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Back to Romania: **Finding my Ithaca**

By Cristina Merrill

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BUCHAREST, Romania—The notion of returning to the homeland after a long absence is often a romantic one. Even when anxiety serves to frighten the mind into all sorts of dark corners, nostalgic thoughts of past times and snapshots of good moments frozen in time encourage the future traveler to dream on. The journey home is an adventure that starts with a great deal of imagination — and hope. The longer the preparation, the more ample the chance to invent idealized scenarios. Of course, all of it is an exercise in building courage, and self-esteem, for the great event. While the homeland may not have changed for the better, the prodigal child surely has. But even in the absence of some kind of aura, the return offers the possibility of finally belonging.

I think romance, adventure, and nostalgia are part of the reason I decided to pursue the ICWA fellowship to Romania, 21 years after my parents and I left my native country to escape Communism. I was 14 at the time we departed, young enough to be molded by the new country but old enough to remember the old country. So more than two decades after the fact, I decided to embark on my Great Return to the homeland, just like Odysseus, who wandered the earth for 20 years before coming back to Ithaca. And just like he did, I entertained romantic visions of what going “home” means. And probably just like it was for him, I would learn that all has changed and the best part about returning is the journey before, or my American life. As Milan Kundera writes in *Ignorance*: “For twenty years [Ulysses] had thought about nothing but his return. But once he was back, he was amazed to realize that his life, the very essence of his life, its center, its treasure, lay outside Ithaca, in the twenty years of his wanderings.”

My parents, as well as all the Romanians I have encountered so far, keep asking why I feel the need to go back to a country that most Romanians want to escape, even now. I find it hard to explain it myself, but I thank America for fueling my idealism and encouraging me to probe and to reconcile my roots. I think American patriotism means knowing where one comes from and then having the self-confidence to acknowledge it.

While America has been good to me, I’ve often struggled to reconcile the childhood spent in eastern Europe with the youth and adulthood in the United States. Were memories of childhood books, songs and games to be put away forever? Was I the same person who wore pioneer uniforms and served as a “leader of the detachment” in Romania of the late 1970s and early 1980s? Would my friends in the States have anything in common with those in Bucharest? How could I ever bring the two worlds together?

Over the years, as I integrated into my new life, snippets of my past life kept coming back. Idealized, of course. Scenes from the countryside came back, winter vacations spent in the mountains of Transylvania, summer breaks on the Black Sea, playing tennis and dancing with the parents to ABBA (!), climbing neighbors’



The author in front of “The House of the (Free) Press” in Bucharest.

In her fellowship application, Cristina Merrill said she had “often wondered what my life would have been like had my family stayed in Romania. Would I have lived, like some of my childhood friends, in the same sterile apartment building for 20 years? Could I have followed my passion for writing and become a journalist in a country that even today restricts freedom of expression?”

“Things seemed to change that December 1989 when the dictator was deposed. I will never forget the wrenching letter my best friend wrote me. In it she described with great emotion the momentous events that unfolded in Timisoara and then Bucharest. I shared her exuberance; I also felt removed from her reality. Should I have rushed there, like so many Westerners, before the bloodstains dried, and taken back a piece of the crumbling communist wall?”

“I did none of those things. Instead, I waited until I was ready. Maybe because, like Isaac Bashevis Singer once said, a writer needs an address, and I was looking for mine in Romania. I finally went back last year for the first time in 19 years. Romania still displays some of the ‘tragic glamour’ a Western author referred to in a book published right after the Revolution. As a *New York Times* article recently put it, Romania is like a man in the ‘second stage of recovery’ from a debilitating disease. ‘He is aware that his recovery was akin to a miracle, and yet the euphoria of survival has given way in his mind to the anxieties of living, like paying his medical bills and staying healthy for a future.’

“Romania is still flushed with hope by her entry into NATO. However, the realities of everyday life paint a less rosy picture. The remnants of a repressive regime and the legacy of a country that for hundreds of years did not have stability, or even an identity, are everywhere. So warm and generous when it comes to opening their homes to strangers to share their love for food, art and history, Romanians sometimes display a medieval ruthlessness and prejudice toward some people, even their own.

“I believe this is the right time to be spending two years in Romania informing your Members, and through them the West, about Romania’s struggle to recover.”

trees in Bucharest to pick cherries — even taking pride in wearing freshly starched pioneer uniforms for special occasions or doing homework by candlelight, as it happened so often when electricity failed us in Nicolae Ceausescu’s times. Anyone who appreciated the inside jokes of Wolfgang Becker’s movie “Goodbye Lenin,” an irreverent look at East Germany before and after the fall of the wall in 1989, would understand such nostalgia... Childhood means different things for different people. Proust longed for madeleines, expat English for Marmite, while those of us who grew up under communism yearn for bad pickles and propaganda television.

In all seriousness, I knew that the country was changing following the fall of Communism — and that I wanted to witness the transition. I wanted to go back and understand history as it happened — none of us growing up then really knew or were told the truth — and as it will happen. A lot is at stake here 15 years after the bloody fall of the Ceausescus. Romania has the chance to reshape her future and start making up for decades — if not centuries — of disruptive rule by various nations and ideologies. A new member of NATO, Romania is hoping to make the next round of admission into the European Union. The presidential elections to be held later this year, as well as the seriousness with which Romania will implement the necessary reforms required for her ascension into the EU, will be a great test of her readiness to change — and learn to be free.

London: From Brancusi to a Baroness to Bucharest

To prepare myself for the fellowship, I took a detour through London on my way to Bucharest. The idea was to view a major exhibit at the Tate Modern of Romanian-born (now-deceased) Constantin Brancusi, who is also considered by art critics to be the father of modern sculpture. Also, after months of trying, I had secured an appointment with Baroness Emma Nicholson, an English member of the European Parliament who monitors Romania’s progress toward ascension in the EU and is believed to have a lot of sway over the country’s entry into the European Union. Lately, the Baroness has been very critical of the Romanian government’s lax laws regarding foreign adoptions of Romanian children, and used some strong language to insist that the government stop “the trade in children” or else risk being turned down from joining the EU. Romania recently admitted it sent 105 children for adoption in Italy despite a ban on international adoptions

it introduced in 2001 at the request of the European Union. A champion of children's and women's rights, the Baroness said the children were sent to Italy as a result of an agreement between Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi and his Romanian counterpart Adrian Nastase.

It was strange to see Brancusi, dubbed by some during his time in Paris as "the grumpy Carpathian shepherd," celebrated as part of such a polished retrospective — the first ever held in the United Kingdom. The 30 works exhibited in a show called "The Essence of Things" showed him as the supreme stylist that he was, a master craftsman in marble, wood, stone and brass. I, however, did not find an explanation for how someone born in the foothills of the Carpathians and who *walked* to Paris, then the capital of modern world, was able to leave his humble beginnings behind and achieve glory in the most refined salons of the world. Brancusi's early work, which was not represented here, reflected more closely influences from Romanian folklore and mythology, all of which gave way to more abstract forms.

Brancusi, I think, was accepted and understood bet-

ter by the world exactly because he left his Romanianess behind and spoke a more universal language. In fact, because he spent the last 54 years of his life in France, Brancusi is considered as much French as he is Romanian. His entire studio has been reconstituted and sits right next to the Pompidou. While his achievements made Romanians proud, Brancusi is yet another example of the talent drain that has crippled that Eastern European country for the last 100 years. What started with intellectuals and artists fleeing Romania in the early part of the 20th century to escape persecution or become more westernized, has turned into a sad phenomenon ever since Communism began in the 1950s. Poverty and neglect from the international community have turned what was one of Europe's richest countries, resources-wise, into a fragmented population that in general lacks the will to stay put and fight instead of fleeing — the way the Czechs, the Poles or even the Hungarians have done. The population now is slightly more than 21 million (it was 23 million when I was growing up), with an additional four million living abroad. Gheorghe Zamfir, the famous Romanian flutist who also made his name outside his native country, recently said on a television show that it's a tragedy that so many Romanians are living abroad. He



compared Romanians to Israelis, as people without land. I can't say at the moment why this is, but I think Romanians have lost hope because of poverty. It was Adlai E. Stevenson, I believe, who said that a "hungry man is not a free man." Also, Romanians don't yet have a leader they believe in, like Vaclav Havel, and who can lift them out of spiritual desperation.

It is estimated that 700,000 Romanians have left their country in the last decade — most of them young. "If I were a Romanian living here today, I would take the first lorry out of the country," says a friend who works as a visa officer for a Western embassy in Bucharest and sees hundreds of Romanians desperate to get out. That is hardly the way to rebuild a nation or gain respect from the rest of the world.

Though short, my meeting with Baroness Nicholson also made me think of the rest of the world's perspective on Romania — and the gap that exists between the Western world and this East that is Romania, which is even more Eastern (and Balkan) than I had thought. Already I hear from Westerners I have befriended how "behind" Romania is compared to her neighbors, including Turkey, Hungary or Bulgaria. Awe took hold of me as I entered Westminster's House of Lords through the private "Peer" entrance and then waited for the Baroness in the sumptuous Peer Lobby. For the ten minutes I waited, I fell under the spell of the English display of Old World wealth. Under the strict gaze of starched attendants, I marveled at the studded brass gates that lead to the Lords' chamber and the gilded floor, a maze of rich blue and red marble tiles that had the intended effect of keeping my eyes to the ground in meekness. I felt humble in a Romanian way as I waited to see her Ladyship. 'This is how it must feel for Romania's diplomats — and the country as a whole — waiting to enter the European Club,' I thought.

Coifed and dressed in an understated light bouclé jacket and black pants, the MEP (Member of the European Parliament) finally came in, rushed, and led me to the Pugin Room (a café named after one of the Parliament's designers where MPs entertain visitors), to have coffee and tea. In her decidedly upper-class, hushed accent, she did most of the speaking for most of the time about which EU reports I ought to familiarize myself with in order to understand the standards by which a country like Romania is judged when being considered for entrance into the Union. 'You have about three months' worth of reading,' she said with a teacher's tone. She refused to answer my questions about what she thought about Romania's chances to make the next round of members in 2007. "Read the reports," she said, "all the information is there." She did say that because of Communism, Romania lacked a democracy, a justice system and a functioning economy (what else is there?). She then said she had to go, and gallantly invited me into the Chamber of the House of Lords, where I witnessed some obscure debate about an amendment to the Higher Education Bill. As I came out of the Parliament building, Big Ben stared down

from up close. My audience with the Baroness was over.

Bucharest First Impressions: Simply Surprising

The romance of the Great Return quickly turned into shock and then reality as soon as I arrived in Romania. I find it apt to describe Bucharest as "Simply Surprising," which ironically is the slogan the Romanian National Tourist Office uses for the country in its English-language literature. At first, the late spring breeze brought back my childhood: the poplar puff floating everywhere, the unmistakable aroma of acacia, the first signs of cherries in private gardens, words spoken in a language that recalled school days and childhood books.

But soon I discovered that I am considered a foreigner in my native land. I speak and understand the language fluently, though apparently I sound very American. I guess I look it, too, because unless I make an effort to blend in (high heels, lots of make-up and tight clothes), I get stared at, even before speaking. Romanians like to stare in general. By nature they are inquisitive, observant and judgmental. They view with interest practically anything — dogs and children are watched, smiled at and touched with great affection. Everyone here, it seems, is an expert in the science of physiognomy. But they'll especially stare at anything that even remotely smacks of being foreign — for four decades, Ceausescu forbade Romanians to have contact with people from abroad.

People's intense interest in me has little to do with my beauty — I actually find Romanian women gorgeous — but because I have a different, and more casual, "air." It also doesn't help things that I jog outdoors (in the land of 1976 Olympic gymnast Nadia Comaneci, amateur exercise is non-existent), wear comfortable clothes (a nice little old lady noticed I was wearing sandals and actually told me to cover my feet) and take pictures. At first, a pause would ensue whenever I addressed people in Romanian; sometimes they would start speaking back in English. When I asked directions for a conference room at a hotel, the bellhop told me I pronounced "Grand Ballroom" superbly. Others have asked me with admiration where I learned to speak Romanian so well, the assumption being that I was born elsewhere. And more than one person congratulated me on being skinny for an American. They imagine us all to be obese back home. Who's spreading this propaganda now?

Anyway, I'm beginning to think that I'm a lot more American than I thought — different, anyway — and that I'll have to leave that continent behind if I am to understand this country. I will try, though I'm already finding it hard not to view Romania with Western eyes. I keep thinking of Kundera again, and the confession that Irina, the character who goes back home to Bohemia after 20 years in France, makes to her friend Sylvie: "I could go back and live with them, but there'd be a condition: I'd have to lay my whole life with you, with all of you, with the French, solemnly on the altar of the homeland and

set fire to it. Twenty years of my life spent abroad would go back up in smoke, in a sacrificial ceremony... That's the price I'd have to pay to be pardoned. To be accepted, to be one of them again."

Hopefully, my experience will unfold under less tragic terms. Nevertheless, I will have to relearn customs or at least understand them as they are — without viewing everything through a Western prism. For one, I am very shocked by how **religious** people are here. An Englishman I know prefers to call it superstition, but by whatever name it comes, it is widespread. Young and old, many Romanians cross themselves whenever they pass a church — and there are many left, even after Ceausescu's acts of destruction. It seems like every other day is a religious one — not only are the many saints' days celebrated, but it is considered insulting not to call someone named after the saint on the day and wish him or her well or bring flowers. It's not enough to have the major holidays, like Easter; Romanians follow special diets before and after such holy days. I quickly become a sinner here, unaware that a week into my arrival the Saints Constantin and Elena are celebrated — I forget to call one of my mother's best friends, Elena, and I hear about it afterwards through the grapevines. Soon after that holy day comes another, known as the Rusalies and celebrated 50 days after Easter and the birth of Jesus. To those more literate in Christianity than I am, this is the Romanian version of Pentecost or Whitsunday, commemorated as the anniversary of the disciples being filled with the Spirit. No washing is to be done on this day, as on any Sunday, and again I put my name on his blacklist. Forgetting my duties but proud of acting like a Romanian woman, I hand-wash my clothes and hang them on the balcony. I won't confuse the reader any further with local lore, which holds that on this day, the spirits of old and ugly women, known as the Rusalies, fly about and punish those who dare work. I may have been bewitched indeed, for my computer has been riddled with viruses ever since.

Religion has also served as an escape for Romanians during difficult times. Even when Communism forbade public displays of Christianity, people went on believing — that things would get better, that they would be saved. As life continues to be hard, this nation of Orthodox Christians still looks up to God. I've heard it especially from old people, but I've heard it from the young as well. For the latter, being religious is having hope and patience that things will change for the better. I rather think that sometimes it's an excuse to let others decide destiny, a legacy of complacency taught during decades of totalitarianism. As Havel points out in *The Art of the Impossible*, waiting for Godot is akin to being hopeless: "But Godot — at least as one who is expected — will not come, because he simply doesn't exist. He only represents hope. He is not hope itself, but an illusion. He is the product of our helplessness, a patch over a hole in the spirit. It is the hope of people without hope."

Eating is another big puzzle for me here. While food

is plentiful, compared to what I remember in my childhood, prices are very high. There are all sorts of stores, corner shops and huge supermarket chains, selling the most wonderful produce, cold cuts and cheese, as well as cooked food. Romanians spend on average about 55 per cent of their monthly salary on food but even that only buys them the basics — bread, cheese, some meat and lots of beer. Many companies, recognizing this problem, issue food coupons to their employees regardless of income, but worth only \$2 a day they seem to make little difference. Most people choose to eat very little as a result, preferring to save money to pay their housing maintenance costs, or for cigarettes and beer. There is a saying that one can spot wealthy Romanians by the extra-size clothing they wear. Indeed, I find most Romanians thin and pale-looking, while politicians and others who have climbed the money ladder are typically plump, rosy-cheeked and bursting out of their business suits.

Romanians love their sweets, a legacy of the Ottoman, Austro-Hungarian and French influence, and because desserts are cheaper than real food, they will skip one meal a day, even dinner, and opt for something like a piece of chocolate cake with fresh whipped cream or a cheese-filled pastry. Ice cream, another favorite, is a pickup pretext ("Can I buy you an ice cream?" a man would say to a prospect), and I notice that McDonald's ice cream is a huge hit among children and adults. As far as I can tell, people eat home and go out for drinks. But even when they go out for dinner, the average Romanian doesn't eat. After going hungry more than once at social occasions with Romanians — they seemed satisfied with beer after beer and nonstop smoking — I asked and learned that traditionally, lunch is the big meal. The saying goes that the Romanian breakfasts at home, lunches with friends and leaves dinner for enemies. Now I know to turn down dinner invitations.

Romanian women are a fascinating subject for most men here, especially for foreigners who are pouring into Romania. "Sexual tourism," is what it's all about. As one Greek man told me, "Romania is a sexual paradise. The women are beautiful, cheap and clean." What he meant is that AIDS hasn't made the rounds here the way it has in Russia, another stomping ground for this kind of tourism — and that because of poverty, women sell themselves for as little as a meal. The same Greek man, who is in his 40s but has a 22-year-old girlfriend, said that it's very fashionable nowadays for women to seek out "sponsors" — men with money who buy them clothes, take them out to nice restaurants and sometimes take them out of the country. A woman who works at the German Embassy says she sees many older men applying for visas for their very young girlfriends. "And you can tell they haven't been together long, they shouldn't be together and once she gets out, they probably will not be together."

The women are very beautiful and take great care of their appearance. They'll keep themselves thin by eating little (I've talked to several women who told me they ate

one small meal a day), drinking coffee and smoking — but will spend the pay for two days' work on clothes and cosmetics. A woman in her twenties I met at my gym (one of the few I see working out) told me that it's a matter of economics. "We don't have money like you in the States. We don't have your opportunities either. All we have is our body and we want to keep it beautiful at any price." For a woman, an ideal opportunity is to marry someone abroad or find a sponsor to take her out of the country. "Romanian women can detect a foreign accent miles away," says a Romanian male friend. Otherwise, marriage to a Romanian is the norm, and the faster the better, for Romania's culture of dependency dictates that women shouldn't be alone for too long. Indeed, once they marry, usually young, these women will start thinking of themselves as less desirable and stop caring about looks. A woman in her 30s is considered over the hill, mostly because women at that age look much older, and less fit, than those I know in the States. It'll take a while before "Sex in the City" catches on in Romania.

Bucharest is under perpetual **construction and chaos**. Here, the world is in constant motion but not harmony, which is why the advice I received to keep my eyes open can be life-saving. I have been frequently splattered by fast-moving cars in the rain, gotten a gallon of water accidentally dropped on me from a window in a construction site — and missed being hit by a cement block by a mere step. One can find cranes, trucks, workers — and thick clouds of dust — on most streets. Unpaved roads are both a source of laughter and bitterness for Bucharest residents and newspaper writers. One guest on a TV show wasn't kidding when he said that he missed the dirt while being abroad. I hear that neglect has been prevalent for the last 15 years, that contracts are awarded by the govern-

ment on the basis of friendships and bribes, and rarely on the basis of merit. What makes it worse is that streets are small and traffic is insane, which causes pedestrians to take life in their hands whenever they wish to avoid work sites. There are no apparent rules governing driving, and I have seen taxis, even buses, go across tram lines, into oncoming traffic. In addition, because of inadequate parking, the same small streets suffer the added load of cars parked everywhere they can fit, especially on narrow sidewalks. People here say that Bucharest has the highest number of luxury cars per capita in Europe (after Albania), while Romania has the fewest numbers of personal vehicles per capita, again after Albania. Regardless, the city's 700,000 cars (for 2 million people) sometimes feel like 700,000 instruments of torture.

Bureaucracy. I know Romania is quite European in her bureaucracy, but even so I'm having difficulty adjusting to long waits. Someone told me that Communism indoctrinated patience for long lines into Romanians, but I would have expected them by now to show their Latin roots more and exhibit some testiness. Because of endless paperwork, it takes forever to buy any product or conduct any official business. I waited two hours before I could get a cell phone. The bill of sale, or "factura," should be banned now that Communism is over. It's a pretext to have numerous pieces of paper filled out by hand, in numerous versions, signed by various "chiefs" — and only after long waits at proper cashier. Few businesses have computers, and those that do sometimes learn how to use them as you're waiting in line. And because this is still a cash culture (checks are not used in transactions and credit cards are still rare), most bills are paid in person. Between running around to pay bills and waiting in line to buy something — lately, waiting for

someone to debug my computer — I could spend a good part of my fellowship mired in bureaucracy. It's been suggested by my landlady that, for a small fee, my building's superintendent can help me in those matters.

Which somehow brings me to a word I've come to encounter a lot nowadays, "spaga," meaning a **small bribe**. Yes, the black market is alive and thriving in Romania. Nowadays it's no longer about buying your way with Kent cigarettes and coffee ("We have all of that now," they say), it's all about money. Money is what Romanians don't have and the only thing that works wonders (especially with long waits). A little something on the side is what



It seems like all of Bucharest is under perpetual construction

cuts the wait, cheers up the furniture-delivery guy or the computer technician, or gets the head physician involved in a serious surgery. I'm told that this kind of bribe is the only way to convince doctors, who apparently have small salaries, to get interested in a patient. A friend had to pay \$500 to the head physician and another \$50 to every single nurse in the ward, so that he could be noticed and cared for after a serious leg operation. What happens if you're poor? "You're completely neglected," my friend said.

The press is free only selectively. Romanians apparently read very little. Only eight per cent of the population reads newspapers (most watch TV), which means that papers are often hard-pressed to find revenue sources and then sell out to those who pay. The top TV channels still owe the government lots in back taxes, and it has been said that differences are worked out in terms of favors involving news stories. I could easily spend a whole day reading every daily publication published and getting different points of view, depending on who accepted money to publish a smear campaign. I've already met journalists who sometimes help bring ads in or admit that they cannot write negatively about people who advertise in their newspapers. Even worse, as friends at The Press Monitoring Agency have pointed out, some newspapers publish advertorials with an editorial byline. One such article, endorsing a party's candidate for mayor during recent local elections, appeared as a big item in the news section, and was designed to look like a news story — complete with headline and byline. A more thorough search into the paper's sales kit showed that the paper accepts articles that qualify as "Publicity with a P," and which bring in good money.

The Godfather

Once I arrived at the Otopeni International Airport, I knew I was in for a new life. I fought for my bags at baggage claim, got through security, passed a few scantily dressed maids offering me deals at Bucharest's many casinos — and was met by my godfather, my dad's oldest friend in Romania. I embraced this man I last saw about a decade ago in America and whose aged appearance I hardly recognized — even though a few weeks into my life here, after I met so many other women named Cristina, I wanted to strangle him for allowing such a common name at my baptism. True, at least he didn't advocate my parents' other choice, of Ioana, who apparently is one of the five most popular girl names here. Religious Romanians really take their saint days seriously, naming their children after St. John (Ioana and Ion for men), Saint Mary (Maria), Saint George (Gheorghe) and so on.

He and the driver, a friend named Nelu, gave me a



Bucharest lacks adequate parking, so drivers use the sidewalk.

quick tour of Bucharest, or whatever I could see from the clouds of smoke coming from Nelu. Ah, Europe! It is estimated that six million Romanians are smokers, though the percentage in Bucharest may be a lot higher. Nelu, a subofficer of some sort in his 40s, said he thought Romania is on the right track but that the living conditions had to improve in order for life to be easier. He makes about \$250 a month, which is above the average of about \$180, out of which apartment maintenance costs (inefficiencies in the system make prices charged for gas, electricity and other shared costs in apartment buildings exorbitant) take about a third. Once phone and food costs are added, there is little left for pleasure. "I dream of the day I could travel like a human being," he says. Because of lack of pocket money and because they're attached to home cooking, Romanians are notorious for traveling on a shoestring and for taking food from home with them wherever they go. On his last trip to Hungary, Nelu said he couldn't even afford the cost of a bottle of water, \$2.

We arrived at my godfather's apartment in the neighborhood called Drumul Taberei, loosely translated as the Road of the Camp. This is where I spent my first week, until I found a place to live. In Ceausescu's time this immense area was built for the many factory workers this dictator brought to Bucharest to create his Communist Industrial revolution — and was known as Workers' Quarters. It's a particularly depressing sight, with sterile, unkempt buildings on top of one another and a multitude of people and homeless dogs rushing about in every direction. And yet, my godfather is proud of his four-room apartment on the first floor. It is unusual for a widower and pensioner like him to live alone in such a large apartment (a kitchen, two bedrooms and a living room). Many pensioners own their apartments (I kept hearing how Ceausescu at least provided a home for people in Romania) but they are often forced to share tight living spaces with their children, often their grand-

children — and sometimes their in-laws. A friendly taxi driver, Florin, told me that there are six people living in his two-room apartment — he and his wife, two teenage daughters, his invalid mother and an aunt.

A former University professor at ANEF (the National Academy of Physical Education) and a popular international basketball referee, my godfather was able to travel a lot even during Communist times and he and my godmother were able to buy the apartment after working in Algeria as teachers for four years. Even so, he is not too different from the six million pensioners living mostly in poverty in Romania. His pension of about \$100 a month barely covers shared maintenance costs. In most old buildings, the cost of gas, heat and electricity is not calculated by usage but by the number of rooms in an apartment (the bigger the number the larger the cost) and sometimes by the number of people living in it. Eating, then, becomes a daily struggle, which is why trips to the market constitute an exercise in extreme restraint. By the second day I was getting used to reheating unused coffee from the day before and breakfasting on Styrofoam plates. Godfather likes his drink, though, and drink — and hope — is cheap in Romania; beer averages less than \$1, as does a cheap tot of distilled grain alcohol. He and his next-door neighbor, Nea Badea, also a widower, often share drinks together — and tell and retell stories — into the night.

It pains me to admit it but my godfather is part of Romania's lost generation — though at this point I'd like to find anyone in Romania over 40 who isn't lost. Communism created a culture of dependence that covers everything from career outlook to family. A recent Gallup poll said that 89 per cent of Romanians expect the state to play a role in ensuring that work is available! Indeed, the average people I speak with complain about their work and say they wish the government could do more to better their lives — which is the problem in the first place, as I see it. Encouraging people to wait for hand-outs was the Communists' way of keeping people down. Ceausescu loved making promises, and the government now does the same. Scared by his party's lukewarm results in recent local elections, the prime minister went on national television the other day to promise the doubling of salaries and of pensions. It's sad, but false promises still work in Romania. There is an expression here referring to political clichés like those used in Ceausescu's time, and now: "*limba de lemn*," literally translated as "wooden terms" — in other words long sentences linked by pompous language that has little meaning. I hear a lot of it bandied about, but few Romanians protesting against it.

Another problem I see is culture is a family nucleus that is overly protective, to the detriment of the individual. Because finances are such that most people live with their parents until past their 20s, and often after starting families, young and old people rarely gain independence from one another. It's a very American thing to say, but I think there is a point at which young adults

need to be independent, and venture out and make something of themselves — or risk being crippled by — fear of risk-taking. The same is true of parents in the family cocoon who feel their age even before their time. Being 30 here is being over the hill. (I'm starting to feel like one of those ugly Rusalies myself.) By 50 one is a veritable dinosaur, with little incentive to keep young by working or being independent. Treating someone over 50 like an elder is considered respectful here, whereas I find it rather demeaning. Buses here are filled with older Romanians, many of whom qualify for free passes — and not only is it understood that when someone with gray hair gets in a seat is made available, but also the elderly will plead with the younger for a seat that's rightfully theirs. I think that so many of the people thinking themselves as old in Romania would be on their 3rd career in the United States, and flourishing, and not fighting for a seat on the bus. Age is a state of mind indeed.

Now 78, my godfather took early retirement years ago and never once considered starting a business. He was one of Romania's best-known international experts on basketball, but somehow he lacked the courage to take risks. "I was somebody," he laments late at night, in front of the TV. He could still be somebody but unfortunately the source of his strength is no longer alive. He showed me his little red communist membership booklet. I had never seen one before. I shuddered as I looked at the words printed on the cover: "Workers from all countries unite." There was a stamp for each monthly dues payment to the Romanian Communist Party (PCR), starting on April 1969. The last entry was November 1989...Of course, the Revolution happened a month later. I asked him if he believed in the party, and the only answer I got was that he and my godmother were able to travel overseas as a result of membership. That is just one of the compromises that Romanians made in order to survive. The party asked him at one point to divorce my godmother because her parents had land and were considered gentry. He didn't, but he paid dearly in other ways. He's still paying dearly now.

Money, or lack of it, is the big subject of conversation for my godfather, as it is for most Romanians. I learned not to react to repeated questions about how much I planned to spend on a rented apartment (a sore point once I admitted a sum that was more than twice his pension), cell phone or Internet access, and the latest exchange rate. While the Romanian currency is the leu, transactions are valued mostly in Euros and Dollars. Because the possession of foreign money was forbidden for so long in Ceausescu's time, Romanians seem incredibly keen on staying abreast of the latest rates. Godfather tried to persuade me to save money on a gym and jog outside instead, but I quickly abandoned the idea the one time I ventured to run in the small park behind his apartment building. I knew Bucharest was full of homeless dogs but I wasn't prepared for the gathering set on my pursuit — and not a friendly one, I'm afraid. An American woman I met later advised me to stop running if any mutt ap-

proached me with evil intent — she said she hadn't been bitten in the two years she lived here, though she did get rabies shots just in case.

I have since learned the dogs' schedules (late to bed and late to rise), and if I dare run outside it is early in the morning. I have also resigned myself to the fact that Bucharest is not for joggers. You wouldn't know from the stares I or other lonely joggers get that this land produced Nadia and Ilie Nastase and countless other world athletes. Besides the fresh pick-up lines from young men, I also have to answer to numerous questions from older men on park benches, who monitor my every move and engage me in conversation: don't I get tired? Why don't I start running earlier in the day? Why am I going so fast? Judy, my English running partner and a trainer at my gym, says she was shocked to discover how little Romanians care for sport and fitness. "I thought they would be sport mad but I found the opposite," she said.

The Daily Markets

I soon discovered one of the greatest things about living in Bucharest: the daily fruit and vegetable market (or *piata*), where small farmers (or peasants, as they're called here) right outside Bucharest bring whatever is growing in season. I find these sellers with wrinkled faces and rough hands beautiful. I fall for their calls ("Come here, my pretty, taste this"). I know they are often the same people who grow these fruits and often the same ones who pick them, so it makes me happy to reward this basic form of labor by making a purchase. I wish I could buy from all of them. They are mostly old, for the young often run to the cities to find work. Traditionally, peasants have been both adored by writers and mistreated by the upper classes. To me, Romanian

peasants (called *tarani*, where *tara* means country) represent the essence of Romanian people: beautiful, good-natured but now directionless. And now, without much help from the government, they are in danger of disappearing. In his manic desire to create an industrial empire and undermined this country's agriculture by destroying farms and bringing workers into urban areas, Ceausescu destroyed the very soul of Romania. Newspapers are full of accounts of funds that the EU sends Romania but which never make it to the right people. When reviewing the work of Corneliu Baba, a leading Romanian artist who liked to paint the peasant, a critic wrote:

"Peasants have never been happy; maybe too much love of the land burns; these are the peasants painted by Baba. Physically beaten down, they have an incandescence in their gaze, born of love and desperation."

So whenever, I feel down, I head for the *piata*. Bucharest can be a hard place to live. On a good day it looks like a city rising from the ashes, while on an average day it seems no better than a locale lost in time. As a taxi driver said, "Romanians live in Third-World conditions but aspire to Western standards." The majority of streets are unpaved or under perpetual construction (and lack a proper draining system), so when it rains pools of water making walking impossible. On a dry day, clouds of dust fill the air.

There is at least one market in each neighborhood, and Bucharest dwellers make use of them on a daily basis. I arrived right as strawberry season got under way, and the smell was intoxicating. These fruits are offered without frills, unwashed and piled on top of another.

They're scooped up and weighed on old-fashioned scales before being placed in thin, clear plastic bags. It's a common sight here to see parents carrying these bags home for their children. In three weeks, the price dropped considerably, from about \$1.50 a pound to about 30 cents, but even so, they are considered a luxury. Bread is the most important thing on the Romanian table nowadays; then comes cheese, tomatoes and maybe meat. Fruit, like sport and good health, are things to wish for but not have every day. Anyway, the berries (*capsuni*) are small but wonderfully flavorful...Washing them and peeling off their little stems is one of the pleasures of summer in Romania, as is biting into a fresh cheese pastry from a corner shop (20 cents) or sitting at an outdoor café in the evening with a bottle of beer (\$1) or wine. Romanians



In each Bucharest neighborhood, there is at least one daily market selling fresh fruit, vegetables and flowers. (Above) Fresh strawberries at Piata Amzei

make good wine, though this is still a beer culture. When I order wine, unless I specify a glass, a whole bottle is brought out, and it's often under \$5 or \$6.

Farming here, a sore point with many supporters of Romanian agriculture, is done on subsistence level. After the Communist took over, growers were allowed to have only small plots of land, which made the whole industry weak and fragmented. Farmers lack funds to invest in the kinds of tools and technology that would allow them to expand and maybe grow produce on a large scale. However, the good news for the consumer is that chemicals are rarely used on fruits and vegetables. I'm enjoying the freshness as a result. Stalls after stalls offer the greenest salads, onions, cucumbers, tomatoes — and dill and parsley, staples of Romanian cooking. Meat, cheese and fish are also sold, typically a separate areas, while flowers are everywhere in sight. Little carnations of every kind, roses and wild flowers of all colors — like the women who sell them and who call out insisting that theirs are the nicest and at the cheapest — beg for your attention. And it's interesting to me that despite money problems, Romanians, Latin sentimentalists that they are, buy lots of flowers.

Finding an Apartment

Culture shock continued as I started searching for an apartment. Real-estate agents, like many small businesses, operate out of residential buildings. Renting in Romania means first locating the right bloc out of dozens that look similar, then finding the floor (count the mezzanine, plus the first two floors as one), and sometimes searching for the office in the dark, unless the light switch is on. Small entrepreneurs in Romania quickly took to real estate and taxi driving immediately after the 1989 Revolution, but there isn't enough office space to accommodate businesses of any sort, especially small ones. Development of office buildings for large companies is starting to take off after a few years of stagnation, but the waiting list is long. According to research from real-estate consultant Colliers International, Bucharest has about a tenth of the large office space of Warsaw and about a fifth that of Prague.

Some 4,000 retail rental agencies operated in every neighborhood, mostly mom-and-pop shops. Besides small signs that some display in their windows or entry ways, one would never guess where the agent is. Coming from New York, where the industry thrives on visibility, I was surprised.

I quickly learned the rules of the game. Many desirable apartments are located in the northern and north-western parts of the city, and out of my price range — neighborhoods with embassies, expensive villas, lots of greenery and little public transportation. Bucharest is going suburban, and segregated, at an incredibly fast pace. Foreigners and Romania's new elite mingle in peace here, away from the crowds and at swanky new

restaurants, at what I would consider to be an extraordinary cost, given Romania's living standards. Monthly rents for very modest apartments in good areas start at \$600 and climb to tens of thousands of dollars for luxury villas. I saw a listing for 30,000 Euros a month and I wanted to view the palace, just out of curiosity, but the agent was too busy showing clients around to entertain a poor ICWA correspondent. In truth, realtors here are still getting used to working on commission and are often dismissive to less-than-suitable prospects. Because they are responsible for paying their own phone bills and transportation, agents often turn even more machiavellian than the average New York City broker. More than once I was pressured to make an offer a few minutes into an initial viewing, and then, upon refusing to act quickly, was left to find my own transportation back.

As Adriana Sohodoleanu, Research and PR Coordinator at Colliers, explained to me, rental prices overall are high in Bucharest because demand is high and supply insufficient. She tells me Romania has one of the highest ownership rates in the world: ninety per cent of the population either owns or has the right to own property here, a legacy from Ceausescu, who made it a policy to build cheap buildings for his subjects. These mostly belong to the middle-aged and the elderly. Young people often do not make enough money to afford their own places and instead live with their relatives in neighborhoods like my godfather's. If by chance apartments become available, they usually rent for \$200 and up but once maintenance costs in these older buildings gets added, they become even less affordable. I have heard from a few young people, in their 20s — Adriana included — that they wish they could move out of their parents' homes and rent their own but for now their choices are either to live with relatives or suffer in terrible university housing. Before recent nationwide elections for mayors and council members, some Bucharest politicians promised to build dwellings just for youngsters — but I wonder if that's the answer in the first place. Maybe the con-



In Bucharest, many real estate agents operate out of residential buildings, such as the one pictured here.



(Left) Back of the Opera and former tennis club. (Above) My apartment: balcony with a view

cept of sharing among friends will take off, but for now Romanian landlords aren't progressive enough to allow unmarried young people to live under the same roof. I was told by a couple of agents that as a single American, white girl, I was an ideal tenant.

Despite financial hardships, most Romanians like to own, not rent. Consumer credit, offered at high interest rates only to good prospects, is allowing some middle-class Romanians to buy property. Already, statistics show that a middle class is forming among Romanians working for banking institutions, who make three times the national average, and in communications. Much of the rental market, then, is created — and inflated — for the benefit of foreigners and foreign and native executives.

I looked at numerous middle-market apartments, most of which left a lot to be desired. Some apartments were in prewar buildings in bad shape — dark, smelly, sinister — but had been redone completely on the inside. I'm told that some of these apartments were previously owned by pensioners who, faced with debts caused by last winter's high maintenance costs — and sometimes eviction — sold them, typically in the fall in order to avoid another cold season. New landlords then turn them into luxury apartments but often cannot persuade the rest of the building's owners, mostly pensioners hard up for cash and little incentive, to invest in beautifying their building. I saw a terrific, centrally located, large, one-bedroom with exposed ceiling beams, tiles, two balconies, ample living room and kitchen. The trouble was that the elevator hadn't worked in a long time, and a neighbor's dog was all too eager to hunt humans unexpectedly. I had a similar disappointment with another apartment, where the balcony looked over the shell of a building being demolished.

A word about balconies: I find this to be a wonderful feature of apartments here, as it is in other European capitals. Balconies can make even the most sterile Romanian building seem livable. But they aren't for show. Roma-

nians really use their balconies to store food during winter and to hang clothes to dry. Many are also enclosed, to prevent young children from falling.

The business of renting out apartments is still a new concept for Romanians, and those who do it are meticulous about choosing the right tenant. Owners are always present during showings and take great care in sizing up the prospective tenant. I met many foreign landlords — Italians and Greeks, mainly — who have bought apartments as investments and are renting them out, at profit. One Italian landlord, who makes a living in Romania by renting out his 8 apartments, was more interested in querying my real estate agent about any available places to buy than in paying attention to the prospective renter. "When Romania will get into the European Union, I'll be a happy man," he said, before answering "Pronto," to an incoming call on his cell. Sale and rent prices have indeed skyrocketed in the last two years, as the Romanian economy has picked up again, consumer credit has grown — and more foreign investment has entered the country.

I finally found what I like in a relatively new building in a middle-of-the-road area that's situated 15 minutes within walking distance to downtown, one of Bucharest's two main parks, Cismigiu, and within sight of the Opera House. It's a young area, in the developing stages — lacking the slow residential pulse of my godfather's place or the foreign accent of the North. While I like the fact that the apartment, like the building, is clean and has two balconies, I took it for sentimental reasons. Out to the West, a block away, I can spot the overgrown grounds of the tennis club I belonged to before moving to the United States, The Tennis Club of Bucharest (or TCB, as it used to be called). The Ceausescus considered it a bourgeois establishment — it was not affiliated with the party — and had it torn down after I left. Now it sits forlorn and unkempt, serving as a secret meeting place of lovers of all kinds and a haven for homeless dogs.

My apartment, on the fourth floor, will need some

decorating, but it's more than adequate for now. At 60 square meters, it's larger than my former apartment in New York, a third of the cost. I have access to the balcony facing east (the back of the building) through both the kitchen and the bedroom. This back view is unexciting, as it opens to the posterior of an entire building complex. It's pretty quiet, except for sounds of barking or an occasional echo from a street peddler calling out for scrap metal. The living room leads onto the little balcony on the western side. I have a few basics (a couch, a TV, some chairs), but my landlady offers to furnish it with a new bed, a desk and a new TV.

Right in front of the windows on the western side sits the other reason I chose the apartment: an unfinished immense building, taking up a whole avenue in length and width — another one of Ceausescu's megalomaniac projects inspired by his visit to North Korea. This Communist Coliseum was meant to house all of the radio stations in Bucharest, though it's unclear what else he was going to do with the empty rooms of the building's 16,000 square meters. Buildings like this, which were nothing but desperate displays of grandeur built on foundations of poverty and neglect, came to be known as "*Circul Foamei*," or the "*Circus of Hunger*." The best example of this building, near me, is what Ceausescu called the Palace of the People and now houses the country's Parliament. It is an immense structure that took tens of thousands of workers and 700 architects to build, and cost billions of dollars. It has 12 floors, 1,100 rooms, a 328 foot-long lobby, and four underground levels, including an enormous nuclear bunker. Started in 1984, it was intended to be the headquarters of his Communist Government, but it was still unfinished when Ceausescu was executed in 1989.

Slowly, these buildings are being taken over by large corporations and developed into retail and office space. Next summer, the building across from my western balcony is due to open to the public as the "*Metropola*," an all-in-one complex that will serve as shopping mall, a hotel with a convention center, a residential building, a health and fitness center and hospital—and lots of parking space. Looking at this enormity, I think there is room for a lot more. A prison for former Communists perhaps? Like the Palace of the Parliament, this building serves as geographical reference, and I'm becoming fond of it more and more. Despite the fact that it lacks architectural finesse, the building looks majestic by virtue of its sheer size. Some complain that the building has remained "under construction" for the last 15 years and even question the fact that it will open on time. Indeed, the large crane next to it has not been used once in the weeks I've been here. At the same time, this empty giant gives me a simultaneous view of Bucharest's dreadful past — and a more hopeful future. □



The view from my western balcony. This unfinished Communist-era building is to be tured into a hugh mall next year.

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