing carols. The people invite them inside and give them things.
- F: Is there anybody dressing up like Santa Claus?
- D: Yes. On Christmas Day we have two or three teams and we have a star with a Christmas picture. You would heat a corner of the star and she would turn over. You go in the house and you sing the song about Christmas.

Another time was a theatre, a short theatre, and there were three or four boys. We have a story like King Herod saying cut the heads of the kids up to a month. It's that story, the same idea. They come and ask you, "Do you want to receive us?" They usually get money. It's a big kick getting some money.

Christmas trees are like here, but the only thing is we put goodies on the tree: chocolate, apples, nuts, candles, bulbs.

F: During World War II, when the Russians took over, what year was that?

D: Immediately after the war, it was finished in 1935, Russia was there.

F: Were the Russians friendly toward you?

D: We didn't have too much contact with them. Usually they don't mix with the people. If they have something to say, they tell it to the leaders and they pass it on to the people.

F: What about the schooling then when the Russians first took over?

D: I think it's the same now because the Communists came back to the same traditions.

F: As far as the Communists themselves though, they took over after World War II?

D: Yes. We still had the king in 1948.

F: With the presence of those Russian troops you had secret police there too?

D: Yes. The whole system changed, the whole government. Everything was changed. We got two reforms in school.

F: What were those?

D: I don't even know the year when they started, but I think it was in 1948. Up to 1947, 1948, you could go to school only for four years. After four years you didn't have to go anymore.

F: Just grades one, two, three, four, and that was it?

D: Yes. They came up with a reform that you had to go seven years. It was an obligation; you couldn't get away with it; you had to go. I don't know if it's still the same, but I think now they made it to be up to twelfth grade.

Everybody has to go twelve years.

F: In the schools themselves when the Russians took over, did they start brainwashing the people toward Communism?

D: They start with the same education. They made up their points there.

F: How did that affect you in school? Did that change any language?

D: We had to start to learn the Russian language.

F: That was in what grade?

D: After you finished fourth grade, to get a better education you had to take an exam. If you passed this exam you could go farther. What happened with me, I finished fourth grade and I took an exam to get to a higher school, a school to be a teacher. I went one year and the reform came, so I went back to the village where I was born and finished sixth grade and seventh grade. From first grade to seventh grade they call this elementary school. When you finished seventh grade, for instance, if you wanted to go and get a better education, you had to go to a school. To get to the school you had to pass an exam. If you didn't pass, you were finished with school and had to go to work to get another kind of education, start to work in a field or start doing something.

F: The kids that didn't pass this exam, they went to work in the fields possibly picking potatoes or something like that?

D: Yes, something like that, helping their parents.

F: As far as the kids who passed though, they were given certain courses they had to take?

D: Every grade has their books. It's the same all over. If you were from Youngstown, you would learn exactly what somebody from Washington would learn. Everybody has the same program.

F: They changed all the textbooks too when the Russians came over?

D: Oh yes. They tried to give a little shape, like the Russian War was fantastic. They tried to exaggerate things so that the kids will think that.

F: How did your family accept this?

D: Usually in a family you discuss and you hear about how

it was. There were comments all the time in the family about how it would be and how it was. Sometimes you discuss things, like an invasion was made by the Germans. If you were in school at that period of time you said, "That invasion was made in Russia."

F: As far as your parents, they tell you possibly one thing and when you're in school you hear another.

D: I learned one way up to a certain point and from there I had to take it the other way. I learned one way and they came and told me the other way. It was a little bit of contradiction. Later, everything was set exactly how it was. That period of time when they took over, everything was coming from Russia; everything was done in Russia.

F: Were there any people in Romania at the time that rebelled against Russian soldiers taking over? Can you give some stories about that?

D: I was too small, too young to remember. You heard that there were some people that went in the woods.

F: What about religion in the schools, did you used to have religion in the school before the Russians . . .

D: I had religion in school up to fourth grade. After the Russians took over religion wasn't taught. If you wanted, you could go to church, but nobody would force you. The church wasn't allowed to say everything. They had to direct their point of view toward the government.

F: Was there anybody that was persecuted by the government who was a leader of the church?

D: In Romania they tried to explain everything scientifically, how the world was formed, not with God and all that. They tried to explain exactly how the world was formed. You learned the history of the people in the world, and the role of religion in the world in that period of time since. They tried to shake your faith.

F: As far as the teachers in the classroom, were they Russians?

D: No, they were Romanian teachers. The only thing, they probably got their instruction of what to say.

F: The Russians taking over there, I don't know if I would especially go along with a lot of that.

D: You didn't have a chance to say no. You are a small country, you have to pray whatever somebody else . . .

F: Whatever they say.

D: Yes. You were too small and too weak to get up to say no.

F: What about the collectivization of the farms?

D: There was a period of time when the peasant was having a hard time. After the period the people who had a little bit of land, they got so much tax on that, tax and money. If you had a crop of a ton of potatoes, they would let you keep a kilogram of potatoes and the rest would go to the government. They would pay you the real cost, not to make a profit.

F: Some of these farms, did they push or tell the people they had to put out so much?

D: Sometimes they told you how much you had to plant and how much you had to give. Sometimes if you didn't get enough to give to the government, you had to buy from somebody else to give to them.

F: And then you would be left with nothing?

D: Yes. Before the 1950's, when Stalin was alive, there was a period of time that was very hard.

F: With Stalin there was the secret police and the killings and things like that too. Did he had his Five Year Plan still?

D: They started.

F: Tractors and things like this they . . .

D: After that the Romanian government started to build their industry. What was bad was that they made a Russian-Romanian film. They got some old machinery from Russia and painted it before it got to Romania to be like new. It was a sad story. After 1944, these kind of films were disappearing.

F: They talked about Romania becoming more independent in the 1960's.

D: There was a period of time where Romania was under somebody's rule all the time. The barbarians started to come from Asia and went through Romania. The people had to leave their village to go to the mountains. When they came back everything was gone and they had to start again. After the barbarians came the Turk state took over. The Turks, everybody had to give so much to the Turks. For this the people had to suffer. After the Turks, part of



Transylvania was under the Austro-Hungarian Imperialists. It was a little bit of a different story with Transylvania than it was with the rest of Romania.

F: How did you come to the decision that you wanted to leave Romania? How did you get to the United States?

D: In that period of time you could listen to the radio, and a lot of aliens came to Romania for summer vacation. They always came with cars. You thought that the west wasn't as bad as you learned in school. It wasn't really that true. You became more realistic. There was more freedom in Romania then and I wanted to see what was going on elsewhere.

F: Your freedoms were restrained though when the Communists took over?

D: Oh yes. You couldn't leave your country. This had to be approved by the police. If you had good behavior and were a good citizen then you could leave for vacation in a Communist country. I was in Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Poland. I asked to go to Austria for an excursion and they didn't approve, but they approved me to go to Istanbul, Turkey. There was a time when instead of going back to Romania, I said, "I'll stay there." From there I asked to get to the United States.

F: Was it true that the people on the farm worked really hard all year long and then got maybe one or two weeks during the year for vacation as motivation type things?

D: The farmers?

F: Yes.

D: The farmers worked all the time.

F: Did the Russians come in and say, "If you work all this time, I'll give you a week vacation."

D: The Russians would never talk like that. The government, the people who were working for the government, came and said that. They said you had to give so much from the village for the government.

F: Till what age did you finish school?

D: I finished high school in 1953. In 1953 I finished eleven grades. At that time it was up to eleven. To go to get a college degree you had to choose your profession at that time. Let's say you finished eleven years and said, "I want to be an English teacher." To go to be an English teacher you had to take an exam to the

English faculty.

F: Before you even got into it?

D: Before. I finished and I wanted to go to be a civil engineer. In the summer of 1953, in August, you had to go in a big city where the faculty would have you take an exam. Every graduate and the people who didn't get into college from other years, at that period of time, had to take the exam. This exam started for each faculty on the same date. You couldn't take one exam here and if you didn't pass it go to another. You took it and it was okay. If you didn't pass you had to go back and wait another year. You would start working and wait another year. If you are lucky and smart enough, you will get in school and it would be okay.

F: Was there any money that you had to pay to go in to college at that time?

D: At that period of time if you had some income up to so much, if your income was over that amount, you had to pay. If you didn't have that income and you were pretty smart, then your college was paid off. You didn't have to worry about anything then. Eating, sleeping, paying for the room, you didn't have to worry about that.

F: In 1953 you finished up with high school and wanted to go into civil engineering?

D: Yes.

F: Did you go directly into college?

D: I took the exam and the school where I was, the professors were pretty strict and we got a pretty good education. Most of the kids who graduated from that specific school got into college. At that period of time our income was lower than the income specified, so I got everything free. The second semester, because of my good grades, I got money from the government for spending money. You only got that if you had A's and B's. Most of the grades were A's. It was to make you want to learn more.

F: They didn't especially care if you went their way?

D: When you go in college then it's specific what you have to learn. They still have an ideological education, but you have that in the first and second year. At that period of time you learned your profession exactly. It doesn't make any difference whether it's English or Russian.

F: So you finished college over there then?

D: Yes, I finished in 1959, after five years.

F: Then you got work right there?

D: At that period of time, when you graduated from college, you had your place.

F: It's already set?

D: Yes. You have a job, but the first year when you graduate, you cannot make more money than a limit. Let's say you are a teacher. You graduate and make maybe seven thousand dollars. It's not that much, but you could not make more than seven thousand dollars up to the first year. The second and third year, if you are smart enough and if you prove yourself, and if you get a higher position, you get more money.

F: So you started right after college then in a job?

D: Yes. You graduate in June and on August 15 you have to present yourself to the job.

F: As far as the work you were doing at the time, civil engineering, is it the same thing as here?

D: I went to work in a field, on a site.

F: What were you planning for, the building of what?

D: I worked in the building industry, building for industry. I'm civil, so I don't have anything to do with mechanics. I built the buildings for machinery and all that.

F: When did you decide to come to the United States?

D: When I had the chance to go back in 1968.

F: You mean the first time you had the chance to get out of the country you took it?

D: Yes.

F: This was the first time you had the opportunity to leave the country and go to the United States in 1968?

D: No, to Turkey.

F: Just to Turkey in 1968?

D: Yes. I had to stay in Turkey for six months so all of my papers would be done. Because Turkey didn't sign one act to eneva we couldn't go straight from Turkey to the United States; we had to go to another camp in Italy.

F: How many people were going along with you?

D: In that period of time there were thirty or forty Romanians in Turkey. There were some from Bulgaria, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia. It was at that period of time when the Russians got into Czechoslovakia. We were let apart because there were so many Czechs.

F: They just allowed you to leave? Then you came over on a boat to the United States?

D: No, plane.

F: Who paid your way?

D: A church organization took care of us. It was the World Council of Churches, or something like that. They prepared the papers, what we needed. We had an interview with the United States ambassador who was in Italy and we got the approval after six months in Italy to go to the United States.

F: You knew no one in the United States when you came across?

D: I had relatives here. My grandfather's brother is still alive in Youngstown.

F: That's why you moved to Youngstown?

D: Yes.

F: Did you find work right away?

D: Yes, I found work right away for DeBartolo.

F: There was no problem?

D: It was a little bit more difficult because I didn't know any English at that period of time and it was pretty hard for me.

F: Were the people discriminating against you simply because of coming across and not knowing the English?

D: It was pretty hard for me. You can take a little discrimination because in pay and everything . . . even now.

F: Could you tell us a little about this Dracula legend of Transylvania?

D: In Romania this legend is not so popular. The real Dracula was like a king who lived in the 16th century. At that time Romania was under the Turks, and he was a fighter against the Turks. Because so many nations went

through Romania and people had to leave their house and go to the mountains; thieves, robbers started to go to Romania. He was that kind of a man who tried to stop that. He thought that the only way to get rid of this is to kill them. Any time when one of the thieves was cut they had a sharp stick and they threw the stick through the thief. They were hanging on the edge of the road on sticks so everybody could see. They would get that punishment. I think after that he was killed by the Turks. I don't remember exactly what happened. From our nation's point of view he was trying to do good for our nation.

F: He was just trying to stop the criminals themselves?

D: Yes.

F: Isn't Dracula interpreted as "Son of the Devil"?

D: Yes. Drac in Romanian means devil.

F: There is another interpretation besides "Son of the Devil," but they stuck with "Son of the Devil." They used to call this man bloodthirsty too because of the fact that he was killing the people.

F: As far as the castle, have you ever been to the castle?

D: Yes, I was there.

F: What was it like?

D: It's a medieval castle. It's on a hill. The road that goes from Brasov on to Braila and goes over the Carpathian Mountains, it is a very strategic point so nobody could go or come in without being seen. It was good for defending a full army.

F: How about as far as the rooms inside the castle itself, what were they like?

D: You have to know a little bit of the style of that time. It was hard stone beams and walls with stucco.

F: Any graveyards close by?

D: Yes, they have a graveyard.

F: You were there in the 1960's, did they start developing this legend of Dracula itself?

D: To tell you the truth, I never heard this legend of Dracula until I arrived here.

F: Up until the United States?

D: Yes. The real Dracula, according to the history of our nation, was a good man trying to better the country.

F: So you never found out until you came to the United States with all the books and stories?

D: That's right. This tale of him being thirsty of blood is just because of his action of killing the thieves. He is thirsty for killing, but killing the real thieves.

F: As far as today, is Romania still under Communist control?

D: Oh yes.

F: As far as the tourists coming into the country, do they have to be given some type of permission by the Communists to enter the country?

D: No, you just have to have a visa, that's all.

F: Just so you have the visa itself you can get into the country?

D: You can get a visa at customs. If you go there for like ten days, they force you to change the money considering that you have to spend ten dollars a day. You give them one hundred dollars and they give you Romanian money. You didn't get your one hundred dollars back, you had to spend it there. This was their way of getting foreign money. Romania was full of Germans, and the Communists let them go back to Germany and they used to come back and they would have relatives or friends so they wouldn't spend any money. They would just bring some things from the west, nice things, and sell them on the black market. This was probably the reason for the law prohibiting this. You have to change the money when you are at the border.

F: I know that some businessmen in the United States are trying to buy into Romania now for the castle of Dracula and that legend. They're having tour buses come in to the country of Romania and go through this entire tour of Dracula and the legend and taking them throughout the town. You never saw anything like this in the 1960's when you were there?

D: It's like a club, National Tourists; they have buses and they take the people who want to go on these buses all over. In Romania there are a lot of historic places. It goes back to 1200 years. They have this tour so you can see the ruins, some nice, old pictures, old churches.

- F: In conclusion then, do you think that there were any advantages to Communism taking over? Did you see any improvements in the country itself?
- D: From the point of view of the standard of life, they improved. They changed Romania from an agricultural country to a pretty big, industrial country. I think that's what they have in mind. The school system and the development of the country, it's very high now.
- F: As far as the weak points to Communism, what would you say? Is freedom the only thing?
- D: We lost the freedom. You were not allowed to get out of the country to see how people from other countries live, and get some knowledge of how the other people live, and go back to Romania and improve life. I consider this pretty bad. It's control of press. You can't really express exactly what you want to express in a paper or something like this. It's up to a point what you can say; any more you just have to say to yourself.
- F: As far as anyone in your own country writing books, there were men . . .
- D: Some probably tried to express themselves more freely, but probably these people who tried to express more freedom, they were kept anonymous. They try to become the writers who see only the nice parts of the country, not the bad parts.
- F: Just one more question before we close. As far as Nixon's Watergate, how did you view that? Did you view that as possibly, from the press' point of view, did you view it as a nation that allowed its weaknesses, its errors, to be shown as in regards to freedom or not?
- D: I think that up to a point the press, the meaning of the press, is to show the truth, what is going on in the country, but not to pick on somebody and show only what is bad. You have to try to be fair in any kind of condition. Up to that point Nixon has a lot of bad points, but probably he has a lot of good points too. Anybody can be a good and bad person. I think what got him down is the taping and all that.
- F: Did you see that the way we presented Nixon, the president of our country, in the papers as being a man who had lied to the public? Did you see this as a means of expressing the truth and freedom that you would not encounter in a Russian world, as something to be looking forward to, that they would actually do this?
- D: I really like that the press expressed everything. I

really didn't like to hear it; it's sad to say bad things about your president because it's the leader of the country who leads you into war. Sometimes you have to see things that are good, and to be fair. What got people probably mad and got indiscretion for Nixon was because he tried to cheat even the taxpayer for his income, which I think doesn't matter if he is the president or is another man from the country. If the law is to pay the tax, let's pay it fair. It doesn't matter if you are the president or if you are a worker or anybody else.

F: Is there anything you would like to see today changed in Romania knowing what you know right now?

D: For me now, I know what I can expect in Romania and I know what I can expect here. I know both systems. Both systems have good and bad points. It would be fantastic for this world if we would take the best parts from each system and come up with something that is really good for all the people. There are good points in a Communist country, like free medical care. You don't have to worry if you get sick that you will lose everything. From the point of school systems, I really like that system because the education you get there, the kids get to respect people.

F: You think it is a better educational system then?

D: From this point of view, I think that it is a better educational system.

F: You think that if we combined, possibly, the good from both systems . . .

D: That would be the best for everyone.

F: I'd like to thank you very much for giving us this time today and talking about your past. I appreciate it.

D: Thanks.

END OF INTERVIEW