

A.C. Frieden Delves into Romania's Espionage Past and Present

BUCHAREST, Romania (Sept. 20, 2010) – Chicago-based novelist A.C. Frieden arrived in Bucharest, Romania to investigate espionage-related matters during and after the country's 1989 revolution as part of his research for an upcoming thriller. He also used his time to find post-Cold War scenes of the capital for another book. "It has been just over 20 years since the fall of communism in Romania," said Frieden, "resulting in a difficult period of transition, which offers fascinating elements for a fictional plot and for character development."



Photo above: Author A.C. Frieden stands at the memorial to the victims of the 1989 revolution. In the background is the balcony of the former Communist Party Headquarters where former dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu gave his famous last speech to an agitated crowd. Trapped in the building for two days after the crowd turned violent, he and his wife Elena were forced to escape by helicopter on the roof of the building only to be executed a few days later. The area in front of the memorial is now called Revolution Square.

During his visit in Bucharest, Frieden stayed at the The Athénée Palace, which was a hotbed of intrigue from the 1930's to the end of the Cold War. The hotel is now part of the Hilton group. It was built in 1912 and was completed in 1914; when World War I began, it had 149 rooms, 10 suites, and a restaurant. The Athénée Palace became a major espionage site after being nationalized in 1948. The Soviet KGB advisors oversaw the installation of listening devices in almost every room, including the café, restaurant and bar. Hotel staff was also trained to observe foreigners and the cabs outside the hotel were typically drivers approved by the *Securitate (Departamentul Securității Statului)*, Romania's secret police at the time. Housekeepers and other employees routinely went through guest luggage, photographed foreign documents, and kept a keen eye on any locals meeting foreigners. Furthermore, all pay phones within four blocks of the hotel were tapped and intelligence operatives routinely followed foreign guests around town. The general manager of the hotel was a senior undercover official for the Counterespionage Directorate of the Securitate and collaborated extensively with senior officials of Romania's foreign intelligence services.

Today, the hotel is an important meeting place for businesspersons and diplomatic guests, and given the political setting, the Romanian government has much less interest in spying here these days. However, on occasion the country's Foreign Intelligence Service (*Serviciul de Informații Externe*) or its domestic intelligence service (*Serviciul Român de Informații*) sets up surveillance missions at this and other major hotels and conference centers. "Romania, as an EU and NATO member has strong ties with allied intelligence services," Frieden added. "Consequently, the SIE and SRI assist in monitoring key individuals from countries like Russia, China, Iran, and Syria."



Photos above (left): Spy novelist A.C. Frieden at the English Bar in the Athénée Palace Hotel, a hotbed of espionage and intrigue during the Cold War.

During the Cold War, Romania used its position of relatively friendly relations with the West and the developing world in order to conduct espionage, mostly in the areas of industrial and technological spying. This in turn gave the Romanians leverage with the Soviet Union. Many targets of Romanian espionage were German, French and Italian engineers and businessmen with access to modern technology, including medical devices, tank engines, telecommunications devices, oil drilling equipment, and weapons systems. But much of the intelligence services collapsed with the



Photo above: Revolution Square in the center of the Romanian capital symbolized end to Nicolae Ceaușescu's dictatorship and was the scene of violent armed clashes between revolutionaries and loyal members of the armed forces.

revolution in 1989, and it took some time to reorganize and purge the former Ceausescu loyalists and pro-Russian collaborators. “The reconstruction and evolution of the Romanian intelligence services is an important part of my research,” Frieden said. “Its internal struggles are relevant to a plot in one of my novels in development, and being here, in the center of what was once a formidable spy program is an enlightening experience.”



Photo above: The east side of the People's House, one of the largest buildings in the world and which is still being finished nearly twenty years after construction began under the Ceaușescu regime.



Photo above: A.C. Frieden stands on the main east-facing balcony of the Palace of Parliament. In the background is tree-lined Boulevard Unirii, one of the longest and widest streets in Bucharest.

During his stay in the capital, Frieden visited the immense Palace of the Parliament in Bucharest (*Palatul Parlamentului*) or, as most Romanian's call it, the People's House (*Casa Poporului*). The Palace of the Parliament is a multi-purpose building containing both chambers of the Romanian Parliament and is the world's largest civilian administrative building. The building's construction began in 1983 under the Ceaușescu regime following the demolition of much of Bucharest's historic district to clear space for the palace (over 30,000 residences and dozens of churches were destroyed or relocated). At the time of the overthrow of Ceaușescu in 1989, the building's exterior and some internal spaces were complete, but extensive work was still required and even today the building is not yet fully completed. The palace stands 12 stories tall with over 1,100 rooms. It also has two underground parking garages and eight underground levels, including a massive NBC fallout shelter to house key government staff in the event of war or a natural disaster. However, for most Romanians, the building represents the greed and recklessness of the Ceaușescu regime.

Frieden also visited several areas of the city in search of scenes for his novels. "I found some interesting places that could fit in perfectly into one or more of my upcoming books," said Frieden. These included Arsenalului Square and the nearby Ministry of Defense, the Palace of Justice (*Palatul Justiției*) on the Dâmbovița River, Polona Street, the area around the Bucharest National Theatre and the Colțea Hospital, and the market area on the west bank of Lake Herastra.



Photo above: The former parliament house on Mitropoliei Hill that now houses the offices of the Romanian Orthodox Church and is adjacent to the Patriarchal Cathedral and bell tower.

About the author: A.C. Frieden is a Swiss-Brazilian novelist and lawyer living in Chicago. He is currently working on several political novels and espionage/legal thrillers, including a sequel to his latest thriller *Tranquility Denied*, as well as various other fiction and non-fiction literary projects. For more information, visit his website at www.acfrieden.com and his literary travel/research blog.

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To contact the author, visit his official website or send correspondence to:

Avendia Publishing Inc.
Attn: Media Relations Dept.
444 N. Michigan Ave., Suite 1200
Chicago, IL 60611
Email: media@avendiapublishing.com