

A Bit of Romanian History

Over the last weekend I traveled with Graham to one of the bigger cities in the area where we're living, by the name of Cluj-Napoca. It's a college town and has about the most happening of a scene you can get here in Romania, or so I was told. The original reason for going here was because Graham knew of a heavy metal concert that he wanted to see and asked if I would like to come along for the ride. I hadn't been in Romania two days and I didn't really feel like hanging around by myself amidst the local villagers, only being able to speak something along the lines of ten words in Romanian. Thus I decided to come along.

Graham informed me that we would be meeting two more Americans who were going to drive back with us to his house and would be staying and helping out like me. They turned out to be an American husband and a Romanian wife, but whatever. Not everyone can be perfect in their descriptions.

The journey Friday morning started by waking up at 5 am. We forced down some breakfast, fed the horses, and headed out to the other end of the village to catch the 6am bus going to Reghin, the nearby grouping of buildings that is just big enough to be considered beyond village status. We waited under the veranda of a bar (it was drizzling outside) while villagers and high school kids gathered around us to wait for the same bus. Graham alternated between making jokes in Romanian to those gathered and with me in English until the bus arrived.

As we walked up to the bus Graham and I found ourselves near the end of the line, and the first thing I noticed was a young high school girl and an old woman, who had been waiting for the bus with us, stood to the side of the door of the bus and waited for everyone else to get on, despite them clearly having gotten to the bus first. Graham and I boarded (and the girls after us) into what made a sardine tin look roomy. We paid for our tickets and held onto whatever poles we could find.

We arrived in Reghin relatively intact. I had to ask, "I noticed the two women waited for everyone else to get on the bus. Is that normal here?"

"Oh yea," he said, walking toward a what I would describe as a convenience store, "Women are second class citizens here. They're counted with the livestock."

After grabbing some bread from the store we made our way to the bus tables to find out we needed to wait another 45 minutes before our bus to Cluj would arrive. Graham suggested we wait at the nearby bar (yes, they're open at 7 in the morning) and we walked in. The customers which were there each possessed a nimbus of cigarette smoke and were drinking coffee (one was drinking a beer). Graham ordered a coffee and I ordered a tea. 1.25 lei for the coffee and 50 bani for the tea (it's a little over 3 lei to the dollar, so about 15 cents for the tea).

A glass, not a cup, appeared on the counter with a clunk. It was filled with a liquid with some hue reminiscent of Mountain Dew. I looked at it in confusion, then I recognized steam coming from the top of the glass. It was hot, and it definitely wasn't coffee. It must be tea. I picked the glass up and waited for Graham to receive his tiny plastic cup, half-filled with coffee. We went to a table, passing by a few nimbuses on the way.

I took a sip of my "tea" and almost spit it out. The initial taste was sugar, and lots of it. This was followed by a citrus flavor, subsequently followed by something very familiar on which I couldn't quite put my finger. It was a flavor I had experienced from childhood that I remember despising at the time.

"What the fuck is this?! This is tea?!" I exclaimed, "It's like hot Gatorade with extra sugar! Try this!" I passed the glass to Graham. He also had to force himself to swallow.

"That description about accurately sums it up." he said and he passed it back to me. Feeling a bit like an idiot for ordering it in the first place, not wanting to be rude for not drinking what I ordered, and because I was really cold, I took another sip. This time I recognized the mysterious third flavor: the citrusy taste of those horrible chew-able vitamins that our parents gave us when we were young. The correct description of this foul liquid was hot Gatorade mixed with crushed up children's vitamins with extra sugar. I should have ordered a fucking coffee.

I managed to take one more sip before deciding I would rather continue the journey cold.

We were still making jokes about the tea when we got on the bus to Cluj-Napoca, a wonderful 3-hour trip where I spent most of my time trying to squish myself comfortably on two seats so I could sleep. I hadn't

done so much sleeping the last week and getting up at 5 in the morning hadn't exactly helped, so I was going to take what I could get.

When we arrived we were unable to call the couple we were supposed to meet (presumably because they were still asleep) so we wandered around town for a little while. When we got the return call and figured out where to go, we called a taxi and had the guy bring us to their apartment.

We went up to the couple's apartment where I preceded to learn that they were recent bar owners of a place down the street. They had recently become fed up with the whole scene and sold the place. Now they were looking for something else to do with themselves, and they decided to come stay out in the country side with Graham to get away from city life for awhile. Having recently sold it, they were still on "bar hours" and had stayed up late the night before. Thus they required a significant amount of nursing with coffee, cigarettes, and energy drinks before they could get themselves moving at a reasonable pace.

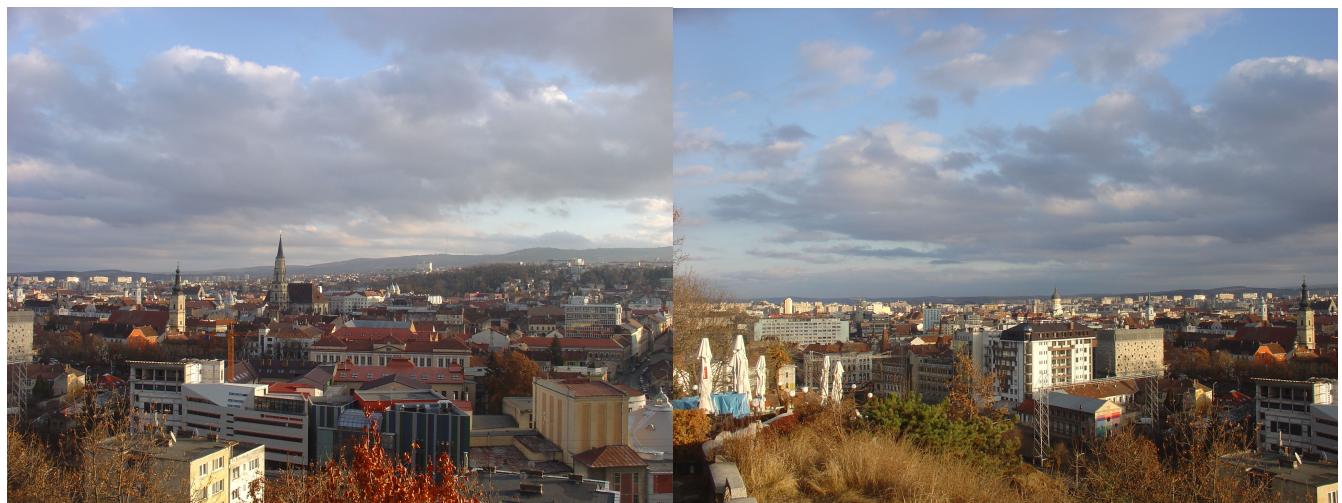
After the two were in a condition worthy of going out the door, they asked Graham and I over and over again what we wanted to do in Cluj. Graham was there for the metal concert and I was just along for the ride (I specifically noted that I wasn't interested in anything touristy), so we both shook our heads saying that we were up for anything, even if that just included chatting in the kitchen. The plan that was decided was to go to the top of the hill in Cluj (so we could thus see the city), get something to drink in a cafe, and head to their old bar to hang out before going to the show that night.

The top of the hill was pretty boring except for some kids who looked like they were in elementary school. They were stoned out of their brains.

"Look at these school kids," Ady, the wife said, "They're totally stoned."

"Stoned?!" Graham exclaimed, "They're like four! Where are they getting the stuff?"

"Ask them, I'm sure they'll sell some to you."



Overlooking Cluj from the hill.

Our pre-bar destination was described to Graham and I as one of the hip-est places in town for college students to go. We arrived and sat ourselves down. For awhile we just bullshitted and got to know each other. I wasn't quite ready for alcohol, so I got some tea (Earl Grey this time. I was sticking with what I knew from now on) and spent most of my energy checking out the hot Romanian waitress instead of listening to the conversation.

Eventually the conversation turned historical when Ady found a book on the shelf on the wall about forbidden history in Romania, written within a year of the fall of communism. History from a first-person perspective really interests me, so I piped back up into the conversation and prodded her for more information.

My prodding continued until the subject came to the Romanian Revolution, where I was asked if I knew anything about it. I had an inkling and I attempted to explain what I did know. I was abruptly met by a sharp shake of the head and a question if I wanted to know what happened as Ady knew it. Eager for non-Westernized bullshit history classes, I forgot about the cute Romanian waitress and nodded to her enthusiastically.

This is my written interpretation of what she told to me. I take no responsibility for how closely this relates to any official history.

For those not up-to-date on their modern Eastern European history, Romania was the last country around the area to give up communism. The regime at the time was particularly and notoriously bloody, headed up by a guy named Nicolae Ceaușescu (pronounced more or less as Cha-shes-koo), who was on every wall, television, and cereal box throughout the country.



Ugly motherfucker, ain't he?

The government had complete control over the television and radio stations, but there was a small amount of Romanians who had escaped the country and would send a pirated radio signal over the border so those within the border could get SOME form of news. The government did their best to scramble it, but it's a bit tricky to shut down a whole radio frequency. The result was that you would only get bits of information over the radio in between static. The Romanian resistance knew this so they would repeat the same information over and over in hopes that their listeners would be able to put it together.

In the north of Romania is the myth-filled area of Transylvania, which has a very large ethnic Hungarian population. It used to be part of Hungary (or more specifically, a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire) and there are still arguments over which country it should belong to. There was a Hungarian priest employed there by the government, to do whatever it is State-regulated religious figures do, who had been fired (I would assume for engaging in non-State-regulated religious activities). In protest, the Hungarian population in the area formed a ring around the building where the priest worked so he couldn't leave or forced to leave. It's worth pointing out here how big of a deal this was. Protests like this were unthinkable in Romania at this time; the country was crawling with secret police and snitches, and people were terrified to talk about politics, even in barely audible whispers. People would disappear and reappear three months later broken of spirit and unwilling to speak up about anything.

Then the even more unthinkable happened, the Romanians joined in and formed a circle around the Hungarians. Normally these two ethnic groups can barely even talk to each other, and here they were joining together in protest. The country, of course, kept it completely barred from the news but word was getting out over the pirated radio station and the whole country began to get agitated. They knew that communism had

fallen everywhere else in Europe and now they knew that something was happening up north.

In a country where the government could only continue its existence by keeping everyone afraid of talking to each other, walking around with their tails in between their legs like defeated dogs, Ceaușescu (and I'm sure the people who controlled him behind the scenes) started to sweat. The military had been ordered to shoot at the people protesting up north, and as could be predicted by any down-falling government in history, this just ramped the people up more. Ceaușescu then decided, in an ultimate lack of tyrannical wisdom, to give a speech in Bucharest, halting the entire working class and making them come to the main government building to hear it. Two million people were made to take the day off work and were shipped in to hear Ceaușescu's speech.

Ceaușescu began giving the standard nationalistic bullshit. Probably something about the west sending in spies to destroy the country or some other spin. Ady said she watched it on the TV from Cluj.

No one knows what happened next. There are several myths about what started it, and Ady told me that she thinks it resulted from an aerosol can exploding in the middle of the crowd (as to why anyone had such a thing, and then would explode it, is certainly up to discussion). Whatever the case, **something** caused a group of people in the middle of the crowd to simultaneously go, "Woa!" This was loud enough and scary enough that when it got to Ceaușescu, he recoiled back in fear; a sharp inhale with eyes wide open. This was unfortunate for him, because that was enough to show the people of Romania that their dear leader wasn't a god. The people realized that they had a voice.

The confused "Woa!" sent a shock wave through the two million gathered in Bucharest which, combined with the look of fear on Ceaușescu's face, echoed back as the realization of power. The second noise didn't just come from the epicenter, but from the whole of those gathered.

"Yaaaaahhh!"

It was at this moment that Ady, who was watching the whole thing on TV, called up her mother at told her to get the fuck home. Now.

That was all it took. People began to storm the gates of the building where Ceaușescu was giving his speech. Ceaușescu panicked and started yelling out promises: more food rations, less working hours, etc. The people didn't buy it. Ady said there is a rumor that a secret service guy who was standing with Ceaușescu on the balcony took a peak over the edge and turned to Ceaușescu and quit on the spot. That's pretty impressive coming from a country where you're not allowed to quit your job.

Ady's mother made it through the door back in Cluj right before she heard the first gunshots.

Around Romania the TVs had gone to static, but it wasn't long before the people had charged into the TV studio and demanded that the operators turn it back on (Ceaușescu had already split via helicopter on the roof). Amidst the confusion the TVs all around the country were turned back on to a news room convulsing with people, cheering and yelling in victory and joy. We did it! We did it!

It was about 15 minutes before the "Romanian Liberation Front" or whatever the fucks were calling themselves showed up in front of the TV screen claiming that they were ready to take over the revolution and get the country back into working order. Again, I don't know much about Romanian history but even from Ady's tone of voice I could tell that this was simply the same power structure that was set in before, jumping on an opportunity when they saw one. Meet the new boss, same as the old boss, and history repeats.

The next few days were total chaos. As Ady put it, if you're some dumb 18 year old with a gun and you have a hundred angry people about to run you down, what would you do? There were incidents all over of the army shooting at civilians, civilians attacking military, and everything in between that you would expect a volcano belching forth hell-wrought anarchy, having built the required psychosociogeothermal stress for the past 45 years.

Boom, motherfucker. BOOM.

Violent chaos reigned supreme. For days on end the cannons on the top of the hill in Cluj fired non-stop. Huge explosions going off every couple of seconds that put everyone in absolute terror for the first few hours, but when no one saw anything in the sky and no one found themselves on the receiving end of a cannon cartridge, they were simply confused. Ady said that until recently she had no idea what had went on with those cannons, until she spoke with an ex-secret service man from the communist era at the bar her and her husband had owned. The was a regular and one day she broke down and asked him about the cannons. He just gave her a blank look, asking whether she had never thought they were simply firing empty shells, in an attempt to intimidate the city population back into submission.

"That's a lot of money to be spending on blanks." Ady's husband Larry commented.

"Hell, when you're a communist country, who cares?" Graham responded.

After a few days of everyone not knowing what to do, as no one with the guts would come up and start giving orders, one of the Romanian generals finally found his pair and put himself on national television. He ordered a stand-down of the military from shooting at any civilians, claiming that he was for the people and that the military was also for the people. It wasn't clear to me how official the next order was, but it wasn't long afterward until the military turned on the secret police. It was even shorter until the secret police all suddenly quit. A decent example of what happens when you turn a pyramid on its head.

Meanwhile, the entire country maintained an insatiable bloodlust for one person in particular: Ceaușescu. The people had had it up to their eyeballs with this vicious fuck and they wanted his head. The helicopter he had fled the scene with had been located but no one knew where he went after that. Four days later he had finally been found. His death sentence was already set.

At this point, Ady (who was 14 at the time) admitted embarrassment over the way she had felt during this, but she (along with everyone else) wanted him D E A D. She knows better now that he wasn't really the one in charge. He was just the puppet put out there ready to act as the scapegoat when things turned sour—same as any country anywhere else.

On Christmas Day the national TV station came on announcing to the people of Romania: *Here is your Christmas present.*

The way she described it to me, it was almost like a joke. A military tribunal had been set up in a classroom, with Ceaușescu and his wife on "trial". Both of them were screaming that they didn't recognize the legitimacy of the court, barking orders at everyone around them. It was a kangaroo court on its face, but no one watching cared. The list of crimes went on through treason and genocide, after which they were quickly found guilty. The sentence was death.

Ceaușescu and his wife were taken outside, pushed against the wall, and hazed by the firing squad. And shot, and shot. Then shot some more. The soldiers emptied their guns in what I could assume was an amalgamation of hate, bloodlust, and adrenaline. After the shooting was finished, the person filming came zoomed in close to what was left of the dead bodies, the red mush that remained where two heads had been moments before. Ady said at that moment the whole of Romania was glued to the TV, asking, "Is that him? Is he dead? Is that really him? Is he really dead?"

Yes, that was him, and he was really dead. Still in the hands of the same mafia scoundrels that had been running the country before, Romania had gained itself a small amount of freedom via the symbolic removal of a political leader. Freedom enough to lounge around in artsy bars and discuss forbidden history. Ady continued on telling us stories about growing up in under a communist regime: waiting in line for food, having her grandfather disappear and appear broken three months later, and people cowling in terror at the mere mention of politics for fear of a nearby secret policeman or a snitch.

The conversation faded back out into less serious (and less interesting topics), and I found myself getting distracted once again by the waitress, a little more wary of local legend.

Dylan Moore
Targu-Mureş, Romania
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