

CIACOVA, ROMANIA

As most of you know, in June, 1983, John and I went to Ciacova and I will try to relate some of our experiences and impressions of our parents fatherland.

We flew from St. Louis to Frankfurt, Germany, arriving there on Friday and we had to wait until Sunday to take the only weekly Romanian flight direct into Timisoara, Romania. We arrived in Timisoara about an hour later on a damp, overcast, dismal, chilly afternoon. The airport is very small and right next to an Army installation. There were lots of young soldiers walking around outside and in the airport there were many Russian and Romanian soldiers on duty with tommy-guns strapped on their back. There was also an army tank located on the airport grounds. Eerie!

At the airport we checked through customs. We had to pay a \$12 tax and also an English speaking lady had us convert \$10 of our currency into their local currency for each day we intended to spend in Romania. Since we stated we were going to be there for four days, we had to convert \$40 of our money. Any extension of our visit would have to be made through the local police. She also asked why we were in Romania and who we were going to visit. We told her we just wanted to visit Ciacova, the place of our parent's birth and to visit the cemetery and we said we thought all our relatives were dead. She was so agreeable and said she had been to Ciacova and it was a nice little "dorf" and there would be "no problem" when John inquired about a car and driver.

We went by taxi to the Continental Hotel (the best in town but very plain by our standards) although it was very comfortable. It was a high-rise and our windows overlooked a patio which in the afternoon from about 4 to 7 pm had red and white checked tablecloths on the tables and the guests and local people gathered to enjoy a beer and conversation and listened to a 3 pc. orchestra playing American music.

Very few people in Timisoara spoke English, or German for that matter. English speaking were the lady at the airport, the hotel clerks, and two waitresses in the hotel restaurant. Without some knowledge of the German language, we would have been lost.

The first day we went into the hotel restaurant, our English speaking waitress asked me if we had something to sell. I asked her what she wanted and she replied "anything." (Strange)

We went to the tourist bureau in the hotel and lo and behold there was the lady from the airport. But this time when we asked about a car with a driver to go to Ciacova, she said "no - couldn't do - no way - no explanation but a definite no." Then we asked about taking a tour of the City - "no tours available." Can we take a taxi for a City tour? "Certainly" Do you have an English or German speaking driver? "No, only Romanian" Well, that took care of a tour!

After walking around part of the City and talking to people in two different tourist offices (one was just for Romanians traveling in Romania) and a dozen or more people in German - we finally found a young girl who would try to get us a car. We couldn't have a driver, so now there was the problem of an International Driver's license which we didn't have. (When John was in Timisoara about 10 years ago, he had a driver and a car that took him

to Ciacova so he didn't have to have a license. At the time he was there he didn't realize we still had relatives there so he didn't inquire about them.) The young girl told us she would have to contact officials in Bucuresti to see whether we could rent the car for a day without the int'l drivers license and we were to contact our tourist office at 8 AM the next morning. So sure were we that we would not be allowed to rent the car that our luggage was all packed and we were getting ready to fly out of that place. But, miracles of miracles, the Tourist office said we could have the car by 10 AM, but no driver. So, after all the red tape and aggravation, we were on our way to Ciacova. The driver who delivered the car spoke only Romanian and he tried to show John how to operate the car and we went with us only to the 12 mi radius of the city, beyond that he was not allowed to go - same way with taxis - they could only go within the 12 mile radius of the City. We were told there was a shortage of gasoline - it all goes to Russia.

The weather for our trip was just lovely - beautiful skies and mild temperatures.

They rented us a small Russian built car with stick shift which was very hard to master (and we never did find the horn) but we found our way out of town (John did all the driving) and about an hour later we turned right off the main highway to Ciacova. There is a train that stops on the outskirts of Ciacova but coming from Timis, we would have had to transfer and then walk into the town (no taxis). There was also a bus that goes by Ciacova but coming from Timis. the bus got into Ciacova in the afternoon and returned an hour later and the next bus was the next morning. We saw no hotels or restaurants or any shops in the town although we didn't have much time to look. The main road through town was paved but all the side roads were dirt.

John drove to a Flour mill he remembered from his last visit and while he was looking around I went over to three men digging a ditch and showed them the address I had from some correspondence at least 10 years old and asked them in German if they could direct us there. One man was so very nice (he spoke German, thank goodness) and he drove with us to the address and went inside and asked them if they would like some company from America. It was Katie and Jani (John) Zoppe's house - Katie Biring Bradt's daughter and son-in-law. They couldn't have been nicer. They all speak German, no English, so we had a time trying to remember the language. Katie said "never in a thousand years did she ever dream she would see a cousin from America." So, right away she telephoned her brother Gerhard and he came over and we talked. Then Katie showed us her garden which covered almost the entire yard. All the houses are built right off the sidewalk with a high 7 or 8' green metal solid fence from their house to the next house. No one can see into the yards so they have only a so-called back yard. There was a gate in the front that they opened and we drove the car into the yard.

Their garden and house were very clean and orderly. The garden contained almost every vegetable you could imagine along with some fruit trees, strawberries, raspberries, grapes and, of course, flowers. There were 2 hogs that they were going to butcher in the fall and also there were a lot of little chickens running around. Jani told me several times about the water faucet that he had in the garden and water in the house so I imagine that it was a new addition. Jani did seem concerned that they had only enough fuel to last them through this winter. They both remarked that the garden was a lot of hard work and they were just getting too old for it.

The house consisted of many rather small rooms but was quite comfortable. I noticed a large Baby Grand piano in another part of the house that I think was his daughter's living area (wasn't quite clear just who all lived in the house with them.) The kitchen was very small and rather barren but we ate in the dining room and bedroom combination and they had a little sitting area. They also had a bathroom with a toilet and tub and wash basin. In Timis. at the hotel they had a television set but at newstime from about 5 to 8 pm the set goes off the air - Jani said that was so they didn't hear any of the national news the Government didn't want them to hear.

Katie then got out the schnapps and we made a toast and she then served us some very delicious smoked pork and dried pea mixture, home-made wine, strawberries from their garden and I think she was tickled that we didn't want any sugar on our strawberries because they are allotted only 1/2 kilo of sugar a month (1/2 kilo is about a pound.)

Since we had gone to Europe to find out about our relatives, I got out the family history and tried to get as much information as I could with 2 or 3 people chiming in at the same time in German - I am surprised I got as much information as I did although there is still more I think I can get.

We wanted to go to the cemetery, so in the afternoon we all walked there and Gerhard and his wife Amelia joined us. Katie showed us our sister Lillie's grave, her parent's graves, Frank Biring, Jr's and also our grandparents grave. The headstone had their pictures on it but we couldn't get a close enough snapshot of it. I don't think we would have ever found the graves without Katie - the cemetery is really built up, with a fence around it and they are paving the pathways and our relatives were all upset because they said it wasn't necessary and apparently they have to pay for it.

As you know, our mother Elizabeth Biring, took her baby Lillie, back to Europe to show her mother and Katie told me her mother told her that Lillie was a healthy happy baby and my mother laid her down for a nap and when she woke up she was coughing and choking and died shortly thereafter of "black diptheria." (Imagine the pain of having to leave your baby over there.) Katie also said that when my father went to Europe in 1928, he had a concrete cover put over the grave. He was on a tour of Europe and was looking forward to seeing his mother and when he arrived in Ciacova, he was too late, his mother had been buried a week or two before he arrived. (What a heartache that must have been.)

John and I didn't know who we would meet in Ciacova but were delighted to find we still have some relatives living in Romania. Both Katie & Jani and Gerhard and Amelia have one son and daughter and some of them have children. I think Gerhards children are the ones in our pictures but with all the confusion, we aren't too sure. We do know that we did not meet Katie and Jani's son and daughter because they work in Timisoara. The girl is a chemist and worked with checking microbes in pork. She works a 12 hour day.

We did ask Katie about the people living in Ciacova. She said there were all kinds - Germans, Romanians, Hungarians, etc. and Gypsies. I asked if they got along with the Gypsies and she said they say "Good Morning" but never let them in the house because they will steal everything.

We asked about the Black Market and they said almost anything can be bought if you have the money, but all the prices were so inflated. She said a package of pudding which cost about 30¢ our money would be 90¢ to \$1 on the Black Market. I asked if they had to have dollar bills to exchange on the Black Market and she said "No, \$5 - \$10 or \$20's no matter." They did get a better rate of exchange with the German Mark than with the dollar.

Buying food. We noticed in Timisoara that there were long lines at the butcher shop in the morning. Meat is rationed so I guess one would be lucky to be able to get any at all. There was also lines at the bakery and milk products store.

Katie said the living was hard but they were making it although there was not much money left at the end of the month.

We are really sorry now that we didn't spend more time in Ciacova. There still is so much I would like to know. We didn't even visit the little Catholic church in town or find out the address of Emil Biring, a Catholic Priest. We also didn't learn too much about Gerhard Bradt and his family. He and his wife were very quiet and we didn't even get a chance to see how he lived and really get a chance to talk with him. Katie is very much of an extrovert and after all, we were in her house. Both Katie and Gerhard have such beautiful thick white hair - must be a Biring trait.

If you would like to write to Katie, I will give you her address. I know she would love to hear from you. I will write for Gerhard's address and if you are interested, please let me know.

I know this will never be considered a literary achievement but I do hope you were not too bored and have a little insight into living behind the Iron Curtain. No fun - we were glad to get out after only four days.

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