

Writer's first novel focuses on life behind Iron Curtain

By Jana Miller
A2 Journal

Imagine living in a place where your political, religious, physical and emotional decisions are made for you. Imagine a form of government far more encompassing than communism that destroys the fabric of a country and the hope of the citizens living there.

That is the life Claudia Moscovici portrays in her first published novel, "Velvet Totalitarianism." The novel has the potential to remind readers that, although the freedoms in the United States aren't perfect, they're better than many alternatives.

Moscovici began writing this novel in her head at the age of 19 while doing her undergraduate studies at Princeton University. Born in Bucharest, Romania, and now a resident of Ann Arbor, Moscovici earned her doctorate at Brown University.

The author experienced totalitarianism personally while living in Romania with her family during the Nicolae Ceausescu regime. And many of her own experiences find their way into her historically rich piece of



Claudia Moscovici of Ann Arbor recently published her first novel, "Velvet Totalitarianism."



fiction.

"A lot of experiences I had as a child, such as my mother's interrogation sessions with the secret police and my father's defection, are in the novel," Moscovici said. "But since I was a child, I didn't have all the information from my par-

ents, so I researched what the secret police did and filled in the gaps with historical fiction."

The novel itself is about a Romanian family and their struggle for survival in a

post-Stalinist country with a totalitarian regime. It weaves two character threads together, one about a Romanian citizen who is caught and controlled by the Securitate and the other about an Eastern European immigrant making her way in the United States after fleeing. Moscovici read more than 80 books on the political policies and historical events of the time period to write her own book.

"Not as many people were killed in the post-Stalinist period, although about 2 million people were put in the Canal of Death and labor prisons for their political views. But mostly it was constant surveillance and oppression," Moscovici said.

"People were psychologically controlled," she said, "and I wanted to show how debilitating it was and how much it weakens your ability to make free and rational choices — how much you live in fear of the police and how much it reduces your humanity."

The name "Velvet Totalitarianism" is a play on the American and Canadian term for the freedoms the free countries claim to have and fall short

on. But it doesn't look so imperfect for those living in bugged homes with a government-controlled media that have to wait in line for food rations.

"The term 'velvet totalitarianism' is used in the United States and Canada to show there are no real absolute free values," she said. "But whatever criticism people may have of our imperfect democracy here, if you've lived under totalitarianism, there's just no comparison."

Moscovici is now 40 years old and a full-time writer. She has also published nine other works, several of them vignettes and one novella. She is currently writing her second novel, "The Seducer."

She was a philosophy and arts professor at Brown University and also taught as a professor at the University of Michigan.

She started writing "Velvet Totalitarianism" at the age of 30 and completed it last year. She readily praises her husband, Dan Troyka, for encouraging her and recalls how they fell in love over the novel. The pair met at Princeton and had similar dreams of writing

political novels.

Her parents, Henri and Elvira Moscovici, inspired the nonfictional elements woven into the narrative. Henri is a mathematics professor at Ohio State University and lives nearby with his wife. Claudia Moscovici and her family were reunited with their defected father in the United States when she was 11 years old.

Moscovici is also the mother of Sophie and Alex, who she hopes will one day learn from the book the ways different forms of government can influence people.

"I hope eventually to go back to Romania and promote the book there," she said. "If my children can see the places and the people, it's more concrete then."

Moscovici's novel is available for purchase online through Amazon, Powell's, and Barnes and Noble. She will conduct a reading from 2 to 4 p.m. Nov. 1 at the Barnes and Noble at 3235 Washtenaw Ave. in Ann Arbor.

More information is also available on her author's profile Web site, www.fellowshipofwriters.com/Claudia_Moscovici.html.

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