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## BOGDAN TEODORESCU

# SWORD

**Translated from Romanian  
by Marina Sofia**

*'A noir novel with troubling political implications, as dark and as shocking as they come.'*

**Le Figaro**



**CORYLUS  
BOOKS**

## The cast of characters

The President of Romania

The Prime Minister of Romania

The Minister of the Interior

Radu Rădulescu – Leader of the Opposition,  
former Romanian president

Nenișor Vasile – MP for the Roma Minority

Marinescu – presidential media adviser and  
speechwriter

Theodor Varlaam – leader of the right-wing  
National Unity Movement NUM

Presidential special adviser in security matters –  
seems to have the President's ear

Presidential spokesman – not as good as the  
President would have wanted

Ion Leșan – the new Minister of the Interior, a  
stingy Transylvanian

Istrate - Head of Communications and Press  
Relations at the Presidential Office

Dobre - Under-Secretary at the Romanian  
Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Vlad – special adviser to the Minister of the  
Interior

Romușan - state secretary at the Ministry of  
Defence

Stoicescu – Head of the Intelligence Services  
(internal)

Movilă - Commander of the General Directorate of the Bucharest Police, most senior policeman in the capital city

Calin - head of espionage (external intelligence)

Captain Dulgheru - commander of a SWAT team

General Dumbrava - retired from the army, trying to restore it to its former glory

Rotaru - army general and confidante of the Minister of the Interior

Marius Ionescu - belligerent journalist, anti-government

Cârstea - an even more vocal anti-government journalist

Cornel Ardeleanu - a fiery journalist who claims he cannot be bought

Alin Dobrescu - TV host and political interviewer

Adrian Maier - another insubordinate journalist

Mircică - the Presidential Palace's pet journalist

Dan Dumitrescu - a TV reporter

Dr Laurențiu Petre - criminal psychologist and profiler

Sergiu Enescu - political analyst and wily old fox

Andrei Rusu - director of the most powerful private TV channel in Romania

Intrepid Tony - controversial radio show host

Preda - a chat show host

Irina Lascar - a glamorous TV presenter

Scorcher of a Sunday summer afternoon, hanging heavily over Obor Market. The heat was keeping people indoors and the market sellers tried to tuck themselves away in the shade of their stalls. You could spot the occasional dodgy sausage grilling on barbeques scattered here and there about the marketplace. A few men lingered over beers at their dirty plastic tables, in no hurry to go home to their wives.

On his habitual corner by the Bucur Obor department store, Nelu the Fly was delivering his usual monotone 'here it is, here it ain't' patter, while moving his matchboxes at lightning speed in front of a small number of blank faces. He'd paid a fortune to be allowed to work in Obor and things weren't going well. That's why he was still trying to make a go of it, though it was the end of market trade and most shoppers had left. Just a few steps away from his table he could spot the little old woman whom he'd tricked out of fifty thousand lei. She'd asked for her money back, but there were too many people around for him to do it openly. He wasn't a bad lad; on the whole he

gave money back to those who seemed to be even worse off than him. No point in being harsh with them. But there was something about this old woman that annoyed him. She didn't look like the typical pensioner going for a little flutter. He stole another look in her direction and decided he wouldn't give her a single leu.

He'd learnt all the tricks of the trade from Uncle Fane, but he'd never have that man's dexterity. Plus, Uncle Fane knew how to tell jokes, talk to the customers, get them drunk on words before he even took their money. People would leave him, beaming with satisfaction. While The Fly, he'd nearly been beaten up twice by some heavy-set workmen who lost half a million each in one go – the idiots!

He folded up his table, shooed away the old woman who tried one more time to ask for her money, and set off home. He'd have liked a beer, but the old woman was blocking his access to the bar, weeping and complaining. She clearly had no intention of leaving.

The alleyway behind the department store was shady, so he stopped there for a breather, despite the rank smell. As he was getting ready to leave, he saw a person dressed in a long, greyish-white trench-coat heading towards him. When the figure was no more than a metre or two away, he suddenly swung open the trench-coat, brandished a sword and planted it in The Fly's throat.

## 2

Less than an hour to go before the close of the evening edition, but the hallways were already quiet. Most people were on holiday, there was barely any real news anyway that month. Victor answered his mobile half-heartedly. Another smartarse who'd learnt how to hide his number when calling.

'Hello, Victor.'

'Hello, Detective, how's life?'

'There's a guy stabbed at the back of Bucur Obor.'

'Who is it?'

'A gypsy. Don't know anything more. But if you send someone asap you'll find them there still.'

'A revenge killing or something?'

'Told you: I don't know yet. Keep in touch.'

An hour later the team got back with a few pictures, predominantly of a puddle of blood, and fragments of a story. The victim, nicknamed The Fly, was approximately 25 years old. He'd been working the Obor area for the past five or six months with his three-card Monte or shell games. He was part of Boy Slit's gang and that was about all they had on him. A local copper told them that he might have owed some

money to some guys. He had more than two million lei on him, so he hadn't been robbed. He'd been killed with a knife thrust in the neck. A single blow.

Victor managed to change the front page at the last minute, squeezing in a photo and five brief lines about the crime in Obor. It was by far the most exciting story of the day.

The next day, he spoke to an eyewitness who told him (off the record, of course) that an old woman who'd lost her money playing The Fly's game had cursed him, screaming that he would get it in the neck. He also discovered that The Fly owed a large amount of money to an Armenian gangland boss called Avakian, notorious for trafficking pretty girls. So Victor managed to get another front page out of it, bringing into it the old woman's curse, a larger picture of the crime scene with the pool of blood, the body covered with a black cloth, and with hints that there were some debts, so a moneylender might have had reason to wish The Fly dead.

He sent it all off to print and sought out Avakian, whom he met later that night at the Vox bar opposite the government building. Avakian would not admit whether The Fly owed him any money or not, but suggested they drop this aspect of the story from the papers. His methods for recovering money rather depended on the debtor staying alive. You might scare him a little, send four solid Moldovans to park a coffin in front of his house, or even cut off a finger with a pair of scissors, but why on earth kill him?

At the end of their chat, Avakian paid for the drinks and handed Victor a little envelope full of money. Five thousand dollars to forget the name of the moneylender or indeed the whole hypothesis of a debt killing. On the way home, Victor realised that none of the other papers had mentioned the killing in Obor, which explained the rather large sum of money Avakian had thrown his way. He toyed with the idea of ordering himself an escort, but couldn't be bothered. He was about to fall asleep when his friend the detective called him (got to remember to pay him too!).

'Victor, it's getting serious. We've got another one.'

'Another...?'

'Another gypsy playing his shell games, stabbed in the neck.'

'Where?'

'Southern Market.'

'Another of Slit's boys?'

'Apparently not. Watch out, the TV stations are turning up soon. You'd better hurry if you want to be first.'

The first thing Victor did the following day was to check whether the second victim, nicknamed The Bulgarian, owed any money to Avakian. Unlikely, since he was rich, very rich indeed. He plied his trade because he loved it, not for the money. The Bulgarian drove around in a Mercedes, smuggled alcohol, knew the right people in government, had paid off the police right up to the highest levels, so he had a really

comfortable lifestyle. He usually had a band of people running the street games side of things, but every now and then he liked to go out in the marketplace himself to show them how it's done. This last demonstration had cost him dearly.

Victor wrote it up as a separate incident, with a bit of background on The Bulgarian, a well-connected figure in the criminal underworld. To his dismay, the next day, another paper produced the screaming headline 'The Gypsy Killer'.

Bit rich to talk about a serial killer after just two cases!

By the end of the week, however, they had a third. Another gypsy, another guy with criminal connections, small fry, working with girls brought over from Moldova and the Ukraine. He'd been found on the ring road on the outskirts of Bucharest with his throat cut. Probably caught out while he was collecting his dues from the girls carrying out their business.

## 3

Istrate, Head of Communications and Press Relations at the Presidential Office, was having what he liked to call 'a fucked-up sort of day'. He'd only just got back from his summer holidays on a boring old Greek island and there was far too much work piled up in his office. He was trying to catch up with the press summaries for the past ten days, but he couldn't quite work up his appetite for them. The only things he liked about his job were the drinks receptions and parties held at the Presidential Palace, as well as the trips abroad. Watching the sickly sweet smiles of Romanian officials sucking up to the President, the meaningless small talk over dinner, hasty shopping trips with the limo waiting outside, being greeted by the guard of honour whenever you landed in a new country – all of this made up for the exhausting and dull work that made up the greater part of his job.

He couldn't stand the Romanian journalists. They just didn't seem to respect him enough, always seemed to prod him with tricky questions and launch personal attacks against him. He didn't like to admit it, but he knew only too well that he'd only got the job

thanks to his mother, who was a close friend of the President.

He was about to give up on even pretending to work and have a wander through the shops instead – he was rather fond of buying suits – when a young press officer brought in a new summary of today's newspapers. The main news story seemed to be a serial killer targeting gypsies. He skimread it and decided that the July heat had got to his colleagues. Whatever next? A press summary about rapists and paedophiles?

He was briefly tempted to write a report complaining about the lack of professionalism in his team. Instead of getting reports about major problems, the international situation, global crises that could destabilise the Balkan region, an in-depth political analysis, he had to put up with silly homicide stories! He gave up reading the press summary, but resolved to complain about it the next time he met the President. Speaking of which, it had been more than five months since they'd last met.

The truth was, the President couldn't stand him. He'd even set up another press office, running in parallel, so that he wouldn't have too much to do with Istrate. This second press office had already informed the President of the three murders, as well as the official statement produced in response by the Union of Romas.

The President liked to position himself internationally as a protector of ethnic minorities in his country, so he was very sensitive about this topic. He felt this issue could cause huge problems.

The Minister of the Interior had given his personal assurance that the culprit would be caught before the end of the week. He had forgotten to mention, however, if they actually had a suspect or if they'd at least identified a reason for the killings. There were only two things that the three victims had in common: they were all gypsies, and they'd all been in trouble with the law.

The President was about to jet off for a five-day visit in the Caucasian region, to discuss yet again the possibility of an oil pipeline that he'd have liked to see pass through Romania, rather than Turkey or Bulgaria. He was sure the case would be resolved by the time he got back.

Just as he was sitting down on board his Airbus 313, the President was informed that a fourth body had been found. Another gypsy, another criminal, with his throat cut, but no other connection to the previous three victims.