

White Cross Mission Newsletter – Spring 2003

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It was a cold and windy morning when Jeff and I left Heathrow airport and a hot, sultry summer's afternoon when we arrived at Budapest. The drive across the long, flat Hungarian plain was quite an adventure in itself. We shared the taxi with a psychologist from India, who was working in Norway and going to visit family in Oradea. Although he had trained in Romania he spoke no Romanian as all of his courses were in English in order to accommodate the many overseas students who choose to train there. He was very interested in our work and pleased to learn that these children now have a future. I always wondered how the various nationalities that I've shared the taxi with over the years managed in their medical courses without speaking any Romanian - now I know!

I mentioned that the drive was an adventure - that is the usual type of adventure you have when being driven by a Romanian! The lady driver was someone I'd not met before and Jeff is always 'nervos' of any Romanian driver and so he couldn't sit back, relax and enjoy the trip.

The speed limit in Hungary is 80 k/h but you really don't expect the drivers to stick to that and we, probably, averaged 120 k/h, arriving in Oradea an hour ahead of schedule. We were only stopped by the police on one occasion, and that was to check the tyres, which didn't conform to regulations so the driver had to pay a fine. I've lost count of the number of times the drivers taking me to and fro the airport have been pulled over - at least 4 have had speeding fines, one shot through a red light and we've even been flagged down for the police to look in the boot to ensure that there were no illegal immigrants inside! It's no consolation to the Romanian drivers when I tell them that it isn't only cars with Romanian numberplates but that UK plates are also a delight for the Hungarian police! That's why we made the rule that the driver of the minibus (alas, no more) is always responsible for the vehicle - and any fine incurred whilst driving or parking!

Enough of that! The following morning we collected a hire car from Hertz in Oradea and drove up to Baia Mare in Maramures county. Our visit there had 2 purposes.

The first was to visit a day clinic on the outskirts of the city where 'Esperando' were caring for 15 children with varying disabilities. 'Esperando' (Spanish for hope) is a charitable association formed mainly by the parents of the children who benefit from this facility. They employ professionals - a physiotherapist, a psychologist, a speech therapist, an occupational therapist & 2 teachers. The husband of the physiotherapist is Director and is assisted with the administration by 2 parents.

The facility for the children is in a beautiful setting, right in the middle of an enormous orchard, which produces some of the finest apple juice in the country. The building is owned by the owners of the orchard - a 2 storey building which they have no use for. It is clean and well presented. The

ground floor is used by another charitable group who provide a bed and a meal for the street children of Baia Mare.

'Esperando' have the first floor, not ideal when most of the children have ambulatory difficulties. They have 8 separate therapy rooms, well equipped and clean and bright, as well as a dining room and WC. Unlike many of the state-run facilities like this there was no odour of urine. Although it was still 2 days into the Orthodox Easter many of the children and parents turned out to meet us.

The owners do not charge either organisation for the use of the building, occasionally they ask them to make a contribution towards the utility bills. The orchard owners also provide transport to and from home for the children and staff and so 'Esperando' only have to pay for the fuel.

Although we thought that this was an ideal location for the children - good, fresh, country air, away from a main road, Mr Filipas, the Director, hopes to be able to move into the centre of the town, as this is where they already have their administrative office. We had to agree that it would certainly raise their profile and they would be in a position to go to surrounding businesses for sponsorship.

Before we left home Jeff and I were told that they needed a new heating system and this was the reason for Jeff accompanying me on this trip. But it turned out that they don't want anything like that from us. They were not even asking us for financial help! They just want us to provide advice regarding the administration of a charity and how to go about approaching Trusts for grants.

So, please, do not send us donations to be used here. I have already given them many new ideas & have promised to put them in touch with other agencies that should be able to help them.

That doesn't mean that we don't want any donations! We are still struggling to pay the wages at our farm homes in Romania each month. Inflation is running at 30% at the moment & ,so, our money doesn't go as far as it should. We would actually benefit by joining the Euro. As it is we have to purchase Euros here before we leave and then change them for Romanian Lei at the Romanian border. At the moment there are 35,000 Lei to 1 Euro. Shopping in Romania is a nightmare of zero's!! We have to convert from Lei to Euro & then from Euro to GB£. It's no wonder I always arrive home with a headache!

When we send money to Crucea Alba or Caritate Delureni's bank accounts we send GB£. Popa also finds it easier to do his sums in GB£s, as even he finds that there are too many zero's in Lei!

So, the sooner I have to deal with just 2 currencies, the better, as far as I'm concerned. The last 2 years have been a nightmare - we used to take US\$ with us as well as Euros. Why don't we take GB£s? I hear you ask! We would if the bank would give us notes without rips, bits of cellotape or writing over them! The Romanian banks will only accept notes in perfect condition!

Enough of the lesson in Economics! While we were in Baia Mare we purchased a vehicle for use in Romania. The cost of hiring a vehicle in Romania is now proving more expensive than at home, so the Euros invested in this Lada Niva 4x4 will save us quite a bit over the coming years. It is a good, strong, serviceable vehicle, which will mean that we have no excuse for not driving to those of our houses that are on mountain tops. We will leave it at a private residence in Oradea so that when the taxi collects us from Budapest airport we can be driven direct to the car & then continue our journey on to Bratca and Suncuius.

We left it with Vasile, our Representative in Romania, so that he can register & insure it then drive it to Oradea ready for our next visit.

I'm pleased to report that, even though we arrived unexpectedly at our houses, we found them all clean & neat, enticing aromas coming from the kitchens and the children either at church or in the fields.

Craciun's ears are still badly infected, & the infection has spread to his face. The surgeon in Oradea would not operate and give him grommets, as he said that it was too bad. We are hoping that we can take an ENT specialist from Cornwall to examine Craciun, Sylviu & Andre in particular, & all the children in general. Dr Platon has promised to help us by ensuring that we can use the surgical facilities in the children's hospital in Oradea.

In fact, Dr Monica Platon & her son, Radu, came to visit Casa Sf Nicolae & Casa David. I well remember her examining Sylviu, who was then at Remeti, in her clinic in Oradea quite a few years ago & she was amazed at the progress he has made since leaving the spital. She was particularly impressed with his speed in answering mathematical questions.

Claudia, from Casa Fericita, was in the hospital at Bratca suffering from Pneumonia. Jeff and I were appalled at the conditions she was in. She was in a tiny, cramped room with 3 old ladies. 2 seemed to be very severely ill & were almost unaware of their surroundings. The 3rd, fortunately, was obviously 'on the mend' & seemed to be looking out for Claudia, who had just vomited onto her bottom sheet. The nurse had given her a 'clean' sheet & she was expected to change the bed herself! The poor girl hardly knew where she was; she'd obviously been sedated. All she kept saying was that they'd given her injections. She did appear to be genuinely pleased to see Jeff & me, but didn't even have the strength to sit up. We were very grateful to the old lady for the caring way she spoke to Claudia & said that she would change the bed for her.

It still seems to be that children and poor people in Romania do not get the medication required before an infection really takes hold. I was pleased, therefore, when executing my daily log-on to 'The Hunger Site' on the internet today (this gives 1.1 cups of food to a person in the third world & I'd encourage any of you who have access to the internet to log on to www.thehungersite.com to add daily to this scheme) to see that the international charity, 'Medecins sans Frontieres', is organising a petition to be handed to world leaders on 18th May. This petition requests that children & poor people in the developing world, including Eastern Europe,

be given access to suitable medication in order to prevent so many dying unnecessarily from curable diseases. Of course I signed.

There's good news from Remeti. Dr Mariana has been asked to write a feasibility report on turning the disused restaurant in the village into a 'Half-way House', where children from the institutes can spend time with their parents, so that they can get used to being a family again. The scheme will employ an assistant, handyman & part-time social worker & psychologist. The building will be divided into 2 units, accommodating 6 children in each. The social worker will make all the necessary checks on the parents' backgrounds &, if they are not deemed suitable, the child will be placed in a foster home. The ethos is not to exchange one institution for another. It seems that the Romanian Government is, at long last, doing its utmost to move these institutionalised children back to their birth families. Not only will the Half-way House at Remeti help the children from Remeti but it will become a centre of excellence for the county of Bihor.

The Government now provides extra benefits for families who have their child returned to them from these institutions and hopes, in the not too distant future, that all big institutions will be closed & those children not returned to their families will either be fostered or living in accommodation like our homes. Dr Mariana confirmed that, compared to our early days in Romania, there are now few children living in institutions. Other charities continue to buy houses in the towns & cities, renovate them & then hand them over to the local authorities to staff & run. Jeff & I went to visit a couple of these projects.

While we were in Baia Mare we visited a house that had opened the previous week. This had been bought by the international charity 'Hope & Homes for Children.' There were 10 children, aged from 7 to 17, living there. They had 2 members of staff on duty that day & they also have a cook who comes in to make the meals. The children attend the local schools but when I asked where they went to live when they became adults at 18, they could not give me an answer.

Later on in the week Dr Platon took us to Baila Felix, where the Swedish Baptist Church runs a compound. There are, I think, 6 (but there may be as many as 10) houses, each with 14 children. The standard of living in these houses is way above the standard of living for ordinary Romanians. The pre-fabricated houses are furnished in Scandinavian style & there is a guard on duty at the compound gate. I suspect that Dr Mariana has this in mind when she says that we don't want to exchange one institution for another.

Dr Platon & her family sponsor a little girl there, Lavinia, who came that day to the thermal baths with us. She is a delightful child & is doing well in school. I wonder, again, what will happen to her when she is 18?

Radu Platon finishes his 6 years training as a dentist this summer & will sit his final exams in the autumn. In the meantime he will be overseeing the completion of the work at the dental surgery. There is little left to do - tiling the floors & completing the tiling of the walls. The biggest job will be the septic tank. We hope that Popa's team (lovingly known as the Maramures

Mafia) will soon return from their work in Ireland & will complete this work before the end of the summer. At the moment the biggest problem is convincing the licensing authorities that the x-ray machine does not need to be kept in a separate, lead-lined room. If there are any dentists out there who have a manual for a 'Belmont Equipment Corporation' x-ray machine, exposure 65KVP, 10MA (I don't know what all that means) I'd be so grateful if you could send it to me. The second problem is that neither Jeff nor Radu could actually work out how to load the film into the machine!!

Let's just go back to Remeti for a second - Dr Mariana, together with 2 other doctors in the area, is attempting to set up an 'emergency medical response team.' The usual problem applies! No money for equipment. So, if anyone has access to ambulance/paramedic equipment please contact me at any of the numbers on the front page. Mariana is still struggling with an inadequate stethoscope, she really would like a proper, professional stethoscope & not, as at present, one from a blood-pressure kit. Again, if you can lay your hands on one of these, please contact me.

I still find it amazing how little we really know about life in Romania under Ceausescu. We all know of his desires for a perfect master race & that is why he allowed no handicapped people to be seen. What we are all, probably, unaware of is how difficult ordinary everyday life was for the Romanians. I discovered on this trip that during his regime there was no such thing as toilet paper. The people, therefore, were forced to buy a daily newspaper, which would have been full of propaganda, for a two-fold reason. I failed to see how a whole country could go mad on Coca-Cola when it was first introduced to Romania. I now know that, under communism, there was only one type of soft drink - orange squash. The mystery of "Marlboro' Man" is now solved - there were only 2 brands of cigarette! And no wonder Macdonald's is the place to take your family for a meal out - the only restaurants were exclusively for the Communist Party Members. People were encouraged to own their own livestock - pigs for slaughtering twice a year, a lamb at Easter, chickens, geese & ducks for eggs & down, & a cow to provide milk. However, if they were discovered having slaughtered the cow for meat they faced a hefty fine, imprisonment or both.

Back to news from our houses - at Casa Sf Nicolae, it is with sadness that I have to report that Moma Florica lost her battle with cancer at the beginning of March. She will be missed by the children, her colleagues & the Directors back here in UK. Also at this house Moma Ani has had to take retirement on medical grounds at the age of 50. We also lose the services of 3 other assistants at Casa Trandafir (Ani & Adelene) & Casa Sf Petru (Lenutsa) who are presently on maternity leave, oh! & Miti at Casa Trandafir, who is still on paternity leave! I am so glad that we decided to comply with Romanian Employment Legislation & pay the full state benefits for our employees, otherwise we would have to be finding the money to cover all these every month as well! So, in total 4 new assistant housemothers have been engaged & Jeta has moved from Casa David to Casa Sf Nicolae, as she lives in Suncuius & won't have so far to walk to work. Popa has also engaged a 'tractorist', Ioan, at Casa Sf Petru for whom

we don't have to pay the first year's salary. As he was previously unemployed for more than a year the Romanian Government pays for this. What an excellent idea, couldn't we copy it here?

While Jeff & I were with Vasile, we handed over a further 700 Euros, to be used at the institute at Braila. Most of this was to pay the salary of the speech therapist for the coming months, together with enough to buy exercise books, pens & pencils etc for her work with the children there.

So, we continue to do what we can, wherever we can I'm pleased to tell you that, despite a near protest by neighbours railing against a gypsy family in their midst, Ana's parents should soon have a decent home of their own.

Thank you for continuing to support our work & for keeping us in your prayers.

Jenny.