



*Dedicated to Professor Alexandru T. Balaban
on the occasion of his 85th anniversary*

A LOST LETTER

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My friendship with Sandy Balaban goes back precisely 50 years, to a 1966 correspondence. There are many chapters in our interaction, from acquaintance through collaboration, much that I value and appreciate today and over the years.

I thought the readers of *Revue Roumaine de Chimie* might enjoy seeing a historical document which goes back to a dark period in Romanian history. It could be classified as evidence of American naivete of what life was like.

In the beginning and mid-seventies, I had three Roumanian postdocs or visitors in my group, Mihai Elian, Mircea Gheorghiu, and Victor Neagu. The first two came to me with the advice and help of Sandy Balaban, and certainly lived up to his recommendation. I also went to Roumania twice, in 1972 and 1978, visiting several laboratories in Bucharest, Cluj, and Timișoara. After my return from the second visit, I got it into my head to write a letter to Elena Ceaușescu, with the aim of helping the dismal situation with respect to chemicals, instrumentation and library materials that I saw in my visits. I knew some of the realities of living under Communist rule from my early years in a part of Poland that then was taken by the Soviets, from a year in the Soviet Union in 1960-61, and from the visits to Roumania. But I thought I could help my colleagues -- I crafted the letter carefully, in terms of the consequences to the Romanian economy and appealing at the end to her great vanity in academic matters. The letter is reproduced below.

When I sent a copy of my letter to my Roumanian friends, it caused great consternation. I could have no idea of the depravity of the Ceaușescu regime, and what they could do to people, even if they were good scientists. Or what they might do, perhaps just because someone elsewhere praised a truly good scientist in Roumania.

In the event, a reply was never received, nor the letter acknowledged. Did it ever reach Mme. Ceaușescu?



Cornell University

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September 14, 1978

Dr. E. Ceausescu
ICECHIM
Spl. Independentei 202
Bucuresti
Romania

Dear Dr. Ceausescu:

About two weeks ago I visited Bucuresti to lecture at the Centrul de Chimie Organica associated with your institute. I tried to make an appointment to see you, but through the fault of the lateness of my inquiry it proved impossible to arrange a meeting. I would have very much wanted to learn of some of the work in your institute and to tell you of our own research.

Perhaps I can accomplish some of this via this letter, leaving the rest for a future meeting when you next visit the United States or when I return to Romania. By way of introduction let me say that I am an applied theoretical chemist and a member of our National Academy of Sciences. I've attached a biography which will give you an idea of my background and scientific work. Our research is theoretical, but it is also closely tied to specific problems of structure and reactivity in organic, inorganic and organometallic chemistry. Some of our recent work is to be found in the reprints and preprints that I've sent under separate cover. I hope that these may be of interest to you and your colleagues.

Over the years I've developed a special relationship with Romania and Romanian chemistry. This has arisen from the fact that I've had no less than three able Romanian collaborators. Each of them spent a year in my research group at Cornell and then returned to Romania, continuing to make significant contributions to the science in your country. These talented coworkers have been Mircea Gheorghiu from the Polytechnic, Mihai Elian from the Center for Organic Chemistry, both from Bucuresti, and Victor Neagu from the University of Cluj. The publication list that I attach contains eight papers that I've published with these colleagues, in J. Amer. Chem. Soc., Inorg. Chem., and Rev. Roum. Chem. I've also visited Romania twice, in 1972 and just now, lecturing several times in Bucuresti, Cluj and Timisoara. In the course of my visits I've benefited greatly from discussions with not only my former coworkers, but with Profs. E. Cioranescu-Nenitzescu, M. Avram, A. Balaban and V. Sahini. I also knew the late Prof. C. Nenitzescu.

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The visits by the young people that I've mentioned to my laboratory and my trips to Romania have not only been a source of true scientific interaction and personal pleasure, but they have also given me some insight into Romanian chemistry. There are some worrisome tendencies that I've noted in the course of my visits that I feel that I should tell you about. I am taking here a great liberty for I do not know you, and indeed you may dismiss these comments out of hand. But I trust that you will not do so. For I write to you very frankly in the hope that you will take these remarks as those of a friendly and at least partially informed outside observer and also because I know that the present state and future achievements of Romanian chemistry are close to your heart.

Let me summarize as succinctly as I can what bothers me about that part of Romanian chemistry that I know: I perceive a significant decline in the resources available to chemical research and in the importance attached to basic chemical research. The resources I refer to are primarily modern instrumentation, the indispensable tools of modern chemistry, and library facilities. In the six years since my last visit there have taken place tremendous advances in instrumentation. Yet the people at the various centers I've visited have received no new instruments at all - no high resolution mass spectrometers, no laser Raman spectrographs, no ^{13}C NMR spectrometers, no large computers. They spend an inordinate amount of time keeping up with the literature, yet lack easy access to many basic journals, for instance J. Organometal. Chem. The researchers I know try very hard, with limited resources, but with the missing instruments and inadequate library facilities they just fall farther behind. Let me put it bluntly to you: Ten years ago the Centrul de Chimie Organica was a world-class institute, competitive with any modern organic research group in Europe. It no longer is that, despite the best efforts of a very talented group of scientific workers.

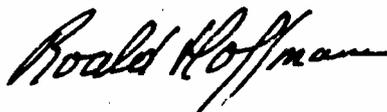
Having read some of your and your husband's analyses of Romanian science and technology, and in general keeping up with the economic and technological situation in the socialist countries, I am quite aware of and sympathetic to the need for an emphasis on applied research and development. When resources are limited this can lead to a channeling away of support from basic science. I think this is the trend I perceive in Romanian chemistry. Let me respectfully, but as forcefully as I can, say that this is a mistake. I speak with some knowledge of both academic and industrial sides of chemistry, having served or serving now as a consultant to Eli Lilly, one of our main pharmaceutical firms, Eastman Kodak, the leading photographic producers, and Allied Chemical, a major general chemical company. No significant long range progress in

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chemical industry is possible without a sound foundation of the technical cadres of that industry in basic science, and without an intense parallel development of basic research. Your country has the natural resources and energy sources for a substantial chemical industry. The important industry it has and that it is trying to develop requires a similar investment in basic research.

Please do not take my comments as disrespectful - I repeat that they are made in a frank but sympathetic way. I will be glad to talk to you personally and more specifically about some of my impressions, should we have an opportunity to meet. Which I hope we will. Let me at this time issue a personal invitation to you to visit us at Cornell University in the course of your next visit to the United States. We will be glad to have you meet our faculty and students and present a lecture on your work. All expenses in connection with such a professional visit would be provided by the Department of Chemistry at Cornell. It would be a great pleasure to make your acquaintance.

Respectfully yours,



Roald Hoffmann,
John A. Newman
Professor of Physical Science

RH:es
Encl.