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TRAVEL FOR THE DYING
Ceauşescu's Romania as Seen by Saul Bellow

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During the Cold War era, interaction between Romanians and Americans was rare. Even indirect exposure *via* the American media to Romania was virtually nonexistent. Perhaps the Olympic champion gymnast Nadia Comăneci provided American media a basis to portray Romania, and thus gave the nation some attention. The way Romanians lived was largely unknown to Americans compared to other Eastern Bloc countries (e.g. East Germans), which were more familiar owing to the Berlin Airlift as well as rare escapes *via* tunnels or other ingenious means of overcoming the Berlin Wall. Likewise, the Soviet Union, with such events as Nikita Khrushchev's antics at the United Nations, the military invasion of Hungary and the constant threat of nuclear war with the US culminating in the Cuban Missile Crisis, as well as the "spy wars" between KGB and CIA, kept Russians in America's conscience during the Cold War. When Bellow writes about Romania, it is clearly exotic travel writing. Yet Bellow's purpose of the trip was not to gather material for a novel but to accompany his wife, whose mother was going through severe medical struggles. For travel writing, Bellow's fiction is rather unusual. His experiences ultimately result in political commentary about his experiences projected into the plot. Following a pattern set by Andrew Gordon's article "Saul Bellow's Spain" (2017) and Yale Richmond's "Saul Bellow in Poland" (2012), this contribution will consider Bellow's travel to and opinions of Romania, offering the American public a fresh opinion as well as a kind of personal inside look.

In 1982, Saul Bellow published his Nobel Prize-winning novel, which drew heavily on his travel experiences during his visit to Romania in December 1978, and focused on the lives of people who endured

perhaps the poorest living conditions in the socialist Eastern bloc. The Nobel laureate's overtures to the difficulties of daily life in Romania sparked American public interest. In Romania, as Anna-Karina Schneider shows, several of Bellow's novels "had been translated in the 1970s, but [Bellow] became a *persona non grata* after fictionalizing his 1977 [sic] visit to Bucharest in the bleakest terms in his novel *The Dean's December* (1982)" (354). Bellow's novel commands a simple immediacy, as the plot in Romania closely replicates his visit to Bucharest.

BELLOW'S BUCHAREST VISIT IN *THE DEAN'S DECEMBER*

The plot of the novel *The Dean's December* centers around a journalist and academic dean, Albert Corde, who compares the bleak Chicago life of crime and corruption to the totalitarian society behind the Iron Curtain in the late 1970s. Closely based on Bellow's own visit to Bucharest while accompanying his Romania-born wife Alexandra Bellow (*née* Bagdasar), a mathematician who taught at Northwestern University, Dean Corde, accompanies his Romanian wife Minna, an academic astronomer, to visit her dying mother in Bucharest. Alexandra's parents were doctors and communist party members, who served in high Romanian government posts in the immediate post-World War II period. Soon thereafter, her father died of cancer and her mother, after serving for about two years as health minister, suffered political disgrace during the "Stalinist Terror in Romania" (Bellow 931). After obtaining a Master's degree in mathematics in Bucharest, Alexandra defected to the US in 1957 and earned her PhD in mathematics from Yale.

While her family's communist party past might have turned off many Americans, Bellow in the 1930s had been complicit to Bolshevism until the Ribbentrop–Molotov Pact was announced in August, 1939. Like Arthur Koestler and other intellectuals in the 1930s, this political position was common during the depression years. David Mikics (192) points out that Bellow knew that the Bagdasar family had bravely hidden a Jewish doctor, Roza Samer Zalozziecki and her family from fascist authorities in Bucharest during the war. In 1975, the Bellows met up with her in Israel, which was described in Bellow's travel memoir *To Jerusalem and Back* (128).

Saul Bellow's mother-in-law, Florica Bagdasar (1901–1978), as the national Health Minister in the years 1946–48, pushed her government to accept American humanitarian aid (i.e., food, medicine) immediately following the war, thus saving lives and helping hundreds of thousands of starving Romanians. However, allowing American

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aid to be disbursed within a socialist country was against the Soviet policy. Additionally, Communists became suspicious, because Florica's husband had studied neurology in Boston, so she was rigorously interrogated about his falsely alleged CIA contacts. Once she was "rehabilitated" in the 1970s while being "a Dubček sympathizer" (Bellow 215), Florica occasionally met with Alexandra in Western Europe in the final decade of her life.

The hardships of her early youth during the war and her mother's severe political difficulties in the 1950s deleteriously distressed Alexandra. While the American novelist certainly found his wife's background fascinating, for Bellow nothing could top his actual visit to Romania for over a month at the end of 1978. Not only did he get to see first-hand the abysmal living conditions, but he noted how denizens of Bucharest endured under overbearing totalitarianism. In his biography, James Atlas paints Bellow as "an innocent American protected by the indulgence of American Democracy, [for whom] the brutal politics of Eastern Europe provided still another opportunity of reality instruction" (484). Corde sleeps in his mother-in-law's decaying apartment, while Minna attempts to master the labyrinthine red tape obstructing her ability to attend to and ameliorate the emotional needs of her dying mother, Valerie, in an ICU in Bucharest. The ugliness of daily life under Ceaușescu is evident, as innumerable examples from this novel reveal. To avoid persecution of innocent people, Bellow's reportorial approach alters the names and occupations of Alexandra's relatives and other Romanians he encountered during this winter travel. As Minna puts it,

> I've been so long in the States that I forgot how things are here. We made such fun of Valerie [Minna's mother] and her shopping lists, but look how people have to dress. The women are so depressed. They have no food, and there's nothing to wear… Now I keep thinking of all the items I could have brought from Chicago. (76)

Albert Corde experiences what could only be classified as vivid culture shock while residing in his mother-in-law's Bucharest apartment:

> The room was dark, the cold mortifying. The toilet, located in a small cell apart from the bathroom, was Gothic. The toilet paper was rough. A long aeruginous pipe only gave an empty croak when you pulled the chain. No water above. You poured from one of the buckets into the bowl… all this was like old times in the States, before the age of full convenience. It took you back. (51)

The derelict toilet facilities and Corde's recollection of his childhood in an immigrant neighborhood in Chicago, the fact how Romania "takes him back" exemplify what Martyna Bryla postulates of the "Other Europe existing beyond the present moment" insofar as the experience of an Eastern Bloc country is "capable of affecting the character in unexpected ways" (486). Corde's wry humor appears in relation to poor heating in apartments in December: "A temperature of fifty-five degrees [Fahrenheit] was ideal for cyclamens" (57).

The perspicacious novelist depicts not only Valarie's neighbors as *Securitate* informers, but even a trusted maid, friends and relatives collaborate with the comprehensive state surveillance system. The paranoid regime had a considerable network of undercover informants. *Securitate* agents kept files on citizens as well as on foreign visitors. Opinions deviating from the party line made people "objects" to be watched. Gabriela Glăvan reveals that "[d]uring the surveillance process, the refashioning of the 'object's' life usually began by infiltrating at all levels of his/her private and professional life, with a clear preference for colleagues and friends" (160). Surveillance is revealed early in the novel: "The fat concierge, Ioanna, was in continual conversation with these loungers. She reported to them. But she was also a friend of the family. That was how it went" (Bellow 9). At the funeral scene, Corde observes "Ioanna beside the coffin, which has just arrived. She was kissing Valerie's hand, laying it to her cheek. She wept brokenly to the dead woman… asking to be forgiven," ostensibly for working as an informer (210). Intelligence-gathering at the most elementary level is brought to light by Dennis Deletant:

> Every block of flats was required to nominate from among its residents a 'caretaker' who would be responsible not only for the upkeep of the building but also for keeping a register of all tenants and visitors who spent more than 24 hours in a flat. Every fortnight the register would be inspected by the local Securitate officer in whose 'beat' the block fell. (37)

The fact that Corde's wife had defected obliged the totalitarian authorities to ruin as much as possible the first visit back to her homeland, culminating in preventing hospital visits with her mother. Minna, like Alexandra Bellow, was "treated as a traitor to the Romanian state and punished by being denied access to her dying mother" (Mikic 194). When the menacing Colonel from the *Securitate* offers Mr. and Mrs. Corde the opportunity to visit the dying Valerie as often as they wished, it is on condition that Valerie be transferred out of ICU to a multi-patient room. Of course, this will lead to the disconnecting of medical instruments regulating her vital signs, thereby resulting in her death

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in a matter of minutes. The cynicism of the Colonel's spiteful offer "was just his way of sticking it to the daughter. A bonus" (Bellow 64). It climaxed the Colonel's way of demonstrating his might over Westerners with their freedom to travel and their pelf which the Colonel candidly envied. His coercion creates extreme emotional anxieties about how doctors might address the illness of Minna's mother and Minna's ensuing guilt that being a "traitor" who had defected to the West might have dire consequences for her mother's medical treatment. Dr. Moldovanu performed a tracheotomy on Valerie, but Minna, still not allowed to visit her, was told by the doctor that more detailed decisions as well as her condition could not be discussed on the phone; she would have to come in person to the hospital (which was forbidden by the Colonel). Bellow fulminates against this mistreatment, "[h]e had come to Europe to interpose himself between Minna and this bughouse country. For clearly the guys in charge were psychopaths. There were no rational grounds for what they did" (77).

In his position as an American witnessing the appalling behavior of Romanian state officials towards his wife, Bellow showed complete loyalty to his wife and her extended family, while trying to use whatever leverage he could muster to help her, such as contacting the US ambassador to Romania, Rudolph Aggrey, an African American official portrayed in The Dean's December (Bellow 58–70), who had been appointed by President Carter the year before. In evaluating Romanian society with the US ambassador stationed in Bucharest in the novel, Corde discusses cultural topics (both Corde and the ambassador worked in Paris) before zeroing in on "the outlook and psychology of officialdom in the Communist world, the peculiar psychoses of penitentiary societies like this one" (Bellow 61). Corde offers a universal "scale of evil" he envisions in reviewing historically oppressive conditions people have been forced to contend with: "A is bad, but B is worse and C worse still. When you reach N, unspeakable evil, A becomes trivial" (63). The wiretapping, the informers and the frustratingly-long wait for bureaucratic permission to make routine hospital visits to a dying relative are modest slights during their brief visit, Corde acknowledges, compared to gulags or the torture Romanian dissidents have perennially endured.

In an interview, Romanian novelist Norman Manea stated that "living in a state without liberty, the paths for evil are catastrophically increased" (Stavans 103). As Corde discusses with the ambassador, "I have a fairly complete idea of how things are in this part of the world – forced labor, mental hospitals for dissenters, censorship" (Bellow 63). Furthermore, he witnesses many kinds of more or less "imprisoned"

echelons of Romanian people and differing degrees of "unfreedom," all ominously resulting in greater suffering than his wife's. Nevertheless, as Corde mournfully informs the US Ambassador, "My wife thinks that her mother can't understand why she doesn't come" (64). Corde notes empathetically that not just his wife but all Romanian people "were faced by the organized prevention of everything that came natural" (108). Gustavo Sánchez-Canales notes that "the dean's patronymic surname connoting 'heart' underscores his willingness to communicate with others through the heart" (148), a connotation Bellow intended as Corde strongly empathizes with the masses of suffering Romanians. In an essay published in *Esquire* magazine in 1983, Bellow lays blame for the cruel political and economic situation in which Romanians found themselves in the decades following World War II squarely on President Franklin Delano Roosevelt: "For opinions on his [Roosevelt's] dealings with Stalin I refer the readers to the Poles, the Czechs, the Romanians et cetera" (Bellow 325), whereas no blame is directed to the Iron Guard or any other fascist powers ruling wartime Romania, a position Bellow will later change.

By contrast, Bellow shows how American freedom, especially since the 1960s, has encouraged the disappearance of decency, while ordinary Romanians living under oppression have not lost this essential element of social behavior. Yet Romania offers what Corde appositely perceived as a "miserable damn comfortless life, and scary as well as boring" (118). As Peter Hyland emphasizes, Corde "is largely isolated from those who visit [his mother-in-law] Valerie's apartment by his inability to speak their language, and aware of his impotence in a society in which he is literally 'alien'" (91–92). Broken English and some French make communication between Romanians and Corde barely possible. Accordingly, Corde is linguistically dependent on his wife. In contrast to the non-Jewish protagonist, Bellow's parents emigrated from St. Petersburg, Russia to a town just outside Quebec, Canada, in 1914, a year before the future novelist's birth. Through birthplace, heritage and religious education, he learned as a child English, Yiddish, Hebrew, French and some Russian. Bellow spoke his rusty Russian with Romanians he encountered, communicating better with Romanians than the novel indicates. Bellow's fictional Gentile stand-in, Albert Corde, only speaks some French.

Unlike other American authors, such as John Updike, whose character in his short story "Bech in Rumania" (1966) meets two Romanian fiction writers, or Philip Roth, who fictionalized his visits with dissident writers in Prague during the 1970s (Bryla 16), Corde never meets intellectuals while visiting Bucharest. In contrast, Bellow actually met

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writers "at a small official gathering at the Romanian Writers' Union" and was rudely insulted by communist officials, as Norman Manea affirmed (239). Unlike Roth and Bellow, Updike portrays little oppression in Henry Bech's visit to pre-Ceaușescu Romania and other East Bloc countries in late 1964, which fictionalizes John Updike's travel to Romania. As biographer Adam Begley puts it, "Bech's report from the other side of the Iron Curtain is conspicuously devoid of Cold War angst" (303), and though somewhat annoyed by Romanian officials, Updike's protagonist groused about American government officials in Bucharest as well, in stark contrast to Bellow's protagonist.

Alexandra Bellow commented on her husband's accuracy in recording their December 1978 visit: "He didn't actually have to invent anything… there was so much going on and it was all so dramatic and so brutal. He didn't exaggerate one iota. It was real life, told poetically by a great writer" (Mikics 199). Corde notes how women friendly to Minna and her mother waited for hours in line so that he might experience better food than the vast majority of Bucharest's inhabitants could rarely, if ever, enjoy:

> Aged women rose at four to stand in line for a few eggs, a small ration of sausages, three or four spotted pears. Corde had seen shops and the produce, the gloomy queues—brown, gray, black, mud colors, and an atmosphere of compulsory exercise in the prison yard. The kindly ladies were certainly buying on the black market, since Corde and Minna gave Gigi all the lei, bought with dollars at the preposterous rate of exchange". (51)

Corde perceptively noted that "feeding an American must have diverted these elderly women" (52) who benignly wish him to experience good things while accompanying Minna as her mother suffers her final days. Visiting a communist country undergoing an austerity plan, with strict food rationing and power cuts (Massino 228), Corde presents the social system of Ceaușescu's Romania to American readers as a heterodoxy of democratic political theory. At the same time, he sympathizes with local women who show grace and cordiality: "Corde observed that here was another case of humane cooperation among women in a Communist society… People in reduced emotional circumstances set their affections on something or other. They were pitted against Eros—against the universe" (Bellow 75). After Corde's lobbying with the ambassador, the Colonel permits Minna just one visit to her mother in the ICU; with a bribe of "a pack or two of king-sized Kents" (168), Minna's Aunt Gigi visits her sister as well. Valerie dies later that evening.

BELLOW'S SELF-CENSORSHIP

As Vicente Andreu-Besó succinctly puts it, "It is highly ironical to find the protagonist, Albert Corde, fighting corruption in his articles about Chicago and, at the same time, bribing officials to solve his bureaucratic problems in Bucharest" (35). Michael Glenday likewise observes, "the repressions of the Communist State are too weakly suggested in this novel, and the venality of Romanian officialdom, easily bribed with a packet of Kents, hardly does justice to the unconscionable reality of life in the communist bloc" (147). However, the ethical reasons for under-representing his wife's most egregious experiences, as well as those of the Romanians Bellow witnessed, are well known. According to Mark Connelly, Bellow was "concerned about the book's impact on his wife's family in Romania, who could face persecution because of its unflattering portrait of the regime" (59).

Undoubtedly, Bellow had to be particularly circumspect in how his fictional Romanian characters express themselves. No epithets, for example, nor jokes about Nicolae or Elena Ceauşescu, which were so common among the people, appear in the novel (Glăvan). All the criticism of Romania in *The Dean's December* comes from the mouth of Albert Corde, or the narrator, or the naturalized US citizen Minna Corde, but not once from any fictional Romanian characters. I suggest that Bellow scrupulously committed self-censorship for the first time in his literary career. As a consequence, Bellow wrote about some, but not nearly all, of the difficulties of his visit, even though he safely resided in the US. His motivation was to pass some standard of Romanian censorship lest his novel become deleterious to his Romanian in-laws. This self-designed censorship made unfamiliar demands on Bellow's creative process. He had not been compelled before to write fiction under such pressure. While censorship may have become a developed theme, fears of the consequences of the novel are not directly or indirectly expressed by Corde. Within Romania, Liviu Maliţa reveals that the term "censorship" itself was "purged from public discourse, where censorship was officially presented as a positive one, of 'coordination and guidance' for cultural and artistic activity in Romania. Only Ceauşescu could afford to use [the term] openly" (28). Corde's empathy and frustration focuses primarily on his wife's hospital visits and Romanians' daily struggles. Bellow's letters came out in 2010, revealing an anxiety of his writing and editing process. In a letter dated August 15, 1981, Bellow wrote, "my book may do friends of the family harm; it keeps me up at nights… How could I face Sanda [Loga] if I increase fame and fortune while she…

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[Note: Bellow leaves the last sentence incomplete]. Doing wrong will cause severe suffering in every way and will Alexandra forgive me?" (Bellow 451). Exactly four and a half months later on New Year's Eve 1981, Bellow confesses to Philip Roth, "I may have a breakdown. I'm not pretending, I'm ready for a padded cell, *The Dean* took it out of me" (462). Bellow feared retribution for writing too candidly despite much self-censorship. Given Bellow's tendencies to write according to his personal experiences, it would not require much effort by *Securitate* sleuths.

While fearing the system of Romanian oppression, Bellow nevertheless conveys the systematic daily surveillance of ordinary people going about their own business. His worries about Alexandra's relatives extended to Romanian writers with whom he had briefly met, as he kept that meetings with the Romanian Writers Union out of *The Dean's December* as well. He might have known about the vicious attack on dissident Monica Lovinescu in 1977 arranged by *Securitate* or about other cases. Bellow accordingly held back on promulgating his or Alexandra's worst experiences to the wider American public. As he told Manea in an interview, "I was aware that I was not telling the whole truth about the one place or the other" (Bellow and Manea 172).

According to Martin Corner, the journalist Albert Corde in his article expresses that, whether in Bucharest or Chicago, the unspoken division in human society is between the doomed, those who are tacitly assumed to be disposable, and those who do the disposing (121). In vastly different ways, both systems oppress ostracized groups of their respective citizenry:

> Instances are not being stacked up as evidence of some prior judgement, nor are the details being made to carry Corde's personal feeling. Bellow's description is entirely particular, yet the passages convey much of the truth of Ceausescu's Romania, a public truth of history overshadowed by the pervasive twentieth century realities of loss and death. The domination of arbitrary rules; the surviving strength of families and connections; shoddiness and general incompetence; individual resourcefulness against the odd. (Corner 126)

Bellow brings a vision of a universal wasteland encompassing both the rotten West detailed in the City of Chicago and the iron-curtained East particularized by communist Bucharest. Bellow's treatment of Romania was not criticized by reviewers. The only criticism was that the novel was too softly critical. The fact that Bellow links life struggles in Bucharest with impoverished and imprisoned African Americans and the social ills of crime in Chicago was significantly less well-received, though Corde's ensuing epiphany of enlightened

spirituality enhanced by his amorous marriage enables him to overcome these malicious conflicts.

FOLLOW-UP REVISIONS OF ROMANIANS IN *RAVELSTEIN*

In *Ravelstein*, the final novel published in 2000, when Bellow was nearly 85 years old, Romanians come to the forefront of some debates with considerable revisions. Overwhelming critical attention was paid to Bellow's portrait of Allan Bloom, a classics professor who replaced the retiring Mircea Eliade on the Committee on Social Thought at the University of Chicago in 1979. Aside from outing Bloom as an HIV-positive pedophile, Bellow derided many other colleagues at the university. Begun after moving from Chicago to Brookline in the Boston metropolitan area, Bellow's *roman à clef* centers on Abe Ravelstein, the fictional *alter ego* of Bloom (Salomon 167), who denounces the Romanian Mircea Eliade as a fascist (in the novel Eliade is renamed Radu Grielescu). Eliade was the leading scholar of comparative religions in the US and had taught at Chicago since 1957, keeping his fascist past in the 1930s undercover. Bellow had worked with him on the Committee on Social Thought since 1962, and a close friendship developed. Saul met his wife Alexandra through Eliade in the early 1970s. The two couples—the Bellows and the Eliades (Christinel and Mircea)—socialized at weekly gatherings and dinners on and off campus from the 1970s to the mid-1980s. Eliade had made numerous suggestions on the manuscript of *The Dean's December*, particularly on the Romanian representations. Bellow and Eliade remained close friends until Eliade's death in 1986. The biographical information is significant because, as Willis Salomon maintains, "[t]he intersection of biography and elegy govern the unfolding narrative of Bellow's novel *Ravelstein*, especially in Bellow's construction of character" (167).

At his death, Bellow and Bloom attended Mircea Eliade's funeral held at the Rockefeller Memorial Chapel on April 28, 1986, where Bellow read the funeral panegyric, honoring Eliade's enormous scholarly contributions. Later that year, Bellow was featured for six minutes in a TV recording, "Mircea Eliade—His Name and His Destiny" (1992), praising the accomplishments and personality of his close friend.

Over the course of decades since his death, it has been documented that Eliade had been a fervent supporter of the Iron Guard, a mystic right-wing political force in the late 1930s, which formed a coalition government with General Ion Antonescu, the Nazi *conducător*, who persecuted Romanian Jews during World War II. The fascist coali-

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tion government of the Iron Guard and Antonescu's party enabled Eliade's diplomatic career from 1940–45 as a representative of fascist Romania at embassies in London and Lisbon. In the novel *Ravelstein*, the stand-in character is a contemptible political advocate "in league with the killers" (Bellow 202). Abe Ravelstein sententiously informs Chick, the Bellow-character, of the Romanian's ugly past: "Grielescu is making use of you. In the old country he was a fascist. He needs to live that down. The man was a Hitlerite" (124). However, who really informed Bellow about Eliade's fascist past was not he classics professor Allan Bloom, but fellow novelist Philip Roth. Five years after Bloom had passed away from AIDS, Roth mailed to Bellow in 1997 Norman Manea's article "Felix culpa" issued in *The New Republic*. Detailing Eliade's pro-Nazi articles written in the Romanian language, Manea criticized Eliade for not owning up to his colossal error in judgment. As Mihai Mindra points out, Manea's essay was "considered scandalous in xenophobic Romania but mild in democratic United States" (84). Bellow's letters show how he learns that this friend passionately advocated for pro-Iron Guard politics in Romanian periodicals, including enthusiastic assessments of Hitler's Germany.

One would be remiss not to mention that Alexandra Bellow divorced her husband in 1986 and *Ravelstein* offers hostile references to her. However, savagely depicting a wife or ex-wife ruining the life of her husband has been a common feature for Bellow, much like Bellow had his first wife Anita Goshkin as "Iva" in *Dangling Man* (1944), his second ex-wife Sondra Tschacbasov as "Madeline" in *Herzog* (1964) and disparaging comments about his third wife Susan Glassman as "Denise Citrine" in *Humboldt's Gift* (1975). The advocacy of Romanians in his travel fiction had changed dramatically since Bellow showed no benign Romanians in *Ravelstein*, written two decades after Bellow's trip to Romania. Bellow reverses his sympathetic depiction of Alexandra's deceased mother, Florica, whom the narrator in *Ravelstein* impugns as anti-Semitic, in spite of her successfully hiding Jews during World War II. American readers of *Ravelstein*, focusing on Bellow's portrait of Allan Bloom, will have to be *qui vive* for his attacks on Romanians.

In his review of *Ravelstein*, Norman Podhoretz states that "Bellow takes so little trouble to disguise the characters who appear here that they are all easily recognizable as this or that person. Calling *Ravelstein* a *roman à clef* therefore verges on understatement" (n.p.). Bellow ends *The Dean's December* with an epiphany for the professionally defeated Albert Corde. Dewey Spangler, modeled on the political journalist Richard Rovere (Bellow 422), attacks Albert Corde and ruins his academic career (much like Madeline

ruins Moses Herzog's career in academia in Bellow's bestseller from 1964). Influenced by the muckraking tradition, Spangler is a pundit whose writing is published in the top political journals and appears on prominent TV news programs, such as "Face the Nation." Rovere memorably pursued "dirt" on conservative politicians, especially Senators Joseph McCarthy and Barry Goldwater. However, back in the 1930s, when Bellow and Rovere were Marxist colleagues, they were on the friendliest of terms. In *The Dean's December*, Rovere's stand-in Spangler is preparing to interview Ceaușescu in preparation for an article on developments in Communist countries. Bellow suggests that Spangler's journalism will be very friendly to the dictator.

DISCUSSION

As a *roman à clef*, Bellow's final novel construed as Bellow's "memorial" to Bloom, clearly does more than just fictitiously parrot real people at the University of Chicago, as Podhoretz asserts. As to the Bellow stand-in narrator named Chick, the reader never gets any sense of his peripetia regarding his close friendship with the stand-in for Eliade. That Bellow had closely befriended an Iron Guard philosopher for two and a half decades must have been quite revolting. Saul Bellow became so conservative that he could not see the forest for the trees; he could not recognize neo-fascists standing right before him. Indeed, in one passage in *The Dean's December*, Bellow stand-in Corde essentially expresses sympathy for elderly members of the Iron Guard. At the crucial funeral scene, Bellow tellingly represents older Romanians paying their last respects to Corde's deceased mother-in-law, Valerie:

> They came out with a sort of underfed dignity in what was left of their pre-socialist wardrobe, to affirm that there was a sort of life—and perhaps, as communists or even Iron Guardists (it was conceivable), they had sinned against it—the old European life which at its most disgraceful was infinitely better than this present one. (122)

In this passage, "the old European life," including life under Iron Guard persecution of Jews, is shown to have been "infinitely" preferable to life under Nicolae Ceaușescu. Bellow thereby relativizes the murders of Jews perpetrated by the Iron Guard as they wear their notorious green uniforms to Valerie's funeral. The drastically conflicting feelings on display regarding Iron Guard members in *The Dean's December* and *Ravelstein* could not be any starker. Likewise, Corde's defense of his Communist official mother-in-law when Dewey Spangler associates her with the Romanian Stalinist Ana Pauker (173) is in severe

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contrast with Bellow's representation in *Ravelstein* of Emil Cioran, the Romanian-born French philosopher, who "cling[s] to France, home is disgusting… this applies to somebody like Cioran" (107–108). The real Romania which Bellow visited co-exists with another mental country provided in his final campus novel, and it was his personality which ordained Bellow's method.

Overall, Bellow's artistic achievement in *Ravelstein* is marred by personal swipes directed at his fourth ex-wife, with a penchant for cheap shots at anyone connected to her country of origin, including some minor characters, a complete reversal from his 1982 novel. Indeed, life imitates art, as Bellow's final autofictional novel reveals him to behave like Dewey Spangler, the American antihero in *The Dean's December*, who takes a soul-searching conversation with Corde and transforms it into a sensational interview, publishes it, and consequently ruins the career of a man whose friendship spanned over thirty years. The only difference is that Spangler did his distortions to a living person, Albert Corde, who might defend his name, while in his characterizations Bellow deliberately aimed to ruin reputations of the dead: Rovere, Bloom, and Eliade.

Abstract: Saul Bellow (1915–2005) traveled to Bucharest in December, 1978, to assist his Romanian-born wife who wished to attend to her dying mother. He experienced Bucharest for the first time and realistically conveyed his wife's humiliating experience with the *Securitate* of Ceauşescu's regime in the novel *The Dean's December* (1982). This contribution will underscore the anxiety which Bellow experienced writing the novel, leading him to pre-emptive self-censorship, undermining to some extent his brief look inside communist Romania and its people during its repressive years. Bellow followed up that novel 18 years later with a pronounced anti-Romanian take in *Ravelstein* (2000) in which, among other themes, the youthful fascist past his former university colleague and friend Mircea Eliade is exploited to implicate Eliade in Profesor Ioan Culianu's murder on campus in 1991. *Ravelstein* is revealed as a cruel novel impugning a few stand-in Romanian characters, as Bellow exposes his thoroughly modified perspective on Romania.

Keywords: Saul Bellow, Romania, cold war, communist oppression, self-censorship

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