On Sundays the Peasants Go Native

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On my first Rumanian Sunday I sat on the toilet in a third-rate Bucharest hotel peering through the window at an open-air movie featuring John Wayne as cop. On my last Rumanian Sunday I sat in a country inn watching a television western featuring Clint Eastwood as good tough guy.

In between I saw little of such capitalist decadence. While Bucharest is a fashionable metropolis, the northeastern province of Moldavia, just a night train ride away, is another world.

I arrived in the small town of Suceava at five in the morning. Four men in dirty work clothes slept on the station benches. A family breakfasted on bread and sausage. A few people arrived well dressed and well packed for a long journey. That was second class.

The general waiting room had no benches. First class, which was empty, had sofas and arm chairs covered with tattered blue spreads. This is social equality? From there I traveled by local buses through a picturesque countryside of high green hills and woods, of tidy villages and farms. Houses, wells, even drainpipes were lavishly trimmed. On many porches were hung bright enamel pots above a cook stove brought there for the summer.

Plastic and plaster crucifixes adorned many houses and gates. The Russian Orthodox Church was more evident than the Soviet state in northern Rumania. Church bells rang the quarter hour. Tiny country chapels, wrapped inside and out by bright frescoes, have withstood five centuries of wars and weathering and are well preserved and well used. While I was not the only tourist entering the chapels, I felt like an unholy intruder among zealous worshippers bowing, kneeling, crossing themselves, and kissing the Virgin’s image.

Between the infrequent cities I saw few automobiles or television antennas, but in every bus were passengers with radio-cassette recorders.

I was immediately recognized as a Westerner. Women begged me to sell them my clothes—until they saw from my suitcase that I was not a fashionable Westerner. Men wanted to buy foreign money and cigarettes, but I had nothing for the black market. All I had brought to repay their hospitality were discount ballpoint pens, a luxury item in Rumania.

Very early on a weekday morning, I boarded an empty bus, which slowly filled with people carrying tools and large, woven bags of food and clothing. One passenger pointed across the river to green hills and snowy stucco houses with red tile roofs. That was Russia, he told me.

In several communes men and women marched along the road with wooden scythes and pitchforks. Mist hung heavy in the hills; rain was certain, but they were headed for the fields.

On a Sunday I passed through communes where villagers were emerging from churches and co-op cultural centers. True to tourist books, they were wearing native costumes for the sabbath; untrue to tourist books, they were not dancing in the streets.

Also untrue to tourist books, the village I arrived in had no hotel. An old farmer took me in his truck to a smaller village two kilometers from a resort.

On the grass by the crossroads sat a dozen peasants with their geese and sheep. There was no bus to the resort, and they tried to stop a car for me. An old woman brought me a tin plate of steaming stuffed cabbage and peppers from her house.

The entire village, it seemed, was streaming toward the resort, some in modern, many in traditional, dress. Finally I started walking. When I was halfway there, a young man carrying a tiny girl came up and took one of my bags; his wife took the other.

Their little girl found the bag on rollers a delightful toy, pushing it from behind and “buuuring” like a motor. Later she sat on it and shouted “gee-up” as her parents pulled her along. At the resort I gave them ballpoint pens. They were so pleased they offered to pay for them.

Valea Mâriei wasn’t much of a resort, just a woods with two hotels and small huts.
encasing mineral water springs. A Sunday gathering place, it was crowded with natives in flowing, white peasant skirts and in bikinis, sunbathing, picnicking in the grass, downing cases of beer. There were a few cars, motorbikes, and horses, but most people were on foot. There were few guests at the hotel; by sundown the grounds were empty. At eight o'clock chairs in the restaurant were stacked, lights went out, the television went on. No one watched the long documentaries, but then attention was fixed—a Clint Eastwood western.

Dan, a clerk there, spoke rough English, and we had a long talk. He was impressed with my life, work, and travels, and he sang my praises, much over-blown, to everyone. Having worked at Black Sea resorts, he was acquainted with a different type Westerner.

Holland and Rumania are friends, he said. He admires Holland for its long fight against the sea, its modern agriculture, and its good cows; also because it is small. Too large is not good, we agreed. Whether in America or Russia, much power destroys what is best in people. Dan mentioned Carter’s Helsinki speech on human rights and shook his head sadly. “In Rumania it is not possible.” Equally grave, he said, were the problems of crime and drugs in America.

On Monday I left the empty resort to stroll into the village. Before one house sat a family of three generations. They called out the usual greetings—questions and asked if I would like some prunes from their tree. Making room for me on the shaded bench, they gave me a tin cup of bitter mineral water from the jug and filled my bag with overripe prunes. The bag was stained forever, but I couldn’t protest—or mind.

Then, would I go inside to eat? The lean grandmother led me through the clean-swept dirt yard and into the smaller of their two rooms. It was filled with two narrow beds, a cupboard, a large wood stove, and a small table with one stool. The walls were covered with handiwork, all religious, but colorful folk art, rather than the gaudy paintings I’d seen elsewhere in Rumania.

She gave me a heaping plate of cold string beans with a slab of pork fat, a hunk of dark bread, and a tiny plastic glass of slivovitch. The plump mother and shy little boy came inside and the three of them watched me intently while I ate, grinning and asking if it was good, insisting that I empty my glass so they could fill it again, and laughing with delight at my mastery of a few Rumanian phrases.

I finished off my meal with two pears and asked them to pose for a photo. They did so happily, the grandmother shoeing the sow from my skirts and the mother apologizing for her everyday clothing.

The next day a hotel guest drove me to the larger village, where I could get a bus. Dan and the other guests came to the porch to see me off. I was on my way, slowly, back to Amsterdam, taking with me enough warm memories for a month of Rumanian Sundays.