

Tanya Domi: Hi. This is Tanya Domi. Welcome to The Thought Project, recorded at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, fostering groundbreaking research and scholarship in the arts, social sciences and sciences. In this space, we talk with faculty and doctoral students about the big thinking and big ideas generating cutting edge research, informing New Yorkers and the world.

Tanya Domi: Katherine Verdery is the Julien J. Studley Faculty Scholar and Distinguished Professor of Anthropology at the Graduate Center, CUNY. Since 1973, she has conducted field research in Romania, initially emphasizing the political economy of social inequality, ethnic relations, and nationalism. Out of those years of research, Verdery discovered two decades after the fall of communism in Romania, that she had been a subject of investigation. She captures this discovery in an impressive memoir entitled, *My Life As A Spy*, published by Duke University Press.

Tanya Domi: Welcome, Katherine, to the podcast.

Katherine V: Thank you so much for having me.

Tanya Domi: My first question is, why did you choose to do research in communist Romania in the 1970's? Having spent several decades there as an anthropologist, it clearly fascinated you. Please share the background story on how you got interested in Romania?

Katherine V: It's serendipitous. I had various ideas about where I wanted to go do my research, and anthropologists often go someplace in particular because it has theoretical problems of interest to them. But I was sitting in my office one day and a friend of mine came by with his new map, which was of Eastern Europe, and we spent a couple of hours looking at the map and looking at all those great place names. I thought, "Gee, this would be a cool place to go." There wasn't any faculty member in my department who was able to direct a dissertation in that area, but I didn't particularly care.

Katherine V: But I think more to the point, I had a sort of long term fascination with the idea of communism, not because I was a leftist. I didn't know enough at that point, really, to be a serious leftist. But, when I was in 10th grade, we had a speech contest, and I wrote my speech about the communist menace, and when I was a senior, I had to write an honors paper, and I wrote it on socialism in Cuba. When I was seven years old, I tried to teach myself Russian by buying a little book that called itself Teach Yourself Russian, and after I got to conjugations, I stopped, because I didn't know what they were. [crosstalk 00:03:14] nine cases in the Russian language. It's pretty complicated.

Katherine V: So, I had all these signs of some kind of interest in that part of the world, and I've always liked margins. So, here was the margin between Europe and the communist world, and why didn't I go there and take a look?

Tanya Domi: That's pretty intrepid. I give you a lot of points there. Having traveled in that part of the world quite a bit. But, two decades, and the reason you're here today. Two decades after the Romanian anti-communist revolt that violently ended the lives of Nicolae Ceaușescu and his wife Elena, by firing squad, in December 1989. It must have been a complete shock for you, or a significant one, to discover that you were surveilled by the Romanian police. The Secretariat?

Katherine V: Securitate.

Tanya Domi: Securitate. Excuse me. Who had developed a file on you that contained 2,781 pages. You were seriously considered a spy by the Romanian authorities, and this discovery must have created a significant intellectual and emotional upheaval. And I'm sure it also caused you to reflect back on all your relationships and what that entailed. Why don't you share with our listeners about that moment of discovery?

Katherine V: In 2000, a colleague and I started doing a project for which we asked for permission to use the Secret Police files archive, which had been opened to scholars. So, for several years, I went there every summer and copied stuff out of those files for the project that we were doing. In the course of that, I got to be chummy with one of the people in the reading room, who, in 2006, said to me, "Why don't you apply for your own file?" And I said, "I'm not sure that I'd want to read it if I got it." And she said, "Never mind. They might not find it, or it might take them a really long time, and if they finally do find it, you can always decide not to read it."

Katherine V: So, I said, "Okay," and filled out the form. And then a year and a half later, I got a letter from the Archive saying, "We have some things for you to see." So, I went in the summer of 2008 to look at them. But just parenthetically, it's not quite true that I wasn't aware that there had been surveillance. I was aware of some of it. Just nothing like the total extent. I had two friends who said to me at one point that they'd been asked to write reports on me, but they didn't want to discuss it further. They just let me know that.

Katherine V: So, here I am now, in the summer of 2008, sitting down with this massive pile of paper, and I started reading things. I was absolutely appalled. I was appalled, first of all, at the amount of surveillance. And secondly, at the certainty that the officers had that I was up to no good, that I was an enemy of Romania, and that I should be very closely watched, if not indeed expelled from the country.

Katherine V: So I had all these reports that indicated their opinion of me. And in addition, I had a lot of informers' reports that were written by one or another person that I knew. A lot of these people were not people that I knew well. They were hotel receptionists, people who worked in the research institutes where I got permission to work. One of the guys who ran the reading library that I worked at in the city of Cluj. So, I didn't know them well, but I knew who they were, and

there they were, writing, saying, "I have looked at the notes she takes when she's reading, and they are very offensive." I didn't think they were offensive. I was just reading all these Romanian writers and writing down my ideas about what they were saying.

Tanya Domi: Of course. You were being a researcher. That's what you were doing.

Katherine V: And I had a pretty strong conviction of my own innocence when I first started to read it, and it took quite a while for me to decide ... I'm reading it over and over again, for me to decide that I hadn't really been so innocent, and that it was possible-

Tanya Domi: In what way? In what way? That's interesting ... reflection.

Katherine V: Well. You know, Americans sort of have this thing about being transparent and open and honest, and whatever we say is to be taken seriously. It's not to be viewed as just an opportunity to throw sand in somebody's eyes. So, what I began realizing as I was reading this, is that my presumption of transparency was laughable in the eyes of the people who were keeping track of me. Because, from their point of view, what I thought I was being transparent about was just as easily seen as some kind of smoke screen. My way of presenting myself as not being a spy, not gathering information that I was going to use to write nasty things about their country. And so I began understanding that from their point of view, even if we don't think of them as some horrible organization, but as one of many police forces that every country has, they had good reason to wonder what I was doing.

Katherine V: They even have some documents in which they say, "We know she is an intelligence-"

Tanya Domi: Operative.

Katherine V: ... operative, yes, "because she writes her notes in multiple copies. She uses pseudonyms for all the people she talks to. She always writes down her own question as well as the answer of people that she's interviewing, and she doesn't use one of these copies. She sends all of the copies of her notes to the US through the diplomatic pouch. And if somebody were trying to write a dissertation, you think she'd keep a copy with her." So, they presumed I was writing the dissertation there, which of course, I was not doing. And I did send all my field notes out through the diplomatic pouch. That was one of the privileges of having the kind of research grant I had.

Katherine V: So, I just began finding that their angle of vision here wasn't so odious or unexpected as I had imagined at the beginning, and so I found that experience very humbling and just tried to take off from there, just how blameless was I in some of this stuff that had happened?

Katherine V: So, when I would find out that one of my closest friends had written nasty reports about me, then I'd have to stop and say, "Okay, what was his situation? What was it that might have led him to do that?" And it was just impossible, then, to be so self-righteous, after I started thinking about these things.

Tanya Domi: I think it's a very generous way of looking at it, with some kind of ... I know in the book review, in the New York Times, they talked about how anthropologists witness, but may not become advocates. There's a line and a distance from the subject itself. And I think it reflects a lot of integrity about you, the way you describe this in the memoir, and just now, how you've shared. It takes a lot of capacity to think about oneself, because it would seem the initial reaction would be some form of violation.

Katherine V: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Absolutely.

Tanya Domi: And yet, you had the capacity, and you've demonstrated the capacity, that you could put yourself in the person's shoes, that may have turned a report in on you, who's a hotel clerk, or even somebody that you talked to at the library or the research institute. Because that's the system, isn't it? The system creates the impetus for people to spy on each other. Is that not ...

Katherine V: Yeah, that's right.

Tanya Domi: But, okay. So, 2,781 pages, but there was also a lot of photographs and your book, *My Life As A Spy*, has a picture of you in your bedroom-

Katherine V: Hotel room.

Tanya Domi: Hotel room, rather. Excuse me. You know, in a state of undress. And that ... what was that like, to see all these photos? How many photos were there in the file? Do you know?

Katherine V: I don't remember how many, but most of them were not compromising like this one on the cover, which the press very generously redacted for me by cutting out my behind.

Tanya Domi: Sure, sure. That was done tastefully.

Katherine V: But I think there were about eight in the series of photographs that this came from, and they were all from a video camera that had been set up in my hotel room, trained on my bed. And, of course, what they wanted to find out was who I was sleeping with, if anybody.

Tanya Domi: Right. So, the whole issue of sex and being compromised by sexual activity, which you address in your memoir.

Katherine V: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Yeah. So that was very important for them. Because, of course, if they could figure out who I was sleeping with, then they could get that person in their net, and imagine that they might have the best possible information. They had a name for this kind of informer. They called them depth informers. People who were really close to the target.

Tanya Domi: To the target.

Katherine V: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Tanya Domi: And [Vera's 00:14:18]. Your name.

Katherine V: Well, it's one of several names.

Tanya Domi: Okay. I thought that was really interesting, in the file they refer to you as Vera. What are the other names? It's just interesting that your target name is Vera.

Katherine V: Well, I liked it because Vera Verdery was kind of cool.

Tanya Domi: Sure [crosstalk 00:14:40].

Katherine V: But, what they do to make up a pseudonym is, often, to take the first letter of the first name or of the last name, and then make some kind of other name out of it. So, I had [Katy 00:15:00], was one of my nicknames. Let me see. I'm forgetting these already. Vicky, and Verona, and some others of that kind. So, they took either the K or the V and then made a name out of it.

Tanya Domi: Interesting.

Katherine V: And I just liked Vera the best, so I made her the central character of the book.

Tanya Domi: I see. That's very, very interesting. So, it occurred to me, because I know that this has happened in other countries throughout East Central Europe, the process of [lustration 00:15:40] in sharing the files. So, is that how you got your file? It was a process of lustration? Is that what happened in Romania?

Katherine V: Pretty much. The idea of lustration came, initially, from the Czechs. From Czechoslovakia. And there are several etymologies for this word, but in general, it means purification or cleansing. But the specific Czech word that they were using, it was also the process whereby the police of the Nazi period tried to verify the people that they were working with. So this word has the meaning of verification, going back way before the end of communism.

Katherine V: So, this idea of vetting people to see if ... people who were Czechs, in this case, or, in the case of Germany, German citizens, had they been working for the secret police either actively or clandestinely, and if so, then it was going to be

more difficult for them to run for political office and things of that kind. So that was the idea. "Let's get the communists out of the new government."

Katherine V: But then people began using these files to try to make it difficult for another person to run for office. So they started using the files as weapons against their enemies. It became, then ... it seemed a good idea, in at least some of the countries, that people should have access to their own files so that they could defend themselves if someone made an accusation that was inappropriate.

Katherine V: That legislation was passed in Romania in 1999 and the process started in 2000. It had been going on for, already, several years in Poland and Hungary and so on.

Tanya Domi: Right, right. Very interesting. So, let's just go back and talk about maybe people that you became friends with. You talk about how you may have inadvertently and unknowingly caused pain to friends of yours, or surveillance of them? People not being able to travel, things like that. And also, just reviewing relationships and reflecting on those, that would be a difficult thing to deal with, given the amount of time you spent in Romania. Indeed, you built a whole career around your research of Romania.

Katherine V: That's right.

Tanya Domi: So, I would think that would be a very challenging thing to grapple with.

Katherine V: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Well. Indeed. Finding out who had informed on me was probably the most difficult of the things that I had to come to terms with, and doing some of this work that you were referring to earlier, of trying to figure out what would be the generous interpretation here. Took me a long time to get there. First of all, I would be just furious at something that somebody had written that I thought was just needlessly compromising. And, for the most part, the people who were good friends, who wrote these kinds of reports, didn't actually say really mean, nasty things about me. But a couple of them did, and those were the ones that made me the maddest.

Katherine V: Otherwise, one of my very closest friends, and I had two days' worth of conversation about her informing on me. And she would talk about how horrible it was for her to be an informer and how every time I would come to visit her, she would know that within 24 hours, she'd get a phone call from this Securitate officer who would make an appointment with her. And then, for the intervening time, she would have a terribly upset stomach and she'd be very nervous, and she wouldn't sleep. Then, she'd have the meeting with him, and then afterwards, she'd be shaking with nervousness for hours.

Katherine V: So, clearly she hadn't enjoyed this. And I have no reason to doubt her self-presentation about this. But then there was the guy who, unfortunately died right after I saw this set of reports of his, who said, "Well, she's really a

Hungarian in disguise." And that, for Romanians, is not too good, because there's still ethnic hostility between Hungarians and Romanians.

Tanya Domi: Right.

Katherine V: It has to do with their history. So, this guy says, "She's been around now for a couple of ... two different visits, and she's been preparing for the real coup that she's going to make." And [crosstalk 00:21:07]-

Tanya Domi: That's pretty outlandish.

Katherine V: Yeah, I mean, what the hell? So, I would have loved to have talked to him about it, but I went to see him and he was ... he died the next day, so he was really in terrible shape. I just said, "I know that some aspects of our friendship caused problems for you and I'm sorry about that." And then I said, "Is there anything you want to say to me?" And he tried to say something, but he wasn't able to speak. So, I don't know what he had in mind. And then that was the end of that.

Katherine V: But it was a very, very painful thing for me, those-

Tanya Domi: How long did that take for you to work through that, emotionally?

Katherine V: Well, I got the file in 2008, and then I got a Xerox of it and put it in the corner of my study and finished writing the book that I'd been working on before. And I would look at it every now and then and say, "I wonder what I'm going to do with that." And finally I finished the other book and started reading, seriously reading through the file in 2010. And I finished the manuscript in 2017. So, it took a long time.

Tanya Domi: Yes.

Katherine V: I kept going back and revising parts of it and trying to think about other angles.

Tanya Domi: So, in essence, the memoir is your processing of it.

Katherine V: Yes. That's exactly right.

Tanya Domi: So that's really high therapy. High therapy, and it's also very ... a striking aspect of this memoir is that you chose not to reveal the names of the people who shared information about you to the police. I think this reveals admirable integrity on your part, and yet, in the chapter four, which I found very interesting, titled Ruminations, is underscored by that riveting quote that you used from W.H. Odden, Herman Melville, "Evil is unspectacular and always human, and shares our bed and eats at our own table." Wow. That grabbed me. That is really powerful, because indeed you would be probably in peoples' houses, eating with them, sitting at their table, and when you got up and left, they sent a report off to the local police about you.

Katherine V: Yeah.

Tanya Domi: Wow.

Katherine V: Yeah. When I first saw that quote, I said, "Boy, this is the perfect thing for this book."

Tanya Domi: So, were there other people that you tried to speak to? You mentioned these two individuals.

Katherine V: Yeah. The two people that I spent the most time with. Several conversations each. And then I had briefer conversations with a number of others, but part of the problem for me was that a lot of the people that I had gotten to know in my earlier fieldwork had already been on the old side, and they had died before, even before Romania's transformation, or shortly thereafter, like this friend that I just referred to.

Katherine V: So, there were a number of people I would have liked to have spoken with, but I simply didn't have the opportunity. Of the ones that I did speak with, mostly I just tried to be sort of loose about it, and say ... for example, I'd be sitting around having lunch with several people, and I'd say, "You know, I'm reading my file and I got a lot of informers in here, and I'm very interested to talk to some of these people and find out what it was like for them. That couldn't have been a pleasant experience. Do you think they would want to talk to me?"

Katherine V: And in one of these groups, there was a friend of mine that I knew had written reports. And so people would say, "Oh, yeah, it might help them feel better." And then I might approach the person later and perhaps they would say, "Well, you know, they actually came to me, and I did some of that too." Or, they would not say that, and then it was my task to try to figure out how to get them to talk about stuff without actually acknowledging their participation.

Tanya Domi: That's an interesting quandary.

Katherine V: But, as far as the names are concerned, I made my career working in Romania. Before this book, I'd published seven books on one or another aspect of research in that country, and a lot of people had been very hospitable to me and included me in their circle of friends, even if they were also, for their own reasons, perhaps writing reports every now and then.

Katherine V: And, I just didn't feel it was my place to out people who had, in other respects, proved themselves to be good friends. So then the question is, why did they do it? And that's what I tried to approach in these conversations that I had with people.

Tanya Domi: That's very logical. And of course, the system that was set up was just really primed to pull people into it and participate. So, in that vein, I mean, I'm very

interested in terms of ... it's been 11 years since Romania joined the European Union, and just last week Romanian prosecutors have formally indicted former President Iliescu for crimes against humanity, contending he was essentially responsible for more than 1,000 people being murdered in December 1989.

Tanya Domi: And we know from other cases in Poland, in Hungary, in East Central Europe, that these processes really take a long time to work through. Just like your own process.

Katherine V: Yes, right.

Tanya Domi: So, tell me. I mean, this is a little bit more contemporary and not necessarily personal, but what do you think about this indictment, and where is Romania positioned today, really as a young democracy, if you look at the long reach of history. Basically, now in the EU, but yet, have they overcome this violent past? And that includes even violence that was committed against you, when you look at this file. Have they overcome that? And it's been very interesting to see, in the last several months, that Romanians are on the street, they're protesting, they're really engaged. Tell us about that. It's part of your story too, I think.

Katherine V: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Yes. In fact, I was not aware of this news item that you just gave me, that Iliescu had been indicted, but I'm not surprised. I have, in a way, given up trying to understand Romanian politics in the last decade, because I'd have to be there constantly. I'd have to be talking to people, reading newspapers all the time, and I can't do that. But there has been a tremendous power struggle going on in Romania for quite a while, between the heirs of the Communist Party, who started this other party, called the Party of Romanian Social Democracy, and who are ... many of them were apparatchiks or employees of the state beforehand, and the other parties of one kind or another have been a very motley arrangement of nationalists or people interested in pursuing democracy, perhaps in a way that we would find more acceptable.

Katherine V: And among other things, the people who are ... there's been a fight between the judiciary and the principal political party that wants to control the government. Because, initially, a number of people were put into, say, the Constitutional Court, who actually had some scruples, who were very interested in trying to turn around the situation in their country.

Katherine V: Those people have been under attack. In Hungary, most of those people were thrown out of the government by Orbán, who's the current Prime Minister, and is making himself a little dictator.

Tanya Domi: He certainly is. He certainly is.

Katherine V: So far that hasn't happened in Romania, but it could be just around the corner. It's touch and go. So, on the one hand, you have the remaining members of the judiciary, the Constitutional Court, and so on, who are ... let's say pro-European,

trying to get as much mileage as they possibly can out of their opportunity to indict people. And then, on the other side are many of these old apparatchiks who just took over the Romanian government in 1989 and did the best they could under the circumstances, or did not such a good job trying to keep the protestors from taking over the Romanian government in 1989, and so on and so forth.

Katherine V: So, there's this constant-

Tanya Domi: Tension.

Katherine V: ... struggle. Tension, yes. And I'm not surprised if the people who made the indictment against Iliescu did so because it would just be in keeping with the previous indictment they made to the previous prime minister.

Tanya Domi: I understand. So, my last question is, what do you hope your memoir will do? What do you hope people will gain from reading it? I'd love to hear your closing thoughts on that.

Katherine V: I have a number of different audiences in mind for it. I hope that anthropology students will read it and get a sense for how complicated it is to try to find out about life in other countries. I would like an educated, general audience, the kinds of people who would read the New York Review of books, and so on. Oh, this was the New York Times book review, sorry. So that I might talk to them about what it was like to live under the Communist system, and what the confusions and difficulties of life after it have amounted to.

Katherine V: But to do that through myself, because it's a little easier, perhaps, for an American citizen to identify with my struggles there, than just to read this as a description of someone else, as it were. So, I'm hoping that I can help people understand the complexity of the post-Communist world through this Romanian example.

Katherine V: And, other than that, I just want people to see more about anthropology, which is my favorite discipline, and I have this opportunity to expose more readers to it.

Tanya Domi: Well, Katherine Verdery, thank you very much. It's an impressive piece of work. I think it leaves a lot for people to think about and contemplate. Thank you for being with the podcast.

Katherine V: And thank you for the fascinating conversation.

Tanya Domi: Thanks for tuning in to The Thought Project, and thanks to our guest, Professor Katherine Verdery.

Tanya Domi: The Thought Project was produced in partnership with CUNY TV, located at the Graduate Center in the heart of New York City, with production, engineering, and technical assistance by Sarah Fishman, and Jack Horowitz.

Tanya Domi: I'm Tanya Domi. Tune in next week.