

THE IRISH TIMES

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A hopeful future for abandoned Romanian children

Romania has moved on from having 300,000 children in orphanages, and great efforts to build hope for young survivors are under way

IMEET ANDRÉ and Mihai (not their real names) on an organic farm in Suceava, Romania, in the foothills of the Carpathian Mountains. André, a 24-year-old, slight with a shy smile, is busy harvesting crops, stopping only briefly for water. Mihai is equally engaged, hauling loaded containers onto the grass. Another lad is herding cows down to the fields.

Part of the attraction of the farm for foreign visitors is the fact that it is in an area of Romania world famous for its unique painted monasteries. They are bastions of Orthodoxy in the 15th and 16th centuries, and Unesco world heritage sites attracting rising numbers of tourists annually.

A former princely capital, Suceava has, however, a less celebrated recent history, being the site of a number of the infamous Romanian state orphanages whose terrible legacy left thousands damaged and disabled.

On the farm, the industrious workers each have their own responsibility, looking after gardens, the fields, the dairy herd, chickens and pigs, or making furniture for export. The farm produce is served up fresh in the dining room each day for guests by a talented cook called Leonuta. It costs about €30 for bed and breakfast and €9 for dinner.

Oat Farm (Oat denotes organic, agriculture, training), however, is a farm/guesthouse with a difference. Set up by a pioneering charity called Fara, it is managed by a young biodiversity graduate called Ionu Pastrav. Its raison d'être is to generate funds for the children's homes in Romania and to teach young

people skills in agriculture, horticulture and carpentry.

André's story is not untypical. Abandoned at four by parents who could not feed or clothe him, he remained in a state institution for 14 years until, at 18, without any skills or special training, he had to leave and find a job.

He went in search of his family, who he discovered lived nearby, but they refused to see him. André was found starving, freezing and living rough in a tractor shed by Pastrav, who offered him work.

"Today he is the second hardest worker, and thriving," says Pastrav with a proud smile. The grandmother who rejected him is now hospitalised and incontinent. Each day after work, André goes to the hospital to change her, a measure of the compassion denied to him.

Mihai's story is equally poignant. Abandoned in a state orphanage, he eventually returned home to find his family of eight living in a house measuring two by four metres. Despite this, his mother took him back. "Sometimes I think the children are paying for the sins of their parents," says Pastrav.

Images of malnourished children in orphanages chained and shackled to steel cots after the collapse of the Ceausescu regime in 1989 shocked the world. It was estimated in 1991 that some 300,000 were living in such conditions all over the country, placed in institutions by families forced to have children they were unable to feed or clothe because of the state's social engineering programme, designed to double the workforce.

The horror propelled a flood of western aid. First into northern Romania was an English nurse called Jane Nicholson. Along with a French doctor and volunteers they headed to Suceava with medical supplies, food and clothing.

"There were 200 children, removed from families at an early age, all with severe behavioural problems. It was absolutely

shocking. There was hardly any sanitation, food or medical supplies," she recalls.

A former chairwoman of the Sue Ryder foundation, Nicholson started to raise money in the UK, co-founding Fara, "a family for those without". Their first home for 16 children called St Nicholas opened in 1997 in Suceava, later followed by another in Bucharest.

"It was difficult at first," Cornelia Mihaescu, a director of Fara in Romania, said. "We started with boys and girls; some were siblings and very damaged from the institutions, but slowly, slowly, things changed. All of them were desperate to be held. They had no concept of a mother."

The home in Suceava is run by Adriana Eabaefu and her husband John, who take care of a group of rescued children of varying ages in a warm atmosphere. One nice story is that of Lacramiara Lungu, who arrived aged 12. She is now a talented oboe player in Bucharest, having had the chance to develop her talent.

Last year, Fara celebrated its first wedding. Pictures of former family members line the walls and though "we try and heal as much as we can, there are a lot of issues behind the scenes", Nicholson says. Some children, according to Mihaescu, "are beyond help".

It costs £7,000 (€7,900) a month to run the home, drawn from private funding – mostly through charity shops in the UK. Though many state orphanages have closed and the number of children in orphanages has dropped to 30,000, difficulties remain. Nicholson claims that authorities are not doing enough for children abandoned in the streets, and the policy of moving them from orphanages into apartments at 14 makes no provision for those with behavioural, learning or sexual problems.

"There are between 30-40 per cent of people living on the poverty line and prices have gone up a lot. We are battling to have some

joint funding for our foster care and special education projects, and we will continue to battle for some money from big companies in Romania," she says. Corruption is a huge hurdle. Abandonment still continues.

In the village of Abore, about 40km away, Fara's project with 40 Roma children has been successful despite local opposition. On a visit to the school I met local priest Fr Catalin and the teachers. Children's exuberant paintings and *macramé* work displayed on the walls were evidence of developing youthful skills.

Nicholson, an accomplished icon painter, works closely with the Catholic and Orthodox churches. "It's tricky but it means we get good people to work for us," she says.

The Orthodox monasteries had problems during the Ceausescu period when they were dismissed as "medieval art museums" by the communists. Today most are home to nuns who outnumber men five to one, a legacy of the period when men had to work and were prevented from entering the orders.

"People could learn everything here from the Old Testament," explained my guide Sorin Fodor at Voronet monastery, one of the most famous. "It wasn't necessary to be able to read." Illiterate believers must have been educated, entertained, inspired and terrified by these medieval picture stories painted by monk artists using plants, herbs and minerals.

Back at the farm, dinner is served by a smiling girl aged 17. Abandoned aged seven, she now has a job and a chance in life. It brings to mind images of the triumph of good over evil expressed so colourfully on the outdoor frescoes of Humor monastery seen earlier that day, and the living evidence of small human achievements all around us at the farm.

www.oatfarm.com
www.faracharity.org

DEIRDRE McQUILLAN

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From left: Florian (in blue top) and Claudio at Oat Farm; a child plays at the St Nicholas children's home in Suceava; Cornelia Mihaescu, staff and children at St Nicholas.
Photographs: Deirdre McQuillan