

My Life as a Spy: Investigations in a Secret Police File. By Katherine Verdery. Durham: Duke University Press, 2018, xvii, 344 pp. Notes, Bibliography, Index, 29 Illustrations. \$27.95 paper

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“There’s nothing like reading your secret police file to make you wonder who you really are (xi):” Katherine Verdery’s brilliant new book opens with this arresting sentence. What follows is an engrossing, erudite examination of communist-era Romania centered on the author’s reading of her Securitate file, which ran to 2,781 pages. In its pages, the Romanian secret police categorized her as a spy, a CIA agent, a Hungarian agitator, a supporter of dissidents, and an enemy of Romania. The file made her rethink the years she had spent in Romania and with them, her very identity. The book’s inventiveness rests in part through Verdery’s polyphonic approach: she uses three fonts, one each for the letters and field notes she wrote in the past, the reports of the Securitate officers from her file, and her present-day analysis of these primary sources. *My Life as a Spy* deserves a wide readership: this is a book that will not only interest scholars, but anyone wanting to learn more about that time and place.

Verdery’s file reveals that on her very first days in Romania in 1973 she fell under the suspicion of the secret police because she made a wrong turn and ended up near a military base. The policeman who stopped her wrote to the Securitate, who immediately suspected she was a spy. Thus was born the first of Verdery’s doppelgangers, “Vera” (she would also be dubbed “The Folklorist” and “Vannesa”). These identities, expanded on throughout the file, Verdery writes, made “Vera” “nearly as real as KV” (5). Reading about the life the security forces concocted “unmoored” her, making her wonder about herself and her motivations, about the people she had met and befriended over the years, and about the consequences of her research projects.

Was she a spy? Verdery in part answers in the affirmative and certainly understands why she was taken to be one: she came to do ethnographic research in a communist country, she pretended to be married so as to convey greater gravitas, she tried to “fit in” by dressing more like a native, she

called her research subjects “informants,” and she tried to escape her surveillance agents when she knew about them. She acted, in short, like a spy.

My Life as a Spy is divided into two parts. The first revisits Verdery’s trips to Romania between 1973 and 1989. In a chapter on the 1970s, Verdery first advances one of her more interesting conclusions: she realizes that she was “a great boon to the Securitate” for “villages were not easy for them to penetrate, and we helped them get in, like flies on a stray dog” (54). Her next chapter, on the 1980s, reveals how previous suspicions rebounded in a more oppressive climate: in Cluj, she recounts how the more obvious surveillance pressure placed on her grew more intense, leading her to feel paralyzed, afraid, and experience insomnia. The file, she writes, acted as a way for the “state to create a person”; “the Securitate made me a spy as I made myself an ethnographer, each an act of creation influencing the other” (131). The last chapter consists of the initial, and varied, reactions Verdery had to reading her file, presented mostly in the form of field notes so that we can see how her emotions changed from her first reading to her most recent. As she concludes, what emerges “is a gradual transformation in my attitude toward the file, reflecting a development from my reacting quite personally, to my thinking about it as a researcher” (189).

And what of these feelings? Part two delves into Verdery’s shifting attitudes to her discoveries about those who informed on her. Over seventy people did; while many were not surprising (her landlord, for example), often the extent and detail floored her. Finding out, as she writes, was “truly distressing” and “produced a reorganization of my entire affective landscape, as far as Romania was concerned” (197). Verdery analyzes several informers in detail, as well as two people in particular that surprised her. The first, “Beniamin” (she retains pseudonyms), someone she trusted, initially made her “horried to see the kinds of things he seemed to know” and “furious at what I took to be his betrayal of me” (198). After confronting him and discussing the file, she alters her view, mostly accepting his explanations that it was his handler who provided a lot of the details and that he felt “panic-stricken” and “miserable” as a result (202-3). The encounter leads Verdery to question how we should view informers: some jobs required it (hotel workers, for example), others gave relatively innocuous reports, while still others did so after threats. Should they be judged the same way as those who informed enthusiastically and viciously? “Silviu,” another informer, “enraged and distressed” Verdery the most because he included lies about her

and was one of her favorite people from her research years. In this section, Verdery concludes: “I think now I see even more clearly the nature of the evil I lived and how much these individuals (in fact, the *system*) contributed to strangling some of my potential ... a life not fully lived, unfulfilled, anguished, oppressed by fear and half measures beginning when I was a child” (241).

It is hard to pick the most riveting section in a riveting book, but for me it came near the end, when Verdery manages to talk to Securitate officers who had surveilled her. After the first encounter, she writes the meeting “cast my soul into chaos for days.” The officer is intelligent, has a good memory, apologizes in part, and is a good conversationalist. Were they just people doing their jobs, as he told her, or great actors who can still play a role? Can we ever really know? In the end, after covering the possible meanings of these meetings, Verdery relies on what ethnography can accomplish; namely, seeing the officers as part of a larger social system (270). The harm they did mostly came at the expense of her friends who were caught up in her own surveillance. They also “made me its tool—perhaps another reason why they did not throw me out” (276).

My Life as a Spy is an extraordinary book and an engaging examination of what it means to be a scholar in addition to how we should understand the Romanian communist system. Bold, brilliant, dazzling, learned, and provocative: this is a work to be savored.