

## PREFACE



*Our first winter in Romania*

**B**efore the 1989 collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe, neither of us had ever been to Romania. Sheilah had a chance to visit briefly, as a reporter, seven years later, but Jim had never set foot on Romanian soil before stepping into the job of U.S. ambassador in early 1998.

It wasn't because we lacked passports or feared foreign lands. Jim was born in Italy. Sheilah had studied in France, and both of us had traveled a good bit abroad, in Asia as well as in Europe. But other than Jim's eight months of infancy in Rome and Sheilah's summer in Paris, we had never lived abroad before going to Romania.

However, we had worked and traveled in the region. As a White House correspondent for ABC News, Sheilah had covered President Ronald Reagan's trips to Moscow and Berlin and first lady Hillary Clinton's 1996 trip to Central and Eastern Europe, including Romania. On the morning of August 19, 1991, Sheilah was the sole ABC News correspondent in Moscow reporting on the attempted coup against Mikhail Gorbachev—the attempted coup that led to the breakup of the Soviet Union that December. That same month, with Jim along for the

Christmas holiday, she went to Georgia to cover the violent overthrow of that new republic's first democratic government. After dashing across a no-man's land, Sheilah interviewed the beleaguered president in his basement bunker in the Georgian parliament building. It was on January 1, 1992, the day the U.S. recognized Georgia and the fourteen other republics as independent of the Soviet Union.

Jim, then a Maryland state legislator and investor, shared Sheilah's interest in the collapse of Communism in the Soviet bloc and became active in the region as well. He was an election observer in Croatia. He invited leading Soviet democrats to testify in Annapolis, Maryland's capital city. He chaired the new Sister State Committee, promoting exchanges between Maryland and the Leningrad Oblast in Russia. In 1995, President Bill Clinton asked him to join the first board of the Albanian American Enterprise Fund, set up by the U.S. government to invest in business development in that poorest of former Communist dictatorships in Europe.

But how did all this lead Jim to become ambassador? Here's the background: Jim has known President Bill Clinton and Vice President Al Gore since the early 1980s. He had worked on both their 1992 and 1996 campaigns, primarily organizing support in the Italian-American community. He told the White House he was happy to remain on the board of the Albanian fund, but would also be interested in a full-time job on the ground in Eastern Europe or the former Soviet Union, if he could make a difference in helping their transition from Communism. The obvious option, given Jim's public service and business experience, would be an ambassadorship.

He knew it was a long shot—there were few embassies, and many interested and qualified candidates. But what was the likelihood that another Democratic president whom Jim knew would be elected any time soon? Like most Democrats, Jim's win-loss record for presidential candidates had not been good in the preceding decades.

Months passed with no obvious interest from the White House. Then, during a dinner at the Italian Embassy in Washington, Jim ran into John Podesta, a friend of twenty-five years and President Clin-

ton's chief of staff. John pulled Jim into a corner.

"I want to ask you something," Podesta said. "Are you really interested in an ambassadorship?"

Jim's initial thought was that his friend was trying to soften the news that an embassy post was not in his future.

"Yes," Jim replied, "but I understand there's lots of competition."

"There is, but you're on a short list," Podesta said. "You need to get your résumé and go see Marsha Scott at the White House—she's handling ambassadorships."

*Hmmm, Jim thought. This might just be possible after all.*

Two days after his legislative session ended in April, Jim went to the White House, résumé in hand. In Marsha's office, he sat ready to explain his interest and answer any questions.

"I appreciate your coming in," she said. "The president would like you to be ambassador to Romania."

*What? Jim thought. Did I miss the start of this conversation?*

"That sounds great," was the best response he could produce.

"Good," Marsha said. "Keep this to yourself for now. We'll be talking a lot over the next few months."

She was referring to the White House vetting and Senate confirmation processes.

Jim walked out of the White House and called Sheilah.

She was as astonished and pleased as Jim was. But there was a complication.

Just a few months earlier, Sheilah had been recruited away from ABC News by *Business Week* magazine and public TV to host a new weekly show—*This Week in Business with Sheilah Kast*. It was the business version of PBS's *Washington Week in Review*, produced by WETA. At the time she accepted the job, we'd concluded that nothing would come of Jim's interest in full-time diplomacy.

Sheilah found herself firmly in the middle of a feminist's dilemma. Half her friends said, "It's great Jim has this job, but you can't give up your career!" The other half said, "It's nice you've got this television show, but you really should be with your husband at a special time

like this.”

Our compromise turned out to be an extreme case of commuter marriage. In the year following his Senate confirmation, Jim returned to the U.S. several times to accompany Romanian officials, or to visit Romanian-American communities. Sheilah made eight round trips to Romania, flying out after taping her TV show on Friday and returning the following Wednesday to work on the next week’s show.

Midway through Jim’s first year in Romania, it became clear to her that Jim was having way too much fun by himself in Romania, and she didn’t want to miss it. *We only have one chance to represent the United States.* So Sheilah gave *Business Week* and WETA-TV notice, left the show at the end of 1998, and moved to Romania with her eighty-nine-year-old mother.

For the final two years that Jim was ambassador, we traveled the country, both together and apart. This book is the product of our unique look at Romania, and of our continuing involvement there. Both of us maintain close ties to the friends we made there, and Jim visits a few times a year as a board member of several regional investment funds.

Our experience was a little different than “a year in Provence” or twelve months “under the Tuscan sun.” When you’re the U.S. ambassador or “Mrs. Ambassador,” you see the country from a different angle than you would otherwise. Part of that comes with diplomacy—not the ceremonial dinners and such, but the opportunity in a free country like Romania to go almost anywhere and talk with almost anyone.

Professional diplomacy is a lot more like journalism than many people in either profession might acknowledge. Foreign Service officers, and non-career ambassadors like Jim, spend a huge portion of their time learning and listening, and then writing up what they’ve learned in “cables,” as the State Department quaintly calls the daily memos each embassy sends to “Washington” (the metaphor that appropriates the name of the whole city to mean U.S. government headquarters).

The big difference between journalism and its diplomatic cousin is that cables are largely secret—neither the people written about nor the average American gets to read them. The results of this secrecy are predictable: Some actual secrets are reported and kept, some errors of fact and interpretation are never corrected because of lack of scrutiny, and most interested Americans rarely hear or see the information collected in their name and paid for with their tax dollars.

Normally, much of what diplomats learn is kept secret, retained in their heads, or shared publicly only in professional memoirs or academic treatises.

This book is different.

We traveled all over Romania. Jim visited all forty counties, most of them more than once, and Sheilah went to some spots that Jim did not. We saw more of Romania and of Romanians—from the mines to the software labs, from the monasteries to the hospitals—than most foreigners and even many Romanians have.

Because of Jim's political experience, we conducted town meetings in villages and cities that had never seen a U.S. ambassador. We invited ordinary Romanians to our house—the Ambassador's Residence—by the thousands. When the Romanian American Enterprise Fund (RAEF) asked us to host a dinner for its board, we upped the ante and suggested inviting *all* the Romanian small business owners to whom they had made loans. That night, our backyard was filled with Romanian entrepreneurs.

Working with the U.S. Consulate, we threw going-away parties for Romanian students who decided to study in the U.S.—with a pitch to come back to Romania, where we saw so much opportunity for them. And we hosted a backyard barbeque for hundreds of credit union managers from all over Romania—mostly women—who had kept the credit union system alive for working people during the Communist years and were now working with the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) to modernize their organizations.

Jim loved visiting factories and hiking across farms. (Sheilah was less entranced by the chicken-rendering plants.) In every town we

visited, we tried to meet with all American citizens, to hear their concerns and their insights into Romania. On New Year's Day, we threw an open house for all American citizens in Romania, partly for fun and partly to meet more of them so we could learn about their experiences.

Why did we spend so much time with Americans around the country—people like Romanian-Americans who had returned to retire or to start small businesses, Peace Corps volunteers teaching high school English, or church and charitable workers helping orphans and the disabled? Weren't we supposed to be talking with Romanians and other diplomats?

We did that, of course, but Jim's fundamental view was that he worked *for* Americans—they paid his salary, just as Maryland taxpayers now pay his state senate salary. They had the right to talk with the U.S. ambassador, so his policy was to see every U.S. citizen who asked for a meeting. And, more broadly, Americans living in, and even visiting, Romania were a valuable source of information and insight for the Embassy. They could help us see through the blur of living as public officials in a nice neighborhood in the nation's capital.

We tried to minimize the filter. Jim was guarded by a security detail for only about a month of his tenure. He drove himself around Bucharest and its suburbs whenever possible, much to the astonishment of Romanians and Americans alike. And Sheilah often traveled on her own, either in her own used car or by train.

Nonetheless, Romanians knew who we were and that we represented the U.S. government. That didn't always elicit the most candid conversations. Ordinary American citizens, on the other hand, lived all over Romania—in villages and small towns, as well as in Bucharest. They had no diplomatic license plates on their cars, and worked and played with Romanians as people, not as government officials. Thus, they knew and understood things about Romania that were not obvious to those of us in the capital's diplomatic bubble. And they evaluated what they learned through their American eyes and American values.

By listening to these Americans, some of whom are quoted in this book, we learned a great deal.

Jim's political and business experience also meant he could, and loved to, talk with Romanian politicians, business people, and labor leaders as peers. He felt their pain when their poll numbers dropped, their stock prices slid, and their members were laid off. And he admired their persistence and commitment to making a success of their country—and of their own parties, unions, and businesses. Jim's interactions with cultural figures were less rewarding, at least for them. Given the big role the U.S. plays in any country, Jim as U.S. ambassador was both an observer of, and a participant in, major issues affecting Romania directly and indirectly.

Sheilah had unique access as well. She was invited to be a part of health fairs, seminars, and galas, and to attend recitals, observe artists at work, and judge essay contests. A professional interviewer of her experience and predilections could only dream of doors opening up and down society as easily as they did for her in Romania.

Romanian journalists, another great force-multiplier for someone who wants to understand a nation, treated her as one of their own, talking with her as they wouldn't with Jim. With lower public visibility than Jim and no official government responsibilities, she could go places and speak with people where his notoriety would overwhelm or intimidate. At the same time, as the wife of the ambassador and not a working journalist during her years there, she could learn things and get to know people in ways which would be much more difficult had she been wearing a press tag.

As we began to consider this book soon after returning home to America, the differences between Jim's and Sheilah's professional approaches became clear. To Jim, what he remembers is what he remembers. In politics or business, what he remembers may be wrong, in whole or in part, but as he sees it, information is always imperfect. What's important is whether the conclusions drawn from those memories are correct—whom you can trust, whether that idea worked out the last time it was tried, why people believed what they believed.

None of this is “truth” in a metaphysical sense. At its best it’s a fragment of truth, but it’s definitely what Jim thinks he knows. That was the book Jim had in mind.

But Sheilah, the journalist, reasoned, “If we were going to write a book, we should have been taking notes from day one. How can we rely on our slowly fading memories? How can we know we’ll quote people correctly?”

We decided to conduct the interviews we hadn’t done. We knew the stories we wanted to share and we knew the people who would tell them. All we had to do was go back to Romania and ask them to tell us again—this time on tape. Graciously, all but two of the Romanians we asked to sit for taped interviews agreed to do so. The major interviews in this book are all the products of those taped sessions, done over the past several years. In contrast to our interpretations, they allow a variety of Romanians, from the Patriarch of the Orthodox Church to recent IT graduates, to tell their own stories and share their own insights.

Not all the dialogue is from tapes, however. Shorter vignettes and those which did not lend themselves to replays are based on our best memories. If we misunderstood by a wide margin, we apologize in advance and look forward to being corrected.

Another big challenge was figuring out whose “voice” the book would be in—Jim’s, Sheilah’s, both, or neither? There’s no question that this book is the product of our common experience, endless conversation, and shared values. But Jim didn’t drive Sheilah’s car or have a fractured ankle treated at the Maramureş hospital. Sheilah wasn’t briefly barred from Turkey because she left her tourist passport in her hotel room. You’ve been reading our decision. When we’re writing about the two of us, “we” means both of us, “Jim” means Jim, and “Sheilah” means Sheilah. It feels a bit strange to write in the first and third person simultaneously, but we hope it works.

Of course, this book is not encyclopedic. It is not a guidebook, but rather a look at a country and a people through American eyes. This is what we saw and what we think is useful to understand about Romania as it concludes its second decade after the fall of Communism.

One tiny caveat: Even for political junkies, it may be hard to immediately grasp the references here to Romanian political parties, not least because leaders move from one party to another and the parties themselves change names much more often than we're used to in the U.S. Here's the crib sheet:

- The major party on the left, led originally by Romania's first post-Communist president Ion Iliescu and in 2009 by former Romanian Ambassador to the U.S. Mircea Geoană, is now called the Party of Social Democracy. Its initials have changed from PDSR to PSD. We'll use the latter throughout the book.
- Major parties on the center/right during the past twenty years have included:
  - \* The National Liberal Party, which was the party of the center/left before Communism, went into opposition in 2009. We'll refer to it by its initials PNL.
  - \* The National Christian Democratic Peasant Party was the party of the center/right before Communism and was strong in the late 1990s when we were there, but it has not been able to elect any members of parliament since then. Its initials are PNȚCD.
- The major center party, led by Traian Băsescu until his election as president, is the Democratic Liberal Party. Previously, it was called the Democratic Party. We'll use with PD-L, its current initials.
- The Hungarian party, which as an ethnic party covers the ideological spectrum and wins the overwhelming majority of votes of Hungarians in Romania, is known in Hungarian as the RMDSz (*Romániai Magyar Demokrata Szövetség*) and in Romanian as the UDMR (*Uniunea Democrată Maghiară din România*). We'll refer to it as UDMR.

Just as Stalin committed the Soviet Union to “Socialism in one country,” this book tells the story of post-Communism in one country. Much of what’s interesting is unique to Romania—the Latin island in a sea of Slavs—but much of it is also relevant to nations from the Czech Republic to Kyrgyzstan and Stalin’s Russia in between. After all, Romania is the fourth-largest former Communist country in the world—the only ones larger are Russia, Ukraine, and Poland. (Once when Jim made that point, a fellow diplomat responded, “What about China?” Jim reminded him that China still is a one-party, Communist-ruled country, even if it is much more open than it was under Mao. It’s a complicated world. Sometimes even the pros have trouble keeping up.)

Many of Romania’s most difficult challenges in the twenty years since the fall of the Berlin Wall in Germany and the fall of the Ceaușescu dictatorship in Romania have been similar to those encountered throughout the former Soviet bloc. Privatization of property; creation of a multi-party political system; relations with Russia, Western Europe, and the United States; the decline of living standards for many and new opportunities for others; the public re-emergence of religion; and managing ethnic conflict in an open society—this is the story of all 350 million people in two dozen countries.

Because we traveled so much around Romania, and because we know the country is much more diverse than Bucharest, we’ve organized the book around our travels. After the three introductory chapters, Chapter 4 starts in Bucharest—“the Paris of the East,” as it was called between the wars.

Then, in Chapter 5 we move to communities around Bucharest, north to Lake Snagov and south to a Gypsy village and the Boy Scouts. We celebrate Christmas in the stunning Transylvanian Alps, which have formed the most important border in Romania’s history.

In Chapter 6, starting at Peleş Castle in the mountains, we meet King Michael, the “good king” who overthrew a fascist dictator at age twenty-two and remains involved in his country as he approaches age ninety.

On the other side of the mountains, in Chapter 7, is Transylvania, the home of Dracula, Romania's large Hungarian minority and much more.

In Chapter 8 we head south again, to Wallachia, the historical heart of Romania south of the mountains. This includes Oltenia, where residents like to compare themselves to Texans.

Chapter 9 takes us to the northern edge of Romania—Maramureș, home of the Merry Cemetery and birthplace of Holocaust witness Elie Wiesel.

We go east in Chapter 10 to Bucovina and Moldavia, which border Ukraine and Moldova, the latter a country which used to be part of the Soviet Union and, before that, part of Romania.

Chapter 11 takes us south again to Dobrogea, to the Danube River and the Black Sea, sometimes called Romania's only good neighbor—besides Serbia.

Chapter 12 is called "Back to Europe" because the Banat and Crișana, the regions that border Hungary and Serbia on Romania's western edge, are the most physically, culturally, and economically integrated into Europe. Europe being Europe, isolationism is not an option for Romanians.

Chapter 13 explains what it's like "living in the Balkans, in the shadow of the Kremlin."

Finally, Chapter 14 pulls it all together. Just twenty years after the fall of Communism, why does Romania work?

The book is a series of vignettes—what we heard, what we learned, what we thought.

Like all Americans, we were fascinated by the stories of the Communist period—what didn't work, but also what did; why and how people left Romania during those forty-two years, and why other people stayed, even those who could have left; and how some people remember those years with horror, while others have more mixed memories.

One of the odder questions we occasionally get from Americans who don't know much about Romania is: "Is it still a Communist

country?" The question is a bit behind the curve, but more important is the way it defines the nation by its political system. That's understandable for the Cold War generation of Americans. For decades, the world did seem, at least to Americans, as if it were divided between the Free World and the Communist world.

But as America learned in Vietnam, that's not the way most people around the world see their own countries. Romanians know the difference between freedom and Communism—much better than Americans do, frankly—but they never defined their country solely by its transitory political system. Romanians saw—and see—their country as unique, and with ample reason: their Latin-based language, their Roman and Dacian heritage, their Christian Orthodox religion, their location in southeastern Europe, their humor, their cuisine, their foreign-language talents, and their engineering skills, among others. Communism, we learned, is not at the heart of their identity. As Romanians periodically reminded us, they hadn't chosen Communism; it had been imposed on them by the Soviet army.

Come with us, then, as we lead you past the misconceptions and show you the fascinating Romania we experienced.

*Sheilah Kast and Jim Rosapepe*

*College Park, MD*

*August 1, 2009*



# ROMANIA's REGIONS



## CHAPTER 1: LISTENING TO ROMANIANS



*Credit: Emanuel Tânjală*

### *Jim listening to very young Romanians*

**S**hort of knocking on doors or chatting at the supermarket, a town meeting is the best way to learn what's on the minds of ordinary people, and to make clear to them you care about *their* concerns, not just those of the big shots—the ones the Romanians call “the big potatoes.”

Jim hatched a plan for a series of town meetings with ordinary Romanians around the country. We had a sign made for one of the embassy vans that said, “America Listening to Romanians.” In a society only a decade removed from a police state, the sign might have been interpreted as an unfortunate reminder of sadder days. But the fact that our van pulled into school yards and village squares in broad daylight bespoke the difference between democracy and dictatorship.

Most days on the road, we took part in seven or eight events, from informal walking tours of markets to question and answer sessions in

dusty villages. Few of these communities had ever been visited by a U.S. ambassador. Unlike Romanian officials, we controlled no highway funds or farm subsidies, so our visits weren't important in any material sense. But the U.S. ambassador is a minor celebrity in Romania. A poll taken near the end of Jim's term reported that about two-thirds of Romanians, including half of all peasants, knew his name.

People turned out for our town meetings. The crowds ranged from dozens to hundreds. Typically, we'd conduct these sessions in a community hall or village square. The mayor would introduce us, and Jim would make a few opening remarks. Usually, he'd open with, "Bună ziua, Rădăuți!" ("Hello, [insert name of town]"). Sheilah, not thinking Jim would actually do it, had suggested this, parroting "Good morning, Vietnam!" But it turned out to be his biggest applause line.

Jim would thank everyone for coming, and then ask the crowd a little about themselves.

"How many children are here? Raise your hands." Hands pop up followed by applause.

"How many parents?" Hands shoot up, with more applause.

"How many grandparents?" More applause.

"How many great-grandparents?" Fewer hands, but much smiling and applause.

Then Jim would ask if any of them had ever been to the United States. Occasionally, a few hands would go up.

"Do you have friends or relatives in the U.S.?" he'd ask. In almost every town, no matter how small or isolated, a few people would raise their hands. So he'd ask, where?

"Toronto," came the first reply in one town.

"Great. How about in the United States?"

"Montreal."

"That's great, too," Jim replied. "Anyone else know people who live in the United States?"

"Vancouver."

Jim surrendered. Much to the chagrin of our Canadian friends, some of the folks in small-town Romania were a little hazy on the

border between our countries. But on with the show. Jim would say we were there to learn about “your town and your concerns and to answer your questions.” Jim would relate a little of what he’d seen in Romania. Generally, it was an upbeat message about progress and hope for the future.

Early in his first trip, without thinking too hard about it, Jim decided to mention the European Union and Romania’s hope that it would soon be invited to join. The crowd exploded in tumultuous applause. *Interesting*. So he mentioned the EU in the next few towns that day. Same response. No fool, he made it a standard part of his introduction.

More important, that experience made the whole tour worthwhile. We learned in those villages what we never would have learned in Bucharest—about the EU, and most important, about Romania.

At least in Romania, the EU is not just a free-trade zone or job-creation project for retired European politicians and bureaucrats. To poor Romanian peasants, it’s a vision of what they had too little of in the last century or any other: peace and prosperity.

When Eastern European peasants give an American ambassador an ovation simply for mentioning that their country will join the EU, it’s clear they have a vision of what they want to make of their country, and it gives an insight into how they’ve done it in the twenty years since the fall of Communism in 1989.