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## "The Cold War: Living Under Its Shadow" featuring Claudia Serea

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## The Cold War: Living Under Its Shadow

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### Claudia Serea

*Claudia Serea, a Romanian-born immigrant to the US. Serea is an author, poet, copywriter, and translator. She shares her personal experiences and the background of her family as they lived through the Cold War in Romania.*

Interview:

**Armando F Sanchez:** Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for being with us today. I have a very special guest and I'm just thrilled to get her background her own experience and the background of her family as they experienced the Cold War in Romania.

We're honored today to have Claudia Serea. Claudia was recommended to us by a mutual friend. David Dephy who is a Georgian poet. He came to the United States as well immigrating, and he is an award-winning poet, novelist, and a multimedia artist. And when I interviewed David, you know, he immediately said, Oh, you've got to talk to Claudia, you have to. So here we are today. And again, we're very honored to have Claudia from New Jersey, not near Romania right now.

But let me give you a little bit of background about Claudia Serea. She's Romanian-born. She immigrated to the United States in 1995 and her poems and translations have appeared in Meridian, Mudfish, Main Street Rag, Harpur, Palate, Exquisite Corpse, and many more other publications and journals, anthologies as well. And we hope to sneak in one of her poems today into the show. So looking forward to it. So background where is Claudia from? She's from Romania. Romania is a southeast European country. The capital is Bucharest I've never been there. But the pictures are beautiful. I mean, you got to just imagine what the areas, mountainous forest for us and we will visit there soon in 1944 The Soviet at that time, the Soviet Union now referred to as Russia back there, the Soviet Union went into a military occupation in 1944. And it became more ruthless in 1950s. In the 1960s the story has it that the country Romania was still being very ruthlessly taken over by the secret police. It was the worst thing that anyone could be called at that time was enemy of the state. And there was a Romanian revolution in 1989 seeking their independence from the Soviet Union. So this show is about the Cold War. We focused that era. We're looking at it from the perspective of her life, her family's life. And one thing that I'll add on before we bring her into the show is that most of these countries in this area are survivors. And I say that because they go back into pre-Christ history. In this case, Romania named after Rome, we're talking the Roman Empire. That's really fascinating. But warfare has been in the neighborhood their whole lives. So those that survive one way or the other, have a lot to share with all of us in all and present history. Claudia, thank you so much for being on the show.

**Claudia Serea:** Thank you so much for having me and for your thoughtful introduction, and you provided many details. I have one small correction that the revolution in 1989 was not to provide for independence from the Soviet regime. By that time the Soviet Army had retreated from Romania, I believe they retreated in 1964 or 68, or something like that. And the revolution was an anti-communist revolution to go against the repressive regime of Nicolae Ceausescu. So it was part of the wave of revolutions from the entire Eastern Europe that happened in East Germany with the fall of the Berlin

Wall, and Czechoslovakia and all the other countries. And he got to Romania in December 1989 later than the other countries and I was the only violent regime change from all of these revolutions and changes over 1100 people dead that and it was a kind of a bloody and intense few weeks when the whole regime fell and Nicolae Ceausescu was shot. Then we made a new constitution, an entire regime change.

**Sanchez:** Amazing thing.

**Serea:** I was I witnessed that firsthand. I was in Bucharest at the time, for work.

**Sanchez:** And we want to talk about that. We want to get back into that information, continue to give us a perspective on how your family and you were impacted, you know from the time you were born in stories that you heard from your parents that have now reach into World War Two and probably even before that.

**Serea:** I was born in 1969 and in a family that had many former political prisoners in Romania. So my grandfather was a political prisoner, and my father and one of my uncles, and they were all imprisoned because in 1950, starting with 1956 when they first in prison, I guess my uncle, and then in 1958, they came after my grandfather and my father. My grandparents were simple peasants because my grandfather was leader of a local chapter of former political party that was banned. When the Soviets and the new Communists came in. They were after him and they were also wanted to force everyone to give away their land and they my grandparents didn't have a lot of land. But my grandfather didn't want to give sign it off to the collective. The history is very kind of long and complicated. So I want to kind of skip ahead, but because he was kind of a troublemaker in the eyes of the regime, they were trying to get him and then with taxes and with other things, when finally they were, they made a trial, and he was sentenced to I believe it was 25 years of prison. And then when they searched the house, they found a notebook, a poetry notebook. My father was 18 at the time. And they found a poem or notebook of poems that he, he wrote against the occupation of the Red Army in Romania. He didn't publish those. He didn't show it to anyone. There were just a few verses about you know, the occupation of the Soviet Army. And then so then my father kind of was also considered an enemy of the people and sent to a military tribunal and sentenced to eight years of which he served five. And so a few years ago, after I emigrated to the United States, I realized that this kind of history isn't really not known at all here or very, and very few people write about this and so that was my first discovery.

And then my second discovery came when I was close to my 40s. So I think I was in my 40s when I started to, write poetry and be interested in this topic and I realized that I was around the age of my grandmother, when all of this happened when she lost her husband, and sons to prisons. And she was she was forced out of her house and she lost all everything that she had. She had to leave for eight years with no, she had no means of subsistence she didn't have any land anything to do any work to do wasn't so the intent was for her to just kind of not be able to push her outside the society right? So when I realized that she was actually I was her age when this happened, I started to write about this topic. And so this is a major top influence in my writing. Now there are many other topics in my writings because I grew up hearing the stories but kind of like hush, hush. Nobody wanted to talk. We couldn't talk about it openly. And my father after he the years spent in prison, he really didn't want to cause or to or like not even by mistake any of the kids to kind of blurt it out towards anyone else. So he kept it a secret from us, too. And so I only heard fragments. Still when I spent summers at my grandmother's house. She told me more details. So I kind of know that's how I know about the notebook. And about the poems.

**Sanchez:** You know, you said, I liked the perspective you're sharing about your personal life and your relationship with your family, ie your grandmother. How are women as a whole treated during this

era? You mentioned one example where they were trying to push her out of mainstream society at the time. Was this common with most women?

**Serea:** No, this was intended for the so-called Enemy of the People so because they wanted to create a new society and the women played a central role. So I can say that women had, you know, started to have access to education and access to other things, but this kind of all the benefits and all the good things that happened to women came at the expense of, you know, losing freedoms, losing like only going on the party line and only losing and also later in the 80s after all of this happened. On one, Ceausescu came to power later in the 80s a huge shortage of goods came. So it happened like that. There was like major, he was trying to pay back the foreign debt. And so he really turned on the screws on the population. So there was like rationing. Widespread rationing, widespread rations for food, for gas, even electricity, blackouts, and women had to suffer because they were the ones who would hunt for food. Men were in the factories and women were working to, but they were in charge of cooking. And so this you have to think that this was kind of an icon old fashioned type of society at that point. Women were hunting for food around town. They were waiting in lines for bread for meat for milk. I remember my mother waking up at 4 am and going to stand in line for to get milk. So women had a hard life. They had to work and also work at home.

**Sanchez:** And they take the children with him or did they leave him at home sort of you guys take care of yourselves until they come back?

**Serea:** We I grew up we went by ourselves we were kids by ourselves. I had I have a younger brother and I was the older one and I took care of him. But we were kids. I was four years old when he was born so I didn't know what to do with a baby. But we weren't we grew up by ourselves for the most part. A lot of I don't think there was maternity leave. My mom almost always working.

**Sanchez:** You know, I remember my background and as a political scientist, I remember when they say when there is a dictatorship coming in. They normally go after the intelligentsia first, and I go after professors and teachers and writers and specifically said, poets. And they specifically said poets from that moment on I've always wondered that you know, there must be a major force that governments must contend with when somebody is a poet.

**Serea:** Any kind of writer and poets when there was censorship, so there was like widespread censorship. You couldn't publish anything without someone you know, reading it first and a lot many poems, poets fell into this underground, but even the underground in Romania I can tell you was not as it was really like it was like You hear stories from samizdat and Xerox copies. I don't it wasn't that widespread. It was like a lot of fear. And poets and writers didn't circulate even underground. Many of their materials because they were they already had at that point when I was growing up, they already had been all the class of intellectuals and intelligentsia that was after the war. They all have been in prison, and they all have been decimated by that point and taken out of the society. So when I was growing up, there wasn't really any kind of underground, I don't think was the only underground that we had was to listen to Radio Free Europe and they had a Rucker hour and so I used to listen it was Yeah, I was just like, you know, listening and that's how I heard of Metallica and of Deep Purple and all these other bands that I had no way of listening to them on the regular radio, or TV or concerts or any kind of other there was no other way.

**Sanchez:** I do a presentation on cruise ships related to the issue of propaganda. And how art and rock'n'roll were used very much as part of the propaganda being shipped out into the eastern European bloc.

So how did all this influence all these activities influence your upbringing and your writing?

**Serea:** I honestly Well, when I started to write I was influenced by the writers in Romania. And in Romania at that time in the 80s, there was a lot of hiding. So everyone was hiding in metaphors, and in very abstract concepts. And so that's how I started. And as a kid, I wrote some sci-fi stories and all of that and so there was kind of like very abstract poetry that I started with. And I wasn't really exploring any of these topics at all. Self-censoring, I guess, but I didn't, I didn't think that that could be a possibility. So I didn't even try. I started to write about these topics after I emigrated to the United States and I realized that this is a wide-open space that nobody else had done. You know, a lot of people talk, not even. I mean, there are examples of other cultures' famous poets, who published in the United States Czeslaw Milosz and others. You know, about their own countries. And there are other literature in translation, but not much Romanian poetry, talking about these kinds of historical issues. So I that's when I started to write which in English, which was about 2004.

That was one of my topics. And so I started late, and, but I tried to explore some of the stories that I know from my grandmother some of the I wrote, kind of a conceptual chapbook, titled The System about the repression system in Romania. So this little book that was published in New Zealand, it's, it has poems, it's about the system of repression that starts with a new form and then it goes to a trial like a mock trial, and then it goes to a prison and labor camp, kind of follows my father's steps and through the repression system. And then when he got out of the prison, he was again, followed by the secret police and our again, informants filing reports after him. So it's kind of like a full circle of repression. So it's a little book that is not very specific about my father. It's just like more about the system. The entire system.

**Sanchez:** Did your father get to see the end of the Cold War?

**Serea:** Yes.

**Sanchez:** What did you think?

**Serea:** When it happened in 1989 we were ecstatic. We were extraordinarily happy and out of our minds, and even if it was dangerous, to be outside or go to these conflict zones where there were, you know, shooting and some so-called terrorists were shooting and the army was responding and it was a crazy time, but we would still try to get close to that. Even though it was a dangerous time.

**Sanchez:** When you arrive to the United States. You know what it was? Now we need to be and compare both societies and how both societies see history. What was your take on that at that time?

**Serea:** Well, when I came to the United States I had a little bit of taste of freedom in Romania too because I didn't come immediately after 1989. I came in 1995, after the whole system fell, fell to pieces in Romania. What happened in Romania after the revolution. There were some other movements, there was no political class, and only people who are connected to a former second tier of the party and even the repression system, and even you know, people who had already the connections, they kind of ascended to power but they were the second tier. There weren't the most visible that there used to be before, right? So that's kind of how it started. And so it was very disappointing for us who were very young to see that the second tier kind of like got to power and this whole thing you know, was kind of all for nothing, you know, and at the same time, a lot of other things happened. The whole economic system kind of fell apart, and all of a sudden, there were no more jobs. And there was like, total collapse. So then I kind of like we struggled for a little while to try

to find a new way and then it became very popular to emigrate at that time, like whoever had any kind of anything or any kind of way of out of the country. They just went ahead and emigrated.

**Sanchez:** And we say emigrated, it was not just the United States. Is that correct?

**Serea:** It was it became more pronounced in to emigrate in Europe, once Romania joined the European Union. But when I came to the United States, I applied to the so-called diversity visa, which is that kind of like a green card lottery, it's called and I applied to get a green card basically. And I won that lottery.

So then I you know, we had to decide like, I didn't know if I should come and so then I thought, maybe just come and give it a try. Even though it was it was it was the you know, the trip of my life. So when I came to the United States for many years I didn't have a clear idea or a clear understanding of the system because we worked in restaurants. I was trying to make sense of my own life. And I was trying to go back to school, I had sought to do so many things to kind of survive. That I didn't get a chance to compare systems or notes. And so I don't think I can compare. It's because they're so different. Now they're getting a little closer after you know after the Romania joined the European Union. Now, everything that's here, it's there to everything. Lifestyle is very similar to their lifestyle is very similar to other countries in Europe. Now it's a lot closer.

**Sanchez:** Do you travel a lot back and forth?

**Serea:** Yeah, I go every year to see my family. My family's still there. Yet we go to the beach. We go on Bucharest. It's so very nice. And it's very European. Very nice. It's very nice now, but that's why it was pretty. It was pretty sad in the early 90s. Because it was still the "greyness" of the communist years, without any kind of capitalist or any kind of anything, many benefits at all, without any kind plus the entire system collapsed. And there was nothing there was no there were no jobs. There was no perspective nothing.

**Sanchez:** It's hard to imagine.

**Serea:** Yeah, very, very hard to understand it you after the revolution is kind of like God like almost, well, something's improved right away like the ability to have demonstrations and the ability to speak and to have any kind of protests and have a free press. So that happened overnight. It was that was that's the great part. Okay. But then economically no in the way of life for the regular people. A lot of things didn't change right away and the things that changed, like disappear. Entire industries disappeared. So it was kind of a disaster.

**Sanchez:** Yeah, they were controlled by it. They were actually just maintained by the government to keep up.

**Serea:** Yeah, and then the new government didn't really couldn't do much or I'm not sure you know, they tried different things. And it didn't they weren't very competent, I should say.

**Sanchez:** No, they didn't need to be because the government was funding everything. So the background, your family background, in your own experience, living during the Cold War. Does this limit the work that you do today is very creative.

**Serea:** Does it limit me?

**Sanchez:** Or do you what are the other themes that you talk about? In your work?

**Serea:** I talk a lot about my immigration story. I have a book about So in my experience when I was in the restaurant and people that I met there, and so I talk a lot about my kind of like my dual life that I have now. With my daughter here and the motherhood experience. I have a book of love poems, but I always come back to history because history kind of grounds me and my family I kind of use my father and my family as kind of like a direct connection to history. It's not that I talk about him. It's just that I kind of like channel through him my connection with recently history, as I did with my grandmother, too.

**Sanchez:** Absolutely. I have another question and then after this question, I'd like to ask you to please, if you could select some of your poetry and read it to us as well. We'd be very honored to hear it. My next question would be do you have any favorite authors and if so, how did they influence you?

**Serea:** I have many, many favorite artists growing up in Romania I can I love you know, Mircea Cartarescu, Mircea Eliade, and many other Romanian authors. I also do translation, so my favorite authors from Romania I translate them into English too. There are many younger authors that I really love. And when I came to the United States, I discovered the poetry of Charles Simic. Charles Simic is a poet who was born in Belgrade, he's almost my father's age. And he talks about his experience during the war when he was a little kid and growing up after the war, and just the way he talks about history, for it resonates the most with me because he has kind of that darkness that I think it's Eastern European, it must be European and it's like a little bit of humor there too, which also must be Eastern European because you can get through all that hardship without making fun of it sometimes. So I'm trying to go you know, to kind of like, learn from that. Also Anna Akhmatova, of course, a big influence. I discovered Sylvia Plath, I discovered William Carlos Williams. So many great American poets. Some of them I read in Romania. Some of them I just discovered after I arrived here.

**Sanchez:** I'm gonna very quickly because you made me think about it. Does the poetry in one language fit smoothly into another language, or is always this conflict that it doesn't really make sense in one language, but it doesn't always make sense?

**Serea:** No, it always makes sense. It's just a matter of working really hard. To make that happen because it's work you have to try to smooth it out in the actual language once you do a translation. Now, many first drafts are pretty rigid, you know, and they don't have the same spirit but then you have to go back and kind of smooth it out and make it more into that into the attendance form. So it keeps that spirit and conveys your original or it feels like a good poem. And then he was like, it's so it was meant to be in English, right? So that happens on the reverse, too.

Sometimes, I translate into Romanian and it's a little bit difficult. That's why I do it very rarely. It's a lot of work.

**Sanchez:** There's a lot of work I can imagine.

**Serea:** That's why you have to kind of capture the same, the same spirit that you feel that you originally had. So that's the most difficult part.

**Sanchez:** You're trying to respect what the author.

**Serea:** It could be done right and then at the same time, you know, you're trying to translate it the other way.

**Sanchez:** Could you do us the honor of reading us one of your poems, please?

**Serea:** I want to read from my most recent book writing, which is a book of poems that was published by Unsolicited Press in February this year. Brand new, so it has been inspired by my history and my growing up in Romania and my family and it's kind of surreal and I want to read and I want to read a poem called Dark Calligraphy. And it's about its kind of a position on history that I thought it would be interesting that would go with our discussion tonight.

## **Darker Calligraphy**

by Claudia Serea

From *Writing on the Walls at Night*

On the blank sheet of paper,  
the little girl writes  
a row of letters *t*.

Her pen screeches,  
barely audible,  
against the white;

as she slowly fills  
the vast field of the page.

\*

Rooms filled with silence: a museum or a library or classroom or kids taking the test. We move from room to room in silence: from the empty church to the ICU, to the closed bar, to the deserted hallway where a janitor mops the floor.

There is a silence of a still life, the silence of Monet's water lilies, and, in my mother's house, the silence of the plastic flowers in a vase. But my favorite silence is the one of the snow when the twigs draw their dark calligraphy.

\*

Is it better to know,  
or not to know?

To remember,  
or not?

To notice,  
or glide by,

closing your eyes

at the ruins of the buildings  
where we were supposed to line up  
by the hand to receive  
our daily soup.

\*

Snow and silence, the enemies. Snow falls, covering everything, making it feel alright. No matter what it is, it will be covered by snow, including an accepting all in silence. Let's bury the past, it says, Let's cover the mass graves with an immaculate silence, a sheet pulled over the dead. Let's throw away the shovels.

Overnight it snowed  
and silence covered everything.

Even the crows were quiet.

Only the woodworms kept chewing  
the furniture on the walls.

No one could hear them, though.  
My grandfather and a few others could,  
and they were driven mad  
by the deafening chew.

Sooner or later,  
everything would crumble, they said,  
but one believed them.

\*

The little girl had finished her homework and left the paper on the table in the deserted kitchen. Row after row, the white field of her sheet was filled with slanted dark crosses. Outside, the wind was tracing its own calligraphy in the trees.

**Serea:** So this is not a funny poem. It's about how do we deal with the past? Is it we just bury it and forget it or we keep talking about it and I choose to keep talking about so it's kind of important to me because of my family history. But I also want to do it for others I want to do it for my daughter I'm gonna do it for other people here who don't know history, European history that much and Romanian history, and everything that happened Cold War history. There are huge dramas that happen in Romania and everyone needs to know them. One of my pet peeves is like there's like no movies made of that, you know, after so many topics.

**Sanchez:** Absolutely. And they're stressing the human ability to endure. But by the same token, it makes us understand how resilient people in Europe have been especially in the eastern bloc to survive these kinds of atrocities that have been ongoing on.

**Serea:** What happens now with a war in Russia, it's an extension of the Cold War. It really is. It's still everyone. That's why all Romania and all my friends and everyone was scared to death when that happened in February because it could have happened to us. It could be it's like really it's very close to home.

And I know people everywhere in the world reacted to this but it was very, very closely felt in Romania, in Poland in all these countries that are like still scared, scared to death of Russia.

**Sanchez:** Absolutely. No, there's no insurance that it will carry over into other countries as well. And you have first-hand experience in that area.

Before we get to our final question and closing statements, I'd like to ask you, could you please provide us with where our viewers and listeners can find more information about you and your future work?

**Serea:** Okay. I have a website. It's more of a blog where I don't really blog that much, but it has all my information. It's on Tumblr, cserea.tumblr.com. I'm also on Instagram and Twitter with the same handle, @claudia\_poetry. And I'm also on Facebook.

I'm not very active. I'm more active on Facebook, but I'm not very active on social media but I'm trying I can try to get to you know if anyone has a question or wants to get in touch, and I circle myself around I'm glad there is someone on the line you're gonna have to sleep. You know,

**Serea:** I don't have time. Yeah, I don't have time.

**Sanchez:** Great people doing great things usually don't have time and that's what I'm hearing here as well. Unfortunately, we're coming to the end of the show. So I'd like to sort of give it over to you and I'd like to hear your closing statements.

**Serea:** Thank you so much again for spending taking the time and have hosting me and spending time hearing my stories.

There are many stories about Eastern Europe that now people don't know.

The it's one of my major topics I write about.

If you're curious about my poems, you can buy my books you can find them on Amazon. But you can also just Google my name and I have a lot of poetry published online. So you'll find a lot of my poems online already.

And to my fellow writers, please write what speaks to you. Please write of what is true. And that's what I'm trying to do to speak my own truth which I believe is the truth of my generation. Please write of what is important to you. And keep at it. Until you, until you get your poems out there because that's what I did. I came to the United States. I knew English when I came but I didn't know anything about poetry, American poetry.

And I started to write and I kept at it and enough in a few years, it started to accumulate so when you carry this kind of stories with you, I just can't wait to just, you know, keep going and keep typing up my stories and share them with everyone. Thank you.

**Sanchez:** Claudia, you remind me of a discussion I had in political science. Back in college. They were saying, you know, the political science economist, we deal with things. People in the arts writers, poets, artists, you talk about the soul and if you take the soul out and if you only have political scientists left, you don't have anything.

It stuck with me. I didn't understand it took years to evolve to an understanding and having the honor of listening to you and talk and reminding us that we have to go beyond just what we see or what we think we have to let our soul travel through different stories and be exposed to a lot of the dark sides of human existence makes us more human.

**Serea:** And connects us to the world.

**Sanchez:** And hopefully, it connects us as the world and makes us more conscious that we have to work together. We can blow ourselves up across the world and all this work was for nothing but to try and remind us of the soul. And we have to be mindful of that as well.

**Serea:** That's all we have. That's all we have in the end. Our soul and poetry help with keeping that fighting spirit.

**Sanchez:** Claudia, Thank you very much for being a guest on the show and I look forward to having you in future shows.

**Serea:** Thank you so much for having me.