

Series of interviews

Rareş: When did you start working in “Alimentra”?

A: mmm... in the 80`s, 1980? 81?

R: That was also the period where you couldn't find much in the stores, right?

A: There were some stores. Not many. They were state owned shops.

For sure not as many as today...

R: Yes, but food. I am talking about food.

There was not enough food to be found.

A: Yes. And there were also ration cards.

Most basic foods were rationed. For meat, milk, eggs, chicken...

there was a ration.... that was the way it was then.

Now it's not like that anymore.

R: Yes, and when these goods were limited to an amount per person you had to queue anyway to get them.

No? I had to queue to get my ration.

A: Yes, there were queues... that was the way it was then.

Now it`s not like that anymore.

R: But why did people have to queue If we had ration cards?

A: Well for instance for eggs, you got up to ten eggs per month but they would only bring eggs like twice a week.

R: And people would queue to get them...

A: Yes, very early in the morning. Very early!

R: And there were also situations where people would queue for hours and hours and then not get anything?

A: Of course...

R: So you would stand in line for 6 hours and get nothing?

A: Yes! But people knew this very well.

Sometimes they left their milk bottles there in the queue...

because some of them they were old or sick...

poor people... and then they came back later

to get their place in the milk line.

R: And what were the most desired products?

A: Meat, eggs, milk. Because these were scarce

and sometimes you couldn't get any.

Chicken and meat would come in the evening around six, half past five.

R: You received the meat in the afternoon?

A: In the afternoon around six you would get the car delivering the goods.

And we would sell them outside the "Alimentara",

because in the "Alimentara" people would cause a commotion and break a lot of things.

R: Aha....

A: Yes, they were sold in a separate rooms

and there people waited in line from...very early in the morning....

R: Like from 3 o'clock...

A: From 3am in the morning for milk.

R: And then from eight or nine we would stand in line for the meat...

A: Yes, till five or six...

R: And what else did we have to stand in line for?

A: For everything, even the beer was sold separately,

and beer would go by very fast.

Meat also sold very fast, horse meat and sometimes veal.

R: Was the horse meat labelled accordingly?

A: Yes, according to veal meat (laughing)

R: And what were some of the products that sold very slowly?

What was difficult to sell?

A: Well not the food stuff, food was sold, all of it, all.

As soon as someone said that 'there's this and that', in the afternoon there was total war. Nothing was left.

R: And this was what? early 80`s, 85-86?

A: It was 1980 when the «Alimentara» where I was working started.

It was the fifth store of this type in our town.

There were five «Alimentara» stores.

There was really a war when we first opened because we had everything, a lot of things got smashed, oil bottles... and this and that...

And after that, we sold outside...

in a different room behind the store - oil, sugar, all outside, in the back.

In the end there were huge lines and people would fight.

God only knows the nightmares I had before coming to work,

I kept thinking that the next day I have to go to work.

And I didn't want to go work the next day, there were enormous food lines.

R: Were there situations when you had to call the police?

A: Yes. Yes! I worked with the police;

I worked with the police right next to me.

I had to check people`s identity card, they had to show their identity card.

These were checked so nobody could buy twice.

But who would really remember if someone had been in the line buying before or not?!

R: How long were the working hours at the «Alimentara»?

A: 8 hours.

R: And you had food. No ? As you were working at the «Alimentara»

it must have been easier for you.

A: No, no. Because we were checked at the door, Rareş.

R: Who was checking ? The colleagues ? How was this working ?

A: Well... everyone who had stood in line all day  
and got nothing would come to the front of the store  
and check what we were taking home. You could not leave with... food.

R: So the people who were in line and didn't get anything...

A: Yes,... First they would check to see if you worked there  
and then they would check your purse.

They came in the front of the store and they checked you.

R: But not your colleagues?

A: No, no. The boss would check you  
but if you needed something you could go into his office  
and say you wanted to buy something but only a reasonable amount.

R: And what did you like the most?

A: Whatever was needed in the house.

R: Come on! Like a product, like salami... you know...  
like a favourite product, something that you liked a lot?

A: Favourite?! But everything was my favourite!

Because everything that was on the market disappeared.

Everything! Once we got canned cat food.

And people didn't read the label... and they kept buying like dozens...  
and when they got to the cash register

I couldn't let them have more than four.

And I also bought it and only when I got home saw that it was cat food.

But we ate it and we were ok.

Rareş and G.

R: In 78 Andreea was born, were you worried you might not have food for her?

G: No, No, I wasn't worried. For several reasons, the first one being that I was really at the source.

R: Where?

G: I was working at the Agricultural cooperative and I had 50 chickens and 10 sheep, I was also raising pigs.

I would give 1 pig to the state and I would slaughter 1 - that was the deal.

But there was plenty of meat!

At one point there was something like one sheep per inhabitant

- this was not the problem.

The problem was that everything went for export.

(...)

R: So before 1980 the economy was radically different? No food shortages and so on?

G: Around '76 our milk factory was producing around 200 thousands litres of milk per day.

And also we used to have the Scandia meat processing plant, they used to make Sibiu salami.

And the animals we used to raise were impeccable...

Ok we used to criticise the weight gain which wasn't very spectacular...

in Romania you could get a weight gain of 100 grams per day

while in Belgium, France, Italy you had gains of one kilo and a half per day.

But they were using concentrated food feed and a lot of premixes that stimulated growth.

R: So in the 80's the madness started?

G: Sort of, for instance you got ``food re-distributions``.

These meant they took animals from your processing plant to another place in the country.

So sometimes, with or without approval, you would hide the real production.

For instance I would hide trailers of corn in a precipice in the forest because it was really important for me, I needed them to feed the sheep because it was really important for how the growth of the lambs.

I didn't breed 5 thousand sheep, just enough for Andrea to have something to eat.

I had like 5. But everything! Everything! was taken by the State. Everything!

R: How was meat production checked? Who would check?

There were national five year work plans that you had to follow, no?

G: Yes. What example should I give you?

One time the military authority office had us under investigations.

Normally you got a letter through from the central office of the communist party informing you that at the end of the month you had to have 80 thousand tons of beetroot.

In reality you had like... 26 thousand tons, maximum 30 tons.

With the new breeds today you can produce 60 thousands

but we did not have enough chemical fertiliser

and the ones we had you had to be careful of,

you had to know when you could use it and how, very strange.

R: So there was a monthly analysis? A yearly analysis?

G: Every month you had to report the cereal and animal production.

R: So you were a good professional but with redistribution

and everything else this fact was never really reflected in reality?

I mean you had to steal to even keep the production working...

G: No, no. It was not about theft... it was about making some... bypasses.

R: In the city you were dependent on a bread card for your ration...

G: Oh yes, the bread card, you had to queue, for milk also and for meat.

So in the 90s the district attorney was asking how can you report

8 thousand kilos when you produced only 3 thousand.

They would come and shout at us - ``What did you do with 500?``

So we wrote on the top of the report in two columns:

on one we said `` production according to the letter from the Central  
Committee: 8 thousand.”

And then you had ``actual production`` on another column: 3 thousand kilos.

R: So there were two: one official and one real.

G: Yes, on the same page.

R: Otherwise it would have been theft from production...