

S VANHILD NATERSTAD, "TO ME ROMANIA IS MAGIC!"

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Abstract:

*Svanhild Naterstad has worked as a journalist for the Norwegian newspaper Adresseavisen in Trondheim since 2002. In addition to journalism studies at the Bodø University College, she holds a Magister's degree (corresponding to the PhD) in Romanian literature from the Institute of Classical and Romance Studies of the University of Oslo (1996). In the period January 2009-October 2010, she was employed at the Department of Modern Foreign Languages of the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU), which at that time hosted the only Romanian Lectureship in Norway, with financial support from Romania's honorary consul in Trondheim, Mr. Terje Roll Danielsen. In 2012 she published the book *Romania in Norwegian*, at the Akademika Publishing House. After her first visit to Romania in 1988, she lived in Bucharest, during a research visit (1990-1991) and in Copșa Mică, where she worked as an interpreter between 1991-1992. Moreover, she had other stays of 1-3 months in Romania, related to her university studies and the research for the book *Romania*. This is an extensive book of 456 pages, which offers the Norwegian readers various information about Romania's history, geography, nature, economy, culture, religion etc.*

Rezumat:

*Svanhild Naterstad este jurnalist la ziarul norvegian Adresseavisen din Trondheim din anul 2002. Pe lângă studiile de jurnalism de la Colegiul Universitar din Bodø, deține o diplomă de magister (corespunzătoare doctoratului) în literatură română de la Departamentul de studii clasice și romanice al Universității din Oslo (1996). În perioada ianuarie 2009-octombrie 2010, a fost angajată la Departamentul de Limbi Străine Moderne al Universității Norvegiene de Știință și Tehnologie (NTNU), care în acea vreme găzduia singurul Lectorat de limbă română din Norvegia, cu sprijinul consulului onorific al României în Trondheim, domnul Terje Roll Danielsen. În anul 2012 a publicat în limba norvegiană cartea *România*, la Editura Akademika. După prima vizită în*

România în 1988, a locuit în București, în cadrul unui stagiu de documentare (1990-1991) și în Coșea Mică, unde a lucrat ca interpret în perioada 1991-1992. În plus, a mai avut alte șederi de 1-3 luni în România, legate de studiile universitare și de documentare pentru cartea România. Aceasta este o lucrare amplă, de 456 de pagini, care oferă cititorilor norvegieni diverse informații despre România, incluzând aspecte de istorie, geografie, economie, cultură, religie etc.



Svanhild Naterstad (photo by Crina Leon)

How did you come to discover Romania, a country which is geographically far away from Norway?

The year was 1988. I was 20 years old and traveling by train through Europe with a friend. It was not our first trip; we had spent more than one summer along the railways of the southern part of the continent. This time we wanted to go East. The Romania we met that summer was, to be frank, quite sad. No one would even talk to us. We later found out that they were not allowed. They simply did not have permission without first asking the police. We could not find food in the stores, except canned. Cabbage in vinegar in a slightly turbid glass jar. I remember very well a cafeteria that we discovered, near Gara de Nord. They had two meters of a sweet cream cake, and three meters of glasses filled with a bright green juice. That was pretty much all we found, and so we left Bucharest. I think it was the same

day that we got on a train towards Constanța, and ended up in a cabin in Mamaia. Here, I remember we were waiting in line for a couple of hours in the middle of the town square, for what we thought would be a truck full of cherries that we had seen the day before. Needless to say, we were pretty disappointed when the truck finally arrived and turned out to be full of cabbage. For two completely unprepared young girls from Norway, used to being able to buy the exact groceries we wanted, when we wanted them, this came as a bit of a shock. It was, however, also very fascinating. Romania was so close to Norway and yet so entirely different.

It is fair to say that we did not become too excited about the Romanian beaches, not to mention the standard of the cabin, but we would not give up on Romania so easily. We decided we would try to go up in the mountains. We jumped off the train in Sinaia, and what met us was a landscape and a people that made a huge impression on us. It was like visiting Norway in 1950. The people - when someone eventually dared to let us in - proved to be outstandingly funny and hospitable. Then, of course, it was the language, which fascinated me enormously. I had studied Latin the previous semester, and so, as it turned out, I was able to understand a whole lot. The country made such an impression on me that when I returned to Oslo and to the university that autumn, I began studying Romanian in addition to the studies I had started in Nordic languages and literature.

When the revolution came in December 1989, I moved down to Bucharest to learn Romanian properly. I got to take part in that initial confused transformation. The commodity selection was still limited: if I wanted to buy milk, I had to get up at five in the morning etc. With the exception of dried shrimps from Vietnam and pink champagne from the Soviet Union, most things were missing. Of course, all Romanians of over 40 know these things, but to me it was nevertheless overwhelming: people would go to the other side of the city if they had butter there - and bought for their neighbor, too. The only thing in abundance was newspapers. Hundreds, all expressing their opinion - now that they finally could. I stayed there for two years, one year in Bucharest and one in Copșa Mică, "the most polluted town on earth", the last year together with my husband dr. Trond Berge - a Norwegian anthropologist doing fieldwork in Copșa Mică. Then I went home and eventually took a *magistergrad* in Romanian. Since then, I have been back several times, the last time doing research for the book *Romania*, which for me was a summary and a thank you for all that I have learned in, and from, Romania.

You studied Romanian at the University of Oslo. Could you please give us more information about the Romanian courses taught in Oslo (teachers, number of students, content of the courses, the period in which the courses were taught)?

As previously mentioned, I began my studies in Romanian in the autumn of 1988. The chapter on Romance languages in the course catalogue said: Romanian language – on Wednesdays 15.00-17.00 (if there are students). The lecturer was Professor Magnus Ulleland, who mainly taught Italian (he made an excellent translation of Dante’s *Divina Comedia*), but who also knew Romanian. He guided me and what I remember to be four or five other students for two hours a week through the chapters of the textbook *A Course in Contemporary Romanian*. The book must have been from the ‘60s. The others were there because they liked Romanian folk dance and wanted to learn a little Romanian, had a Romanian girlfriend and the like. I was the only one who graduated.

Magnus Ulleland was a knowledgeable and inspiring man, but his teaching in Italian was probably more varied than his Romanian lessons. However, we did actually have some vinyl records that came with the textbook, so that we could hear real Romanians speak... There was one major exam after a year and a half of Romanian studies. That was the first and the last. There was no Master’s degree in Romanian, but when I graduated, I applied for a so-called *magistergrad, candidata magisterii*, a form of extended, more research-oriented Master’s degree, and was granted it. This possibility disappeared when I graduated in 1996, the same semester that Magnus Ulleland retired. The title of my thesis was *Spre comunism în zbor. On the Patriotic, Panegyric and Party Conscious Poetry in Romania (1947-89)*.

You live in Trondheim, a city of high significance when referring to Norwegian-Romanian relations. What part did Trondheim play in promoting Romanian language and culture in Norway?

Each time I had to pass an exam, a professor with long, grey hair came down from Trondheim to be an examiner - Arne Halvorsen. When it is said that Trondheim is an important city for Romanian-Norwegian cooperation, this is primarily his doing. The work he put into making dictionaries is incredibly impressive. Moreover, he conveyed knowledge of Romania to anyone who wanted to read about it, in every format from newspaper chronicles to encyclopedia articles. He worked for many years to create a lecturer’s position in Romanian at the University of Trondheim, and it came so far that our foreign minister in the mid ‘90s shook Ion

Iliescu's hand and promised that this would happen. But it never did. Between 2008-11 the university hosted a lecturer from Alba Iulia, Lucian Bâgiu, who taught Romanian. Since then, more or less all the small languages have gradually disappeared from Norwegian universities.

Could you name some Norwegians who have brought their contribution in developing Norwegian-Romanian relations, from various points of view?

I have already mentioned professors Magnus Ulleland and Arne Halvorsen, who were both important, perhaps first and foremost in spreading knowledge about the Romanian language. Others to be mentioned are Steinar Lone, who studied Romanian in Oslo a few years before me. He has done an impressive job translating Romanian literature into Norwegian. Great books and great work - it is nice to be able to recommend Mircea Cărtărescu, Camil Petrescu and Dan Lungu to Norwegian readers. Jardar Seim, a historian, has been the one most frequently turned to by the Norwegian media to explain what happens when there are elections, revolutions, demonstrations or other news from Romania. The journalist Jahn Otto Johansen has had much of the same role. The two also collaborated on an article collection, *Romania*, in 1980.

In addition, there are several researchers working with subjects related to Romania. I know mostly anthropologists. I have frequent exchanges of ideas with my husband at the dinner table when Romania is in the news.

How did the idea about writing the book *Romania* come up and how was the book received in Norway?

Since I visited Romania for the first time, I have used most opportunities to tell people about this weird and beautiful country, but it was only when the Honorary Consul of Central Norway, Mr. Terje Roll Danielsen, offered to pay for my project, that I could finally find the time to write a book. With the promise of a steady salary, I could take a leave of almost two years from my job as a journalist in *Adresseavisen*. The decision about how to treat the substance of the book, and the idea of bringing a photographer with me to be able to communicate what I wanted to convey, were my own. I started writing the book having worked as a journalist for almost ten years. It was very important to me not to simply present the reader with dry facts, but to give her or him a sense of presence, an opportunity to experience Romania through the book. When it came out,

the reviews were surprisingly many. In the five or six newspapers and journals that wrote about it, the reviews were, I am glad and a little relieved to say, all very positive.

I was extremely happy to experience that Romanians from all over Norway contacted me and thanked me for what I had written. In summary, the feedback from Romanian readers has been that the book managed to describe the people, their qualities and their challenges in a truthful way.

Could you share with us some curiosities involving Romanian-Norwegian relations, that you have found out while conducting research for your book on Romania?

A common thread through this book has been the many surprising and sometimes funny connections and intersections between Romania and Norway. A few examples: perhaps the most interesting discovery was that Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, Norway's 'national bard', was strongly involved in the situation of the Romanians in Transylvania in the early 1900s. He engaged in a controversy with the Hungarian education minister, which played out over a long period of time in German newspapers. Because of Bjørnson's commitment to the Romanians, the small newspaper *Tribuna*, in Arad, did five long interviews with Bjørnson. They all ended up covering the paper's front page. Another curiosity is that the grandchild of the same Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson was herself a Romanian, namely the highly acclaimed costume and stage designer Maria Bjørnson, who worked in London, and won a number of prizes for her work on Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Phantom of the Opera*. It is too complicated to go into the details of it here, but in short, Maria's mother, the Romanian Mia Prodan, lived as a refugee in Norway and Sweden during the war when she met Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson's grandson. Maria's full name was Maria Elena Viviane Eva Bjørnstjerne-Bjørnson. For Norwegians, it is also entertaining to hear how one of the country's largest industrialists, Christian Thams, was in a sort of house arrest at Athénée Palace in Bucharest during World War II. In a letter to his wife, he wrote beautifully about the city, describing it as extremely fashionable.

What Romanian cultural events have taken place in Norway lately?

I have far from a full overview. This spring I was involved in the release of a special edition of the film magazine *Z*. The issue was devoted to the Romanian film industry, which has got a lot of positive attention in recent years. My contributions were one article on Romanian art and

culture and one about the Romanian language. I live in Trondheim, and a few weeks ago, the city organized a festival where all countries that have residents here could have their own program to present their countries to the city. Romanians in Trondheim, who have just started their own association, had a great program, with *sarmale*, *cozonac* etc., as well as lectures, folk dance, courses in egg painting and music. I showed pictures from Romania and talked about Romanian history and culture, the pan flautist Roar Engelberg played Romanian folk tunes and so on. A great day! Of course, I also make sure I watch all the Romanian movies that are set up at the cinemas in Trondheim. The last two were *Graduation* and *Sieranevada*, both great films. There is no attempt to embellish the people or the reality they live in, yet you become very fond of them.

In which way could Romanian-Norwegian cultural relations develop even further?

Such relations will always depend on individuals who put down an extra effort because they believe in it. Then there is the matter of support. There are a number of bilateral programs where good projects can apply for funding, also in the field of culture. I also think it is of importance that the embassies in both Oslo and Bucharest continue to organize gatherings where all kinds of people who are engaged in issues related to Romania and Norway are brought together. It is always a good thing to make people meet.

What would you consider typical of Romania and what do you love most about this country?

Although I am by no means the first to make the point, it is hard not to express admiration for the hospitality of the Romanian people. Having lived in Romania for two-three years has given me a lifetime of proof that there is more of it there than in most other places. Perhaps this is changing, and there are certainly big differences between Romania's villages and the country's big cities, but it still seems to me that people have more time. This both for the good and the bad; not everything is so extremely effective all the time, and perhaps one could argue that this is sometimes paid for in efficiency. I highly appreciate the wilderness and the stunningly beautiful landscape. Norway is also beautiful, but I love how, for instance, the pigs in Maramureş roam freely around in search of chestnuts, how the shepherds wander the hillsides with their sheep. These things can no longer be

experienced in Norway. Although I must recognize that this is a tough life, it looks from the outside somehow like a peaceful and good life.

If you were to characterize or define Romania in only one word, which word would it be?

To me Romania is MAGIC!

[Interview with Svanhild Naterstad, July 5, 2017]