

## **Viorel Marineasa**

### **Mrs Steiner doesn't live here anymore**

*Translation from Romanian by Maria Jastrzebska and Cristina Baci, MTTLC student*

*How does death occur? What else can happen? The triviality of such questions depresses you.*

*You find the rabbi under the same sycamore, where the ivy grows even more invasive, under the crypt roof made of pebbles. You watch the charred crypt entrance for a signal. At regular intervals, someone releases humid emanations from the deep, you decode fragrances of doom and balms of eternal life all in the same breath.*

*You would be tempted to see what is written on those notes tossed onto the sand bed, which are full of the desires of desperate people. How do you know they're desperate? Blasphemy! Have you not, by any chance, grabbed one and read it?*

Angela, who now calls herself Paulina-Alfreda, will bring more news of the tenement house on Reșița, currently Iuliu Maniu Street, made up of standardised apartments: room, kitchen, outdoor WC, room, kitchen, outdoor WC, room, kitchen, outdoor WC. The estate of Mrs Steiner, the true owner of the property, begins right on the corner of the thick gate. Her apartment was a bit better equipped though: three rooms, one kitchen, a hallway, one bathroom and a glass-panelled veranda. No one knows if the land was hers or if the authorities just tolerated her on her former land. It was a real adventure when Mrs Steiner tried to get to the two garden armchairs located about two metres from the doorway in the direction of the yard, as she suffered from a disease of the spine (contracted at

birth or after giving birth) and walked with difficulty, dragging one leg and almost always making use of a cane, with the sofa on the veranda serving as guide and support. If she makes an effort to remember, Angela, aka Paulina, aka Alfreda, aka Paulina-Alfreda, she can see Mr Steiner performing two roles after his release from prison (where he was held for excess property? Zionist views? a mere opinion?): 1. giving out candied sugar to the children, a habit tracing back to before the war; she can barely make out his grey hair and baldness starting at his forehead, and spreading to the tip of his head, or his face marked by an endless exhaustion; 2. Being laid back out on the veranda, entirely covered in a bed sheet, resting his head on a brick. A candle was lit every day in one corner of the veranda for year afterwards. The apartment grew darker, as the green blinds were still drawn at midday, the only source of light being the glass partition of the same veranda. Another aspect that fascinated Angela – the kitchen filled with many big, shiny bowls (her folks barely had two pots and a pan), the oven that seemed to be made of porcelain. The Community Truck delivered food daily, and, at regular intervals, a woman came to tidy up around the house, the same person who, once or twice a month during the summer, was in charge of producing enormous portions of soup noodles which she then dried, laying them out on paper and towels throughout the house, even on the armchairs in the yard. From Mrs Steiner, who allowed Angela to address her as “Steiner-neni”, and from Miss Mărioara Ancel (the same name as Paul Celan!) too, a Greek woman from Galați and widow of a French pilot who had worked for the Romanian Ministry of War and had fallen victim of German espionage in 1940 – from these two people, Angela, the little devil, learned to saw artistically, to knit and use the crochet hook to make the famous *chain stitch*.

Around the same period, Steiner-neni gave her a bed cover as a present for when she got married. Angela last saw Mrs Steiner, so to speak, in her final year of high school: completely covered with a bed sheet, with a brick under her head, she lay in the now familiar veranda filled with glass panes.

The apartment was empty for a while, until a large clan of quarrelsome Moldavians moved in.

*You notice the invasion of ferns, dogwood and hazelnut trees. Ants, butterflies, blackbirds, sparrow owls, locusts, transparent mould flies. In the ash urn – wildflowers wrapped in crepe paper. Around the charred iron gate of the crypt – a travellers' flyer (**Canada – the land of promise; Majorca – the magical island**), a tub of MATINAL margarine, wax, matches.*

On the right side of the yard, as you go in, lived Mrs Altmann, a professional when it came to jams and marmalade, and teas too. To indulge her hobby, she 'combed' all over the shores of Beghei and the edge-of-town areas in search of herbs. She owned a house on Ciprian Porumbescu Street, but couldn't actually live in it sooner because of the tenants, an endless garden and fertile apricot trees, but also white butterflies by the thousand.

Mrs Markovits was the only one whose husband hadn't died. Slightly hunched forward, she took small steps. On the table there was always a glass of water with flax seeds left to macerate, a drink recommended for easing digestion, to the effect of which Mr Markovits swore. This is where Angela borrowed cheap paperbacks and erudite tomes from. When the two spouses took the tram to the Opera House, Madame displayed a petrol grey costume, a frilled white blouse and black laced gloves.

You lied, Angela. Or you merely forgot. You left out those who gave you the two-armed candlestick as a present, that you use on holidays or whenever necessary – it's their names you can't remember. The elderly man, tiny and skinny, couldn't stand being touched, and, if you nonetheless tried it, he would twitch and start screaming; the little ones would tease him on purpose, but not Angela, she behaved exemplarily.

One must not leave out the fact that, next to the tenement house, was (and still is) the synagogue. Sometimes, Mr Markovits came home sad because the minimum number of men required for the minyan had not been met. Angela was fascinated by the wrought iron gates, the stone-slab paved yard where multi-coloured stone flowers sprang up, a part entirely different from the rest of the yard, all covered in either dust or mud. Let us not forget the walls of polished tiles. Let us

not ignore the fact that at Easter or Christmas time Angela made greeting cards for her relatives in Bucovina or Bistrița, taking inspiration in her vignettes from the leaf and flower motifs adorning the temple grilles. This temple opened its gates wide one particular day at the beginning of summer to welcome the procession of youths (those were the days!) returning with bulrushes they had picked along the river banks on the other side of the harbour, toward the Mодоș Bridge.

*You are wandering aimlessly through the infinite cemetery and you notice that enough plaques have slid to the side due to the vegetation constantly digging its way. You look for Mrs Steiner. In Gothic letters, you see: Dr Leopold Steiner and Dr Josef Steiner. And a Hebrew inscription. They may or may not be connected.*

Back on Reșița Street again. You walk into the yard that is no longer yours, but, instead, is owned by a bunch of people. People who, you'd say, have no history or personality. Useless to say, charm. Frau Steiner, that is, Steinerné, doesn't live here anymore.

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