

Romania Reflections

The first thing you notice as you fly across the former Iron Curtain is the gradual transition from square, neat farms to smaller, less colorful strips of farmland. You can sense, even from 20,000 feet, the reduced prosperity of the region. Upon arriving at Bucharest International, the divisions between East and West become clearer. The airport is new but already dated, abandoned, noseless airplanes litter the tarmac, and the surrounding area is underdeveloped.

Before the current economic crisis hit, Romania was in the midst of a major economic boom. Romania's recovery from the social, economic, and political turmoil of the 1990s was capped by its 2007 admission to the European Union. Average income is low by European standards, about ¼ of America's, but has grown from abysmal levels in the late 1990s—the average Romanian lived on less than \$4 a day in 1998. Nevertheless, many groups have been left out of the country's post-2000 growth. Growth is overwhelmingly concentrated in cities, while rural areas have continued to decline. Perhaps the greatest hit has come in the area of social services; the elderly, single mothers, and orphans suffered most from the fall of the Socialist Republic of Romania. It is not at all uncommon to hear Romanians say that things were better off under Communism—for a sizeable part of the population, they were.

The plight of Romania's orphans has garnered international attention and was the reason for my trip to the country. Romania has one of the world's highest orphan populations. In Brasov County alone, an area maybe the size of Roanoke and the New River Valley, there are more than twenty orphanages. Factor in nonresidential facilities caring for orphans, and the number rises to at least fifty. According to the Romanian government, there are more than 80,000 orphans in the country, out of a population of 21 million.

We worked with several groups of orphans through Hearts Across Romania, a Dallas-based nonprofit. Hearts doesn't run the orphanages directly but provides financial and material support to several groups in the greater Brasov area. We worked closely with a group of young men from Un Pas Spre Viitor (A Step to the Future), which is an organization that transitions boys ages 18-24 to independent living. It is a small center operating out of the fourth floor of an unused dormitory in Brasov. UPSV emphasizes personal decision-making and individuality while adhering to the rules of the center, and gives its residents a much greater deal of freedom than if they lived in a normal orphanage. The director, Florin Catanescu, grew up in orphanages himself and was moved by his experiences to start the center. Hearts Across Romania, as well as the American Embassy and American Cultural Association, have been instrumental in supporting UPSV. Last year, a group of volunteers from Hearts renovated much of the former dormitory space where the center is located. This year, we renovated the last unfinished room in the building. When we started, it was filled with bird droppings, had holes in the bare concrete walls, and had no window, just a gaping hole to the outside. We scraped what was left of the dirt-brown paint, sanded and drywalled the walls, and painted the walls and ceiling. We also lay down carpet, got furniture, and hung curtains. The room now houses three more men who were able to transfer to the center because of our work.

The other group we spent a large amount of time with was the kids at the state orphanage in Dacia, a village about an hour and a half outside of Brasov. In many ways, leaving the city was like going back in time; traffic jams due to horse-carts on the two-lane highways were commonplace, as well as the sight of people tilling their fields by hand. Dacia's roads were not paved, and few, if any, buildings in town looked like they had been built in the last fifty years. Rural Romania has few options for employment and is losing population to the cities. Yet the orphanage itself was in good condition. It had been recently

renovated by groups from Ireland, with much of the financing coming from the Irish government, the German government, and the European Union. This was common in many of the orphanages we visited: most of those that were in good condition had been financed by the German government, German corporations, and German organizations, as well as by the EU. The Dacia orphanage had maybe seventy or so children, from the very young up to middle-school age. The first day, we took the children to a picnic outside Dacia, where we cooked chicken and pork. The kids got oranges, which were a big deal for them, and we made s'mores at the end (marshmallows are impossible to get in Romania, and no one, including the adults, had ever had one, much less a s'more). We spent hours out there playing with them, talking to them, and giving them some affection. We came back to Dacia twice more and each time it was great (although I was really sick the last time). They put on a performance for us, which was wonderful. We also spent time in the nearby town of Rupea, where we worked with an orphanage for young girls. Many of Romania's orphanages are both all ages and have both genders living in them, but many of these are now being shut down or their residents are being transferred to new orphanages due to abuses. Older Romanians who went through the orphanage system, especially in the 1990s, have horrible stories of abuse of younger children by the older kids and, unfortunately, of physical and sexual assault in the orphanages. The Rupea orphanage was very nice, though. It had about 50 girls and was newly renovated by a group from Hanover, Germany. The rooms were bright and airy, with 4-5 girls generally sharing a room. Each had its own bathroom and the girls had a playground with plenty of toys. The girls ranged in age from about four years to around twelve. They were very nice, and the older ones were very excited to have a male visitor—I received several proposals of marriage, which I reluctantly turned down.

In addition, we worked with very young children at a day care facility about 30 minutes outside Brasov. We called it the Ladybugs, and I never got the real name. It was, again, freshly redone with a grant by a German group, and was nice. This facility served mainly local families and provided two meals, a playground, beds for napping, and tooth-brushing to twenty-odd toddlers from the local village and Roma (gypsy) settlement. We all loved going to see the Ladybugs—they were a lot of fun and were so energetic! Their favorite thing was to be picked up by the arms and spun around, which became nauseating pretty quickly. We received endless requests for a spin, though. We brought the Ladybugs some toys we had picked up at the Romanian version of Sam's Club, and we visited them three or four times.

Not all the orphanages we visited were nice, though, and those were often the most upsetting. In Codlea, a town maybe 15 minutes outside Brasov, we spent some time at a facility for handicapped children. These were kids with severe afflictions—encephalitis, retardation, and debilitating disease—that were in pretty terrible conditions. Most were lying on thin mattresses with thin blankets and were filthy. Although some were as old as twenty they looked like tiny children, because their disabilities had retarded their growth and they had received little or no medical care. Brasov had a wonderful facility for treating similarly-afflicted orphans, but they were unable to treat Codlea's due to the complications of moving them. Codlea is awaiting a renovation of its facility today.

In addition, we spent time at an orphanage for the blind, a few other orphanages in the Brasov area, and spent time at Asociatia Catharsis, a wonderful organization run by Ms. Azota Popeascu. Azota is an amazing woman and is the person to whom all of the eyeglasses went. She was responsible for opening the orphanage for the blind and her organization places dozens of orphans with Romanian families each year. Asociatia Catharsis also was responsible for getting Hearts in touch with the Un Pas Spre Viitor group, as well, and has provided strong support for them over the years.

Romania was an amazing place. Brasov was absolutely gorgeous, with snowcapped

mountains and a beautiful old center. The new city, despite its depressing Communist architecture, was modern as well, and many interior spaces were not different from what you'd see here. Yet at the same time the countryside was so backward that it seemed a different place. We visited a Roma village where the people were literally living in mud huts, often open to the elements (but also almost always with a satellite dish attached to their thatched roof). It was a bizarre place, where people in BMWs rub shoulders with true peasants. The orphanages, like the country, ran the spectrum from supportive, strong places to heartbreakingly spartan. There's still a lot of work to be done, and I hope to return in the future.

I want to thank the Board of Deacons, Session, Mission Committee, and everyone at RCPC who donated to my trip for making it possible. The support I received from the church was amazing. The donations went to great use—the Dacia and Rupea children loved the candy and toys, while the medical supplies will be put to good use in the orphanage for disabled children. The Rupea and Codlea girls were given the hygienic products and cosmetics, which was a big deal to them as many of them are teenagers and have few, if any, beauty products. Finally, the clothing was distributed to many different groups of orphans, which is important because many, even the older ones, only have one or two changes of clothes. Without the support of RCPC, this trip would not have been a success. I want to thank you all for that.

Thank you,
Andy Garden