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CM-12
ROMANIA

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On the Bus to El Dorado and Back in Five Days

By Cristina Merrill

MAY 13, 2005

BUCHAREST, Romania – It was pitch black outside when I arrived downstairs to wait for the taxi to take me to the bus station. At 3:30a.m. on a cool April-Saturday morning, Bucharest was eerily still. Gone were the Gypsy midnight cleaners whose high-pitched chatter (and dust clouds scudding from dry brooms) usually rambles on till late, lost and found in the hollow frame of the abandoned monumental Ceausescu-era building that stands guard, reluctantly now, in front of my apartment building. Even the occasional drag racers, whose restless young hearts push them to compete at night on busy roads amid incoming traffic, had run out of steam. And *les chiens vagabonds* had turned by now into *chiens dormants* — the way I like them best.

A rare moment of peace before the cab arrived. When it did I crawled in, dragging more food than clothes for the upcoming two-day trip. Inside, trouble: stifling, warm air (Romanians fear the cold more than they do draculian spirits) and a chatty driver. Instead of resisting, I took it as a chance to build up antibodies for my immersion journey. I was about to spend several days (two going to Spain, two more coming back) huddled next to people who consider group bonding normal. The word “privacy” has no equivalent in Romanian, roughly translating as “intimacy” or “secret.” We exchanged pleasantries.

Taxi drivers here love dishing out unsolicited practical information, offering tips on everything from cooking to medicine and even real estate. The polite way to communicate under the circumstances is to feign interest, nodding throughout, and empathize profoundly with complaints about life’s hardships. Airing grievances is a form of national therapy; you’re either with the distressed masses or pretend to be as laden with sorrow as they are — or else, sooner or later, a certain jealous someone will secretly put spells on your beloved farm animal. I may have previously mentioned the Romanian saying, which may not be recommended as an effective team-building tool as much as a sinister means of establishing equality among mortals: “If my goat is going to die, let my neighbor’s goat die as well.”

I learned that morning, for instance, that my driver had been up and working for almost 22 hours in order to help fulfill his monthly distance quota. Failure to meet this requirement had cost him a reduction of 30 percent of his salary the previous month. “Dragons,” he called his bosses under his breath. I genuinely sympathized and nodded. But the only demons I have to answer to are my own.

The makeshift bus stop was a familiar, if posh, place — mere steps from the fanciest hotel in town, the Hilton Athénée Palace, as well as the national symphony and the national art museum that once served as a royal palace. In the new “savage capitalist” economy where practically everything is for sale, this chameleon square serves on weekends as space for trade exhibits and outdoor concerts or cultural events. During the week it’s a large parking lot controlled by a monopolistic firm whose prices vary according to the moods of the individual

collector sporting a recognizable white-and-blue uniform. Many forget now, but 15 years ago crowds from nearby Revolution Square protesting against the late dictator Nicolae Ceausescu spilled into here as well. It's partly because of that revolutionary moment in time that buses such as mine are even *allowed* to go abroad. And they do now, in droves, almost every day of the week. Like taxis and currency-exchange shops, travel agencies have mushroomed in the years since the end of the Communist regime to entice Romanians with promises of the foreign dream. Several thousand such agencies in Bucharest alone issue relatively cheap bus tickets for foreign departures through various transportation firms.



The large, clean, bus I took to El Dorado was a Spanish-made Volkswagen that the Romanian crew cleaned painstakingly.

Romanians, in fact, are the third-largest immigrant group in Spain after Moroccans and Ecuadorans. These days, poor Romanians are to western Europe as poor Latin Americans are to the southwestern U.S. and Turkish “*gastarbeiters*” are to Germany — essential-but-disdained low-cost labor. And Romania, what’s more, is to industrialized western Europe as China and India are to the industrialized U.S. — a low-cost threat to export manufacturing and manufacturing jobs. In polls leading up to France’s May 30, 2005 referendum on the EU constitution, one of the principal reasons given by those leaning toward “*Non*” was fear of competition from Romania’s lower-cost low-wage workers — equated with, the French said, “*Polish plumbers.*”

Fifteen years after the fall of Communism, Romanians are still seen as possible defectors, likely to stay on as undocumented aliens and illegal workers after being allowed to travel visa-free, for up to three months, to countries belonging to what is known as the “*Schengen zone*” (As I explained in my previous newsletter, the name comes from a town in Luxembourg where the EU free-travel policy was negotiated. It provides for visa-free travel among and between all European-Union countries and many EU-wannabees, including Romania.)

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, with a minimum of 500 Euros for five days (a large sum in a country where many people make that much in one month). They must also have proof of medical insurance and a return ticket. Recently, some west-European countries have been asking for additional guarantees, including proof of hotel reservations or other lodging, as well as notarized, translated copies of a work contract or invitation from someone in the host country stamped by officials at consulates of the destination country. Sometimes even this documentation is not enough, with border officers apply-

ing subjective standards when making decisions to allow or deny entry — and this after a prolonged scrutiny at the frontier that can turn into hours of waiting. Last year the Romanian police turned back almost 1.7 million people at the border, either because travelers didn’t have enough money with them or their documents weren’t in order. After a scare this March and April, when tens of thousands of Romanian travelers got turned back at the Spanish border, tickets to that country were discounted. I secured a round-trip for \$130, but the price required me to complete the journey in a week’s time.

Assuming that border controls go smoothly, a trip to Spain normally takes about two days (48 hours to Barcelona and 56 or so to Madrid). On the way back, buses leave every other day, and because of stops along the way in several countries (including France and Germany), seats are harder to secure. I had picked as my destination Barcelona, the first stop in Spain, but any delay in getting there lessened my chances of getting a seat on a bus back to Romania in time to meet the limits of my discounted ticket. More travelers return from Spain than from anywhere else.

For months I had watched large groups of people getting into large buses in Bucharest, carrying more food bags than luggage. It was my turn now to take an exploratory trip. The bus company I used, Euro Time, specializes in international transport to Spain and works in partnership with a firm there, Lasa — thus the white, clean, Spanish-made, mammoth Volkswagen bus I was to admire later that morning after a few hours’ sleep and the first of many espressos. Only about 20 people had gathered for departure, with another 20 scheduled to get on at the several stops we would make on the way going west, toward the Hungarian border. I sat close

to the back. Soon after take-off I fell into a mild sleep-coma, through which I could still hear parts of a whispered conversation, in the last row, between a passenger and one of the four alternating drivers. All I could make out was that the young woman had been repeatedly turned back at the Romanian border. "The driver said he's OK with my staying on the bus even though I don't have my documents in order," I heard her explain to another passenger close by afterwards.

A doctor, a Gigolo and girls "with commerce"

The next thing I remember, five hours later, is passing through Romania's Transylvanian town of Sibiu (where we picked up more passengers), a different scene altogether from gritty Bucharest: clean streets without potholes, recently renovated homes in vibrant pastels, high fences that stood proud and tall. We made our first rest stop — my chance to take a better look at my fellow travelers. Two children, neither older than six, seemed resigned to the long trip ahead. One of them and his mother were going all the way to Portugal, a good 36 hours ahead.

Another passenger had brought along her two-year-old Pekinese named Gigolo. She said she was getting off in Paris, though I overheard her tell someone else that her ultimate destination was somewhere in Spain. Afraid she might be stopped at the border, given the troubles Romanians have had getting past customs-control on buses, she was going to get there by taking a train. Controls on trains, as on planes, are less strict than on buses for now — until Spanish police discover this new loophole and get tougher there as well. Gigolo's owner explained to a new friend that it's possible to get into any country, for the right price, even without papers in order. Recently, when she tried getting into Spain on an expired visa, she was taken aside by the Spanish customs officer. After the *de-rigueur* admonishment, he told her that if she were to leave 200 Euros on his desk, he would let her into the country.

I started talking with a Mr. Popescu, a retired doctor in his late seventies — tweed jacket, brown vest, starched white shirt, perfect shave. He said he was

going to France to visit his daughter who lived there with his three-year-old grandson. "I told my daughter that she better give me a grandson," he laughed. "She did, at 37." He had taken the bus trip many times before; the distance and the lack of comfort didn't bother him. "It's not very different from taking the train." He was eager to speak of his daughter's accomplishments, a tale best told in numbers. Romanians have a habit of illustrating success by throwing about figures and prices (denoting salaries, costs of objects acquired).

With a doctorate in chemistry, his daughter had married a director of the telephone company, France Telecom, where she also works and makes 2,200 Euros a month (about \$2,800), a salary she could never command in today's Romania. The husband earns 7,000 Euros. "They've done well," Mr. Popescu nodded, adding that they own several villas around Paris from which they get rental income. He then lowered his gaze and spoke about his "other child," a son in his early 40s who is less of a high achiever. "After the Revolution he did what they all did, he went abroad. He worked in Germany for seven



years. He came back a diabetic. His girlfriend is from a peasant [Romanian] family. When they heard of this disease they turned against him, and when his girlfriend got pregnant with his child they insisted she get an abortion." Mr. Popescu sighed. He began to talk about more pleasant things, such as his and his wife's home in the countryside, where they grow vegetables and make wine. "I'm content," he said. "I have nothing to complain about." He said that during Communism he worked in Morocco for a few years. "I had my family with me. I was making lots of money. I could have defected but I couldn't. I missed home too much."

Back on the bus, one of the drivers collected tickets and checked travel documents, including passports and visas. He advised a passenger going to Madrid to buy a return ticket, or else border police officers "will catch on. It doesn't look very good." We stopped again near Arad, one of the last pick-up points before the Hungarian border. The bus drivers, the four *amigos*, as I began to call them, went around meeting the passengers. Young, handsome, cheerful and professional, they made me feel better about the two-day ride. Once they figured out my American accent and heard me ask questions, they started teasing that I was a spy — and for the remainder of the trip they kept asking in jest for my "hidden recorder." They made the most of a captive audience by showing off and hiring someone at the gas station to clean up the van, a thorough process that achieved its intended effect. For the rest of the trip they made sure the bus remained clean, going as far as to forbid passengers from using the on-board bathroom (Romanians are serial smokers).

Romanian men are no different from males of any other nationality in that they like vehicles of any sort — but Communism-induced deprivation has created an unquenchable, childlike enthusiasm for anything motorized. Mr. Popescu was no exception. This man who'd spent four decades in surgery seemed hypnotized by the car-washing process. "Look at all the cream they're putting on and the good lather it creates," he said. "I think this cost a lot, probably even ten dollars. But they're doing a great job. Bravo!"

Mr. Popescu's niceties stopped short of two of the passengers in front of us, one of whom was the woman without a return ticket from Madrid. Both sisters, as we later learned, they were dressed as though for a fancy night out, rather than a long bus ride: body-fitting striped suits, pencil-thin high heels and so much carefully applied make-up that for once I started to believe that Romanian women can perform their own cosmetic enhancements, and much cheaper than under a surgeon's knife. Who needs Botox when a month's supply of L'Oreal foundation and mascara, applied layer upon layer, can cover nature's defects? "These two girls are with commerce," he said, inferring prostitution. "Their documents aren't all in order, but these driver guys will probably help get them through." Indeed, one of the drivers later snuggled in between them as they did crossword puzzles in the

back. I don't mean that he was about to get favors from them, but I suspect that he and his colleagues were nice to the sisters (as to all of us, for that matter) for two reasons: comradeship, especially since in the last month Spanish border officers had got tough on both Romanian passengers and the drivers taking them out of the country. Also, of course, the hope that a small recompense might come their way. I still maintain what I wrote several newsletters ago: that because of the particular kinship that Romanians feel for one another (and the unrestrained terms of affection present in the simplest social dialogue), corruption is difficult to define.

"The Bat" and tales from the prison

Back on the bus, I began making friends with the warmly approachable man sitting to my left, Vasile Gavrilescu. I learned, to my fascination, that in the late sixties and early seventies he had served ten years in prison for political dissidence. He was first condemned in 1958 to 22 years for having served as "leader of a subversive organization," and pardoned in 1962. "I didn't even do real propaganda," he said. "All I did was write for myself." In 1965 he was caught and put back in jail after he tried escaping over the Danube. All together, he spent time in four prisons — or "universities," as he called them. He said that as the son of poor peasants, he should have turned out to be a promising Communist, but instead he turned against the system with virulence. He still vents his anger at the Ceausescu regime, and perhaps mourns losing some of the best years of his life in



Meeting "The Bat," a former political prisoner during Communism, was a highlight on my trip.

jail or enduring brainwashing. He has written about 12 books, only a few of which have been published. He was making the trip to France in part to show one of his recently released memoirs to Paul Goma, a famous former Romanian dissident and writer now living in Paris. On the bus I read the book, titled "The Bat," (the code name the Romanian secret police had for him). The memoir pieced together parts of his now-declassified *Securitate* dossier he was able to review following the fall of the dictatorship, as well as the "propaganda" notes he wrote for himself, which he'd tried to keep away from the Communist authorities.

Despite lighter parts, in which he talks about his weakness for women and books, and retells anecdotes about misleading tails assigned to trail him, the book is an intense read. It boils with his unchecked frustration at having been suppressed from exercising his right to write, and write the truth. "Nobody can stop me from seeing the light of print," he once scribbled in Ceausescu's time. "What will our children look like, when they are born to be lied to by parents, friends and teachers? The building of [Ceausescu's] 'new world' has proven a huge blasphemy to the detriment of the sincere man." Regardless of the literary merits of his books, writing for him was, and is, necessary therapy.

It's a wonder Mr. Gavrilescu survived his many trials: his mother was imprisoned because of his anti-Communist beliefs and died in jail. His first wife became an informer who spied on him. Financially, he has little to show for his victimization: as a former political prisoner, he gets a monthly pension of about \$14 for every year spent in jail — a total of \$140. The medicine to treat his diabetes costs him as much in one month. I have since met his wife, so I can say that he is lucky to have found a strong woman the second time around — and together they keep a nice home a few hours outside Bucharest. An artist, art teacher and a model housekeeper, "Nusa" helps them stay self-sufficient: she grows all the vegetables and barnyard fowl they need for themselves and their many guests. He finds peace at his writer's table in the garden below, by the river and away from the clamoring geese, chickens, roosters, turkeys and odd boar. Unlike many of the Romanians I know who embraced religion after the fall of the regime, Mr. Gavrilescu said he is "a convinced atheist." He said to me: "Why would I be forced to carry around even more guilt and suffering than what I have already? Besides, I can't see God walking around with an accountant's notebook to keep a record of everything good and bad we've done."

I took an immediate liking to this funny and confident talker, with his strong nose and full set of white hair, who hails from the same region of the country as one of my grandfathers; that area supposedly produces stubborn men and leaders (unfortunately, Ceausescu was also a product of this region, known as Oltenia). In addition, we both figured out that he spent many years in jail with one of my relatives, the same uncle who later es-

caped to America — and then sponsored my family there in 1983. The Bat's revolutionary verve was impressive, especially now that transition fever has put on hold what should be for this nation a process of coming to terms with unpleasant history.

Mr. Gavrilescu's past is very much with him. He looks back fondly on some of the time he spent in jail, which he considers a character-building period devoted to a good cause whose purpose is no longer in fashion. He laughs as he tells stories about writing bits of his novels on the back of his shoes or fashioning chess pieces out of soap and bread — which he and other detainees sometimes had to swallow whole to avoid getting caught. "We prisoners were once happy to be in jail," he said. "We thought we were part of the resistance." In his book, he even describes his return from exile as "the hero who has become futile." But negative memories linger as well. I noticed him getting more and more jumpy as we approached first the Romanian customs border, then the Hungarian one. He simply cannot forget the years of plotting to get away, only to be caught by the secret police and sent back home. "I remember, that's why," he said. "Resentments, young Ms. These guys appear when you least expect them."

Tension at the border

He had nothing to worry about this time around (he also holds French residency), but other passengers did. After getting on the bus to pick up passports and ask passengers how much money they had on them to fulfill Schengen requirements, the Romanian customs officer returned to take a look at one woman whose picture didn't exactly match her passport photo. He made her turn her head to show her profile. "You've lost weight since this picture was taken," he told her. He then asked her to get off the bus momentarily for closer inspection. At a later rest stop she told us the officer had acted rudely in the office, ordering her to show her "mug" up close. The same officer also interrogated two other passengers who were traveling together and had gotten on this bus close to the border in their third attempt to be allowed out of Romania. They were forbidden to leave previously because they couldn't prove they had a place to stay in France. This time around they produced hotel reservations, which I later learned had been made hastily and were not valid. These two, in fact, had been hired as illegal work hands on a construction project in Marseille, and they did not know how long they were to remain in France. "We'll do anything to make extra money," one of them said. Both taxi drivers in the Romanian city of Iasi, they said that they couldn't make ends meet on \$100 a month, when monthly electricity and hot water came to \$75.

Some things happened at the Romanian border that I couldn't fully explain. Getting through seemed more a question of luck (and money) rather than following some rule of law. One young man was ordered off the bus. One of the drivers called out a name, followed by "I don't know what it is but there is a problem with your docu-

(Right) Romanians still fear border controls such as this one, where they are subject to long waits, moody and corrupt officers, and where they risk being turned back at any time. (Below) A checkpoint at the Romanian border with Hungary — for many Romanians an important point of departure on the way to El Dorado.



ments and you're going back. There is no way out of this." Mr. Popescu said afterward the reason the young man was sent back was that his work contract had not been translated into Romanian — Mr. Popescu had the same problem (the invitation his daughter wrote on his behalf was written in French), but he was able to get through. And as for the woman of the night who had no return ticket from Madrid, I swear I saw our friendly driver come back to collect money from her, perhaps to bribe the customs officer.

The tense atmosphere continued all the way to the Hungarian border, a few meters away. One woman in front of me kept munching on sunflower seeds to quiet her nerves. Mr. Gavrilescu took the opportunity to visit the duty-free shop between the two countries to buy his own nerve-calming medicine. "Have some of your American drink to help you feel at home," was his enticement upon returning with a bottle of Jim Beam bourbon. The Hungarian border officer got in, frowning. Because of disputes over who Transylvania belongs to (Romanians got it back after WWII, even though Hungarians had managed it for about 800 years), little love is lost between people of these neighboring countries. I commented about the officer's seriousness, only to be told

by a passenger to be careful not to incur Magyar wrath. A travel agent traveling to Germany to buy a car, the man told me that one time when he was bringing clients back to Romania, someone in the group poked fun at the Hungarian officer's gravity — and they got held back for two hours as "revenge."

Eventually "we're done with the Hungarians," in Mr. Gavrilescu's words. It was evening by the time we got to ride through the Hungarian countryside, which looked better cultivated than Romania's. Passengers' cell phones buzzed with welcoming messages from local cell carriers (Vodafone in Hungary, T-Mobile in Germany, LuxGSM in Luxembourg, Orange in France). Our drivers started making more regular rest stops, during which we did the usual: bought coffee, snacks, inspected the gift shops, used the bathroom. "Up, down, out, after a while one gets used to the system," Mr. Gavrilescu joked. I think I was one of the few to find it funny when one of our drivers advised the sunflower-eating

woman in front of me to do something about the stinky cheese she had deposited in the luggage compartment below. My luggage was with me, thankfully. Only when we got to Paris and the bag-storage place was opened did I get a whiff of the pungent sheep-cheese smell. The young woman apologetically explained that she was taking the cheese to Portugal, along with six bottles of strong liquor and homemade food, to her husband and his seven brothers, all of whom lived in the same town.

Once outside Romania, Mr. Gavrilescu felt confident enough to share his thoughts, as someone with experience abroad, on the need for Romanians to change their mentality and work ethic in preparation for their country's expected 2007 entry into the European Union. "The EU isn't the milk and honey they expect," he said. "A pack of cigarettes costs five Euros, not a dollar as it does in Romania. Romanian peasants are refractory, for example. When I tell the people who live near my house to clean dung from a cow, they say, 'what for? It will just get dirty again.'" He entertained us further with a joke about a travel promotion for seven days in hell. The poor Romanians who signed up for it got arrested upon entry and thrown back out. Why? As the devils explained, there's a difference between entering legally, as a

tourist, and illegally, as an immigrant.

I felt a chill of prejudice against Romanians a couple of times, not least when we entered Austria shortly before 2 am. Although under the Schengen agreement we should have been allowed to pass through without controls, we were told to come out of the bus and show our passports. As an American, I got a quick check and a smile, while the rest of the passengers were held in line longer to have their passports stamped (an unnecessary procedure). When people asked whether we could use the bathroom, Austrian officials smirked and shook their heads, saying “kaput.” A fellow traveler muttered that only Romanians get that answer.

Barely Spain

In Germany we admired the ordered, serene, freshly seeded fields — as well as the spick-and-span gas-station bathrooms. At a refueling stop in Luxembourg, the drivers and passengers familiar with that country’s low sales taxes, bought coffee in bulk. Outside we noticed a quick landing by a medical-evacuation helicopter, which descended on a meadow in front of us. A passenger van sped in front of us and a couple brought out what looked like an injured child — perhaps the victim of a highway accident. The first-aid team carefully wrapped the child in foil to keep his body temperature up, and then raised him into the helicopter. “In Romania they would have thrown him into the garbage,” said one of the drivers.

We arrived in Paris late in the evening the second night after departure and lost most of our passengers. Even those whose ultimate destination was in Spain or Portugal got off, most likely heading for trains, where border controls were likely to be more lax. As he got off

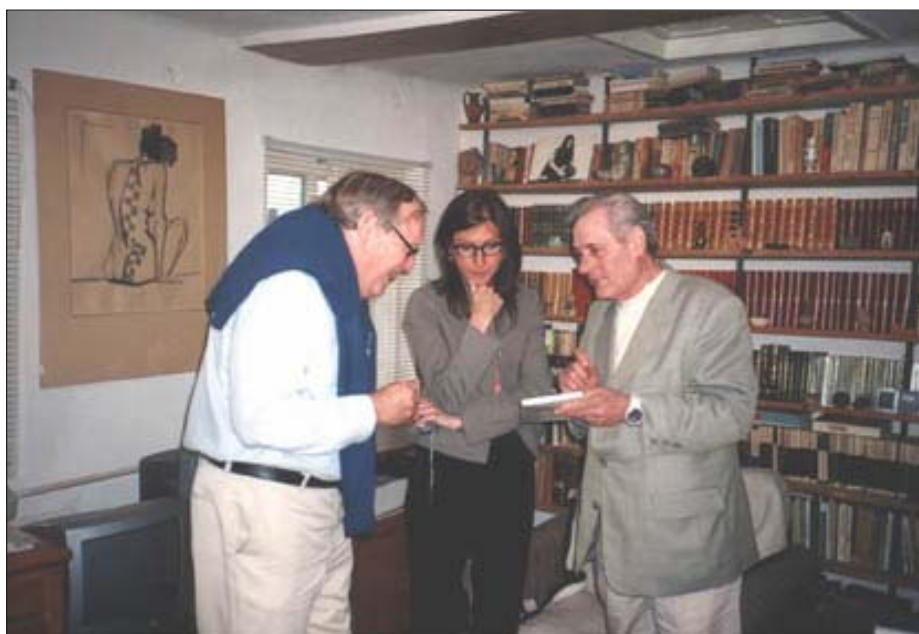
in Paris, “The Bat” made his farewells, after which he turned to me and said, “I hope we’ll meet again, kid. Maybe we’ll start another Revolution.” (We did meet again, a month later when the Institute’s Director paid me a mid-fellowship visit and we traveled for an Orthodox-Easter lunch at the Bat’s rural home.)

I moved up front to chat with the four amigos, with whom I had bonded over many cups of coffee. We were headed south, toward Spain, and the drivers dreaded approaching that frontier. The month before they had to wait two days there before being allowed in, and only with those passengers whom authorities deemed in order. Two of these drivers, in fact, had been accused of bringing Romanians into Spain illegally on the bus, and had interdictions imposed on their licenses forbidding them to drive in Spain for ten years.

“The Spanish are clearly discriminating against Romanians,” one of the drivers, Ion, told me. “They have an unofficial policy to exclude Romanians, Ukrainians and Bulgarians.” Ion told me that the bus company had recently hired a lawyer and was looking into suing Spanish authorities who kept passengers out of Spain and Portugal, even though Romanian authorities had established that their documents were in good standing. Ion insisted that once back in the United States, I “should never forget” about Romania. “Tell everyone you know about us. I really believe we’re on the way up.”

The long customs checks at the Romanian/Hungarian border had set us back about seven hours, so I decided not to go on to Barcelona, opting instead to be dropped off about 40 minutes from the Spanish border, at the French town of Le Boulon. It was close to a place I was familiar with, Amelie les Bains, where I could spend the night before turning around to go back to Romania with the same drivers (whose last destination was Madrid) the following evening. Legally, I wasn’t allowed to get off there, but the amigos offered to let me out at a gas station on the highway. It was eight o’clock in the morning, 52 hours after the departure from Bucharest. We established that they would pick me up in the same town, at the gas station located on the road going the opposite way. To their credit, Ion and his buddies refused even a small token of gratitude for their efforts.

At the gas station I asked the clerk to help me call a taxi to Amelie, some 15 minutes away. My driver was a young Frenchman of Catalonian ancestry, Joel Nora, who was familiar with the



ICWA Director Peter Martin and the author look at one of Vasile Gavrilesco’s books in his study. Photo: Lucretia Martin

recent fiasco at the border with Spain. He said that he drove Romanians who had been refused entry back to the border, only to be told by authorities that if he tried it again, he would be arrested. The border police keep several taxi firms on call, including Joel's, which means that on several occasions he and his colleagues have been called upon to take Romanian rejects to the train station at Perpignan, France. That town is some 90 minutes away from the Spanish frontier — a long and expensive car ride, so six or seven Romanians share it. Joel said that people short of money walk to Le Boulon, which can take a couple of hours. "It's hard to see them in that situation, especially old people and children who have come all this way."

On the road again, with a motley crew

After a night's rest and a day spent charging my lungs with Pyrenees fresh air, I met the amigos again the following evening at midnight for the 3,000-kilometer ride back home. They seemed tired, having had time only for a few hours of sleep in Madrid. Apparently they hadn't encountered any problems getting into Spain, probably because there were only six people left on board when they arrived. Hopefully those that got off in France to avoid the Spanish inquisition, taking the train into that country instead, made it safely. It was too late and dark inside the bus for me to be able to survey my fellow companions — 20 of them. I already missed the group I came with, the "Bat" especially. It didn't help that the man behind me now got a craving for munchies at 2 a.m. He must have opened a dozen plastic bags of chips, pretzels and cookies before settling in to listen to rock music too loud for his headphones. Of course, all we needed to bond as a group was a rest stop, and a few shots of espresso and cappuccino. We got the chance near Paris, some ten hours later — where we also picked up 20 more passengers. It was a tight fit, *mano* near *mano*.

People seemed more tense this time around. Those who got on in Spain and Portugal looked run-down, whether from the long trip or the work they did there. I heard one woman say that she started her journey a day before, from a town near the Portuguese border. By the time she reached Romania she would have been traveling for three days straight. She had gone to Portugal on a seasonal contract to pick strawberries but couldn't survive the work conditions. She showed us how she had to sit, bent down, for eight hours at a time (8 a.m. to 4 p.m.), with only a ten-minute break. She finally asked to be released from the contract. "Nobody can understand how hard that work is," she said. I just couldn't do it, it ruined my back. Nothing in this world is worth that sacrifice."

Other passengers were being difficult for other reasons. An older Romanian woman with a fixed, stern look on her face, demanded to sit up front, pushing people out of the way. She continued to treat those around her dismissively, emphasizing that she had lived in France for many years and was thus not in a mood to associate

with ruffian Romanians. This reminded me of what a journalist told me during an interview, about expat Romanians who become pompous abroad and "even more insane than those trapped in the gulag at home."

Before we left the Paris area, the driver asked if anybody's French visa had expired. One young man answered that his would do so that night, around the time we were scheduled to exit the country. "You have money on you in case we get there later to pay the fine, right?" the driver said. My seatmate, a man on crutches, knew the drivers from before and spent time talking with them. As mechanic on Euro Time buses, "Mic," the nickname he goes by, had frequently made the trip between Romania and Western Europe. On the same trip last year he'd been sitting up front in the guide's seat. The driver apparently fell asleep, they got into an accident, and Mic's leg had to be amputated. After surgery, during his first visit to a Romanian clinic, the doctor didn't even bother to take measurements, fitting him instead with a heavy leg that felt like a "prisoner's galley-chains." The doctor said that he couldn't help him with something lighter; since antiquated Soviet technology was all he had at his disposal. "But you charge Western prices," Mic answered back. As a French resident (he works as a mechanic outside Paris), he was able to get a better-fitting leg. "Romania is still light years behind the rest of the world in so many regards but we still keep hoping the EU will help us," he said. "I fear it won't; we need to help ourselves first."

We took a slightly different route back to Hungary, via Strasbourg and Metz, Germany, where we picked up the rest of the passengers. The bus was full. Mic joked that we couldn't have asked for a more motley crew: cranky old dames, students, strawberry pickers, illegal workers, a handful of gypsies and "small-time crooks" - he later told me that he saw some of our fellow travelers lift goodies from a gas-station shop in Germany. I hadn't spotted any Gypsies (as an English friend jokes, "pure" Romanians can often be darker than Gypsies), though at a lunch stop we made after we arrived in Romania I heard a group of young men speak in an unfamiliar language to a peddler of counterfeit perfumes. It was Romany.

Customs bribes and long waits

This trip was far from boring, even without the "Bat". A high male testosterone quotient helped keep noise levels high. The drivers didn't help matters by playing counterfeit American movies that had been badly dubbed in several languages (Italian, and German, mostly); some tapes had Greek subtitles. Even so, one of the young men from the back insisted on taking Mic's seat, right in front of the video screen, whenever he went upfront to chat with the drivers. This young man then sat, agape and seemingly hypnotized. Despite what anyone says, Hollywood is America's biggest propaganda weapon.

A small row ensued when the drivers assigned a

young man to collect five Euros (\$6.25) “for customs.” Few people refuse to give on buses going abroad, and most of the money goes to bribe customs officers. In exchange, officials don’t scrutinize luggage or expired visas as carefully as they might. Thinking that the money would end up in the drivers’ pockets, the cranky old woman objected loudly. “I don’t want to be stolen from under false pretenses. The only times I’ve ever been stolen from has been at the hands of Romanians.”

I am not for bribing anybody but I realize that in cases such as this, where customs authorities themselves are corrupt and subjective, tipping officers is a coping mechanism. Being on their good side means, for instance, not waiting hours in line for an entrance visa — when the trip there has already taken two or three days. It isn’t just Romanian officials who are shady. On this trip, Hungarians were just as deep in the shadows. In order to stamp a young man’s receipt for a purchase he had made in Germany that would have allowed him to get a value-added tax refund, the Hungarian customs officer wanted a bribe of 15 Euros. The student refused, since he was entitled to only 30 Euros on his purchase.

Not that the bribe helped. We waited at the Hungarian border for close to two hours anyway. It took that much time to check on the recently renewed Schengen visa of one passenger, a young Romanian woman (tight white outfit, transparent ruffled skirt and white leather boots with the words “sexy” on the side) who lives in Strasbourg with her husband and was traveling to Romania to see her family. Her visa showed up “expired” in official computers, and we had to wait until authorities in France faxed papers showing they she had approval to renew her residence permits. Hopefully, in time, as European-Union laws take root and are enforced, bribes will gradually go away. Ironically, as our bus pulled by mistake into a lane reserved for E.U. buses, a Hungarian officer curtly told off our drivers, saying that the E.U. stopped in Hungary (a recent entrant in the Union), and Romanians didn’t yet qualify.

We finally got through Hungarian controls and made our first stop in Romania, near Arad. I heard another passenger, a young girl of 18 who sat near me, give out a loud sigh of relief, followed by a quiet sob. She had kept her distance throughout the entire trip, clutching several plush teddy bears and other toys. Now she spoke fast, almost uncontrollably. “I’m so glad we’re in Romania.



Catalina couldn’t wait to get back home after tough times in Spain

There is no other place like home. I’m never leaving again.” She had left for Spain three months before, hoping to make enough money to go to university there. “I have always had this dream of going to school in Spain,” she said. She got a harsh dose of reality in El Dorado. She worked at menial jobs, slept in train stations, and encountered enough shady characters to know that the Western world isn’t the dreamland Romanians like her envision it to be.

I, too, was happy to return home. For almost five days I had lived on processed snacks and coffee, trapped in a tight bus seat, unable to walk, let alone jog. My biggest wish was for a long, hot shower. As I undressed, I discovered that my ankles had puffed up to gargantuan proportions from water retention and inactivity — not a pretty sight but a small price to pay compared to the struggles my bus-mates deal with on a daily basis, whether they are abroad or at home and wishing to be elsewhere. I recalled a brief conversation with a young woman I met a few months ago on a train to Bucharest. Threatened with dismissal by her current boss, she was on her way to an interview for a job that only paid about \$400 a month. She needed the work in order to help support her ailing parents. She was aware that someone in her field — public relations — made at least four or five times that in western Europe, but traveling abroad was too expensive to be worth the effort — and to me, as I learned on my trip, full of danger. “Allow me to envy you,” the young woman said. “You’re free to leave Romania whenever you wish. This counts for a lot.” □

Current Fellows and their Activities

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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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Author: Merrill, Cristina
Title: ICWA Letters
(Europe/Russia)
ISSN: 1083-4273
Imprint: Institute of Current
World Affairs,
Hanover, NH

Material Type: Serial
Language: English
Frequency: Monthly
Other Regions: South Asia; East Asia,
The Americas; Mideast/
North Africa;
Sub-Saharan Africa

ICWA Letters (ISSN 1083-4273) are published by the Institute of Current World Affairs Inc., a 501(c)(3) exempt operating foundation incorporated in New York State with offices located at 4 West Wheelock Street, Hanover, NH 03755. The letters are provided free of charge to members of ICWA and are available to libraries and professional researchers by subscription.

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