

Romania: Thoughts and Impressions

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The Team and I

This trip held so many firsts for me. It was my my first international travel experience and my first international social work experience. I was so anxious and nervous about everything. Would I do well? Would I get along with the team? Would I get homesick? Even the prospect of flying for that long was nerve wracking--previously the longest flight I had been on was to Boston. I usually consider myself to be really competent. I've never come across a challenge I could not meet. I never quit anything, despite mistakes and stumbles. I have no regrets. As I waited for the plane to depart I wondered if I had finally gotten myself into something I could not master.

My first concern was getting to know the team. My teammates were so different from me. I was very aware of the fact that I was the youngest *and* I was the only one who had not traveled. However, I also know I have a tendency to take charge of situations and I feared that I come off as a know-it-all. I was worried about this, was worried that the team would feel like I was holding them back due to my lack of experience, or that they would resent my efforts to take charge, especially since they might feel that I have no idea what I was doing.

The team started bonding on the three flights over. We discussed our lives, our prior experiences and ourselves. I started to feel that I wasn't as inexperienced as I had thought. My volunteer work in college, my classes in undergrad, my first year at MSASS, and especially my first year field placement, left me with a lot more knowledge than I gave myself credit. The experiences of flying, making connecting flights, and especially getting from the airport to our

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hotel in Budapest helped us to begin to see ourselves as a team. We all watched out for each other and in each situation we all played different roles. Although I felt myself taking the lead often, I did not feel that the other girls resented it.

The group dynamic changed over the course of the trip. Throughout, the four of us felt bonded and worked well together. I continued to feel like I was the one who would speak up first, make decisions, and ask for directions, especially when the four of us were alone. In Oradea we all talked about group roles and I discussed my fears that I would be seen as young and inexperienced. I also told them I worried that they would feel that I was bossy. The girls assured me that they did not feel I was inexperienced, and told me they actually appreciated my taking the initiative in situations. In the beginning I appreciated the thoughtful, cautious nature of the others in the group. I felt that they balanced out my often impetuous personality. However, as the trip went on, I started to feel weighed down. A few of my teammates tended to be anxious a lot of the time. I started to feel irritated that they would not let go of some of their fears and habits. I felt that things would run more smoothly if everyone tried to give a little more. However, the team got along well, especially because we were all willing to share and discuss our feelings.

Agency Comments

Visiting the agencies was an amazing experience. It was difficult because there was so much that was new and hard to understand. These agencies operate in a culture that I was struggling to comprehend. The history, the

attitudes of the Romanian people, and the ever-changing laws all impacted these agencies. As the other members of my team have written an in-depth report of our findings, impressions and ideas concerning these organizations, I will briefly comment in this paper.

The first agency we visited was Casa Minunata. It was hard for me to know what to do, what to ask, and what to notice while we were there. It was our first visit; we were still trying to get an understanding of Romanian culture, the views toward the disabled, and the laws. I especially felt like I had a hard time because I had my field placement at an agency for children with disabilities and I kept trying to equate what I saw to what I had known at that agency. However, the differences were so great that the comparison simply did not hold up.

I thought Casa had a lot of unique ideas. Their father's camp program seems to be a great idea, especially in Romanian society, where fathers tend to take a hands-off approach to parenting. I really like their alternative ideas to finding funding. Although I had personal discomfort with the agency renting out space for religious services, I found it to be an imaginative way to use what they had to get the funding they desperately need. After the visit, I had a hard time thinking critically about the agency. The girls and I all overlooked the fact that the agency did not serve Roma children. I thought that was interesting because if it had been African Americans in the US that would be immediately noticeable. I think this was the first thing that made me aware that I had to think in an entirely different way.

I found our next stop, Cluj, to be sort of a whirlwind. First, we had problems with the van breaking down, which made things interesting and difficult. I felt that I did not get much out of the visit to the University. I think that if we had a better understanding of the coursework and maybe if we had gotten a chance to speak with students it would have helped our understanding. We had such brief time with the three agencies we visited that it was hard to know what to ask, especially since we had no time to prepare. I felt that Estuar seemed like more of a rec center than an agency; their programming seemed very limited and their staff inexperienced. Artemis was an interesting agency, but I worry they will have limited success until laws and attitudes toward domestic violence change in Romania. FRCCF seemed to be a huge and successful agency. However, we had limited time there and were unable to get a full view of their work. FRCCF seems to be a place for further exploration and possible collaboration

I found our time in Bistrista to be most compelling. Once we went into the placement center it all became simple again; it was easier to see the big picture-- that we need to find a way to help these kids. Further, I felt the staff at Romanian Children's Relief reflected that same simple goal of making life better for these children. Having direct contact with the children made the experience more real, and having the opportunity to stay in a home that was fostering a child helped me to see how the process worked. I felt that the staff had a great relationship with the DCP and that helped the unique collaboration. Further, the staff was very receptive to us, due to the prior relationship with Dr. Groza. As I learned more I did find myself growing frustrated that the social workers and psychologists were

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not doing some things, like working with the parents, but I would remind myself how remarkable their program is and would realize how much they are doing and how much things have improved in the in such a short time.

I must admit that I felt completely drained by the time we visited Close To You. Even with our vacation, I felt brain-dead, drained and overwhelmed. I found myself preoccupied with the trip coming to an end. I was anxious to go on to Amsterdam and Belgium. I was not yet homesick, but I did miss people from home. I was getting sick of lugging my bags around and waking up each night in a different place. With all this going on, I unfortunately retained little from this visit.

In Country

When I think about this trip, I am most struck by the village life and the history of Romania. I am still so amazed by the village we visited. The life we saw there was so hard, demanding, and exhausting. However, I also found it appealing. I can image how rewarding it must be--how simple and uncomplicated. I don't think I had realized that people still lived like that. I also could not believe that those in the village were still connected to those in the cities. To me it seemed like there should be such a huge disconnect, as those worlds seemed so different.

I was also very struck by the history of communism, the Ceausescu rule and the revolution. These events have left such a mark on the country and it was fascinating to see how history can shape the personality of a nation. I loved

hearing the Romanians speak of the history and seeing the way that the events of the recent past were shaping the present.

Coming Home

The prospect of leaving Romania depressed yet excited me. The last few days in country I felt total ambivalence. I felt pushed and pulled. I knew if I stayed longer I couldn't have taken in anymore, and yet I did not want the experience to end. I had such strong feelings on the train from Bucharest to Budapest. I couldn't sleep; I laid in the dark watching Romania seem to pass in reverse. I was so afraid of it "erasing", of all of it going away as we traveled back across the country.

And a lot of it did. It's so hard. You get home and life went on without you. Your friends and family want to catch you up on what you missed but when you first get back it feels like you are in such a different place. I would try to tell them all about my trip and couldn't. The experience felt back in time, on a different plane, a different world. People go to Europe and talk about how it changes them, makes them realize things, and they find themselves. For me, Western Europe was amazing. It was different and old and did have that feeling of history and all that, but Eastern Europe is a different universe. Now, there are times my cell phone dies, my DSL connection goes down and I catch myself getting so mad. If I think about, I remember its ridiculous. I remember men milking goats to make dinner and a living. I remember standing on top of hills and feeling so different than I ever imagine feeling in the US. It's not just about technology; it's

not only the natural purity of the country or its strong historical presence. The feeling in Romania is unlike anything I've ever experienced.

I went on to Western Europe, an entirely different experience, that I won't go into here. That week flashed by and I found myself alone in the Detroit airport—tired and completely drained. I felt Romania still pulling at my heart and knew I would not be able to explain it. Exhausted and depressed that my journey was over I pulled out my journal and wrote, "I am nowhere and I am everywhere." My mind was full of all these great experiences and amazing places, and I was back in the dreary averageness of an airport in Detroit.

And I was right; I don't think anyone I tell about this experience "gets it." It's this thing I did and no one in my daily life really can understand. At best, someone will equate it to his or her European trips. But I don't know anyone who tried to learn a country up and down. I met and really talked to people. I saw life at its best and worst, richest and poorest, the accepted and the excluded. We lived like kings, we stayed in average homes, and we really tried to understand the poor, the sick, and the orphaned.

I think that's what bonds the team. We are all so different, as different as four people could probably be, but we did this together. I've always been a communal person. I've experienced much of my life with people, have had other people's perceptions to temper my own, but in this case the perceptions of the team are the only help I have had.

Back to School

When I returned to school and field in the fall, areas of the trip started to fall into place. I found I could really use what I had learned and experienced. I will use MSASS's eight abilities as a lens to look at what I've learned.

Of the eight abilities I feel that the critical thinking ability was most important on the trip. There are many factors influencing everything the agencies do and being able to see things on multiple levels is very important. I really feel I grew in this area. In Romania I learned that things are not always as they seem and that I should try to look deeper to accurately understand something. I saw how history could affect a country and its people. I think that looking critically at this has helped me to look at how history affects my clients and their family systems. My time in Romania taught me that my assumptions rarely help my understanding of a situation, and that silence, listening and thinking are the best ways to understand.

This trip added to my communication ability greatly. I tend to be wordy in writing and speaking. Sometimes I have a hard time getting to the point easily. In Romania we often had to communicate with people whom English was their second or third language. I found it very interesting to try to put things in a way that would be understood. I had to be very simple and direct in my speech, avoiding any slang or jargon. I think that speaking in that manner helped my overall speaking. I try now to speak this way more often, especially avoiding jargon with my clients. I find that it makes it easier for me to be understood.

I think that this experience greatly contributed to my professional identity. I feel more competent, more experienced, and better able to practice as a social worker because I have had this unique experience. This contributes to my attainment of the social work practice ability. It is so rare for a social work student to have the opportunity to study in a country like Romania. Since I have had this experience, I feel that it is something that sets me apart from my peers. Similarly, I feel that this has contributed to my world of work ability, as I feel that I am now unique and have special skills and understanding that I will be able to use in the workplace.

Observing the way that social work is practiced in Romania contributed much to my understanding of professional use of self and advocating for social justice. I felt that the social workers we met in Romania used themselves professionally in such amazing ways and hope that I am more able to emulate them. In Romania, social work is a young and not commonly understood profession. I felt that the social workers we met all used themselves to try and advance the field. They all worked within the community to raise awareness and to correct misunderstandings. Further, they advocated well for not only their clients, but for themselves. I feel that social workers in the US fail to be their own advocates, and fail to use their professional images in the communities they work in. Social work in the US has a poor reputation, as it does in Romania, but I feel that the social workers we met in Romania were fighting harder to change their image.

Lastly, Romania helped me to understand diversity a little more and helped me to refine my own values, especially in terms of international adoption.

Previous to traveling to Romania I had unclear views on international adoption. I was aware that research indicated that interracial adoptions were difficult for children, and thought, like many others, that for a Caucasian family a child from Romania or Russia might adapt better because they are also Caucasian. What I neglected to understand was that the culture of that child extends far past the color of their skin, and that just because they are white like their parents will not make their adjustment any easier. Through this I developed the personal feeling that adoptions must remain in country, and this has become one of my values.

Through my travel in Romania I saw many more factors of diversity than I had previously understood. I was able to witness the differences and difficulties of the Roma population, and was able to experience the feeling of being an outsider, something I do not get to feel often in the US. This trip greatly expanded my view, understanding, and appreciation of diversity.

Tips for Future Travelers (aka Romanian Gerbils)

- Try everything - even chicken liver, it was nasty, but some people like it

One of the things I was most glad I did was to try and drop a lot of my boundaries and experience all that I could. That meant eating some things I wished I hadn't and climbing mountains I didn't want to, but it also meant that I now know that I like fish egg salad, hate fried chicken liver, love the view from the top of a hill overlooking a village, and hate the smell of goats. Even if you are really afraid of something, I urge you to try it, Romania is a surprising place and things might not turn out like you expect them too.

- If the elevator looks old, take the stairs

Even simple things might not turn out like they should, and maybe sometimes you should listen to your fearful teammate. However, no matter how stuck you get, remember the Romania people are generally very caring and helpful!

- It's all an adventure

No matter how hard you try, how culturally competent you are, and how resourceful you are, you will wind up in at least one difficult situation. I think the best thing to do is to be calm, and to remember that this is your adventure. Every odd situation turns into a great story for later.

- No matter how quick you have to get off the train, watch your step

While you're diving headfirst into this experience, remember, a little cautiousness never hurt anyone.

- Be flexible, be ready for anything

Anything can and will happen. You've opted to go to Romania with Victor Groza, what do you expect? Again, remember, it's an adventure. Just try to be as prepared as possible and take things as they come.

- Pack light

Seriously, I mean it. If you can't carry all of your bags by yourself bring less. Remember that you are going to want to bring so much back home. By the second week you are not going to care what you look like, but you are going to be upset that your bag weighs 75 pounds, especially when the airline charges you on the way home.

- Keep a journal

This trip is such a rich experience, you are never going to be able to remember all of it, so do yourself a favor and write down as much as you can.

- It's worth it

Whatever you have to sacrifice to go, I would. Its expensive, it's a long time to be away, but it's an amazing experience and I can't image anyone regretting it.