



Drawings by Serban Chelariu

# Border Guards and Recurring Dreams

Donald Williams

**F**or years now Ecaterina and Serban Chelariu, my wife's mother and brother, have tried to leave Rumania, and we have tried various means to help them. When we moved from Switzerland to America, my homeland, we thought the free emigration provision of the 1974 Trade Act might be a source of leverage to influence Rumanian authorities. In line with the Trade Act the U.S.-Rumanian Trade Agreement of 1975 committed Rumania to freer emigration practices and to the principle of family reunification. It committed the United States Congress either to assure compliance with the emigration provision or to cancel Rumania's "Most Favored Nation" trade status.

Senator Henry Jackson interceded with the Rumanian authorities on our behalf, but no results followed. We contacted others who helped, notably Senators Abraham Ribicoff, James Buckley, Floyd Haskell, Gary Hart, and Herman Talmadge and Representative William Green. When illness threatened my wife in May of this year, a sense of desperation provoked me to undertake more

energetic measures. I flew from Colorado to New York, where I met with Rumanian hunger strikers across from the United Nations building and subsequently joined them on a trip to Washington.

**O**n the afternoon of June 7, 1976, with a four-hour drive, less sleep, and many hours of aggravation behind me, I stood on the steps of the U.S. Capitol alongside twenty-five or so Rumanians. We were protesting Rumania's emigration policies and, we hoped, doing something through this action and through the hunger strike in New York to obtain passports for family members still in Rumania. Our banners and signs spread over the front steps were seen by busloads of tourists, by school classes, and scouts. Our action was registered by perhaps a hundred Instamatics. The demonstration attracted the more serious attention of a small French group and of a visiting English soccer team, but of few others. (Rumania has close cultural ties with France; the soccer team had a match that evening and, like us, expected a meager reception.) The dimes spent calling newspapers and TV stations for press coverage were wasted.

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A middle-aged man stopped halfway down the Capitol steps to read the signs; his wife, a step ahead, looked back and said: "C'mon, there's always somebody protesting about something." To me, too, it seemed likely that Congress would not be moved by what one man called "more personal horror stories" of Rumanian oppression.

Although I was inordinately exhausted on that afternoon and would have preferred a shady place in which to sleep, an unsuspected source of energy prevailed and would not let me rest. The heat of inward emotion was as constant as that of this Washington summer day. It was then I decided to write an article about the problems of Rumanian emigration. Though the initial objective remains, I know I am also driven by a far less obvious design and must admit the psyche may have other interests unknown to me.

The Trade Act of 1974 and the subsequent Trade Agreement with Rumania touch on many complex considerations: détente, expanding markets, Japanese and West European competition in trade with Communist bloc nations, multinational companies, Soviet Jewry, U.S. relations with Israel, Rumania's valuable independent foreign policy (they maintain diplomatic relations with the U.S., Israel, Arab nations, China, and others), American unemployment, organized labor, oil shortages, questions of conscience, and, finally, election-year politics. Being a stranger to these deep waters, I am compelled to look elsewhere for my subject. By nature I turn to images, and in a relaxed state the images select themselves, first more personal and private images, later, images of America and the democratic process.

**R**ecurring dreams are images of central conflicts; they are mysteries our best understanding and action have failed to penetrate. These border stories of past events come to me as images; they have the quality of recurring dreams.

Nearly forty years ago my wife's father, Traian Chelariu, a newspaper editor, poet, and linguist, was offered a teaching position at an American university. He and his wife, Ecaterina, chose to stay in Rumania. Perhaps it was the earth, or loved ones, maybe a home, a mother tongue, or a young child that held them back. War broke out not long afterward, and when the Communists came to power they were forced to flee their home in northern Rumania. The land became Soviet territory, and Traian was blacklisted by the Rumanian Communist régime.

Years later his daughter Maria, my wife, was arrested at the Rumanian-Yugoslavian border while trying to escape with the man she then loved, a Swiss. Chance, or more likely the meaningful design of fate, led to their arrest. Eight months of prison and two years later she married this man and was allowed to emigrate to Switzerland legally. The relationship, however, was not transportable; it did not survive the border crossing. In the years following our meeting in 1970 I watched her explore this side of the border and gradually accept it as home. Though it may take only minutes to pass through the border formalities, it usually takes years to arrive in the West. Were it not for ties of the heart and soul and the

longing of this family to be together, Maria would now be inaccessible to the habits of fear and despair she once learned. On many late evenings spent with Rumanian friends we have rehearsed past failures and present strategies for the family's passage; always at the end of the road are those wild fantasies of a planned escape that we recognize as indulgence. As I write this, my closest friend, Allen, may be with Ecaterina and Serban in Bucharest en route from a sojourn in Greece. His spirit is resourceful, articulate, and daring; I know his visit will hearten them.

There are other border stories to be told. In 1971 Maria's brother, Serban, was to have an exhibit of his paintings in Paris. The exhibit was cancelled and the paintings returned when the Rumanian Government refused to grant him a passport for the opening. In 1972 Ecaterina received a tourist passport and visa for Switzerland, but it was revoked without explanation three days later just as she prepared to leave. Then there was an event that only fate or chance, but not official ill will, could have ruled. Serban (a construction engineer by training, an artist by creative daemon) was in western Rumania on business and was to return to Bucharest by plane. To lengthen his stay he rescheduled his flight for later in the afternoon. The scheduled flight was pirated to Vienna, where many of the passengers chose to remain as refugees.

Other efforts were made. Twice we tried through a third party and legal channels to purchase passports for the family, but with no success. We waited over two years before being forced to abandon this path. A year and a half ago the family made official application for emigration, and when we moved to America last year, we hoped that the U.S.-Rumanian Trade Agreement with its provision for free emigration would secure their success. Memory looks back to these recurring images and causes us to doubt the future. We still fumble in the dark and the questions remain: Who is it that guards so relentlessly the gate, and with what will he or she be appeased?

I am not opposed to borders; they define us, telling us who we are and where we are. I recall the many border crossings I have made in Europe and know that borders mark genuine differences among people. My thoughts turn as well to the value I place on the borders of my own personal territory and to the awareness of those interior borders between conscious and unconscious worlds or between the modes of being with which I am familiar. I object only to the unnecessary prohibitions placed on the freedom to cross these borders.

**O**n May 31, 1976 (retracing my steps for a moment), we received a call from Maria's cousin in New York telling us that a group of Rumanians had started a hunger strike opposite the United Nations. A similar strike had taken place a year ago while Congress debated the emigration question, and we knew that most of the participants at that time were finally joined by their relatives. Maria was ill when we received news about the strike, but she was determined to go to New York. I preferred to go in her place, and we argued. That night she dreamed we were outside

when hurricane-force winds began to blow. For safety she held onto an enormous boulder (the name of the town in which we live), while I ran across a clearing into the wind, running but getting nowhere. News of the strike set off this storm and the impulse to act was projected onto me. After this dream I was not surprised when, two days later, she decided to remain at home while I flew to New York. In terms of her psyche it appeared fruitless to exert herself, the correct thing being to hold fast to her reality—her health, a home, the fresh roots in a new land. I asked myself if she had not crossed a border with this decision and broken some pattern.

On the same night I dreamed I was attending a meeting of about a hundred people in Bucharest, where the question of emigration was being discussed. There was a long table at which we were seated for a meal, and near me at one end of the table a Communist official was standing and speaking in a dogmatic tone. He passed out pamphlets written in Rumanian to the guests. After I challenged him he adopted a personal, more friendly approach, and handed me a copy of the pamphlet translated in English. Surprisingly enough I was obliged to cross the border *into* Rumania.

My own dreams are prone to elude me, as this one did at the time. The dream suggests to me now that a direct confrontation has positive effects (the change in tone) and that the problem of emigration is to be dealt with in the open with a sense of cooperation and common purpose. I am struck by the contrast between this communion-like meal of the dream image and the fasting of those demonstrating in New York. Had I seen this at the time, I would have avoided my brief association with the hunger strike and, despite exclusively negative experiences with Rumanian officials in the past, would have sought a meeting with the Rumanian Ambassador while I was in Washington.

I have also walked around this dream looking for a more subjective meaning. Now I can see those aspects of myself that have been accustomed to living behind closed borders, suppressed by pettiness of spirit and by a misused rationale of the common good. From the dream it appears that a way was being prepared for these barriers to be lifted. In retrospect I recognize that the trip to New York and Washington freed some personal energies long neglected.

On Friday, June 11, 1976, I made a second trip from New York to Washington, this time with the intention of learning what I could about Congressional attitudes toward Rumanian trade and emigration. Three images, rather than the facts I sought, remain with me from the day.

Once in Washington I quickly separated myself from the two-man Rumanian delegation that had come along to distribute copies of a memorandum to the members of Congress. The previous day I had made an appointment over the phone with Holmes Brown, a member of Senator Haskell's (D.-Colo.) staff. Mr. Brown is a personable, introverted man in his early thirties, and, papers in hand, we found an unoccupied but crowded corner of the office in which to sit. In response to our phone conversation he had researched the U.S.-Rumanian

Trade Agreement and the Helsinki Conference and had obtained information for me about the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe soon to be established to monitor the degree of compliance with the Helsinki Accord. He also directed me to Michael Rowney and Dick Rivers, professional staff members of the Finance Committee, who had been involved in drafting the Trade Agreement. This initial image of the day, of Mr. Brown's interest and cooperation, was representative of almost all the personal contacts that followed. These meetings restored some faith in government at the personal level and, after having lived abroad for five years, provided me with fresh knowledge of life within U.S. borders.

The most striking image of the day, however, ran counter to the first and was derived from the place itself, Capitol Hill. This image was found in between appointments in the labyrinthine maze of underground corridors beneath the Capitol and the Senate and House office buildings. I was struck by the contrast between this maze and the impressive clarity of the buildings at a distance. Several times in going from one office to another I was lost; most other times I could at best give a decent approximation of where I was, but never knew quite for sure where I might surface.

This same sense of disorientation followed me throughout the day's appointments. From one man I heard that Congress would be very cautious about overextending itself and intruding too far in Rumania's internal affairs by demanding free emigration as a matter of principle (the grim example involving the emigration of Soviet Union Jews being fresh in memory). I suggested that it might be wiser to make the same demands but to put the emphasis on our national interest in safeguarding the rights of Rumanian-Americans and of Rumanian-Jewish families in Israel, *not* on calling primary attention to the moral shortcomings of Communist Rumania. I was told that this approach was not politically practical, since high principle is valued at the polls. It seems I made a wrong turn, leaving me more confused than before about these marriage partners, principle and politics, and their stormy relations.

The image of the labyrinth appeared elsewhere, although this example calls for some background. Ecaterina and Serban originally applied for emigration to Switzerland. When Maria and I moved to the States, it seemed the Chelarius could avoid further delays by maintaining Switzerland as their destination. We arranged with Justice Stevens, the American Consul at the Embassy at Bern, that the Chelarius would be allowed to immigrate to America shortly after their arrival at Zurich.

That afternoon in June I learned that our efforts and those of Congress would most likely be fruitless, since they were not seconded by the State Department and the American Embassy at Bucharest. The Embassy would not intercede on the Chelarius' behalf because, technically, they had applied for emigration to Switzerland. It made no difference that U.S. immigration papers had already been prepared for them at the Embassy in Switzerland. I am convinced by these and other experiences that the underground maze of corridors depicts the



workings of Congress, the confusing interconnections, and the uncertain outcome of all action.

The last image I shall mention caught me unexpectedly. At the end of the day with nothing left to do I stood beneath the Capitol dome. My eyes wandered to the four emblems carved in stone above the archways, emblems of our relations with the Indians. One in particular struck me: a settler holds a scroll that reads, "TREATY," while an Indian extends a pipe. The pipe and the printed word are equivalent, they are sacred objects. The pipe is the symbol of the Indian's relationship to the spirit, while for us that relationship is carried by the printed word. I was reminded of Allen's comment several months ago as we drove across the skyway from Manhattan to New Jersey discussing the "lost colony," our first memory and awakening as a nation. He remarked that America was the first country to be founded on words—the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, the Bill of Rights—and that we celebrate two hundred years as a nation and yet remain unaware of how we are sustained, led on, liberated, bound, and deceived by words.

With the Trade Act of 1974 Congress went out of its way to use its economic leverage to deny "Most Favored Nation" status to nations that harass citizens wishing to emigrate. These are words to which Congress has committed us, words that define us, marking our borders. A Senate subcommittee will be looking into the facts about Rumanian emigration and about those persons known to have been denied the liberty to join close relatives in America and Israel. The measure of our commitment to the spirit of our words will be revealed in the willingness of Congress to withhold preferential treatment from Rumania until these families are reunited.

#### *Postscript*

July 4: I learned by chance on July 3 that a conference of Rumanian and American historians was taking place a few blocks away, at the University of Colorado. One of the speakers was Colonel Ilie Ceausescu, the brother of the Rumanian President, Nicolae Ceausescu. Maria contacted the Colonel that evening and invited him to breakfast the next morning before he was to fly back to Washington with the rest of the delegation. She hoped she might be able to bring her family's plight directly to the attention of President Ceausescu and thereby obtain the long sought-after passports. This morning she met Colonel Ceausescu over breakfast at the Holiday Inn, but

he was joined by Mr. Ploscaru, the First Secretary of the Rumanian Embassy at Washington. He was serving in a repressive (rather than protective) role as security agent. Maria says Colonel Ceausescu impressed her as a gentle and sympathetic man but that Mr. Ploscaru would not permit a private conversation with the Colonel. Mr. Ploscaru controlled what conversation there was and finally informed Maria that her mother and certainly her brother would not be allowed to leave Rumania.

July 13: We received a telephone call from Serban and he told us that on July 6 their applications for emigration had been refused. We have again taken a long journey to the border only to find the gates closed and guarded. We must again look for other paths.

August 12: With the help of Mr. Stevens, the U.S. immigration files for the Chelarius have been transferred from Bern to the Embassy at Bucharest, where they will receive first priority. Their direct immigration to America is now possible insofar as the State Department is concerned. They were invited to the Embassy for an interview and Serban was impressed with the warmth of their reception and with Vice Consul John Spiegel's statement that he would do his best to help them and to protect Maria's rights as a permanent resident in America and mine as a citizen. Who, if anyone, in Rumania has cared to protect Serban's rights? Ecaterina and Serban next approached the Rumanian passport authorities to reapply for emigration, but there were no application forms available. Tourist forms were available, however, and they were allowed to apply for tourist visas until the other forms are again on hand.

The dream is once more in full motion and we look for some sign that this border may now be crossed.

September 24: Yesterday Holmes Brown wrote that Senator Jesse Helms of North Carolina put before the Senate on September 20 a resolution of disapproval of the Trade Agreement with Rumania on the basis of Rumania's failure to comply with the freedom of emigration provision.

This morning, just an hour before I was to call *Worldview* about final arrangements for the article, I received a call from Senator Jackson's office. I was informed that the Rumanian Ambassador had given Senator Jackson a list of names of people approved for emigration; the Chelarius were included on that list. Ecaterina and Serban do not know that their applications have been approved; in fact, since July 13 they have met only with opposition from the local authorities in Bucharest.

I am told it may be months before the Chelarius actually receive passports, but it seems now that the border may be crossed. I still do not know the names or the faces of those who guard the borders, nor can I see the process by which they decide to grant passage. In the time to come we shall look in our own lives, our own personal myths, for an understanding of why the dream now ends differently and watch for other dreams that will take its place, trying to find there a sense of our responsibility for the future. I do know, from this side of the border, that final passage is possible because some people remain faithful to the words on which this nation is founded.