

# Roaming Romania



**The Hekman Group**

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*But Communism has wreaked a special kind of havoc on these people.*

## **March 6, 1999**

A long journey has brought me to this place. It was much more than the eleven hours of flight time from Grand Rapids to Detroit, then Amsterdam, and finally Bucharest. It has also been decades of subtly growing faith; a career of preparation to make a contribution to developing health care systems, a cataclysmic, attention-grabbing trauma, then a welcome seed of invitation planted in fertile soil. A long journey indeed, and yet it has just begun.

First impressions can be long-lasting. I can already tell that Augustin (Dr. Batis) and I will be fast friends. A keen mind, a readiness to learn, and a hunger for mentoring on both professional and faith levels are matched only by his warmth and genuineness.

This is a needy country indeed. I sense the same qualities of danger and casualness observed in Suriname. Reckless drivers, unreliable cars and roads, and the absence of police are all too familiar. Even dogs are familiar, but here they are homeless, and not part of the security system. They have been displaced by the ruination of rural villages, then prolific in reproduction, to become a mangy part of the scenery. They are everywhere. I see them along the roads, in public areas, even along the runway at the airport like prairie dogs might be spotted in the central states.

But Communism has wreaked a special kind of havoc on these people. This was once an intellectual capital, forged by the unique combination of Roman roots, geographic centrality to ancient trade routes, and a kind human spirit. But they have been bantered about like a football for centuries, leaving little to their identity, and much to their distrust, even of themselves. Intellectuals were tolerated for their ability to support the working class, but secretly admired by those who benefited from their contributions. Factory workers earned more than physicians. Nearly a decade has passed since the revolution, but the country is still run by many of the same people with the same ideologies, despite the growing obviousness of their syncope with the world economy and even with their own collective conscience.

## **March 8**

Our whirlwind tour of Romania included wonderful stops in Sinaia to see two castles formerly held by the royal family before Ceaucescu rose to power. The beauty of workmanship was exquisite, the history so tangible. All in all, it took my breath away more than once.

Transylvania is beautiful country. It literally means "through the forest" and is a most deserved description. I was reminded of Colorado Rocky Mountain National Park, although the ruggedness and snow-capped peaks were probably only about 2,000 meters (6,600 feet). I saw Dracula's castle. The mythical tale arose from a cruel count who made a toll booth at a critical mountain pass, and dealt with his enemies (and anyone else who crossed him a little) by chopping off their fingers, hands, or

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other body parts. When he was really upset, he would impale them. His name was Vlad Tepes, otherwise known as "Vlad the Impaler." It is so unfortunate that he gave this area a bad reputation. It is as beautiful a mountain region as any I have seen, interspersed with quaint villages.

On the whole, I am struck with the impression that time is standing still in Romania. Horse-drawn carts are common sights. About 40% have cars, 80% have telephones, and 100% are literate, but the average family income is about \$3-4,000 per year, and the economic limitations, matched by the mental baggage of Communism, makes for a difficult life. But not completely. Cellular phones are ever-present in the cities – digital, no less. The clothing is a unique mixture of traditional and Western. The hotel in Pitesti is clean and modern, although it took ten minutes for my shower to warm up this morning, and the phone doesn't work. Oh yes, and water came up from the floor drain when I emptied the sink. I filter a bottle of drinking water each morning to use for the day, and we drink bottled water in restaurants. It may not be necessary, but hepatitis is a risk I don't need to take.

### **March 10**

So much is happening so fast, both to me and to this country. Monday we met with a banker who spoke of 65% interest rates for loans. He indicated the Prime Minister intends to put a limit of 40% on loans in another month, but according to the banker, that won't hurt the banks too much. It sounds incredible, but with inflation at about 40 – 50% per year, those limits will either force inflation under some control, or cause an economic disaster. This banker scribbled the terms of a loan out for us on a plain piece of paper, as though he doesn't get too many requests for loans. No wonder. These are poor people already. They don't need 65% interest rates to help them along.

I'm now staying in an apartment known as Bloc 37a Sc. C, apt. 1. Nice address. Real personal. But that's how things are here. It's all part of the lost identity. Communism squeezed it out of these people. They were displaced from their homes and forced to move to these lousy apartments. Mine has been recently renovated and is exceptionally nice. It is better than a modern Holiday Inn. I have hot water all the time, a microwave, a water filter at my kitchen sink, refrigerator, and laundry in a two-bedroom, two-bath 1,000 square feet apartment.

### **March 13**

My days have been filled with financial planning through spreadsheets, thinking through strategic options with Augustin about management structure, legal structure, timing, the scope of services, selection criteria for physicians, and details of banking, construction and training of new employees. Augustin is very capable and dedicated indeed, but the challenges of development are beyond his experience, and can be overwhelming at times. The complexity of this work is compounded by the lack of local models, either for medical groups or for business practitioners in a market-driven economy, by the difficulty of trying to be moral (not pay bribes) in a society where that is the way of life, and by not knowing who is trustworthy.

Several critical details about the clinic are coming into focus. It now appears that this clinic has a capacity for about 100,000 visits per year. Doctors will also do house calls, adding about 40,000 more visits to the total volume. The shining star of the operation, though, will be the diagnostic capabilities. We will have a state-of-the-art lab, led by a young and very capable pathologist. Even by American standards, this is a major operation. It will be about twice the size of my primary client in the states, which has been in operation for thirty years. It is amazing, but this practice will be successful, mainly by offering medical services for a fee that is less than 95% of doctors seek in bribes. And this is a country where the government provides "free" health care. And doctors aren't the only ones. Apparently every worker in

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every hospital expects something under the table, from the nurses to the lab techs who draw the blood, the cleaning staff and the rest. The way of life is simple to understand: no bribe, no service, even for healthcare. How tragic!

I have incredible focus and single-minded dedication to this project. There is no doubt that God is busy here, and that I am privileged to join him in his work. This city has 350,000 people, but only about 500 evangelical Christians. This ministry has unbelievable potential to influence this region for good. Not only will it become a shining example of medical competence, but it will also demonstrate the value of ethical dealings, serve as a model of employment in a market economy, and show how God works to transform lives. Healthcare is a universal vehicle for showing the love of God in every culture, and this clinic is at the apex of that kind of ministry for masses of people with hungry souls. God is doing a beautiful thing here.

It takes a lot of energy to understand English with a Romanian accent. They struggle with finding the right words, and I struggle to understand their meaning from the context of the discussion. It takes energy, but probably not as much as they need to speak in a language that is not native to them. Augustin learned English only in the last few years, largely from dealing with Americans through the Luke Society. He's my age, so I have a great deal of respect for his accomplishments, not just to manage a new language, but for how the Lord has used him in such a powerful way.

Everything takes longer to get done here. People aren't used to working by appointment, so interruptions are the order of the day. Little problems cause big delays, making almost every schedule unpredictable. Everything in my apartment works just fine, but I believe mine may be one of the few where that is the case. During communism, everyone was employed, even if it meant that they worked 20–25 hour per week. So now, that schedule seems like full time to them. But a market economy can't work like that. Consequently wages are low, about \$1.00 per hour for clerical work, and they now have 11% unemployment. But even that figure is lower than reality, because many people have jobs without working, or without working as hard as Americans do. They aren't lazy. They just don't get rewarded for working harder. Without incentives, the mindset remains complacent. Personal responsibility takes a back seat to just getting by.

Augustin showed me a Metro store this week. It is very much like Sam's Club, but it has only been here about a year or two. When it first appeared, it overwhelmed Romanians. They could not believe the variety of goods they had access to. Formerly, they had to go from store to store, just looking for a portion of meat or a loaf of bread. Frequently they could not get the food they wanted. Julia was six years old before she saw her first banana. Now the options are growing, but much of it is still difficult to afford.

Today, Saturday, I went on a hike in the woods with Dahlia and her family, her husband and five children, ages 4 to 10. Dahlia is a Christian dentist who is likely to work at the clinic, and we enjoyed a wonderful walk and talk. She knows someone personally who was murdered for his faith, and for smuggling Bibles. He was a dentist, and when he was strangled in the water on a vacation to the Black Sea in 1984, it was partly through his testimony that Dahlia was inspired to become a dentist. Dahlia's father was one of the early Christians in Pitesti, even before the revolution in 1989. He was a physician as well, and through his influence, three generations of his family, dozens of patients, and several professionals have come to know the Lord. He died three years ago of a heart attack, but his testimony lives on.

### **March 19**

I'm home again after an arduous day of flying. Now it's time to reflect on the whole experience, wrap up my reports, and get back to routines. But somehow it seems that nothing will be "routine" again. I'm changed forever by this experience, although I barely understand how just yet. I think that I have never felt so completely

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and consistently in the will of God as I have been in Romania. My skills were a perfect fit for the needs of the clinic, and the warm and intimate relationships that developed so quickly enabled us to accomplish more than I expected. I felt as though the hosts of heaven surrounded me, not just for personal protection, but for encouragement, concentration, understanding and energy. Carla was here with me, and she was joined by many others who were cheering me on. I found joy again. I found it in sharing of myself, fully and without reservation. I found joy in catching a vision of what God is up to, and of how I can participate in it.

The needs and opportunities are compelling. They speak to the core of my soul. They draw out the best in me and fuel my spirits, not just to continue in service to Romania, but to reach deeper, to seek to be in God's will moment by moment, and to enjoin others in meeting the challenges of sharing the gospel everywhere. I had many occasions these two weeks to say, "Wow!" Augustin and Mihaela got worried looks the first few times I said it. Finally I had to tell them that whenever I said "Wow!" it was a good thing. Look what God is doing:

- Providing high quality medical care to one of the most needy countries in the world,
- In a cost-effective manner, both for the patients and for the long term expansion of the ministry,
- In a setting that will enable the gospel to be shared both with doctors and the community at large,
- In a way that can introduce market-driven business methods, incentives, and management,
- With strong support from Christian friends in the U.S.

What else is there to say? **Wow!**