

The Gypsy Saw Two Lives



By Rodica Mihalis

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The Gypsy Saw Two Lives is the story of the author’s personal journey and does not claim to be a political or social study. Certain names in the memoir have been changed to protect the privacy of the people described. While everything written is true, some details have been left out because they were irrelevant or to protect those involved.

Copyright Page Editor: Eva Mihalıs

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Houston, TX 77065

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ISBN 978-1-61897-491-4

Acknowledgements

My thanks go to God first for giving me the right words to write this memoir.

Secondly, my deep gratitude goes to my two daughters. I thank Eva for her many hours of work and dedication in editing my book. I am thankful to Natalie for using her artistic talent to design the front cover. Thank you Eva and Natalie; I couldn't have done it without you! I am grateful also to Caitlin Campbell for the final proofreading.

I want to thank my friends who supported me during the writing process and throughout my life. I am so grateful for Nicholas and Cassandra Ludington. Their friendship has spanned my two lives, and they have been with me every step of the way. My thanks also go to Dr. Michael and Mim Rieders, Fran Kirsch, Donna and Greg Jones, and to my old Romanian friends, Mioara Savinuta, my childhood friend and soul sister; Maria Marian, for always listening to me and giving me invaluable advice; and Diana Pruteanu, my former co-worker and friend of over thirty years. They continue to be my rocks during the most dangerous storms of life. When even I had lost hope, they still believed in me. Thank you for your infinite trust.

My deep gratitude goes to Mark Stein, the author of the New York Times Bestseller *How the States Got Their Shape*, for brainstorming themes for my writing with me and for his invaluable advice over the years. I also remain thankful to Jonathan Maberry, author of *Dust and Decay* and many award winning books. Jonathan suggested Word Press as a blog and gifted me with a small “Gnesh” statue to bring me inspiration.

This book would not be possible without the trust my publishers, Strategic Books, placed in me as a first time author. Thank you for trusting me in this difficult but rewarding process.

Finally, I am thankful for the over 2,000 views of my blog, “Memoirs from My Two Lives.” Your positive encouragement motivated me to keep writing and to have the courage to pursue publication. Thank you for making time to read my stories in today’s busy world.

Dedication

I dedicate my memoir to those who have made me who I am today: my daughters, Eva and Natalie, and my truly everlasting friends, Cassandra and Nicholas Ludington.

Table of Contents

Part I: Communist Romania, Roots that Grow Deep	1
God Had a Plan, but I Disagreed	3
A Fairy Tale from Romania	5
A Little Girl Forced Upside Down	7
A Taste of Freedom	11
Lessons Taught, Lessons Learned	19
Always Trust Your Gut	23
The Christened Chicken at Grandmother's House	29
Was It Fear or Second-Hand Smoke?	35
Mandatory Russian Classes and Private French Lessons	39
Why Are You Touching My Breasts?	45
A House Is Not a Home	51
Sex and Booze... A Teenager's Paradise	57
Eloping: Could It Be Genetic?	63
The Bible, a Sinful Book	71
Antiques: What Do Americans Know?	75
The Earthquake that Shattered My First Love	81
The Priest Was There, but Where Was God?	91
The Truth about the Soviet Union	99
The Speechless Speech	105
Good-Bye or See You Later	109
Choices and Consequences	113
Suspended Between Two Countries	117
I Was a Number	123
Time, a Matter of Perception	131
The Interview	135
There Was No God, but I Met the Angels	141
Pictures	149

Part II: America, a Nest on My Branch	155
The Peanut Butter Crisis	157
No Experience Necessary	163
Gay! (As in Happy)	171
Things, Good and Bad, Come in Three	175
Coincidence Or Destiny	181
Pride, Lust, and Damaged Men	185
Advantages and Disadvantages of Dating a Younger Man	189
Society Hill Socialite	195
A Slice of Borrowed Heaven	201
An Independent Woman	205
Here Comes Prince Charming in a Talking Car	211
Am I in the Red Light District?	217
The Social Register	225
The Unforgivable for Corporate America	229
Two American Citizens At Once	233
A Voice from the Past	237
Not All Immigrants Are Alike	241
A Year of Death and Birth	245
Natalie, Child of Christmas	249
The Potty Training Seat Travels to Holland	253
Susan's Spirit	263
Is this Domestic Violence?	271
Am I a Guinea Pig?	277
A Voice from the Past Returns	281
Why It's Called the Practice of Medicine	287
I Stay for the Kids	293
An Exotic Date with My Ex-Husband	297
The Convict Fish	303
A Letter from the IRS	307
Still Waters Run Deep	311

The Beginning of the End	317
Incidental Findings	323
The Year from Hell	329
...Hell Continued	337
Shock at the Funeral Home	345
Confusion at the Police Station	349
The Gift that Keeps on Giving	355
To My Roots and Back on My Branch	359
God's Plan for My Two Lives	367
About the Author	369

PART I

*Communist Romania,
Roots that Grow Deep*

God Had a Plan, but I Disagreed

On December 9, 2010, I fell and broke my right ankle and sprained my left. I had to cancel my long-awaited trip to California to see my daughter for the holidays, and I could not drive for the next six weeks while it healed. I was stuck in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, of all places, where I had just moved because of financial hardship and had not yet met anyone.

I couldn't help but question. Why is this happening to me? If God has a plan for everyone, what kind of terrible plan is this?! Couldn't God have found better timing? He stuck me in bed for six weeks without consulting me. The nerve!

For the first few days I felt like a victim. I absolutely could not envision any good coming out of being immobilized and alone for the holidays. Out of boredom I started to blog. As I kept writing the stories of my life, my situation didn't seem as bad. To my delight, people read my posts, and I watched as the blog gathered more and more views. Maybe my readers related to my stories. Maybe I was sharing something that people wanted, or perhaps even needed, to hear.

Just maybe God had a plan. I wasn't sure where this plan would take me, and I certainly wasn't in control. I had to let go and write.

A Fairy Tale from Romania

When I was little, my mother told me time and again the story of Sleeping Beauty. The Romanian fairy tale is very similar to the American version. A beautiful Princess, the only child of a powerful Emperor, was cursed at birth by an evil “Ursitoare” (Romanian for fortune teller). Her fate was to fall asleep until a handsome prince kissed her and saved the day. Her entire life was set in stone from the moment the Ursitoare bestowed their blessings and curses at her birth.

As far as my birth goes, I don’t know if any Ursitoare came to wish me luck, good or bad. I do know that the year before I was born, my mother had yet another abortion. The child before me was a boy, and from the very beginning, I was a disappointment to my parents because I was a girl. Ironically, the only story my mother ever told about her childhood also involved abortion. Her mother, my grandmother, had unsuccessfully tried to abort her. My mother was the only one of her siblings to go to college. My mother, the unwanted baby, became a doctor and supported my grandmother and aunt, who made no money. There was a pride and bitterness to her story.

As the years went by, I developed a theory that each time my mother had an abortion, she stopped the same baby's spirit from manifesting on earth. I came to believe that even if the flesh and sex were different, the spirit was the same. This spirit was meant to manifest in the world at the time of my birth and in my form. I had heard stories of Ursitoare bestowing fates upon babies when they were born, but my destiny started well before I manifested in flesh.

When I was born, in Romania in the 1950s, parents no longer called upon Ursitoare to bless their children. Because of communism, most parents did not even baptize them. My parents were adamant atheists and opposed Christianity. Fortunately for me, my aunt was a covert Christian, and she secretly took me to a priest to baptize me. She believed that if a baby died without being baptized, the baby went to hell. Whether I was blessed by a priest or an Ursitoare, no one would have guessed the fate of that little baby girl born in communist Romania.

A Little Girl Forced Upside Down

In communist Romania in the 1950s, the average family had one child, which was about one more than they could afford to feed. This one baby was lucky to be given a chance at life, as many babies were routinely aborted. Although illegal, abortion was a socially acceptable form of birth control. Ceausescu, the tyrannical president of Romania in the 1960s, '70s, and '80s, ordered mandatory gynecological exams for women of childbearing age. If a woman had fewer than four children and was pregnant, the state forced her to give birth to the child. The families were so poor that they could not raise their children, so they placed the babies in orphanages. Rumor had it that Ceausescu fostered a secret plan to build an army of orphans, people blindly devoted to him and the communist regime, ready to defend him under any circumstances.

After the fall of communism and Ceausescu's execution on Christmas Day of 1989, many documentary movies revealed the horrors of the Romanian orphanages. They showed footage of children untouched by human hands, shaking their cribs to soothe themselves, their milk bottles attached to the cribs to ease the work of the caretakers. These images, meant to stun and haunt the world,

came in the 1990s, after the Romanian Revolution. Only after the fall of communism could the truth about Ceausescu's many abuses surface for the entire world to see. We, the Romanian people, lived through the terror in fearful silence. Years later, while in graduate school, I wrote a paper titled "Diagnosing Ceausescu." My research about the man whose insanity drove me out of my native country in 1981 still gives me goose bumps. The memories of my childhood and youth seem surreal.

In the early 1950s Ceausescu wasn't president yet, and I was the only daughter of a medical doctor (an ophthalmologist) and a counselor in the Ministry of Agriculture. In another country, my family would have been privileged, and perhaps we were by communist standards. I didn't know how other families lived, but the three of us lived in one big room. There was a long, dark corridor leading to the room. The stove, which heated the entire apartment, was in one corner while the only window was at the opposite end. The kitchen contained a cooking stove and a bath tub. If I took a bath while my mother was cooking, I would draw a curtain around the tub for privacy. We must have been better off than our neighbors, who did not have a bath tub and sometimes used ours.

I vividly recall the small, unheated room at the end of the corridor—the bathroom. It had a toilet and a small sink with cold water. Since we didn't have toilet paper, we used old newspapers instead. Sometimes the rough newspaper made me bleed, but I didn't think anything of it. I can still feel the terrible sensation, to be so cold. It was as if my whole brain slowed and I became unable to function, but I survived. I had no choice. To this day, the chills I experienced in the bathroom as a child still echo in my mind and body each time I sit on a toilet. To sit or not to sit? What if my behind freezes? But the fear was, and still is, all in my head.

We owned nothing under the communist regime. For that reason, my mother focused all her attention on improving me. I didn't have toys, but I had books and one doll named Olga after my grandmother. I even had French books, and somehow my mother managed to enlist me in a French daycare for a while. Oh, and ballet lessons were a must! She found a private, probably illegal, studio, and at the age of two I started taking dance lessons. I hated them so much I would develop a fever before classes. Fever or not, how I felt didn't matter. In my mother's eyes, she would do whatever was required to make me a worldly and well educated young woman. She forced me to go to the dance lessons.

I don't remember the dance lessons or any dance moves, but I do remember the day my nanny forced me to sit on the studio's dirty toilet seat (My nanny took me to lessons when my mother was at work). The smell of that toilet will always stay with me, and the memory still makes me vomit.

A few days later, I started feeling sicker and sicker until I was so sick that my parents took me to the hospital. The doctors diagnosed me with typhoid fever, a potentially deadly disease which I most likely contracted from the dirty toilet at the dance studio. "Your child could die," the doctors warned my parents. "It's serious, especially in a two-year-old." They admitted me to the hospital to administer a series of horrifying blood draws, shots, and medicines that would make up some of my earliest childhood memories.

I remember the austere, simple iron beds with mattresses that hurt my back. I remember the doctors and nurses all dressed in immaculate white uniforms. They always came to my bed smiling. They didn't know I was not to be fooled. I saw the syringes behind their smiles, the tools of torture. The syringes they wanted to insert in my neck, the only part of my body which had good veins, they said, but I didn't believe them, it hurt so much.

The first time the nurses gave me a shot was easy because I didn't know it would hurt. After the first time, I knew what to expect. I fought the army of white-uniformed monsters with syringes, who flipped me upside down to find the veins in my frail neck. They told me if I behaved the fever would go away, but it didn't, and a month later I was still in the hospital.

Then one day I woke up, and I didn't feel hot anymore. The fever went away, and the stabbings stopped.

I was in the hospital for over two months, but it wasn't all bad. For one, the doctors saved my life, but that was nothing compared to another, more important memory. Every day a train passed by my hospital window. The mechanic always smiled at me and waved, and I smiled and waved back. This was the highlight of my day, every day. I could rely on him. He never missed our secret date. He was my only friend, and I trusted him.

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