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## Romania's Orphans: Princes and Kings in Waiting

By Cristina Merrill

OCTOBER 13, 2005

BUCHAREST, Romania — Steliana Srstarzyk likes to tell her daughter Sophia bedtime stories about a little girl who was adopted and lived happily ever after. The yarns are based on fact, since Sophia and her brother Aiden are orphans who seem to have struck gold with their adoptive mommy. Steli, as everyone calls her, has eyes only for the two small children she is trying to make legally hers. The kids, in turn, cherish her every loving gaze. I have spent enough time with them, at home over pizza or out at cafés, to sense their bond of love — a bond for which Steli has fought very hard over the last three years since she first set eyes on daughter Sophia. She took the now five-year-old girl in her care in 2003. A year ago she was granted custody of Sophia's younger brother Aiden, who is now two.

Like me, Steli was born in Romania and emigrated as a child to the United States with her parents. She returned 20 years later because she missed her native country and because she wished to adopt from here. Steli is very American in many ways, and not only in her devotion to these kids: a former banker, she is financially independent and she runs marathons in what little spare time she has. In order to be able to adopt Aiden and Sophia, she has decided to move to this country and establish residence here. Away from her husband of eleven years, who is back in Chicago, Steli is bravely facing the numerous and onerous ob-



*(Left) Steliana Srstarzyk has moved to Romania to be able to adopt these two children.  
(Right) Two-year-old Aidan has known no other family besides Steli's.*

stacles created by Romania's bureaucracy and corruption, made worse nowadays by a new adoption law passed this year, which has turned everything topsy-turvy.

This thirty-something woman, who attributes her great positive energy to her Christian faith, seems undaunted by the obstacles in her way: she says she is motivated by her great love for the children and by the feeling that she wants to give back to her native country. She thinks she is "meant" to stay here and give. "I can't help it, Romania grows on you like a bad mushroom," she laughs.

Steli would be a role model in the West, but in Romania she is considered

foolish. Adopting children, especially those born of Gypsy women, as is the case with hers, has never been culturally approved. In today's times it is deemed especially untrendy. And like all else in this country, the system of adoption is going through transition-inflicted fast-growing pains, as well as great pressure from the international community. Reforming the system will be one key proof of this country's ability to recover gracefully from its painful recent past.

### Little time for role models

Living in a transition country, where constant daily change leaves little breathing space to ponder transformation, makes for a strange, neurotic way of existing. I think of it as an electric-Kool-aid acid test, Eastern European style, with spiced borscht and instant coffee instead of LSD. Turgenev could have had today's Romania in mind when he wrote, in *Fathers and Sons*, "Nowhere does time fly as it does in Russia! In prison, they say it flies even more quickly." Recently awakened from a long Communism-induced sleep, Romanians seize the day with abandon or, if they're driving, in an unfortunate zombie-like state. Movement, not necessarily purpose, is the order of the day.

In a normal world, living in the present and expecting each day to be different from the next can be exciting, if not slightly addicting. But in the case of a former Communist country, change is a weightier matter. Here the overhaul is profound, given that people are expected — and they expect it of themselves — to quickly make up for the decades of physical, cultural and moral destruction inflicted by the former regime. It is also costly: as the Communist bubble deflates all over, Romanians are left to pay for all of its inefficiencies. As more and more state subsidies are eliminated, for example, life and especially utilities get more and more expensive. It seems like every day another tax or living cost goes up, often unexpectedly: electricity, heating, property, or fuel.

To keep up with ambitious commitments and promises made to lending institutions such as the IMF or the European Union, which Romanians hope to join in 2007, the government keeps passing new laws and ordinances spanning all areas — and sometimes changes them within months, at breakneck speed, making it practically impossible for ordinary people, businesses and investors to plan ahead. But authorities are not the only ones succumbing to manic revamping fever: to cope with the reality of this epoch's savage capitalism, newspapers are swiftly changing their look all the time, TV stations their formats (my favorite all-news channel just launched a morning breakfast segment), women their breast sizes.

Had he lived in our time, Orwell would

have noted that in Romania Big Brother had shattered into many powerful Little Siblings, driven by thirst for money rather than paranoia. That's called capitalism, no? Ironically, they say anything is possible in Romania (legally and especially the other way around) and appetite is commensurate with this kind of Egoistanschauung. At this rate (given McDonald's popularity) I predict that the prototypical East-European gaunt face will soon take on Rubenesque dimensions. And maybe America, now obsessed with carbs and catching on to the slow-food fad, will become a model for moderation and slenderness.

In the disorganized fast pace of life here, it is easy to overlook people like Steli, who are bringing meaningful change to others' lives and to this country. A popular complaint is that Romania lacks role models, but in my view the country is full of them — the ones I have in mind are not hip, like soccer stars and scantily clad fashionistas whose faces adorn press coverage. They are those who choose not to cut corners and fall prey to corruption. More, they follow their hearts, not the money trail, and quietly.

### Adoption: an area ripe for heroes

Adoption and caring for orphans are two areas where heroes abound universally. As most of the world knows by now, thanks to footage widely released in the West in the 1990s, that wasn't the case in Romania before the collapse of Communism in 1989. Dictator Nicolae Ceausescu was consumed by a mad drive to increase population by forbidding abortion and contraception to women under 45 and instituting strict policies of control over women's lives (which included spontaneous forced searches, prison sentencing, and harsh fines). The tragic result, which came to light only afterwards, was the loss of the lives of an estimated 10,000 women, as well as the mutilation of many others. Forced



to give birth, tens of thousands of women abandoned their unwanted babies.

In Communist Romania, where many considered life a miserable curse, having children was not the joy that many in the West experience. What kind of future could parents offer offspring in a country where food, electricity and heating, not to mention freedom of expression, were scarce? Dehumanized by the authoritarian regime, people often chose to look elsewhere when giving birth became their only choice. The straight-line thinking went, “the State wanted the children, the State should care for them.” Meanwhile, ill-equipped public orphanages filled up with newborns. By 1990, more than 150,000 children were estimated to be in the care of the state. Some say that in some custodial places, especially those holding kids with special needs, the death rate was fifty percent.

Prolonged lack of affection, meanwhile, had seriously impaired the physical, emotional and cognitive development of even “normal” children, to the point where babies grew into disturbed human beings with low mental and motor performance. Westerners who poured into this country after the regime fell were dismayed by the wretched conditions in which these children were living — overcrowding, poor hygiene, non-nutrition. One such visitor recalled, in a BBC online commentary, his experience in 1990 at an orphanage in the northern city of Iasi: “It is no exaggeration to say I have never been as horrified and shocked by what we encountered, the children kept four to a bed in basements, tied down or wrapped — almost mummified. The stench of urine and disease are no exaggeration. I can still smell and visualize those places fifteen years later.”

Some say that although many things have improved, the tragedy left by the Communists still continues. Poverty is still rampant; many children are given up by teenage moms unable to financially care for them. The “science” of nurturing orphans is slowly being developed here as a result of efforts by the government to train social workers and launch better care centers. Also, the law that went into effect in January puts great emphasis on protecting the rights and the dignity of children at all costs and integrating them (or re-integrating them) into their biological families. The U.S. government alone, through its USAID arm, has poured \$15 million recently into a five-year partnership program with the Romanian government to help Romanian families become economically stable by offering them job skills and temporary aid.

Women still abandon children at an alarmingly high rate of about 9,000 in a year, according to UNICEF — on a par with Ceausescu-era rates from 30 years ago. The Romanian government, however, says the real figures are only about half of UNICEF’s estimates. Following cries from abroad, the Romanian government has made serious efforts to close down orphanages and distribute children to the care of foster parents, social workers and other kinds of family environments. Some 50,000 children, who

otherwise would have been institutionalized, live in such homes. Even so, about 32,000 mainly teenage children remain in public institutions; estimates show that an additional 5,000 minors live on the streets. Clearly, orphans in this country need a Dr. Larch, Homer Wells’ benevolent mentor in John Irving’s book, “Cider House Rules,” to soothe them every night with “Goodnight you princes of Maine, you Kings of New England.”

**Steli: “At that point I knew I was a mom and I had a little girl.”**

Steli is such a soother, and much more. She didn’t think about adopting until after repeated tries to get pregnant and expensive fertility treatments did nothing — except, at one point, causing all her hair to fall out (it has grown back and is miraculously wavy). By 1999 she and her husband decided to adopt, and soon after signed up with a U.S.-based agency to find a child in Romania. “There was no question of adopting from any other place — this is the country I came from, and I want to give back,” she says. It took close to three years to pass all the requirements to prove that they were eligible, and fit, to adopt.

In February 2003 they received a package of information on Sophia, who was then two and a half, including a picture and a description of her. Her name on the birth certificate is Edina Zita Ionas but Steli has chosen Sophia — once adoption papers go through, Steli plans to legally change the girl’s name. Apparently, Sophia was mature enough to eat by herself — and she was independent. It was the videotape they received soon after that convinced Steli and her husband to fall in love with Edina. “She had this little cap on, I’ll never forget,” said Steli. “She had this blunt haircut and the most adorable pouty chin. She was so energetic, and running back and forth. She looked like me when I was little, a mini-me. I must have watched that tape ten times that first day. At that point I knew I was a mom and I had a little girl.”

Sophia had been given up at seven months by a young and illiterate Hungarian-speaking Roma mother in the town of Satu Mare, in northwest Romania (close to the border with Hungary). The mother was living on the streets and repeatedly tried to give the child away — however, by 2003, all orphanages in Satu had been closed down by order of the government, and there had not been any room for little Sophia. Sophia went into foster care when she was ten months old. By that time, the Romanian government had also imposed a moratorium on international adoptions, making the adopting of children like Sophia from the United States a difficult proposition.

Steli came to Romania in August 2003 to spend a few weeks with the little girl, taking a room in a friend’s house, while organizing custody papers. Sophia spoke very little Romanian but they got along well. “She loved to eat,” Steliana said. “It was love at first sight.” A couple of months later Steliana moved to Satu and was granted

partial custody, meaning that she could keep Sophia three days a week. It was the beginning of the long road ahead. Given the moratorium on international adoptions, local authorities instructed Steli to regain her Romanian citizenship — a process fit for martyrs that would take too long to describe. It includes filing countless notarized papers and paying all sorts of fees — not to mention unofficial supplements to speed up the process. Steli applied for full-time placement of Sophia, which included a Romanian version of a screening process to deem her qualified to adopt. At the same time she started paperwork for adoption under the old law. Finally, in June 2004 she was granted “simple placement” — which is by no means a guarantee that she will be granted adoption rights. “They can take her away at any time, which scares me to death,” Steli says. Her extreme contingency plan, should that ever happen, is to run to the U.S. embassy for protection.

In December 2003 Steliana learned that Sophia’s mother had given birth to — and abandoned — another child, a son by a different father. Not one to back away from challenges, Steli leapt at the chance to get placement of him as well. His birth name is listed as Robert Zsolt but she calls him Aiden. She was granted custody in July of 2004, when he was nine months old, but not before being put through more trials. A day after picking him up she had to go to a hospital; he was sick with bronchitis. There she witnessed some of the same poor child-care methods that foreigners had discovered after 1989. The understaffed hospital ward was full of crying children. Steliana estimated that only one nurse oversaw, inadequately, about 20 rooms full of babies, who all crying— probably for food and the attention they weren’t getting. She said she was horrified to see the morning nurse, a stout, loud woman, change diapers by grabbing the children by the feet, wrapping them tightly “like rag dolls,” and laying them down to one side after filling their mouths nipples attached to old Coke bottles. Steliana tasted the liquid: it was stale powder milk.

She calls the first eight months she spent in Satu the “worst experience” of her life. “I cried every day. I was calling my husband every day to say that I’m dying here.” She couldn’t understand why medical care was so poor in the hospital, why bureaucracy and corruption were so pervasive in a nation that aspired to become a member of the European Union, and why people treated her as an outsider. Her spoken Romanian is perfect but her American accent is strong, a sign to Romanians that she’s good for money-milking but otherwise should be kept at a distance.

It didn’t help that she was direct and forceful, in an American way, in dealing with authorities. Steliana said that she was lucky to meet some very helpful people, but she reserves a great deal of criticism for many of the social workers in Satu who weren’t doing their job properly and didn’t conduct regular visits to foster homes to check on the progress of children. Because Satu isn’t a

big place, she was able to recognize social workers who used company cars to go shopping during working hours. “Nothing comes easy in this country,” she said. “You’re trying to do something good and it’s as if you’re talking to people from outer space. I was a nightmare for them as a foreign citizen. I created many problems for some of them.” Because she hadn’t been approved as a resident, her foreigner’s visa was valid for only three months. So every 90 days she crossed the border by taxi in order to have her passport stamped and receive a visa good for another three months. “How did I survive this time? By knowing that I have a mission here,” she said.

Life has been almost normal since she and the kids moved to Bucharest last year. Steliana bought an apartment in the same neighborhood she grew up in and refurbished it quite tastefully. Outside her sanctuary lies a Soviet-type Communist ghetto filled with unattractive apartments buildings and roaming stray dogs, and a heavy air of rotten past. Inside, Steliana has created her own dreamy boudoir, dressing up her rooms in rich colors of red, yellow and mahogany. The kids have their own rooms and closets and color-matched towels. Communication back home to the States is easy. The kids can talk with and see Steliana’s husband Dan through the latest voice-over-Internet service, Skype, installed on her laptop. One night I was there, Aidan insisted on sitting on the keyboard and kissing “daddy’s” web-camera face.

### **The new law: a child’s friend or foe?**

Since nothing is easy in today’s Romania, Steliana’s trials are not over yet. The new law, in effect since January 2005, has thrown a new set of obstacles in her way. The law stipulates that no international adoptions are possible except in the case of parents or grandparents living abroad. The law leaves open one possibility for foreigners who want to care for another child: they can do so only if they establish residence in Romania, after having spent time and established a bond with a child they wish to adopt, but even then adoption is not guaranteed. Newly established child tribunals rule on each individual case. Furthermore, the law dictates that in the best interests of the child, great effort ought to be made to integrate an abandoned child back into its biological family. That means that new release signatures are required from these parents. In the past, parents lost their rights to children six months after abandonment. Now, when parents cannot be found, efforts will be made to persuade the extended family to take the child in.

In some cases parents change their minds and decide to take their children back (critics of the new law say that some financially strapped parents agree to take back their children only because of the child support provided by the government, and that in other respects they continue to neglect them). In others, parents cannot be tracked down, delaying decision-making. Such delays could have significant adverse impact particularly in the case of children still in institutions. Another problem with the Ro-

manian government's rush to close down orphanages, critics say, is that few alternatives exist to absorb the constant flow of abandoned children. The new law also forbids children under two from being adopted nationally. Many maternity wards are overcrowded as a result, and poor care could have grave consequences at a critical stage in a child's development.

In Steli's case, this means that she has to go through all the adoption paperwork again, in order to be deemed a fit parent and for the kids to be considered adoptable. She is no longer pushing to get her Romanian citizenship back but is concentrating on establishing residence here, which involves even more ventures into the labyrinth of bureaucracy. "It's a good thing I'm a runner, or else I would never be able to get everything done," she laughed. "I know I'm here to stay for a while." For her, remaining in Romania is something she actually relishes. Several of her childhood friends have also come back from abroad. She just started work as director of a sports-rehab clinic. She takes it as a sign that she is destined for this place, at least for now. "It's strange how life brings you back to the place where you started." It's hard for this correspondent to fathom it, but she said she will adopt a third child soon to be abandoned by Sophia's and Aiden's mom.

For others who aren't originally from here and still want to adopt, the new law is practically an interdiction. Take Karen Barrentine, of Louisville, KY, a friend of Steli's who first came to Romania on a mission with the Southeast Christian Church eight years ago. She fell in love with a little orphan girl who will turn eight next month and is now in a children's home run by Franciscan nuns in the city of Braila. Ever since, this pharmaceutical sales executive has tried, unsuccessfully, to adopt little Elisabeta, or Beti, as she lovingly calls her. Ms. Barrentine has made 22 trips to Romania over the years (she even lived here for a while) and, not speaking Romanian, has experienced all sorts of adventures. "It wouldn't be so bad if I didn't get ripped off so much," she said. Ms. Barrentine has been trying for five years to take Beti to America, to the bedroom she has decorated for the girl and which now sits empty. She has had to quit several jobs because of the time she was taking off to be in Romania.

She has done a lot of good here. Together with a friend, last year she started Beti's Blessings, a foundation designed to help educate Romanians learn skills they need to care for children with special needs, and provide homes and life instruction for orphans who come out of institutions when they're 18. But her priority is to make Beti legally her child — for the seven-year-old who calls her "mommy," every day spent away from a family can have long-lasting negative consequences. "She will never recover if I cannot adopt her," Ms. Barrentine said. As a last resort, Ms. Barrentine recently decided to establish residence here. The last

time I met her she was in Romania on a week-long, whirlwind tour during which she saw Beti in Braila, then came to Bucharest to file paperwork, met with lawyers, got an audience with the head of adoptions and bought an apartment. "This is my last opportunity to try and do this," she said.

### **Romania: No longer a haven for international adoptions**

Romania, once seen as adoption heaven by American families and others elsewhere, is suddenly no longer an option. U.S. government statistics show that since 1989, Americans have adopted about 8,300 Romanian children — and an average of 765 Romanian children per year in the five-year period before the moratorium was passed in late 2001. In 2003, only 200 Romanian children were adopted by U.S. foster parents. In 1991, Romania was the number-one choice for all international adoptions by Americans, with 2,594 adoptions. Indeed, it was almost too easy to take a child out of here right after the collapse of Communism. Poor oversight and rampant corruption, not to mention greed on the part of some Romanians who saw babies as a lucrative opportunity, allowed for a booming adoption business. Most children probably ended up in loving homes, but it was because of the few who didn't that European officials started putting pressure on Romania to change its guidelines. Some children reportedly were taken out of the country to be trafficked for sex. One sick and unfunny joke I heard last year was that the real reason the Romanian government was rushing to award a highway contract to an international company was so that a smooth road would make it easy for pedophiles to come to Romania.

The last straw for EU watchdogs was when it was revealed, in December 2003, that the Romanian government had approved, despite the moratorium, 105 adoptions for Italian families. Baroness Emma Nicholson, a Member of the European Parliament then responsible for keeping tabs on Romania's progress towards accession into the European Union, declared war on all international adoptions from Romania. Some say that she warned that Romania's joining the EU was contingent upon the



*Karen Berringer has been trying to adopt little Beti for six years. Above is one of the first pictures of them together, when Beti was two. To the left is Beti, now 7, who is still in a children's home in Romania.*

country's ability to clamp down on foreign adoptions. The strict new law the government passed last year and came into effect in 2005 was the result, critics say, of the handiwork of this iron lady of children's rights.

Regardless of the effectiveness of the new law, the problem currently lies with 1,700 international adoptions, including more than 200 American ones, which were somehow registered with the Romanian government after the 2001 ban was imposed — and whose status is unclear. The U.S government, which all along has condemned Romania's latest tough stance on foreign adoptions, has been lobbying hard to get these cases resolved. In September, the United States Helsinki Commission, which monitors human-rights issues, held a hearing on the impact of Romania's new law. Saying that it is "tragic if the price of admission to the European Union is the sacrifice of thousands of Romania's children," Commission Co-Chairman Christopher H. Smith said he will soon introduce a resolution in the U.S. Congress calling on Romania to process the 200 so-called "pipeline" cases and even reverse its anti-adoption law. And President Bush's choice for ambassador here, Nicholas Taubman, has vowed in the press to make changing of this new law, as well as solving the undecided cases, a priority for his upcoming term in this country.

### The Forsyths' Saga

One adoptive parent who gave testimony before the Helsinki Commission is Elliot Forsyth, who together with his wife Whitney has come to Romania periodically over the last 11 years to work with abandoned children, both in state-run institutions and private orphanages and foster homes. They said they fell in love with the country and the people but were saddened by the poor treatment of orphans. "Over the years we've seen some improvements, but in our experience, the needs of abandoned children are as great now as they were when we first went in 1994," he said. He and his wife were able to adopt a girl in June 2001, before the moratorium. Their daughter, Simona, is now 7 years old. "Simona is of Roma decent and her story bears testimony to the miracle that inter-country adoption can bring to a child who needs a loving family. She was abandoned at three months of age at a State hospital in Romania. She spent the next two years of her life in State institutions where she was largely neglected. Fortunately, she was then placed with a loving foster-care family for nine months, which in many ways saved her life. But had inter-country adoption not been an option for Simona, she likely would never have been adopted domestically due to her age and Roma heritage."

UNICEF statistics show that 66 percent of all aban-



*Elliot and Whitney Forsyth, who adopted Simona from Romania in 2001, have been waiting for two years to adopt a second child.*

doned Romania children are of Gypsy ethnicity and thus less likely to be adopted. The reality is more complex, however. The director of national adoptions here, Theodora Bertzi, told me that the first part of the statement isn't valid (that Gypsies tend not to abandon their children), and that if anything, it is young and poor white women who leave their offspring behind. That statement was also confirmed by an American friend here, a Fulbright scholar studying the Roma who said that Gypsies often take into their fold abandoned white Romanian children. What still holds true, however, is the old, prejudiced mentality against Gypsies. Roma children, as well as older ones or those with disabilities, have the least chance of being — taken in by Romanian families.

After falling in love with another child they had spent time with as part of their volunteer work, the Forsyths filed adoption papers in September 2003. Despite the ban, they received a registration number from the Romanian government, which gave the hope that this adoption would also go through. I contacted Mr. Forsyth following his testimony and was able to learn more about his case and prolonged fight to get this second child to the United States. The child they are trying to adopt, who will turn three next month and is also of Roma heritage, was apparently left on the doorstep of a public hospital when she was newly born. As a result, no information about her family exists. To protect her identity, Mr. Forsyth declined to give her name. She is currently at a children's home in a small town in the Northwestern part of Romania. Unlike other children there, she has not yet been given

into foster care.

Mr. Forsyth rightly argues that the more time the little girl spends in an institution the more her normal development will be impaired. Also, the older a child gets in a Romanian institution, the less chance it has to be adopted by a Romanian family — and now, with international adoption forbidden, by a foreign family as well. The Forsyths have led a persistent campaign over the last two years to influence the Romanian government to solve their and the rest of the pipeline cases as well as change the new law banning international adoptions. Writes Mr. Forsyth: “I have personally met with then-Prime Minister Nastase in July of 2004, and with President Basescu last March in [Washington] DC. Both Nastase and Basescu promised resolution to the pending cases. And yet we still wait. Of course, the EU accession is at the heart of why we still wait, stemming from pressure applied by the European Parliament Member and EU Rapporteur to Romania Baroness Nicholson...of whom volumes could be written about her twisted schemes to shut down inter-country adoption around the world, starting with Romania.”

The subject of adoptions is a highly sensitive one, and in today’s Romania it’s a real minefield. Passions run high, almost to an extreme, on both sides of the argument. Mr. Forsyth said that he considers his family fortunate compared to “some American families with pending cases. We have traveled to Romania to see our assigned child on two occasions and have received periodic updates and photos. However, many have waited much longer than we have — some up to six years. Some continue to pay monthly for private care in children’s homes or foster care to ensure proper care for their child. Still others have lost all contact with their assigned children or learned that they were singled out for domestic adoption. Time is passing. These children are growing up without families, families that have already been assigned to them by the Romanian government.”

If in his fervor Mr. Forsyth can be blind to other arguments, he still displays a Western mentality that I see

lacking overall in Romania: a selfless compassion for human life which, while at times erring on the side of exaggeration, could be welcome in the case of Romania’s orphans. How else can one explain the high rate of child abandonment by mothers? “My feeling is that it’s probably a mix of things — yes, poverty and lack of education play a role, but I also believe it is a morality issue, an issue of the heart. Forty years of communism and brutal dictatorship has really warped the reality of many in Romania,” Mr. Forsyth said in one of his e-mails.

### Romanians have heart too — the Capatans

I have also found plenty of Romanians with heart. Take, for instance, Cristina and Danut Capatan, who in my opinion are veritable angels. Not only do they have their own biological child, a 9-year-old daughter, but they have also adopted one boy and are in the process of adopting another — *and* because of their work with a Bucharest non-profit organization that works with street children, City of Hope, since 1994 they have taken into their home 12 mostly teenage boys and raised them to young adulthood.

The Capatans could write a book about their challenges bringing up street kids. The couple, both in their thirties, were students in Bucharest when they were persuaded in 1994 by the founders of City of Hope, an American and a Romanian, to go out on the streets to give kids food and offer help. “For me that was the moment when I realized that I needed to do something,” said Ms. Capatan, who is now coordinator of City of Hope. Her husband is assistant pastor at an evangelical church associated with the organization. “It was a painful time then; streets were full of young children.” The couple helped care for eight City of Hope kids who had been taken off the streets. “It was a shock to our system to take them all in,” she said. “There was no order to their lives. They didn’t have most basic-life notions. The majority had run away from their orphanage. And we all know how [awful] orphanages looked under Ceausescu.”

In 1998, two years after their daughter was born, they



Since 1994, Dan and Cristina Capatan (left) have raised 12 mostly teenage boys in addition to their own. (above) Cristina Capatan with the two boys she and her husband are adopting.

took into their home three previously homeless brothers, twins aged 14 and a twelve-year-old. Back then fostering was not yet developed in Romania but the Capatans acted in the same spirit. "They were very violent because they had been badly beaten before coming to the orphanage," said Ms. Capatan. "Their father beat them every night." Still, she said, the boys felt tenderness toward the Capatan's daughter and grew to consider her a sister. They all "graduated" and left on their own. One of the brothers, who helps out the organization, takes time during lunch to check on the Capatans' daughter.

By 2000, the couple decided to do most of the fostering from their home — taking in an additional three children. They now had eight children, seven of them boys. Yes, they do get assistance for each child they care for, but the kind of work they do is, in my mind, priceless. They deserve to be millionaires. "It was very hard," she said. "Perhaps a little unrealistic, because we knew that all we could do for them was be a model on how to be a family. They never had a normal family life; all they witnessed was orphanage life and life on the street. I will never forget what one of them asked us a month after they moved in: 'I cannot believe the two of you don't beat each other up!' For him it was a shock, since all he ever knew were fights, threats and beatings, grandfather killed grandmother, etc."

The Capatans felt that part of family education was teaching these children responsibilities. Once a week they would have family-discussion sessions, during which they would discuss problems or make a plan for the week. They gave them tasks around the house and in the garden; they tried instilling in them the fact that family life is not just about having rights — that it works best in a team where members help one another. Ms. Capatan said that children in orphanages aren't taught how to be responsible — they are conditioned to expect to be given meals or clothes, without being asked to contribute in return. "A child of 17 who arrives into a family such as ours after a ravaged life has no comprehension of the reality of life," Ms. Capatanu said. "This child dreams of a family life like the one he sees in American movies, in which the child disappears, the parents search for him, they bring him back and they all live happily ever after."

She gave an example of how one day, after a sleepless night of work, she sat down and asked one of the children to help wash dishes. He asked, Why should he do it when she was resting? "I said, 'Let me tell you what a real family means. It means that we all work, we all watch TV, we all enjoy eating as a family. I help you, you help me.'" As hard as it's been, the Capatans seem to have relished their experience. Right now they have two foster children left in their home. When they leave to be on their own, the Capatans plan to use their experience raising street children to teach others how to work with children in need. "Working with humans is not easy, and it requires much time and dedication," she later e-mailed

me. In this, the couple is perfectly matched, for they both seem to think alike. "When you have passion, the way we have had for these kids, nothing stops you. You find a solution," said Danut Capatan, her husband.

### **Romanians also don't have it easy adopting — the Ions**

It wasn't enough for the Capatans to raise a dozen street children. They figured that once their foster children left, their house would be empty and their daughter lonely. Seeing that their style of life was too stressful to withstand a pregnancy term, they decided to adopt, first a baby in 2002, then another, last year. Both are boys, whom they met by chance.

She describes the first fateful visit to a maternity ward — the abandoned children section — with a couple wishing to adopt. I imagine this is what every prospective mother feels: "Suddenly, when he turned his eyes towards me and our eyes met, my knees started to shake, my heart started beating hard, and I said this is our child," said Ms. Capatan. "It wasn't that he was the most beautiful child, but I felt that instant connection." Because adoptions were easier before 2005, the Capatans were able to bring Daniel home five weeks later — but they fought daily battles to make the placement, and later adoption, happen. The baby was seven months old and they wanted to get him out of an institution as quickly as possible. "It was an age when he had to connect with parents," she said. "Each day counted. Each day spent there was a loss for him. When we first went there he looked like a little pie, a bottle attached to him through a towel. He already was becoming a robot."

One would think that the Capatans have learned to live with challenges, but even for them the paperwork process and bureaucracy were arduous. Ms. Capatan said that while they found some helpful people along the way, often they didn't receive "encouragement and respect. You have fallen in love with a child, you want a child. But often times you are treated like a beggar. Not by everyone, of course. We don't believe in bribing and didn't use it. I am doing a good thing for a child, I am making it easy for the state and of course I fulfill my heart's wishes. We want to give society responsible humans. This is not child's play."

The Capatans' hearts went out again, last summer, when their foundation got a call about rescuing a six-month-old abandoned boy in a hospital ward outside Bucharest. His diapers were "pickled" in pee from not having been changed frequently enough. Ms. Capatan said that nurses were offended when she suggested that she would go out and buy new diapers, but she did it anyway. The baby is with them now, "fat and beautiful," but he is not yet legally theirs. The new law, which requires the mother's signature, makes the process lengthier. The 16-year-old mom is nowhere to be found.

Another difficulty the Capatans have encountered is



the prejudice many here display toward orphans, even their own parents. "It's still the old Communist mentality about 'me and my family only,'" she said, adding that she and her husband often don't tell others that their boys are adopted, out of fear that the children would be treated like "criminals." Recently, when she took the little one to the hospital, she was asked by the staff whether she wasn't afraid of not knowing more about the parents. What if he had some strange genetic defects that would appear later in life? "There are so many wealthy families whose biological kids take the wrong path," Ms. Capatan said. "People like to point their fingers at adopted children, forgetting that others, from "good" families, can be worse. But I think people here need to be educated about adoption. In general, people are afraid: they are afraid of paperwork or that their child will be taken away. Potential exists but the old mentality unfortunately is still with us."



*"We have aged," said Silvana Ion, referring to the long process she and her husband Aurel have had to undergo in order to adopt little Mihail.*

"Adoption is a long road," said Silvana Ion. She and her husband Aurel also feel as though they have been through a war ever since they decided to make 2-year-old Mihail legally theirs. I first met them last spring, soon after they became his godparents. Ordinary Romanians sometimes choose to baptize orphans, considering this to be a Christian duty. Ms. Ion, a medical assistant who works at a local child-protection agency, became enamored of the baby during one of her shifts. She and her husband, who don't have any children of their own, said that taking in Mihail helped changed their lives and made them all a family. They soon filed adoption papers but a whole series of events (including the battle they won preventing the child from being sent to an institution last fall) delayed the process. The new law kicked in as of January, and all paperwork has had to be redone. Again, social workers had to track down the baby's relatives. The Ions had to undergo psychological tests and prove that they are fit. The little one needed to be declared, in court, adoptable. Luckily for them, relatives up to the fourth degree have renounced the rights to Mihail. His mother disappeared two years ago.

"It has been a terror," Ms. Ion told me recently when I caught up with her and little Mihail at a children's playground in the basement of a mall. "We have aged a lot in the last year." Indeed, the beaming 40-year-old woman with a thick mane of dark hair I had met in 2004 has matured; her smile is now melancholic. "We are a family,

and a family doesn't fall apart," she said. She blames the new law for being overly strict. "It went over the top. Before, they were spitting out adoptions as if from a factory. Now it's the other extreme." She also criticizes social workers for being too young, inexperienced, and poorly trained to cope with children. Nurses, she said, even called her "crazy" to adopt someone else's child. They called the boy names and said he was ugly. But at the same time, since she works in the field, she knew that they were simply overwhelmed with work. "It takes a titanic effort to be a nurse. How can one handle fourteen or fifteen babies at once and do a good job?! But it's not the children's fault. I just feel sorry for the healthy kids whom the system has damaged."

### **The Government: let us do it right this time**

I walked into the office of Romania's head of adoptions, Theodora Bertzi, with an armful of questions and not without an attitude. I had in mind all the stories of broken dreams caused by bureaucracy, poor thinking by the government and pitiful conditions Romania's orphans have been growing up in. I brought with me the anger I have long felt for Ceausescu's manic dreams to force women to have babies. The sorrow I felt for those women I know who had to mutilate themselves in order to abort behind closed doors, or the poor children who suddenly found themselves in jail-like institutions. The cold hearts that a ruthless system created here to the point that so many women so easily abandoned their own. I felt I knew enough to indict at first sight. And my frustrations, perhaps like those of the hundreds of American and Romanian families who feel defeated by the adoption system, begged to be aired in front of a government official. As

director of the Romanian Office for Adoptions, Ms. Bertzi occupies the post of Secretary of State, a key position in the government.

I left her office much calmer, more informed and somewhat assured that the wheels are starting to turn positively in the problematic area of adoptions — and that perhaps one day, this monster legacy of Ceausescu's regime can be tamed and entirely reformed — even made to benefit Romania's image. It will take a long time for that to happen, of course, but at least for now Ms. Bertzi is the right woman for the job. A general physician and former member of Parliament, she has participated since 1997 in the first governmental efforts to restructure adoptions. She was named to her current post at the newly created centralized office soon after the new law went into effect in January. She was the only one at the helm for the first few months, until she received an operating budget, gathered her team of experts, and found them a headquarters. She said they felt under pressure to perform, and fast. "We had to go back in time and understand everything that happened before, all the files of adoptions that had not been approved. It has been very frustrating to have to answer for a period of indecision and ambiguities [by the former leadership.]"

A priority for her staff was to audit the status of the almost 1,400 pending international adoption filings (representing some 1,100 children) that hadn't been resolved (international cases included) and that had been registered in the period between 2001, when the ban was announced until the end of 2004. Her office of 20 specialists couldn't do it alone; they work with hundreds of Romania's local child-protection agencies — a fragmented system that can easily fail when mismanaged. Bucharest, for example, has one child-protection agency for each one of the six sectors into which it is divided. The criterion they used was to keep the best interests of the child and its family in mind when making an evaluation and obeying the latest law, which specifies that no child under three can be adopted. "The old law took away the child from the family too easily, and very little effort was made to keep the biological relationship," she said. "The new law specifies that all efforts should go toward supporting the biological family, or that of the single mother. If that is not possible, the extended family should be encouraged to do that — with domestic adoption as a last resort."

So far, her office has reviewed the status of 400 abandoned children. She intends to inform various embassies, and prospective parents, of the outcome, but the results don't look promising so far. It seems that most children are in "stable" situations and thus less likely to be available: children have either been returned to their families or are in the process of being adopted by Romanians. The Romanian government argues that international families wishing to adopt from Romania should have respected the moratorium of 2001 and not filed for adoption. Of course, the same families answer that the

government should not have allowed them to file. Oddly, all of them received registration numbers during that period. Also, officials here said that proper procedures weren't followed (such as legalizing requests through a notary, every Romanians' indispensable friend for any kind of official action nowadays — and a friend who's getting richer by the minute); that children requested were often officially not yet ready to be adopted or under the age when an international adoption was permitted; and that overall it amounted to a faulty system that didn't necessarily benefit the child since it gave priority to finding a child for a family, instead of the other way around.

"We were very surprised [when reviewing the files] by the fact that many got to know children through pictures, videos or as a result of visits during which they brought presents," said Ms. Bertzi. "It was as if, 'I like this object and I want to have it.' I don't feel responsible for this, it was the fault of our professionals who were not professional enough to say 'Not everything that you see here can be bought. The children are not deemed adoptable, they have parents.'" Ms. Bertzi sounds a nationalistic note that is reflected in the new law, which clearly gives priority to domestic adoptions. But I also read it as a defensive attitude in the face of so much international criticism over the years. She added "I actually think that we can raise our own children, that we must demonstrate this in order to be deemed worthy of acceptance into the European Union. I mean what are we, barbarians, to abandon our children? Even cats make sure they're around to raise their own."

Ms. Bertzi said that the government has been encouraged by the rise of domestic adoptions ever since the 2001 moratorium was put in place. Last year 1,422 children were legally taken into Romanian families (and 251 went to families abroad). So far this year, Ms. Bertzi said, 1,200 Romanians have registered to adopt — but there are only 268 children deemed to be adoptable under the new law. Ms. Bertzi agreed that the high rate of child abandonment is still a matter of concern, but insisted that the government is working on addressing that problem. For one, it is making it easier for mothers to keep their babies by increasing the number and quality of alternative-care services, such as day-care and maternity centers. For example, official statistics show that Romania has now 118 day-care centers for families in difficulty, double the number in 2001. The number of counseling centers for parents has more than tripled, to 70, from four years ago, and so has the number of family-placement and reintegration facilities. Some of the recent efforts seem to have paid off: out of the more than 4,600 children abandoned last year, close to 2,390 children were reintegrated within their biological families and 940 children were placed within foster families.

Things are far from perfect. No statistics can hide the fact that maternity wards are vastly understaffed. In addition, the drive to get kids out of institutions is over-

whelming the relatively few available foster families, who are apparently taking more children than they are legally allowed. As critics say, initial financial aid to a biological family is only a short-term aid to reintegration, not a permanent solution. Finally, older orphans who have few chances of being adopted or taken back by their biological families, are still “ a problem,” Ms. Bertzi conceded. She agreed that these issues need to be worked on in the future. Surprisingly, one of the problems her office has identified is a “tendency among medical staff in maternity wards to encourage abandonment.” What she meant is that most hospitals don’t yet offer a counseling and support structure to advise mothers in need. Said Ms. Bertzi: “Once doctors and staff become aware that a potential mother is thinking of leaving the child behind, they need to immediately appoint a local child-protection agency to see the pregnant woman through to birth and talk to her about mother-child relationship.” According

to Ms. Bertzi, the way mothers and their children are made to sleep in separate rooms, or sometimes on different floors in most hospitals, is another obstacle to the maternal bond. A partnership between the Romanian Ministry of Health and the World Bank is developing a number of programs aimed at reorganization of maternity wards.

“But we do need patience and the confidence that we are doing things right,” Ms. Bertzi stressed. “We are possessed by effervescence and the challenge of doing something new. We started something from scratch as far as this office is concerned, and [are developing an] attitude toward adoption as a professional act. If Romanians are being asked to eliminate corruption, to be consistent in following the law, not to change laws from one year to the other — I think that we ought to apply the same high standard to this area as well.” □

# Current Fellows and their Activities

## INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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

A lecturer in Philosophy, Asian Religions and Logic at Rutgers University, Rick Connerney is spending 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.

### **Kay Dilday** (October 2005-2007) • **FRANCE/MOROCCO**

An editor for the *New York Times* Op-Ed page for the past five years, Kay holds an M.A. in Comparative International Politics and Theory from the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, a Bachelor's degree in English Literature from Tufts University, and has done graduate work at the *Universiteit van Amsterdam* in the Netherlands and the *Cours de Civilisation de la Sorbonne*. She has traveled in and written from Haiti and began her journalistic life as city-council reporter for *Somerville This Week*, in Somerville, MA.

### **Cristina Merrill** (June 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 is spending 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.

### **Nicholas Schmidle** (October 2005-2007) • **IRAN**

A journalist and researcher for the Pew Forum on Religious and Public Life, Nick is finishing a Master's program in Comparative and Regional Studies (Middle East/Central Asia) at American University in Washington DC. He is studying intensive Persian — as is his fiancée, Rikki Bohan — in anticipation of his departure for Iran after his marriage in autumn 2005.

### **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 working as a Senior Editor with the Oxford Business Group and a correspondent for the *Economist* Intelligence Unit. His two-year ICWA fellowship bases 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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