

Romania

Daniela Maria interviewed **Nora Iuga**.

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Maria: How would you describe your childhood and what comes to your mind when you think about the place you grew up?

Iuga: This question suits me perfectly because at my age you always turn to childhood. I mostly live in my memories, and especially in the most distant ones, which are more alive. I might forget what I ate yesterday at lunch, but I perfectly remember the authors of the books I read in primary school. My childhood was a little more special than those of many people of my age, and even than those of many who are now middle-aged. I had the luck of having artistic parents: my mother was a ballerina and my father was a violinist at the Philharmonic. Because of that, they managed to sign some contracts abroad, meaning a lot of tours abroad, on which they would take me. So, from the age of three I went abroad with them to Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands. That's where I went to kindergarten. I had come to speak German much better than Romanian, which came to me naturally then. This was the wonderful part, which I am almost ashamed to tell others, because I think there are very few people in Romania who had such a childhood. You see, it is very easy for young people to go abroad now, but eighty years ago I think it was not so common. You normally had to be part of a very wealthy family, which was not really the case with us.

The second phase of my wonderful childhood that I warmly remember is the part spent in my grandparents' house. There is a beautiful story. My grandmother was a poor old woman... But she had been an operetta singer in a band, because there was no operetta theatre at that time. There were bands traveling all over the country, through provincial towns, and she bragged, that she was a performer in a band – I don't know if it was true. She told me about her youthful affairs, which leads me to think she must have been a beautiful young woman. I remember all these things. When I heard on a Standard radio, a very old radio, that "La Paloma" was broadcast, my grandmother would start crying and I did not understand why. "La Paloma" was very popular at that time, today it is broadcasted only from time to time. . When I asked her why she cried, she told me that she loved a ship captain, a French officer. My grandmother lived in Galati, where she was born, and she often went to Sulina [a town on the Black Sea coast of Romania] where the harbormaster was, and where she met this captain, Pierre, whom she still remembered, even when she was almost sixty years old. At that time love was not easily forgotten.

Maria: Can you tell me an important memory you have with your grandparents?

Iuga: Yes. My grandfather was not at home, he was an inspector and at that moment he was somewhere in the countryside. I was at home with "Big Mini" [Mini Mare], that's what I called my grandmother. The siren sounded. As we lived on Dinicu Golescu [Boulevard around the Northern Train Station in Bucharest] on the opposite side there was a small park where I would usually go for a walk with my grandmother in the afternoon. Around noon the siren started, but we weren't scared. That's because anti-aircraft exercises were often done to teach people to be prepared to rush to the shelter. We were living next to the Northern Railway Station, and there was a very big shelter. The CFR [The National Railway Transport Company] Palace was built with ten floors, a very solid building. It had a shelter in the basement. The siren started, but we weren't sure it meant air defense, so we didn't evacuate the house. And suddenly I heard a noise, coming from the sky like a howler, but twitching,

and it was getting closer and closer, and we ran into the yard to see what was happening. Then I saw a lot of planes, but they were very high, they were as small as some silver swallows. We realized that something was strange, that they were in tight groups, I wouldn't know to describe it otherwise. I ran to a room; I remember I stayed under the table and my grandmother was sitting on the couch. That's when the air attack began. I had some horrifying moments because the bomb blasts were so loud, it seemed to me that they were happening on our roof. I am not exaggerating; I perfectly relive that moment. They bombed the North Railway Station. It was the first bombing; we weren't used to it at all. The house on our right and the one on the left were on the ground, shattered. I think we had a guardian angel, our house was not even touched by shrapnel. A lot of buildings on Dinicu Golescu were ruined, and Grivița was devastated, too. People came desperately from that direction and someone said that he saw a horse with its legs up, dead, in a balcony. I mean, that blast was a terrible thing. This is one of the events that marked me. After this I got to the point where during walks, I would cross myself continuously. I would walk down the street and cross myself all the time and say, "God help me". I mean, that's not, in any case, a typical behaviour for a thirteen- or fourteen-year-old girl.

Maria: Do you have any childhood items that you have kept?

Iuga: I haven't kept any toys. My parents bought me a lot of toys, they bought them for me as Santa Claus. There were a lot of dolls and all sorts of things. We had a big sack full of toys, but we fled the Netherlands, Germany actually, not the Netherlands, Hitler came to power. The terrible persecution began, and despite the fact that we were not Jews, it was obvious that we were not Germans. We were very questionable, dark haired as we were, I was also freckled. The foreigners had to leave Germany. I remember that we fled at night in a car - my father came from the place where he had been singing, and we drove away. He told my mother from time to time to look back and see if we were being followed. We arrived at the train station and took a train and left the country. So unfortunately, I have no toys left from my childhood, because that big sack with wonderful toys was left in Germany. We could not take our things from there because it was a hurried escape. I don't know what else - my mother always bought me books. Since I was little, she used to buy me books, often in French, as I had just started learning French at school. I was very, very attracted to books, even at that age. I think I was born with a passion for literature, for reading. I had all the children magazines that appeared at that time, some wonderful magazines. The main writer of those magazines was actually also the editor or the director. *The Universe of Children* and *Children Mornings* which appeared weekly, as it happens now with *România Literară* [a Romanian Cultural and literary magazine]. I still remember with great joy, two of the series that were published there, a story called *Poor Adrian* and *Ina, the Persecuted Girl*. They were all tearful, but I really enjoyed them. I don't remember any other toys left that I really liked. I don't think I really liked toys either.

Maria: What does 'home' mean to you and what makes you feel at home?

Iuga: I've travelled for a long time. My first journey abroad began when I was three years old. I was terribly lucky that after so many decades of captivity in this country [foreign travel was restricted during the communist period in Romania], it made me feel neither sadness nor joy, I became used to it. A miracle happened. If, at the beginning, at the age of three, I was abroad, the second time I started going abroad I was seventy years old, so, you see, from the age of six and up to seventy, I didn't have time to go abroad. At seventy I had some amazing good fortune: I received a scholarship, which I didn't even apply for. It was known that I translated a lot of books from German, and they invited me for a three-month scholarship. I arrived in Berlin and I probably made such a good impression there that, for the next ten years in a row, I received scholarships in Germany, Austria, Switzerland and the last one was the biggest German scholarship, from the DAAD [Deutscher Akademischer

Austauschdienst, a German public body that funds international academic collaboration], which from Romania only Doinaș, Ana Blandiana, Dinescu, received, the elites. There I had a very good opportunity because they took me to other countries. That's how I got to New York and to Buenos Aires, thanks to this last scholarship. This wonderful DAAD was the *Finis coronat opus*. After that, you realize that at the age of eighty it would have been a bit crazy to go on accepting scholarships. But I was also invited to give readings in Germany. It's very strange, I have no feelings for the house I'm living in, although I had great moments with my husband, with whom I was very happy and who died young. I have a tremendous feeling when I travel by train from another place, from another country, and when I come return to my country. As I have never been able to define, I could not have given a definition of what it is, not even now I can't; it's called patriotism. I didn't know what that feeling meant, and I didn't feel like a great patriot. Now, when I hear on TV, that Romanians are like that and that, this aspect annoys me. We are all people, and also with this label, with the 'Romanians'. The word patriotism is foreign to me but the country, when I enter Romania, I feel something very special in that moment because, I swear, I don't think that there is another country in this world that seems more beautiful and more soulful to me than Romania. It's a fairy tale country, and those villages remained as they used to be with those tiny huts, kids, goats, cows in the yard, cemeteries grouped at the edge of the embankment; I don't not know, it's like we were waiting for Sfânta Vineri [a character from Romanian mythology] to appear around those houses. Here are the stories of my childhood. And also the mountains, the forests, my God, this country is beautiful, if people were up to it ...

Maria: What is the most important lesson you learned in school?

Iuga: There are two things. The first one is my Romanian teacher that I will never forget, Mrs Golopenția. I had a teacher at *Iulia Hașdeu* College, whose husband was a government minister; in any case a great diplomat, liberal. I will always love the liberals because my grandparents from father to son were liberals. Mrs Golopenția was doing some amazing Romanian literature lessons and I loved her immensely. Almost every week she asked us to write free compositions. You realize how much I loved these, much more than reading Romanian literature. I was happy with all my heart because she always asked me to read my compositions out loud. I must have developed talent then. I think that was it. And also, that she played with us. We played two games, she divided us into two teams, there was the team of those who loved poetry with rhythm and rhyme and the one of those who loved blank verse and free verse, and I was obviously a kind of center-forward in the first line to the free verse group. It was great, yes, I liked the Romanian classes the most. I also liked organic chemistry, I really enjoyed the time when I studied at the Catholic Monastery School Ursula from Sibiu, one of the nuns, who taught natural sciences. All the Natural Science classes, from the time when spring came, were only done in the school yard, where there were furrows full of all kinds of flowers, from various families, lilacs, those with three petals, five, etc. We were doing them all live. We didn't study on drawings, we didn't look through books, she explained them to us and showed them to us. The petals, the pollen, she explained how the bees come, how the butterflies come, how the seeds are sown. There were some beautiful things during these classes, we would end up reaching *Tristan and Izolda*. It was marvelous.

Maria: What was your favorite book back then?

Iuga: I have to return to Mrs. Golopenția again. As a teenager I didn't really like Eminescu [1850-1889, Romantic poet, considered to be one of the greatest Romanian poets. His poems are required to be read in Romanian schools] and even now I cannot say that he is my favorite writer. It seemed very difficult to me, it seemed full of metaphors, it was too poetically loaded for the mind of a child that was quite well embedded in reality. And that is although I had the gift of poetry. It seemed very strange to me, I was attracted to bizarre

things. I liked Ion Barbu [1895-1961, Romanian mathematician and poet] although I never understood anything from him, but he had something special. I mean, just this secrecy, this mystery, this sense of the unknown, I loved it. He also had great titles. *Lapona Enigel și Riga Crypto* opened a whole world for me, in another dimension. I could see a mushroom with a red hat with white dots, Riga Crypto looked something like an evil spirit. It's like I was seeing shamans; it created a possibility for me, it introduced me to an imaginary world, precisely because it was so mysterious, and I did not understand anything. I'm sorry that we have the kind of writers who are not studied in depth for the complexity of their personal language, because they are more interesting than the great romantics and realists who give you everything on the tray, you know? I liked Macedonski [1854-1920, known for promoting French Symbolism in Romania], I used to read through all the nights with crazy pleasure. I don't understand why Macedonski is totally buried and why he was always hated by his fellows. He was involved in a conflict, he did not like Eminescu. But do we all really need to love each other and like and consider each other?

Maria: What did you study and why?

Iuga: What could I study but philology? I studied philology at university, my father wanted me to study medicine - and here I feel guilty towards my father, but I cannot do anything about it. I would have liked to be a doctor, I am interested in medicine and even back then I was interested, but I was very scared because I was convinced that I would not get into the faculty. It was terribly difficult to get into medicine, and besides, there was a lot to learn, and there were so many Latin and foreign names that I thought I couldn't remember. Then I said: why make my life more difficult? I fell in love with a student who was studying medicine and, in the end, I didn't do medicine. So, I did not tell my father, and I chose philology. Why? For convenience - I was pretty superficial when I was a little girl. I was just concerned with feeling good, as young people generally are. Back then I wanted to do whichever course of study was easiest and didn't require me to learn anything, to which I could be admitted with what I already knew. And I was admitted to philology. It is true that on the admission list in philology I came third, with an average of 8.50. At that time the averages were smaller, it was not easy to get a 10. I was very excited, and I chose German philology, as there were fewer people in this program and another reason was that I knew the language.

Maria: Was there a university course that changed your life?

Iuga: They totally changed it for me, they made me what I am. The man who really made me a poet was George Călinescu [1899-1965, Romanian literary critic, historian, novelist, academician and journalist, and a writer of classicist and humanist tendencies]. He was crazy. I really believe that a true poet must have something that is not exactly in order in his brain or in his physiology in general, hormonal. And Călinescu told us he did not follow any kind of analytic program, he did not follow historically the events of Romanian literature, personalities, no. He always taught his courses only through inspiration, he didn't have a plan, he always spoke freely and there were so many pens on his desk, that they might be only finished by now. They were all remarkably sharp, like pins. We were not allowed to take notes while he was teaching, he did not allow us to for anything in the world! And if he saw someone from his desk, someone at the back of the amphitheater writing something on a notebook, it was awful. He would start throwing those sharp pencils, and if he hit him, blood would flow from his cheek. What I am about to say is not an exaggeration: I have never seen rooms as full as those in which Călinescu held his classes, not at a theater, not at any famous show. There were people crowding on the floor, on the chairs, on the windows, all sorts of people, students from all the faculties and people from the street. They were sitting on the floor, and we, his students would be pushed, if we had no seats anywhere. This (*gestures*) was his desk, and I remember once I was crushed against the edge of the desk, right in front of him. The desk was not very wide, so when the man was talking, not only was

he very loud, he was talking in my ears, but he was sprinkling me with his saliva. Can you imagine if that happened during this coronavirus? I would have been infected...

He was my poetry teacher because he was doing poetry, but he was talking instead about his extraordinary merits as a politician and revolutionary. I remember that he was talking about onions, to show us the poverty Romania suffered. He said, that not everyone could even afford onions. He used this phrase 'doesn't do as much as an onion'. We now say "it doesn't make as much of a frozen onion".

The man had a very special way of thinking. We may laugh now, but he was wise in a way. The story is very beautiful, and I think that's where my inclination to poetry comes from. He also told us stories from his walks, completely and utterly unexpected. Like the following one: 'I had left school, it was lunch time and at one point on the corner of Edgar Quinet Street, a student appeared in front of me - not really a student, a young man who looked more like a vagabond, something between loafer and beggar, dressed rather shabbily. In his hand he had a piece of black bread on which he kept gnawing. He stops in front of me and says: "Master, don't you want to do me the honors of serving a piece of my bread?" It seemed very strange to me, very interesting in its own way, it was not the sort of experience you are accustomed to, so I didn't refuse it. I tore a piece of that loaf of bread and ate. "Would you let me ask you a question?" - "Yes, I'm happy to answer it". He asks me: "Where do lilies grow?" And I answer: "In the Emyrean". And he says, "Yes, I understand". I also wanted to test him because the question seemed very strange to me and challenged me. So, I said to myself, let me see, is this weird young man on the same line of thought like me? I asked him: "But tell me, do you know where the crows fly?" The young man answers me: "To the Emyrean, where there are the corpses of heroes". That's when I realized that he really is on the same line of thought as me and I wasn't sorry I ate from his bread.' Lord! How can you not become a poet when you have such a teacher? This was another terrible chance of mine. I had him in Romanian literature. In the other class, for foreign literature, I had Tudor Vianu [1898-1964, Romanian critic, poet, philosopher, and translator]. And in philosophy I had Henri Walt. He didn't do Marxism or scientific materialism, he did real philosophy, he was into Heidegger.

Maria: What did you dream of becoming when you were in college?

Iuga: I wanted to be an actress. Although I was in philology. I did not give up on this idea, and so after I finished the first year of university, I decided to take the theatre admission exam. The jury included Clody Bertola [1913-2007, Romanian actress] and another actress, but it's impossible for me to recall her name. The chairman of the jury was Radu Beligan [1918-2016, Romanian actor, director, and essayist, with an activity of over 70 years in theatre, film, television, and radio]. I chose a poem that didn't suit me at all. Not a smart move from me, I didn't have any intuition about this thing. *The Miller's Daughter* by George Coșbuc [1866-1918, Romanian poet, translator, teacher, and journalist, best known for his poems eulogising rural life]. I had never lived in the countryside, I only knew the peasants from literature and nonetheless I chose this poem. I had to play a peasant girl who was spinning wool and was pregnant without the knowledge of her parents. She felt very dirty and sinful. Meanwhile I was a bit crazy, wearing trousers, make-up. They put up notes about me on the notice board, because I wore trousers. Women did not wear trousers at the time, I was rather eccentric. And here, I was the miller's daughter who was crying hard, thinking what her parents would say when they discovered that she was pregnant. It didn't suit me, and Beligan didn't like it at all, obviously. They insisted that I move well on stage, but he said I had no diction, and that's why I failed. And then I was left with philology and became a poet.

Maria: What languages did you learn in school?

Iuga: I started with German and English. You could learn two languages in the first year, but I left the English class at the end of it. Russian was also compulsory then, but in Russian classes no one learned anything, I only know ... *(begins to say a few sentences in Russian)*. I was ashamed of talking in English, I had to pretend, I had to change the position of my tongue, lips. We were told how we should do it, to change the position of our tongue according to the vowel or consonant we had to pronounce. This was unimaginable to me. I am a pretty natural person and that's when I said give up this damn English, better Russian than English. In any case, I only did German and Romanian, obviously. French was the language that I loved so much and today I'm surprised that I didn't want to study it earlier. In college I couldn't study it because you could only choose between German and English. But I liked French the most.

Maria: What important lesson did you learn from your parents?

Iuga: How do I know it's a lesson? I don't know if it applies today. My parents never envied anyone, I never heard my mother or father envy a colleague who got a better role or was promoted to a higher salary. Never. My parents never trembled, they never dreamed of having money. Perhaps you can explain it with the fact that they actually received these things without asking. I was a family of people who were gifted. We always fell on our feet, we were admired, loved.

Maria: How did you get your first job?

Iuga: Very easily. There were no problems during that time. When you were at university, you knew that the moment you passed the diploma exam, you would be sent somewhere. You were getting a job somewhere. Sometimes you had the possibility to choose, maybe they would give two or three options, and you went where you wanted. When there were no jobs available – the German language was not taught in all schools – they would send you somewhere in the country, and they sent me to this school in Stalin. Braşov had the name 'Stalin' at that time. I was assigned to this school, I talked to the head of the school, who was German, and he told me that there was a place for a German language teacher at a school in a village near Braşov. I told him I do not intend to go to a village because I'm not used to the countryside. I had only been in the countryside during the American bombing that took place in the war. That is when he told me he could give me a job as a gym teacher. Okay, I said, but did I just waste five years in university studying German language and German literature to teach gymnastics? Having a ballerina mother and having the young age and the right constitution, I could have been a gymnastics teacher without going to university. He started thinking, he checked again, 'What about going to Sibiu? We have a German teacher position there.' And how could I have not wanted to go there, I spent my best years in Sibiu, in Ursuline, I very much preferred Sibiu to Braşov. And then they assigned me the job.

Maria: What career achievements are you most proud of?

Iuga: They came late. They came, I think, in the last two years. The biggest achievements so to speak, because I had many moments of joy, also during the period when I was abroad and I had public appearances on stage and I had great successes and I had many extremely good reviews in Frankfurt and Zurich. I have the greatest official recognition now, at the end. The first was the Knight Commander's Cross of the Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany [Verdienstorden der Bundesrepublik Deutschland], which was awarded to me by the President of Germany, who retired - Joachim Gauck. And then a year later, our president, Mr. Iohannis, came and he awarded me the Cross of Merit in the rank of

commander, in Cotroceni [Cotroceni Palace is the official residence of the President of Romania]. Then I was happiest, but as relaxed as I am now.

Maria: Would you change anything if you could at the beginning of your career?

Iuga: I made some adjustments back then. I don't know what I would change now, at ninety years old. In my first teaching year in Sibiu, I did some revolutionary things. I was moved from school no. 1 to school no. 2 for 'disciplinary' reasons. I have told my students, two boys were leading my way, they were about fourteen years in the seventh or eighth grade. I was twenty-three, the difference between us was of nine or ten years. They were carrying my notebooks. The power went out. The teachers' office was on the first floor, they took these notebooks, to carry them for me and eventually to hold my arm, to light the stairs, so that we could reach the office. It was late, around the last class, and it was getting dark outside. We had to unlock the office because the other teachers were gone. One of these guys lights a lighter to illuminate the doorknob, so I could unlock it. When I saw him light the lighter, I realized that the boy was probably smoking. 'How come you have this lighter with you? Do you smoke?' He said no, his mother was at work when he arrived home at noon, after school, and then he needed something to light the stove with. I saw that his fingers were a little yellow. 'You're not fooling me, you're smoking, obviously'. He fell silent. 'Look, I'm not going to punish anyone in the class for smoking, because I know very well that you, both boys and girls, smoke a lot inside toilets during the breaks. If you like this thing so much, you can try it, but don't abuse it. But I want to teach you something else: do not lie. If you like to do something and you do something that is not allowed, admit you did it. That is, to take responsibility by saying you did. I do not want you to lie'. They were so surprised. 'Now why don't we talk to each other like friends, why don't you stop calling me comrade teacher? How about calling each other by our names? You call me Nora.' In fact, we became friends, the difference between us was very small. Afterwards, they told the whole class to use my name. I've been called by my name by the whole class ever since. I made trips with them every Sunday to Păltiniș, we also went to the movies together and I never got rid of them for the whole period I stayed in Sibiu. They would drive me home, take me from home to school and I, a twenty-three-year-old girl, was not lucky enough to meet someone, to go to the cinema with, so I had to go to the cinema with my class.

Maria: What advice would you give to the young generation of poets?

Iuga: To write on inspiration and not on the basis of literary theories.

Maria: What are the major political events that took place in your youth?

Iuga: There were a lot. The first ones that I remember are from a lot of newspapers that were read in my grandparents' house. The first was a legionary movement, which interested me a lot. There were many young people in the Legionnaire movement [The Iron Guard or 'Legionnaire movement' was a Romanian fascist organization that operated between 1927-1941. It was a key player in the government of Ion Antonescu between 1940-1941, when it was suppressed]. The newspaper *Curentul* came in the morning and in the evening, there were murders. My grandparentes also bought two Legionnaire newspapers from time to time, the *Buna Vestire* was one. There they talked about many young Legionnaires, children aged sixteen, seventeen that were killed, but they probably did horrible things too. As a child, I empathized with the victims when reading those things. I was relatively immature, not knowing on the other hand what they were doing. My grandparents were totally horrified by the Legionnaire movement. I remember when I found out about the death of Armand Călinescu [1893-1939, Romanian politician and opponent of the Iron Guard, who eventually assassinated him], who was the prime minister at the time. He was found in the street, shot with several bullets. It was the first time when something happened in my mind, in my soul, I realized that something was wrong and that

they were committing crimes. Then I found out about Nicolae Iorga [1871-1940, Romanian scholar, writer and politician, conservative opponent of the Iron Guard, murdered after they came to power] what happened in Sinaia. It seemed even more dreadful to me, because they unfairly mocked him. I really liked Corneliu Zelea Codreanu [1899-1938, Leader of the Iron Guard, imprisoned and murdered by the then Romanian government] because he was a very handsome man and spoke very nicely, he was a cultured man, he was a lawyer and he had a certain fantasy. He probably wanted to attract his people and make an impression. For a ten-year-old girl, these things were like a fairy tale. But, I tell you once again, I did not understand ideology at that time. I was struck by the cruelty and by the fact that they do things like this. I certainly distanced myself completely from them, especially under the influence of my grandparents, who were desperate. Something of this sort. That was my first contact with politics. I always had bad contacts with politics. The second contact with politics, a deformed touch of it, covered in colorful wrapping paper, or being covered in a very bright polish. I was already in the eighth grade. Mihai [1921-2017, Michael I, last king of Romania, r. 1940-1947; initially a puppet of the far-right Antonescu regime, Michael led a coup against it in 1944, after which Romania defected to the Allies. Forced to abdicate by the Communist government in 1947] had left the country. In the year that Mihai left the country, there was a big gathering around his birthday, the 7th of November, if I remember correctly. I know that a lot of young people gathered in the Palace Square, a large column of people came, the liberal students. I was always with the Liberals and even now I am fond of them. And the column came with a large sign, there were only students, 'The King's Students' was written on it, and from the other side, another large column also entered the palace square. They also had a sign as big as ours, 'Maniu's Boys' was written, it was the National Peasants' Party. We had run away from school. All the gates were locked, they knew we wanted to go there. Back then I was thin like you, maybe even thinner. In the basement were the toilets and the windows in there were quite low, facing the sidewalk but having some iron bars. Being as thin as you are now, some of us were able to get through those bars outside, so we got to the Palace Square. There was a terrible turmoil as the communists came with some trucks. There was a very ugly clash, the King's students, who were in a bigger number, had some iron crowbars. They set the communist trucks' tires on fire and even overturned a truck. There were probably some victims there. I do not know that for sure as I wasn't really close. But after that the machine guns started, from the opposite direction. The machine guns were fired at those gathered in the Square in front of the Palace. Students died; they were shot. I ran away, I was terribly scared. A man saw me on Calea Victoriei. I was holding something on my chest, I will tell you. A plane flew over the square and threw sheets from the *Ardealul* newspaper, from Transylvania, pictures with Mihai. I found one, I took one of those pictures, those sheets. I was running and the wind was blowing towards my chest and holding the picture still. On Calea Victoriei, a man stopped me and slapped me twice, I will never forget him, and said: 'Come to your senses! Life is more important than anything, do not do such a thing again.' He was not a communist, but he still thought that we, the children, had gone completely crazy. And so, I've experienced things I never forget.

Maria: What has struck you from the recent political scene?

Iuga: There are things I would rather not discuss. Not because I'm scared, because at this age one doesn't have much to be afraid of. Because you no longer represent a potential danger. I can't help but mention something that stirs my displeasure, as well as something that stirs my immense joy. I am very upset by the Parliament, which is made up entirely of parties that are not doing Romania any good, and what I am most happy about is the fact that, largely thanks to Iohannis [Klaus Iohannis, President of Romania since 2014-present], we are well seen by the EU.

Maria: How do you think Europe has changed over time?

Iuga: It's hard for me to talk about this. Europe is a continent, and it is populated by quite different people. To me, and through my life experience, it does not seem that our formidable conquests in the field of technology, of discoveries – fields which are sought because of the astonishing evolution of science and technology – would come to the aid of man and society. In some aspects, my primitive animal instinct tells me that maybe it's not good that we are too much in competition with nature and we think that we can go further than nature allows us to. I believe that in fact they [the EU] want the best, but just as in a family where there are several brothers. Not everyone thinks the same, not everyone perceives the same. Sometimes I'm really afraid that it can fall apart. There are quite a few who challenge it and who would like something like Brexit.

Maria: Do you remember a difficult time when you were abroad?

Iuga: I was at the Frankfurt Book Fair, the big book fair. They did me the honor of reading on the blue sofa. There was a blue sofa in the courtyard, it was summer, and I had to read from my novel *Sexagenara și tânărul* [English translation: *The sexagenarian and the young man*], which was very successful abroad, it was translated in eight countries. It had just been published in Germany, and I was on the blue sofa to present it at the fair. I read fragments from the novel. Before I got to the fair, I was in front of the train station and there was a bus stop. Since I was invited there as a big star, I had done my best in wearing the best clothes I had. So, I went to a lady at the bus stop and asked her “Please, if you don't mind...” Before I could even say “Can you tell me which bus goes to the book fair?”, she interrupted me and all that remained in the air was “Please, if you do not mind...”. She turned to me, measured me from head to toes and said: “I do not give money to beggars.” Do you know how dumbfounded I was? I mean, I was going there, I felt like a queen, but after she told me that, I felt like the queen of a tent, just like in an old romance called *Zece cobzari* [English translation: *Ten minstrels*].

Maria: Can you tell me some songs or movies that represent you?

Iuga: They changed over time because I changed. I changed my tastes. The film that I believe to be 100% representative of me and that drove me crazy is *Tristan and Isolde*, the legend of lovers, with Jean Marais and Madeleine Sologne. See, I can even remember the actors. It is a movie that I couldn't forget. But then my taste started to change. And it changed a lot. *Zorba the Greek* drove me crazy, let's say I lived in an environment full of classical music. Now I don't listen to music at all, I don't even have a radio - music is not really the art form that I like the most. When I was six years old, and I was a very emancipated little girl. I want to tell you that my favorite composer was Stravinski. I madly loved Stravinski, I even told my parents, and they were amazed because he was the craziest and most modern musician you could have imagined at that time. I explained to them why I liked it. The explanation I gave still amazes me. “I like Stravinski because he has no melody.” Indeed, his music had no melody. There were shrill, scattered sounds, like that. I really like the unusual. I love the unusual. In literature, and everywhere. I always say that the best poem is the one that is not understood. And I honestly believe this.

Maria: When did you first use a phone and why?

Iuga: It was my most terrible fright. I was twelve years old, but I didn't actually use it. My mother wanted me to use it. My mother had some rehearsal at the opera. She was friends with Capsali [Floria Capsali, 1900-1982, ballerina and ballet master]. She asked me to call her because we didn't have a phone in the house. There was only a pastry near us that had a public telephone. She told me, ‘Look, I'm giving you this card, you go to the pastry, you put it in the phone, you pick up the handset, take it to your ear and dial the number.’ I had

the number on a piece of paper. I froze, but I said alright. I was convinced I wouldn't be able to call her. I went in there, I said I wanted to make a phone call, I picked up the handset, I was terribly scared, I put it back and I came home and told her that she didn't answer. I was afraid of the phone, the elevator, all this technical stuff. Instead, I was taught from the age of three to go up the escalator in the Netherlands. I liked that, I kept asking my mother to walk on it, it was my favorite game.

Maria: Can you tell me a popular joke from communist Romania?

Iuga: It's a little dirty, but no, I don't mind. I don't have to say that word. But I don't know what to replace that word with. I know there were a lot of jokes about Zaronie. He buys some new shoes. He was the minister of agriculture. He comes home with his new shoes on. He shows them to his wife: "Maria, look what beautiful shoes. Tell me if you've ever seen such gorgeous shoes." Maria looks: "Yes, they are amazing. You did well taking them." The evening comes. He lays down in bed wearing shoes. He is lying on the bed, having Maria by his side and tells her, "Maria, look how beautiful they are, do you see that *she* also looks at them?" Maria says, "You should have better bought a hat."

Maria: What were the moments when you longed for freedom the most?

Iuga: You make me laugh. It's so common for me to laugh. I have never longed for freedom because I am, I think, the freest person in the world. I used to complain about Ceaușescu while waiting in queues: I never disguised what I was doing, but nothing happened to me. But don't think that I was protected from the troubles of the communist regime. I had two terrible experiences during the regime, but I have always remained a free person. I love freedom more than anything. I can't even imagine that you can't be free. I had a horrible thing with Mrs Maria Banuș when I went abroad. They took me on the train, and then a soldier with a rifle in his back took me to a compartment where there was a security major and showed me a piece of paper on which was something I had said on the phone. I had spoken to Mazilescu [Virgil Mazilescu, 1942-1984, Romanian poet, essayist and translator] my good friend who died, a great poet. We were both oneiric, we were the group of oneiric. I had a friend abroad, Paul Goma [Romanian writer and opponent of the communist regime. He was forced into exile] who had already fled to Paris. We were good friends and Mazilescu had received an invitation to a big festival in Belgium, to which the Queen was also invited. He rejoiced like a child. But Mazilescu was very ill. We did not expect him to live too long. I got the impression that if I promised to do what he asked me to do, I might give him great joy, even give him hope and prolong his life a little. He gave me a call asking me to contact Goma by phone when I got to Vienna, because I had to go to Vienna the same week. He asked me to give him a phone call from Vienna, he had his phone number. To ask Goma to send Mazilescu plane tickets, or money to buy tickets. Mazilescu was poor. Writers did better during communism because they earned better during communism. Incomparably better. I used to take 12,000 for a manuscript, and at Casa Scânteii [the headquarters of several newspapers] where I worked for a German magazine, the salary was 3,000 a month. Now, I'm not even getting my monthly pension doesn't even resemble the money I get from publishing a volume. The money I receive for a poetry book is less than my retirement money. I don't get paid for magazine collaborations. What I write is absolutely free. We are not paid at all. It was the other side that was negative. It was censorship that didn't really let us say what we wanted. Then everything was counterfeit. I was saying something, thinking that maybe we were suggesting the things that we actually wanted to say. I did so well that they banned me from publishing for eight years. That's why I'm telling you. Caraion, with whom I got along and became very good friends, had also served eleven years in prison and was sentenced to death, but he dodged a bullet. Whenever he read my poems, he would ask me: "Tell me honestly, why you weren't sent to jail. From the way you write it is clear that you only write about freedom." Indeed, believe me, I feel like a free person. I

understood that movie *Zorba*, wholly. Everything was so natural there. It was a plea for freedom. I care about this more than anything. That is why I told my students to call me by my first name, because it's natural. That's the way it should be. If we were more natural, the world would be a thousand times more beautiful. That's why I tell you, I'm afraid of technology and the advance that people get out of it when compared to how they naturally are. We have to do this to defend ourselves against coronavirus, but we don't always succeed as you can see.

Maria: What did you think the future looked like after World War II?

Iuga: I don't know what to compare it to, so I compare it to my childhood during the monarchy. When books appeared in France, books written by French writers, after two months they appeared in Romanian translation, in Romanian publishing houses, especially during Carol's time. [Carol II]. He was hated by many, committed many sins while king, he abdicated, but he was a free man. But because we are talking about freedom, I think he was not made to be king, but he adored artists. He gave money to all the artists of that time, to Sadoveanu [Romanian novelist, short story writer, journalist and political figure, who twice served as acting head of state for the communist republic], to Rebreanu [Romanian novelist, playwright, short story writer, and journalist], to Arghezi [Romanian writer, best known for poetry and children's literature], he took state money and gave it to artists. He supported our culture, and our best culture was during the reign of King Carol II. That's why I love him, even though he's insulted by everyone. Politically, he brought about nothing but catastrophes. If I compare the period after World War II to the period of the monarchy, I liked the period of the monarchy more. Maybe since I was a child, and I didn't comprehend it very well. It's not bad now, I can't complain, and if I liked pomposity or being in the city center, having a car, travelling, maybe it would have only gone well for me, but I wasn't really interested in that part. In any case, what is happening today is not exactly what I would have dreamed, but what I dreamed of was a utopia. I believe that there is always a plus and a minus in this world. These govern the whole universe, the whole cosmos, and then the fact that countries do not understand each other; it is normal that it is so. Of course, there are major differences between states, both in terms of economic standard and in terms of evolution, cultural development. From this point of view, we lost, although we were among those who won the war. But when we look at Romania as a state, it seems to me that we lost. We are not, I think, as well seen by France, or by Western countries, as we were after the Union that happened during the monarchy, and we are not at all well seen now. I see the European Union beginning to show us some visible sympathy, but this is still due the fact that we have a leader who is not Romanian, he is German [President Iohannis is Transylvanian Saxon, an ethnic German minority who settled in Romania in the twelfth century]. We are not well seen in the big world, in Europe for example. And in America we do not exist.

Maria: What role do you think religion has in Romania nowadays?

Iuga: Just as in the rest of the world, people's tendency towards religion has decreased. Of course, not really in Romania, because we have always been an overall agricultural country. But now we are doing badly with agriculture, as you can see, now we are neither horses nor donkeys. Back then we at least had agriculture. It was said that Romania was the granary of Europe and it brought us a lot of money. We were a prosperous country by having oil and agriculture, what else did we need? Ceaușescu, poor man; even though he was a fool, he was not entirely stupid. He only wanted to foster industry because he realized that we cannot rise without the proletariat and without having industry, but he destroyed exactly what was bringing us this wealth. He destroyed agriculture, emptied the villages of young people and brought them to the city. He built thousands and millions of blocks of flats to give comfortable houses with bathrooms, with showers, to these young peasants. In this way, only the old

people were left. People who were no more able to work properly on field and agriculture went abroad, they were the ones that brought us the greatest wealth. His intention was good, such a pity that he was not able to comprehend that he did not have what was required. As a country, we have been unlucky throughout history. We were badly located, in the way of all the invaders, living in the forests, when the Hungarians next to us already had a church. They were already Catholics, their first king when they settled in the Pannonian plain, Stephen, was already a Catholic [Stephen I, 975-1038, first King of Hungary, responsible for the conversion of the Hungarian people to Christianity]. But we had no houses, we lived in the hollows of trees, in forests, to take cover, because the Huns, the Tatars, the Hungarians came over us, as many as there were, all the invasions. The first ones were the Goths.

Maria: What do you think Romania will look like in fifty years?

Iuga: I will not be here to see it, but I'll see it from up there, not in the heavens, but on another planet. I don't believe in God. I do not believe in God as having man's appearance, as a being, I do not even believe in God as a great builder who would have built the whole cosmos and the whole universe. I blindly believe in the cosmos as in a huge mechanism that has always existed and is always regenerating. It is always revived from its own configuration. Rhythmically, periodically, it revives, it is reborn again and again. This is the circle, the symbol of the cosmos, each planet, a circle, each cell, a circle, with a nucleus in the middle and its constellation, with electrons. This is our sign, and it means that we are infinite. I blindly believe in this, but never in reincarnation and the return to earth, that's truly nonsense. I think we will be something else in this world, something that I can't imagine, and no one can. We will be energies that travel through the cosmos. That is our purpose. The great journeys of the substance that governs everything. We are part of the cosmos, and we have the cosmos within us. We cannot disappear, even if we are swallowed by black holes, I am sure we enter from one side and exit another. I think we have a wonderful journey ahead of us. I think we're going to have marvelous adventures. The coronavirus almost doesn't scare me anymore.

It is very difficult to say what Romania or Europe will look like, because you do not know which country rises and which falls. They do not go so well together, they understand each other less and less. Don't you see that more and more people want to leave the EU, they don't like the EU anymore. That's exactly what I'm afraid of. We need to be united, we need a European Union. It helps us in everything. America also helps us when it comes to wars.

Maria: Do you have a message for me and my generation?

Iuga: I love you, you young people very much, but it seems to me that most of them are going the wrong way. They are going the wrong way because they believe too much in technology and in the power of human ingenuity, which is very great, and it was and is proved. But they should not forget what we bear in us and what we will never lose. That is everything we have inherited from the past, which is very important, and unfortunately, they look with contempt and mockery on the place from which they came, on their origins. But there, in that place, there is a huge treasure stored. That is why they should look back to it.