

Free to Run and Play

BY DONNA HANSON

“I only want to go outside!” Where else would a six-year-old child want to be on a beautiful, sunshiny summer day? But this was not a typical child, nor a routine day for either of us. The child was a patient at the hospital I was visiting—Budimex Children’s Hospital in Bucharest, Romania. I had gone there to see the building of the center for handicapped children, being funded by the Catholic Health Association (CHA).

In May 1991 I met Liana Pogorilovschi, delegate from the Archdiocese of Bucharest, at a meeting in Rome of Caritas Internationalis, an international Catholic health and welfare organization. I asked her how soon Caritas would be able to do something for the abandoned Romanian children who had been the focus of an ABC “20/20” program. She responded, “That depends on you.”

She reminded me that Romania had been a Communist country since 1945. For every need, people were told that “the government will take care of it.” Romania had no social service system, the government had repossessed churches, and voluntarism was totally unknown.

Thinking about Liana’s challenge, I asked Bp. William S. Skylstad of Spokane if I might be released from our diocese for June and July 1992. My goal was simple: to journey as a pilgrim, sharing my experiences and listening to the stories of people involved in the work of Caritas Bucharest.

CARITAS PHARMACY

During my first day in Romania I spent the afternoon at Bucharest’s Caritas Pharmacy. As I walked in the door, two men (dressed in pajamas) stood to offer me their chairs. The men had come from the adjacent hospital, prescriptions in hand: They could not otherwise procure the needed medications.

Two physicians from another hospital were also at the pharmacy, sorting through medications and supplies, boxing those materials which

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could help their patients. Before they were finished, a distraught middle-aged woman arrived. Her 23-year-old son was schizophrenic. Only a particular medication had allowed him to function for the past two years. The woman was desperate to replenish his supply because he had only enough medication to last the next few weeks.

MUNICIPAL HOSPITAL

After this introduction to the medical needs of the Romanian people, I accepted an invitation to visit the Municipal Hospital in Constanta. This port city on the Black Sea is thought to be where AIDS entered the country, since all other borders had been closed. Sailors had contact with the residents; some, not knowing they were infected, donated contaminated blood. Today, 54 percent of all European children with AIDS live in Romania.

I asked a physician overseeing the children’s care what one message she would convey to people in the United States. She responded without hesitation: “We deeply appreciate everything that has been done for the children of Romania who have AIDS. We are especially grateful for their belief that no one should be ostracized, that every person needs love and care.”

The physician accepted medication samples from a visiting American physician in our group. Knowing he would be coming to Romania, he had saved medication samples for skin rashes and fungus diseases. The samples he received during a two-week period would serve all the children in Municipal Hospital’s AIDS wards for the next two months.

CLUJ HOUSE

In Cluj I had another opportunity to view projected programs for Romanian children. I was invited to see the progress in the renovation of a house for disabled children, being funded by CHA. When I arrived at the home, I was greeted by Srs. Sophia, Marie Antonina, and Fidelia—

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THE HUMAN ELEMENT

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Sisters of the Mother of God who will care for the children and teach them to function in a small group setting.

CHA's wheelchair-accessible home will provide a unique place for special-needs children. As we viewed the work being done, a young Romanian mother commented, "Any child would be fortunate to live in such a facility."

CENTER FOR HANDICAPPED CHILDREN

When I returned to Bucharest, I began to deeply appreciate the scope of the challenge CHA has accepted at Budimex Children's Hospital. Pediatric orthopedic surgeon Dan Catana gave us a warm welcome. Shouts of joy greeted him as we walked into the first ward. The children's faces lit up as he called each child by name and responded to their requests.

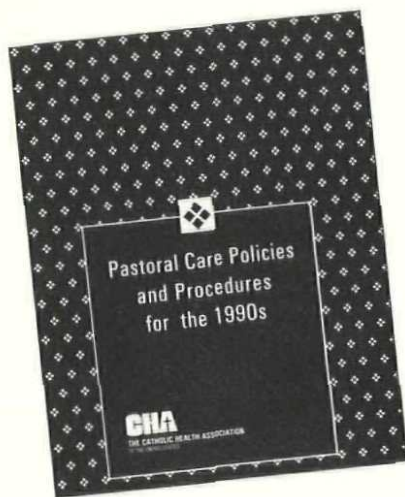
One energetic little boy had to be restrained so he could get some rest, so his leg had been tied with gauze to the side of the bed. He promised Dr. Catana he would not run away if he could be untied. Once freed, however, the youngster ran into the playroom, quick as a flash. But his six-year-old friend (who looked no older than three) limped over to me, wanting to be held. I lifted her small, bandaged body into my arms. As I walked toward an open window, she cried, "I only want to go outside!" I later learned she had been in a children's institution 600 kilometers from Bucharest since birth. The hospital had no records on her, but Dr. Catana and the staff were treating her congenital hip problem.

HEARTFELT THANKS

In her name, I thank every donor to the CHA programs in Romania. Your response gives meaning both to the principles of democracy and to the Gospel beatitudes. Thanks to you, children will no longer grow up in hospitals, and going outside will no longer be only a dream. □

For information on how you can assist the nameless children of Romania, please write or call David Sauer, Catholic Health Association, 4455 Woodson Road, St. Louis, MO 63134-3797; 314-427-2500.

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