

# Dictator's Dream Took Harsh Toll: Ceausescu's Population-Boosting Plan Spread Despair, Death

Michael Dobbs Washington Post Foreign Service

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### *Ceausescu's Population-Boosting Plan Spread Despair, Death*

By Michael Dobbs  
Washington Post Foreign Service

BUCHAREST, Romania, Jan. 4—Nobody wanted Elena Moraru to come into this world. She was born last August, weighing just over two pounds, a direct result of the bizarre social planning of Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceausescu.

Forbidden by law from seeking qualified medical assistance for an abortion, Elena's mother, Iuliana, tried to abort the pregnancy herself at six months. Like other Romanian women, she felt physically and psychologically incapable of raising a child. Food, housing and heating were in desperately short supply in Ceausescu's Romania.

It was only after the abortion attempt failed that Iuliana Moraru agreed to be taken to a hospital. Both mother and child survived. Iuliana, a 19-year-old worker, signed a scrap of paper asking the state to look after her daughter because "I do not have the possibility of bringing her up." Elena, now weighing about eight pounds, spends most of her waking moments crying her lungs out in a tiny ward with 10 other abandoned children.

Romania after the overthrow of Nicolae Ceausescu is awakening to the frightening impact of his megalomaniac policies. An entire generation is now paying for the dictator's ambitions to increase the country's population from 22 million to 30 million by the end of the century. Ceausescu's obsessive campaign resulted in increasing numbers of orphans, an infant

mortality rate higher than anywhere else in Europe and the deaths of thousands of women who attempted illegal abortions each year.

In 1966, a year after Ceausescu came to power, Romania adopted legislation setting a prison term of one to five years for illegal abortions. Abortions were permitted only if a woman had already borne five children. In 1986, the law was tightened further to ban abortions for any woman under 45, unless her life was endangered.

But like most of the grandiose schemes launched in Romania over the last two decades, Ceausescu's policy of forced population growth was a failure. He wanted to raise the birth rate to five times that of neighboring countries. But because of popular resistance, it rose only slightly higher than those nations—where abortion is common.

A part of the story of what Ceausescu and his wife, Elena, were doing to Romania leaked to the outside world over the past few years, despite the dictator's best attempts to seal his country off from the rest of Europe. But it is only since the revolution—as a result of which independent observers can roam freely around Romania's hospitals and orphanages—that the horror wrought by one of the world's most totalitarian states is becoming fully apparent.

"I do not know what was going on in Ceausescu's mind, why he tortured us so," said Eudora Coma, 39,

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Orphans spawned by Ceausescu's policies huddle for warmth in state institution.

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# Population-Boosting Plan Took Toll in Romania

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recovering from a self-administered abortion in Bucharest's municipal hospital. "It is better to have three healthy children than five unhealthy ones. My husband and I used to cry in the evenings because we had nothing to give our children to eat."

Interviews with dozens of doctors, social workers and patients paint a picture of the biological degradation of a nation caused by coercive efforts to boost the population while failing to create adequate social conditions for raising a family. Virtually all those interviewed blamed the medical and social disaster of modern-day Romania on the abhorrent policies of the Ceausescu and the blind loyalty of their Communist Party underlings.

The harsh anti-abortion law was just one element in Ceausescu's social strategy. Others included barring all forms of artificial birth control, a "scientific nourishment program" that resulted in widespread malnutrition, an all-powerful security police to enforce the policy and draconian restrictions on the use of energy as an economy measure.

Asked what illness the 226 children in Bucharest's Orphanage-School No. 6 suffer from most, director Titza Batezatu replied: "Frostbite." The temperature in the orphanage, a three-story concrete barracks in a slum area, sometimes falls as low as the freezing point, and the children wear knitted caps and mittens during the winter to keep warm, even while indoors.

"What you see here is a tragedy of the dehumanization of man. We are reverting to the status of bipeds, which is something entirely different," said Dr. Ekaterina Lazar, a senior health inspector in Bucharest, reflecting on the attempt to build communism in this once well-fed Balkan state. "Ceausescu succeeded in gradually destroying the maternal instinct, one of the most basic instincts of all."

Maricia Negru, 24, a plumber, has been married for four years. She has two girls, aged 3 and 1. The Negrus live in one room of a communal apartment, sharing a single toilet, bathroom and kitchen with 15 other families. The walls are always damp.

When Maricia became pregnant for the third time last August, she could not face the prospect of raising another child in her cramped room. Unable to pay a doctor for an illegal abortion—the black market rate is three to four months' salary—Maricia decided on self-abortion.

From October onward, she tried several methods of ending her pregnancy. She pushed a rubber tube up her uterine cavity—the most common method used by Romanian women. It was not until December that she finally aborted the fetus. But then she started bleeding badly.

"I was very afraid. I knew that if I came to the hospital, there would be an inquiry. It was not until after the revolution that I dared to come in," she explained.

Budora Toma, lying in the next bed, said that two of her friends had died as a result of trying to abort pregnancies by themselves. One died after trying to squirt alcohol up a rubber tube into the uterus, the other of infection.

Bucharest Municipal Hospital alone dealt with 3,000 failed abortions last year, including 200 women who required major surgery, according to Prof. Traian Rebebea, head of the hospital's gynecological section. Every such patient admitted to the hospital was examined by a commission that included a public prosecutor and a policeman. If the commission determined that the mother's life was in danger, the hospital was allowed to complete the abortion.

"This phenomenon of self-abortions is like a huge iceberg—of which we only see the tip because most women have been afraid to come to hospitals," said Lazar. "We know that the tip is growing steadily, but we have no idea how large the iceberg is."

Rebebea estimated that well over 1,000 women die in Bucharest every year as a result of bungled abortions. Gangrene of the uterus and permanent sterility are frequent complications. A colleague, Dr. Darnen Rosda, recalled a case in which a patient lost her uterus and her left leg because she came to the hospital too late.

One of the first acts of the National Salvation Front now running Romania was to repeal the 1966 and 1986 decrees restricting abortion.

The severity with which the law was applied is illustrated by the experience of Rosha, who was sentenced to 16 months in prison in 1985 for "provoking an abortion." Rosha denies that she broke the law. She contends that police charged her because they were under pressure to stage a show trial of 30 doctors and patients participating in an alleged abortion ring.

"They wanted to make an example, to frighten everybody," she said. "I was picked because I had previous-

ly refused to cooperate with the security police. Several doctors who had been carrying out illegal abortions for money were not arrested because of their positions. One was the secretary of the Communist Party's local committee; another was the wife of a senior official in the secret police."

Negru risked her life attempting the abortion because of cramped living conditions made more painful by the sight of luxury apartments for high Communist Party officials going up along the monumental Boulevard of Socialist Victory. Factory worker Toma said her reason was that she has no time to look after her children.

"I am gone from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. It takes one and a half hours to get to the factory. We worked without knowing why we were working. We worked, went home and worked again. I never had time for the children," she said.

And then there was the "scientific nourishment program" designed by Elena Ceausescu. In theory, every Romanian was allowed to buy 3 pounds of salami a month, one-third of a pound of flour, 1 pound of rice, 10 eggs, 2 pounds of meat, 2 pounds of cheese and a packet of butter, usually rancid. In practice, meat could rarely be found. Toma said she feeds her 16- and 11-year-old children a diet of beans and moldy potatoes.

"They called it a scientific salami. In fact it is dangerous to feed children such salami. It is dirt," Negru said.

At present there are 11 abandoned babies in the maternity unit of Bucharest's Colteza Hospital, across from the Intercontinental Hotel. The babies usually occupy a pleasant, sun-filled room, but they had to be moved during the revolution when the snipers of Ceausescu's Securitate secret police opened fire from across the street. A woman who was a patient in the neighboring ward was killed by sniper fire.

In the cot next to Elena Moraru's is a 2-month-old girl who only has one name: Daniela. She was abandoned last week at Bucharest's main railway station. A young woman approached an elderly woman, asking her to hold the baby for a moment while she made a phone call. She never returned. The baby was named after the nurse who went to the railway station to fetch her.

Such cases are common at the hospital. But even more common are the women who come in to have their babies and then say they are unable to look after them. One of these is Mioara Humuzache, 19. An unmarried mother who lives in a single room with eight other young women, she said she has no way of looking after her child.

"I am alone. If I kept the child, there would be no one to leave it with when I went out to work. I did not dare get an abortion because it was too risky," said Humuzache.

"I tried to persuade her to keep the child," said Lucia Pana, her doctor. "I told her that she would grow to love it if only she kept it. She cried and cried. It was my duty, but I understand her decision."

According to health inspector Lazar, the number of abandoned children in Romania has been rising by at least 10 percent a year. Last year nearly 1,000 children were abandoned by their parents in Bucharest alone. Lazar said another 2,000 unwanted babies are forcibly returned to their parents by the state.

Asked whether Americans could adopt some of the abandoned babies, Lazar replied: "You have to understand that many of the babies are in very poor physical condition. Some are malformed. Most American probably would not want them. As for the healthy ones, it is better that they stay here in Romania. Romanian mothers that cannot bear children should have first priority."

Lazar said the Ceausescu regime shipped healthy orphans off to Western countries. According to some reports, they were sold for hard currency, but Lazar said she could not confirm this. The new government has issued a decree requiring presidential verification for foreign adoption of Romanian children.

A study prepared by Lazar covering the first three months of 1989 reported the deaths of 319 babies in Bucharest, most of them less than 3 months old. The most common causes of death were bronchopneumonia, congenital malformation—which would have led to termination of the pregnancies in most Western countries—and neonatal sepsis, an infection in newborns. Since the revolution, Western agencies have sent large amounts of cephalosporin, an antibiotic, to Romania to treat this affliction. Under Ceausescu, the drug was available only at the hospital reserved for families of the Communist Party elite.

The willful neglect of children by the state led to a predictable rise in infant mortality during the Ceausescu era, officially designated a "Golden Age" by the Romanian state news media. Lazar said infant mortality stands at 27.6 per thousand live

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Former party building in Bucharest now displays poster decrying communism.

births, up from 20 in 1970. By contrast, the infant mortality rate was 3.3 per thousand in Sweden in 1986 and 10.6 in the United States.

When news of Ceausescu's overthrow on Dec. 22 reached Orphanage-School No. 6, the staff and children tore down the portraits of the dictator that were hanging in every room. Some girls even gouged the eyes out. But there are still plenty of traces of years of political indoctrination. "The people, Ceausescu, Romania, the party!" a group of 30 girls began singing as a visitor entered a room dimly lit by a 40-watt light bulb, the maximum permitted under the former regime.

"That's enough! Enough!" shouted Batezatu, the orphanage director. "You saw what Ceausescu did. He killed children; he shot children. He only pretended to love you, but in fact he killed you."

A group of girls gathered around the Western visitor, stroking his jacket and coat as though it were made of a miraculous material.

"Ceausescu was a criminal," said 12-year-old Rodica Bruiso. "Yes," piped up Mikhaela Baiban, 18. "He kept everything for himself. We heard rumors about children who were taken from orphanages and raised to be terrorists for the secret police." Talk about orphanages being used as a recruiting ground for Securitate officers is widespread in Romania, but no proof has emerged.

According to Batezatu, the orphanage was regularly visited by Communist Party officials to ensure that the children were being properly indoctrinated in the cult of Ceausescu. A party apparatchik recently complained that the children, who range in age from 6 to 18, did not know enough about last year's party congress that elected Ceausescu for a further five-year term.

Until the revolution, the children had no toys or dolls of their own. But packages of presents are now arriving from Western countries and Romanian factories. One girl was wearing a sweater with the words "Long Live Free Romania."

The children live in rooms of 10 beds each. They receive lukewarm baths on Wednesdays and Saturdays. The corridors are completely unlit because of a shortage of light bulbs.

To keep their spirits up, the girls sing politically uplifting songs that are mocked by the cold and dark reality that surrounds them. "How beautiful, how beautiful is my life, I can become what I want," goes one such song. "I am a patriotic hawk of the fatherland. Today the country is taking care of my childhood. How beautiful, how beautiful is my life. For my country, one day I will sacrifice everything."

Batezatu said that the present

building is completely unsuitable. Until 1986, the orphanage was housed in an old palace in the center of Bucharest but that it was demolished to make way for one of Ceausescu's grandiose housing projects.

"Nobody told us anything. The children all left one summer for a two-week vacation. When we came back to Bucharest, we were told we had to go to another building, as the old building was being demolished. It was very difficult. The children cried a lot," Batezatu said.

It was the generation raised to adulterate Ceausescu that finally caused his downfall. Most of the young demonstrators killed by security forces in the streets of Bucharest from Dec. 21 to 23 were between 15 and 24 years old, born and raised in the Ceausescu era. Children who had never known freedom fought on the streets to acquire it.

The outlines of Ceausescu's social policies were known to Western governments. But impressed with his reputation as the maverick of the Soviet Bloc—on foreign policy issues—they refrained from public criticism until relatively recently.

When Romanian athletes appeared at the Los Angeles Olympics in 1984, they were applauded as the representatives of a country that had the pluck to defy the Soviet-led boycott of the Games. The United States continued to grant Romania most-favored-nation trading status until 1988, when Bucharest renounced it rather than meet the required human-rights standards.

In Romania itself, it was practically impossible to protest Ceausescu's rule without landing in jail or at least losing one's job. When Lazar urged the Bucharest party committee to construct special child-care units in all the city hospitals, she was told to mind her own business. If children were dying, the apparatchiks said, it was because doctors were not doing their duty.

"It will take us a long time to recover from this disaster," Lazar said. "Ceausescu's dictatorship was so thorough, and we suffered so much that it could take us at least five years before a semblance of normal life returns."

Not far from Orphanage School No. 6 is a former children's playground hastily converted into a graveyard. Hundreds of candles flicker in the night at the Cemetery of the Heroes. Adorning the grave of 14-year-old Marian Mulescu, killed Dec. 22 by the security police in Palace Square, is a placard recording his last conversation with his mother as he lay dying in the hospital.

"Why did you go down to the square, my son?"

"I went there for freedom."