

Sarah Parry: Trip report from Romania



In June 2003 I was getting ready to leave school and was planning my gap year. I made the decision to have a gap year a little too late and missed all the deadlines for the gap year companies. As luck would have it however, I heard about a charity based in Manchester who worked with abandoned children in Romania, India and Africa. I knew that I either wanted to go into Medicine, Psychology or Music Composition but had not applied to University as I wasn't sure which would be the best course for me. I had a suspicion the next few months would show me which to choose.

I found myself desperate to go to Romania and tried to read everything I could find about the communist regime under Ceausescu, the huge numbers of children born through the ideal of the Romanian Workers Army, and their current situation. A couple of phone calls, two meetings, and an application form later, I was on a plane to Slatina, Southern Romania in September 2003. I was going with five people from a church called *West Street* based in Crewe. The extent of what I was taking on only hit me when I got to the airport. I remember begging my now husband not to leave me. I had no idea of what to expect, and I was worried I wouldn't have anything in common with my other team members as they held different beliefs and were much older than me. I certainly had no idea how much the next two weeks would change my life!

We arrived in Romania in the middle of the night and I slept for most of the journey from Bucharest to Slatina. I remember the mini-bus pulling up outside the apartment block where we were staying and thinking it looked like one of the depressed blocks I had seen in Russia the year before. It was grey, cold, damp, dark and had that peculiar smell you only seem to get in concrete blocks in post-communist countries. This was one of the many points when I wondered what I was doing! We went up the six flights of stairs with our luggage (of which I had a great deal) and had a brief chat with our hosts before going to bed.

The next day we went straight to the day care centre we were working in. There we met the abandoned children with disabilities from the orphanages. The first thing I remember is the overwhelming smell of urine and sweat. I walked in to the room where all the children were and could not believe what I saw. I had worked with children with disabilities in the UK, but nothing could have prepared me for this. They were rocking, hitting and biting themselves, (and often each other) and many just seemed locked in their own world. When I realised none of them could speak it made me shiver. It was virtually impossible to tell at first who were boys and girls as their heads were shaved and they were extremely underdeveloped. Before I went to Romania, I had read a book by Dr. Ronald Federici, a Developmental Neuropsychologist, called *Help for the Hopeless Child* (www.drfederici.com/book.htm). This book has since become my bible in institutional syndromes, disorders and interventions, and had at least given me some of the background information I needed to make sense of this horrific situation.

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Jayne Harries, our team leader, had been to Romania seven times before and, recognising a child she knew, jumped straight in and started playing with Gabi. The rest of us tried to follow her example but it was so hard. I attempted to play with a little boy called Alex who just carried on hitting himself. After half an hour of trying to get him to stop hitting his head and attempting to play *bang the table not your head* I found it too much and went outside and burst into tears. I felt so useless and angry that these children were being so neglected. After a while I went back inside and saw a little girl called Mihaela huddled up to the wall, cowering from the other children. I went over on my knees and tried to talk to her (in English, rather futile in hind sight.) The closer I tried to get the further she moved away. Two hours later she let me sit next to her and then it was time for them to go back to the orphanage. Overall, a pretty demoralising morning.

The afternoon however, was much better. In the afternoons, able abandoned children from another orphanage came to the centre to play games and make friends in a safe and loving environment. The children were so friendly! I sat with some of the teenage girls trying to gather the gist of what they were saying to me, when a tiny girl came over, sat on my knee, grinned, and then skipped off. The girls managed to tell me she was called Argentina, was three years old, and quite often got very upset. During the afternoon I spent a lot of time with the older girls and Argentina, and felt we all had a good bond by the end of the day. It was really reassuring to see that many of these children were generally ok after the shock we had that morning. They all had shaved heads and a few cuts and bruises but were socially alive which was fantastic to see!

That night as we discussed the day, I was told how many of the children who attended the morning sessions at the centre had been diagnosed as Autistic, including Mihaela. Federici (1998) discusses the many environmental factors which can lead children from institutions to display Autistic like tendencies and behavioural patterns, which can often lead to confusion over diagnosis. These contributing factors were all too evident the next day when we visited the three orphanages the children came from.

One of the orphanages was for babies and toddlers. Although they were not beaten and were fed, they were not cared for emotionally. I will never forget the deftly silence as we walked through the wards and none of the babies cried or made a sound. They had obviously realised there was no point in communicating anymore. I remember picking up one of the 18-month-olds and feeling how tightly she held onto me, it was heartbreaking! I also visited the orphanages the older children come from, one for able children and the other for children with disabilities. Both orphanages were fairly horrific but I have never seen anything like the orphanage for the children with disabilities. I realised just how poor the care they received was and that most of them didn't speak because they were simply never spoken to. One of the members of care staff picked up Mihaela and she cowered. I wanted to snatch her out of his arms and tell her everything would be ok, but we had been warned not to challenge the staff so all I could do was stand back and watch. It was awful!

For the next two weeks we worked solidly at the centre. Going to the orphanages had spurred all of us on to working with the children no matter how hard it was. We worked from 8:30am till 12:00pm with the children with disabilities and from 2:00 pm to 6:00 pm with the more able children. By the Monday of the second week Mihaela (aka Micky) jumped into my arms as I got into the centre, and Argentina was calling me 'Mama' and came everywhere with me. This meant so much to me as I

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knew from the research I had done previously that children such as these with multiple care givers lack a model on which to base socially meaningful relations (Garmezy & Masten, 1994). I had also painted more finger nails in a week than I had in my whole life and had firm friendships with many of the older girls. By this point I had decided that this was what I wanted to do with my life.

A week later it was so hard to say goodbye to the children we had all become so close to. It was hard to leave Micky but at least she didn't fully understand what was happening. Saying goodbye to Argentina was near impossible; I wanted to take her home. On our last afternoon we took all the children for ice-cream and walked them back to the orphanage. As she was so small it took her ages to eat her ice-cream so we were last back. We turned the corner to the orphanage and saw the six foot high gates and I welled up with tears. I remember feeling so wholly miserable at the thought of leaving her there. We got to the gates and she started to cry, her tiny hand held mine so tightly I didn't think I could get her inside. I picked her up, gave her a cuddle, passed her to one of the carers, and broke into tears. Jayne came over to give me a hug and before we knew it we were all in floods of tears. None of us wanted to leave the amazing children we had met. That first trip to Romania touched me so deeply it will never leave me.

When I got home I got a full time job so I could go back quickly and enrolled in a Psychology AX night school course. I also finally got round to submitting my UCAS application, I applied for Psychology as I hoped to unlock some of the mystery that surrounded these amazing children. I was desperate to learn more about how I could help the children. Over the next two months I got a few grants from Unilever (where my father worked), and Medlink (where I was working during my school holidays). Dulux Plc. even gave us everything we needed to decorate the Family Home as I was working there as a temp and didn't stop talking about Romania (or bombarding them with leaflets and information – some things never change). I also created the 'Romania Appeal' with the Workshop Company I work with at the University of Nottingham. The 'Romania Appeal' is a work experience programme for students, like me, to go to Romania and now other countries to enrich the children's' lives (and theirs!).

To cut a long story slightly shorter; I have now made nearly 30 trips to Romania, the smells of damp concrete and the children are now smells of home, Micky and I are firm friends, Argentina and Gabi have been adopted into loving families. The money and materials raised through Unilever, Dulux, and the Workshop helped a charity adopt fourteen once abandoned children in a Family Type Home. Twelve of these children are the children who I befriended on my very first trip to Romania. Our Appeal has since grown tremendously and spread to other areas of Slatina as well as Bacau and Bucharest in Romania, Sofia and Varna in Bulgaria, Hyderabad and Goa in India, Minsk in Belarus, and Uganda. In addition to this, over 400 student volunteers and many specialist volunteers have joined us. In 2007 we created a UK registered Social Enterprise called Life Improvement For Everyone through which our programme operates officially and independently. Hayley Lee, Vaneeta Sadhnani and I act as Directors whilst the wonderful CAST Committee looks after much of the volunteer programme. Without the Committee there is no way we would have been able to grow, expand, and develop as we have. Thank you for making it all happen!

My most recent trip to Romania in July 2008 was just as special as my very first trip in many ways as it was the first trip which was a joint effort between us and the UK charity Wishing Well in order to

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reach more people in need. Our programme in Slatina (Olt) now reaches all the children with disabilities, children with HIV, and adults in two psychiatric institutions.

As for me, I successfully completed my Psychology BSc in 2007 and am now a Masters student specialising in Mental Health before specialising further and embarking upon a Clinical Doctorate. I can not thank the University of Manchester enough for their support over the years. I would like to take this opportunity to thank Abbi Sweeny, Ming-Wai Wan and especially Dr Cliff Davies and Dr. Evan Kidd for all their support and the time they took to come to Romania to work with our children and hold training seminars. Many thanks also to Dr. Suzanne Zeedyk from the University of Dundee for her support, expertise and endless energy and passion for the children. Evan, Suzanne and I have made a start on two research projects we hope will demonstrate the need for better state care and interventions for able abandoned children in Romania. I have been lucky enough to receive the Zochonis Special Enterprise Award several times which has enabled me to make so many trips to Romania.

Romania joined the EU in 2007, consequently it is more important now than ever that people know how much they need to help these children. I will certainly be involved in humanitarian work in these countries for the foreseeable future. The children in Romania have become like family to me. Since my first trip I have felt fiercely protective over all the children and this experience has completely changed my views about having my own children some day. Until I went to Romania I didn't think I could be a parent, but it has totally changed my mind. My experiences in Romania have taught me to love as I never thought I could, and has awoken a passion and drive in me I didn't know I had. It has forced me to become a person I didn't think I had the potential to be. For that, I owe them everything and will be here for them for as long as they need me to be.

Finally, I can't close this story without thanking the people who made all this happen. I have to thank everyone who has helped me and all the other volunteers work in Romania and elsewhere, those who have supported our growth and stuck with us through hard times; and to Hayley, Vaneeta, Vicky and all the other key players who have become great life long friends! A massive thank you to Jayne Harris for inspiring me to follow in her footsteps! Thank you for reading my report, I hope my account and others like it will inspire you to join us in improving people's lives across the developing world!

References

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