

BOOK REVIEW



Zoltán Rostás – Florentina Țone (eds.): Tânăr student caut revoluționar (I.-II.). București: Curtea Veche, 2011–2012¹

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The two volume book which was edited by *Zoltán Rostás* and *Florentina Țone* under the patronage of *The Romanian Institute for Recent History* contains half-hundred oral histories about the Romanian Revolution of December 1989. In 2009, two decades after the December 1989 events, Rostás and Țone asked their university students to register the participatory memories about the revolution of those common people among their acquaintances who had taken part in the December events.

The novelty of these volumes consists in the fact that the interviews give us an insight into the Romanian revolution through the lenses and interpretations of those common people (i.e. “small revolutionists”) who have not become well-known leading figures of the revolution. The editors recurrently accentuate this aspect of their volumes in the form of a *different revolution*.² Rostás, in the foreword of the volumes, warns the reader about the difference of their approach compared to those many works which tried to answer some “major” questions about the revolution (e.g. was it a revolution or a coup d’état; who shot in the masses; were there any terrorists and, if yes, who those people were, etc.). Indeed, this work does not answer directly these questions. However, through the bottom-up interpretations of the events by the interviewees, the book offers various dissections of these major dilemmas. Consequently, the volumes constitute a very diverse perspective on the Romanian revolution and, as Țone puts it, all these interviews which resemble several “small experiences” of the “small revolutionists”, finally make the “puzzle of the revolution”.

1 Title in English: *Young Student Is Looking for Revolutionist*.

2 This approach is referred to in several reviews as the major quality of the book, for instance those written in Romanian, e.g.: A. Dumitru: O altfel de revoluție. *Evenimentul Zilei*, 26 June 2011; P. Cernat: În căutarea revoluției pierdute. *Revista 22*, 12 June 2012; A. Zaharia: O altfel de carte despre revoluție. *Historia.ro*.

L. Nistor, the author of the present review has also outlined the major values of the book in Hungarian under the title: Figyelem! Ez egy másik forradalom. In *Erdélyi Múzeum*, 2013/1.

Through the memories of the participants, the reader gets the chance to see the revolution from inside and from the bottom. The December 1989 events are remembered on the basis of the interviewees' personal experiences so that we are able to read some very personal repertoires on the interpretations of the revolution. For instance, the cavalcade of the revolution is remembered as going on with different degrees of speed, ranging from slowness ("In Focșani the revolution took place on December 22, between 1 p.m. and 6 p.m. Then, they've put a chair in the doorway and closed.") to agitation ("Shit! We did it. My children will remain without parents."). Through the personal life stories going on in connection with the revolution, the reader gets an insight into the kitchen of the revolution, both literally ("The revolution caught me with four kilos of meat in the fridge.") and in terms of how different segments of the population waited for this event and tried to prepare themselves for a new era ("Change – it was in the air for a while."). In the days of the revolution, the interviewees solved different kinds of everyday dilemmas ("to wait a line for meat or to go to demonstrate against Ceaușescu") and fears ("Father, I did something bad, I took part in the revolution, but I'll go home if you promise you won't beat me."), meanwhile they got imprisoned and then liberated and, finally, they ended up by asking the major, recurrent question about the revolution: was all this worth it?

The interviews show us the smaller, human scale dimensions of the revolution and the reflexive interpretations of it by these citizens. On the basis of the interviews, the impression is that the *big* moments of the revolution have disappeared by now, and the revolution has lost its major importance among the life events of those interviewed. *Then*, the events around the revolution had crucial importance. *Now*, two decades later, all these events have lost their saliency in the life of the interviewees. Thus, the revolution became just one puzzle among the many others which compose the life of the interviewees: they took part in the revolution, but before and after that December, there happened many other events to them and, two decades later, the revolution does not necessarily constitute a cornerstone event of their life-worlds.

Besides the vast collection of interviews, the volumes have a number of other aspects which need to be mentioned as important contributions in connection to the methods of teaching history, on the one hand, and of teaching the methodology of oral history, on the other.

As the title of the volumes (*Young Student Is Looking for Revolutionist*) suggests, the interviews were recorded by young students in their twenties, who thus have no memories about the revolution, except some urban legends they have heard from their parents. In the course of the interview-making, these students had the chance to learn about the recent history of Romania in a participatory manner. During their field research they became more and more curious about the December 1989 events and also tried to look all by themselves

for several other sources and documents about the revolution. It is interesting in this respect how the work methodology has changed during the research. At the beginning of their project, students tried to locate their potential subjects for the interviews on the basis of the registers of the revolutionary associations. Later on, as their curiosity grew, students began to look for subjects among their acquaintances. Thus, the intensity of students' personal involvement in terms of their interest and curiosity was rising in parallel with the duration of the project. These youngsters have learnt in a participatory way not only the methodology of oral history but also the recent history of the country.

In terms of oral histories, the volumes constitute an extremely valuable source for those interested in oral history in particular and in qualitative methods in general. All the interviews constitute genuine pieces and examples of how to ask questions and how to let the stories develop during the process of interview-making. Indeed, the major aim of the interviews is to register the memories about the revolution of the participants, but these core-questions are carefully prepared throughout the course of the interviews and thus subjects get the chance to prepare themselves for evoking these memories. Consequently, the reader gets valuable insight not only into the personal memories about the revolution, but also into the everyday life of the interviewees before and after the revolution. These latter segments of the interviews constitute very important documents in connection with the everyday life during Communism and during the period of transition. As a result, the reader gets much more than a bottom-up approach in connection with the Romanian revolution.

In accordance with the deontology of oral history, the editors do not interpret the texts of the interviews and the sole editorial artefact consists in arranging the interviews in several thematic blocks, based either on the succession of events in connection with the revolution (e.g. firstly there was fear; the moment of decision; revolutionists in action, etc.) or on the socio-demographical background of the interviewees (e.g. soldier, women, revolutionists with experience, nostalgic revolutionists, etc.). This thematic arrangement does not steal the original, unprocessed nature of the interviews which thus constitute a first-hand, qualitative dataset for researchers aiming to undertake a more in-depth analysis on the major themes of this bottom-up revolution.

Given the fact that the students who realised the interviews were based in Bucharest, they succeeded in reaching mainly subjects from Bucharest and from towns situated more or less close to Bucharest. Thus, the interviews in the volumes constitute a call for completing the oral history archive of the Romanian revolution with further oral history documents based on the memories of revolutionists from other parts of the country. In this way it would be possible to reveal if there are any differences between the discursive repertoires of revolutionists and if the distance from Bucharest and Timișoara, i.e. from the main sites of the revolution, has any role in structuring these repertoires.