ICWA
LETTERS

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Life in Block 67

BUDAPEST, Hungary MARCH 1998

By Christopher P. Ball

On the way out of the Hungarian-speaking Romanian city of Timisoara, in the direction of Arad, you find a mushroom-patch of communist-style apartment blocks just to the left of the road. Named for their large, block-shaped structures, these socialist-era apartment buildings are found in most Romanian cities. Here, in these rectangular cubes, behind dilapidated facades, live the statistics — the "averages" and "estimateds" that make up much of our statistically gathered knowledge of the world. In these blocks reside the average wages, the 1.5 children, an occasional census liar and more than a few obstinate standard-deviators. We gather them together, sum them up, weigh them and scatter them about in diagrams that we then trot out to demonstrate the ways in which they relate to each other and the world in which they exist.

Upon closer physical inspection, though, we find that the reality is not as simple and clear as our models and equations would have us believe. The walls are dirty and crumbling, the grass is dead and the wasteland here is littered with the empty Coke cans and candy wrappers of Western modernity.

"The walls are dirty and crumbling, the grass is dead and the wasteland here is littered with the empty Coke cans and candy wrappers of Western modernity."

When one enters these fading memories of communist days gone by, the mind is wiped clear of numbers and estimates. In their place we find, with humbling surprise, just people — human beings, souls who work, live, raise their whole-numbered children and generally struggle to survive in the fallen remains of a world they never wanted to build in the first place. In this report I offer the stories of some of these souls who live in block 67 on the way out of Timisoara.

BY WAY OF COMPARISON

Before beginning, I'd like to encourage the reader not to think in terms of US Dollars. Thinking of foreign prices in terms of our own currency often distorts our view of things there. If the reader should still choose to do so despite my appeal, the best exchange rate to use here is about 8,000 Romanian Lei to one US Dollar.

If we are to avoid the mathematical conversion of *lei* into dollars, we need some other basis of comparison. Here are some general prices that I hope will help when trying to comprehend how people live in the Romania of today. The bare-minimum rent for an average block apartment (two bedrooms, a day room, bathroom and kitchen) is about 400,000 Lei/month. The minimum utility costs would be about 400,000 Lei/month. A small can of instant coffee is about 30,000 Lei. A kilogram of cheese (2.2 lb.) costs

about 37,000 Lei and a loaf of bread about 4,500 Lei.

All the people I spoke with in block 97 were either given free housing or bought their apartments for virtually nothing under the communist regime in Romania before the uprising that brought down Dictator Nicolae Ceasescu 1989. Today, therefore, they do not pay monthly rent, but must pay for utilities and all the other common costs of life (clothes, food, etc.).

RODICA MUTIU

Rodica Mutiu is a kind woman. She is a quiet woman. She is a single woman with one daughter and signs of wear on her face that reflect the difficulty and sadness of her world.

In the 1960's, after four years of high school and three years of technical training, she began working as a laboratory assistant at the Timisoara Environmental Center. She has been there ever since.

Her daughter is now 20 years old and attends the local university, where she studies ecology and modern environmental protection. Together they live in a small apartment in block 67. The daughter is the best thing in Rodica's life, according to her own admission.

After 30 years of work, much of that made up of eight-day communist work weeks, Rodica earns a monthly salary of 340,000 Lei after taxes. She owns her apartment so she has to pay only for basic utilities and buy clothes and food. Calculations based on the figures I gave above will quickly reveal that from her monthly wage she can not afford utilities and food.

Rodica Mutiu

To make ends meet and provide a basic subsistence-level life for her and her daughter, she freelances as a typist on the unreported black market, something she is naturally not proud of. It is a necessary evil that literally puts bread on the table.

Referring to the current Romanian government's policies, Rodica says that she hopes the country is going in the right direction but worries because not much has happened yet. These concerns are painfully real for her. Since starting work 30 years ago she has seen her world go from bad (1980s) to worse (1990s), from stable to unstable, from subsistence to something approaching abject poverty. During our discussion, she had little more to add; there simply isn't much else to say. At the time of our meeting her job at the now-partly-privatized Environment Center was guaranteed for only one month. After that she did not know what would happen to her. She had already begun looking for other work, but with no success. In today's Romania, her situation is typical.

MARGARETA VORONCA

Margareta Voronca is a pleasant woman with a warm heart and a healthy sense of humor. These days, however, the sadness in her watery eyes often betrays the gaiety of her smile. She has been working as an economist at a (still) state-run enterprise for 22 of her 47 years of life.

Before the changes of 1989, her husband passed away, leaving her alone to raise her daughter Ioana. Like Rodica, Margareta deeply loves and takes pride in her daughter. She hopes for what she calls "the normal things a mother wants for her daughter." That means a happy life, a good husband, a healthy family. She places all her hopes in Ioana, but has no hopes for her own future. Better, seemed to be the implication, to place her own hopes in her daughter and the next generation where there is still a chance for improvement rather than in the current generation, which many have already written off.

After 22 years of faithful service, Margareta brings home 600,000 Lei per month. While this, according to our figures (above), can literally "pay the bills," it provides little more. "Some pensioners make more than that," she is quick to point out. Unlike Rodica, Margareta has no real skill to peddle on the underground economy, although she occasionally knits a sweater or two to sell when times are tough. Because of her husband's death, she also receives some help from the state that pays for her daughter's education until she is 21, provided she is studying.

Until 1989, Margareta says she could live, save and occasionally afford to buy a little extra something for the family. Since then, she says, "things have slowly gotten worse. The refrigerator is increasingly empty... Everyone knew it [the transition to democracy and a market economy] would be hard, but nobody knew to what degree. The rich got richer, the middle class no longer exists and the misery has greatly grown."

Since Margareta is an economist, I thought she might be able to provide some useful insights into the current Romanian situation. I ask her what she would recommend to young Romanians just starting out. She replies: "I used to recommend they study economics, but not any longer. The best would be for them to study computers [word processing, programming and so on] and English

or German." The others in the room are quick to agree.

Her opinion reveals why there is a bit of tension between her and her daughter these days. Ioana, the daughter in whom Margareta places all her hopes, has little interest in computers or English. Rather, she is a devoted academic studying ancient languages and philosophy. Currently she is enrolled in an English-language class and learning the language very rapidly, judging by a brief discussion I had with her, but she seems to be taking the class more to appease her mother than out of any real personal interest. As all parents know, however, children rarely choose to follow the life-paths parents dream up for them.

Margareta Voronca

Concerning the latest Romanian government (since 1996), Margareta feels that they are moving in the right direction but, like the others in the room, she complains that nothing real has happened yet. The problem, she argues, is that "intellectual[1] work doesn't pay. The only ones who can earn money are those who trade and are dishonest [suggesting as well that the latter naturally derives from the former]. This is why businesses are having problems. Everyone chases after their own profits while the rest of us just hate to go to work." Not surprisingly, she listed "stress at work" second only to money as the hardest thing in her life.

Her final comment: "[During communism] we all listened to Radio Free Europe and hoped for, and looked forward to, the Americans coming. It never happened. Today we still wait for the Americans to come, but now just to invest."

VICTORIA ALIPAN

Victoria Alipan is the kind of daughter in whom Romanian mothers seem to want to place their hopes. She is 24 years old, attractive, outgoing, has a steady boyfriend and perhaps most importantly, has a job that pays well. She lives in block 67 with her parents and younger sister.

Since 1994, Victoria has been working with the military and police department as a civil servant.[2] Her basic take-home pay is 500,000 Lei per month, but she earns more than 1,000,000 Lei/month on average. This is because she receives additional pay for working with the military, for overtime and for "special activities" like manning the computers for customs at the border.

The regular starting pay for a civil servant working with the police is around 300,000 Lei/month. In February 1997 Victoria completed a two-year associate degree in telecommunications. Since then she has been promoted to the rank of officer and received a pay raise concomitant with her new rank.

Her monthly take-home pay is more than that of both her parents added together. Despite this high wage, Victoria does not save, intend to buy a car or plan to move out of the family house any time soon. Instead, she uses her money to help support the family and put her sister through college, where she studies chemistry.

Naturally, Victoria dreams of some day starting a family of her own. At this point, however, it simply isn't feasible. She explains why: "If I move out and buy my own car, I would have no money for food. To buy an apartment would cost around 320,000,000 Lei and I can't save that much anyway.[3] It's easier to live at home, contribute to my family and have a little more spending money."

All things considered, Victoria and her family live fairly well. She has hopes for the future and a reliable

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[1] The Hungarian word "szellemi" literally translates as mental, intellectual, or spiritual. Actually it implies all of these combined. Thus "szellemi" work, translated above as "intellectual" work, implies the use of intellect and somehow that the work and worker are both morally good.

[2] At her request I have changed her name and omitted her picture from the report for reasons of job security. Note: She works with one organization that combines police and military work.

[3] It is important to note that there is no functioning loan system for individuals in Romania. Thus, she must save to buy something or forego the purchase altogether. This will hopefully change with further bank reform and development. Theoretically she could rent, but if the minimum rent is 400,000 Lei/month (see above section: BY WAY OF COMPARISON), then a "decent" apartment would surely be much more, perhaps even as much as her entire monthly salary, before including the cost of utilities. Renting then would erode any chances she might have of eventually saving her money and one day buying a place of her own or a car.

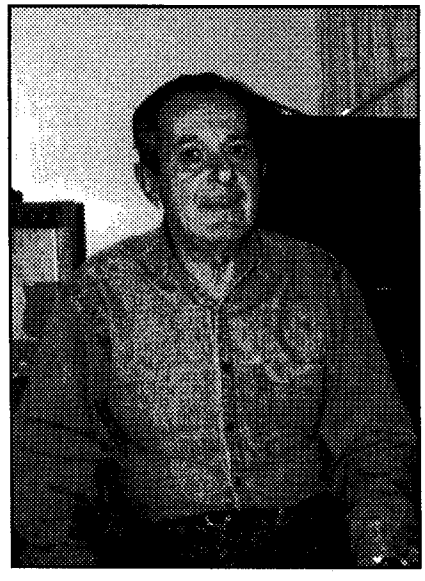
Finally, the market for renting is extremely tight, pushing up the rental price. This is largely because owners would rather sell than rent their apartments for a one-time large profit and new apartment construction is negligible at best.

enough job to realize some of those dreams — given time.

MIRCEA MUNTEANU

Mircea Munteanu is a man with a quick smile and a certain inspiring light in his eyes. At age 61 he was physically the oldest in the room, but clearly one of the younger in spirit. With his comments and light-hearted humor he kept the discussion from becoming too depressing, given that we were mostly talking about the difficulties of life in today's Romania.

His humor and youthful demeanor, however, did not hide the fact that he is a stern man with firm convictions. Such people are often the ones who have the inner strength to find humor in even the most difficult situations.



Mircea Munteanu

Mircea was openly a member of the Romanian Peasant Party during Ceausescu's dictatorship when views and parties other than the dictator's were strictly forbidden. It was a dangerous stance for Mircea to take and got him imprisoned on more than one occasion. Prison could not silence him, though. Many in the room even commented that they were always surprised he wasn't imprisoned more often or conveniently made to disappear by Ceausescu's secret police.[4]

Mr. Munteanu is not a Timisoara native. He was born and raised in the region known as the Banat in a small village near the Romanian-Hungarian-Yugoslav border. Like most of the others in the room he understood Hungarian and some English.

For 29 years Mircea worked as a veterinarian for a communist collective with one million pigs. In 1994 he retired and has been living on his pension ever since. His wife is a nurse, also retired and receiving a pension. They live together in block 67.

He never revealed how much his pension is, but commented that with his wife's pension they receive enough to live comfortably. It is money enough that neither he nor his wife work although both have the opportunity to do so in the private sector. He said he could easily work as a private veterinarian in neighboring villages and his wife could work at a hospital in town.[5] Nevertheless, they choose not to work. He explained: "I don't need the money and I've had enough running around in the mud in knee-high boots."

For me, the most interesting part about them being pensioners and living comfortably was that it contradicts the impression one gets from reading English-language articles about the hardships in Romania. This winter, for example, the English-language press in Hungary and most of Europe ran several articles about how hard the winter would be in Romania because of reforms (i.e. higher energy prices, lower wages, shortages, etc.). In almost every article they mentioned that it would be hardest on the pensioners. Mircea, and the others in the room, disagreed with that claim. Mircea explained that it is hardest on the average wage-earner, not on the pensioners. "We [the pensioners] are done," he said. "We are done raising our children, clothing them and putting them through school. We are done saving for the future and buying fashionable clothes. We just live normally and our pensions are usually enough to support that." His explanation also agrees with my casual observations over the last four years in Romania and Hungary: Pensioners, especially if both husband and wife receive pensions, tend to be better off than the average working family.

Mircea and his wife live a peaceful life in Timisoara. The hardest thing in their lives these days is the absence of their son. He is 33 years old and moved to Canada in 1991 for a better life. There he works fixing watches. His wife works as a waitress in a pizzeria. Together they earn a decent salary, but they miss Romania deeply. Aside from their parents, however, they have little to come back to at the moment.[6]

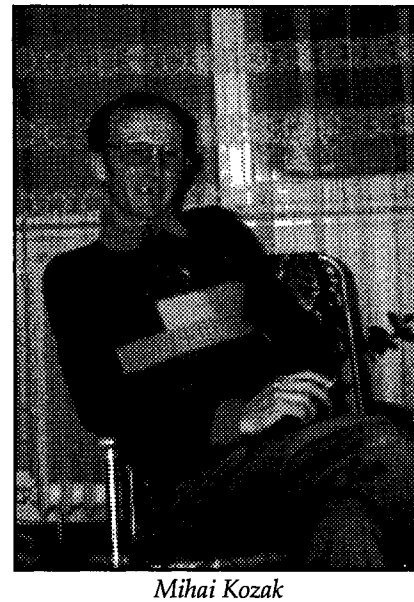
His final comments: "For 40 years we didn't work, we built socialism," he laughed. "Today, I think, we [the country] are moving in the right direction, but it is hard to imagine real change here. Romania is a Balkan country with a Balkan mentality. Here they don't even pay attention to cleanliness [referring to the dirty streets and

[4] The astute reader with knowledge of Communist and post-Communist countries will immediately recognize that this comment by the others could easily mean that Mircea was actually working *with* the secret police, thus explaining why he never conveniently disappeared. Here there was no such implication and the comment literally expressed surprise at the fact that Mircea was still alive and well after so many years of protest.

[5] Actually she does occasionally fill in for sick or vacationing nurses at the hospital where she used to work, but Mircea was quick to mention that this was rare and done out of friendship, not because of any need for extra money.

[6] Their wages as a watch repairman and a waitress would not support them in Romania today.

decaying buildings]. It's just hard to imagine a real change. I only hope that one day Romania can be like Hungary is today."



Mihai Kozak

Maria Kozak

THE KOZAK FAMILY

The Kozaks were nice enough to host me during my stay in Timisoara and allow me to use their living room to hold my meeting with the residents in block 67. They of course took part in the discussion, themselves also being inhabitants of block 67, and should be mentioned as well.

The Kozak apartment currently houses three people: Maria, the mother, Mihai, the father, and Dani, their son and my former Romanian teacher. The older son, Sebastian, moved out some time ago and lives on his own in town.

Until recently they were in a situation similar to that of the others. That is, Dani was studying journalism at the university, Sebestian was living at home and Mom and Dad were trying to make ends meet for the family. Mihai, the father, is an engineer and has been working for a private employer since 1992. He takes home 400,000 Lei/month. The mother, Maria, is a hydro-engineer working for the state and brings home 700,000 Lei/month. Together that makes 1,100,000 Lei/month. Subtracting out the minimum 400,000 Lei for utilities leaves them with only 700,000 Lei/month to live on and raise their kids. This puts them in about the middle of our group, a little better off than Rodica Mutiu and Margareta Voronca, about the same or a little worse off than Mircea Muntea and his wife, but clearly below Victoria Alipan's family.

The older son, Sebestian, moved out in 1991, improving the Kozak's position a bit. He now lives in one room of an old, state-managed house where his grandparents used to live. He pays an extremely low, subsidized rent, but the conditions are pretty poor. I visited once. His room is small, the walls are cracking and often wet from plumbing leaks, and the wooden floor sags dangerously in places. He does have a small kitchenette and shower, though. While living is cheap, his bring-home pay is only about 400,000 Lei/month and barely enough to pay the bills. Consequently, he visits Mom and Dad every other day for meals. Sebastian works as a nurse at a state mental hospital.

When I first met Dani in mid-1997, he had just graduated from Timisoara West University with a degree in journalism. He was also working part-time at the Soros Open Society Foundation in Timisoara and teaching me Romanian for extra pocket money. Dani is intelligent, outgoing and has a caring heart.

At the beginning of 1998 the Timisoara office of the Open Society Foundation hired him full-time as the Public Relations Assistant there. His take-home pay suddenly jumped to 1,600,000 Lei/month. This alone moved the family up to the Alipan-family status. Like Victoria, Dani remains at home, earns more than both his parents combined and financially contributes to the family's well-being. At the time of this discussion he dreamed of moving out but had no definite plans and was quickly learning that while the money is better, working for an American organization leaves little time for much else in life.[7]

I didn't interview the Kozaks separately during the discussion and therefore I didn't ask them my standard set of questions. After the others left, though, I had a chance to talk with the father, Mihai, and reflect on the discussion with him. He is Hungarian[8] and did most of the translating for me when needed.

I confessed to the father that even after the long discussions I still had a hard time imagining exactly how people (like Rodica Mutiu, earning only 340,000 Lei/month) managed to live. To be honest, some of the individual stories, like Rodica's, were worse than I had imagined. Mihai's response was something hard to translate into English: He said, "*csak ugy.*" Literally translated it means: "just that way." More meaningfully translated, it means something like Nike's famous slogan, "Just Do It,"

[7] Central Europeans, with their generally lax working schedules and loads of vacation time, are usually shocked when they first learn how much Americans work and how little vacation time they get for their labor.

[8] Maria, the mother, is Romanian and speaks some Hungarian. The older brother, Sebestian, speaks some Hunarian and generally understands it. Dani neither speaks nor understands Hungarian.

without the positive connotation. That is, people just manage, somehow. Actually, there is little more to explain.

FINAL COMMENTS

In many ways this report is simple. When I sat down to talk with these people I wanted them to speak freely about the things they wanted to speak about. I had only three general questions for them: first, what did they do and how much money did they earned doing it. Second, how many people did they support on their salaries? Third, what was the hardest thing in their life? These questions were primarily designed to initiate discussion and were only secondarily intended to give some uniformity to the information I was gathering. This method seemed to work. They were very interested in telling me what they wanted me to know and, in some cases, had always wanted to be able to tell "the West," which I represented by virtue of my being an American. As a result, however, their accounts did not always make coherent little stories.

In this report I have offered five stories of peoples' lives in Romania today. Despite their income differences, they put their family and friends first. They all take each day as it comes and hope (in the words of Mihai) "that it just doesn't get any worse." Overall, despite their sometimes-growing income differences, they tend to have more in common than they differ from one another. This report does not, of course, answer the question of how exactly the average Romanian lives, although I think it gives a number of useful hints.

What struck me most, however, was the anger that welled up in me while listening and writing their stories. I was constantly reminded that democracies and market economies are not ends in themselves. They are means. They are means to living a fear-free life without arbitrary government abuse and under a government that is legitimate because it is both democratically elected and maintained. They are means to improving the well-being of people like the ones in my report, to allow them to live decent lives and harbor realistic hopes for their futures. I was reminded of these things because neither the means nor the ends exist in Romania yet. I was angered because every time a new Romanian government rises and falls, and ties itself up with internal power struggles, these people who should be the main beneficiaries of the changes since 1989 are left behind and are totally forgotten. They have gone through some 40-odd years of communism, waited for American troops that never came and then fought for their own freedom. Somehow, they still got cheated in the end. ❑


SLOVAKIA
UKRAINE
Chernovtsy
Prut
Satu Mare
HUNGARY
Suceava
Botosani
MOLDOVA
Baia Mare
Borsa
Moldova River
Somes
Mures
Zalau
Bistrita
Iasi
Szonok
Piatra
Chisinau
Oradea
Birtin
Mures
Cluj-Napoca
Vaslui
Bacau
Tirgu Mures
Aiud
(Nagyenyed)
Arad
Siret River
Medias
Sfantu Gheorghe
(Sepsiszentgyörgy)
UKRAINE
Timisoara
Mures River
Deva
Sibiu
Olt River
Brasov
Galati
TRANSYLVANIA
ALPS
ROMANIA
Vulcan
Rimnicu Vilcea
Buzau
Braila
Resita
Tirgu Jiu
Jiu
Ialomita
Tulcea
Pioieste
Pitesti
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Fellows and their Activities

Adam Smith Albion. A former research associate at the Institute for EastWest Studies at Prague in the Czech Republic, Adam is studying and writing about the republics of Central Asia, and their importance as actors within and without the former Soviet bloc. A Harvard graduate (1988; History), Adam has completed the first year of a two-year M. Litt. Degree in Russian/East European history and languages at Oxford University. [EUROPE/RUSSIA]

Christopher P. Ball. An economist, Chris Ball holds a B.A. from the University of Alabama in Huntsville and attended the 1992 International Summer School at the London School of Economics. He studied Hungarian for two years in Budapest while serving as Project Director for the Hungarian Atlantic Council. As an Institute Fellow, he is studying and writing about Hungarian minorities in the former Soviet-bloc nations of East and Central Europe. [EUROPE/RUSSIA]

Shelly Renae Browning. A surgeon specializing in ears and hearing, Dr. Browning is studying the approaches of traditional healers among the Aborigines of Australia and the indigenous peoples of Vanuatu to hearing loss and ear problems. She won her B.S. in Chemistry at the University of the South, studied physician/patient relationships in China and Australia on a Thomas J. Watson Fellowship and won her M.D. at Emory University in Atlanta. Before her ICWA fellowship, she was a Fellow in Skull-Base Surgery in Montreal at McGill University's Department of Otolaryngology. [SOUTH ASIA]

Chenoa Egawa. An enrolled member of the Lummi Indian Nation, Chenoa is spending two years living among mesoAmerican Indians, studying successful and not-so-successful cooperative organizations designed to help the Indians market their manufactures, agricultural products and crafts without relying on middlemen. A former trade specialist for the American Indian Trade and Development Council of the Pacific Northwest, Chenoa's B.A. is in International Business and Spanish from the University of Washington in Seattle. [THE AMERICAS]

Paige Evans. A playwright and former Literary Manager of the Manhattan Theatre Club in New York City, Paige is looking at Cuba through the lens of its performing arts. With a History/Literature B.A. from Harvard, she has served as counselor at the Buckhorn Children's Center in Buckhorn, Kentucky (1983-84), as Arts Editor of the International Courier in Rome, Italy (1985-86), and as an adjunct professor teaching a course in Contemporary American Playwrights at New York University. She joined the Manhattan Theatre Club in 1990. [THE AMERICAS]

Marc Michaelson. A program manager for Save the Children in The Gambia, Marc has moved across Africa to the Horn, there to assess nation-building in Eritrea and Ethiopia, and (conditions permitting) availing and unavailing humanitarian efforts in northern Somalia and southern Sudan. With a B.A. in political science from Tufts, a year of non-degree study at the London School of Economics and a Master's in International Peace Studies from Notre Dame, he describes his postgraduate years as "seven years' experience in international development programming and peace research." [sub-SAHARA]

Randi Movich. The current John Miller Musser Memorial Forest & Society Fellow, Randi is spending two years in Guinea, West Africa, studying and writing about the ways in which indigenous women use forest resources for reproductive health. With a B.A. in biology from the University of California at Santa Cruz and a Master of Science degree in Forest Resources from the University of Idaho, Randi is building on two years' experience as a Peace Corps agroforestry extension agent in the same region of Guinea where she will be living as a Fellow with her husband, Jeff Fields—also the holder of an Idaho Master's in Forest Resources. [sub-SAHARA]

Daniel B. Wright. A sinologist with a Master's Degree in International Relations from the Nitze School of Advanced International Studies of the Johns Hopkins University, Dan's fellowship immerses him in southwest China's Guizhou Province, where he, his journalist-wife Shou Guowei, and their two children (Margaret and Jon) will base themselves for two years in the city of Duyun. Previously a specialist on Asian and Chinese affairs for the Washington consulting firm of Andreae, Vick & Associates, Dan also studied Chinese literature at Beijing University and holds a Master of Divinity degree from Fuller Theological Seminary of Pasadena, California. [EAST ASIA]

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