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Interview with Former Romanian Foreign Minister, Corneliu Mănescu, Regarding the Romanian Delegation's Over-Flight of China and Visit to Moscow During the Cuban Missile Crisis (excerpts)

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Summary:

Former Romanian Foreign Minister Corneliu Manescu discusses an incident involving the flight of a Romanian delegation over Chinese territory just prior to the Cuban Missile Crisis. Manescu reports that at the time, Romanian leader Gheorghiu-Dej interpreted miscommunication regarding their flightplan as a Soviet attempt on his life. He also discusses the Romanian response to the Cuban Missile Crisis.

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[...]

Manescu: There was an important visit of a Romanian state delegation in India, Indonesia and Burma; states which had considerable importance in world politics, as they tried to evade the clutches of the two blocs – socialism and capitalism. On our return trip we were happy with the results of the visit. We traveled, as was the custom then, with a Soviet aircraft, flown by a Soviet crew, in which we had embarked from Moscow. On Soviet territory we landed in Tashkent both coming and going. On our return over the Himalayan Mountains we were informed of the interdiction against overflying a part of China. This meant that if the plane did not turn back, it could be shot down. Naturally, Gheorghiu-Dej requested to turn back. However, we did not make our way back to Delhi and the airbase in Tashkent communicated to the Soviet crew that we had meanwhile received permission, as a result of requests made on the ground, to overfly Chinese territory. We went ahead, crossed China conforming to a flight route, and landed in Tashkent. We had to remain there, in a guest house, for one night and the next day continue onward to Moscow. In that house, the local party head who greeted Dej and Maurer told us that we had crossed China under conditions of interdiction. [He said] that the Chinese had not reconsidered their refusal, but that Khrushchev, to whom what happened had been communicated – the crew and aircraft were the same that he traveled with – gave the order to continue on their way and transmit the message that was communicated to us. Certainly, the Soviets said, the Chinese would not have dared to kill us.

Interviewer: How did Gheorghiu-Dej react?

Manescu: Then I heard Dej, for the first and last time, screaming with fury. He cursed in a way that I had never heard before or after!

Interviewer: Did he curse the Soviets in some way?

Manescu: No, the Chinese! How could he curse the Soviets on their territory and among their people? ... He cursed the Chinese, but you can imagine that he was thinking of the Soviets. He told us after we arrived back in the country: "Khrushchev needed by cadaver in order to prove to the world how right he was in the dispute with Mao." In Tashkent he appeared to recover rapidly. He paced through the house in his pajamas, completely furious. But when he spoke on the telephone with his daughter, Lica, he seemed to forget what he had just been through; he was so worried about her. ... And that was not the only misfortune on that trip. Arriving in Moscow, we found out about what has become known as "the Cuban missile crisis."

Interviewer: How did you find out about it?

Manescu: Certainly during our stopover in Moscow there was talk about what "had occurred with the Chinese." And Kosygin said to Maurer look what can happen, we also have problems, Khrushchev is in over his head with the scandal produced by the missile deployments in Cuba. What scandal? And then things were clarified for us. They told us that all of the foreign press – not our press or that of the Soviets, naturally – was full of the scandal provoked by the act of deploying Soviet missiles in agreement with Fidel Castro. We are part of the Warsaw Pact, as a result of which we would have been obligated, conforming to the Pact, to go to war alongside the Soviets if one began, and we knew nothing about it.

And Maurer, shocked, told Kosygin, pretending that he did not understand that the foreign press was capable of publishing such aberrations about us and about other members of the Pact: "Those foreign journalists think you're crazy; you'd have to be crazy to do such a thing." ... Thus, he pretended that he did not understand; that he did not believe that the Soviets would have been capable of such a thing. The truth is that we had known nothing of it. Only when we arrived back in the country did we begin to unravel things. Once there we moved on quickly from the fly-over

interdiction incident and we began to identify the best way of protecting ourselves from what could have happened in the autumn of 1962 after the discovery of the intermediate-range missiles that the Soviets had deployed in Cuba.

Interviewer: How did you unravel things back in-country?

Manescu: In the first place, we informed ourselves. We found out that, only a day before arriving in the country, the American President Kennedy had made a solemn declaration on television, announcing the discovery of the Soviet missiles deployed in Cuba, thus in the ribs of America, with the intention of being directed at it. That meant the intention to launch a nuclear war. And, obviously speaking for America, he affirmed that he would not back down in the face of such a threat, if it came to that. The day after Kennedy's declaration, Khrushchev responded through Soviet radio broadcasts. He said that he considered it justified to have missiles in Cuba, so long as America has military bases in Europe. He requested the Americans to withdraw - which would have meant the end of NATO - and then he, Khrushchev, would give up his [missile] base in Cuba. ...

Interviewer: But what, specifically, did you do?

Manescu: We decided to try and save ourselves in case the worst would happen. As we had seen after what happened on the return from the trip to Asia, we could not trust Khrushchev one iota. We wrote a letter to the White House, to Secretary of State Dean Rusk, which said that, regardless of what would happen, we bore no responsibility for, made no contribution to [and] had not even been informed of the existence of those missiles. We also told them that we had no nuclear weapons on Romanian territory. We stated the truth. The letter was signed by me, as foreign minister, but the disposition for it came from Dej.

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