

Building the Bridge: Agnes Mura, Romania and the 1984 Olympics

Agnes Mura and William Bergquist

Following is an interview conducted by William Bergquist with Agnes Mura as part of a series in the Library of Professional Psychology concerning cross-cultural dynamics. This particular interview focuses on the critical role that Ms. Mura played in securing the participation of the Romanian Olympic teams in the 1984 Olympic Games held in Los Angeles, California.

Bill Bergquist

It's a joy for me today to be interviewing my good friend Agnes Mura, who over her lifetime has worked, consulted, coached, and trained all over the world. I did a previous interview with Agnes about her work in Mexico.

However, there's a very special occasion in the life of Agnes Mura, having to do with her work with the 1984 Olympics. Let me ask Agnes to talk a bit about how she got involved with these Olympic Games.



Background

Agnes Mura

I was a fresh arrival in Los Angeles, coming from Germany, and before that, having lived in Britain, and before that, having grown up in Romania. At the time, what was going on in Los Angeles of great international interest was the preparation of the XXIII Olympiad. The city was buzzing with feelings of risk and foreboding as well as enormous anticipation. Similarly, today, LA is once again preparing to host the Olympic Games in 2028.

As a new arrival in LA, I went to the Olympics Organizing Committee headquarters and offered my knowledge of five languages (which did not include Spanish at the time). I told them I'd love

to be involved and help in this international event— welcoming the world to Los Angeles, my recently adopted new home. There was so much to do, my future supervisor asked me which of the many open jobs in language services or international relations I would you like.



There weren't that many people who had my international background. I initially got involved as a volunteer and then transitioned to full-time roles, which I held and for a couple of years. This was how I really started feeling a sense of belonging in California. And there's a part of me that has remained a LosAngelena at heart for the rest of my life, even though I now live in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

Peter Ueberroth led this enormous undertaking. He was the leading head and heart in bringing everyone together and accomplishing a major victory. Peter Ueberroth had a strong vision of what our Los Angeles Olympic Organizing Committee (LAOOC) and Southern California could accomplish as hosts.

He personally interviewed and tested all the new hires who started any positions with the Committee. We would each stand up and say something about our backgrounds. That's how he first learned that I was originally from Romania, which is relevant to the rest of the story.

Bill

Tell me a bit about Peter. Who is this man?



Agnes

He's an exceptional leader. Peter Ueberroth had run an international travel network. One of his special mindsets was a very meritocratic approach to women and men, both young and old, giving them a chance to see if they could perform at a high level.

And when he was tapped for running the LAOC, the main genius that he was bringing to this job was leadership with a very encompassing international lens, a network of strong connections, broad cross-cultural experience and a strategic business approach.

One of his tests for us, for example, was to provide us with some questions about what's going on in different parts of the world. So, he would make sure that we would not be a provincial organization. And that reflected who he was. And of course, he was also an excellent businessman and found ways, with the help of thousands of volunteers in LA and throughout California, to diffuse this fear that the Olympics had to cause a country and a city a huge financial loss.

Thanks to his totally new funding model, we actually ended up being profitable. There is still a foundation that allows young athletes to benefit from that legacy. So, Peter provided a huge leadership impact in running the LAOC. All of us were there because of him. And there also was this very clever and pragmatic business element to his persona.

Bill

How did you catch his attention?

Agnes

Well, he paid attention to individual stories and talents, and always had an interest in how to deploy each person in the best possible manner, deploying their best strengths. This was a big part of his genius as a leader. I was in charge of turning hundreds of volunteer multilingual locals and California residents into live-action and press interpreters. That was my first job. So, I had some exposure to Peter before the Soviets declared a boycott of the games. (And by the way, he and I remained friends and collaborators forever.)



Bill

So, what happened when the Soviet Union decided to boycott the LA Olympics?

Request

Agnes

Well, the U.S. had boycotted the Moscow Games in 1980. So, we suspected, feared, and anticipated the Soviets would reciprocate in some way. The Games took place in August, and it wasn't until May that the Soviets declared their intention to boycott. And this had an important implication. If the entire Soviet bloc of 14 countries, which produced superb athletes, refused to come, the whole event, the XXIII Olympiad, would be in jeopardy, since - per charter - a certain number of countries need to be in attendance. So, this boycott threat wasn't just qualitatively, but also from a governance standpoint, a very important existential threat.



Clearly, Peter Ueberroth looked at ways to manage around this obstacle. Our LA Organizing Committee was housed in this huge helicopter hangar that we had transformed into cubicles and office space. Peter somehow found me. He came to my desk and sat on the edge, and literally said: "Hey, kid, you got a passport? Could you possibly fly to Romania and help us out here?" Romania was one of the countries that we suspected might be willing to break the boycott.

Peter also tried to convince Cuba and China to break away. China hadn't participated in the Games for almost 30 years until then! We suspected that all three countries might be willing to and interested in breaking this boycott, because of the extraordinary athletes that these countries would have had an opportunity to feature.

That was step one. Peter asked me to help by going to Romania on a delegation to negotiate this possibility.

Bill

Was Peter involved in those negotiations at all?

Agnes

Well, the head of the IOC (the International Olympic Committee) was in touch with the Soviet leadership but was not successful. Peter was working through us more at the individual country level. And I think that was absolutely the right approach. And so, he chose a few countries on which to focus. I was becoming an Envoy, as he called us, for Romania.

Every participating national delegation of athletes would be shepherded by an Envoy from start to finish. We were internal ambassadors who reported to Peter on the well-being of each national Olympic delegation.

He had handpicked professionals and businesspeople, whom he could confidently send to different countries. China and Cuba were critical, and Romania was very important.

Now, what was he aware of, in terms of my history? He knew that I had defected from Romania in my late teens.



And while I was carrying a German passport at the time of my Olympics assignment, going back to Romania was not a risk-free undertaking for me.

This is why he asked me whether I was willing to put myself forward as an interpreter and key member of this delegation. It was not a just a walk into a familiar

country.

Bill

What were some of your own personal feelings, besides sensing a risk? What were some of your own emotions related to this return to Romania? There was a strong history regarding not just your escape from this country, but also what your family had endured in Romania.

Agnes

Let's summarize it this way. My parents - both professionals - had suffered during the Ceaușescu regime in Romania, which as you know didn't fall until several years after the Olympics, in 1989. There had been years of brutal authoritarian rule, a personality cult, and repression in the name of communism.



My mother was a highly talented pianist, having been acquainted with and worked throughout her life with some of the most noted musicians in the world – such as Radu Lupu, for example.

My father died as a consequence of a party trial (a sort of extra-judicial process). I lost my dad to that ordeal. Even though he was rehabilitated, as they call it, my dad had a heart attack shortly thereafter. We paid that enormous price. My mother lost the man that she loved and I lost my father.

A big part of my departure from Romania had to do with that trauma, and having seen so many of our friends suffer, being imprisoned, and being coerced into all sorts of positions. So, that's what made me decide in my second university year to find a way to leave the country, which I did.

And once I was outside the country, I had to consider my options based on whether there would be a country to take me in. That was the next challenge. Eventually, after finishing my undergraduate studies at Edinburgh University, I ended up in



Germany. I had grown up speaking German, Romanian, and Hungarian, and I had gone to the German School in Bucharest all the way to graduation. So, I had a broad foundation in German culture. I also spoke French and English, but that wasn't relevant at the time. And so, the separation from Romania had been fraught.

It wasn't an easy relationship that I had with the country nor with the regime. A lot of this is quite complex. And let me offer a little bit of history. This territory that we now call Romania



had been overrun and dominated since its inception by the Romans, by the Goths, by the Ottomans, by the Habsburgs, and by the Slavs, to name a few.

Romania retains a very interesting multicultural and multi-ethnic foundation as a country. And my parents, who were

born in Transylvania, woke up after the First World War, finding that they were now Romanian citizens, because Transylvania became part of Romania when the Austrian Hungarian Empire fell. So, my identity and affiliations are not very clear or clean when we speak about belonging and about national allegiances and identities. I have never had a simple answer.

Bill

As you said, the invasions came from everywhere. It's likely a part of Europe that was occupied and underwent multiple changes in identity under various threats, eventually becoming Romania.

Agnes

The whole of Romania, as we think of it today, was under Ottoman rule for hundreds of years until its independence in the late 19th century, by forming an alliance with the Russians against the Turks. And then, at the end of the Second World War, when Romania was under a fascist regime, they again created an alliance with the Soviets to get rid of the Germans. These alliances were never



simple. They always cost something. On the first occasion, it cost them a piece of the Moldavia, which they had to cede to Russia. And after the Second World War, the Soviet 'liberators' remained an occupying force that installed their own favorable regimes.

So, the character of a people that had to be so clever, so adaptable, and so resilient—with all of these different cultures—became part of their collective DNA. These many cultures become part of one's own DNA. There are Slavic influences. Greek influences, Ottoman influences. Of course, there is the Western Habsburg culture as well. So, I was born into a richly multi-cultural history.



I grew up in Bucharest, which was a very Western-looking, elegant city. They used to call it the Paris of Eastern Europe, until communist-style grandiose architecture took over. I was raised hearing different languages and reading a lot of classics and modern books in the original.

Since we lost my dad, inevitably my mother, a piano professor, was working full-time. I grew up with tutors, reading the classics in different languages. I had had a French teacher at the age of nine, and an English tutor as I approached my university entrance exams. The implicit requirement (which I still hold) was that one had to seek to speak different languages impeccably – out of respect for the privilege of stepping into that culture.

And education was always considered hugely important in our circles, as the only portable asset nobody could take away.



Bill

A colleague of mine talks about the social unconscious, which is the trauma that is being held by a country. In your case, you're talking about four or five different kinds of social unconscious swirling around, each with its own trauma. And in the midst of this was the repressive Soviet regime.

Negotiations

Bill

Agnes, back to 1984. You're now about to go to Romania on this mission. It is an important mission, not just for Romania, but, as you've said, for the actual operations, perhaps even the enactment, of the Olympics. This is not a trivial issue. You're going on a mission that impacts many people.

Agnes

Let's remember, I'm very young. And I'm not a U.S. citizen. I've just literally arrived in California a few months earlier. And I am feeling responsible for delivering success to my boss, Peter Ueberroth, and to all of us involved in the Olympics.

We are all committed to its success. I'm feeling an obligation to deliver good news. I had three other colleagues accompanying me, and

they were experts in different sports and Olympic governance matters. So, I was well supported and well briefed, and we were very aligned.

Bill

But you're the only one who knew Romania and the Romanian language.



Agnes

Right. So, I'm also the translator, which is a very powerful place to be. But, you know, the first sensory experience and memory that I had in getting off a plane in Bucharest at the airport was stunning. I could barely recognize what was appearing in front of me.



My colleagues and I were picked up with in a black limo right off the tarmac and whisked to a forest-like lakeside park located outside of Bucharest.

Our team was to meet with members of the Romanian Olympic and Sports Committee.



We met in one of these secluded retreat dachas that was placed at the disposal of the Romanian Olympic Committee. We spent a few days there with the Romanian delegates.

These were a small number of officials from the National Romanian Olympic Committee. They were living and talking about things with us, as an equally small delegation, for three days.

So, just for context, Ceaușescu was one of these ambiguous figures, who would make overtures to the West to curry favor. He hoped to buy legitimacy and attention. Maybe he would then be able to repress his own people in an even more clever manner. So, we were hoping to appeal to the maverick part of Ceaușescu. Maybe we would be able to leverage this appeal of defying the Soviet dictates.

The other major leverage point of the negotiation was the strong desire of the Romanian athletes and the Romanian Olympic Committee to participate in the Olympics. They had signaled that to us. So, we weren't there to convince them to come. We were there to figure out how to make it possible for them to participate without the risk of Soviet invasion.

Czechoslovakia had already been invaded by the Soviets. How does Romania participate in the Olympics without any incidents? How do we make it safe for them and make it affordable for them (because the Soviets wouldn't subsidize their attendance as they would have in the past)?

The interesting part of my role was as a linguist. That's where my degrees in philosophy and linguistics proved to be valuable. It was very powerful to observe in these negotiations the irresistible emotional connection that takes place when language is matched. When you speak the other person's language without an accent.

Members of the Romanian delegation would literally say, in so many words: "We forget that you're not part of us. We forget that you are actually representing the United States and the LA Olympic Organizing Committee." This was very interesting to notice.



Both of my parents had originally been born in Transylvania. As a result, both had a little bit of a Hungarian accent. I didn't have any sort of accent at the time in my use of the Romanian language. I'd grown up in Romania. I spoke a bunch of other languages, but Romania was home. And my pronunciation of "R" has remained very Romance.

Just for those who don't know, Romanian is a Romance language, a Latin language, as a result of the Roman invasion around 106 CE. So, I've always had a facility with other Romance languages, as well as the Germanic languages (German and English). My home pronunciation, however, has remained very Romanian; I think that was a strength during the negotiations.



That was a huge, irresistibly unconscious way of connecting. And then, from a practical standpoint, I could always understand everything they said amongst themselves.

But I think the first factor of knowing that they're in good hands, of trusting that I'm there to help them, and that I will advocate and make things easy, was decisive. And later, at the Games, I lived with the delegation at the village, and the bonding continued.

Bill

Did they ever look into your own background in Romania? Did they check on you? Did they know a bit about who you were and about your parents or anything?

Agnes

Do you think that anyone could make it into a Communist country without being thoroughly checked by the Securitate? Of course, they knew all about me.

Bill

Were they, therefore, at all suspicious of you?

Agnes

You know, there was a hierarchy of interests. Their number one interest, no doubt, was how to utilize my presence to get what they needed in order to come to the Games. And they were very grateful that there was somebody there to help them navigate this negotiation.

At a personal level, I never noticed and never heard anything that would put me back in a fear mode from the Olympic officials. Now, my main concern was not this group with whom I was

negotiating. My main concern was about my departure. Will they let me out of the country?! That was the moment of fear.

Bill

There is another factor at play. You were a young woman representing the United States. Was that difficult for them to handle, either your youth or your gender?



Agnes

I'm sure that's why Peter made sure three professional colleagues and I formed a balanced group with differing strengths and backgrounds. They would fill in the gravitas of the delegation. And they had all the right answers to sports-related things and to legal matters. Chuck Cale, the Sports Commissioner, who was actually the head of our team, is a highly experienced attorney.

So, Peter was very careful not to leave me unsupported in taking this personal risk. But from a political standpoint, you are vulnerable once you've been held in a country. At the time, Romanians didn't have the right to own a passport or to travel. The same restriction was placed on the citizens of the GDR and the other Warsaw Pact countries. So, once you've been in that position, your whole body knows that borders are really tricky to cross. So, I wouldn't really exhale till I was out of the country.



However, what overrode all of these fears was being able to call Peter after three days and being able to tell him: "They have signed and they're coming. And they've actually tripled the size of their delegation. So that you can count on them. And Nadia Comaneci will be accompanying them as a guest of honor."



This call to Peter was highly emotional for me. What was the neurochemical mixture in my body? It certainly was a major high for me. And all of this good news was what kept me going. The pride of being able to help them out and secure our Games as well.

The Romanian officials were just as elated. In fact, a few years ago, a Hungarian journalist called me and said: “Where were you when we needed you? You should have come to Hungary too. We would have loved to go to the Olympics. We would have loved you

to help us negotiate for our delegation to be present as well. We were so envious when the Romanians walked into the Coliseum. And everybody stood and applauded.”

Bill

Had you expected they would say yes? Or was it a bit of a surprise when they agreed?

Agnes

My colleague, Charles Lee, who went to China, encountered a similar sort of situation where they verbally would say, Yes, we want to come. However, it's a big step when they actually sign and are committed to participation in the Olympics.





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I became increasingly confident that we could create the security guarantees and the conditions for them to say Yes. But, you know, from there to them signing and getting approval from the

head of the country, that was a big step. The main excuse that the Soviets had come up with was that they couldn't let their bloc's athletes come to L.A. because L.A. wouldn't be safe for them. That their athletes could be exposed to some serious security breaches.



So, this is why I lived with the hundred-plus Romanian athletes who resided at the village. Our security guys were outnumbering the athletes.

They were my allies to be sure that nothing would happen, especially to Nadia, who was still a young woman. She would want to go shopping, and she'd like to

do all sorts of fun things. We were terrified of anyone creating an incident that could then be used against the Romanian decision to attend the Games.

At the Closing ceremonies, I ran up to Peter and said: "Congratulations. Wasn't this extraordinary, and aren't you relieved that all went well?"

He said: "I am not relieved until the last athlete is up in their airplane and off the ground safely." That's how preoccupied we were.



Event

Bill

Agnes, we're now in Los Angeles. And an Olympics is going on, and you're watching some of the results of your work with many other things, many other people involved, but you had something to say about it.

What was it like to actually observe the Olympics? And you were living there with the Romanian delegation.

Agnes

There were two Olympic villages in LA, the University of Southern California (USC) and the University



of California at Los Angeles (UCLA). Our whole Romanian delegation was at USC. And what was so admirable to watch was how focused these athletes remain. I mean, they're kids, they're young people. They were so focused right up to the last minute of any competition, and then after the competition, they became themselves again.

At the time, like the Olympic athletes, I was giving this event everything I had. I was charged up right alongside them in preparing for each athletic event the Romanians were competing in. And then, suddenly, I was transitioning back to a more normal way of being physically and mentally.

This was extraordinary to experience in myself and observe among the athletes. I would go through these cycles of up and back down with each of the sports. Of course, I would attend a lot of the events and support them.

Bill

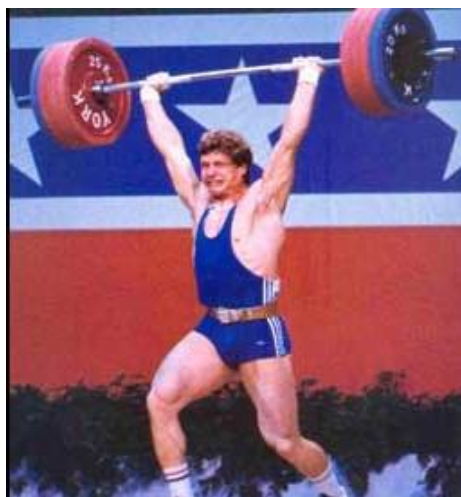
When I was working in Estonia, I stayed in the Olympic village. Part of the 1980 games in Russia were held in Estonia. The Olympic athletes (and later I) were sleeping in small bedrooms. The beds were short and stiff. The bathrooms were minimalist. It was dormitory living. So, what was it like for you and the athletes? Were they used to that kind of harsh living in a dorm room?

Agnes

Well, our dorm rooms were wonderful compared to what they were used to. So, there was no hardship. And there was a commissary, a cafeteria or dining room that was open 24 hours a day. With the most healthful delicacies you could wish for. So, these young athletes were very well taken care of. And they were delighted to be there. This was not a hardship. Los Angeles really did take care of all the athletic delegations beautifully. And my colleagues in transportation, security, and all of these support functions were absolutely amazing.

Bill

I know it's hard to generalize, but what did you think were the perceptions of the Romanian delegation about being in the United States? There had to be some complexity in their own reactions.



Agnes

You know, when people are on a mission, they are there to compete and win. But the LAOOC were also hoping that there wouldn't be any defections. And that every athlete who came would get back on the plane. Defections would have caused a big disruption.

Of course, I was torn, because I had found a way to escape that prison called Romania under Ceaușescu at the time of my departure.

I was torn about what to wish for the athletes from Romania. On the one hand, I was empathetic with their justifiable wish to leave Romania. On the other hand, I knew that it was important that their accomplishments and their participation go down historically in a positive light. And that their accomplishment became a victory for them as a team.

Fortunately, everyone did return. Some of them today are no longer in Romania and have international careers in sports. And I'm very proud of them for what they did and how we were able to launch some of these careers. But I think, without exception, everyone that I remained in touch with and was able to speak with considered their participation in 1984 a highlight of their life.

Their participation was particularly a highlight because of the odds against which the successes happened.

By the way, the absence of the East Germans, the Russians, and a number of other highly athletic countries allowed the Romanians to be the second-highest-medaling team at these Olympics.



So, for many reasons, this was indeed a very important part of their lives and remained so in the end.

Bill

The Olympics really drew attention to Romania in the United States. Who are these people?

Agnes

Very true. And when the Chinese Olympics occurred, the memory of Romania's achievement was reactivated. There was the whole recall of this brave little communist country that came to the 1984 Olympics and did what it needed to do to demonstrate its talent. Their remarkable accomplishment came back into the news again. So, they have a lot to be proud of. And I'm glad to have facilitated it.

Reflections

Bill

Let me ask one thing before we close this interview. Did anything surprise you? Was there a way in which somehow the Romania you came in touch with in 1984 was different from the Romania that existed when you were young?

Or did you see a different side of Romania in your role as negotiator for the US? Is there anything that surprised you in this critical cross-cultural interaction? Or is there anything that surprised you about your American colleagues as they got involved with Romania?



Agnes

Undeniably, the Romanian culture is much more convivial, group-oriented, family-oriented, hospitable, and generous at the personal level than we expect. The Romanians are proud, not in a nationalistic way, but proud in a sort of individual way: "We've

survived so much. And we will get through this one as well." And then there's humor and their legendary resourcefulness.

There's a wonderful Romanian word, that has roots in its history: *descurcăreț*, which implies "We can get around anything and figure it out". You can't trust any allies for too long. You have to push back in clever ways on anyone who tries to dominate you. So, there was a lot of this small, resilient, kick butt kind of spirit in the Romanian delegation. And a lot of winking. A lot of subtext, that may have escaped my American colleagues, who are very pragmatic and had themselves been high-performing athletes in their day. They were in Romania to close the deal and bring all their good will and experience to bear for that outcome. So, there was something very matter-of-fact and literal about the approach taken by my American colleagues. There was something much subtler, with a lot more color and subtext in the way the Romanians listened and responded.

So, as one might say, this was young psyche versus old psyche. The Romanian psyche is a thousand years old. It has grown through a lot of different routes, evolutions and responses. It expresses its soul in great art, music – and irrepressible, irreverent humor.



Bill

So, what are some things that you learned from this work that you did? Given your background internationally, it's not as if this is the first time you have been to another country. Your life was filled with international experiences, before then and since then. You have been exposed to many intercultural, cross-cultural, and transnational experiences. What about this particular work taught you something or impressed you?

Agnes

The world is home to a lot of people who are either refugees or have moved around the globe. These people constitute my tribe. I speak six languages, by now all with an accent. And so, the globe is my home. All of us globalists have parts of us that associate with different emotions and mindsets associated with the different cultures in which we have lived (physically or intellectually). We live with multiple ways of thinking, ways of feeling, ways of viewing the world.

And the work, I think, for those of us who have had to become so multifaceted and sometimes torn, is to be conscious of these many facets. It's like you're a gemstone with different sides. Those are the things that are going to come to the surface—depending on which one is reflecting the light in the moment.





I learned Spanish last, just when I came to California and realized it's the missing language for my new life setting. But when I work in Spanish, there is a lightness that I feel, a lightness and a connectivity. An intimacy very quickly forms through that language. It's different when I'm speaking in other languages. I was just thinking of that the other day with a French client. Our intellectual prowess, the *esprit*, is what matters most with this client and others from France. And so, that has to be in the foreground. And there's something about working in German that concerns being well-founded

in data and being serious about what you know - and what you don't know.

And I can often notice other changes in my being when working with different languages. Even right now, my face changes when I think in German versus when I'm in Latin mode.

So, there is such richness. We are so blessed, those of us who've had the opportunity—often at very high cost—to move around the world and be adopted by or adapt to different cultures. The enrichment that the international experiences have caused and generated in our being is priceless.

And it better be priceless, because it came at a cost. It came at the cost of considerable effort, of learning things, of always moving around, and of being scared at the borders. In my case, the cost was being stateless for five years and still managing to come out the other side. So, I feel extraordinarily privileged, in essence, to have somewhat cultivated the ability to connect with anyone at any time because of some of my acquired inner fluidity.

I think this fluidity in my being has been the greatest gift of all during those difficult times.

Bill

You've talked about this international fluidity and the many international experiences that you have had that are priceless.



And it's priceless not just for you. I think it's priceless for a world right now that desperately needs to be able to gain the appreciation of those people who differ from us in some important ways.

What you've learned is absolutely what everyone in our world needs right now. Most important, I think, is the whole sense that you were able to help bring some people to the United States, who at one point were caught up in the international politics of resentment, denial, and fear. And it's quite extraordinary, the bridge that you helped built. So, thank you very much.