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The Grass is Always Greener on the Other Side of the Fence

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England

Initially I came here in 1990; the purpose was to work in an orphanage, and I quote „orphanage“ for children with disabilities – „handicapați“. So I’ve worked for one month with a group of about 30 children aged about seven to eight, maybe nine in an „orphanage“ in a place called Plătărești, which is about 40 minutes drive outside of București. It was an institution for children with disabilities, physical and handicapped, and mental disabilities, who, very fast we learned to know as the „irecuperabili“ as they were known in Romania. Far from being „irecuperabili“, we actually managed to recuperate a vast number of them and that was only in one month work. So we worked with children who were seven to nine, who have never ever left the „sanctuary“ of their cots, who were still being bottle fed, who were the size of maybe four – five year old with extended stomachs which is typical for malnutrition. So they were like in the films you see from Africa nowadays. Children with big standing stomachs, stand for malnutrition and I think we lost five children in the first month that we worked there.

Nappies didn’t exist, they were pieces of rag; all the children had diarrhea so they were changed only once a day before we arrived, then we tried to change them because they messed their nappies; they were very regular because the

diarrhea always occurred after the milk round, so 7 1/2 years old ones they were fed with one bottle of milk with a bit of crushed maize in it. And because the cots were so close together, the stronger children who were able to drink that milk faster just got into the cot and pulled the bottle away and drank that bottle as well. It was Darwin’s theory of evolution: the stronger got stronger and the weaker died off.

There were about almost 400 children in this institution; the children we were with and we worked with for one month, had never actually left their cots in their entire life. 7 years living in a cot; and we broke all the rules. We started giving them baby-food, to try to get them on to solids, we took them outside into the sun light for the first time in their lives. They were hysterical the first time we got them out the cot so we did it gradually, we got them out the cots on to the floor and on a floor where there was no protection, they had nothing, so they were forced to interact. And it was an extraordinary experience when we managed to get the first one walking: Ionuț. The other ones, we just took them out into the sunlight and I can remember the 1,2,3,4 caretakers, us, foreigners, with maybe, I don’t know, probably about 30 children. So they were so frightened about being outside that I must have had at least 10 children laying on top of me, holding on to

every inch of my clothing and everything else because they were so, so frightened. And so it took them a few hours to realise that there was a whole new world. And you could see them looking around and seeing trees, houses, and, not houses, there weren't houses, trees, bushes, grass, each other in another context, environment, to touch a leaf; it was an experience that they never ever had! It was just so extraordinary! It was incredible! And the really, really important thing that came out of it was: the foreigners we came along with, brought toys and all sorts of things and we wondered why are the children not playing with the toys. I mean this toy in the UK would have cost seventy pounds or whatever. And it took a long time... I don't think I actually discovered this on my first trip but it took me a long time to understand that the reason they were not playing with toys was that they didn't how to play with toys and it hit me so powerfully. When we were children, of course, we learned to play with toys, our parents taught us to play with toys, mom got a doll and she's going ah, what a wonderful baby, that's my baby and the daughter copies and of course these kids they never had anything. They haven't had that sort of interaction so they had no idea what a car, a toy car, or a doll, or a fluffy toy was. It was an innate object which they couldn't relate to.

And there was an extraordinarily wonderful experience and very frustrating looking to the authorities. Can you imagine walking in as a foreigner, you don't even know the culture, you don't even know the country, you know nothing and you're just presented with a word to a room, of thirty children who's cots are side to side, with malnutrition, children who are dying, who lack any stimulation, and you suddenly arrive and you go „Hi, my name is Ian“ and what the f. do I do? It was just an immensely experience; you roll your sleeves up and just do what comes naturally which was to change shitty nappies, and feed starving children and to try and ... so it was after some time that we managed actually to develop something, but at the beginning we were totally out of

context. I mean this is like being dropped into another planet. I mean it is just unbelievable. Totally unbelievable.

What we found out very quickly was that this children were not actually real orphans, but they've been abandoned by their families for whatever reasons and I know they were many, many reasons. Can't say that I understand what they did, but I can understand that there were lots of reasons why people may have been inclined or tempted to abandon their children. Can't condemn it, but understand. Try and understand. So, that's were the children werewhat I was going to say, I lost my words.

We were in Plătărești who was in a gypsy village, a Rroma village.

So the carers are people who work in this village and they're paid nothing to do nothing; that was the bottom line. And when we came in I've seen children physically picked up by an arm or a leg and transferred to another place. And I never saw a caretaker cuddle a child or relate to in any way. But of course we were. These were gypsy women from a gypsy village, you can imagine.

No, no training. Nothing. Absolutely nothing.

But these were kids! I mean, Jesus! they won't psychiatric cases! What happen was that the system that was running in Romania caused and made children handicapped. When you are abandoned at birth by a parent and you spend the first three years of your life in a cot with no stimulation, with nothing, and you've been bottle fed because it's the most convenient and economic way of feeding a child and you're not talked to, you're not stimulated, they all became „irecuperabili“. And the system created what it is. I wouldn't say it's a national disgrace or a national disaster, because are too politic; but that's what it was. It was awful, awful!

And I think what is difficult for Romanian people is to understand why other cultures has got this reaction and thinking Romanians, Jesus! is a nation of beggars, a nation of people who abandon their children and whatever. Because the pictures that came out in the early nineties

were horrific. They were! Where do you see them? I'll show them to you. They are awful, awful images; but that's the reality, and because the Romanian government, the Romanian authorities didn't say yeah, we've got a real problem, what can we do to resolve this, they just kept baring it and say there is no problem and they were lots of international adoptions and there was „șpaga“, it was an awful, awful time in the nineties.

The Romanian people were so concerned with surviving from day to day and to find the meat and the food to live another day, to find the warmth... Do you think the Romanian people were even remotely interested in something they were not even told about? They were not even told about all this children.

What you had was - these children were hidden away. These children in these institutions were not in the... You didn't have Bucharest orphanage as you have now; that was something else, they were scatted all around the country in peasant communities, small villages and they were tacked away, nicely, quietly hidden. Now, I mean, said that, the Romanian population they were not told or were not aware of these institutions existed. Thus to give them the highest possible score of innocence; the reality is between innocence and naivety. And I suspect it was something in between, about 50 - with the law which banned abortions and contraception which came in the same time.

Now, that's another statistic. That is a human life story and unfortunately we tend to be stuck with statistics and however the Romanians going towards, but every single statistic is a life story. And they mean so much for those who were involved. And is just totally ignored. I think what's happened here is that people are so preoccupied with trying to keep their own lives together, keep the resources together, just to get on through this week, next week and till the next paycheck. But the bigger picture is totally lost and I don't know whether that's denial, I don't know whether the Romanian people are saying „it never existed“. If

you read through the eighties there's a lot of that - „it never existed“. Lots of things that say „no, never existed“, under Ceaușescu it was a wonderful time. And there is that balance too. So it's got to be balanced and I can understand older person who says to me „it was better under Ceaușescu“, because for that particular person, yes, it was. Because you're talking a person who was pensioner, who wasn't an activist; and then Ceaușescu just go on and they did what they were told and they've gone through the system forty years plus and they've just done what they were told and whatever; and ok, they don't necessary agree with the party line but they've gone to work when they got their money; they pretended to work, they pretend to be paid, whatever, whatever, whatever, and then the end of it: what they've got? They've been abandoned by everybody, by the state, by the community, by anybody they know. They're just so deeply abandoned. That's not reflected in the politics of the country. Maybe now it might start being, after the last election whether they carry through the general elections and - don't quote me on this - I don't know. Who to vote? Well, I know lots of people who didn't.

I drove from England to București with a van. Initially when we arrived we didn't know where we were going or where we were gonna stay and we drove over in a van for medical aid so we found our way into București and ended up miraculously outside the Intercontinental. So we booked in - that's another story.

There were lots of other things like cheating; so I was a foreigner, particularly in the first year or two, I can remember arriving at the border and changing 500 pounds into lei. So I had three - four „pungas“, pungi de lei, because the highest denomination bank note was 100 lei and it was tatty, it was awful, it was old and it was smelly. The currency smelled, it was awful. And I drive into Romania and we stopped at the petrol station and said: „We want petrol“. „No, no, no you got to have a voucher“. „We have a punga with lots of lei here“. „No, no you have to have a voucher. Do you have a voucher?“

And we very quickly learned you can only spend foreign currency, we could not spend lei. And yet they don't tell you that at the border, of course. So we had 500 pounds in the lei which couldn't spend. I mean it was just impossible to spend.

That was quite interesting because they were visitors to this country, foreign visitors, particularly British, American, Irish who were looking for babies to adopt and there was us who tried desperately to look after the babies that we had. So, whenever we were in each others' company we were pretending to be Romanians and to speak Romanian so if any foreigner came up we just say, „hi, my name is whatever“ and we go Ce? „Nu știu“. And we just pretend to be Romanian.

In April '91 I came back with 100 lorries and 300 people and a quarter of million pounds. Went back to the Romanian orphans with the needed trip and all that raise... April 91. In 1992 I came here to live – for two years. After two years my project collapsed, I was left with nothing except I was living in very large three class 84 rooms department in the middle of the ghetto, surrounded by Rroma. Gypsies.

What might have been different was my particular project. We were giving two apartment blocks, Class three, in Zăbrăuțiului, by the Ministry of the Interior to try and develop a project for children. So we moved into this block, in one of the blocks, P1, in 1992. But then still lots of families were living there and we were coming to this block; they never made any attempt to move this people out. It took us a year working with local mayor and construction people and whatever trying to move this people into new apartment blocks; this were people living in class C accommodation and they moved into brand new accommodation and that was an achievement and



not one leu passed in „șpaga“. Nothing passed in șpaga“. It took us a year to do, but we did it. And the way we did it was: we brought somebody with a video camera and video cameras were quite rare in '93-'94 and we said: this is a guy from the BBC and is filming all, interviews, or whatever and the mayor was so impressed with the BBC filming all that; he signed his papers and all

this papers, and moved all this people ...if only he knew... but it worked.

And then I lived in Zăbrăuțiului with lots of international volunteers we refurbishing the block and then the international NGO that I was with said „sorry, enough, we can't get... here, there are so many obstacles and the bureaucracy is crazy, we pull out“. And I was set back to actually a closer project and this is '94.

And I came back to do that and I was so impressed by the many people I've been working with and friends I've met there and they convinced me that it was important to carry on the project and we made it Romanian; so I was the only foreigner in it and we just registered and an association of 32 members and we plunged into another big life learning thing, as it happens. So for one year I lived in this block on my own and five stores class three, they were 84 rooms, or apartments, each apartment was, I suppose, three meters by three meters and that include kitchen, and the toilet and the shower. I lived on my own for one year; the gypsies used to break in as often as they could and steal whatever I had. But in the same way I was very much respected by them, I had no physical abuse, in fact I was invited to their weddings, funerals and baptisms and it was great. Whether they expected the traditional gypsy payments for wedding or whatever – they never got, but at least I was invited. I suppose it was a

novelty having a foreigner. In fact I was known as the mad Englishman amongst all the locals, but I knew that I have to hold on to that block.

My prior in the UK was that I was in the British police, I worked for the National Crime Scud so we were looking at and targeting serious crimes, particularly violent crimes, arm robberies and major fraud so I used to travel around a bit for out the UK so I did surveillance work and undercover work; I had a five bedroom house in Folkestone, in Kent, which is pretty well where the tunnel connects to the UK; life was gorgeous, I was married, I had four wonderful kids. I was also a deacon with the catholic church, so I was ordained, so I did a lot of youth work, I had three or four different charities I worked with in the UK and used to raise lots of money every year for charities. So basically that's what it was. All that. Oh, God, yeah, ok, a bit more complex and I used to counsel children with progressive illness, so children who were dying. Do you understand that last bit? I just sit down with children and help them die.

In the early years I had an interpreter, translator, Andreea, I don't know, is not Andreea, but it is close; She was a very efficient translator; she was very generous; she was a generous woman, there's no doubt about that; 'course we had issues on various other things, but she allowed us to stay there, in her apartment for nothing and she did all this translation and whatever for nothing.

Ioana M., the director of the orphanage, was a larger like women, in personality as well as in size and she was difficult to work with in the beginning.

In the early days my precious friendships were what they can get out of you; honestly they were awful relationships. As things developed I have loads and loads of examples but seeing the train and you travelling half way across the country and everybody in the train compartment sat there and owns their lunch and offers it around, I mean that was extraordinary; it never happened to me before and it still happens today and I actually do it. If I opened up a bag of crisp on a train, I feel I

had to offer a crisp at least to anyone it's in the compartment; it was the way I was brought up in Romania, if you like. „Poft? bun?“ and all the other bites and pieces. I had a real, real deep distrust of every Romanian, because I was a foreigner and he was a guy that I, as a foreigner had access to all the things that they didn't have and I was a target, absolute target to everyone. The big learning carve for me was living in Zăbrăuțiului with lots of gypsy that more open, if you like; „give me this, give me that“; they didn't pretend to be my friends, precisely because they were my friends. So, whether I gave them, whether I didn't, I was this complete and odd, an eccentric guy. Can you imagine living in a ghetto and suddenly an English guy arrives with lots of volunteers and refurbishing the area?

So it was totally bizarre, so I was eccentric, they were eccentric, and I suppose that's how we get along together in the early days. Then I lived outside of all this chaos and that was brilliant. I met my wife and it was just extraordinary and then developed much more interpersonal relationships in Romania, starting growing friends. I've done lots and lots of friends now, Romanian friends. But in the beginning very suspicious, now, maybe too open. Still get taking for a ride every now and then.

I was coming into the end of my career in the police, my marriage was coming to an end but it was there because of the kids; I was desperately trying to find something; I was retiring at 49 years of age, for Christ sake! I desperately was trying to find something to keep me occupied. I knew I could not sit down and play dead; I played this gray hair, retired guy; I needed to do something. And I'm sure I could have done it within the UK, I'm sure I could have been joining lots of trustees, of charities and been working and working; I just needed another challenge. I run out of esteem of my first career which I thought hard to get and won this huge struggle and I did it and I was very successful. I just wanted something else and then just before I came here my older son was killed in an accident. So hand on heart, I came running to

Romania to escape from everything in the UK and in the same time I was trying to find something which I can identify with.

That's the closest I ever came to despair. By that stage I left my wife and I was going thorough a divorce and all sort of other things so despite everything, my loneliness, loss of the older child, my older child, whatever, I'm living in the middle of the ghetto. And I have to confess there were one or two times when I thought „what the f*** do you do? Just get a life! You goanna do something“. I know lots of people who were involved with working with NGO's and charities and I know lots of British businessmen who had different interpretation; they're here for business and whatever, and the diplomats and whatever and...

Am I different? Yes, I am. And I'm different because we hear lots of expatriates saying „well, I've learned the language, I've become localised, I'm Romanian“. Fantastic! I take my hat off and I say „well done, congratulations, bravo“.

So the important thing for me was – I'm not Romanian; I have lots of friends who pretend they are Romanians and who can speak the language beautifully in their own way and adopt all these Romanian customs but they are not Romanians and I think it is so false to see a foreigner going „săru' mîna“ and kissing a women's hand. That was never in the English culture; ok, they maybe French, certainly Romanian; the English? They cannot even carry off with the finest finesse that you can actually bring up; we can never carry off; I mean it's wasted on the English; the English can never „saru mina“; the Romanians – definitely. The French- absolutely, the Spanish - wow, but the English? – come on, we were never born to do that; it's not in our culture, why pretend doing it? I'm not Romanian. I am by birth British and by birth English, born in London. My experience since living away from the UK, and you got to accept that the first 11 years of my life were spent in Kenya, in East Africa and then from 11 till 42 in England and from 42 till 53 in Romania. I can hardly describe myself as a British; I'm most definitely European and I include Romania in Eu-

rope and I cannot identify anymore with a particular country because I think that's untrue. I'm British by passport, but I'm not British by residence or nationality or nature. I've got a much broader experience now, but I'm also not Romanian; I'm married to Romanian, I'm whatever, whatever, whatever, but I'm not Romanian. I'm deeply aware that I'm not Romanian and that's what sets me apart from the expatriates who lived here who pretend to be Romanians and they're not. Does that make sense? I don't know.

I like pork, I like beef. I like tomatoes, I hate mămăliga, I cannot understand why anyone could eat it; sarmale, I can eat two maybe once, twice a year.

But I went into a market place and I saw all this big barrels- empty market back in the old days, and the smell was awful and I say „where is that smell coming from?“ „Ah, there the cabbage leafs“. „What cabbage leafs?“ „For sarmale.“ All right, ok, and that was it. My brain switched off – in fact my brain didn't switch off; it put up the big Q card whenever you're offered sarmale – refuse. So when I first came over here the only places you could really eat in a restaurant wise back in the nineties was the Bucuresti or the Lido hotel. And you had a plus because you had entertainment as well. Floor dance or whatever. And the food was reasonable. But I was eating for the first six months that I was over here hors-d'oeuvres which consisted of pork brain, the spinal cord of the pig and various other things which I was eating for six months until I discovered what they were and then I was sick for all the six months previous. And I was enjoying it. That was the worst thing. I was actually enjoying what I was eating until I found out what it was that I was eating. English are very stude, they're very...

I had no contact with friends for at least five years; I keep wanting to and I keep saying I'm not and I will do; family is very, very different in England as to the family here so here the family is very close; you have speak to your mother at least three times a day. I speak to my mother about once every two-three months and she's aged, she's

old. My father's very old. I try at least once a month. There's all superficial is „how are you dear, how you're getting on, what's the weather like“, whatever. There's all bloody superficial but then one has to accept it's another generation, it's not only English but it's a generation who were born seventy years ago for God's sake. I was looking particularly through that book on the eighty and I can understand some of the things there because I actually inflicted – that was happening in my country as well. Perhaps not so hard or in another context but I actually identify. Here, my understanding is 99.9 % of Romanians – just want out. Just want to get out into Europe, into the world and live a wonderful life.

The fallacy is, of course, there is not a wonderful life; it is bloody hard, there are mortgages to be paid, there's the cost of living which are much, much greater than here, a lot of problems. The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence. Inversely, for me it has been paradise. I have actually come to one of the most beautiful country on earth and I lived in Kenya and that is THE most beautiful country on earth, but I've actually lived in the second most beautiful country on earth and in relation to my pension, my pension from the police, my income, I would live far more comfortably than I ever dreamed of in the UK; I'm not a rich man in the UK. Not anymore, that's another story to my five bedroom house and whatever. That all went.

I understand the Romanians. They've got the political system so they've got the bureaucracy, so they've got the apartment blocks which they can't escape from, they've got ideals which are just so bloody difficult to move from one village to another or from one city.... They've got all these obstacles and obstacles. I can understand all of that. But you have one of the most beautiful countries on earth in which to live. That means nothing because is not materialistic, you don't get paid enough to get you out and to see it and whatever and all that.

What can I say? I'm advantaged; I know I'm advantaged. I'm not disabled. I'm enabled. But

I'm only enabled because Romania it's a country and it's people have seduced me: I want to be here. I want to spend the rest of my life here and I'm comfortable here and so I'm not a perfect Romanian speaker but wherever I go I can make myself understood.

I live in a city I never ever felt threatened. Never ever felt threatened. And I can't say that about London, Paris or other cities. I can't say that. It's just an extraordinary thing that I can. I think we have a special privilege because we are foreigners and so the local gangsters don't actually pick on us with physical violence because we're foreigners and they know that if they do that they gonna be locked up for lots of years. So I suppose, I don't know.

The irony of the whole thing is I'm married to a Romanian who lives in Brussels, who doesn't want to come back. And I want to stay and it's a tension. Not a big tension, but there is a tension. And I can't blame her for one moment for wanting to get out. I really can't. How I see it – the normal Romanians – when you look around you go „wow this are normal Romanians they got cars on the street, they now have mobile telephones, this is a country in poverty – ok, this is Bucuresti, so I understand that but I have to make this differentials. Young kid, dressed very well, is not homeless, he lives in a family and he's got begging to go on tonight and he's begging.

Everywhere! My most favorite place – I've got so many favorite places in Romania – is Săpînța – it is gorgeous. The road between Braşov and Piteşti so you've got Bran, that road... We were there some time ago when we went to Vama Veche. I was in Vama Veche when it was Vama Veche, not what it is now. So I was there in... first I was in Vama Veche was '94 and the only place you had was Scoica on the main road. There was only one in those days – nothing on the beach except us, nudies in tents – they sometimes have tents. So I mean Baia Mare, Suceava, Buzău, Iaşi, Tulcea, Galaţi.

Interview done by Claudia Cîrlig and Mirela Florian and transcribed by Monica Pepine