

Romantic Romania



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by Ken Hekman ~ September 1999

Romanian history conjures pictures of confident strength, of progressive industry... of romance.

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In the late 1800's... It was the epitome of romance and the golden age of this grand country.

With a name like Romania, you would expect romance. This region was once a part of the vast and powerful Roman empire, known for its opulence and indefatigable spirit, ruled by the likes of Caesar. The history conjures pictures of confident strength, of progressive industry, of hope, and of..., well, of romance.

But these days you have to look for it. Decaying buildings are the most common landmarks. The Dacia, Romania's own car, is popular not for its reliability but for the availability of parts, all of which require frequent replacement. And you don't have to look long in the faces of people on the streets to read the character of their spirit. The sidewalks, such as they are, are filled with old men and women, whose typical posture is stooped, looking down, hands behind the back, bundled up in well-worn clothes, with leather faces that tell stories all by themselves. If you can catch their eyes, you may see deep sorrow, exhaustion, hopelessness, even resignation. More dead than alive.

Then there are the young people. Their posture may be better, but they come for interviews with stern faces, not the kind of happy smiles that are sure to get you a job at McDonalds. This is serious business – trying to eek out a living, and you're not about to mistake them for someone who is hopeful. Many of the women dye their dark hair red in an effort to add some fire to their lives. Some of the men keep their shirts partially unbuttoned, just in case. But romance, real romance, is smothered by a perpetual distrust, borne of years of untrustworthy leadership.

Then one day it finally struck me. In the states, you expect people to have integrity and are disappointed when they prove themselves otherwise. But here, you expect people to be corrupt and are pleasantly surprised when they are not. The American legal concept of innocence until proven guilty doesn't apply here. Rich people are assumed to have gotten rich by graft. They offer tainted models at best. Even employment is considered something you have to earn by other means than your competence. And politicians are the worst. If you want to disgrace someone, compliment them for their political skills.

The roots of distrust run deep. Just mention "Transylvania," and images of cruel counts, ominous castles, feudal lords, and bloody battles come to mind. Yes, this is also the land of Vlad Tepes, aka "Vlad the Impaler," made popular as Dracula by an Irish writer a few hundred years after his reign of terror. The borders of several eastern European countries, including Romania, have been redrawn with regularity by ethnic clashes and political disagreements for centuries.

Then, before WW II, Romania was ruled by four generations of kings. Romanians imported their first king, King Carol (pronounced "Carl"), from Germany in the late 1800's. They wanted someone from the outside to come in and clean up. Carol was just the ticket. He brought German precision and aristocracy, and drew out the best in Romanians. The palaces built at Sinaia for Carol and his successors show the best of architecture from around the world, combined with the best of Romanian workmanship. There is beauty and romance in every corner of each magnificent room. He had special guest rooms built for poets and musicians. The pride and sensitivity are truly breathtaking! And Carol paid for the palaces out of his own pocket as a gift to the Romanian people. It was the epitome of romance and the golden age of this grand country.

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But communism drained the country of color. The palaces were closed except to the dictator and his cronies. Art, science, beauty and romance were devalued. Another palace, far larger and more opulent than the first, was built in Bucharest, but this time it was built at the expense of the people, when they could least afford it. Forty-five years of communist control left the country in ruins and the people with leather faces. No wonder they smile so little.

But smiles are returning, slowly, and perhaps in ways that would make King Carol proud. Hope is returning from outside the country and igniting the spirits of Romanians with a new fire, a new romance, and perhaps a more enduring one. The source of hope is not just an aristocratic king with a flair for beauty and generous hospitality. It is none other than the King of Kings, the Lord of Lords.

Today, you can see women carrying flowers to church on Sunday. You can watch children find simple pleasures playing with each other, and with the dogs who adopt their "blocs," their cramped apartment buildings. Improvisation is alive. Color is returning to homes and businesses. Young adults fall in love and get married. These and other signs of romance are testaments to the indomitable human spirit, and to the way God works, even through great adversity, to restore people to himself.

Adversity may, in fact, heighten the renaissance.

When you talk to evangelical Christians in Romania, you will find a sad joy. These are people who can name those who were imprisoned for their faith. They tell stories of "early" churches that met under the cover of remote forests, of Bible-smugglers, and of believers who simply disappeared and were never heard from again. You will also hear of an intense knowledge of the Bible, of fervent prayer, of generosity, and of hope. The leathery faces are now homes to fresh smiles. Fear is giving way to fortitude, and helplessness to hope.

And if you ask them why, they will tell you that the hope of Heaven outweighs the history, the shortage of basic needs, the corruption and the poverty. They will tell you that they live as though God could return today, and they wouldn't mind if he did. They will look into your eyes with a peace that seems out of context, and sing a song that restores color to their cheeks, and to yours.

So is romance on the rise in Romania? Perhaps it is, but not in the traditional understanding of the term. People are daring to love and to trust each other, and themselves, again. But this isn't shallow, romantic, puppy love. This is love that has been tested and proven under fire. This is love that knows things could be different – less secure, less romantic. When you look into their eyes, they seem forty miles deep, and you can detect a glint of joy that transcends circumstances.

For years, I remember being told to pray for Christians behind the Iron Curtain. Now I know what I could not have known then. *Faith under fire is the real thing.* They should have been praying for us who had it easy. We managed to soothe our guilt by whispering a quick prayer, something like, "God, make it all better for them." But our self-sufficiency quickly returned to snuff out any real sentiment of sympathy, much less empathy, for those who pursued God under the gravest of adverse circumstances. Our faith was, and is, perhaps more at risk than theirs.

What can we learn from Romanian Christians? Plenty. First, life-changing faith must come from outside ourselves. Hope, real hope, can only come from God, through those who are willing to be his servants. Second, enduring faith is exercised by adversity. If adversity doesn't come to us, maybe we should go to it. Third, faith is contagious. The seeds of faith that survived communism are now beginning to yield fruits unimaginable by those who dared to meet in the woods. Faith is building the institutions of health care, business and education, and thereby building hope for

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future generations. And fourth, faith has the power to transform culture. At least I'd like to think so. Maybe the jury is still out on this one, but I can already see how Christians are setting new standards for decency and interpersonal relationships that are attractive to the populace. They are treating people as they wish to be treated. It's simply the golden rule, but after decades of moral decay, even the basics seem fresh again.

I have hope for Romania, but not because of the resourcefulness of the people, of their appreciation for beauty and their sensitivity. No, I have hope for Romania because God is clearly busy here, restoring hope one heart at a time. He is romancing Romanians, and he is winning them over, using them to rebuild this part of the world into a reflection of his character.