

After the Romanian Revolution of 1989

Christopher Hitchens and Andrei Codrescu in Chicago

Radio Host: With us is Andre. I could ask you, Romanian poet, essayist, author, and regular commentator on NPR. All things considered, could rescue was born and raised in Transylvania, Romania, and was expelled from the University of Bucharest in 1965 during the repressive regime of Nikolai Ceausescu, the dictator who was killed by. People during the upheaval in Romania last year. He's lived in the United States. Currently, he's the editor of a journal called The Exquisite Corpse, and he teaches at Louisiana State University. Joining Mr. Codrescu is the internationally known columnist for the nation, Washington editor for arpas book, Hoppers, and Book reviewer for Newsday, Christopher Hitchens.

Hitchens: The qualities of human survival that are needful in a country that in every variety of despotism, every variety that's been Rd. tested within living memory are these; the ironic, the skeptical, the raucously incredulous, the openness of the fantastic and my new friend Andre is a fine exemplar of these qualities.

As you'll shortly hear and shortly see Romania libera. Sad to say, is still a country of the imagination. But, sad as it is to think of Romania libera, free Romania. As still a country of the imagination, we can console ourselves with the thought that in countries of the imagination. People like Andre can be part of the provisional government, even if they are always teetering on the verge of resignation.

So forward. Andre, please, may we close the curtains and, ladies and gentlemen, I wish I was in your shoes and was meeting him for the first time. Thank you.

Andre: Well, our first poet was an. So ever since in a kind of reciprocal gesture, Romania has been sending all their poets out. It's our main export, yeah. Of. For years, I just thought of myself as American. Until this Romania burst into my consciousness and everyone else's and so now I'm Romanian once more.

My horrible step-father was an engineer and his only pleasure in life was building amateur radios used to spend every weekend at his workshop table inventing. He invented the phone, radio, a clock, radio, a butter churn radio and the mailbox radio. Long before these things became common.

So proud was he of his radios that he punished anyone who didn't show the proper degree of amazement before them. Once he beat me for writing dirty words on the world map that hung over his workshop table. He didn't beat me because the words are dirty, but because dirty words distracted him from his radios.

One day I removed a small piece from inside his latest creation. It took him several cursing days to find out what was wrong from that time on, I took a little piece out of whatever he was working on every time I chanced by his table, he became horribly Moody and had big fights with my mother. He beat me whenever he could lay his hands on me, which wasn't often. I was too quick and he was too depressed. Finally,

one day he packed his radios and his bags and he left us. My mother cried, but it was a great day for me.

Now that I have become a little peace in the radio myself, I often wonder if I'm not the very first piece that I removed from my horrible stepfathers radio. And whenever somebody says I heard one of your radio pieces, a piece of radio comes back to me removed by little fingers from a mean man's soul pleasure In life.

Radio Host: When you went back to visit your native country and I know that you've been American for many years and you consider yourself an American. How did you respond to what was going on there?

Andrei: Well, the first time I felt the euphoria that everyone else was feeling there, about the end of the Ceausescu's. I felt. Emotions that's haven't been repeated since.

Particularly since I've gone back the second time in July and both the atmosphere and the country seem quite different to me and euphoria had turned to anger.

I think what's happened there recently, though, was probably the greatest. Play staged play of the end of this century and. They are descendants of the Romans for a good reason. It was a play with real bodies that it was done on a scale that I don't think it's seen. And it was also quite scripted.

Hitchens: Now, among many great Romanian. Names of the century is that of Eugène Ionesco. And did you, if you had to say which play you were in? For an esca which which scenario would you like to compare it with?

Andrei: You know, I've thought about this for a while and I think that. It is parts of the rhythm of the rhino or in this play there are also parts of. Umm. Oh others, including the ball soprano, but it heads other, more tragic levels that I think that Eugène Ionesco didn't quite get to. I'd say the Romanian Revolution was scripted by Eugène Ionesco, but also by Beckett for some nights.

Of course, the reason I had a stepfather at all is because my real father Stalin died when I was a child and it was a traumatic event in my life as it was in the life of many other people of my generation born in that part of the world. It's the question that, when asked the way people ask in the United States, where were you when John Kennedy was shot, they say, what were you when Stalin died?

Nobody dies, like Stalin did. He didn't just die, he took the world with him. My world at any rate. I was eight years old at. All the kids had been crying and I've been crying the most for us. Stalin was that saintly, fatherly figure that smiled from above, surrounded by adoring children. For me personally, he was father, pure and simple, because I didn't have one of my own. On my little night stand table. Had his portrait and I slept securely under the shadow of his mustache.

Devastated disbelieving, I came from home from school to the back alleys, hiding my tears from everyone when I got home, I saw my stepfather and another man sitting soberly at the kitchen table. I slipped into the room and hid too upset to talk.

I'm glad the son of a bitch is dead, the man said. And my stepfather conquered.

My world was there and then shattered forever. Later I watched people cry and tear their hair publicly on the streets, but I somehow knew that it was all a show.

They were just using the occasion to grieve, weep and cry for other sorrows. Stalin was just an excuse to mourn for the world. And I suspected fraud about the whole race of fathers, leaders and men larger than life.

There are no fathers, I decided. Only mustaches, which scatter in the wind hair by hair which vanish, disappear, betray and leave you alone at night.

I met a task respondent in Cebil in my home town, we got drunk, we had a bottle of vodka and he said I was in Tamasha...

Hitchens: You got drunk on one bottle of vodka.

Andrei: Well, the two of us did OK because the local brew was serving us back-ground... Because we drank quite a bit of turkei and some more...

Hitchens: He was new to task presumably.

Andrei: Actually that's all he had. Maybe he kept his stash for someone else, but it was enough.

One of the things he said was that, in Mishra on the 10th of December, and I said Timisharon on the 10th of December. And I said what were you doing in timashur on the 10th of December? None of this business happened until the 15th. And then he winked.

I said now wait a minute, what are we doing into Michelle and the 10th of December?

He said. Well, I was there, I.

How many of you were there?

He said. Were three tasks respondents. There is someone from Hungarian radio and two people from Tanjug.

So you're all into Mishawaka on the 10th, and this little Transylvanian town over here.

Said yes.

Romania now is a country where a great fiction is going on, and it's true that a fiction can be, and the imagination can be powerful and wonderful thing. The kind of fiction that now exists in that country is not a good one. An evil one in many ways, mainly that the governments now ruling the country's been is the result of a great staged play.

More romanian than that is the fact that Brancus sculptures, especially the magic bird, which I had unique and rare privilege of viewing all by myself today, somewhere in the recesses of this museum. It figures in the poetry of great Romanian poets named Lucian Blaga and I translated his poems into English, not because I believe in translation, because I don't, but because I had to pay a debt. He was the poet of my adolescence. He's the poet. Forbidden when I was growing up, who turned all of us into poets? The one of us were going to do that and. The way I obtained his book is by stealing it from a very nice old man who invited a few of us young poets to his house to eat his food. And so we repaid him by stealing all his books.

So I stole the first volume of blogas poetry and then not only that, but I miserably went ahead immediately because I needed some money to drink and be a. Poet. And sold it to Mihai Nadina, professor then in Luge and told him that I would give him

volume 2 and three whenever I get a chance to still those. And he paid me for the whole. So years pass and I'm now in America, and that was the no library in New York. The Romanian Library there and there was a volume of Bloga in Romanian. So I stole that. So it became imperative to translate this poet for all those reasons, and because I loved him.

But then I did dedicate this to to Professor Nadine, who is now in the United States and said here is volume 2 and three. OK. It's a sordid story.

The magic bird

High signed Orion blesses you in the southern wind.
A tear shedding above you. High and holy geometry.
You lived once on a sea bottom and circled closely the solar fire.
Your cries sounded from floating forests over the first waters.
Are you a bird? A traveling bell or a creature?
An ear less jug, perhaps
a golden song spinning above our fear of dead riddles.
Living in the dark of tales you play ghostly Reed pipes
to those who drink sleep from black subterranean puppies.
The light in your green eyes is phosphorus, peeled from all bones,
listening to wordless. You are lost in flight and celestial grace.
You guess profound mysteries under the human domes of your afternoons
soar on endlessly, but do not reveal to us what you see.

This business in the end about do not reveal to us what you see is a central fact of Blogas poetry. Who once said that our job, when faced by mystery, is not to explain it, but to increase its mysteriousness.

Hitchens: This. When I was clutching around Transylvania and talking to Romanians and so on during the. I thought I. I wrote in the article in Brancu that I did about. I first saw the shadow of an impending military regime, not a not a junta, not a not a cabinet of generals, but a a state. Really, the. Armed forces would hold the most power. Was I wrong in thinking that?

Andrei: Well, what you're seeing now is the emergence of a new type of military dictatorship. That part of the world, a new kind of military. Traditionally, the military was never. But now they're running the country. They have an image. They can be seen as running the country, but they will come. Very soon, probably before this video comes out or anybody sees it, where the army will step in and they'll say we're in charge because there's a complete crisis of confidence in the government and everybody else is distressed.

Demands of exile

We are growing a better seed issue of poets who can't go home again in this year, Jarvis.

Here are squat, squat men in fat suits. Papillon greasy, huddled in dark Chicago basements

Perched on writing tables to leap to Paris, into bedermayer ink stands.

Prettiness, of course, is in the issue and one has left behind all the pretty things and is now at the mercy of scents, happenstance, emigration, digestion.

Notice the issue? Courage or top form though both are necessary in order to play sweep over the borders of official forms that need be completed and punctuated.

Not nostalgia, not horror, not righteousness, though in various degrees these are the alarm clock perched on the wobbly armor child of one eternity, and an enraged grown up who saw her bathing one day at a non political shore of childhood and caused them to merge into a murderous infinity whose issue is fiery death and more death.

For now, they are kept apart by the writing hand. The pen prevents the closing of the fist and prices being where they are. A good thing too.

Not indignation. Intelligence, rage, though in various bourgeois measured these two once mixed well to steer the Hornet nest of culture, causing bees to rise from pamphlets into larger print.

Home is a car on the road to a cottage filled with story telling, myth making, rustics leaning on a future composed of woven pelts, miles of sausages, milk and approximate figures which form the antihistorical peak where one rests in the company of national fiction at its most formal ease under a sky of homespun ambiguous and goat.

No, those are not the issues, though each line makes the jar buzz and sets the fashion free. The issue is ease and when the bitterness thereof is the lack of it.

The Sunday afternoon going to bad movies made by people one knows slightly letting the haze of a. Over Turkish coffee, push the country forward. A miraculous machine that is the opposite of a cement truck.

When I went back to Romania and saw my old friends from high school that I definitely felt once more. That I was a Jew, which I had quite forgotten in a certain.

My family came from the Park of Pennsylvania. Let us see the to Hungary during World War 2 and all of my mother's sisters and my grandmothers family died in Auschwitz. My mother and one of her sisters managed to get into Romania where they were safe. And so Hungary or the Hungarian parts of Romania? To me is a desolate place. That's all that side of the family was gone. Complete emptiness, there is nothing there. When I got to the other side. I found a kind of pedestrian anti-Semitism it was in everybody's benal way of getting along.

A guy came to our table and I was sitting with a friend in Sibiu. He said. We exchanged a few words and he said, oh, you sound just like the coming back. So I

looked at him and I said. And so was your mother, Hitler's assistant or dentist. Don't know what I said. He was offended. He was offended. Was. Because this is just a way of. It was friendly to say you talk like the Kiku back. So I chased him away. And for the rest of the time, my good friend kept exchanging soulful looks with his other friends who couldn't come to our table because I was going to tear his head off.

Hitchens: All anti-semites are like that, they're basically saying fuck you if you can't take a joke.

It struck a lot of people as paradoxical that the state of Israel had such good relations with Ceaușescu regime, and that Rabbi Rosen was such a prominent figure of Buqarest society and was involved in the the sale of Jews for exile that he knew was swearing Ceaușescu's coffers. And he would also testify on the hill in case of need that Romania was a good country and most favoured nation status could be conferred. Did any of that strike you as painful, it could be an opposition between the dignity of the Jews of Romania and exigencies, if you like, of the state of the state of Israel? The real politic of the state of Israel?

Andrei: Well, to me it was a tremendously lucky thing because I was one of the Jews that Israel bought in early on when Ceausescu just started selling people abroad, Germans to Germany and Jews to Israel. Israel paid \$10,000 a head for me and my mother. So I owe the State of Israel 10,000 bucks. At some point, I'll probably have to pay it back because I never went to Israel.

Hitchens: I think you're the first person I've met who's been bought and sold, and yet retained autonomy.

Andrei: Well, because once the deal was concluded and I got outside of Romania, there was no point of abiding by the terms. You know to me because I wasn't going to go to Israel. I certainly didn't feel any kind of loyalty to any Jewish idea because I was not a Jew in any kind of way except for...

Hitchens: Perhaps for once redeemed would be the word in fact.

Andrei: That's...

Hitchens: One doesn't often get the chance to say that. I thought I'd take it.

Andrei: (laughs)

Hitchens: Do you believe that there could ever be an intelligent nostalgia for the communist order in Eastern Europe?

Andrei: Well Hell it's already going on, I've heard a lot of people say things like we were better under Nicolae Ceausescu threw a bottle at the police, you'd get arrested.

I've heard people saying seriously that Nico Ceausescu was a good guy. Before we had food when he was around. Things our worse. There is already. The place is haunted with nostalgia, it's probably the same in the Soviet Union.

Hitchens: A tyrannized people force you to ask why do people ever get to love their chains? And this is what we've been discussing. But in your book on the outside you ask why a free people like the Americans who have never known any chains, so much love to volunteer to be conformists?

Andrei: Well, It may well be that conformism transcends ideological systems, in that it is just a part of the human desire to get along and not make waves, you know and the kind of conformism that I talk about in the United States is qualitatively different than the kind of conformism that Romanians experience there because it was coerced, there was fear.

I think there is probably a big difference between Stalin and Vanna Wight, although I tend to write somewhere that they both serve the same function, to make you believe that the world makes sense. Because if you turn those letters over, underneath somewhere, there are intelligible phrases, never mind that they are clichés and that they are these things these endless things. But the world makes sense, you can guess at them and it's the same kind of feeling of security that Stalin gave us because the iconography of communism of that period of communism is so comforting, it made sense of the world and anyone who struggled out found themselves in a wilderness, and I think that any time people experience the wilderness in a certain way, part of their selves will resist it.

There's a poem called circle jerk, which is being translated into Romanian, and I had a hell of a time explaining to my translator what actually that meant, as I've told her I had to explain the literal and also tell her was a kind of political term as well, you know, but. So let's. You know, these guys are sitting around, you know, the circle. You know, figuring out what is going to happen for the next 50 years.

Circle Jerk

El Mel, Mezzo del. I found myself in the middle class
looking at two diverging options, ideology and addiction.
My triumph is to practice both. Reverginate or perish?
Learn how to read to trees. You never know who might be listening when
the class enemy is in the class.
Can he be that hombre who walk into town followed by a slow caravan of
Toyota vans, laid the note, empty male sacks, ready to buy everything?
The shelves, the things on them, the stores themselves, the clerk's personal
effects and gives them whatever they ask for.
When this ombre leaves the town, wobbles like a great plucked chicken and
shivers from cheap wind.
This ombre then sits in on a card game West of the Picos and tells this
joke to the members of the cabinet.
An old Jew asks the Soviet border guards for a globe to see where he should
go.
After hours of careful study, he returns it and asks do you have another
globe?

In the end, we remember not the joke nor the out of place place where he
tell it to the people, but the fact that we all detest living through the
adroit manipulations of the small print clauses of our social contract.
Therefore, you in the front row, wouldn't you rather do it your way?
Don Juan narcissist, whose job is to upset order and the authorities spent
establishing it, releases energy teased into being by his hat.
Once a man loses his taste for himself, he becomes completely unsavory.
Meat spoils from within. Others seeping through the chinks, and chomps
their way through heart and gut.
Two careless lovers are worth 1000 bankers. The world is froth over the
surface of an untouched hardcore that first looks real, then nostalgic,
then Betamax.
I stagger from barbecue to barbecue and never see sobriety anymore.

The Ted K Archive

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<[youtube.com/watch?v=SDwijSla1FI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SDwijSla1FI)>

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