

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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TALES FROM THE GOLDEN AGE (2009)

CRISTIAN MUNGIU

Contents (Overview-Synopsis-Characters-Character Analysis-Themes-Scenes)

OVERVIEW

Auteur Cristian Mungiu (b. 1968) is one of the most gifted directors of the Romanian New Wave Cinema. To date, he has directed twelve movies, for which he has received numerous awards. He became widely known after his movie *4 Months, 3 Weeks, 2 Days* (2007), which received the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival. He also received the *Best Screenplay* award at the Cannes Film Festival in 2012 for *Beyond the Hills*. For *Graduation*, he received the Best Director award at the Cannes Film Festival in 2016. In 2017 he was knighted with the Legion of Honour by the French ambassador in Bucharest.

Film *Tales from the Golden Age* is a comedic take on urban legends circulating during Communism in Romania. Its first part, 'Life is Beautiful, Comrades', was released on September 18th 2009, and its second part, 'Love in Leisure Time', on October 21st, 2009. The movie is an accomplished comedy and review of communist times in Romania. The first part includes the following short films: *The Legend of the Party Inspector*, *The Legend of the Party Photographer*, *The Legend of the Zealous Party Activist*, *The Legend of the Greedy Policeman*. The second part includes two shorts: *The Legend of the Air Sellers* and *The Legend of the Chicken Truck Driver*. *Tales from the Golden Age* is a masterful rendition of some of the worst (and, at times, some of the best) features of people living in Romania during Communism.

Background The movie's background is the corrupt society in communist Romania and the problems ensuing from it. We have several stereotypes in the movie: the corrupt party inspector; the party photographer who has to submit to censorship demands; the party activist who is filled with communist ideology and feels as though he were a missionary but leaves his 'mission' with a carriage filled with goods from the peasants he was supposed to teach how to read and write; the greedy and silly policeman who receives a pig and is stupid enough to make it blow up in his building; the young people who cheat people into giving them glass bottles which they can later sell; and the hard-working truck driver who tries to make some extra money by selling the eggs from the hens in his truck. These are the many forms for a phenomenon that took wing during Communism: because of political terror, lies, censorship and poverty, people had to resort to all sorts of (usually illegal) tricks. This often leads to comic situations, which Mungiu depicts masterfully.

STORY 1

SYNOPSIS

The first story presents the visit of a Communist Party inspector to a village in Romania. He is welcomed by the mayor, the secretary and all the villagers with a lot of enthusiasm and pomp. However, the official likes women, eating and drinking. The film derides this whole situation through a merry-go-round scene, when all the characters involved in the reception are unable to get off due to a stupid mistake.

CHARACTERS:

The Secretary The Secretary works for the village mayor.
The Party Inspector The party inspector visits the village.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

The Secretary

The village council secretary is the one taking care of the official preparation for the party inspector's visit to the village. He has an obsequious attitude towards the mayor and the party inspector. However, he manages to solve some of the difficult situations with much zeal and work.

Obsequious The secretary has a servile attitude towards the mayor and obeys all of his demands, no matter how unrealistic they are. For instance, when the mayor asks him to find white doves for the inspector's visit, he does his best to find some, naturally, to no avail. He is equally submissive towards the party inspector.

Loyal The secretary is loyal to the mayor and to the party: he gets all the peasants in the village to come and welcome the inspector. He organizes a traditional meal for the inspector and manages to get music for him at the inspector's request. However, he fails in the most important tasks, in particular, in the merry-go-round incident.

Hard-working We can tell that the secretary works very hard, as he plays the intermediary between the mayor and the rest of the villagers. He is the one who gets in touch with the people, talking to them and convincing them to do as the mayor asks. We could say that he is somewhat exploited by the mayor, who employs him to deal with all the difficult situations.

The Party Inspector

The party inspector is the man coming to visit the village. He is full of himself and very much aware of his importance and prestige. He is also corrupt and unprincipled.

Arrogant The party inspector has a self-sufficient attitude, knowing he is respected and feared by his subordinates. He feels he is entitled to the treatment he is given and does not hesitate to take advantage of everything the peasants have prepared for him. For instance, he eats and drinks with much gusto at the table which is prepared for him.

Corrupt The party inspector is a corrupt and unprincipled man. When he gets a bit tipsy, he asks for music and then tells the young woman singing to come sit on his lap. He is licentious, with no moral values. He only cares about his welfare and takes advantage of everyone around him.

THEMES

Servility One of the main themes is servility towards one's superiors in the party ranking. During the communist period, there was a rigid hierarchy and each individual in an inferior position would bow to and obey his superiors. This attitude verged on the ludicrous at times because these officials who were too obsequious in their endeavour to please their superiors. In the movie, the secretary and the mayor illustrate this attitude very clearly, as they go beyond themselves to please the party officials who come to their village.

Stupidity Most of the times, these party officials were really stupid, as they were not chosen based on merit, but rather on 'healthy origins' (peasant parents) and good communist conduct. The movie portrays this theme brilliantly in the merry-go-round scene, where they will have to go round all night long because of their stupidity and neglect.

SCENES

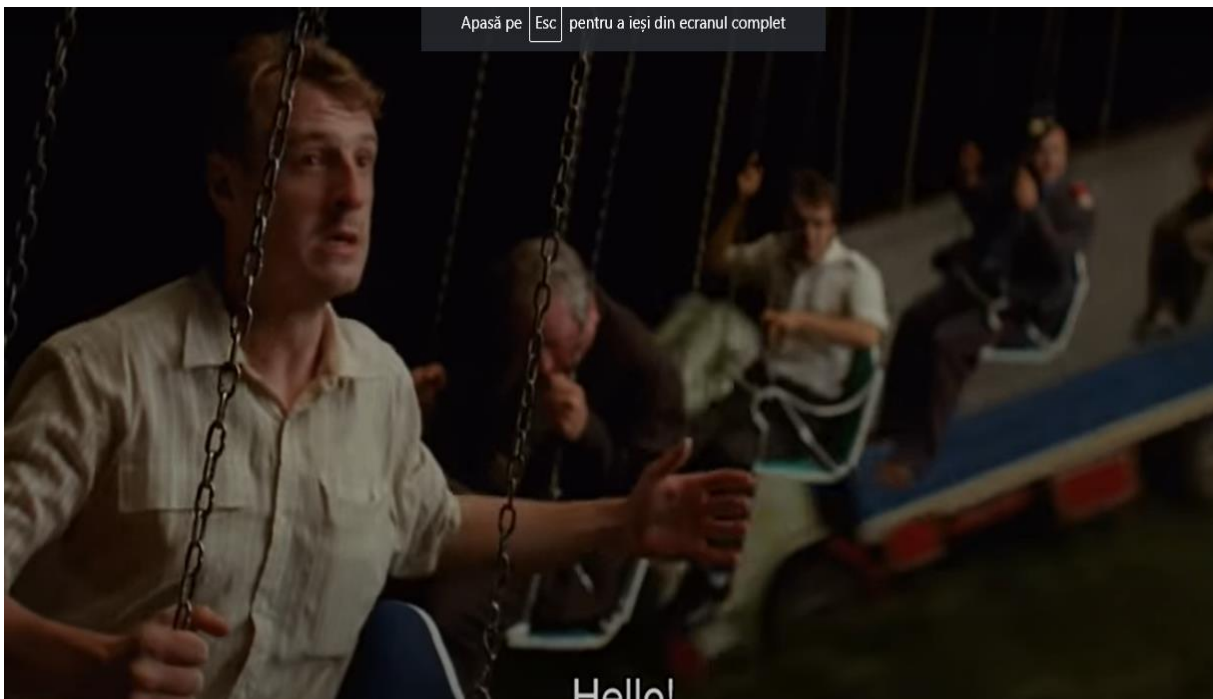
The reception of the party inspector The whole village becomes involved in the reception of the party inspector. They wait for him with flags, banners, flowers, bread and salt, as was the custom. The secretary, who had arranged the reception, makes sure that everything is in order. The mayor, not feeling well, has a handkerchief on his head, which the secretary carefully removes.



The Official Dinner The party inspector is invited to an 'official dinner' where there is plenty of food and alcohol. The party inspector requests that some music be played for him. The secretary brings in the musicians, including a girl, whom the inspector asks to sit on his lap. The mayor and the inspector go beyond themselves to please the party inspector.



The Merry-go-round Tipsy and foolish, the group from the official dinner decide to go ride a merry-go-round. They insist that the man coordinating it join them. The mayor starts feeling sick and faints. The secretary asks to have the merry-go-round stopped, but there is no one to stop it. So they keep on turning, in view of a group of shepherds who think they are having a good time.



STORY 2

SYNOPSIS

In the second movie in the series, we witness the prevalence of censorship in communist Romania: the employees of the foremost communist journal of the time are all caught in a crisis situation when they wrongly adjust a photo of the president. Because the president looked shorter than in the original picture, they are asked, by the party secretary, to remake the picture so that the president does not look short anymore. They do this by placing a hat on the president's head, but they do not notice that the president was holding his own hat in his hand.

CHARACTERS

Party Secretary The party secretary implements censorship at the journal *Scanteia*
Old Photographer He is responsible for the pictures appearing in the journal.
Young Photographer He is the old photographer's assistant.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

The Party Secretary

He is the man in charge with the image censorship. He has a domineering and threatening persona, inspiring fear in most people around him.

Domineering The party secretary is the kind of man who could destroy someone with just one word. That is why he is greatly feared and respected. He is in charge with making sure that nothing compromising will appear on the national journal's pages. He threatens the staff that they will be punished should any mistake be made.

Corrupt The party secretary is also corrupt, as he endorses the alteration of reality so that the president and the party will look good. When he sees that the Romanian president looks too short, he asks the photographers to alter the picture so that this is 'corrected'. He is the type of man whose only god is the president and who would not hesitate to destroy anyone opposing him.

Stern Overall, the party secretary has a stern demeanour, and is frightening in his dead seriousness and calmness. This attitude is typical of a man used to threatening and destroying other people's lives. He intimidates his audience in this way.

The old photographer

He is the man in charge of the pictures appearing on the pages of the journal. He is scared and has a servile attitude for that reason.

Obsequious The old photographer treats the party inspector with respect and servility. His shoulders are bowed, his whole attitude is humble, and he takes the commands without daring to say anything. When the party inspector asks him to remake the photos, he goes directly to his lab in order to obey this command.

Fearful The old photographer seems to be afraid all the time. When the young photographer intervenes in the discussions, he admonishes him, saying he is going to bring trouble for both of them. Unfortunately, he is right, as, due to these interventions, the young photographer gets a file under his name with the Security Department.

The young photographer

The young photographer is the old photographer's foil: he is rash, courageous and not afraid of the party inspector. However, due to his carelessness, he will get all of them into trouble.

Courageous The young photographer is not afraid to intervene in the party committee's discussions, although he knows he might get them all into trouble for that. He tries to explain to the party secretary that it is almost impossible to do what he requires, but he is rebuked. Because of his brave attitude, he gets a file under his name at the Security Department.

Careless The young photographer is also careless. Because of his lack of attention, the journal goes to press with a blatant error in the picture: the president has two hats – one on his head and one

in his hand. This alerts all the party officials, and both he and the old photographer are harshly reprimanded for this.

THEMES

Party Politics Mungiu also shows us glimpses of party politics as we see the party officials execute the orders from 'above'. We can tell that it is party politics based on terror, lies, censorship and the lack of freedom of expression. Those who represent power are oppressive, threatening and deadly serious. The others are afraid or brave enough to take risks (which they all will pay for). The party follows closely every move of the people, and nothing gets 'out there' without their consent.

Distrust Because of this sort of politics, human relations are plagued by distrust. The old photographer does not trust anybody and is afraid of making any comments whatsoever. Nobody trusts anybody and the relations among co-workers are tense. It was a time when anybody could report you to the Security Department, which is why nobody trusted anyone. Mungiu captures this phenomenon very well in his movie.

SCENES

The censorship committee meeting In the second story, we see the censorship committee meeting after the release of the next issue of Romania's foremost journal. They debate the various ways in which the images and words should be censored, as well as the directives they have from their superiors. They realize that one of the pictures shows the president as being much shorter than in the original image, and they decide to 'fix' the picture.



One too many hats The two photographers have to change the picture so that the president does not look short anymore. They decide to do this by placing a hat on his head. However, they do not notice that the president was holding a hat in his right hand at the same time. The disaster is imminent as the journal has already been sent to the cities in Romania for distribution.



STORY 3

SYNOPSIS

In the third story in the series, we are presented with the party activist stereotype: he is the type of air-headed intellectual who is eager to implement the party's politics at all costs. For this reason, he goes to a Romanian village to teach literacy to the peasants there. Most of them respond reluctantly, but he insists, calling the police to help him enforce literacy on the people. An accident occurs, he is struck by lightning and has to leave the village.

CHARACTERS

The Party Activist He is responsible for bringing literacy to the Romanian countryside.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

The Party Activist

He is the type of zealous and obedient party member who believes in the party's ideology and is determined to implement it at all costs. However, he has a very feeble sense of reality and, when confronted with 'field work', he lamentably fails.

Zealous After hearing the new directives at the party summit, he sets on his task to bring education to the illiterate Romanian villagers. He insists that both young and old attend his class and forces people to come to his class under threat of police intervention. When the mayor explains it is difficult to educate people with no electricity, he says it should not be a problem since their ancestors learnt how to read by candlelight.

Serious The party activist is also deadly serious. During the class, he tries to persuade the villagers how important it is to be literate: they would risk burning their houses down if they couldn't read the instructions on a box of matches, for instance. He convinces all the peasants to come to class, with one notable exception: the village shepherd, who considers this class useless.

Ridiculous The party activist appears ridiculous on several occasions. First of all, when he walks the hills of the village to the soundtrack of Western movies. Secondly, when he gets struck by lightning, making the mistake he had warned his students not to make (never touch a cell tower during a thunderstorm). Moreover, his seriousness and zeal are always in juxtaposition with the villagers' lack of commitment and the harsh reality of their everyday lives.

THEMES

Poverty In this story, Mungiu shows the miserable conditions people lived in during Communism. We see that peasants live with no electricity, the tap water of city dwellers is impure, they have low wages, products are hard to find, and the black market is rampant. Their households and apartments are modest, and we can wonder how a human being can live in a block of flats such as it was conceived by Communist architecture. Because of this, people have to make all sorts of compromises, become corrupt or even criminal in order to make a living. During Communism, people were kept in poverty under the pretence that the country had to pay its national debt. But the living conditions were miserable indeed, well below subsistence.

Servility In a political system that mainly functioned through fear and terror, many people became humble, obedient and even obsequious. In the movie, the director shows the drama and ridiculousness of this posturing and criticizes it vehemently. We see the party inspector in his zeal to instil literacy in the minds of working, middle-aged and elderly peasants. Mungiu shows there was a true stereotype of the obedient man during Communism.

SCENES

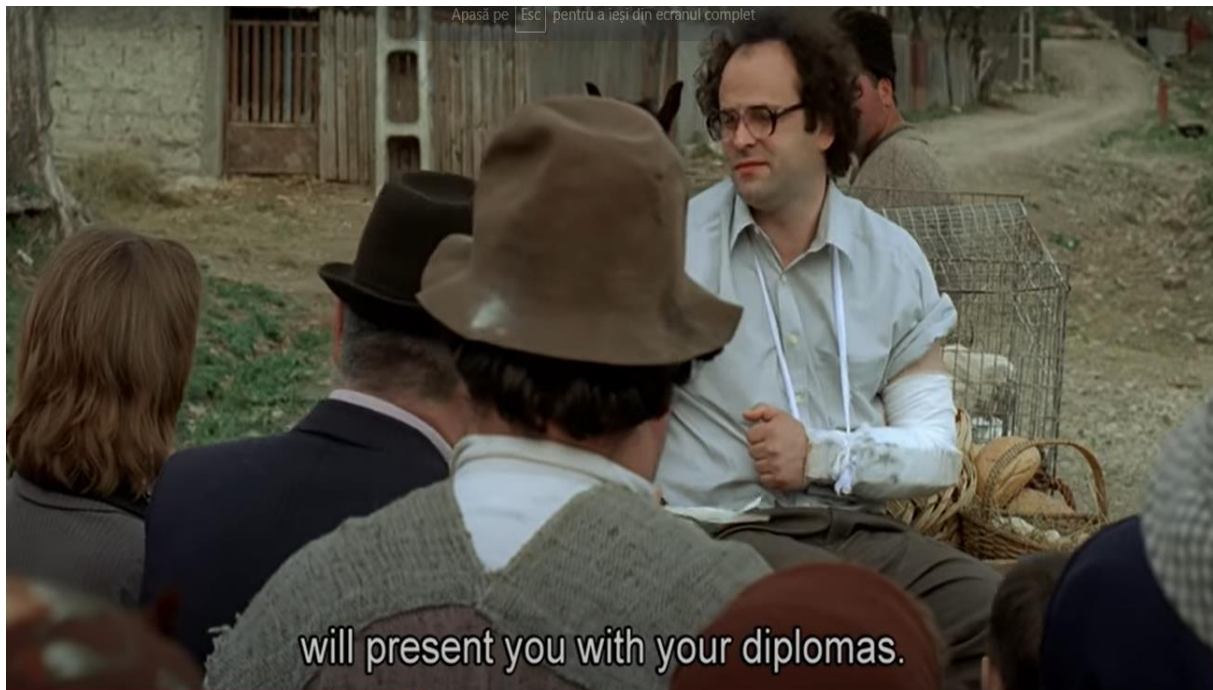
Party activist comes to the village After the Communist Party's summit, the party activist is sent to deal with the illiteracy of Romanian villagers. He arrives in a God-forsaken place, with no means of transportation or electricity. He even has to cross a river. But nothing prevents him from accomplishing his task. He walks over hills of the village to the soundtrack of Western movies.



The Party activist teaches a lesson When he finally manages to get almost every villager to come to his class, the party activist starts teaching. He does this by scaring the people into believing that if they are not literate, they might harm themselves, giving the example of what is written on a box of matches ('keep away from children').



The party activist leaves The party activist has an accident: he gets struck by lightning as he was searching for the last villager who wouldn't attend his class. The mayor makes a speech, the party activist makes a speech, and gives diplomas to his students. In return, the villagers fill his carriage with goods from their households.



STORY 4

SYNOPSIS

The fourth story showcases the politics of the gift in communist Romania – a policeman receives a pig for Christmas, but there is a problem: the pig is alive. The whole situation hinges on the ludicrous when the dead, gas-filled pig explodes.

CHARACTERS

Policeman Alexa Policeman Alexa is a policeman who manages to blow up a pig.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Policeman Alexa

Alexa is the type of silly policeman, who was the target of myriad jokes during Communism. He is just as corrupt as everyone else, yet he has an endearing side, stemming from the warmth with which he treats others.

Silly Policeman Alexa is at the center of the drama in this movie. Taking on his son's idea to asphyxiate the pig, which he had received for Christmas, he manages to produce an explosion the minute he tries to burn the hair off the gas-filled animal. Happy with the solution found by his son, he does not think for a moment about the danger of mixing fire and gas. Thus, he is ridiculous and silly.

Corrupt Policeman Alexa is also corrupt, participating in the gift-giving and bribing going on everywhere around him. He receives a pig that he intends to give for Christmas to someone who will help him in the future. Thus, he is an epitome of the corruption of the officials in Communist Romania.

THEMES

Stupidity The stupidity of the party officials is derided once again in this movie as policeman Alexa considers that there is no problem in burning off the hair of a gas-filled pig. As nothing too serious happens, the event has a highly comic effect and we see the limitations of the officials of the time.

During that time, jokes about the stupidity of policemen were plentiful, and this story is a case in point of this urban legend.

Corruption Corruption is an important theme in this movie too. In fact, corruption is a trigger of the action. It is because of corruption that policeman Alexa receives a pig for Christmas. Mungiu references the politics of the gift in communist Romania, which was a widespread phenomenon. Policeman Alexa is just one example of many cases of gift-giving for the purposes of obtaining something in return.

PLOT

THE ALIVE PIG Policeman Alexa receives a pig from a relative. The only problem is that the pig is alive and policeman Alexa lives in a block of flats, without the means to kill it. Policeman Alexa is also afraid his neighbours might see the pig and report him to the police. With great effort, they manage to get the squealing pig into his apartment.



The pig explodes Policeman Alexa's son suggests they kill the pig by asphyxiating it with gas. While they dismiss the idea at first, the parents realize then it is their only option. Filled with fear and expectation, the family asphyxiate the pig and go to see what happens next. Policeman Alexa has the idea of burning off the pig's hair with a blowtorch. The pig, filled with gas, explodes.



STORY 5

SYNOPSIS

The fifth story is a take on *Bonnie and Clyde* as it documents the fall into criminality of young people due to poverty and harsh rules. One day, a young high school student, Crina, receives the visit of a young man who says he is from the Ministry of Chemistry and is checking on the running water. Crina will soon find out that the whole water business is a sham by which the man can make some extra money. However, Crina is drawn to the idea and she embarks on an adventure with Bughi. In the end, Bughi will get caught by the police, while Crina manages to escape.

CHARACTERS

Crina	Crina is a high school student.
Bughi	Bughi sells glass bottles.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Crina

Crina is the heroine of the fifth movie. She is smart and enterprising, yet she has a penchant for small crime, or, rather, a need to make money fast so she can go on a school trip with her class.

Smart Crina is clearly a smart young woman. When Bughi comes to her apartment to ask about the tap water, she realizes he is a sham. Moreover, she quickly catches on to the job Bughi was doing and excels in it from the beginning.

Enterprising Crina is also very enterprising. She needs money to go on a school trip with her class and, when she hears about Bughi's business, she decides to be part of it. She gets involved and becomes very good at it from the start. She manages to make some money, which solves her money problem.

Independent Although she works with Bughi, Crina is also very independent. When they are caught by the police at the end of the movie, she decides to jump from the building rather than be caught by the police. When she hears that Bughi has a relative who is party secretary, she leaves him, knowing that he will be fine.

Bughi

Bughi is the type of enterprising young man who manages to make money from scratch. He is also brave and at odds with the law.

Enterprising Bughi finds a way to make money without having an actual job during the Communist period. He goes from door to door pretending he is from the Chemistry Ministry to check the purity of water in people's apartments. He then asks for a sample in a bottle, takes away the bottle and sells it. He is credible because tap water during Communism was indeed impure.

Brave Although it might seem innocuous, the type of business Bughi is doing was dangerous during Communism. He is not afraid to take risks, however, and even the car that he drives is stolen. At the end, he confronts the police bravely.

THEMES

Enterprise Crina, a high school student, goes to people's houses in order to collect bottles which she then can sell. Bughi, a young man who is unemployed, makes some money by selling those bottles. He also manages to find Western movies to watch and occasionally steals cars for his errands. Like them, many Romanians became enterprising and resourceful during Communism, as a way of surviving.

Criminality In communist Romania, many people got introduced into the world of criminality mainly because they could not cover their basic needs. They were poor, they could not find basic food and drink or they simply wanted to be free. This is what happens with the protagonists of this story, who fall into criminality for materialistic reasons and because they want to be free.

SCENES

Crina and Bughi meet A high school girl, Crina, is home alone. She is visited by a man who says he is from the Ministry of Chemistry, coming to check on the water in the apartment. He asks for a sample and suggests that Crina put it in a glass bottle. Crina complies. The man is in fact after the glass bottle, which he intends to sell in order to make some extra money.



Crina gets into business After Crina and Bughi meet again and he tells her about his sham business, she says she would be interested to see what it is about. She learns quickly and begins to do Bughi's routine. She needs the money for a school trip she wants to go on with her class. However, we can see that she is also enjoying the job.



Crina flees At the end, the two get caught by the police. They run onto the building's roof and realize they have no choice but to jump onto the next building. Bughi hesitates because he is afraid. Upon learning that Bughi has a relative who is a party secretary, Crina decides to jump, thus leaving Bughi behind. Bughi gets caught and is taken to the police.



STORY 6

SYNOPSIS

The last story in the series is another commentary on the corruptibility of people during Communism, as a truck driver resorts to selling the eggs of the hens he was transporting. This idea is suggested to him by Ildiko, the director of the hostel he was staying at. He accepts the plan, although he had never disobeyed the rules before, and is caught by the police and sent to jail.

CHARACTERS

Gligore	Gligore is a truck driver.
Marusia	Marusia is Gligore's wife.
Ildiko	Ildiko is a hostel director.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Gligore

Gligore is the type of hard-working man who has a family and a job and who works to support them. However, he has a weak spot: he falls in love with Ildiko, a hostel director, and he does something in his line of work that lands him in jail.

Hard-working Gligore is hard-working and serious about his job. We can tell how serious he is when he explains the rules of the job to a younger colleague. Then we realize he has never made the slightest mistake in his job and has always strictly obeyed the rules.

Naïve However, Gligore is also naïve and is seduced by Ildiko into selling the eggs from the hens he was transporting, using Ildiko's contacts. He is caught, of course, and sent to jail. He has made this mistake because he was in love with Ildiko and unable to refuse her requests.

Marusia

Marusia is Gligore's wife. She is the type of dutiful, faithful wife who stands by her husband no matter what.

Faithful Marusia is faithful. Although her husband has made a terrible mistake, at the end she brings him food in jail, and we realize she has forgiven him. Although their relations are cold because Gligore had fallen in love with Ildiko, she is willing to forgive him and be by his side in difficult moments.

Ildiko

Ildiko is the type of businesswoman during Communism who will do anything, take all risks and do whatever needs to be done in order to make her business work.

Enterprising During a food crisis, Ildiko finds a way to get eggs for Christmas cakes and sells them to her contacts. She has the idea of stealing the eggs from Gligore's truck and selling them, with his collusion. She does not get arrested because Gligore does not tell on her. However, in the movie's last scene, it is not she who visits Gligore in jail, but his wife, Marusia.

THEMES

Corruption One of the main themes is corruption. In a country where it is very hard to get by, the black market and the contact policy (obtaining benefits *via* well-placed contacts) are booming. The characters' justifications for corruption are different, but the cause remains the same: a state based on fear and terror, which keeps its people in poverty. Gligore and Ildiko are just common folk who try to get by in difficult conditions. Corruption was prevalent in communist Romania, at all levels of social life.

Enterprise In these conditions, one had to develop survivor's skills in order to get by. Most of the time, it was by doing illegal business and engaging in the black market. Gligore, a totally honest and hard-working man, falls into criminality when he decides to sell the eggs of the hens he was transporting. Ildiko is also an enterprising woman who immediately seizes the opportunity presented to her. The characters in this story show the resourcefulness of the Romanian people when they were living in difficult conditions.

SCENES

The Egg business Gligore is persuaded by Ildiko to take all the eggs of the hens in his truck and sell them. Although it is illegal and he has been an honest man all his life, Gligore agrees, mainly because he is in love with Ildiko. There are many eggs in his truck, so the two make quite a big sum of money.



Glignore gets caught and sent to prison In due course, Glignore's theft is discovered and he is sent to jail. He does not reveal Ildiko's involvement in the theft. In prison, he is visited by his long-neglected wife.

