



*Photo: Karen Krasny*

**Re-constructing Romania:  
An Autobiographical Account of  
Foreign Adoption —  
A Reader's Theatre in Five Voices**

In June 1991, I traveled to Romania with the heartfelt desire to adopt a child. This performance ethnography is a reconstruction of my lived-through experience and the events and the news reports that brought the plight of Romanian orphans to worldwide attention. Graphic depictions of the deplorable conditions in Romanian orphanages prompted international aid and throngs of prospective parents from North America, Western Europe, Australia, and New Zealand to pursue the foreign adoption of Romanian children. The economic conditions of Romania in the wake of a communist regime led by a notorious dictator and the often unbridled desire of first world baby-boomers to fulfill the need to be parents created a “black market” for babies and unscrupulous adoption practices. Through readers’ theatre, I hope to highlight the moral and ethical tension I experienced in attempting to reconcile my husband’s and my determination to become parents while coming face-to-face with a country that to most Westerners might appear stripped of its compassion to care for its own. I listened to the stories and saw firsthand the children who fell victim to abandonment, suffered institutionalized abuse, and escaped infanticide. In retrospect, while this is the story of our sons’ journey from a small Hutsul village near the Carpathian mountains to a suburban home on the western Canadian prairies, it is unquestionably a story of my emotional survival as I navigated the morally contested terrain of foreign adoption. Perhaps most surprising, however, is the way in which the story of our sons’ journey has woven its way throughout the fabric of our family’s heritage in the intersections of generations of Western and Eastern European voices.

Implicit in the process of memory construction is “the complex social interactions and trails of ideas that that lead from the observations” which demonstrate “that perceptions are always partial” (Schratz & Walker, 1995:

25). When asked, “What was it like?” I have always replied that everyone’s story is different. The basis of this memory creation relies heavily on the mental imagery evoked through a rereading of the contents of a diary that I kept during the summer of 1991. Accompanied by an interpreter and another prospective mother from Montreal, we slept at odd hours to accommodate the legal legwork and the detective efforts associated with a child search and an adoption process that consumed every waking moment. As news of adoptions closing spread from region to region, I found myself trapped in a bizarre game of “Beat the Clock” in which both time and money ran in increasingly short supply. As the game progressed, the “official” rules were constantly changing in ways that ensured profits for bureaucrats leaving us forced to use our collective mental energy to make abrupt changes in plans. As a result, the entries written in a simple coil-bound steno notebook are scant and as the reader will note, there were times when I completely lost track of the date. Nevertheless, I believe that this performance ethnography will serve to problematize the rhetorical construct of collective amnesia (Slattery & Rapp, 2003) that operates to accommodate the hegemonic ideological perspectives determining how the adoption of thousands of Romanian children is viewed.

This autobiographical account defies linear notions of time and space. Unexpectedly, I found myself immersed in a region next door to my paternal grandmother’s birthplace and across the river from what was my mother-in-law’s home in the Ukraine until the Nazis placed her in a work camp in Germany during the Second World War. To me, the notion of proleptic time—the sense that the past impinges on the present in ways that ground future possibilities—is not so much a postmodern pastiche as much as I feel is it the nature of existence itself. Aware of the obvious cliché, I felt as if this land was calling me. In the spirit of Brady’s (2003) *The Time of Darwin’s Reef*, in which this poet anthropologist manages to merge time—“twisting the familiar into strange and showing the strange to be familiar,” I have attempted to portray the convergence of time and space and the intersections of Western and Eastern voices by juxtaposing diverse texts to enhance the meaning of the “present.”

This performance also incorporates a number of articles in local newspapers which I read faithfully in laying plans for my trip and excerpts from transcripts from a series of internationally televised *20/20* and *Nightline* reports from the American Broadcasting Corporation on Romania’s children that span more than a decade beginning with the first report in the fall of 1990. Continuing reports of the plight of “unsalvageable” children provided adoptive parents with an affirmation that in fulfilling their desire to become parents they achieved humanitarian ends. However, as Simone de Beauvoir would argue, existence is, by its very nature, ambiguous and the idea of saving one child at a time needs to be juxtaposed against the colder truth that we fueled an illicit economy and might stand accused of robbing a nation of its youth. One of three brown legal folders, all of which housed the identical

documents from Canada translated into Romanian helped recreate in the mind of this writer, the laborious and intense adoption process. In addition to these artifacts, I have included the texts from a chaotic collection of scraps of papers and backs of envelopes upon which are scribbled the names of contacts, arrangements, and messages gleaned from an instant network of support made up of strangers at home and abroad who found themselves caught in the same dream.

*Voices*

Narrator 1

Narrator 2

Karen: A 32-year-old teacher from Winnipeg, Canada journeying to Romania to adopt a child. Married 14 years to Peter.

Hutsul villager

The children

Setting: An assembly of educators, professors, parents, students, teachers or interested individuals in a classroom, conference, or workshop session. This readers' theatre might be performed to activate the group's response to auto-ethnography, identity formation, "messy history," children's rights, the moral and ethical considerations of foreign adoption, or media's impact on the construction of a social and global conscience.

*(Stage directions: Where the number of participants including readers and audience number fifteen or less, participants are seated in a circle. Readers are seated at regular intervals—between every three or four persons—around the circle. Where the number of participants exceeds fifteen, the readers may stand next to the audience seated in rows. In smaller groups, the parts can be re-arranged so that every participant can take a major reading role with all reading the part of the chorus in unison. Ukrainian folk music is playing in the background, a combination of vocals and bandura music.)*

The children: Tell me about where I was born and how you found me.

Narrator 1: *The land wrote itself before any  
came to chart it...*

—Sheenah Pugh, Geography 2

Narrator 2: *I have my roots inside me,  
a skein of red threads  
the stones have their roots inside them  
like fine little ferns*

*Wrapped around their softness  
the stones sleep hard*

*for centuries they have rested  
under the sun.*

—Tommy Olofsson, “Old Mountains  
Want to Turn to Sand”

Karen: You were born Feb. 19, 1991 in a hospital in Sighetu, Marmatiei, ROMANIA, but when I found you, you both lay sleeping in a two-room house in a small Ukrainian village in Romania known as Crascunesti. Earlier that morning I had met with a doctor in the region who told me that there was a woman in the village who had a large family. Already forty-three years of age and under the burden of poverty, hard work, and a poor state of health, she was having difficulty caring for her eighth and ninth children and not coping well. Neither parent was at home when I arrived. Eleven-year-old Marie, we called her “the little mother,” watched over you and three-year-old Veronyca.

Narrator 1: *Beside the house, the mother lulls  
The little children for the night,  
Then she, too, settles at their side.  
And all is still ...*

—Taras Shevchenko, Evening

Narrator 2: Meanwhile...  
In 1922, some sixty kilometers away across the Tisa River, in the Ukrainian town of Delatyn, your Baba, Wasylyna Hrodzicki was born among fields of poppies and wheat.

Narrator 1: Still further north in Bukovyna, at the same time around 1898, your great grandmother, Nana was born.

Hutsul villager: *Oh, Carpathian Mountains that gave birth to me, soul and bones, you fill me with joy, you make me young, with you I am happy.*

—Paraska Plitka-Horytsvit (Suchy, 1997)

Karen: You were born among family here and at home.

The children: What brought you to Romania?

Narrator 1: *(Barbara Walters' voice speaking)*

**I'm Barbara Walters and this is 20/20.**

From the very beginning it was a story that moved America deeply—the wretched plight of the orphans of Romania. We followed their story for three years, returning five times to expose their desperate situation, and each time the response from Americans was overwhelming. You took all of these children into your hearts and some of them into your homes.

- Karen: *April 29, 1991*  
*Dear Friends,*  
*Both Peter and I are overwhelmed by the continued support and concern regarding our plans to adopt in Romania and bring aid to the children left behind. Many of you wanted to know how you could help. I have recently met with a woman who has just returned from Romania and I now have a more comprehensive list of what is needed. I will be leaving June 6, 1991. Thank you for your support.*  
*Karen*
- Narrator 1: *Portage la Prairie Daily Graphic, Tuesday, March 19, 1991. **Headline: Romanian trip was like stepping back in time. A better home.***  
Patty Levandosky is glad she was able to save one small child from the life she was destined to live in Romania. Levandosky and Carissa, her newly adopted baby girl arrived home in Portage la Prairie last weekend. The family is already providing Carissa with so many things she would never have experienced as an orphan.
- Karen: June 28, 1991, Friday  
Winging my way through the skies. At present I am amazingly relaxed. Goodbyes were as expected, difficult for me. My thoughts are as always with Dad lately. I still feel Peter is with me, but then, we are for the most part, one. I know that in a short time I will feel the distance.
- June 29<sup>th</sup>, 1991, Saturday?  
I really do not know what day it is but it's 8:30 p.m. Romanian time. I'm on a thirteen-hour train ride from Bucharest to Sighetu. Just before nightfall, the train

stopped to let off passengers and I watched through the train window as a man in peasant clothing walked through a field to meet his wife. Grinning and barefoot, she had been waiting for him. She was wearing a babouchka and as she walked to greet him, her legs pushed forward the folds of her full skirt breaking through waves of tall grass. I'm writing this in the dark. The lights do not work in our berth. I am told that for a good portion of this trip the rails hug the border between Romania and the Ukraine. Just rode through a tunnel—here comes the second. No light at all. Immediate culture shock in Bucharest—one could not be prepared. Listening to walkman—"Les Mis"—to simulate the comforts of home. It's difficult to be alone with one's thoughts because they always drift home. I would give anything to have my Pete here next to me.

Liviu met us at the airport with roses. Aurel and Michael left me a note from Karen Guenette. She's left with her new baby. Liviu has been incredibly obliging. We will arrive at his home tomorrow morning.

Narrator 2: *(in a newscaster's voice) Time Magazine, June 7, 1991.*

**Romania No Longer For Sale.**

Few black markets are as shady as international baby trafficking. Last week in an attempt to quell a burgeoning underground trade in children, Romania announced a temporary halt to adoptions by foreigners until tighter rules are enacted.

Ever since the warehousing of 140,000 unwanted or sick children in squalid state orphanages was uncovered after the downfall of Ceausescu's regime in late 1989, Westerners have flocked to Romania to adopt thousands of abandoned babies. A growing number of unscrupulous prospective parents have reached beyond the orphanages however and scoured rural villages....

Hutsul villager: *I help my neighbor and my neighbor helps me. This is the way it has been here since ancient times.*

—Ivan Hotych (Suchy, 1997)

Narrator 1: *(as if reading a letter)*

Naroc!  
Karen II,

Hi! Welcome to Romania! I hope that your flight over was uneventful and you have arrived safely. You must know that Jerry and I consider you a friend even though we have not formally met. I will think of you often during your stay here. What advice can I give you? Be patient and have faith.... Don't give up even when you feel at your lowest, that's when you must think of me and my baby. It's worth it all, the hard work and tears, to be called Mom! ... Trust your instincts—if something doesn't feel right then leave it. Ask questions. And please make an effort to understand and love the people and the country. Take care. You are in my prayers.  
Karen I

Narrator 2: *(Tom Jarriel's voice)* ABC NEWS March 19, 1993.  
This is Romania three years after the world was put on notice that tens of thousands of children were being warehoused in substandard orphanages. Children here are still crowded into cold metal cribs. In this orphanage alone there are 800 children under the age of five, and every day more newborns arrive. Despite the outcry from the western world, despite the efforts of Americans to adopt these kids, the problem is worse than ever. There are currently more than 80,000 children still living in orphanages and medieval institutions across Romania, trapped by bureaucracy.

... The television screen intruded into Upton's comfortable life in October 1990, as he watched 20/20's report "Shame of a Nation" on the so-called "unsalvageable" children of Romania. As image after image flashed by, Upton spotted the face of one youngster who seemed to personify everything that was wrong—12-year-old Elena Rostas, with one leg grotesquely twisted over her head.

Karen: *(gently intruding on Jarriel midway in his report)*  
Sighetu, Marmatiei. July 1, 1991.  
We met a nurse from Birmingham, England on our travels today. Heading home soon, she was here in Romania working with an international aid project funded by the BBC at the hospital for handicapped children. As it turns out, the institution is yet another dumping ground for children. She suspects that nothing is



physically or mentally wrong with most of the children when they enter through the doors but because of restraints and neglect they soon succumb to any number of maladies.

On another note, Peter phoned late this evening, had a wonderful connection. He informs me that Dad is doing well. Hope to have good news for them all soon!

Narrator 1: *(Tom Jarriel's voice resumes.)* Upton made his way to a remote corner of northwest Romania to the town of Sighetu, Marmatiei. This is the institution that propelled John Upton into action ... a cold, concrete, prison-like building where 216 children live. The kids here have been declared “unsalvageable” by the Romanian government because of physical or mental disabilities. The sign over the door is blunt—“Hospital for Irrecoverable Children.”

Hutsul villager: *The day had died in the endless spaces, and it was impossible to tell whether time was passing.*

—Mykhailo Kotsiubynsky, *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* (Suchy, 1997)

Karen: July 2, 1991  
Up early—6:45 a.m. Waiting to use the bathroom. Water here is turned off at 9:30 p.m. and periodically throughout the day. Showers/baths limited to two per week. Praying for some good news today. Looking hopeful towards the day's events.

Narrator 2: Later that same day ...

Karen: Went to Ukrainian villages. On the advice of a local doctor we saw twin boys. Beautiful, but mother is having difficulties and considers giving them up. Michelle and I talked about postpartum depression and the fact that there isn't any medication to treat a toothache let alone providing psychiatric help to women forced through circumstance to have so many children. I'm not too sure about the father. He works the fields from dawn to dusk and Liviu will have to find him.

Hutsul villager: *For me it's important to work the land because she feeds us.*

*I can't imagine any other kind of life.*

—Paraska Bodaruk (Suchy, 1997)

- Karen: July 7, 1991. Sunday.  
Woke up to church bells ringing. Dreaming of the twins. Michelle and I talked about the children, their parents, and the prospect of court. I'll feel better once I have written consent tomorrow. Ioan and Cristian are wonderful and I can't get their little faces out of my mind. I'll tell Peter all about them when he phones.
- Narrator 1: Much later on the same day...
- Karen: Peter phoned while we were at the lawyer's (Marianna's). He got through around midnight. He is thrilled about the twins. He wants to phone everyone, but I told him to hold off at least until tomorrow when I get consent. Peter tells me that Dad came home today from the hospital. Mom phoned later and I got to speak with Dad and Arnold, too. It's great just to hear their voices. Thinking constantly of bringing the boys home to everyone.
- Narrator 2: *Winnipeg Free Press*. May 15, 1991.  
**Red tape hinders Romanian adoptions.**  
Don and Rhonda Manuchulenko had to climb a mountain of paperwork to adopt a child in Romania.
- And the new Grosse Isle parents, who brought three-month-old Steven home earlier this month, say a new Romanian commission will make the process even tougher.... "They are still very disorganized as the commission is not working yet in all parts of Romania," Don said. ... Colleen Rodgers was among 11 Manitobans, including the Manchulenkos, who went to Romania in February.... "It was a very painful experience. The parents are glad to see their child getting a chance at a better life ... but the reasons behind it all are very sad," Rodgers said.
- Karen: Monday, July 8, 1991  
Up early this morning—6 a.m. Didn't get to bed until after 1 a.m. but I slept soundly. Met Ioan and Cristian's parents at the notary's office and held hands with the

boys' mother. I tried to impress them with the few words of Ukrainian I know and can pronounce. They are interested in knowing what animals we have. I hardly think that their interest extends to Nelson, our Old English Sheepdog and with the aid of Liviu we joked about it.

We have written consent from the birthparents to adopt their children. One step further ahead. We now need medical certificates and hopefully will set our court date in Baia Mara tomorrow. Slept most of the afternoon.

Hutsul villager: We are independent souls born of the mountains and isolation. Through centuries of domination by foreign lands, we have sustained our culture, from fleeing serfdom to fighting against Nazi and Soviet repression we now live scattered in villages throughout the Carpathians of southern Ukraine and northern Romania.

Karen: July 17, 1991. 7:25 a.m. Court Day!  
Waited for the 7:10 train from Bucharest for a DHL envelope with a much needed document. Train 10 minutes late. Any longer and there is no chance of making it on time to Baia Mare in time for court hearing. Liviu went to sleeping car, returned with much needed paper, had it translated and notarized even put air in the tires and had a quick bite before leaving for court at 8:50 a.m. Peter had phoned to wish me luck and tell me he loves me.

Waited an eternity for our hearing. I was first up and they seemed to have already found a hitch in our declaration. Court stopped, we ran to find a public notary to make a new declaration. At first, she said that she couldn't do it today—\$20US changed her mind and her attitude. Raced back to court—stood in front of the judges again. (There were five and much later I thought that the “wild goose chase” for a new declaration gave them time to eat lunch.) I understood when the birthparents were asked if they agreed to our adoption of the two boys. They consented and after that I wasn't exactly sure what was being said for the next five minutes. Michelle underwent a similar process. Michelle and I received a collective verdict

delivered in French. WE ARE PARENTS! We will have to endure the 15-day waiting period and Liviu is quite insistent that we do not take the children into our custody before that time is over.

Phoned Peter and I wished him Happy Birthday, Dad! He phoned everyone with the news.

Narrator 2: *The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away. [Job 1: 21]*

Karen: July 18, 1991.  
Peter phoned. Dad died last night beside his beloved Audrey. Mom said he was happy about the twins and went to bed saying, "This is indeed joyous news." I love my Dad and don't know how I will face the next few days. Mom wants me to stay put in Romania, near the children. I cannot and I have booked my flight home and will return in two weeks with Peter for the boys. I would give anything to hear my Dad sing one more time.

Narrator 1: *Winnipeg Free Press*. August 19, 1991.  
**Krasny (nee Peabody)** Karen and Peter are pleased to announce the arrival of Jonathan Arthur Paul and Arnold Robert Cristian born Feb. 19, 1991 in Sighet, Romania. The family would like to thank the many friends and relatives whose thoughts and prayers saw us through this journey.

The Children: But what about children left behind?

Narrator 2: But what of the tens of thousands left behind? Did world outrage make any difference in their lives?

Narrator 1: *(announcing abruptly)* Dateline: June 8, 2000.  
**Romania's Traffic in Babies, For Some, Selling Infants Is the Family Business**  
Imagine selling your child to the highest bidder—and getting away with it. For many Romanian families, it's not a nightmarish fantasy, but a common strategy for survival.  
In a country whose capital was once known as the "Little Paris" of Eastern Europe, the illegal sale of babies has become a multimillion-dollar enterprise, sanctioned in some cases by corrupt public officials.  
After years under the heel of dictator Nicolae Ceausescu,

Romanians have struggled to get by in one of the poorest nations in Europe. The average salary is less than \$1,000 a year, and an increasingly popular way to make a living is the sale of babies to brokers who make them available for international adoption.

Narrator 2: *(Ted Koppel's voice speaking)* Nightline. Wednesday, Jan. 19, 2000, 2:10 p.m. ET  
They are children living in a harsh adult world. Homeless, hungry, tired, poor and unwanted, they live in subway stations and roam the streets in packs. They are violent, angry, lonely, confused and rejected. Both abusers and abused, they fight for survival in a nation that has turned from them in shame.  
For Romania, like many other countries in Eastern Europe, the post-Communist transition has led to ordinary growing pains. For thousands of abandoned Romanian children, however, the pain of growing up has been extraordinary.  
After outlawing abortion and contraception, former Communist dictator Nicolae Ceausescu prescribed that Romanian women have at least four children. Most parents dutifully complied. Yet many, especially the unemployed, lacked the means to care for these children and were forced to give them up for adoption.

Narrator 2: Ten years later, Ceausescu and his regime are gone, but the byproducts of his policy remain. Having fled state-run orphanages, a generation of Romanian children has sought freedom on the streets.

Narrator 1: In the spring of 2001 Mr. Jarriel returned to Romania to update his earlier "20/20" reports on the conditions of children detained in state-run institutions and orphanages. Ten years after, he found many of the same problems and abusive conditions, plus a thriving new market in selling babies on the black market. The five-part hour-long "20/20" report also examined the pathetic lives of older children living in rat-infested utility tunnels beneath the streets of Bucharest. The European Union is alarmed about such conditions for children and is now putting economic pressure on the Romanian government to make improvements.

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*Photo of Annie Cullen, circa 1925. From the collection of K. Krasny.*