



No crumb shall be left behind. Perceptions of food waste across generations

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore whether there are age-specific differences in perceptions about food waste in two groups of women living in Bucharest (born in/after 1989 vs mature in 1989), as well as the extent to which such perceptions are influenced by relatively recent periods of food shortage they may have experienced/heard of (Communism, the transition period). While circumstances such as the difference in the pace of personal/professional lives, available budgets as well as other wider-scale economic factors (such as a general food shortage) are proven to dictate, to a large extent, how the elder group acquire food, it will be argued that their present-day beliefs about the value of food and strategies to avoid food waste appear to be rooted in their childhood experiences. Additionally, members of the elder group seem to have developed food saving and recycling practices that inadvertently transform them into exemplary eco-friendly citizens.

Keywords

Food saving, food waste, aging, food shortage, communism, post-communism, recycling

This qualitative research is placed at the crossroads of studies concerning the life of retired persons and food waste studies in Romania, with a milestone set (for comparison purposes) around the 1989 Revolution in Romania. The findings reflected in this paper are the result of six individual interviews conducted with three women who were adults at the time of and three women who were born close to the 1989 Revolution.

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In conducting this research, I set out to find out, on the one hand, whether food scarcity in the Communist era still influences excessive purchases which inevitably result in waste (apparently not perceived as such, but as generous provisioning) and, on the other hand, for those born in or after 1989, whether stories of Communist food shortages heard from parents/grandparents inform their present-day supposed awareness of and fight against food waste. As these specific research questions were likely to obliterate other types of experiences that were instrumental in creating the respondents' attitudes towards food waste (e.g. changes in life circumstances that impose budget limitations, food preparation practices they were exposed to in childhood and which they stand by as adults, etc.), efforts have been made to formulate questions in such a way as not to lead respondents into confirming that Communism is, indeed, at the root of their present-day perceptions of food waste. Instead, the matter of food waste was used, with both groups, as a starting point for more complex discussions which surfaced personal histories around food procurement and spontaneous recollections of situations where a specific mechanism was devised to cope with food shortage.

In my discussions with the six interviewees, several collateral topics emerged organically: the ethics and morality of food saving practices, with a focus on charity and cases in which it can help avoid throwing food away, the question of authority vs experience in assessing when a food item is fit for consumption, individual approaches to dealing with food scares, as well as discussions around the hierarchy of waste matters (plastic, glass, paper, food, etc.). This paper lists the common elements identified within each group and the differences that resulted from the comparison I made between groups or that respondents spontaneously made with other age groups within their family. The purpose was that of offering an outline of the way in which each group (considered to be representative of a generation, as shown further on) reflects on its own food consumption and waste prevention practices. Mention should be made that the notion of group is not intended to reflect an awareness that each interviewee may have had about her common views with the other interlocutors, but rather a distinction that I made based on the initial age and cooking experience criteria I had in mind when choosing who I was to talk to.

Literature review

Given the complexity of the theoretical background against which this research stands, I have chosen, for ease of use purposes, to delineate each category of related academic literature separately.

The question of aging

Several studies attempt to paint the picture of a retired person's life in Romania from different points of view, one of the topics approached being the way in which public policy aimed at tackling essential issues affecting the lives of the aging population impacts the structure of the social service system (Bodogai and Cutler 2014). Bodogai and Cutler, for instance, offer detailed statistical data that support projections of a rapid aging

of the Romanian population (Bodogai and Cutler 2014:148) as well as retired persons' increasing budget limitations, with the average monthly pension reaching close to half of the net average wage (Bodogai and Cutler 2014:150). Other topics identifiable within the aging research landscape are that of communication between general practitioners and elderly patients and the types of preconceptions that inform the former's perception of the latter (Craciun 2016) as well as parental and filial responsibility norms that make a difference between East and West-European societies (Daatland 2011). Though not directly connected to the subject of this paper, this set of articles sheds light on the economic and social limitations that a Romanian retired person's life is subject to.

A comparative discussion of food procurement and waste prevention practices in the two age groups referred to above starts from the assumption that there are, indeed, generational differences to be observed and analyzed. In this context, reference should be made to Karl Mannheim's discussion of what a generation is, from a sociological point of view. The first argument that Mannheim makes and which is relevant within the context of this research is that a generation differs from a concrete social group (e.g. family) because it exists even if its members are not specifically aware of their being part of it; it also differs from an association in that members do not voluntarily adhere to the group for the accomplishment of a specific aim (Mannheim 1952:288-289). Another element worth considering here is that Mannheim's generation is rather similar to the "class position" (Mannheim 1952:289) and that "[...] the unity of generations is constituted essentially by a similarity of location of a number of individuals within a social whole" (Mannheim 1952:290). This location entails "[...] definite modes of behavior, feeling and thought" (Mannheim 1952:291). Moreover, when defining a "generation unit", Mannheim stresses the similarity in the constituent data of its members (Mannheim 1952:304), and the existence of a similar response to common experiences (Mannheim 1952:306).

Based on the elements above, the two groups considered in this paper were believed to be part of two different generations, with the Romanian 1989 Revolution set as a milestone separating the two sets of food procurement/saving experiences they were exposed to. The existence of a generation-specific response to food shortage during Communism and to food waste messaging in post-Socialist Romania was to be confirmed/belied following the interviews conducted. None of the respondents was aware of the others' response to a specific situation or answer to a specific question, so that the common elements that were identified were those organically emerging in discussions around the same topic. Therefore, it is not possible to speak of a conscious adherence to the generation-specific principles of food provisioning and waste prevention, but rather of that precise similar response to common experiences that Mannheim referred to.

Building on Mannheim's work around generations, Pilcher proposes the use of the term generation when kinship is involved and of the phrase "social generation" when the group referred to would most accurately be described as "[...] people within a delineated population who experience the same significant event within a given period of time." (Pilcher 1994:483).

Pilcher also clarifies three dimensions of Mannheim's theory of generations that are of definite interest for sociology. First, there is the connection between biology and the social, namely the fact that the process of aging, without strict limitations to physiological aspects, does have an influence on social processes (Pilcher 1994:485). Second, there is the matter of time, understood as subjectively lived experiences, and that of contemporaneity, which is not a coincidence of time frames, but an exposure to the same type of influences (Pilcher 1994:486). Third, there is the question of language, the analysis of which is, in Pilcher's view, a solution to connecting historical time with a generation's consciousness. The purpose of this analysis would be to identify what is common in a group of persons' mode of thinking and to what extent what is being expressed is reflective of what is known about the specific age that a group of persons belongs to (Pilcher 1994:493).

All three dimensions that Pilcher chooses to highlight are relevant for the purposes of the present paper in that respondents were aware and capable of identifying age-specific differences in food procurement and waste prevention practices triggered by changes in lifestyle and life dynamics brought about by the passage of time. Also, the common influences they were exposed to surfaced as common responses to questions around their motivations behind treating food in a specific way. Finally, the language each of the respondents used reinforced on the one hand the idea that each group was part of a specific generation and on the other hand the fact that each generation's perceptions of food waste was rooted in a different set of formative experiences.

It is also worth mentioning here one contribution to the body of scientific research situated at the crossroads between psychology and the anthropology of aging, namely professor Michael Smyer's concept of "greening gray", a phrase defining the aging population's potential role in combatting climate change due, in a nutshell, to their specific perception of the passage of time and prioritization of actions to take in relation to the environment. Smyer, who is also a Co-director of the Center on Aging and Work/Workplace Flexibility at Boston College, argues that it is difficult for people to connect to projections about the future of the environment that exceed a 50-year span and that the way they relate to such projections also depends on their life experiences. To Smyer, this means that the aging population has a great potential to play an active role in combatting climate change, even greater than other age groups (Smyer 2017).

Within this context, my own contribution would be that of shedding light on one particular aspect of the aging population's daily life in Romania – managing food resources so as to avoid waste – with the intent of outlining possible differences with respect to their children/grandchildren' generations, and the way in which these differences are contextualized by the interviewed retirees.

Food waste studies

From a statistical point of view, food waste in Romania is still a matter of rough estimates. The data published by the European Commission for the year 2012 (next update is scheduled for 2018), do not offer specific information for Romania (Stenmark et

al. 2016). According to Waste Statistics (Eurostat 2016) data on the type of waste generated in UE, with a separate category for household waste, Romania ranks (based on data valid for 2014) last but one in Europe (Eurostat 2014) (though we may suspect that this position is actually due to the same lack of information coming from Romania).

Based on communication around this topic available in the public space, the food waste picture in Romania is quite fuzzy. According to foodwaste.ro, a web site supported by the *Mai Mult Verde* Foundation, approximately 2.5 million tons of food would be thrown away in Romania (Food Waste Romania 2016). This appears to be the only source supporting a statement containing this very impressive figure made by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, Achim Irimescu, in a press conference on the subject of food waste (Birnaure 2016). A footnote on foodwaste.ro somewhat clarifies the methodology behind these estimates: “At this moment, there is no large-scale study done on over 1 million people [in Romania]. The most recent figures are based on surveys and estimates provided by various players in the food production industry. [...] For household waste, the most accurate estimate is a study done in Great Britain, covering 2,000 households.”

From the point of view of Food Studies, as a branch of cultural Anthropology, food waste is a relatively recent research topic even in other geographic spaces. However, there are a few studies built around the idea of food saving which might be worth mentioning here. Edwards and Mercer, for instance, approach the problem of food waste in Australia and the way in which the freegan or dumpster diver communities choose to tackle it as part of an “alternative ethics of consumption” (Edwards and Mercer 2013:175). This study is preceded by a long line of research focusing on food sharing practices within rural communities. Other connected themes refer to the active role that consumers have in choosing what to buy/eat (Holloway *et al*, 2007; Wilson 2012) and the right to grow and eat healthy food under the umbrella concept of “food justice” (Levkoe, 2006). Also, the “autonomous food space” concept (Wilson 2012) allows Edward and Mercer to define the specific role freegans have in saving, based on the use of senses, food items that would officially be unacceptable to NGOs or other organizations aiming to recover such resources (Edwards and Mercer 2013:183).

As regards the way in which food waste is generated and defined as such within specific social relations, it is important to note the contribution that Zsuzsa Gille makes in identifying the dynamic connections between value creation strategies and waste generation mechanisms (Gille 2013:27). Thus, Gille points out that an understanding of the way in which waste is generated and managed depends on an analysis of the institutions and social conventions whereby something is declared to be a waste matter as well as on the power relations at work in the process of producing, representing and regulating waste (Gille 2013:29).

Gille identifies three types of risk that are countered through the production of waste: economic, technological and legal/political (Gille 2013:32, 34, 35). From the author’s perspective, the economic risks associated with food waste can be exemplified via the food aid provided by international organizations in various African countries and its impact on the fate of the local agricultural production. In fact, it appears that this form

of aid fuels the illusion of a permanent availability of resources, which, in the end, contributes to the aid beneficiaries never escaping their dependency on such aid (Gille 2013:31). Technological risks, on the other hand, consist, in Gille's view, in the requirement for a uniformization and standardization that only mass production can keep up with, so that waste is generated on the basis of form rather than on content-related criteria (Gille 2013:34). Legal and political risks are, in Gille's opinion, connected to the development of mass obsessions about the permanent contamination of specific food items temporarily declared, by official sources, as being a peril to consumers' health (Gille 2013:36).

On the subject of the perishability of food items and of the mechanisms whereby they reach the waste status, it is worth mentioning Richard Milne's brief history of food safety in Great Britain, which sheds light on the various labelling systems and messages they were to convey to consumers (Milne 2013). Thus, initially, food labels were supposed to work as proof of the freshness of the products on display (Milne 2013:86); next, they were used as sources of information on the nutritional content of the food items they were applied on (ingredients, calorie content) (Milne 2013:87); finally, food labels came to reflect food safety parameters, empowering consumers to check, on their own, whether the food items were still fit for consumption, according to official standards (Milne 2013:91). Milne opens a discussion about the trustworthiness of mentions such as "expiry date" and "best before", namely whether they match evaluations of the state of food items that consumers make based on their senses (sight/ smell/touch) (Milne 2013:91) as well as whether the authority of official food safety institutions should prevail over consumers' own practical experience in managing the risks associated with consuming perishable food (Milne 2013:98).

Anthropological literature around food waste also dwells on the theme of recipients used for the storage and transportation of waste matters. Metcalfe *et al*, for instance, focus on the box designed for the storage of food waste in Great Britain households, an object that they consider to represent "[...] a metaphor of authority, waste and the environment" (Metcalfe *et al* 2013: 143), which users must make an effort to accommodate in their dwellings and which, ultimately, determine a change in the habits of those who own it.

Food and (post-)socialist life

Despite the fact that the socialist political system takes various hues and nuances depending on the country or region one focuses on, it is possible to identify overarching conditions under which particular food procurement and saving practices appeared under this political regime. Melissa Caldwell's study on the connection between food and daily life under State Socialism (Caldwell 2009), though not specifically referring to Romania, paints a very accurate picture of what it meant to deal with the severe food shortages that characterized the socialist food production and distribution system. Caldwell highlights here the creation of a "scientific" food regime with specific standards and recipes governing food production and communalism and egalitarian principles governing its distribution. In Caldwell's view, this conjunction of ideological factors

triggers a shift in the focal point of food practices from the private to the public sphere (Caldwell 2009:6), which was intended, among other things, to liberate women from the burden of cooking. Paradoxically, the communalist and egalitarian ethos was paired with a highly “[...] differentiated access to food goods, [...] according to one’s employment, party affiliation, or even political status” (Caldwell 1994:12).

Building on Verdery’s research (Verdery 1996), Caldwell points out the core deficiency of the state socialist economic system which made it possible for this paradox to exist: “[...] for maximum efficiency factories were encouraged to produce large quantities of certain types of goods rather than a wide variety of products, resulting in little diversity. At the same time shortages of raw materials affected the quantity of goods produced and inefficiencies in the distribution network prevented the goods that were produced from ever reaching their destination” (Caldwell 1994: 9)

Another trend that Caldwell identifies and which rings true to those living within the Romanian space during Communism is the so-called “temperance movement” aimed at policing and rooting out undesirable food and drink consumption practices (e.g. alcohol) as well as condemning the illegal accumulation and wasting of food resources (Caldwell 2009:7).

There is an extensive body of research covering the various forms of limitations that Communism set on everyday life in Romania. Also, given its longevity on Romanian soil, this political and economic system influenced the existence of several generations of Romanians in ways that vary considerably according to the decade we are considering: “A ‘golden period’ of higher consumption and rising expectations (1964-1977) was followed by a period of crisis and decline in the living standards of the population (1977-1989), which led to a rise of societal dissatisfaction with the regime and finally to the December 1989 upheaval.” (Petrescu 2014:292). A series of economic measures such as concentrating investments in heavy industries, launching extremely costly and unrealistic infrastructure projects, aiming to rapidly systematize urban and rural areas led to an accentuated economic crisis (Petrescu 2014:288-290), which manifested itself under the form of severe food shortages in the early 1980s that were countered with food and fuel rationing measures which brought the matter of covering basic survival needs to the forefront of people’s daily activities (Petrescu 2014:290). The “Program of scientific alimentation of the population” published in July 1982 counts as the official attempt to cover up a major economic disaster and it is the local equivalent of what Caldwell identified as the state-imposed “temperance movement” that was meant to fight individual tendencies to store and consume food in excess (Petrescu 2014:291).

Researchers have also dwelt on the way people remember Communist Romania, both in face-to-face interviews and in online confessions, and in these studies, the 1980s appear as a particularly harsh precisely because of the struggles that procuring food would entail (e.g. Vultur 2014). Thus, there is a large body of testimonies and even entire books in which queuing for some food item to be distributed or to arrive in stock at a specific shop rises to a symbolic status: an instrument whereby private time was re-structured and given a different meaning by the state (Campeanu 1994, Cernat 2004).

This idea ties in with Catherine Verdery's concept of "etatization of time", which defines the Communist state's intentional capturing of its citizens' spare time, which, combined with a drastic limitation of incomes, pushed them into various illicit supply procurement activities (Verdery 1996). Liviu Chelcea's finding that "hoarding, rationing, intensive recycling and extensive repairs" were used as survival strategies in periods of intense shortage during Communism adds another important element to this mix (Chelcea 2010).

Pointing out other scholars' findings on the post-socialist challenges connected to food access and consumption, Melissa Caldwell quotes Krista Harper's study on the entry of the McDonalds chain in Hungary as a good example of how food packaging and disposal regulations within fast food systems has an impact on the way consumers learn new environment protection and recycling practices (Caldwell 1994:16). To complete this picture, Caldwell also mentions the emergence of food safety and hygiene issues related to the adherence to EU standards and the various food scares associated with food items originating from specific geographic areas (Caldwell 1994:16 -17). Of particular interest - due to its relevance for my own research - is also Caldwell's note on food standardization and loss of diversity when entering the EU (Caldwell 1994:18) and even the emergence of a nostalgic approach to memories of food in the socialist era (Caldwell 1994:20).

Caroline Humphrey's discussion of the "economy of favors" during post-Socialist times points out the persistent social value of procuring something for someone, as a favor: *"By doing things through favors you kill two birds with one stone: you get what you want and you take part in the 'warm' and endless cultivation of relations. In such a way of thinking, the official impersonal manner of doing things is not the default mode that (as it were) everyone would prefer [...]. On the contrary, it is perceived to be lacking in possibilities for personal intervention, in space to maneuver, or recognition of one's person, and therefore unpleasantly"*. (Humphrey 2012: 24)

Within this context, the decade considered in the interviews conducted for the purpose of this paper when recollecting food shortage periods and the ensuing coping mechanisms were, in fact the hungry 1980s. Exposure to present-day official references to food waste and environment protection were used as a starting point for discussions around food availability as a source of food waste and they led to interviewees drawing comparisons not only to Communist times, but also to earlier periods of food shortage that inform their views of the value of food.

In the absence of an extensive body of research dealing with food waste in Romania as well as prior studies done on aging groups' food consumption or preservation habits in Romania, this research is also partly fuelled by statements made by professor Vintila Mihailescu, head of the Anthropology department at the National School of Political and Administrative Studies in Bucharest, with respect to Romanians' food waste habits: *"[...] we entered the world of abundance on an empty stomach, after a decade of Communist hunger. It's only after 1990, then, that, to make up for it, the nation became bulimic at a scale far greater than in other post-Communist countries - and the ensuing food waste was proportionate. We continue to spend 41% of our income on food (highest rate in the EU), so that it is hard for us to conceive of our own food waste, let alone of « the global*

food waste issue »” (Mihailescu 2016). Consequently, we would be dealing with a lack of “[social awareness] of the risk posed by « waste »” (Mihailescu 2016).

Methodology

The main tool used in this research is the semi-structured interview. Interviews, which lasted 45 to 60 minutes each, were conducted, recorded and transcribed in Romanian, then translated into English. Discussions with respondents were conducted based on a list of 25 questions covering issues such as: awareness of food waste (in general and applied to Romania); identification of habits leading to food waste/saving, if any; likelihood of buying excessive quantities of food; extent to which resources are preserved over longer periods of time as a means of avoiding immediate excess food disposal; any ecology-driven food saving practices. Also, interviewees could spontaneously develop mentions about food saving/wasting habits of other family members and state whether they perceive them to be a characteristic of that age group or an individual choice.

Due to time and resource constraints (the entire project, from design to final write-up lasted two months), this study focuses on women only. Age-wise, the choice of respondent groups was determined by the fact that one group would have to have had the direct experience of procuring or preparing food during the Communist era whereas the other wouldn't. It can be argued that the Romanian Revolution in itself did not cause a sudden change in food availability or food procurement habits, but that this was a longer process. However, the respective year was maintained as the borderline between the two types of experiences based on the following logic: it would have taken several years for a baby born in or around 1989 to become aware of food-related circumstances characterizing his/her early childhood and chances were that reminiscences about food scarcity in Communism would have appeared to them as closer to fiction or a myth rather than to an actual lived one.

The elder group of interviewees is retired now, living on a limited State-provided pension. Efforts were made to choose respondents belonging to the same social background, namely women who had done clerical jobs during Communist times, all living in Bucharest. I should note here that one of the respondents is slightly older than the other two – 5 years senior - and that two of the women have lived all of their lives in houses, whereas the third spent her childhood in a house, but moved to a block of flats as a young adult and remained there ever since. Though no specific figures were given to reflect their level of income during their active life, all three elder women mentioned that they now live on a tight budget. Also, they have husbands or another member of the household who brings in a second income. Moreover, they all spontaneously mentioned regularly catering to the feeding needs of family members other than the partner/spouse, namely adult children, grandchildren, nieces and nephews or acquaintances in need or in poor health conditions. Finally, all elder women interviewed cook regularly and make various preserves to consume during winter.

Given the more salient and lengthier preoccupation with food procurement, storage and saving within the elder group, discussions with the three elder respondents, which obviously lasted longer, also allowed me to understand a bit more about their personal histories, before, during and even after Communism. Thus, two of the respondents have been friends ever since early childhood, they live on the same street as me, a few houses apart and their everyday lives have been strongly connected. Respondent X., worked as a translator and guide at the Youth Travel Bureau (BTT) during Communist times. Between 1977 and 1991 she would travel abroad for two-three weeks at least once a year. Oddly enough, she has not left the country since 1991. She was also the owner of a typing machine, which, during Communism in Romania was likely to bring about a close encounter with the authorities, given that such instruments were to be registered with the police. This detail surfaced as she repeatedly offered to type my phd paper for me, a service she declared to have provided to several other students before me. Though this was never the subject of our conversations, her exposure to foreigners and her ability to travel abroad before 1989 makes it likely that she was asked to provide accounts of her interactions with foreign nationals to the state authorities.

Respondent B., her friend, worked in a very large Communist factory. She has a daughter, who lives abroad, and two nieces; her son died at a young age and, in his memory, she has “adopted” my husband, offering him cooked food that she experiments with based on the various recipes she sees on tv. She is quite versed in the use of spices and does not shy away from using more “exotic” ingredients, such as seafood and sea weeds, as well as from replacing meat ingredients from classic recipes with various vegetal substitutes. In fact, most of her gifts of food are vegetarian, which is mostly due to the fact that she needs to feed her husband, who has a serious liver condition, mostly plant-based dishes.

Respondent L., who is my aunt, used to work as an architect’s technician during Communism, and her professional activity was mostly focused on the building of large blocks of flats. She has passed down her passion for civil engineering to her daughter, who is an employee of the City Hall, within the city planning department, and even to her granddaughter, who is an architecture graduate, a photographer and a singer. All three women live in the same two-bedroom flat, and the grandmother is the sole responsible for the cooking and food provisioning activities. The daughter and granddaughter mostly buy supplies that go in the direction of soda drinks, chips, cookies, cakes, etc. Respondent L. hosted me during my student years and I was able to learn about her cooking habits first hand, over the period of two years that I spent in her home.

While respondent B and X live with their husbands, respondent L is divorced, and so is her daughter.

The younger group is made up of women working in corporations (two on site and one remotely), with no direct responsibilities of feeding persons other than themselves, but who are living in couples. They were all born in smaller Romanian cities, but moved to Bucharest to go to the university and have stayed on ever since. None expressed concerns over the level of income that they earn and the impact that food expenditures might have on them. As for their cooking habits, none of them cooks regularly because of

a lack of time. They rely on purchased food during working hours and mostly store basic ingredients in their refrigerators. They all accept cooked food from their parents – part of which they also often throw away – despite having pointed out to the parents that they can manage without. Discussions with them were less rich in details and some of my questions led to dead-ends as food and cooking are not a main focus for them, such as in the case of my elder interlocutors.

Though this was not an initial selection criterion, none of the respondents in either group has direct knowledge of or experience with food waste combating measures applied in Romania or is aware of statistics reflecting food waste levels in Romania. However, all respondents could provide an example of food saving practices that they have seen/heard of or experienced in other countries. In addition to that, none of the respondents indicated that food waste would rank among their main concerns and were most likely prompted to think about this topic by the description of the research project at the beginning of the interview.

All respondents are urban dwellers, and they live in districts located in the outskirts of the city.

The main caveat concerning respondent selection would be related to the limited number of interviewees in each group. I would like to propose that the qualitative insights derived from the analysis of these testimonies be considered as valuable for the way in which they help surface interviewees' reflections on the value of food within their own specific life context. These reflections help uncover motivations behind their choice to throw food away or to avoid doing it at all costs which may apply to the generation each group belongs to, as shown further on.

I would like to make a note on my own experience with food procurement during Communism. Given that I was born at the beginning of the 1980s food crisis and that, at the time of the 1989 Revolution I had already had the experience of queuing, at least for the bread ration, my life story somehow bridges the gap between the two generations that I am considering in this paper. My mother worked in the bakery and pastry industry, so I have extensive knowledge about the way in which these food items could be used, in times of shortage, to buy favors in various social situations. I, myself, was, at one time, paid for tutoring services with a large carton of biscuits and I have provided, my own English language tutors, with fresh bread from the factory my mother worked in, in addition to the fee normally requested for these services. I am, therefore, relatively familiar with the practice of making food gifts during Communism and of assessing their value not based on the price that they would have in stores, but based on their availability at one point in time.

Findings

The following sub-sections reflect the common themes that appeared in the six interviews and a comparative view of the way in which each individual respondent and each group approached the respective theme.

What is food waste and why does it appear?

Within the younger age group, the common element in the definition of wasted food is “food items purchased without actually being ever cooked/eaten”. It is not excessive quantity that is to blame, in their opinion, for food waste, but rather a lack of time to consume things bought on an impulse/out of the desire to try something new.

None of the three younger women cooks very much at home, and that is why just one of them spontaneously included food cooked in larger quantities than needed within the food waste category: “[...] *We cook and we throw away three quarters of what we made because we don’t like it anymore or because we have found something else to eat*” (respondent O). The other two younger respondents somehow share responsibility for cooked food that goes to waste with the source of that food, namely their parents, although the daughters are the ones who actually dispose of the excess. For instance, respondent C. said she failed to persuade her parents to send her less cooked food, but that the only way she could avoid throwing that food away was to completely refuse it.

All women in the elder group cook both for themselves and for at least one other member of their families; cooking takes up an important part of their time (a new meal is cooked every 2-3 days) and consequently, the procurement of supplies, their quality and price have been at the forefront of their interests and concerns not only for longer, but with more intensity than in the case of the younger group. This difference in lifestyle is noted by one of the elder interviewees, who compared the cadence of her shopping with that of younger generations: “*People work according to a different schedule nowadays. Many go to buy supplies once a week. And that’s why they buy larger quantities. They don’t necessarily consume everything they have bought for the respective week or they might change their mind about what they want to eat (something different from what they had bought)*” (respondent L.)

The three younger respondents spontaneously made comparisons among three generations that they believe have a different attitude towards food leftovers: themselves, their parents and their grandparents. All three mentioned, in a form or another, that grandparents do not waste food, either because they use leftovers to feed animals or because they practice a form of self-restraint. One respondent mentioned that this reluctance to waste is explained through grandparents’ belief that, at their age, they don’t need much, which hides a desire to save money to give away to their grandchildren. Also, another younger respondent merged two age groups – parents and grandparents – and expressed the belief that there is a threshold beyond which budget concerns make it so that no waste is possible anymore: “*I think that beginning with the age of 50, they [i.e. parents and grandparents] have this issue: they don’t throw away anything, not even bread. They find ways to somehow give it away. If it’s stale, they re-purpose it, they make something out of it, they somehow find a way to cook it*” (respondent C.).

All three interviewees in the elder group expressed straight from the start a concern with managing their limited pension-based budget in the best possible way, therefore vehemently excluding the possibility of throwing food away: “*Every penny matters for someone who is retired. When you’re young, you have other possibilities and*

your options are different. [...] I only buy what I need.” (respondent X); “[...] we, retired people, we are not the middle class...if I threw food away, I wouldn’t be able to pay the light, the gas, anything. I’ll go into a collapse if I don’t know how to buy supplies and manage them” (respondent B).

Moreover, when asked about whether they purchase food based on a list or on inspiration, all three elder respondents stressed the importance of planning, though they did make exceptions now and then: “We have a list. If we were to buy only based on inspiration, we’d run out of money in no time.” (respondent L); “Just like nutritionists say: « Don’t go shopping for food when you’re hungry».” And make a list. So, if you don’t have a list and you’re on an empty stomach, then you’ll pile all sorts of things up. You’ll just spend money recklessly. When you get home, you’ll find that most of what you got is useless.” (respondent B); “They [i.e. retailers] cannot trick me! I think things through very well, I leave home with a list... if I happen to buy something that’s not on the list, then that really must be something I don’t have at home. Otherwise I don’t buy it. I never say: «I’ll just get one more, ‘cause it’s on discount».” (respondent X). Respondent B even confessed to extending these careful meal planning practices to her pets as well: “Even the parizer [i.e. minced meat sausage that has a lighter, pinkish hue] that I buy for the animals, I buy a piece and I know that it will last me four- five days for the dog and the cat. So, there’s nothing to throw away there.” (respondent B).

The women in the elder group put other people’s tendency to waste food down to their relative lack of concern for the impact that such waste and the purchase of additional supplies would have on their budget (something which the younger group stated about themselves): “If you’ve got loads of money, you’ll waste. They buy a lot and when they get home they decide that they need this and that, but not the other one, they eat out and if the food reaches the expiry date, they’ll throw it away.” (respondent B). To a certain extent, the voice of the elder group confirms the question triggered by professor Mihailescu’s statements, namely: Is being “too poor” (per one’s own perception) a deterrent to wasting resources? However, the nuance which might be necessary here is that, even with a less restricted budget, the elder interviewees would most likely still take pride in their budget and resources management skills and would be able to attach a price – both in money and in time – and feel remorse/sorry about whatever quantities of food they would be throwing away under these circumstances: “To waste food means] to buy more than you eat and, similarly, to cook more than you eat. It’s a pity. First of all, for the financial side, you’re wasting some money you’re simply throwing some money away and, second of all, if we were to think about the environment [...]. You should not waste either the money, or the time that it took you to cook that food.” (respondent X); “No food is thrown away at my place. I have never thrown food away: [...] I know exactly how much to buy for a few days, not a large quantity that would go bad. [...] Expecting guests. How many? 10. Then get 10 pieces of roast. Get 11, perhaps one of them wants some more. Get 12! Who knows? But no more than that!” (respondent B).

Current food saving strategies

Two of the younger respondents share an aversion towards shopping in hypermarkets, where the variety of products and the stress of shopping in a crowded, large surface increases the likelihood of excessive shopping: *“To avoid wasting, I have begun to only go to Mega Image lately, somewhere very close by. I avoid hypermarkets because I used to buy a lot of useless things and I also wasted time. I also like to go to the market, but that is very rare because I don’t really have the time.”* (respondent C). The third younger respondent added an interesting twist to this by a reference to one of her parents’ food saving practices that starts at the time of the purchase: *“They [i.e. her parents] try to get food from people they know, whereas we go to the store, the supermarket, we go less to the [traditional] market or search for local producers.”* (respondent O). As for the planning of the meal and cooking with leftovers, respondent O. confirmed the generation gap referred to above: *“They [i.e. her parents] know a lot of recipes and Mom, at least, can tell immediately that she can use some leftovers to make some other type of meal. I, on the other hand, think of them as just leftovers.... I would have to actually look for a recipe to do something with them. Plus, I don’t cook as much as they do.”* (respondent O).

The respondents within the elder group mentioned a number of things that they do in order to save food, while also catering to the needs of their families. This is an area where some practices vary within the group, and it is my suggestion that this is due to each respondent’s family history.

For respondent L., it is important that the food be fresh and good quality, which causes her to buy small quantities and to hand pick food items every day: *“[...] Now I buy what I need every day. Except for groceries that last longer, such as a pack of sugar, a pack of rice. [...] We have this habit: we buy from shops that get supplies daily and that have good quality merchandise. We know what shops just cut out or change the top layer of food so that it looks fresh. I’m talking about cured meats... you get used to these things. And if people avoid them, they’re forced to throw the food away.”*

Food shopping done based on respondent’s L.’s principles would have to involve a quality check-up done via the senses (for fruits and vegetables) – *“[Fruit and vegetables] should not be blemished. They should look and smell inviting. You should feel them... Not too hard, ‘cause if you have a very ripe pear, they’ll get their finger into the fruit... same for peaches. But you can still get close to them. You’ll feel the smell: it’s the smell of ripe fruit or it’s the smell of fermented fruit”*- or guided by the list of ingredients (for packaged foods) – *“Usually, with these foods, people generally look to see how fatty, how salty or how sweet they are. They will take that into account. But there are some people who don’t look... they don’t read the ingredients. Even I once stumbled upon... I opened a pack of biscuits, which had not expired, mind you!, but which were mouldy. They must have been kept in inappropriate conditions, so it really didn’t help that I looked at the package and at the expiry date... they were no good”*.

Respondent L. also admitted to re-using leftovers from the refrigerator in order to strike up new dishes that would help the family eat those leftovers more easily: *“If there are boiled eggs that they don’t eat, we’ll fill them with some foie gras cream, add some*

greenery, some mustard. We change their appearance a bit. If we have roast left over, we'll make a salad with or without mayo, plus another ingredient or two... it's a different type of food!". Interestingly enough, she would not eat at a restaurant that would resort to the same food rescuing practices, as she would be concerned about the freshness and safety of consuming those ingredients.

Particular to respondent X., within the elder group, in the matter of food saving practices is a frequent use of deep-freezing in order to satisfy both the need to cook in large quantities and to offer a diversified menu to her family: *"I cook a certain quantity. What does not get eaten goes to the deep freezer and then I heat it up later on. [...] These days, for instance, I've just defrosted some cabbage stew with bacon and cracklings.... Of course, I cooked a large quantity and at a certain point, you've had enough of that... You don't throw it away just because you're bored of it. [...] That's the same for sarmale [i.e. mixed ground meat rolled up in pickled cabbage leaves], bean stew... When you cook, it's good to make a larger quantity because the food tastes different/better. And so, unless I have visitors over to eat it all quickly or you eat the same food all week, I deep freeze it. [...] I have sticky labels that I put on the packs to know when the food was cooked."*

Under the same food saving umbrella, respondent B., within the elder group, added to the repertoire of practices a certain type of knowledge that one acquires in time in order to identify high quality food, that is unlikely to go to waste: *"[Food on discount] is a cheap trick. They [i.e. fruit and vegetables/ any other food on discount] are already ruined. If you ever happen to look at a pack of cured meat, you'll see that there's a sort of jelly that surrounds the meat. [...] Those bags of food on discount are real junk. I don't even think dogs would eat that food. [...] They are probably not expired, but they look pitiful. I took a look once and when I saw that jelly and some kind of juice that was floating in the pack... those were definitely not fit to eat."* (respondent B).

Charity, food sharing and food waste

Another subject around which a comparison between age groups naturally occurred was that of food charity with items that are in danger of becoming waste.

Within the younger group, respondent D., who admitted to feeling no guilt or responsibility over throwing food away, pointed to one of her mother's strategies for the holidays, which is when food waste levels peak: *"Mom will share cookies with the neighbors, but that's just so that she doesn't throw them away. If several days have passed and the food is still there, they [i.e. the parents] start thinking about doing something to give it away."* (respondent D). Respondent D. said she would offer leftovers to those in need, if they were in her proximity when such a decision is necessary. Otherwise, no planning for food charity occurs with her. Also, in the special case of food gifts received by her in the religious context of remembering the dead, she does not consider throwing such food away to be taboo. If she does not like it or does not need it, she will discard it. However, her grandmother, though otherwise reluctant to eating things cooked by others, still observes this interdiction against throwing away this form of food charity.

In the case of my three elder interlocutors, food charity is a definite food saving practice. While allowing them to stick to their declared “no waste” objective, imparting food with close ones or with those who are in need also contributes to the strengthening of relations within the family/circle of friends or the wider community.

For instance, respondent L. knows and helps others who live in her block of flats: “[...] There are elder people who live alone, who have a very hard time moving around... Aside from the fact that I help one of them, I drop by and ask her whether she needs anything from the market, I sometimes give her a portion of cooked food, a slice of cake... There’s an old lady, and an old gentleman. There was another lady, but she died, unfortunately.” In addition to regular cooked food donations, she also shares preserves – jams, jellies, etc – in case she estimates that the supplies left over from winter are too many to be eaten by her family. She is also the recipient of such food gifts, but only when it comes to particular types of jams or jellies, made from fruit not available in Bucharest or specific to other geographic areas in Romania, all of which would fall under the category of delicacies. Respondent B. resorts to the same excess food distribution, but within a closer circle: “If I cannot finish them [i.e. sarmale], I call a friend over and give them away and that’s it!”.

Despite not having a constant concern for food sharing/charity, within the younger age group there is an understanding of the force of ritual/beliefs concerning feeding oneself and the others on special occasions: “I grew up with this idea, let there be food, what if we have visitors, we should eat something of everything... It’s a tradition to have them all and it’s not necessarily a shame, but it’s difficult when you’re not cooking what you used to. You keep a tradition going.” (respondent O) However, the younger women are not willing to perpetuate such rituals or beliefs and they have already begun to part with them: “[If I had my own family] I clearly would not cook the same, the more so as I don’t eat all the foods that are now traditionally cooked at home. I think I would like to maintain the same variety, but I would like to cook different types of food that might end up becoming a tradition.” (respondent O)

Referring to their parents, as shown before, the younger respondents believe that waste is generated mostly on special occasions, such as birthdays or religious holidays. When asked about the possible motivation behind this, they mentioned either tradition (this is how we do things on this occasion) or the kind of excess that is necessary to make in order to always be a good host, either for their own children who come to visit or for the unexpected visitor they might get on that occasion: “But Dad, as the head of the family, wants to buy a lot of meat... to buy a lot in general... and I think this is a habit they cannot get rid of. I tell them every year: I don’t drink sodas, I don’t need Coca-cola... and they still buy those. To feel good and, perhaps, to be able to offer me those things in case I change my mind and want them.” (respondent C.) An interesting gender difference was made here; one respondent said the mother is likely to buy one piece of fruit if this is the only thing she needs, while the father is likely to buy a whole bag of the same fruit every time. Also, another respondent mentioned that her mother did not go shopping based on a list because she wanted to try cooking new things, so she was likely to buy more and waste more. I believe that this may be a direction worth exploring further in that gender

roles within the family as far as cooking and budget management are concerned seem to determine the amount of food waste the respective person is likely to generate. Adding the aging element to this type of research it may be worth testing whether this difference between genders tends to be levelled out with age and as the self-restraint condition intervenes.

This moral obligation of being a good host to potential visitors is, for the elder group, one of the very few situations in which food waste is acceptable: *“We, Romanians, unlike the Germans, for instance, do not have this habit: just buy what is strictly necessary. Don’t buy an extra portion! We, on the other hand, are used to getting that extra portion... What if somebody drops by? You should have something to put on the table for them. This is our custom”* (respondent L); *“People are careless. They don’t think this is such a big thing... let’s cook a lot so that we have a lot... Maybe at some point in time, they lacked the necessary means and when they reached a point when they don’t have this problem they say to themselves ‘Let me make a lot, just to make sure I have enough!’.* Also, this is the Romanian way: welcome your guests. So they think they should have something ready at hand to serve to anyone who might drop by: some cooked food, a piece of cake, some fruit jelly [...].” (respondent X). This echoes Katherine Verdery’s findings from her fieldwork in a Romanian-German village, where “[...] the offering of food was a principal indicator by which Romanians thought themselves distinct from Germans” (Verdery 1996:54).

Food safety and food waste

Within the younger group, a discussion about food safety and eating food items after their expiry or best before dates was cut short as all three respondents declared to check these dates during the shopping session and to almost never eat anything that is out of date, with the exception, perhaps, of an occasional yogurt.

One common belief within the elder group, on the other hand, was that expiry dates can be disregarded and that sometimes, if not at all times, a reliance on one’s own knowledge and experience can help avoid food poisoning traps. Testimonies in this direction go from a selective consideration of expiry dates - *“The [cooking oil] brand I look for and which I know is good... I check the expiry date. It shouldn’t be too close, as you don’t use a whole bottle of oil in one day...”* (respondent L) - to a moderate distrust in what these dates might indicate - *“You can eat food 2-3 days tops after the expiry date... sometimes even a week. I heard it from people who know these things, namely that they set these expiry dates one or two weeks ahead of the time the food actually goes bad. So, you can eat it even two weeks after... But these days, you can’t trust them anymore. Say something expires today; they’ll erase that date and write another one and so you really don’t know whether that food is still good or not. [...]* For meat, if you buy it in the supermarket, you can find out its expiry date... but when you buy it from the butcher’s, you must cook it right away” (respondent B) - and up to a complete disregard of these marks of freshness and safety - *“I am a well-versed cook, I’ve been doing it for ages, so, for me, it doesn’t matter that they say this thing expires tomorrow. I’ll use it the day after tomorrow if I know that it has the same organoleptic qualities. [...]* Long ago, they’d eat eggs even

after three months. And they were good. Now, they're only good for three weeks. [...] I got eggs from my goddaughter and from a nephew, I then went to Olanesti [...] and passed by a relative of mine whom I had never visited, so she gave me another 20 eggs, when I came back from my parents, in the village, I had another 40 eggs, then I got some more from a nephew who lives down the street, so I've only eaten village farm eggs this year. I don't buy eggs from the shops. [...] Especially if you grease them well, so that they don't 'breathe', they will last" (respondent X).

Respondent X. somehow went to extremes in her conviction that deep-freezing is a safe, long-term food storage practice, the more so as she believes the food retail and food aid systems heavily rely on this practice: *"With meat, I ate it even after two years! There were some leftovers [...] and I ate them. And here I am, alive and kicking! If it's frozen at all times throughout this period, you can eat it. Come to think of it, there were those American chickens, American chicken legs at the beginning [i.e. soon after the 1989 Revolution], they had been kept by the Americans as part of the National Reserve, which they refreshed. So, they were brought to us. And nobody died because of them. I, on the other hand, got into hospital because of some fresh cheese that I bought from peasants... I don't know what it had in it, but they put me in a hospital bed and found that I had an enterocolitis of unknown origin. So, everything is relative."*

Food waste and the environment

Within the younger group, respondent D. offered a polarized picture of food waste in Romania with a strong age component: *"[...] Looking at the Romanian population, where there are more elder people than young ones, I don't think they, the elderly, throw food away. I also don't think they have such a big purchasing power, so they buy the bare minimum. When I go shopping, I see elder people buying things like 2 lemons, 2 bananas....no more than what they need for the respective day."* (Respondent D.) Moreover, respondent D. was convinced that the age group with the largest contribution to food waste is hers, which is due to cooking and to food purchase planning (such as thinking of a recipe ahead) being less prevalent among the young: *"Because I don't cook, I buy stuff, but I don't end up using it. I don't have a recipe in mind when I am shopping so that I know what ingredients to buy. I buy things and only after that I start thinking about what to do with them"*.

Within the elder group, respondent L was convinced that the end consumer is the largest food waste generator, while stores come in second, due to food quality regulations: *"Stores waste as well because the merchandise goes bad very quickly. For instance, they purchase 20 boxes of bananas and when they open the last boxes and put the fruit up for sale people won't buy them anymore, as they are already either too ripe or blemished. And then, what are they to do with them? They throw them away". [...]* *"It may be that they estimate incorrectly what quantities would be sold, but it's also a matter of the quality of merchandise that they buy"* (respondent L.). She suggested that a good food saving measure, in this case, would be for people not to reject oddly shaped fruit and vegetables: *"Even here, in Romania, I've seen two-horned eggplants [at the market]. Just*

like two fingers glued to each other. And people still bought them. They did not seem to mind it. Or even carrots with two or three legs. We, Romanians, are not that reluctant to doing it..." (respondent L.)

Furthermore, respondent L offered a detailed account of how waste, in general, is dealt with within her household and in her neighbourhood. She said that food waste is collected separately in her household, just as paper, plastic and glass bottles. Containers for selective waste disposal in her area have disappeared, and she does not know whether those who come to pick garbage up put it all in one place or maintain the separation done at individual level. There are blocks in her neighbourhood where people put all of their garbage in the same bin. No selection is done. She also remembered a time when even fabric was collected separately, but this is no longer the case. Only plastic bottles are picked up by poor people who earn their living by selling them to recycling centers.

Respondent B., on the other hand, had a hard time believing that there is such a thing as food waste in Romania. Her conviction, based on her personal experience, is that official statistics are inaccurate because of a lack of connection to the reality of the poor class' everyday life: *"They say one Romanian throws away I don't know how many kilos. But this is done based a sample that is way beyond the average level. Why don't they go and ask poor people, at the bottom....they don't even have anything to eat. Those people will eat anything. No matter what you give them. Even charity food."* (respondent B) She even goes as far as to offer an extreme personal example of how little choice you have in rejecting food when you are conscious about its cost: *"Look at my mother. She's 95. She doesn't throw away anything because she doesn't cook what she wants. She eats what I give her. But even before, do you know what she would do? She'd cook a huge pot of soup, which she would keep in the fridge for one, one and a half months. From time to time, she'd boil it again. Things would get stuck on the bottom of the pot. She'd just pour it into another pot and continue to eat it. It would get a crust of mould at the top... she'd still eat it. 'Cause you can't throw food away. You just can't! How can you do that. [...] You paid for it, so you should eat it."* (respondent B)

When asked whether she knows of any measure that is being enforced in order to save food items from becoming waste, respondent B. was able to provide her own example of the "ugly" fruit and vegetables series. She spoke of Sweden, where she had heard they had given up planting potatoes, for instance, because they could not observe the shape and size standards imposed by the supermarkets. She then talked of Jamie Oliver and of how much he praised "hideous" fruit and vegetables. In fact, respondent B. is convinced that they are perfectly healthy and there is no reason not to eat them, unless they are mouldy or rotten. Nevertheless, she believes that they should be sold at a small discount because of the way they look.

Within the elder group, respondent X. is armed with her own set of environment protection strategies. According to her statements, hers is almost a waste-free household: *"I don't throw away plastic bottles – when we buy sodas or still water – so I re-use them by filling them with borsch. I don't use them for anything else. When I make tomato and pepper preservers, I put them in glass bottles. So I recycle those too"*

(respondent X.). Moreover, though she now throws potato peels and other such food waste away, she is considering making her own compost, but she is still documenting the whole process on Facebook and the internet. She is also considering deep-freezing brew made from vegetable peels (she saw it on Facebook) under the form of cubes, which she would later use as a base for various sauces.

Respondent X. also has her own understanding of where and why food waste happens the most, but her perspective is that a balance is struck when animals are fed with what cannot be absorbed by the food distribution chain: *“I don’t think food producers want to waste their work... It’s just that [...] if intermediaries pay them too little, then producers would rather feed their crops to the animals. Fruit and vegetables are wasted because the so-called market economy is a completely different thing, it’s not organized. So, producers who don’t have the means to come to Bucharest to sell their produce, to pay the market owners who set a specific tariff, which, obviously, does not cover the producer’s effort in obtaining the respective crop, then people feed them to the animals. It’s not really waste, as they are feeding animals, and animals, in their turn, feed them... so the cycle comes full circle”* (respondent X).

Childhood and food saving

Aside from the references to parents’ holiday-driven excesses, the women in the younger group did not refer to a particular childhood memory that may have influenced their present-day food saving practices. Also, none of the three younger women stores food for longer or even shorter periods of time; according to one respondent’s testimony, even a bag of chips opened one week earlier can go to waste if it is not eaten on the spot.

Within the elder group, on the other hand, there were stories depicting a particular formative experience connected to how they recognize good food, how they process and save it properly.

The freshness and quality theme re-surfaced as part of respondent L.’s recollection of her upbringing in this respect: *“When I was a child, you did not have the possibility of keeping food cool for longer periods of time. You would store food in the cellar or in an ice-based rudimentary cooler, but it would not last... 2-3 days at the most. You could not keep cooked food for long. Preserves are a completely different thing, they would last in the cellar for several months. But with food that could go bad easily, you would eat parts of it for two days, but the third you would already start fearing that you might get sick. You would still boil everything again every day.”* Despite these technological drawbacks, the nostalgia of the fresher food of old times lingered in respondents L.’s words. However, she also admitted to having grown into the habit of storing basic ingredients and preserves at the beginning of autumn to get through the winter due to her experience with the post WWII hunger that marked her early childhood: *“Compared to how we do things today, you ate fresher food then. Immediately after the war, there was this... I don’t what to call it an obligation... but the street deputy would drop by and if you had a patch of land, you’d better cultivate something on it: some salad, some radishes, fruit trees... but people would do this even without the deputy’s intervention. You could not find much those*

days, the markets were poor, you did not have a lot of money, those who produced food themselves and came with it to the market did not have large quantities... We ate things that were fresher. We did not eat that much meat. Not everyone could afford buying pork or veal. Chicken, we'd eat it, but more rarely, as we'd prefer to keep them for the eggs."

Following the same path of early childhood experiences that influence present-day behavior, a brief dive into respondent X's past uncovered a time of hardship which marked her: "We were born and raised in a different era, when it was more difficult for people to obtain certain things... I, for instance, was an orphan. My father died when I was four. Mum, obviously, went to great pains to feed me as much as possible, so I could grow up and be healthy... so, clearly, she did not waste food. Poor thing, she'd eat what was left over from me as I was really picky with food... I did not eat everything she'd offer me." As for the Communist period, it will be shown, later on, that it was most probably not as impactful as this childhood episode in shaping her food consumption practices.

Just as in the case of the other two respondents within the elder group, childhood memories about how food was procured and prepared seem to have left a strong mark on respondent B's repertoire of food assessment and preparation abilities: "When you're thrown in the water, you have to learn how to swim. When I was a child, we, the family, would not eat pork. My father was a hunter. From the end of October to February, it was open season for rabbits (now the season is way shorter). So, we did not eat pork. We'd eat rabbit. Whether it was rabbit soup, roast, rabbit foie gras.... that's what we grew up with. Venison. [...] Just look at the piece of meat and it will show you itself how to cut it. Here's the muscle, here are the ribs, here's something else. So, if you keep your eyes wide open, you can learn by yourself. You don't have to go to school for that." (respondent B). She is also very proud of her capacity to tell good cheese from bad one, something she picked up because she grew up in a farm, which enabled her to participate in and learn about all the stages in the preparation of this food item. She would use this knowledge to understand, for instance, whether the cheese was prepared using a coagulant or not based on how it behaves during frying. Moreover, in a borderline mystical belief, she confessed to knowing children who are born with a special palate and who can discern "real" tastes from fake ones very easily.

Communism and food saving

Remarks concerns the Communist food shortage and the way in which this phenomenon might have influenced the elder interviewees' current food saving and consumption practices were sparse. Respondent L. mentioned, in passing, her own strategy in dealing with the unpredictable nature of food supply cycles, namely frequent shopping sessions, just in case something interesting appeared in stores: "[During Communist times] I would do my shopping every day, or every other day, it depended. When I got my hands on a pack of meat I would cook for 2-3 days. But the rest, fruit and vegetables, I'd buy them more often... when I could find them".

On the other hand, within the elder group, respondent B. and respondent X. confessed to having been part of local variants of the alternative food procurement

networks and systems described by Humphrey, for instance, in which one would create “a sense of self-worth within relevant social circles” (Humphrey 2012: 22) by means of favors provided to the members of those circles. They also appear to have resorted to the same category of “scavenger” practices that Verdery described as having been used in order to cover domestic consumption needs in times of severe shortage (Verdery 1996:50-51).

Therefore, these two respondents appeared to have had no problems in procuring food via relatives or acquaintances to whom they communicated their seasonal preferences. For respondent B., her food safety network was made up of connections created at work both by her and by her husband: *“My husband would call me and say: ‘Look, I’m going there. What do you want?’ And I’d say this and that and that. That would happen right after the time we got our salary and we also got the food cheaper than on the market. I cannot say where I got it from, but I really did not lack anything: whether it was meat, chicken, pastrami, eggs, cheese, milk, cream, cookies [...]”*. She also seems to have appreciated what was available in the State-owned system of public food distribution: *“We also had Casa de comenzi [i.e. a sort of food bank where foods not available on the market could be ordered and they would be received weeks later], but it was very unlikely to find there enough of what you needed. Or you would go to Amzei market, it was very well stocked, especially at the Gospodina store, where you would buy things like sarmale, schnitzels... This was semi-cooked food. You’d come home with them and, for example, if you did not want the schnitzels with all of those spices and stuff, you’d wash them and roast them. The sarmale were already rolled up, you’d just have to spice them up and put them in the oven. You’d find there turkey meat, turkey breasts... you’d only get one piece, but that was a 3-4 kilo piece of meat, so it was more than enough. And the price was very, very good. Yeah, you’d have to stand in line for half an hour/an hour to get this...but that was no problem.”*

Within the elder group, respondent B maintains a positive view of how certain food items were processed during Communism, based on her conviction that the multitude of preserves or additives that are now used were not available then and, hence, food was overall “cleaner”: *“[...] you did not have all of this junk that they put in [the meat]. In those times, they did not do that.”* (respondent B.) For example, she now goes to the butcher’s and asks for specific pieces of meat to be minced on the spot because prepackaged minced meat is likely to contain other undisclosed animal parts that affect the quality of the mix. Speaking of meat, respondent B., also painted the very complicated picture of procuring pork for the holidays in Communist times, an episode which is also relevant for a certain type of knowledge transfer that would occur from the farmer to the end consumer, and which would endow the latter with the ability to properly store and cook this food item. Her husband worked at the Post Office and he knew a postman from a village in the North-Eastern region of the country whom he would call to get a whole pig sent over to his house, in Bucharest. *“They’d cut it in four for me. They’d put blood and salt in a bottle, so it did not coagulate. The man’s wife would wash the pig’s intestines so thoroughly, that they’d end up like parchment sheets. ‘How the hell does she do it’, I’d wonder. I’d have done them myself, but I did not know the technique.*

Later on, the woman explained how she would beat them and clean them and I learnt, in time.” (respondent B.) They would carry the 100 kg pig back to Bucharest, where respondent B would cut it into small pieces – bacon, meat for greaves, meat for roast - label it and put it in the deep-freezer. This pig would last them from December to as late as August, the following year.

Respondent X. was also inadvertently part of this Communist “farm-to-table” system, but in her case, there were relatives living in the countryside and who supplied her with high-quality basic food items: “[I was not tempted to buy more food after 1989] because [during Communism] I had everything I needed. I even had more than the others. My son, for, instance, grew up with goat milk. My husband would go to his mother, in the village and he’d bring it from there. My mother-in-law reared one goat, two calves...you know, just like anyone else. So, we relied heavily on this. Also, my mother raised chickens, at some point. They stole them from her, so she gave that up. She’d keep them around for an egg or two.” (respondent X)

This is by no means to say that food shortages were not real or that every Romanian had access to such alternative food procurement systems, but that the landscape of connections that could be made in those times may have fuelled my respondents’ illusion of food availability and, therefore, their nostalgic perspective of that epoch.

Conclusions

Returning to the initial research questions, based on the answers of respondents in both groups, the supposition that that today's food excesses are actually perceived not as waste, but as a compensation for the Communist-era food scarcity appears to be disproved. Only one person in the younger group put her father’s excessive food purchase for holidays down to the influence of Communism, but, according to her statement, this was just her supposition, as they had never specifically touched upon this subject. Maintaining the caveat that this study is not intended to deny Communist food shortage and that the prevalence of alternative supply procurement networks has not been determined yet, it appears that the elder group tends to attribute excessive food purchases and, consequently, food waste, to a lack of budget management skills and portion control.

However, it is my proposition that the more likely source of the elder women’s current food procurement and consumption practices is their upbringing. I suggest that subsequent periods of food shortage forced them to apply the kind of knowledge and skills acquired in childhood in order to recognize, prepare and store (good) food, whereas the method whereby they acquired the respective food items was, indeed, dependent on the social and economic conditions specific to each stage in their lives. Within the younger group, there is a constant reference to other generations’ ways of doing things, not in the sense of marking a continuation of tradition, but rather in that of pointing out an increasing generation gap.

Still on the subject of waste, but from a different point of view, it appears that within the elder age group, budget restrictions are the ones that dictate a reasonable and rational use of resources, while ecological concerns are close to inexistent here. However, all three women in the elder group extensively described their selective garbage disposal habits as well as the way in which they reuse plastic and bottle containers to store preserves. All three also decried the authorities' apparent abandonment of the selective garbage disposal issue. Therefore, the elder group appears to be exhibiting, even outside of official constraints, the behavior of highly eco-friendly citizens. The younger group, however, appears to refuse to attach any moral or ethical responsibility to their food waste and present it as a fact of life, a consequence of their life dynamics.

Another interesting characteristic of the elder group is that food saving practices such as giving away preserves or cooked foods that are likely not to be consumed within the family are informed by a sense of community (helping those in need, that are alone or in a precarious health state). This humanitarian element is less visible in the testimonies of the younger group. However, they would give away food, but only provided that they are in the presence or proximity of someone in need at the very moment they are eating their lunch/dinner etc.

As mentioned before, this study is just scratching the surface of the food procurement and consumption landscape of the aging Romanian population. In fact, it is just a tiny fraction of analysis valid for some urban dwellers. An extension of the study that would cover a wider population, both as numbers, gender, socio-economic and ethnic distribution would be necessary. Also, focusing on the intermediary generations, that of parents, would help develop a better understanding of this picture. Beyond any academic interest in any of the research fields mentioned herein, these studies could contribute to the shaping of public policies concerning food access for the elderly, on the one hand, as well as communication with these age groups around ecological issues.

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