

Dracula's Castle: September 1999

“Where do we go now?” I ask Dan who picks me up at Bucharest airport.

“Straight to Brasov.”

“Where’s that?”

“You know where Cluj is?” I do. It’s in the heart of Transylvania to the north.

I’ve been there two or three times. Once, a Romanian colleague and I drove from Cluj to Bucharest on a dark, rainy night. “Exciting” springs to mind.

“Well, it’s about halfway to Cluj. It is a huge city. Surrounded by mountains.”

I settle back for the ride. It’s the man who comes from the World Vision Romania office and meets me at the airport every time, Dan. But usually a different Dan. This one works in the World Vision program at the “Number One Orphanage” in Bucharest. Even that is a complete misnomer. “Number One” implies the best, but this is a league in which no one would choose to play if they had the choice. None of these institutions is really an “orphanage” since most of their clients are not orphans. Romania is still suffering from a form of institutional childcare that encourages birth control by abortion and childcare by surrendering children to State-run institutions where they are psychologically damaged and often physically abused. Worse, the usually but not invariably, well-intentioned interests of the international child adoption business find an institutional structure that is a fertile field for business growth. Too many clerks can grow wealthy, providing free-lance assistance to people in the adoption business and encouraging Romanian mothers to give up their children to these institutions. From there, it is easy to make them available for childless couples in the West. At up to USD40,000 a time, it is a lucrative business. But mostly, it is a bad business.

The drive takes a little over two hours. Romanian traffic is not too thick, and it follows home-grown rules that permit the occasional fast spurt tempered by the knowledge that around any corner, one might come upon a horse-drawn cart going at a walking pace. These carts are entirely invisible at night, so we don’t drive at night if we can avoid it. Dan enjoys driving and makes the best out of the ‘80s model Opel Ascona. A Porsche with strange plates dashes past us as we climb the mountains. Dan asks me what kind of car I drive. I admit it is a BMW.

“But it’s a small one—second hand. About five years old now,” I explain defensively.

“Five years old is new in Romania.”

In the ‘60s, I saw a documentary on Bali where the narrator urged us to “see Bali before it is gone.” I assure you it is too late for Bali. Too many people took his advice. But Romania is still in the “see-it-before-it’s-gone” category. Indeed, now is probably the ideal time for tourists because there are, at last, good quality hotels with reliable hot water and electricity. Yet, the place is not overwhelmed with visitors as Western Europe is any summer these days. Go to London in August and the accents in the street are uniformly American, Japanese and Australian. It is the same for all the big European capitals, including Vienna, my home.

Within the next few years, the old streetscapes of the towns along the road to Brasov will be transformed by modern, more ‘useful’ buildings. Right now, it seems little has changed for hundreds of years. The buildings are rickety yet elegant, showing off elaborate carved wood facades with every verandah a work of carpentry art. The wood is stained or aged darkly. As you look, you see the Coca-Cola signs, early pioneers of the coming modernity.

Brasov, pronounced “Brush-off”, began as a small town surrounded by low mountains. It has since spewed out of its valley onto the vast plain. From Bucharest, the city is entered through the peloton of sterile apartment blocks. Built in the communist architectural genre, they are a triumph of utility but lack entirely the beauty of Western Europe's Bauhaus buildings, which combine extreme functionality with an artistic presence. Nearer to the centre of the old city, the roads narrow, and buildings look like an Austrian village with elegant windows and thoughtful roof lines.



Today we arrive at the centre of town to discover the whole main street, built along the line of the old city wall, transformed into a tent city. At the centre is a huge inflated beer bottle, signalling that this is the annual Oktoberfest in Brasov. The street is crammed with young people. No salmon swimming upstream had a more challenging time than we did getting from our car to the front door of our hotel, strategically placed, for beer drinkers, opposite the centre of the beer fest.

Inside is a hotel foyer, also built in Communist proportions. It comprises the entire ground floor and is two storeys high. Far from creating a sense of community, it shrinks the individual to insignificance. It was intentional, of course.

They assigned me to room 218, which is large by European standards, but at least I feel human-sized again. The room is walled in highly polished wood and has at least a dozen mirrors. Everywhere I look, I see more Philips putting their

bags down. I leave the mirrored doors of the wardrobe open to obscure a few of these intruders.

The restaurant downstairs is also of magnificent proportions, including what appears to be a viewing deck running around at first-floor level. The restaurant is full, and as I pass the tables, everybody says “Hello” to me. Romanians are friendly people, but I have never experienced such warmth in a public restaurant. There are tables under a low ceiling on one side, and I find Christopher Shore, our Romania country director, just finishing his evening meal. He welcomed me and pointed out that everyone in the restaurant is World Vision Romania staff or family of staff—more than two hundred. I have never seen them all in one place, and it is impressive.

The meal begins with fried Camembert. A soup follows, followed by steak and vegetables and a dessert. This is not the main meal of the day, mind you. That’s at midday. This is just a generous snack, Romanian-style. The meat is remarkably good—tender and cooked medium rare. An ice bucket beside each table is filled with bottles of local mineral water.

“Do you want to see the beer festival?” Christopher asks rhetorically.

“Na,” I reply. “Thought I’d go straight to bed.”

“Yeah, right.”

Addie and Manuela Gazibar join us for a stroll through the crowds. We sample a sweet and light beer named “St George” and later the local brew “Cuic,” pronounced “chook.” This is also the slang word for chicken in Australia, but I leave alone the idea of drinking a ‘chook.’

The Gazibars are the kind of people that make one hopeful for Romania. They remember the Ceausescu years but are young enough to adapt as society is transformed around them. Many older people find the rules of the old culture deeply ingrained. Those rules are brittle, but the change feels more like destruction than liberation.

Not for Manuela and Addie. They, and thousands like them, represent the next wave of professionals and leaders. I pray that the political change can keep pace with their needs and the potential such young people can deliver. Manuela is the human resources director for World Vision Romania, and with over 120 staff members and more being added all the time, she has a big job. Addie works with my regional team on our technology issues. In other words, he's our computer guy. And he's good. He could be working for Microsoft but would rather change the world.

Now I discover that Addie not only knows everything about bits and bytes, but he's also an accomplished tour guide. We walk away from the press of the intoxicated and discover a lovely medieval town heavily influenced by German touches. The main square is a delight and has been recently paved. A gorgeous honey-coloured brick Orthodox church sits opposite the old town hall. The church forms part of a circle of beautiful buildings. It is like many town squares in Europe – Brussels, Bruges, Bratislava. But Brasov is unique at the same time. The church is, for me, the centrepiece. Incongruously, it has shops on either side of its front door. Later, I mention this juxtaposition to Father Mihoc, a Romanian Orthodox priest who assures me that the shops are not part of the church.

"The church is through the door," he observes with unquestionable logic. "I think maybe the State put the shops there in times past."

Just beyond the square is the "Black Church," named after a fire that damaged it. I hoped for a more metaphysical reason, including the church's role during the Reformation, when it gave the town the liberty of tolerance for both Orthodox and Lutheran believers. While the town square was well-lit for the night stroller, the church is in complete darkness, and the new paving does not extend to the church surroundings, which still feature the ancient worn cobblestones.

"They say that the organ in this church is one of the best in the world," explains Addie, the tour guide.

"Really?" I am surprised only because one has become accustomed to expect less of Romania. "How wonderful. When is the next recital?"

"I think on Sunday." Pity. I leave tomorrow.

"Is it a German organ?" I ask.

"Of course," says Addie with a big smile.

Addie also explains the German architectural influences.

"Brasov was also called Hermannstadt after an industrialist who founded it."

As we walk back towards the hotel, a group of about a dozen attractive young women come towards us with big smiles and welcoming looks. I wonder what is going on.

"Our Cluj team," announces Chris as we briefly meet and joke.

"Very impressive," I say with multi-layered intention, adding, "Any jobs available there?" in case Chris misses the point.

I retire to my woody reflections and sleep.

We breakfast again in the vast restaurant, and I am joined by Father Mihoc, Romanian Orthodox priest, leader of 'The Lord's Army,' a movement within the church, father of 13 and grandfather of 2 (as of last week, about which he proudly apprises). Four of his teenage children are with him. Father Mihoc has had a busy summer. He is a world-renowned New Testament scholar, responsible for a church in Sibiu, a World Vision Romania board member, and all the diversions above. The summer has seen him at theological conferences in South Africa, Rome, and a

Greek island. In the last place, the debate was about whether the Apostle Paul was shipwrecked on Malta as traditionally taught.

“We can be certain that it was not Malta,” reveals Father Mihoc. “We talked to experts on navigation, weather and the sea. And the Bible doesn’t say Malta. The Greek word is Melita, and nobody knows which island that was.” Resolving this issue might not change the essentials of the Gospel, but it might impact tourism in certain places.

After breakfast, we hear quite a bit more from Father Mihoc as he leads the fourth in a series of talks. Today, he talks about the meaning of the cross. From an Orthodox perspective there is much to celebrate in the cross. In some other traditions, the focus is more on the suffering of Jesus. So, the idea that we “carry our cross” need not be miserable. I hear this through the mediation of Violeta Ronan, who whispers English in my left ear while Father Mihoc’s voice booms in the auditorium.

The venue is a large theatre that seats around 200. It has a small dress circle and a tiny stage from which the speakers deliver their orations. We find it by descending stairs behind a door in the hotel foyer labelled “Dancing Bar.” There is an implied play on words with ‘Dancing Bear,’ but I suspect this is unintended. Certainly, there is neither dancing nor bears below, but one does pass through a bar area on the way to the theatre.

The plan is for the team to break into small groups to discuss Father Mihoc’s talk and report back. Since I’ll be utterly useless in this Romanian-dominated arena, Chris takes pity on me and tells me he is driving me out to see “Dracula’s Castle.” Violeta asks if I have an appointment to see Dracula. She says the name with the Romanian accent perfectly formed to imbue every syllable with legendary significance. One almost hears “laughter-off” as she speaks.

“I need an appointment? No. I don’t have one.”

“Pity. You will not see him then.” She smiles. The Romanians are mostly somewhat bored with the Western interest in Count Dracula. He was an invention of Bram Stoker, not of Romania. Had Romanians invented him, no mean poets themselves, he might have been even more interesting.



Instead, Dracula is based on Vlad the Impaler, who became notorious for excessively displaying vanquished enemies’ heads. Addie assured me that there is a field near Bucharest, although he was not sure exactly where it is, in which Vlad displayed over 1,000 heads of Turks his army had slaughtered. Each head perched on a spike in the ground.

Vlad’s dad, Mircea the Old, started this nonsense with a little more restraint, and his castle is called Bran. That’s where we were going. Vlad’s own castle has long since fallen into ruin, so Dracula pilgrims have to make the best of it and go see the one in which Vlad was born.

Bran has remained in good condition because it was used as a house by a series of wealthy landowners, culminating in the royal family of the early part of the 20th century. The castle is perched high on a white rocky outcrop at the side of a narrow pass in the mountain and strategically placed as a toll booth from which the local chieftain extracted 3% from passing traders for the privilege of passing without an arrow in their backs.

Nothing whatsoever is made of the Dracula connection in the castle itself. It remains a well-preserved example of castle life. The architecture is complicated and cute, resembling a collection of hundreds of nooks and crannies. Small stairs that lead nowhere, and others that

wind up dark rocky tunnels to emerge in, for example, the large music room. Ceilings are universally wood-panelled and painted in naive floral art. The doors are heavily carved, and many are shaped to fit into stone doorways. The courtyard is a delight. It has three stone paved levels and is decorated with attractive flower boxes, which still give their best in early autumn. Passageways and windows look down into the yard, and other visitors pop their heads over as we walk around. There is a well on the top level which is blocked. Christopher explains that this is merely the top of the old well, initially over a 40-metre shaft drilled down through the rock. Earlier this century, when town water was available, the well shaft was changed into an elevator shaft so the residents, by then the Romanian Royal family, could make the journey up from the valley more easily. We had walked up the steep path, of course.



Inside is an interesting collection of furniture, baroque sitting beside medieval. The famous Romanian composer, Ionescu, taught the young Prince Michael to play the piano in the music room and “Ionescu’s pedal organ” remains on display beside a lovely reading nook beside the fireplace. Throughout are wood-fired ceramic plated heaters, which are now out of use (but a similar one kept my room at tropical temperatures once during a late winter stay in nearby Sibiu).

The absence of Dracula references in the castle itself is admirably compensated for by the small souvenir market below. You can buy a locally knitted pullover with a picture of the castle and the word “DRACULA” emblazoned across the front for about USD 5. Not to mention a few varieties of Dracula T-shirts, ceramic plates, beer steins, etc.

Beside the castle at ground level is a model Romanian village populated by genuine Romanian village buildings transported stone by stone from surrounding towns. Chris and I wander around, reading the English descriptions and checking unusual translations against the Romanian and French also on offer. We are confused by villages being described as “transmitting the vastes,” the parallel phrase is missing from the Romanian and equally confusing in French. But the reference to “sheep folding” — the process of putting sheep into a fold (enclosure) — started us giggling, and when one sign suggested that local farmers made cheese from sheep, we fell about in paroxysms of laughter. It is devilishly hard to fold those sheep into that cheese churn.

The village is actually quite charming and interesting, and it is well worth the visit, which is included in the admission price to the castle. Especially noteworthy are the wooden shingles,

each one split by hand with a technically correct groove fitting over its neighbouring tile. It is quite a work of carpentry.

On the way back from Bran, Chris takes me by a village where gypsies populate a whole section. The architecture of the houses is distinctive. It is more straightforward and practical than in the town's main streets. But the people look pretty much the same as everyone else.

“They don’t look like gypsies to me,” I comment.

Chris thinks about this momentarily, then says, “Maybe they don’t look like one kind of gypsies. You mean they don’t have bright clothes and long dresses?”

“Exactly. That’s the only gypsy I know. I see there is more than that stereotype.”

“Exactly.”

We stop for a Coke after Chris makes one false start in trying to find the road out of town up the mountain. A few dozen teenagers hang about a large school building in the city—boys and girls in groups. Boys wrestling, joking and being loud. Girls in tighter, quieter groups, eyes aware of the world around them. Like teenagers just out of school everywhere. In a similar style, march a hundred or more younger children in ordered rows under the supervision of teachers. When we take their picture, a few boys break ranks to pose. Such scenes have played out in front of me all over the world.



From here, we drive up into alpine meadows and through early autumnal woods. It is a delightful drive that ends in a modern alpine resort town, just like any alpine ski resort in Austria. Two cable cars stretch up the mountain and out of sight beyond the crest. In winter, this is the way to the ski fields.

Finally, the road brings us back above Brasov, and we see the old town from its best vantage point: a city of red-tiled roofs hemmed on three sides by the mountains and the newer town spewing out beyond, grey and dull.

We are back in time for lunch. More three-course meals. More meat. More soup. More salads. More desserts. Please. No more!

After all this excitement I take the chance for a post-prandial nap and then join the other World Vision Romania board members for our primary business. Much is discussed and done satisfactorily. Then, it is time for me to address the staff in preparation for their Day of Prayer the next day. October 1 is observed in World Vision offices worldwide as a day of prayer. On this day, as good as any other, World Vision begins its financial year. At 0800 on October 1, World Vision is broke. We start the year with little apart from promises, plans and hopes. It is well to

remember that nothing can be taken for granted and that all we have to work with comes from God's hand.

Chris has asked me to speak on "The Place of Prayer in the History of World Vision." After we sing, Dr. Chirila directs our attention to several prayers within scripture, including the most famous and familiar of Christian prayers, the one we call "Our Father."

After this, Chris asks everyone to stand up. Then he asks anyone who has been with World Vision for one year to sit. Then, two years. Then three. And so on. Since World Vision's office in Romania has only been going ten years, only two are standing at 10. His point is to dramatise that I have been in World Vision for 23 years. I joined World Vision Australia on the 7th of October, 1976. Fortunately no-one speculates whether such long service is an achievement or a sign of failure. No one speculates out loud anyway.

I wanted to title my talk "Confessions of a Minor League Prayer", but it is impossible to translate the words and the double meanings of "minor league" and "prayer/player", so I call it a confession. It seems pointless to present a theology of prayer, even if I felt qualified to deliver one, so I tell a few stories about prayer in World Vision. A story is always a more robust communication device than a well-ordered theology, which is why Jesus told so many.

At 1900 I am finished, and Dan (the one who usually meets me at the airport) is there to whisk me away to the railway station. I am to return to Bucharest by train. Partly, this appears to result from a lack of drivers and partly due to the dangers on the road at night. I certainly don't object as trains are a pleasant way to travel, although I haven't been on one in Romania before. We go to the station with a hotel porter in tow to give us directions and ensure we get the right train (and to carry my bag – he's a porter, after all). A self-explanatory diagram on the platform indicates the train and carriage numbers. My ticket tells me I am in Wagon 12, First Class.

"Wow," I joke, "I'm in First Class."

"Well, maybe First Class in Romania is like Second Class in your country." This is humbly generous and a little inaccurate since even Second Class in Austrian trains is usually a bit better than Romanian First Class turns out to be. The train arrives and stops halfway down the station.

"Very unusual," says the hotel porter, but we decide to walk down to find our carriage. The first wagon is numbered 8. OK, we say to ourselves, we'll walk along to 12. Except the next one is 7. Then 6.

We stop. A railway worker is making some adjustments beside the train, and another passenger asks where the wagons have gone.

"They haven't gone," he assures us; they are coming." He points down to where we came from, and we see that the engine has been detached and disappeared. We wander back to our appointed place, and soon enough, the engine returns, shunting five extra carriages in front of it, including our number 12.

I find my seat, number 22, without difficulty in a 6-seater cabin which 5 fellow travellers quickly fill. Three are elderly Romanians. Across from me is a young Canadian man dressed in shorts and a Bavarian hat from the Beer Fest. He thinks the hat is Romanian, but I do nothing to dissuade him. Travelling with him is a young Romanian woman whom he regales for the next hour with stories about the English language. Having heard my farewells to my colleagues he comments that my English is excellent. I inform him that this gives me great delight since few Australians are known to speak the language with fluency. He laughs generously, which I consider to be just as well. I wouldn't have wanted him to think I was being sarcastic.

The train ride was uneventful, although it became more pleasant after the train emptied a little somewhere in the middle of the dark evening, and my companions moved around the wagon to

take advantage. At the same time, I discover why I am feeling asphyxiated. Near the floor, the heater control has been knocked onto maximum heat. I knock it back, and soon the cabin returns to a pleasant cool.

At the Bucharest station, there is the first Dan to welcome me again. I thank him for staying up late a second night on my account, and he is dismissive of his effort.

It has been another full day, packed with interest and pleasure.