

## **How Easily You Could Disappear!**

**(Bucharest, Romania, 1973)**

We had arrived by plane to Bucharest, a dark, gray city in Romania. Our train awaited at the station to take us across the border to Kishinev in the Ukraine, the former home of Peg's mother, now a part of the Soviet Union. Unsmiling, armed, and intimidating military men were seemingly posted at every corner.

After passing through customs, Peg's mother used her native Russian to arrange for a taxi to take us to the train station – another gloomy, decrepit underground place. Homeless families, with worn, threadbare clothes, filled the shadowy train tunnels.

When we arrived to the train station, we found out that our train to Ukraine would not depart until midnight. Time seemed to move in slow-motion, as we waited there with our luggage in the dark tunnel, crowds encircling us. There was a filthy public restroom that consisted of nothing but holes in the floor to squat over. Used newspapers served as the toilet paper.

The train finally arrived, leaving punctually at midnight. A Soviet official accompanied each train car.

Two hours later, the train stopped at the border crossing into the Soviet Union. A new Soviet official boarded our train car, demanding our passports and itinerary. We had prepared everything as required. During those Soviet years you needed to pre-pay for everything on the trip – the plane and train tickets, the car rentals, and the hotel.

This Soviet official seemed to indicate that everything was in order with regards to our documents. He left the train without incident. Suddenly, our sleeping compartment doors burst open again. A new, large, Soviet woman official, who

could have been mistaken for a linebacker in the NFL, barked at us, “Luggage! Open! Now!”

“What is this?” I asked. “What are you doing?”

“Open! Now! Luggage!”

In a low voice, the young female Soviet official in our train car said, “Do what she asks. She inspects. Do not make her angry.”

We opened our suitcases.

The tightly-buttoned officer mauled our belongings, carelessly tossing them out of the suitcase. She seized our cameras and books. “I take this.”

She did.

“When do we get them back?”

She scowled at us – no answer – and slammed the door behind her as she left with her arms full of our belongings.

We had been forewarned that this would happen. We had been advised not to bring any books or any objects that could identify us as “Jewish.” Anti-Semitism was still the drink of choice in Russia.

I looked out into the empty, shadow blackness of the expanses of the Soviet Union. It was two in the morning. We were exhausted. We were scared. How easily you could disappear out here. Who would know? Who would ever find you?

A chill ran through me.

Ten minutes later, the Soviet official in charge of our car, knocked on the compartment door. “You come with me. We leave the train. You follow.”

“Why should we do that?” I asked, in a nervously defiant voice.

“I received instructions. You obey. You follow now.”

The darkness through the train window looked even more ominous. What was our choice? Refuse to go with her?

“Tell her that Peg and I will follow her off the train, but that you are too old to walk in the darkness.”

My mother-in-law translated what I had said into Russian. Reluctantly, the official agreed. It seemed that she was new in her position, and that she was afraid to make a mistake in judgement.

The official carried a light as we descended the train steps. The two of us followed.

In complete silence, we walked behind the arc of the swinging lantern of the official, along the tracks by the side of the train until the train disappeared into the emptiness. There was nothing out here. Nothing.

My imagination began to run: where was she taking us? Why? The official had approved our papers, what more did they want? How would we get back to the train? Would we get back to the train?

After walking for a half-mile behind the official, we approached an outpost, an old wooden two-story train station. It looked to be at least fifty years old.

She pointed to a wooden bench on the second floor of this ominous building.

“Sit.”

We did.

“Please, could you tell us why we are here?” I asked. She didn’t answer.

The door to an office opened. The official who had checked our passports appeared. He directed us to come inside, authoritatively pointing to two solitary wooden chairs. “Sit.” He turned, walked back to his desk, sat down, and ignored us as he reviewed our documents once again.

“Why are we here? Why did we have to leave the train?”

No answer. He swiveled his chair and turned his back to us.

We sat there for twenty minutes in silence. Outside, I saw through the window only blackness.

Finally, he stood and walked to the front of his desk. “You did not pay enough. More money.”

We had pre-paid for our entire trip through the Soviet travel agency, *Intourist*. As this was the sole tourist company that managed international travel to the Soviet Union, we were sure that we didn’t owe any more money. Do we try to argue with this petty, corrupt official? If we do, what could happen?

“How much do we owe?” I asked.

“Ten rubles. Each one.”

Forty rubles. I quickly calculated the equivalence to about twenty dollars. Was I willing to risk our lives for twenty dollars? Who could I appeal to, in the darkness of this forsaken Soviet train depot?

“Okay. We will pay.” I took the rubles from my wallet and handed them to him.

He took the money, a little smirk crossing his mouth. He walked to the door and signaled to the woman.

She came to the doorway with her lantern still lit. Without a word, we followed her out into the night in a different direction from the way we had come. Finally, we saw the train.

Within minutes, the train began to rumble, continuing into the darkness of the Soviet night.