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ROMANIA

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Down and Out with Romanians to El Dorado: Getting ready

By Cristina Merrill

APRIL 13, 2005

BUCHAREST, Romania—It was past midnight on a Friday evening, and as I prepared the first of several feta and tomato sandwiches for the long bus trip toward Spain that would begin at 4 o'clock the next morning, I started panicking. I knew that my runner's daily diet of fluids and fresh food would have to change drastically in car-confinement conditions (even marathoners can become "super-size" on a staple of bread, sweets and inactivity, without resorting to just McDonald's), but I kept asking myself how many provisions I needed for the 48 or more hours on the road? Will we have adequate bathroom stops along the way, to also allow for teeth brushing and personal hygiene? I knew showers would be out of the question, but did I need toilet paper too? The mind remained on high alert, buzzing with minutiae, even once packing was over and I should have gotten a couple of hours of rest. It was clear this would end up being the first of three nights without sleep.

I kept wondering whether it was partial loss of sanity that led me to attempt a bus trip to western Europe, to shadow the journey that tens of thousands of Romanians regularly take as a result of financial necessity. At the witching hour of 2 a.m., when I was half hoping to sleep through the alarm clock, I debated with myself whether this attempt would end up being a contrived "reality" reportage, and a patronizing one at that; unlike most Romanians, I didn't *have* to do this. A friend asked me whether I was going to take the plane back home, to avoid the two-day-long journey. No, I said, I was in this for the round-trip effort — but of course I could afford a plane ticket back if things got hairy. In that sense, the same mixed emotions I have carried with me since my arrival, 11 months before, surfaced to stir further unrest. I am better off than these people in many ways, and so am grateful to my parents for taking me to America two decades ago, but my fortune bears its own burden of guilt, especially now than I'm back in the fold. What's the point of getting married in paradise if your family can't afford tickets to the wedding? If the bus trip promised to be a loaded one for me, at least spiritually, for my fellow travelers it was to be difficult all around. It's ironic that even after the passing of Communism, a time when getting out of the country was severely restricted, travel abroad is still a risky, arduous, nail-biting and often humiliating experience. Since 2001, Romanians have been allowed to travel visa-free, for up to three months, to countries belonging to what is known as the "Schengen zone" (the name comes from a town in Luxembourg where the "zone" was delineated), meaning all European-Union countries except Ireland and the United Kingdom, and Norway and Iceland, which are not part of the EU.

This freedom came with many requirements: in order to leave their country (and gain access anywhere in the zone), Romanians need to have on them 100 Euros (about \$130) for each day they are abroad — or a minimum of 500 Euros for five days (a large sum in a country where many people make barely that much in one month), medical insurance, and a return ticket. Recently, some Western countries have been asking for additional guarantees, including proof of hotel reservations or other lodging, as well as notarized copies of a work contract or



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Since 2001, Romanians have traveled visa-free to select European countries — for better or for worse.

an invitation from someone in the host country, translated and stamped by officials at consulates of the respective countries of destination. Sometimes even providing this documentation is not enough, with border officers applying subjective standards when making decisions to allow or deny entry, and this after a prolonged scrutiny at the frontier that could turn into hours of waiting. Last year alone, the Romanian police turned back almost 1.7 million people at the border, either because they didn't have enough money with them or their documents weren't in order. As almost always, the stakes and the desperation to get away are great.

From picking strawberries to picking ... pockets

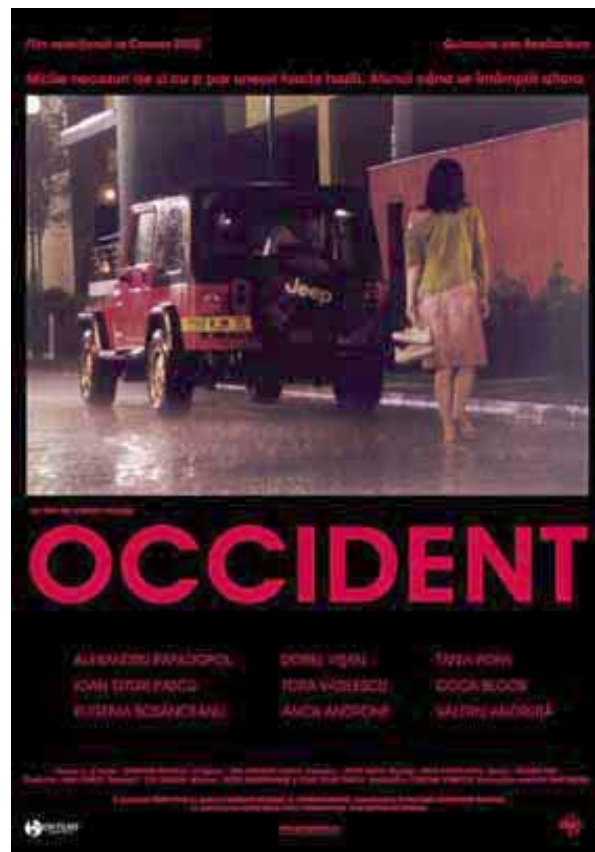
Romanians took advantage of the newly opened gates to the Schengen region, and literally flooded Europe. An estimated 2.5 million Romanians work abroad, mostly illegally — and mostly in Spain and Italy, where black-market employment has been tolerated more than elsewhere on the continent (until recently). There, Romanians have provided a cheap labor force, especially in agriculture. Picking strawberries in Spain has become not only a reason to go West but also a phenomenon with profound societal implications. The working-abroad theme is reflected in contemporary culture. A Romanian-made film I saw last year, "The Italian Girls," tells the story of two sisters who are recruited to go to Spain to pick berries but end up forced to work as prostitutes in Italy. Another, "Occident," which translates as "The Western World," is a dark comedy about the social meltdown that takes place when Romanians leave their families and friends behind in search of a better life.

Because so many young people go elsewhere for employment, Romanian agriculture suffers from a lack of available laborers. Staples such as corn, sunflowers or apples rot away in fields already lacking man- and technological power. Tractors seem to have evaporated into

the charged air of corruption, leaving harvesting to be done a shovel at a time.

Working and living abroad, and making the transition in between home and elsewhere, is having an impact on the traditional structure of the Romanian family. Many of my acquaintances are in this position, with sons, daughters and siblings toiling and sometimes starting families elsewhere. My childhood friend Cristina, who lives in Switzerland with her Romanian husband and young daughter, rarely comes home to visit her parents. Cristina is caught between two worlds, forced to integrate (her child is fast forgetting her maternal language and developing Swiss habits). Yet she longs for home: her mother regularly sends her homemade Romanian food by bus all the way from Bucharest!

Migration happened during the Communist years as well — my own family is an example. Generations like mine left the home country for good, not expecting the authoritarian regime to end in our time. They then built a more permanent existence in new countries, with no going back. But under current conditions, already marked by the chaotic atmosphere of transition toward democracy, going abroad just to make money and taking life a day at a time is unsettling. Maybe the



Popular culture, such as movies like "Occident," portray the theme of migration and the social displacement that comes with it.

“hooligan” returns, as Romanian-born writer Norman Manea put it as the title of his memoir, maybe not. This type of open-ended departure is not unique to Romanians — America has seen many, many such transitional émigrés, including the Irish in the 1840s and Mexicans today. People from poor countries take a chance on leaving to work abroad, but they do not necessarily integrate into a new life; they often return because work contracts are cancelled, illegal status is discovered, or because they miss home. What’s different for Romanians today as opposed to days of Communism, is they *can* come back. The motto “foreign lands are good for the body but home is good for the soul,” uttered by a character in “The Italian Girls,” exemplifies the dichotomy of a here-and-now existence dictated by economics. It is understood, and I’ve heard it said, that people should do “whatever is good for them” — meaning what is bodily good for them.

The soul, and the heart, suffers more often than not.

Many parents leave children with the grandparents when they go abroad to work, which puts undue pressure on elders. If they don’t leave together, life partners often break up as a result of the separation. My friend Luminita, the fitness instructor I wrote about several newsletters ago and who left last fall for France to work and study, has written that she is in a “state of upheaval” in her relationship with previously-steady boyfriend Bogdan, who remained behind. Bogdan, also a friend of mine, has expressed the same “puzzlement:” How to plan for a life together when he rarely speaks to or sees his partner. Luminita may or may not come to Bucharest for a brief visit this fall. She is hoping to complete her French studies in two years, practically a lifetime here. In Romania today, personal bonds, like everything else, are vulnerable to chaotic winds of change.

The question Romanian men pose to me, when they are asking me out on a date, is whether I

am seeing anybody else in this country (“Are you single here?”) — not whether I may have a boyfriend somewhere else.

If there is a clear winner in all of this, it is the Romanian economy, which benefits from a hefty cash infusion from this labor outsourcing. Last year, Romanians sent back to families some \$2.5 billion in wire transfers, a significant boost of capital for a country that still lags in other kinds of foreign investment, compared with other Eastern-European nations. An adviser to the former prime minister was only half-joking last year when he told me he’d rather see money coming in this way, than spending needlessly to create jobs inside the country. This short-term fix, and narrow thinking, may change once Romania’s horizons expand with her entry into the European Union. Already, those who get the chance to spend time abroad, even briefly, bring back a new mentality that, in time, will instill hopeful and needed Western values



of democracy. The chatter I hear increasingly in all walks of life, from taxi drivers to neighbors who have friends or family abroad, is about how “they do things over there.”

The new wave of Romanian outward migration has had an impact on host countries, though not necessarily in a positive way. Faced with many Romanian arrivals and at the same time struggling to absorb newcomers from former Soviet-bloc countries that last year joined the European Union, Westerners are beginning to get tough on travelers suspected of abusing their welcome or upsetting their hosts’ economic balance. To combat record-high unemployment, Germany is waging an aggressive attack on low-wage laborers from Eastern Europe who threaten locals’ chances of getting work. Not incidentally, key German politicians are some of the toughest opponents of Romania’s entry into EU in 2007.

In February, Spanish authorities started offering illegal Romanians resident status, in part to help collect taxes on previously undeclared income from a workforce of about 800,000 *arrivistes*. At about the same time, the Spanish began restricting access to inbound new Romanians, as well as other “potential illegals,” such as Ukrainians and Bulgarians. As of March, record numbers of Romanians were turned back at Spain’s border with France. In one day, some 3,000 rejected Romanians had to turn around and start another 48-hour-long journey back home on the bus. Stories circulated in the press about cruelty at the hands of Spanish officers, who while performing border checks kept travelers, even small chil-

dren, inside buses for hours at a time. Curiosity about this phenomenon of outbound travel at any cost, as well as the fact that I needed to renew my own three-month-old Romanian visa (a problem that foreigners here solve by making quick trips out of the country), provided the impetus for my bus trip to Spain.

The paranoia felt by the Spaniards isn’t completely unfounded. In their eagerness to cut corners and make money fast, many Romanians have resorted to crime — everything from stealing, identity theft, falsifying money and documents, computer hacking, trafficking of human bodies and prostitution. Just recently, a virulently anti-Romanian song, mixed by a DJ Syto, started playing to alleged success in Spanish discos. The lyrics depict “a nation that is invading us,” and people who work “even on our days off” and ends with an incitement to “cut off” their hands, and other strongly formulated words.

Romanians even seem to have cornered the market on foreign begging. The overseas press has been writing about Romanian organized-peddling rings. I’d like to see Hollywood turn *that* into a blockbuster HBO series, along the lines of “The Sopranos.” No matter how pure the genes of Romanian Roma breaking the law (the excuse “real” Romanians invoke is that Gypsies are born beggars), they all have been labeled as a problem throughout Europe. Apparently natives of some towns in Italy feel they are being overrun by Romanians. Romania is seen by many as a gateway for illegal immigration and problems of all sorts. *The Economist* published a poll last December showing that Romanians are among the least-



Taking a bus is the cheapest and most flexible way out of Romania — and yet it is a luxury for many Romanians.



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Getting out of Romania, to travel or to work, has remained an attractive proposition, post-Communism.

liked nationals in the UK, after Iraqis and Pakistanis. If they had to choose their neighbors, for instance, the British would rather take black Africans, people from West Indies and Poland than Romanians.

The myth of foreign lands

"It's not out of prosperity that they are leaving Romania by bus," I was to hear a traveler say on my trip, about his fellow Romanians. Indeed, a long bus trip is anything but comfortable, and yet short of the stowaway option, taking a bus is the cheapest and most flexible way out of Romania. Affordable air fares to the West are just making their way to Eastern Europe, but Romania is still not high on flight planners' lists. Recently, a small company launched reasonably priced flights between Bucharest and a few cities in Italy and Spain, but even so, cheap flight travel carries time restrictions that involve advanced planning, a luxury that a seasonal worker, for example, cannot afford

Bus travel, of course, is not just the domain of Romanians. By virtue of its smaller size, compared to the United States, Europe can be crossed more easily on wheels — the French have complained for years, for example, of German campers. I hear Deutschland's people have of late discovered Croatia's beaches, where they are relishing biking in the nude. But long-distance car journeying on a shoestring is almost a religion for Romanians (even for local destinations). Travel agencies often post "autocar" prices first when listing excursions abroad — and the main highway is full with such vehicles making long trips, frequently.

Even a bus trip, no matter how tortured the cramped quarters, is considered a treat. Not everyone can afford

the 500 Euros (about \$650) the Schengen requirement demands Romanians to have with them when they leave. A bus ticket can also become an invitation to try new things, a promise of bettering one's life, even for a short while. Without being the forbidden fruit it was during Communism, travel to the West carries many of the same romantic notions as before, such as the allure of escaping to see nicer and more civilized countries. The word "foreign" still has a positive connotation, meaning well-off in terms of people, and well-made when speaking of products. If a person spends more than a few weeks in another country, say Italy, then he becomes a veritable Italian. Even though I am fluent in Romanian and spent my first 14 years here, I am "americanca, the American girl."

Fifteen years following the fall of Communism and its tight rein on all things foreign, the West has remained that quixotic El Dorado Romanians want to reach, almost at any price. Romanians hold great expectations of those who are "lucky" enough to get out. The fortunate traveler has an obligation to prove to those left behind that the trip was worth the mental and financial effort — at the very least, a reference as small as a Belgian chocolate, a colorful shopping bag with foreign brand words on it or, just as in old times, a carton of cigarettes and a bottle of whiskey from a duty-free shop. Sometimes travelers take this sense of duty to the max, using up all their foreign currency on gifts for loved ones (this too I recall from my youth here, when my parents spent their short visits abroad chasing down clothes and candy for me instead of sightseeing.). In fact, in order to play into this overseas-is-better myth, some people who work or settle outside Romania make the most of their imagination to enhance their new status. A couple of popular songs describe a current habit of boasting back home of having it made it, when in reality many immigrants barely scrape out a

living. Some Romanians allegedly borrow (even steal) fancy cars when making visits back home, in order to impress.

Let the trip finally begin

At 3:30 a.m. on the appointed day, I climbed into my taxi — not without dark thoughts, however. I was re-playing words from a friend who cautioned that no man would stick by me if I kept giving in to my adventurous spirit and taking trips like this. Augie March and Don Quixote, two of my favorite fictional characters are best left to fantasy, I agreed. But leaving the *patria* at an early age may have doomed me to a lifetime of wandering. It's no surprise I have nomadic genetic matter in my blood; I come from a nation of emigrants so frustrated by their place in the world, according to historian Lucian Boia, that they cannot make up their minds whether to be patriotic or ashamed of their nationality. On the bus, a fellow Romanian traveler asked me if I had been born in Romania. "How terrible for you," he said, not jokingly, when I said yes. "Just like it is for the rest of us."

It's telling that like many other Romanian personalities (national poet Mihai Eminescu, playwright Eugen Ionescu or sculptor Constantin Brancusi), Emil Cioran, one of the most admired intellectuals here, chose to live abroad. Ambivalent in his love for the abandoned land (why is it that "in sickness and in health" is a vow applied only to marriage and not to citizenship?), Cioran

was especially critical of Romania's place in the world. One of his books, "About the inadequacy of having been born," in which he philosophizes about the futility of human life, has been interpreted to mean the inadequacy of having been born in Romania. In one paragraph, he writes: "In my uninterrupted rebellion against my own ascendancy, my whole life I have wanted to be something else: Spanish, Russian, a cannibal. Anything else but what I was. It's an absurdity to wish to be something else, to embrace in principle any condition but that of your own." A recent Soros-sponsored study shows that while a quarter of all students dream to leave Romania for better pay, 15,000 of the top achievers in high school and college do leave to work elsewhere, with no plans to return.

Understanding the roots of nihilism of Romania's intellectuals (or the lack of confidence in the nation among the general population) was not at the top of my mind the morning of my departure. As I carefully stored a couple of liters of water, sandwiches, cookies and toiletries to last for two days, I even began feeling sorry for myself. I looked as downtrodden as the travelers I had seen many times before at bus pick-up points throughout the city (not all overseas buses leave at the same ungodly hour as mine did): dressed casually to the point of being unkempt, and holding more bags of food than luggage. Being a tourist, rather than a mere traveler, is not just an attitude, I thought; it's a state of mind that reflects spiritual and material stability, happiness with one's state in life — and perhaps even pride in the place you're leaving behind. □

Current Fellows and their Activities

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Alexander Brenner (June 2003 - 2005) • **CHINA**

With a B.A. in History from Yale and an M.A. in China Studies from the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, Alex is in China examining how the country is adapting to economic and cultural globalization following its accession to the World Trade Organization.

Richard D. Connerney (January 2005 - 2007) • **INDIA**

A lecturer in Philosophy, Asian Religions and Philosophy at Rutgers, Iona College and the University of Hawaii at Manoa, Rick Connerney will spend two years as a Phillips Talbot Fellow studying and writing about the intertwining of religion, culture and politics in India, once described by former U.S. Ambassador John Kenneth Galbraith as "a functioning anarchy." Rick has a B.A. and an M.A. in religion from Wheaton College and the University of Hawaii, respectively.

Cristina Merrill (2004 - 2006) • **ROMANIA**

Born in Bucharest, Cristina moved from Romania to the United States with her mother and father when she was 14. Learning English (but retaining her Romanian), she majored in American History at Harvard College and there became captain of the women's tennis team. She received a Master's degree in Journalism from New York University in 1994, worked for several U.S. publications from *Adweek* to the *New York Times*, and will now spend two years in Romania watching it emerge from the darkness of the Ceausescu regime into the presumed light of membership in the European Union and NATO.

Andrew J. Tabler (February 2005 - 2007) • **SYRIA/LEBANON**

Andrew has lived, studied and worked in the Middle East since a Rotary Foundation Ambassadorial Fellowship enabled him to begin Arabic-language studies and work toward a Master's degree at the American University in Cairo in 1994. Following the Master's, he held editorships with the *Middle East Times* and *Cairo Times* before moving to Turkey, Lebanon and Syria and worked as a Senior Editor with the Oxford Business Group and a correspondent for the *Economist* Intelligence Unit. His two-year ICWA fellowship will base him in Beirut and Damascus, where he will report on Lebanese affairs and Syrian reform.

Jill Winder (July 2004 - 2006) • **GERMANY**

With a B.A. in politics from Whitman College in Walla Walla, WA and a Master's degree in Art Curating from Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson, NY, Jill is an ICWA Donors' Fellow looking at Germany through the work, ideas and viewpoints of its contemporary artists. Before six months of intensive study of the German language in Berlin, she was a Thomas J. Watson Fellow looking at post-communist art practice and the cultural politics of transition in the former Soviet bloc (Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, Croatia, Hungary, Latvia, Romania, Slovenia and Ukraine).

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