

I'm a Communist Old Bag
A novel by Dan Lungu

In the following extract, Emilia remembers an incident before 1989 at her workplace.

This is how it happened.

It was Easter Day and we were all in the workshop. We had said to the foreman that we were Orthodox Christians and that we wouldn't work on that day. This was illegal of course, but the foreman had nothing against it, providing that we made up the time later. Right from the morning we let the machines idle and laid the table with everything needed for a proper Easter celebration: bread stuffed with cheese, eggs and spices; painted eggs; Easter bread; wine. So even if we weren't at home, we could celebrate somehow. The atmosphere was pleasant, we chatted, told jokes – in a word, we were having a good time. At midday the bell rang. It wasn't our code. We looked at each other and went into full alert. We gathered everything together, shoved it in the cupboards and took up our places at the machines. It took a while before we opened up. In the doorway: Local Party Secretary Dorofte. He didn't say a thing, he started to walk around the workshop and to look in all the corners. I think it smelt of wine and eggs, even if we couldn't tell anymore. And then he bent down over the rubbish bin and took out what he had probably been looking for: painted eggshells. We hadn't thought of them.

“How did these get here?” he asked with a look of triumph.

Nobody said a thing.

“I asked you a question,” said Dorofte. Then he added, “Comrade Apostoae, you're a new member of the Party, do you think what is happening here is right?”

I looked down.

“Please take a seat at the table and take down a report. This sort of thing can't go unsanctioned.” The last remark was directed at me.

I looked for a piece of paper and something to write with, then I sat down and took a dictation. I was almost on the verge of tears.

Probably somebody had told the foreman because I hadn't even finished the report when he appeared. Dorofte tetchily explained the situation to him.

"Yes, Comrade, I'm sure you are right. But it's nothing more than tradition, you know how it is... Not necessarily religious feelings... And then, during lunch break, Comrade, well, everyone eats what they've brought from home... what their wife or mother-in-law puts in their bag," the foreman sweet-talked him.

Our big diplomat of a foreman, you can't say fairer than that! Otherwise he wouldn't have made it to foreman.

But Dorofte continued to be petulant, he made us all sign the report. We looked at the foreman, and he nodded.

After that they went into the office.

I don't know what the foreman could have told him, how he charmed him, but at some point our foreman stuck his head round the door and gave us a well-known signal: bring me something good to drink. He always had coffee and cigarettes in his office. We gave him the best cognac we found because the whiskey was hard to get out quickly. That was already a good sign. After two hours, he gave us a signal: bring another bottle. So it had been resolved.

All our high spirits had perished. It was past home time, but no one dared leave. We were waiting to see the end and to take a dressing-down from the foreman.

About five, they came out supporting each other. The foreman wasn't a big drinker, but if he had to get drunk, he did. On this occasion he didn't have a choice. While he was walking Dorofte out the door towards the taxi, he held out the report to me. I tore it up and threw it in the bin.

He returned, took his belongings and slurred, "We'll talk tomorrow."

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Editura POLIROM
B-dul Carol I nr. 4
P.O. Box 266
700506 Iași
Romania