

Episode 27 – The Most Famous Bank Robbery in Communist History

Hello, I am Adrian Iosifescu, your host of the History of Romanian Jews podcast and this is episode 27, where we'll be discussing the Romanian Jewish gang that pulled off the most famous bank robbery in the history of Communism.

By-the-way, you just listened to the melody "First Bank Robbery" by James Horner from the movie "The Lady in Red". A link to the full song is provided in the episode notes.

The robbery

In the morning of July 29, 1959, a payday in Bucharest, a car belonging to the Romanian National Bank which was transporting 1,686,000 lei (the Romanian currency) stops on Avenue (Calea) Giulesti in front of the local branch of the National Bank. Out-of-nowhere a taxi cab appeared, stopped by the bank's car and four men and a woman masked got out and brandishing guns immobilized the bank's car driver and his companion and took two large bags of money from the bank's car, quickly leaving the area by same taxi. All this happened in a flash, a few tens of seconds. The taxi then went up on Calea Giulești, passed the bridge Chiurel and stopped close to an open field by the bridge for the robbers to evaluate what was in the two money bags they took. There, they decided to abandon the small banknotes. A child observed them and alerted his mother and some locals, who later will find the dropped banknotes in the amount of 138,000 lei.

The five left the area and got to the Cotroceni neighborhood, where they abandoned the taxi on Dr. Teohari street. The taxi is later found to contain another substantial amount of money, 213,000 lei. After they abandoned the taxi, the five individuals took the tram. Arriving at one's residence, they shared the money, each receiving just 25,000 lei each, after which they hid the rest of the money and their weapons.

To understand the value of this robbery, please keep in mind an average that monthly salary in Bucharest in 1959 was about 600 lei. The stolen amount was the equivalent of over 250,000 dollars, a huge amount for that time.

The investigation

The Romanian police and the security services were immediately alerted. The Minister of the Interior, Alexandru Drăghici, was actively involved in the investigation. The Communist Party Secretary, the country leader, Gheorge Gheorghiu Dej, asked for a daily report of the investigation. The Soviet councilors to the Romanian leadership were mobilized.

The investigation followed many tracks. The police carefully watched restaurants, luxury stores, jewelry stores, for people spending money. Informants were asked if they know anything about the robbery. Well-known gangsters in prison were interviewed. Nothing conclusive was discovered in the first couple of weeks after the robbery. The investigation was led by Colonel Cristache Zambetti, the director of counterintelligence in the Securitate. The case file recorded in the archives under the name of "Ioanid Case" contains 27 volumes, which totals to approximately 10,000 pages.

Listening to telephone calls, working with informants and some mistakes made by gang members led to the eventual identification of the perpetrators. Of great value was the

testimony of the child in the field Chiurel and the taxi driver whose car was used in the robbery, allowing the making of robot portraits of the gang members. It was just a matter of time. On September 18th, six weeks after the robbery, they are arrested. Almost the entire amount was recovered as well as the weapons used.

Conviction & execution

The interrogations and confrontations took almost two months and were conducted by the 'infamous' Security officer Gheorghe Enoiu, and, on November 12, the robbery file was closed. Two days later, on November 14, the file was sent to the Military Tribunal where the gang members were to be tried. On November 23 the trial was held behind closed doors. The sentence was given on the same day. All the men in the group present at the robbery received the death penalty. The woman, because she had two children, was sentenced to life imprisonment. On November 24 their appeal for pardons was rejected. The four men were executed on February 18, 1960 at the Jilava prison. The woman was sentenced to life imprisonment, sentence later commuted to 25 years in prison. In 1964 the woman was amnestied and allowed to emigrate to Israel in 1970 where she died in 1977.

The movie

Soon after their capture, because the facts seemed so incredible for a communist country, the Securitate made a propaganda movie about the robbery, called "Reconstruction", directed by Virgil Calotescu, in which the condemned played their own roles and they told in detail how they did it. It is assumed that the six members of the gang were lured by the authorities to act in the movie and confess their crimes in order to have their sentences reduced. However, this was not the case, The members' Jewish identities were emphasized exhaustively. Portrayed as gaudily decadent, they were shown enjoying a life of luxury and lavish spending that was simply inconceivable in Romania at that time. The robbery was presented as nefarious Jews were robbing Romanian people. Like the Soviets, the Romanian government succeeded in cultivating the image of the Jew as a "rootless cosmopolitan," the hated enemy of the proletariat and of Romania. The documentary, considered "for internal use only", was presented immediately to several hundred party activists and trusted journalists.

Romania in 1959

To better the context of this robbery let's quickly look at the political situation in Romania in 1959.

The Jews of Romania were growing disillusioned with communism. Interwar membership rolls for the communist party reveals that as many as 30 percent of its members were not ethnic Romanians, but Hungarians, Bulgarians, and Jews. Ana Pauker (born Hannah Rabinsohn) was the unofficial leader of the communist party in Romania after the war and served as the foreign minister in the late 1940s and early '50s. Yet if there was any hope left that the Romanian People's Republic would be free of the divisive class and ethnic conflicts of its past, that wish died with the nationalistic party purges of the 1950s. Following Stalin's anti-Semitic purges, Gheorghiu-Dej sought permission from the Soviets to purge the party of "foreign" persons, like Pauker. She was arrested in 1953 after a carefully devised political witch-hunt, and was accused of supporting international Zionism and conducting espionage for the 'enemy', America.

Fearing her reinstatement after Khrushchev's ascension to power in the Soviet Union, Gheorghiu-Dej redirected his persecution campaign to focus on her "Stalinist excesses". Pauker was forced to politically exile herself from the party in 1956.

In the summer of 1958, the Red Army left Romania. Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej, wanting to show the Soviet Union that he can control the country without the Red Army, started a wave of repressions, targeting especially Jewish party members to be marginalized.

The authors of the robbery were not gangsters, they were not some notorious felons, they had no criminal record. All of them were Jewish. After the second world war, each one had a career in the communist apparatus. When the coup took place, they were still young people, between 31 and 42 years old. All were intelligent people and highly trained; two academics, two journalists, a senior aviation engineer, and a police lieutenant colonel. They were not only part of the Romanian-Jewish intelligentsia but also among the pioneers of the pre-1948 communist movement. All six were official party members in 1948, at a time when party membership was less than 1,000. For them, as well as many other Jews in the Eastern Bloc, communism held the key to absolution: a society where their Jewish identity would finally be accepted. With the mass purges of the communist party, however, it is clear that they had been duped. A new Romania would be built, but only for Romanians. The group was well aware of the political climate around them; they knew that Jews would remain, as they had for hundreds of years in the Kingdom of Romania, an "other".

After a period of great jobs and entitlements, important roles in the party and in overall country management, they were pushed to the edge society because they were Jewish communists.

The drama actors

Let's look at them one by one.

Alexandru Ioanid was a member of the communist party. Born in November 1920, he was at the time robbery an ex-lieutenant colonel of police. He was married to the sister of Alexandru Draghici's wife, Martha Cziko. Alexandru Draghici was then the powerful Minister of the Interior. Alexandru Ioanid had occupied the position of head of department judicial branch of the police until in May 1959, when he was dismissed and forced to retire. His real name was Leibovici.

Paul Ioanid, born in March 1923, the younger brother of Alexandru Ioanid, was also an important figure in the party nomenclature. He was originally an engineer, an expert in aviation issues and an airplane pilot. He studied in Moscow, where he took his doctorate at the beginning of 1950s and was known for his press and radio commentary on first Soviet launches into space. He worked as a teacher, professor of ballistics, at the Military Academy, being head of the department. Paul Ioanid was the Romania's representative in the secret Soviet program space.

Igor Sevianu was trained as an aviation engineer but worked as the head of the Romanian National Tourism until he was dismissed in 1957. He was a communist party member from before the war. His name was Igor Herșcovici. He was married to Monica Sevianu and they had two children, but, without a job, they lived from Monica's tutoring efforts.

Monica Sevianu worked as a journalist at the Romanian radio but she was let go in 1957 because of lack of a college degree. She had been previously married and lived for several years in Israel. She was a member of the communist party.

Sasha Musat real name was Glanzstein Abrasa. He was born August 1924 and was a member of the communist party when the party was still illegal. He was a close friend of Emil Bodnăraș, one of the Romanian communist leaders, being a cousin of Bodnăraș wife Florica. In 1948 it was sent to the West as a spy but was exposed in Paris and expelled. He became associate professor at the Faculty of History of the University of Bucharest but fired in 1958 because he didn't have a PhD.

Haralambie Obedeanu real name was Lazarovici. He was a journalist at Scânteia, the communist main newspaper and dean of the Faculty of Journalism. In 1958 he was replaced as dean. He was a member of the communist party. He was the only defendant who was not at the scene of the robbery.

Another important actor in this drama was the Security officer **Gheorghe Enoiu** who joined the party communist after the Soviets imposed the government of Petru Groza at the end of second world war. In 1949 Enoiu join the newly created Securitate. Initially he had worked as a humble printer, but in short time, thanks to his communist connections, he became officer investigator, specialized in interrogations. He got the reputation of "a *butcher*" due to the manner he conducted his interrogations, without mercy or scruples. During the period 1963 - 1967 he held even the position of head of the Criminal Investigations Directorate. In 1968 he was investigated by a party commission whose mission was to explore irregularities produced during the time of Gheorghiu-Dej and was forced to retire, being classified as a "brute" by the investigative committee. However, at the end of in 1968, he rejoined the Securitate at the same Criminal Investigation Department, where he worked until 1989.

Other movies

The Romanian public was fascinated with this improbable robbery so other movies were made trying to unravel its mysteries.

In 1998, Irene Lusztig, a graduate of Harvard Film School, shot a documentary film that came out in 2002, also titled "Reconstruction". The film was an effort to understand her grandmother's life, Irene being Monica Sevianu's granddaughter. In the film she returns to Bucharest to reassemble the pieces of her family's bizarre, dark history.

The Romanian filmmaker Alexandru Solomon then tells the story again in the 2004 documentary "Marele Jaf Comunist (The Great Communist Robbery)". In contrast to the 1960 original, his documentary is intent on showing everything, on filling itself up with faces, statements and buildings, not to give a definitive meaning to the affair, but rather in order to calculate its myriad meanings. He speculates that at the time of the trial one could read the revelation on their faces.

Nae Caranfil's "Closer to the Moon" is a 2014 Romanian film, a fictional take of the Eastern Bloc's most famous bank heist. In it the specter of antisemitic communism always lurks about, but the story comes across much more, as a flashy middle age crisis, set in a picturesque Bucharest, one lit by a CGI moon and inhabited by people who seem to always have the headlights on them. Caranfil is the kind of director that fills his films with everything that he is in love with – divas (Vera Farmiga as Alice, inspired by Sevianu), good criminals, bad cops, juvenile love, boyish charm and, finally, the figure of his own father.

Robbery or staging?

This robbery raised numerous questions, as such a crime would not have made sense in communist Romania. Why would some intellectuals from the ranks of the communist nomenclature rob a bank and what would they do with the money that they could not spend anyway without getting caught in the end. There were several unusual things about the story in its most common version. Beyond accusations based on various ideological guidelines, no reasons for the alleged robbery, or for the loanid group to have perpetrated it, were ever given.

During the trial the six allegedly said that the money was intended for the Zionist movement and helping Jews, but there are rumors that they were forced by the authorities to say this. One thesis says that the six invented this legend in the hope of obtaining help from Israel, or from the international Jewish movement. Did they want to create a good image for themselves, to pass as heroes of the Zionist movement ? Hard to say. It is true that they gave small amounts of money to Jews who had submitted applications to emigrate. The stolen sum was in lei, which at the time, could not be exchanged for hard currency anywhere in the world.

Other voices of the time said that Alexandru Ioanid was targeted by the authorities because he wanted to divorce his wife, who was the sister of the Minister of the Interior, Alexandru Draghici. The latter allegedly told Alexandru Ioanid that he would "destroy" him if he divorced his sister.

Another thesis claims that the holdup did not take place, that it was a staged plot by the Securitate. The regime needed a pretext for the anti-Semitic campaign and the creation of an atmosphere of intimidation and fear, especially in intellectual and professional circles. Paradoxically, it aimed to reduce the number of Jews who applied to leave Romania.

Also, according to other rumors, the six became inconvenient for the system, and were forced by the Securitate to steal the two bags of money in order to eliminate them. During many months preceding the alleged heist, at least one of the members, Obedeanu, was aware of being followed and of being constantly watched through binoculars by the Securitate from a building across the street from his apartment. Moreover, also for months preceding July 1959 the phones of the gang members were tapped. In the aftermath of the robbery, several of the friends with whom they had talked, lost their jobs or positions.

Based on what is known about the group members (journalists, a physicist, a history professor, and a Securitate colonel) all of them were fully cognizant of the Romanian situation, and of the political climate at the time so another scenario also seems likely. Following prolonged Securitate surveillance of the group, which resulted in the accumulation of evidence about conversations with dissident tones, members may have been blackmailed including threatened with harm against their families and themselves, and promised some reprieve or even permission to leave the country with their families, if they went along with the staging of the robbery to serve several government and some personal purposes. In any case, the government failed to uphold its end of the bargain.

As a parallel, in what was a highly unusual move for those times when nobody was allowed to leave Romania, another Jewish Securitate officer, Ion Crişan, incidentally described as "friend" of the Ioanid group, was permitted to leave the country with his family and go to Brazil around 1961, shortly after the alleged incident; this has led some to believe that he may have been the agent through whom the government communicated its promises and made them credible.

Conclusion

Only the opening of archives that have remained secret, and new testimonies can bring some real answers to all the questions surrounding this event.

The myth, the enigma of this strange case remains intact after 66 years from its occurrence.

This concludes this episode.

Until next podcast episode, be well.