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CM-13
ROMANIA

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Beauty Show for Strays, Romanian Style

By Cristina Merrill

JUNE 13, 2005

BUCHAREST, Romania—Lolita sat quietly in her owner's arms, keenly surveying the crowds. Freshly groomed, sporting a delicate floral necklace, this young dog of far-removed corgi ancestry occasionally grinned to betray two very long, somewhat unladylike fangs, as if to emphasize that she was no ordinary pooch.

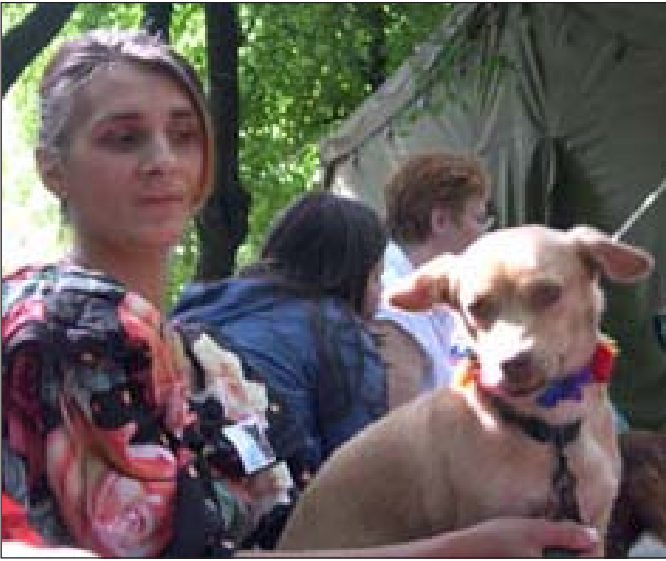
For this was no ordinary competition. On a sunny Saturday morning in late May, some 70 mutts, their owners, and many more gazers-on gathered in a park in the northern part of the capital city to partake of a most unusual event, one that rewarded at once the beauty and the beast: a contest among formerly stray dogs. As part of the challenge, entitled "the beauty of my four-legged friend," domesticated dogs competed in five categories, such as "most mixed of mixed breeds," "the big eater," and "popularity."

A first for Romania, the event was organized by a local veterinary center at the initiative of Neculai Ontanu, the mayor of district 2 (Bucharest has a mayor for each of its five districts, and a general mayor in charge of everyone). A well-liked politician who has survived his party's unpopularity to win a second mandate, Mr. Ontanu is an animal lover himself and the adoptive father of two homeless dogs.

"The fact that we are holding this competition today indicates that we are taking a stand regarding our general behavior and our responsibility toward these animals," Mr. Ontanu said in his opening speech. "These dogs are part of our



Some 70 mutts recently took part in Bucharest's first contest for previously stray dogs.



More than anything else, even more than food, these dogs need love," says Lolita's owner.

daily life, and it's not their fault that they're on the street."

Roaming dogs have been a part of life in this country since the 1970s, when the late Communist dictator Nicolae Ceausescu began manic social experiments to create the "New Man," by industrializing cities and destroying private property. He made room for his gaudy and monumental buildings, many of which now sit abandoned 15 years after the fall of his regime, by tearing down churches and private homes, and forcing people to move into sterile apartment buildings — "matchboxes," as Romanians refer to them — with little room to raise families, let alone pets.

"Demolition and abandonment are the two main reasons behind the explosion in homeless dogs," said Ana Halmageanu, founder and president of Bucharest-based Society for the Prevention of Cruelty against Animals

(SPCA), who served as a judge at this year's show.

As with most animal shows, this one seemed to be as much about the owners as it was about their pets. These adoptive parents obviously took pride in caring for their respective "Linda," "Foxy," "Blackie," "Dwarfie," "Little Paw," or "Lolita," of course. But the stories these people told, as they presented their pooches to the public, were anything but typically cheerful: these were accounts of how owners found and rescued their dogs from abandonment and sometimes, from death.

One woman cried as she talked about how her son brought home the puppy of a female dog that had been beaten, tied to a pillar and left to die. Another recounted how she fought dog-catchers to rescue a neighborhood dog from imminent death. "Since we took him in, he guards us like crazy. He's a beauty and we couldn't live without him," she said.

The sad tales went on: one couple rescued a dog after it had lost his hearing as a result of numerous beatings at the hands of previous owners; a young woman who had befriended a local dog who kept walking her to work for months decided to finally take him inside her house after he saved her life in a mugging incident.

Another tale was that of "Mr. Wire," a four-year-old mutt with traces of terrier blood (thus the name), who ended up winning the "popularity" prize. The woman who adopted him, Andreea Urascu, said she first noticed the "friendly dog who kept trying to find an owner" three years ago. She already had five other dogs, four of them strays, so she decided to look the other way at first.

She later found out that Mr. Wire had helped save and shelter two puppies that had been abandoned near his sleeping place; soon after, he also helped rescue aban-



Organizers of Bucharest's first contest for previously stray dogs wish to encourage adoptions of the city's thousands more roaming the streets.



Mr. Wire, pictured here with owner Andreea Urascu, won the popularity prize — he is also renowned in Bucharest for having rescued abandoned puppies and toddlers.

doned newborn twins. “As I understand it, he put the children in his makeshift dog house to protect them, and he sat outside to guard them. He then went around people in the park, as if to talk to them, and take them to the twins. Finally, two athletes from the nearby sports complex followed him back and found them.” Ms. Urascu, an economist in her early thirties, said she finally decided to adopt Mr. Wire when she noticed one day that he had been badly beaten by people in the park.

As they slowly awake from four decades of Communist repression, during which their feelings may have been hardened by their own loss of freedom and human rights, Romanians are learning to behave more humanely towards animals, as well as to one another.

Before Communism, Romanians were devoted Francophiles, with Bucharest being known in between the two World Wars as “the Paris of the East.” In their approach to pets, however, they seem to have become rather Balkan. Animals are mostly seen as dirty and purely functional creatures, best kept outside. Thanks to recent introduction of such TV shows as *Discovery* and *Animal Planet*, they are beginning to learn how the Western world obsesses over and cares for pets.

Once the Ceausescu regime fell and amassing material wealth became trendy, newly rich Romanians started

showing off expensive breeds — but even so, keeping a pet inside the home, especially if it is not of pure blood, is not encouraged. Neighbors don’t like barking, while some building administrators charge high maintenance fees for each dog owned.

Animal activists say that such obstacles shouldn’t be an excuse for not tackling the problem of a large homeless-dog population. Dr. Jacqueline Mocanu, an assistant professor in the surgery department of the Veterinary University in Bucharest and a judge at the contest, says that people who want to adopt an animal should just go ahead and do it. According to her, most adoptive parents of street dogs are elderly people who take their pets to the doctor more often than owners of pure breeds despite meager pensions of less than \$100 a month..

“In the end it’s lack of civilization on our part not to do anything about this problem,” said Cecilia Nicolicescu, director of the three-year-old vet center, also in district 2, which organized the dog show and also serves as a shelter for street dogs. Bucharest has several city-run dog shelters, but she said that hers, with a capacity to hold 250 dogs at a time, is the only location that doesn’t put dogs to death, regardless of whether they end up finding an owner or not. In order to encourage more adoptions and help change the mentality of Romanians, this mother of seven former street dogs has big plans for the future. One is to have a dog’s day every May; in the works is a program to train dogs in shelters as people helpers.

Until then, Bucharest’s streets remain littered with dogs. During the day they aimlessly roam the city’s parks and streets, cleverly crossing streets at pedestrian crosswalks, and nimbly boarding subways and trams. As with humans, dogs’ personalities vary wildly, from darling to beastly. The most dangerous canines begin gathering in packs in late afternoons, and sometimes become aggressive. To passersby familiar with the jungle of Bucharest’s streets, a growl is a signal to stay on the alert, but not to run away, since turning one’s back serves as an invitation to attack.

This reporter has been threatened countless times on daily jogs (an imprudent undertaking, to say the least), and bought a pepper spray as deterrent after losing an expensive leather purse to fangs as long as Lolita’s. It’s no joke, however, that over the years, dogs here have killed children and adults. Recently a pack of wild dogs reportedly bit a cleaning woman to death who was walking home through one of Bucharest’s parks. U.S. embassy staffers are instructed to get rabies shots as protection against unexpected canine attack.

The exact number of vagabond dogs (also known as communal dogs or *maidanezi*, after the word *maidan*, which usually denotes an abandoned public space) in Bucharest isn’t known, mostly because no census has ever been taken. Figures quoted by officials range anywhere from 5,000 to 60,000 unowned dogs at large. An estimated



Each pet owner received four pounds of dry food, some of which was generously distributed to stray dogs

80,000 others are said to have been killed since 2001, when then-mayor Traian Basescu (who in December became Romania's president) declared war on them, charging the city's Cruela de Vil units with catching and killing those dogs who couldn't find a home. Horror tales appeared in the press about puppies being thrown to the pavement to have their heads smashed or receiving poisonous doganasia injections.

The ensuing uproar, especially when animal-rights activist Bridgitte Bardot got involved, created a tense atmosphere between Bucharest residents and public officials. Even though they cannot bring them into their own homes, many people here are prepared to fight for neighborhood street dogs. As with everything in this country that is making a slow transition to democracy, and where capitalism is considered "savage," the transaction is pure and raw barter: in exchange for being fed, these dogs become guardians of the respective bloc or set of courtyards — sometimes at the expense of strangers passing by. Dog lovers take great pride in chasing dog-catchers away, which happens more often than not, especially now that the city has allocated fewer funds for dog patrols.

The answer is not to catch and put animals to death, says Ms. Halmageanu, whose organization proposes euthanasia only in the worst scenarios, when dogs are too violent or incapacitated. She says that the issue could be resolved if more people took in more dogs and if dogs still loose could be vaccinated, sterilized, tagged and returned to the streets — two cities outside of Bucharest have recently adopted this measure, with initial success.

She says she hopes the "beauty" show will spawn similar happenings in other Bucharest districts, as well as across the country. Organizers seemed pleased with the turnout of a couple of hundred people, some of which came simply for the joy of the spectacle — as well as a dozen free-range dogs that live in the park and turned out to mix and pick fights with the show-dogs. In the end, each participant received four pounds of dry food from the main sponsor of the event. Some people gave away their single-dog rations to owners of several dogs. Others offered their shares to stray park dogs. "More than anything else, even more than food, these dogs need love," said Lolita's owner, gazing adoringly into her baby's eyes. □

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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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