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ROMANIA

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Welcome to Bucharest: The Wild East

By Cristina Merrill

JULY 11, 2004

BUCHAREST, Romania—I was recently having dinner with my landlords, Dana and Daniel, their 7-year-old Ioana, and a friend. We spent an enjoyable evening at a well-known restaurant, Casa Doina (Doina House), in a posh, tree-lined area of Bucharest. The food was delicious and plentiful: savory appetizers, grilled meat, steak frites, rich desserts, good wine. The locale, a beautifully reconstructed old mansion in the Romanesque style of rounded archways and pointed roofs amidst old oak trees and grapevines, was sublime. A band of Gypsy players was making the rounds in the later part of the evening singing love songs. Children were running around, playing hide-and-seek under parents' protective gaze.

For a couple of hours I forgot I was in Bucharest. This relatively normal scene could have taken place in any developed Western capital of the world. Dana and Daniel, with whom I'm fast becoming friends, are a middle-class couple — the middle class is just beginning to develop in today's Romania, a country of extreme poverty and wealth. They are both in their mid-30s and started working as executives at McDonald's ten years ago, when the fast-food company was launched here. After rising through the ranks as second-in-command in Romania, Daniel recently left McDonald's to become the chief operating officer of a leading insurance company. Dana now runs a coffee shop modeled after Starbucks. Daniel works very long hours and is atypical of a Romanian male in that he is handsome without being macho. From the visits I have made to McDonald's with them (they are still very proud of the place where they worked and met),



Daniel and Ioana

I've found that he is still revered by his staff. I think he's the kind of man Romania needs in politics. He is intelligent, professional, well-educated and balanced. I asked whether he would ever consider running and he shook his head vigorously. "No, it would be too dangerous," he said. "I need to focus on my family."

I even attended their daughter's end-of-school-year celebration and was amazed at how Westernized the atmosphere seemed. Ioana finished first grade in a four-year pilot program called "Step-by-Step," sponsored by the Soros Foundation. Instead of grades, the final report for the 20 kids noted that they had been "promoted" to the next grade. Following a brief and highly photographed ceremony, where children performed a series of songs, the event ended with cookies, cakes and soda.

On a recent drive through Bucharest, Daniel took us to a wealthy portion of the city, filled with large mansions belonging to Romania's nouveau riche. I could

tell Daniel was relishing the sight, perhaps hoping that one day he and his family would be able to live among millionaires. "The first step in becoming rich is feeling like a rich man," he said. I don't think he was joking. The good life is what this modern couple seems very driven to achieve. I have since been out with them on social occasions and could tell they are nurturing new acquaintances among the Who's Who of Bucharest. Their daughter has recently been enrolled in a tennis program for the summer, at \$35 a month — not an insignificant sum here — and Daniel wants to take up golf at the Diplomatic Club (a social club where foreigners and Bucharest elite mix) to help him network professionally. They're both going on vacation to Spain for ten days in August. They invited me to come along and were surprised when I refused, saying I needed to watch my budget. I wonder if they're already beginning to forget how the other half lives in Romania.

* * *

Learning to Communicate

I'm starting to adapt, or at least put up less resistance, to Bucharest's strange ways. I suspect it is somewhat harder for an American to accept a place like this, where the theater of life is played out to its fullest drama in the open every day. Corruption, domestic violence, inequality among sexes, prostitution, and many other vices are found back home as well, but they rarely come to the surface as vividly as they do here. The rule of law, as well as a free press and the civic responsibility that our society has built over more than 200 years of democratic struggle, has a lot to do with the fact that in the United States we are much less vulnerable to abuses than most Romanians. Though ancient in territory, Romania is still a young country in the democratic sense. She is still washing her sins in public waters.

Sometimes I think we have been too sheltered from raw societies like Romania — and are often unprepared by the culture shock these countries or others much different from ours present upon visiting. Bucharest is no Kansas. It's not even New York. A few weeks ago I met an American woman, a mother of two who confessed her amazement at the "debauchery" she had witnessed in the hotel the night before. Young women dressed like "prostitutes," soliciting a mostly foreign clientele. And the TV in the lobby was turned on to some sexually explicit program. "I wanted to go to management and tell them to turn the porn off," she said with frustration. She would have been unpleasantly surprised, had she done that. Romanians, like many Europeans, are much more liberal about pornography and sex than we are in America. And strong women are

rarely appreciated, especially if they cause trouble.

I'm getting to learn the pace of this odd city. I have come to regard piercing construction noises at seven in the morning as a natural way of waking up, and no longer a nuisance; another day means another dug-up road somewhere, everywhere. Equipped with little more than hammers and shovels, construction workers gather like ants early on and chip away manually at bits of cement — it's all a patching job that sooner or later gets undone, but I suspect the constant activity gives some "boss" the satisfaction of work being performed. I am learning to address as "Sir" or "Lady" people I meet for the first time. The Romanian way of speech is formal, with men commonly saying to women "I kiss your hands," and sometimes even doing it, upon introduction. Sometimes the formal address will be coupled with a person's first name, which is why I'm sometimes referred to as "Ms. Cristina." I've become deft at handling the inflated currency, the *leu*, which runs into the hundreds of thousands of units. One dollar is worth about 34,000 lei, which gets very confusing once serious monetary exchanges take place. It is hoped that in preparation for entry into the EU, the *leu* will lose the zeros next year and become "heavy," or *greu*. Until then, I'm having fun feeling rich as I thumb through banknotes worth millions, even though sometimes all I possess is \$60.

I appreciate Romanians' talkative and personable ways. I find it refreshing to be able to make friends quickly. I think most people here are as curious about me, as a naturalized American, as I am about them, as authentic Romanians. In general, however, Romanians love to talk with one another. They genuinely like people. In the evening the streets and the parks are full of couples and friends, young or old. Same-sex friendships seem espe-



Another day, another dug-up road in Bucharest.

cially strong, and I have seen more than a few girls or young women holding hands — and not as lovers. While they are too macho to hold hands, men also form strong bonds. They seem to shake hands a lot and greet each other with salutations. Romania’s conservative and patriarchal society may have something to do with these segregated friendships. Women form special bonds of sisterhood as a way of identifying with and protecting one another in their weaker roles, while men, decision makers, socialize on their own.

But the real reason why Romanians are extroverted is more complex. They’re Latin, for one. Also, unlike Westerners whom “efficient” market economies and technology have estranged from one another, Romanians have been forced by an old-fashioned bureaucracy to have close social contact. Here, having to communicate with people in order to get anything done is a necessity. It also builds great people skills. Bill Clinton would be a great success here (Hillary, on the other hand, would not.).

One cannot escape having to talk to strangers on any given day. The cash culture is pervasive here, as payment by check doesn’t exist and credit cards are rare. Every invoice, therefore, must be dealt with in person. And because many firms are not yet computerized, performing even one transaction involves dealing with several people and long waits caused by administrative manual labor. But this applies to all areas, not just banking. As I found out on my own, buying a train ticket is an experience — I had to wait in line twice, first to be able to make a reservation, then to buy the ticket. Because I wasn’t able to get a seat on the trip back, I lined up at my destination to secure seats going back home, only to be given seats in a car that didn’t exist! It didn’t matter anyway. Romanians don’t respect seating arrangements.

Communication by cell or telephone has been another lesson in people skills; since it takes forever to get a phone installed and the country is poorly wired for phone lines, only 20 percent of Romanians have a phone. Cells are much more popular but very pricey, which means that mobile communication becomes a hurried means of arranging meetings in person. Few Romanians have voice-mail or leave messages, also because of costs, and many use a system by which they call once, to signal the recipient (and wait for the other person to call their cell back). The result is that no serious conversation takes place over the phone — ordinary Romanians prefer to communicate in person. For instance, the administrator of my building — a woman who not only watches *her* budget like a hawk but also by nature is the curious type — has rung my doorbell several times late in the evening. First it happened because she wanted to meet me, but then



other building-related matters popped up. She simply refuses to make any phone calls. Her unexpected visits were a cause of great distress to yours truly, as this writer’s apartment isn’t always fit for unannounced drop-ins. Needless to say, I could not invoke the right to “personal space” I would in America. And the same goes for other unexpected nocturnal visits I have received from representatives of the electricity, phone and cable company, some at 10 in the evening — to read the meter or make routine visits to obtain their monthly payments. I no longer panic when I hear the doorbell late; the apartment is now ever-tidy, ready for guests.

I also have come to expect neighborhood homeless dogs to start settling for the night down below close to 11 p.m. — that still doesn’t mean going out after dark is safe, as these vagabonds, humble during daytime, turn into veritable hyenas at night. Even the noises of seagulls, calling on each other as they return in the evening to the abandoned building across from me, are soothing now. Seagulls in a city far from a city or an ocean? Countless dogs threatening to take a bite out of a midnight rambler? *Bien sur*, it’s Bucharest after all. Anything can happen here in the former “Little Paris,” as Bucharest was known between the two world wars, and is now referred to by some as the “Wild East.”

* * *

A Country of Contrasts

Romania is a country of great paradoxes. It is at once bloody and romantic, tragic and full of hope. It’s hard even for me, as a native, to fully grasp her *raison d’être*, but I imagine it is practically impossible for those born elsewhere. I can’t figure out, for example, why a second-class theater ticket costs as little as a good cappuccino (about \$2), while a lipstick is five times as much. Con-

tact-lens solution, for those of us who are blind (apparently Romanians aren't, or are pretending they're not) is a whopping \$15! Taxis should be cheap, when meters are turned on, but in the hands of Machiavellian drivers who refuse to turn them on and instead raise their prices tenfold at the sound of a foreign accent or when they're needed the most — such as train stations or airports in the middle of the night — they become a luxury. Two months into my stay here I have discovered, and memorized, the number of a few trusty taxi dispatchers. The cars they send have meters and their drivers don't balk at having to drive relatively short distances.

"Romania is Africa with white people," a frustrated Belgian diplomatic wife who has spent many years in Kenya told me. Racism aside, she was referring to the big digs in the roads, the dust, the pollution, the corruption and the predatory Romanian women who rarely miss a chance to tempt foreign men in the hope of getting a free meal, a new perfume or even a ticket out of the country. Apologies to Africa, but the wilderness element pops up especially in discussions about Romania's economy, which a Romanian friend here called "savage capitalism" — a notch below Russia's gangster capitalism but lawless regardless. Local barons in many of the big cities rule everything from politics to media, without even as much as a slap on the wrist from the government. Many of Romania's factories have been sold for a song (mostly with no bidding) and many privatizations have not gone smoothly, mostly because of corruption and workers' Communist-era mentality. Renault, which took a majority interest in Romania's best known car, the Dacia, delayed launching a much-touted new model for three years because of such basic problems as car-parts theft by line workers.

Romania's tourism-promoting slogan of "Simply Surprising," to which I referred in my previous letter, speaks to me in an ironic sense on a daily basis. I'd add "Simply Shocking," however, or "Simply Exhausting," or even "Simply Numbing." Conditioned by decades of Communism to endure hardship, and beaten down by a constant struggle to survive the high cost of living on meager salaries, few Romanians question the relative absence of fundamental tenets of a civilized life, such as freedom of the press, respect for the rule of law and guaranteed basic human rights. Democracy is a luxury for these hungry people. At 69 Euros a month, or about \$85, Romania's minimum wage is about one-tenth that of the U.S. and one-third that of the Czech Republic, Poland or Hungary. Only Bulgaria, the other 2007 candidate for the European Union (which is ironically seen as the more viable aspirant) has a lower minimum wage, at 61 Euros, among EU members and candidates.

I'm told that conditions have improved since the fall of Communism in 1989, and yet Romanians seem to have a 24-hour outlook on life. Who has time to plan another Revolution, when there is not enough money to eat or cover apartment expenses? As Andrei, a talented painter

with a dark sense of humor, said, Romanians have "so many problems of existence, never mind even thinking of taking vacations. It would be overwhelming to realize that there is no way out for most of us." Except for migration, of course. A recent poll showed more than 85 percent of young people wish to go abroad.

Whether they are preoccupied with putting bread on the table or simply embittered — Andrei says what he got for being recognized as a "hero" of the 1989 Revolution was a free pass on Bucharest's infamously crammed bus system — many Romanians have come to accept and justify their burdens with a fatalistic saying. The oft-muttered expression, "*asta este*," or "such is life," has inflamed even outgoing U.S. Ambassador to Romania Michael Guest, who has publicly expressed his disappointment at the "lack of moral outrage" he has seen exhibited here over this country's endemic corruption.

I, too, have come to accept that insane drivers and their cars dominate the city — sidewalk included — during the day, with homeless dogs taking over at night; that police are not inclined to serve in the public interest; that in this highly traditional society men and women play highly outdated gender games, and both end up losing; that anything is possible, especially when money is involved. In a country where almost a third of the people live in poverty and where 15 years after the fall of one of the most ruthless dictatorships in the world few can see past the transition phase, the situation is such that existing here is an exercise in survival on the most primitive level.

* * *

Summer

Summer's arrival has brought balmy Mediterranean sunsets and dressed an otherwise gray city in the vivid colors of the fruit and flowers sold in abundance at the markets. Outside beer gardens overflow with revelers enjoying their brew, one of the more affordable pleasures here. I knew school had ended, when over a few days I saw scores of parents and students, smartly dressed, emerge from school courtyards where end-of-year celebrations had taken place. Some youngsters proudly wore the flower wreaths top students are awarded, a tradition I also enjoyed while growing up. Now parks and playgrounds are filled with grandparents caring for their young kin, while romances are fueled with ice cream on practically every corner.

June municipal elections, which at first seemed to damage the image of the party in power, the PSD, or the Social Democratic Party, ended up maintaining the status quo. True, the opposition won key posts in big cities but the PSD received the largest number of mandates. The turnout was low, 38 percent nationally and 28 percent in Bucharest, a sign that Romanians have become indifferent to and removed from political jostling at the top. The one encouraging sign was the demoting of the



End of school means flower wreaths for top students.

mayor of Bacau, a ruthless local baron who bribed his way to the top and controlled most of that city's interests, including the press. At a recent conference, a Bacau journalist who works for one of the newspapers the baron didn't own, told me that the former mayor had offered her the top job at his main newspaper, an apartment in the city and a permanent burial plot — and burial plots are hard to come by in Romania.

Election posters are slowly being removed — now and then I see one of them and smile, thinking that political marketing has a ways to go. One ad, for example, proclaimed that the candidate "Takes action and doesn't shut up," (*"Face si nu tace"*). It's funnier said in Romanian. News stories are becoming more varied. Romania is obsessed with her ascension into the European Union, just as it was with her entry into NATO. It seems that every day begets another opinion on whether Romania will make it or not. The answer seems to change daily and usually depends on the latest EU report, or the poor European official who gets caught answering Romanian journalists' questions.

Newspapers' business sections religiously run stories detailing EU regulations and, more importantly, the amount of subsidy money Romania's economy will get once the country gets in. I recently witnessed first-hand this monetary fascination associated with entry into a Western organization. At a NATO conference I attended in Bucharest, a Romanian journalist boldly asked General Wesley K. Clark "How much investment will result from Romania being a NATO member state?" The General politely gave an answer he knew Romanians would appreciate, notably "billions and billions of dollars." Next day those words became the headline, which ran in bold letters in many newspapers. Once the cameras were turned off, however, the General lit into the question, saying that Romania needs to prove it is worth the aid by investing in jobs, infrastructure and a clean political system.

The reporter's query was indicative not only of Romanians' impatience to get out of the penury but also

their naiveté. As one publication wrote, the Romanian public seems to want "money for nothing," a myth perpetuated by the media and the government. It is said that if the main party and its leader, the prime minister, win later in the year in parliamentary and presidential elections, it will be because of the positive perception of financial inflow associated with the "coups" they have presided over, that of entry into NATO and consideration for entry into the EU.

Not all news has been political, however. Romanians are fascinated by wealthy people and pop stars, which is why the apparent suicides of two top businessmen in Romania, two unrelated events, have received an inordinate amount of print. Of interest has also been a case involving the use and trafficking of drugs by a group of millionaire's kids and their friends — including the son of former tennis player Ion Tiriac, now the second wealthiest person in Romania. Sex, of course, is never far behind. One of the largest-circulation newspapers, a sensationalist publication for the attention-deficit reader oddly named "Freedom," or *Libertatea*, has a daily section on the "Girl on Page 5," modeled after English tabloids. Every day it runs photos of readers who send in pictures of themselves in various stages of undress. This paper is not alone. I've seen naked bods in many other newspapers — only in Romania's mainstream press can Angelina Jolie be seen nude, while many TV presenters opt for the less-is-more mode of dress.

People in Romania are interested in the oddest things. An example was the promotion of BMW's latest car for Eastern Europe, the Seria 1, with the help of a dirigible—the "largest in the world." For three days, as this motorized balloon paraded through Bucharest's atmosphere, the press wrote endlessly about this "event." To judge by people's awed looks, one would have thought it was a UFO. Attention has now turned to Joan Baez's upcoming arrival, which has been getting lots of press. Speaking of music and aging artists, I'd like someone to tell me who "celebrated" musician Gary Moore is, whose concert had also been touted endlessly and who broke a lot of hearts recently postponing the show due to a "painful inflation in the finger." A quick look at music channel VH1's webpage tells you that the 51-year-old Mr. Moore is "one of rock's most underrated guitarists" who "remains relatively unknown in the U.S." I can think of a fitting slogan for Romania. It should be "Come as an Unknown Westerner and Leave as a Celebrity."

* * *

The Foreigners

Even though Romania has not received the kind of overseas investment other Eastern European countries have, foreigners occupy a special place here. There are lots of British people — they were among the first missionaries to set up charities here — but I have also met Germans, Italians, Canadians and several other nation-

alities. They are perceived as exotic by Romanians who were isolated by Communism for decades. People who speak other languages and look different, not to mention those of different races, attract lots of stares and attention. It has happened to Western friends of mine and it has also happened to me. I once had two little girls follow me and an English-speaking companion nonstop on a train — they wanted to engage us in conversation, just to see if either one of us spoke Romanian.

Even though Romania is still learning to act more Western, the leadership hasn't necessarily made foreign visitors feel at home. It's true that English is slowly becoming the second language (instead of French), but few people speak it well. As the capital of a European country, Bucharest should make an effort to act cosmopolitan — I think it ought to have signs for streets or major reference points in different languages and kiosks where visitors could pick up travel guides and maps. Despite politicians' talk about Romania's readiness to enter the EU, Romania acts too Balkan. Of course, there is so much to do internally that appearance will probably have to come later. But shouldn't it be an important consideration? "Bucharest is a city that's still ailing," writes Catherine Durandin in a book recently published in Romanian, *Bucharest. Memories and Walks*. "An ailing city that's still waking. Some blame the past, the Communist plague, others denounce the transition that has taken too long and the delay in getting back a standard that had been conceived or dreamed of as normalcy."

Foreigners see Romania's fatigue. If they're not inclined to probe past the cosmetic problems and figure out the depth of this country's soul, they become disenchanted. I've heard of cases of executives from abroad, or their wives, turning around and going back home the same day they arrived because of disappointment. They segregate themselves from Romanians, which only perpetuates the division. Most expats live away from residential areas. They have their own bars and restaurants, where they speak the home language. They have their own drivers and maids, who come cheaply in this country. I hear that some expat wives live under a lot of stress, a lot of it caused by the moves "predatory" Romanian women — in their pursuit of a better life — make on their husbands. I found Romanian men to be no different. I've been on the receiving end of unwanted attention from native men. A taxi driver I used often and had befriended until his advances proved to much, Florin, was convinced he is the only one who can give me happiness. This *man fatale* is also married, has two teen daughters and lives in a crammed apartment with all of them, plus his invalid mother and an aunt. I wonder why he's interested in an American like me... I

find the sexual games here appalling anyway, even when foreigners are involved, but that's a topic that needs to be discussed at length some other time. A recent Gallup poll said that only 3 percent of Romanians believe in conjugal fidelity — simply shocking indeed.

Expats like to hold court at the ritzy Hilton Hotel, the former Athénée Palace and one of Bucharest's former grandest addresses. Smartly crowning Calea Victoriei Street, for a century Bucharest's most fashionable city address, the refurbished, and sumptuous hotel has kept a lot of the old allure. Many foreigners come here for conferences, the outdoor garden or the gym. A few blocks away from many embassies, it's also a short stop from work for diplomats.

Newsweek correspondent R. G. Waldeck wrote about the hotel and the start of World War II in her semi-fictional book, *Athénée Palace*. She arrived the day Paris fell

to the Nazis. She wrote: "In this summer of 1940, Athénée Palace was the latest cosmopolitan scene in Europe after the first world war and Europe of the New Order." She described how all kinds of spies, diplomats and attachés convened at the hotel; how gossip revealed state secrets and tarnished reputations; and how foreigners enjoyed the company of loose women; "Here, in the hallways of Athénée Palace, where Europe's past was living its last breath, the Nazis [...] were indulging in one of the most refined pleasures of man — the sweet regret of destruction."



Foreigners hold court at the former Athénée Palace, now a Hilton.

The pleasures of the flesh are still a draw for foreigners to Bucharest. Whether it is the sexual tourism I mentioned in the first letter

or just curiosity about Romania's beautiful women, many foreign men descend on the capital in the hope of meeting one or more of these slim lovelies. One Englishman, in fact, runs *Expat*, a magazine with advice for foreigners on how to meet and bed Romanian women. It is filled with ads from escort services. "Some expats in Romania act in ways they never would in their home country," said my English friend Judy. "It's a good place to reinvent yourself."

There are some genuine characters as well, of course. Mark Percival, a British man I have met, has lived here for several years and considers himself "Romanian-English," rather than expat. He said he fell in love with Romania before the fall of Communism and has wanted ever since to help the country recover. Determined to steer Romania on the right track and combat corruption, he has established "Romania Think Tank," an organization that seeks to encourage democratic reform. A translator for the British Embassy, Mark speaks very good Romanian — and is

hoping to become a citizen soon, so he can obtain the right to vote. “I feel I want to change Romania just as if I’d been born here, as if I were a Romanian citizen.”

* * *

The Presidential Candidate

Another expat who wants to change this country is one of Romania’s own, Lia Roberts. The chair of the U.S. Republican Party in Nevada, this Bucharest native left Romania during Communism, over three decades ago, and is running for President in the November elections here.

She agreed to see me at her foundation’s headquarters, a beautifully refurbished mansion in a very good neighborhood. On her “listening” tour of Romania, during which she is traveling throughout the country to understand the kinds of issues people care about, Ms. Roberts recently helped baptize a set of orphan twins — I have learned that a surprising number of Romanians take christening very seriously, performing what they consider a religious duty for orphan children and she was open to discussing that topic for a while.

I had read a lot about her before my arrival and was curious to meet this daring millionaire woman who promises to bring American-style values to Romania. Petite and pretty, hazel eyes shining, she has a decidedly feminine Romanian quality. And yet, though she spoke fluent Romanian, she sounded very American. Dressed in a red power suit, Ms. Roberts spoke firmly and measured her every word. After the initial honeymoon-welcome she received when she announced her candidacy late last year, she has received lots of criticism in the Romanian

press. She was more open with me than she would have been with a Romanian reporter, but still wary.

There is a mystery air to this fiftyish woman, who left Romania overnight, married a few men and became a millionaire. She chooses not to talk about her private life, or even her former family in Romania, which only adds fuel in this gossip-hungry country. It seems that Romanians apply a double standard for a Westerner who is Romanian-born and a woman. Some have said she used to be a member of the women the *Securitate*, the Romanian secret police, deployed overseas to influence “opinion” in the James-Bond-girl way. Sour grapes have even muttered that she was a CIA operative. It didn’t help that from early on she was associated with controversial characters, some of whom had been members of the *Securitate*. Former Bill Clinton adviser Dick Morris even served as her campaign consultant for a while.

It will be interesting to see how she will do in the November elections. Though she is running as an independent, she has flirted with various political parties in hopes of making an alliance, which some say have hurt her chances of taking a clear position. I dare add that her chances are further diminished by the fact that she is a woman. My experience here over the last two months tells me that Romania is not yet ready for a strong woman in a leadership role. One of the few prominent women to run in the recent municipal elections, Anca Boagiu, lost because of her opposition’s—and, ultimately, the voters’—misogyny, according to one newspaper account. One political analyst was even quoted as saying that “in the Romanian subconscious all things bad are associated with women.”

I was surprised to hear the editor of an English-language newspaper, an otherwise bright and enlightened young woman, tell me how odd it seemed that soon after arriving in the U.S., Ms. Roberts turned to making money in real estate. “One doesn’t just jump into making money without first spending time getting accustomed to the new country,” this editor said. “As a woman especially, there are things you do in the first few months to understand the culture. You look at clothes, see how women dress...”

* * *

A City of Nibblers

Part of my reintroduction into the Romanian wilderness has been a new eating regime. Those who know me would be shocked to learn that I’m adopting Romanian eating habits, which are none too healthy in the



Romanian presidential hopeful Lia Roberts (left), also the chair of the U.S. Republican party in Nevada, recently godmothered two orphans in Bucharest.

American “body-as-temple” sense. They are appalling, really. Less than two months ago, I avoided sugar and carbs like the plague, with wine as my one indulgence and evening drink of choice. Beer was for plebes, of course. Something in the polluted Bucharest air has changed all that, however. I’ve become partial to great fresh bread and terrific Romanian pastries, chocolate desserts, all sorts of biscuits, pretzels and chocolate wafers. Mostly because they cannot afford to eat consistent food and because meat is prohibitively expensive for them, Romanians — Bucharest residents especially — are nibblers, and I’ve become one of them. Romanian wine is wonderful, and I still enjoy it from time to time, but I find that in 95-degree dry heat, a cold beer wins every time. Beer is cheap, plentiful and delicious in Romania. I’ve tried all kinds but the Romanian brew Ursus, “The King of Beer in Romania,” is my favorite — as another painter friend of mine says, “Ursus’ bitterness is the best antidote to Romanians’ own bitterness.”

I’m considering writing a best-selling diet book on this Romanian, anti-Atkins, pro-Bridget Jones diet. I’m joking, of course, but anyone who does will make millions in Hollywood. The women here are skinnier than Kate Moss (before Kate discovered food) and when they decide to have their one meal a day, in between smokes and strong Espresso shots, they opt for sweets, bread and beer. Their protein-deprived diet seems to have produced a new female human specimen with twiggy arms and waists the likes of which I haven’t seen on many American children, never mind grown women.

In all seriousness, even though young women here try hard to restrict what they eat (three women in their 20s recently told me that role models for young women in Romania are fashion models), most Romanians nibble on carbs out of economic necessity. In fairness, it’s not just women who are thin here, Romanian men are as well — the situation changes with age, when people gain weight, as lack of exercise adds to the impact of a slowing metabolism. But in general, Romanians don’t seem to commit the food excesses that we do at home — they eat to live rather than the other way around, which is why the obsession with losing weight is less pervasive.

Whether it’s medium-sized pretzels (called “poor man’s food” here) or tiny ones on a string, selling for between 10 to 30 cents, pastries (cheese or fruit-filled), sweet biscuits or wafers, Romanians stave off their hunger on the cheap, especially at lunch. But let me not dismiss this practice, for these goods are mostly baked fresh. Romanians may be poor but they’re quite discerning about their own version of fast food. White bread, which here sells out in a moment’s notice, comes straight from the oven and is often bought in multiple loaves. And it’s not just construction workers who at midday feast on generous portions of bread, cheese, tomatoes and beer. I’ve seen travelers on intercity trains slap bacon and pastrami on whole loaves, and office workers on their lunch break put together sandwiches made with cold cuts brought

from home and bread bought that day—hot, crusty white bread divinely soft on the inside. Coca-Cola seems to be the beverage of choice when consuming this type of food. It’s common to see people carrying around large plastic bottles of Coke during the day.

Alina Dragomir, a young executive with Daedalus Consulting, a leading marketing-research firm in Romania, confirmed that Romanians are mad about flour-based street food. Studies performed by her firm this year show that Romanians buy millions of pastries and pretzels every day. In fact, more than 50 per cent of urban dwellers bought pretzels during the month when the study took place, at a rate of three times a week. While more than 40 percent of Romanian city dwellers bought pastries and cakes about twice a week, three-quarters of Bucharest residents bought pastries frequently that month.

Bucharest residents, Ms. Dragomir said, are more likely to reach out for these snacks because they are more pressed for time; also, Bucharest has more students, who tend to be on even tighter budgets than the average population.

* * *

Wild About McD’s

Western-style fast food, she said, is having a big impact here, and not necessarily because Romanians’ penchant for nibbles pre-conditioned them to it. “There was no demand for fast-food in that sense before,” Ms. Dragomir said. “These companies created it.” McDonald’s was the first chain to open here a decade ago and it now has about 50 outlets, half of them in Bucharest alone.

From the beginning McDonald’s made a big publicity splash, which worked wonders in the commercially virgin territory that was Romania of a decade ago. Even now Romanians are sponges for advertised products. I’ve frequently observed shoppers (shopping here is a social



Ronald McDonald has many friends in Romania.

event, done with families or female friends) point out to products they had seen advertised, and then buy them. Places like McDonald's introduced consumers to open spaces, often with outdoor gardens, which except for brasseries didn't exist before and appealed to extroverted Romanians; also, McDonald's endeared itself to parents by having Ronald McDonald drop in and keep their children entertained. There was no tradition of that before. Both Dan and Dana, the landlords I mentioned before, are proud to be what I'd call a McDonald's family (my apartment holds quite a collection of McD memorabilia they left behind). Their daughter said she considers Romania's Ronald McDonald, a personal friend of her parents', to be one of her best friends.

The couple is very grateful for the management experience they gained at the fast-food company. For them, McDonald's provided a solid Western model of running a business (customer service is very slowly making its way in Romania), just as for consumers it provided a Western-style hangout place.

"People in Romania badly want to identify with Western values, and McDonald's is a symbol of that, of the United States," said Ms. Dragomir. "If you go there, you feel as if you were leading an occidental life. It's a means of escape, of course, seeing that the reality is anything but occidental." It's also not cheap for the average Romanian to eat there. A family of three, Ms. Dragomir said, can spend close to \$10 on an outing at McDonald's, more than two days' wages for some people.

* * *

Hyper Shopping

Romanians have also responded enthusiastically to another consumer venue they didn't have before—the supermarket—and now, the super-super market, or the hypermarket. The first supermarket came to Romania in 1996, through the German chain Metro, which now has 19 stores. Two French companies, Carrefour and Cora, have since raised the stakes higher, with the introduction of giant supermarkets that occupy from 8,000 to as much as 16,000 square meters. I must admit that even two decades of life in the United States and shopping at Price Club or Home Depot didn't prepare me for these food meccas.

Set up as malls on one level, these stores hold various clothing and home-appliance stores, a food court (where invariably a McDonald's or Pizza Hut holds stage), beauty salons and sometimes dry cleaners. The main attraction, however, is the mega market. Endless aisles hold everything from hundreds of varieties of cheese and sausages (mostly Romanian) to countless brands of beer, chips, detergents and even clothes and furniture. The produce and meat aisles are impressive. Here you can even buy traditional home-cooked food, such as stews, pilaf dishes, eggplant salads or Romanian-



Hyper-shopping at Carrefour supermarket

style schnitzels and meatballs, all of which are made fresh on the premises. I counted 60 cash registers at one hypermarket near me and I have yet to see any of them idle. In fact, hypermarkets here are full at any hour of the day — on weekends, waits at any given cash register can be one hour or more. I can't quite explain how Romanians, with a tenth of our purchasing power, can afford to buy the food, which is only slightly less expensive than food in the US. But they do. Even unofficial figures, which point to the fact that a quarter of Romania's economy is achieved in the black market, cannot explain this phenomenon. Daedalus estimates that shoppers spend an average of \$49 in hypermarkets, with about 31 percent of shoppers making hypermarkets their main shopping trip, double from 16.3 percent two years ago. Since credit cards are still rare, consumers pay in cash, sometimes using the food coupons companies give them, worth a little less than \$2 for any day worked.

One hypermarket group that proves that if you build it in Romania they will come is Carrefour, which is close to launching its fourth store since 2001. The company has said that it knew from the start it had a profitable market on its hands when the first store exceeded anticipated sales by three times. The CEO has declared that despite low buying power, the Romanian shopper is a generous purchaser by virtue of being "Latin." Also, with the second largest population in Eastern Europe after Poland, Romania is considered a large market with good potential. The second hypermarket chain belongs to Cora, which entered Bucharest last year and as a second arrival is having a tougher time becoming established. The France-based chain recently fired most of the top management it had brought over from Hungary, where it now dominates the supermarket space.

* * *

The Pastry Shop

I wanted to understand what goes into Romania's favorite nibbling activity, and spent the better part of three

days observing the workings of a pastry shop in a central market area of Bucharest. I had come several times before and noticed the long lines at lunchtime. I was also drawn by the sign advertising that the shop makes pastries in its own “laboratory” in the back. Since the Revolution, lots of pastry stores have opened, and competition for the consumer’s meager food money is fierce. Being able to bake goods on the premise is an added advantage. The owner, an amiable Iranian who opened the shop about five years ago to help support his studies in Bucharest, introduced me to the pastry chef, Mr. Mihai, and said to come anytime.

I bought a white hospital robe for the “lab” and soon presented myself at the shop on a Tuesday morning at 7 am. The four workers, Mr. Mihai and his three women assistants, Coca, Gaby and Aurelia, had been there since 6:30 to set up. A lot of the dough had been prepared the afternoon before and left in the fridge. As I arrived, Mr. Mihai (whom the three women addressed as such the entire time I was there) was busy lining up the first batch of cheese-filled little horns or *cornulete cu branza*. The cheese used is “*telemea*,” a Romanian version of feta made from cow or sheep’s milk. I soon met the “supplier,” an elderly woman who makes a very long bus trip from the country to sell her cheese to Bucharest shops. It’s all illegal, of course, as she is not certified by the state. Her cheese, however, is delicious and cheaper by about a third than that of official sources.



Coca and Aurelia roll dough for fresh pastries.

The cheesemaker, Mrs. Veronica, tired from her trip, eats a sandwich of bread, cheese and tomatoes, while Mr. Mihai, as he deftly extends the cheese-filled dough and shaves Swiss cheese over the top, explains to me that economic necessity forces the shop to look for the cheapest ingredients and still keep the taste. For example, the recipe for these little horns used to call for the cheese to be mixed with bread or semolina to give them consistency. Now, flour or eggs are used. Lemons and raisins, which were used for pastries with salt-free cheese, are no longer used. “People now look for whatever they can get, and they want to get as much as possible for as little as possible,” said Mr. Mihai.

The shop produces about 16 different kinds of pastries, all variations on two different kinds of dough, a French-style phyllo dough and a sturdier, Greek type. By 7:20 a line forms and Gabriela, or Gaby, the plump factotum woman who is the newest shop employee, runs between taking orders, making coffee, braiding dough, and taking pastries out of the oven. Customers insist on hot

and fresh pastries. Because the week I worked was considered a fasting or *post* week (one of many in religious Romania) in preparation for a holy day, the shop offered pastries made with no animal-derived products, and no salt or butter. Gaby is in her 30s and not married yet, an oddity in Romania. She said men here are “not serious.” She wants me to start a dating agency in Romania, so I can make good matches with “serious” American men. She always keeps a smile for customers: “May I get you a little bag for the pastry?” she kept asking, “little bag” being the kind of diminutive often used in the Romanian language as a sign of friendliness.

All four of them worked extremely hard during the time I was there, whether it was beating eggs, melting chocolate, folding dough, mixing flour or cleaning the floor. They also afforded me interesting insight into their lives. Poverty and struggling to get through life was on their minds. Coca, who has five children, hasn’t had running water since January because it got cut off; also, her building’s administrator ran off with thousands of dollars in utility funds. Aurelia, who is in her 50s, complained about making do on a small salary: “Does anyone think how we live on 3 million (less than \$100) a month?” Because the produce market was nearby, the women sometimes took turns to check on the latest prices and consistency of bananas, cherries or sour cherries, which had just come into season. Romanians use sour cherries to make cakes, jams and a delicious liquor that would do a great deal for world peace.

Mr. Mihai, who as the “chief” kept a respectful distance from the woman talk, has worked for 35 years in the business. He’s in his early 50s and has served as head of laboratory for some prestigious shops and hotels. By the third day I managed to learn that he has two daughters, one of whom has caused the family a lot of trouble. He is happy his younger daughter is interested in learning how to use the computer — computers are referred to as “*calculators*” — and plans to borrow money this summer to get her one. His only indulgence is a quiet smoke out back every so often, but otherwise pastries are his passion.

Mr. Mihai takes his work very seriously. In order to function properly, he goes to bed by 8 pm every night and doesn’t touch alcohol during the week. He takes pride in making his baked products look good. One day, he makes a special effort to finish one of his specialties called “Polish pretzels” for a group of boys who through-

out the year have been loyal to this pastry, which hot out of the oven is dipped first in syrup and then in shavings of coconut. "I'm losing them after today," he says sorrowfully. Indeed, business slowed down considerably by my last day at the shop. Many parents send their children to stay with grandparents in the country. Also, Romanians like to travel and they use their vacations mostly during the summer to go away to the Black Sea, and lately to Spain, Turkey and even Egypt, which offer even better prices than the domestic market.

In case the reader is wondering, I sampled the shop's goods, of course. Coca wouldn't have it otherwise. One day Mr. Mihai made bread from scratch especially for us. Another day, I was handed the most delicious cheese pastry I have ever eaten, seconds after being taken out of the oven — the first crunchy bite of the sizzling pastry gave way to a spoonful of liquid cheese. I savored every bite and thought that Romanians certainly make the most of their poverty... A memorable experience was also the chocolate-cream éclair I tasted at the shop. It too had been made there, cream and chocolate glazed included. I felt guilty being treated like royalty by my new friends, who declined any of my efforts to pay for what I consumed. One day I had to force them to accept a gift of bananas (I had heard them talk about how much they like them). With her dark eyes, Coca gave me a hard stare and said that Romanians may be poor but they are proud.

* * *

Bucharest stories: Street Beggars

Ordinary Romanians are surprisingly generous. I have witnessed numerous acts of people giving change or food to others in need. Because there have been stories circulating about "professional" beggars, some may be giving less now than before. Also, the need is so great that it can be rarely satisfied. "If I gave money to every beggar I see on a daily basis, I'd be left without a penny," said a journalist I know, Liviu. Beggar children have long been a problem for Romania, and at first the excuse was that they were Gypsies (therefore, it was expected of them to make money that way). Bucharest still has her share of street beggars but I was even more surprised to be approached by numerous children in the Transylvanian town of Brasov. They were of all ages, from seven to their early teens, and while some seemed practiced at it, others looked uncomfortable. "I'm hungry," a beautiful little blond girl making the rounds in a café told me. Carmen Duma, a child social worker in Bucharest, said that it's no longer just Gypsies that send out their children to beg. All kinds of impoverished parents do it, and the police haven't had much luck in preventing them. "The minute the police are gone, they send them back out," she said.

A new phenomenon is for older women, previously of means, to beg on the street or sell their possessions in



This street beggar cannot afford payments for apartment maintenance or gas to cook.

order to meet high living expenses, such as apartment-maintenance costs. It surprised me so much at first that I started talking to some of them. Holding a picture of her only daughter who had been killed by her drunken husband, the first one I spoke to said she was hoping to raise enough money to both feed herself and pay her apartment debts. With the small change she had made that day she bought had beans from the market. She was hoping to make a Romanian version of refried beans, but the gas in her apartment building had been cut off. It's normal practice in residential buildings for utilities to be cut off when one or more residents don't pay their debts. She started to cry as she described the poor sewage conditions in her building and the fact that she also had no running water. I figured that the only thing I could do for her was buy her two loaves of bread — at the store I asked the seller whether they ever gave left-over bread to street beggars. She shook her head with a puzzled look and said that leftovers are sent back to the factory. An American-style soup kitchen may be in order here, I think.

I found another elderly woman while looking over the few books she was offering for sale, timidly, on a street corner. I could tell she wasn't comfortable being seen in public. Her black skirt and shirt were of good quality, her spoken language poetic and proud. This could have been my grandmother, mourning an unfulfilled life. I later regretted trying to bargain with her on two older titles by a famous Romanian philosopher. It turned out they were her deceased son's school books. He had died of pneumonia five years before. Forced to pay back utility debts, she had started to sell her possessions.

"We're a sad people," said Cristina Horia, the director of one of two women's shelters in Bucharest. "But we keep on hoping." She said she and her young colleagues, counselors and social workers get depressed working with battered women who are often forced by poverty to return to their spouses. "We try hard not to fall into the

mentality that this could be one of us.”

* * *

Potential Traps & Salvation

I think that in their current state, Romanians are especially vulnerable to doctrines that promise salvation for the hopeless. The church, which has had a strong hold on many Romanians, is already making a comeback in the post-Communist era. I had heard, back home, about a cultish U.S.- based group called Landmark Forum, that promised to fulfill personal potential through intensive and expensive “coaching.” On its website, the organization vowed to help “Uncover and examine the blind spots or context holding you back in your life,” and “Find out where your current context originated and address it for what it really is.” Heady stuff.

I never thought something as New Age would make it in Romania, but I was wrong. After meeting a Romanian woman who told me that thanks to Landmark training she had “learned to live passionately again” after losing her husband, her son and a brother — and urged me to attend an introductory meeting — I decided to see for myself.

Apparently the group, which has offices in 26 countries, has offered sessions in Romania for the last four years and is growing in popularity, according to the main “coach,” who later, after realizing that I wasn’t interested in joining, declined to give me any more details. The night I went, there must have been 200 people, many of them first-timers. The inspirational signs posted throughout were along the lines of “Everything that is good and that you desire for your life is possible” — for \$300 a course, which is big money in this country. I must confess I didn’t last the whole three hours of indoctrination, but I stayed long enough to hear participants discuss the reason they were there: many of them were women with marital problems and little self-confidence; others were just directionless, unsure of what to make of their careers, their personal lives or their future.

Maybe Landmark’s “education” or even a good dose of Western-style psychiatric therapy could help some Romanians regain their confidence. And yet I hope many will choose to do it on their own. Due to their turbulent past, Romanians have a long tradition of introspection. It is no coincidence that Eugène Ionesco, the leading modern playwright and arguably the father of the theater of the absurd, was Romanian-born (but lived in France most of his life). I recently saw one of his plays, “The Chairs,” in Bucharest. The dark farce about an old couple who invite a mute orator to deliver their life story in front of fifty, invisible and thus nonexistent, people, is funny but mostly tragic. To die alone, without proof that we existed, is a nightmare many of us wish to avoid.

The author wrote about “The Chairs,” which he wrote in 1951: “I have often chosen to write plays about nothing, rather than about secondary problems (social, political, sexual etc)...In *The Chairs* I have tried to deal more directly with the themes that obsess me; with emptiness, with frustration, with this world, at once fleeting and crushing, with despair and death. The characters I have used are not fully conscious of their spiritual rootlessness, but they feel it instinctively and emotionally.”

I was pleasantly surprised to see, the night I saw “The Chairs” — and in fact at several other plays I have attended in Bucharest — that the theater was filled with people of all ages, and that the audience gave the actors a long, standing ovation. These Romanians understood what Ionesco was writing about. Maybe because life here unfolds like an absurd play, theater is appreciated here. I’m hoping that people’s spiritual regeneration will come from this kind of deep self-questioning and not cosmetic fixes and pastry. □

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