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## **Nadia in the Shadow of the Romanian Securitate**

**Stejărel Olaru (2021). *Nadia și Securitatea*. EpicHistory  
<https://www.edituraepica.ro/produs/nadia-si-securitatea/>**

**N**adia is a Romanian national symbol and common treasure. The world-class female gymnast symbolizing perfection, who was the first to receive a perfect score at the Olympics, mesmerized the world in the shadow of the Romanian secret service and the dictatorial regime led by Ceaușescu. Her sporting excellence and fame served as a legitimization tool for the state apparatus, which aimed to present itself in a positive light to the Western democratic countries. Stejărel Olaru, a Romanian political scientist and historian, and an expert on Romanian secret service documents has long been examining the CNSAS archive (e.g. here the archives of the former repressive secret service or police known as Securitate).

The author presents Nadia's life path based on the Securitate documents with sufficient objectivity and research rigor. It is commendable that the researcher refrains from disclosing information about the gymnast's private life, instead emphasizing Nadia Comaneci's career as a top athlete. The book, which consists of seven chapters, explains the complete life path of a female athlete in detail. However, it provides an insight into Romania in the 1970s and 1980s. Although the book is about Nadia, the text reflects on Romania and its social realities, particularly on the constructed reality created by the Securitate. It can be an exciting and painful read for those interested in and curious about how the regime exploited and sacrificed the life of a young gymnast for its purposes.

In the years leading up to the fall of communism, many Romanian citizens left the country due to political oppression, poverty, and food shortages in addition to seeking a better life. The first part of this empirically inductive logic book tells the story of the Olympic champion's escape from Romania. In the months leading up to the December 1989 revolution, Nadia, accompanied by a few unknown individuals and with the help and guidance of a boyar, arrives in Hungary and then travels to the United States. Upon introducing pluralism, she is greeted by a horde of journalists, but she speaks succinctly and metaphorically. It is noteworthy that the athlete's defection had a strong political dimension, as it resulted in significant prestige loss for Nicolae Ceaușescu, the Romanian dictator referred to as pro-Western. Moreover, the situation was further exacerbated by the stubborn rumors circulating among the population that Nadia Comăneci had a close relationship with Nicu, the youngest son of the Ceaușescu couple, presumably at the latter's initiative.

In the second chapter of the book, the author introduces Nadia Comăneci's journey from the beginning of her gymnastics career to her remarkable victory in Montreal. Nadia was born in Onesti, Bacău County, a town that suffered from significant infrastructural shortcomings and exponential population growth due to migration and resettlement. In socialist, Eastern European countries, sports were often used as a propagandistic tool during the Cold War, creating a new athlete ideal explicitly modeled on the Soviet Union. Athletes were expected to

receive a Marxist-Leninist education and promote socialism, brotherhood, and peaceful coexistence among member countries. These factors contributed to the creation of the athlete model that Nadia and other gymnasts were expected to embody.

The construction of the sports complex in Onesti/Ónfalva before 1989 named Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej, inaugurated in 1968, was made possible with the intervention of a few teachers and students. With the increase in sports opportunities in the small town, a Hungarian-speaking Béla Károlyi and his wife Márta settled in Onesti. Among the first students of the athletic academy was Nadia Comăneci, who was taught gymnastics by Márta Károlyi and Valeriu Munteanu. Following her remarkable success, her later coach Béla Károlyi denied the contribution of others to the young athlete's professional development, attributing her success solely to himself and his wife. The Romanian secret service followed Béla Károlyi's career through surveillance bugs and informants, praising his professional dedication and criticizing his human qualities. Even though the communist state apparatus and the Securitate were aware of his harsh training methods, they did not take any action against him, which can be explained by his considerable success and great dedication. After poor results in her first competition, Nadia achieved considerable success at both national and international levels, introducing the country to the sporting establishment of Onesti.

From 1975 onwards, although she was young, Nadia was placed in the senior group, giving her access to international competitions. Due to political pressure from Béla Károlyi, the young gymnast was delegated to the International Gymnastics Championships in the south of Norway, and she won first place there. At just 14 years old, she was dubbed the discovery and star of gymnastics by the international press. The athlete and her coach, now in the limelight, made qualifying for the 1976 Olympic Games in Montreal their top priority. It was a coincidence that Béla Károlyi, a gymnastics teacher, was entrusted with the task of putting together the team for the next Olympic Games. After the election of the communist regime, it became clear that Nadia Comăneci would travel to Canada's second-largest city to compete in the Olympics in the summer of 1976. Despite poor accommodation conditions, the Romanian national team trained hard to achieve victory. It soon became clear to everyone that there was fierce competition between Romania and the Soviet Union in the field of gymnastics. The Romanian team in rhythmic gymnastics was only a few points behind, so the team from the Soviet Union won this part of the group competition.

In the individual competition, Nadia Comăneci made history by scoring top 10 at the Olympic Games for the first time. She was precise, measured, and fast, focusing on every step and every exercise, winning the adoration of every spectator. After this brilliant victory, Romania stands out among the other communist member states. It is seen in a positive light by democratic countries, legitimizing the totalitarian regime led by Ceaușescu. After the Olympic Games, many fans and journalists waited at Bucharest airport for the champions to return home. For her outstanding success, the regime awarded Nadia Comănece, then only 14 years old, the Order of Hero of Socialist Labour. In the communist public spirit of Romania, paying homage to one person was inseparable from the political context of the country. Thus, in the minds of society, Nadia's sensational victory was linked to the legitimacy of the dictatorial regime that had created and paved the way to success. The achievement was the success of both

Nadia and the Ceaușescu couple. “Yes, Nadia symbolized perfection, but Ceaușescu was a genius” (p. 87).

The toxic and destructive relationship between Nadia Comăneci and Béla Károlyi reached its climax in 1977, which led to a complete break in their relationship. Her abusive pedagogical methods and abusive behavior forced the young gymnast to flee from training, intending to end her career as a professional gymnast. After the fall of the Iron Curtain, the coach published a memorandum in which he admitted his wrongdoing. However, he tried to explain it all away as the price of success. The Securitate had clear evidence to support the gymnasts’ allegations, but the Romanian secret service did not want to dismiss him. The socialist government praised Béla Károlyi for developing a gymnastics team that excelled on the international stage, despite poor conditions and conditions. Moreover, it would have caused a major scandal and loss of prestige for the country and the sports complex in Ionfalva. This would have been because the coach’s constant abuse had been made public. Not least, the late decision of the Romanian socialist regime could be justified by Béla’s considerable and diversified political capital. Nadia’s mother, Ștefania Comăneci, who learned of the situation from her daughter, proved to be a relevant player in the abuse story. Ștefania wanted to speak out against the coach to the highest state institutions, but Béla’s extensive political network prevented her from doing so. Yet, the coach says that the mother was trying to change the situation out of self-interest, as she was receiving a relatively small financial reward for her daughter’s success. Despite the situation that arose, the gymnastics competitions continued, and Nadia again performed well. Of particular significance was the International Gymnastics Championships in Prague. Unfair judging decisions by the nation’s dictator resulted in the Romanian athletic delegation withdrawing from the competition and returning home. The judges’ decisions in favor of the Soviet gymnasts and the Romanian delegation’s reaction to them had a significant political dimension, reflecting the deterioration of diplomatic relations.

Nadia settles in the capital and starts working with a new personal trainer, Gheorghe Condovici. His main objective was to restore the young gymnast’s mental and physical health. He appeared as an educated and precise individual. The Securitate continued to map Nadia’s daily life through bugs and cameras, as well as information from people close to her. Her freedom was similarly restricted, with restrictions on the routes she could take home and on her leisure activities. In this way, the secret service sought to manipulate her relationships to make her single. The adolescent gymnast’s first love, a male member of the gymnastics team, was moved out of the capital after seeing the harmonious relationship. Several reports in the Western press claim that Nadia had attempted suicide, but she partially denies these allegations. In her book, she explains that the constant persecution led her to drink a glass of disinfectant to draw attention to herself. Several foreigners wanted to make a film about Nadia’s eventful life, but Romanian state officials refused their requests.

Despite the rejection, the film was released, portraying the young athlete as a victim of the communist regime and the coach. As a result of the stressful mental state, Nadia’s success was interrupted, with increasingly poor results. In the meantime, the Károlyi family and Géza Pozsár’s political intercession is seen as a political intervention to launch a new sports complex in Deva, where they work as coaches. At first, the sportsmen liked Béla, but later he again behaved aggressively with the students. Achieving huge success with the team in Deva, the

number of students increased, gaining a remarkable reputation. After meeting and talking to Béla Károlyi Nadia Comăneci, the gymnast decides to return to her former coach and move to Devea. Her decision was largely influenced by the lack of head and professionalism in the women's gymnastics team. Following the return, the relationship between the two changes and shows a relevant development. He pays special attention to his former student, scheduling special training sessions for her, which helps Nadia to return to the limelight. The aim was to fully prepare for the Moscow Olympics, as the political context meant that they had to start from a disadvantageous position. In 1980, the Romanian national team was greeted by fans in Moscow with whistles and obscene language. Nadia achieved a perfect score in the first round of the competition, but a mistake in the next round of the game put her at the bottom of the rankings. The judges showed certain favoritism towards the Soviet players, making it impossible for the Romanian gymnast to improve her ranking. After the Olympic Games, the Károlyi couple lost a great deal of political influence, and this was the reason why they did not return to the country after a competition in 1981. The Romanian state sentenced Béla Károlyi and his wife Marta Károlyi to seven years in prison for treason, as well as the choreographer of the gymnastics team and the most loyal informer of the secret service, Géza Pozsár. For several reasons, the administration did not want the case to become a scandal. First, because the refugees were members of a minority ethnic group, they could have accused Romania of chauvinism. On the other hand, the trainers who remained in the United States had been accepted, so they would have feared bad diplomatic relations by attacking them. Their most salient fear, on the other hand, was that the Károlyi family owned several important so-called state secrets, which could have done emphatic damage to the regime. Despite their fears, they wanted to persuade the Károlyi family to return to Romania by letter, which they forwarded to the United States Sports Federation and the family personally.

In the book's final chapter, Nadia describes her daily life since retiring from professional sports. At the end of the book, she repeatedly touches on her escape from the country, framing the book. After the flight of the Károlyi family and the athlete's retirement, it seemed pointless to follow the gymnast's life, but the Securitate planted bugs in her new apartment. A break in the surveillance dossier occurred when the Ceaușescu couple became involved in a relationship with their son Nicu. Nadia denies the allegations, saying that the two were merely colleagues. The Romanian dictator liked and appreciated the Romanian gymnast, but his wife did not like him. Elena's decision prompted the Romanian Secret Service to mobilize the retired athlete on weekdays, restricting her access to the border. Despite this, Nadia was selected to be part of the Romanian team delegation to the '84 Olympics in Los Angeles. She was able to travel with the national team to the United States. According to the book, Nadia's escape was precise and deliberate, as the Secret Service had no idea of her intentions. Outlining the details of the escape story, Stejărel Olaru dispels conspiracy theories that foreign organizations had supported the young athlete.

In summary, *Nadia și Securitatea* (Nadia and the Securitate), authored by Stejărel Olaru, is a credible and comprehensive account of Nadia Comăneci's career and life as a professional athlete. The special feature of the book is that it presents the athlete along the lines of Secret Service documentation. We can see how the communist regime victimized a successful child.