

NICOLAE

Story and Photos by Linda N. Cortright

During the summertime Transylvania is paradise. Centuries of farming have kept the hill-sides green and bountiful, and the slow onset of modernity has preserved much of its ancient architecture. Romania's capital Bucharest is just starting to appear on the cover of travel brochures and no doubt the masses will eventually throng west to the countryside where horse-drawn carts and bear-studded mountains still decorate the landscape.

The day I arrive in Romania it is not paradise. It is the tail end of winter and the fog is so dense it is impossible to see where the snow stops and the fog begins. It is the proverbial "damp cold" that does not invigorate you but makes you wonder if you will contract pneumonia before nightfall. Ideally, I would have arrived on a day when there was at least a suggestion of sunlight, but alas, there is no camera setting for "remove large wet paper towel," which is precisely what I fear all the pictures will look like.

Some might wonder why I don't just return in summertime. Who doesn't want to visit paradise? The answer is simply that no matter where you go, paradise never lasts, and in order to understand a farmer's life in this part of the world, one must visit at the end of winter, which offers a generous dose of reality.

Shortly before noon I arrive in the town of Tulcea, which is within whispering distance of the Hungarian border and technically not part of Transylvania, although its summers are comparably beautiful. The road to the village is narrow and the combination of weary old nags pulling hay carts and wayward sheep clogging the roadway makes for slow travel.

Right: Nicolae Toma holding a healthy young Tsurcana lamb.

In a country that survived one of the most horrific reigns of communist rule, the utter enchantment of this Romanian shepherd is a glorious new beginning.







Nicolae immediately takes me out back to meet his sheep. Their wool is wet and dirty just like the landscape, but what I see is a flock of extraordinarily beautiful creatures.

By the clock, the sun has been up for hours but the village still seems eerily hushed with sleep. Perhaps the impenetrable gloom is keeping everyone inside. Most of the houses are clustered within a few large blocks connected by crumbling sidewalks and vacant alleys. Everything and everyone live behind walls, making the view from the road not particularly inviting. In truth, it reminds me of the villages I have visited in Central Asia where the chill of communism still lingers. Given that Romania was under communist rule until the revolution in 1989, perhaps the shroud of political oppression is what still clouds the horizon.

My amazing translator, Cornelia Major, gets off her cell phone and instructs Géza Csát, my friend and sheep aficionado from Hungary who is also playing chauffeur, to go down several blocks and make a left. Nicolae Toma, the farmer I am to visit, will be standing on the corner waiting for us.

In a town of less than 3,000 people, the majority of whom are subsistence farmers, it's easy to find sheep but difficult to find someone who understands wool, particularly the wool from one of the original Romanian sheep breeds, the Tsurcana.

Tsurcana are big hairy sheep with graceful legs and dramatic horns. The name is etymologically derived from the Sanskrit word *sturka*, meaning sheep-goat. Historically, the animals were used for meat, dairy, and wool. Imported merinos have usurped what's left of the wool market, however, and aside from Easter lambs the Tsurcana is now a solid dairy animal.

In less than a minute we reach the designated corner where a man in tall black boots standing nearly knee-deep in slush and wearing a wool hat flags us down. Less than 24 hours previous I had been tempted to cancel our interview.



Above: A Tsurcana ewe with a pair of newborn twin lambs. Right: My friend and sheep aficionado Géza Csát can't resist a quick peck on the head.



Cornelia's brother had informed me that Nicolae had just lost 30 lambs and was desperately worried that whatever was "wrong" would result in losing the rest of this year's crop. I was convinced that the arrival of an annoying American journalist was probably the last thing he wanted to contend with, but I was quickly assured that was not the case. For reasons that both humble and mystify me, shepherds around the world are "honored" by my arrival, and apparently Nicolae was anxious to not only tell his story, but also to share his piece of paradise. Yet true to my original intent, 30 dead baby lambs does not make for paradise no matter what part of the world you are in.

I expect Nicolae to be glum, perhaps properly downtrodden, in view of recent circumstances, but he is anything but. He does not convulse with laughter like a department store Santa Claus. Instead, I find him so firmly grounded in the sweet sincerity that comes from living with animals that I am all but dumbstruck. From the moment I walk through his front gate it is clear that I am not a visitor but a genuine part of his home. Thus it is on these occasions when I am the one who feels honored beyond words.

Nicolae immediately takes me out back to meet his sheep. Their wool is wet and dirty just like the landscape, but what I see is a flock of extraordinarily beautiful creatures. There are more than 300 Tsurcanas, but he seems to know each one as intimately as if it were the family pet. Over the years I have noticed that one sign of a true farmer is the expression on their face when they are with their animals. Nicolae's smile when he picks up one of the surviving lambs can only be described as intoxicating. Yes, his deep brown eyes and strong Roman build certainly don't hurt, but inside there is a man who dearly loves his animals.

He hands one of the lambs to Géza, who instantly cradles and then kisses the lamb's head, and I quickly drop my camera and extend my arms so I can hold one too. Soon we are all standing around holding wooly babies like proud parents in a nursery. This, for me, is paradise.

Although it is difficult to tell under their thick winter fleeces, the ewes appear healthy, yet they are not producing enough milk for their lambs to survive. Going to the store and buying 50-pound bags of powdered milk replacer isn't an option in this part of the world. Animals survive, or not; there isn't a lot of

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Above: One of Nicolae's neighbors walking down the sidewalk by Nicolae's home. Below left: Nicolae in front of his modest shepherd's hut. Below right: the prancing of the lambs begins!





middle ground. Nicolae isn't sure what's causing the problem, but he suspects he was sold hay that had been treated with GMOs which can potentially have negative effects on both man and animal. And because of an unprecedented amount of flooding the preceding summer in sections of both Hungary and Romania that destroyed thousands of acres of farmland; Nicolae was forced to buy his hay from a different farmer and he suspects that is the cause of his problem. Unfortunately, it is too late now to do anything other than pray the remaining lambs will somehow survive.

Nicolae has something the other shepherds
I have visited do not, however, and that is a *bunda*.

Common to both Romania and Hungary,
bundas are the granddaddy of all fur coats.

Reluctantly, I put the lamb down and it quickly joins its pals prancing in the mud. There is a peculiar law of physics, which dictates that baby lambs never move in a straight line; everything is done in a series of staccato hops from side to side rather than forward and back. Perhaps it is the ovine foxtrot?

In addition to his flock of Tsurcanas, Nicolae owns a handful of cows, countless chickens, several dozen geese, and an adorable cluster of pigs – all of which will eventually find their way to the dinner table. Even in the cold and muck I can tell the outbuildings are well maintained. And though this is decidedly not the land of barns the size of mini apartment buildings, everyone has enough elbow room.

Yet there is one outbuilding not designated for the animals that is quite small, perhaps only 5 feet by 6 feet, with a long narrow platform inside that has a mattress on top. During lambing season this is where Nicolae sleeps. He needs to be close enough to his sheep so he can hear if there is trouble; it also enables him to provide a second line of defense in case of a predator. The first line is a large shaggy dog that is presently tied up. I suppose there are predators hungry enough to venture past this dog's bark, but I wouldn't want to meet one.

I have both seen and slept in more primitive settings than this, but never when a toasty warm bed was a few hundred paces away. Nicolae has something the other shepherds I have visited do not, however, and that is a *bunda*. Common to both Romania and Hungary, *bundas* are the granddaddy of all fur coats. They are designed like a cape and require up to a dozen sheepskins sewn fur side out and weigh up to 25 pounds. Nicolae sleeps in his *bunda*, works in his *bunda*, and herds his sheep in his *bunda*, and for the purposes of my visit he will definitely have his picture taken in his *bunda*. I can see why the cold is not a factor when you're buried underneath your *bunda*, and come morning that desperate leap from under the covers is completely circumvented – you just take your "covers" with you. However, when Nicolae drapes it over his shoulders, he is no longer a peasant farmer swaddled in bedding; he commands a staggering presence that rivals any royal portrait in ancient history.

Without warning, Nicolae quietly disappears into the fog. I sense he is probably going to check on the rest of his sheep and I am timid about accompanying him – and he doesn't ask me to. A few minutes later he emerges through the cold smoke. He is walking slowly with one hand held out to his side and making a gentle clucking noise. Behind him, a long row of Tsurcanas are marching in single file. There is no pushing and shoving, no one is complaining as I have no-

Opposite: Nicolae proudly wearing his *bunda*. The sheep are very respectful of their late distant relatives.



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ticed sheep are want to do, and they are all in this beautiful straight line following right behind Nicolae. They must be stunt sheep, really! But I know better and what I am seeing is a true shepherd in action. To witness someone so closely connected to their flock is absolute magic.

There are advantages and disadvantages to interviewing someone when there is no common language. Ultimately, I find myself relying much more on gestures and intonations than actual words, and so before I actually sit down to interview Nicolae I already have a sense of who he is. But when I ask him my opening question, I am in no way prepared for the response.

Cornelia translates for me and asks Nicolae why he decided to become a farmer. His answer lasts almost an hour.

"My father's mother had a problem with drinking," he says. "My father's father [Nicolae's grandfather, but the word is not used] was a rich man. In 1950 he had 50 sheep [sic], four horses, and a few cows. There were 200 families in the community and he was the richest. But his wife always had too much alcohol and couldn't help with the animals. His father's father had to sell the animals. There was no one to help him."

Nicolae is sitting on the edge of his daughter's bed as he recites his family roots. I am sitting opposite him on the edge of his son's bed. His wife, Ildiko, who has been quietly tending the woodstove, is making sure the living room stays warm, not only for the people, but also for the two parakeets happily chatting in their cage beside Nicolae and for at least one striped cat I notice vying for napping rights by the woodpile. Nicolae continues speaking slowly so Cornelia can translate while I sit utterly transfixed by his openness.

It's interesting to note that when Nicolae talks about his grandmother there is no sense of shame or scorn, but only sadness. It is a tone that dominates much of his family history.

In 1961 at the age of 17, Nicolae's father left home and went to work on a state vegetable farm. His father didn't like animals and so he made his home at the vegetable farm where he met Nicolae's mother. The two were soon married and had four sons and one daughter. Nicolae was born in 1970 and is the youngest.

"My father genetically became alcoholic," he says. "He lived with my mother at the vegetable farm and eventually he was able to buy a house a few streets from here. I know it is not the right thing to say this but I was a happier child when he died. My life would have been easier without him. You understand I know that it is not right to feel this way, but I do."

I quietly nod my head to show him I understand. Sometimes it is not easy to speak the truth, but I also sense that is all he knows.

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After Nicolae's father was killed in a car crash, Nicolae had to stay home and help his mother. "This is why I have only eight years of school," he says. "I had to leave or the family would not eat."

By the early 1980s Romania was engulfed in the height of President Nicolae Ceaușescu's megalomania. The ensuing reign of communist based deprivation caused inhumane levels of food rationing, led to daily power outages that left many freezing to death in their homes, resulted in virtually no medical care or access to treatment for people in rural communities, and left a leader who was forced to export virtually every natural resource to pay a \$13 billion debt he incurred building his personal "monument" in Bucharest. "The People's House" as it was ironically called was later renamed "The Palace of Parliament" after the fall of communism and to this day it remains a great source of controversy throughout Romania.



When Nicolae was 12 he went to help his older brother who was working on a state farm. The farm had lots of animals and Nicolae was responsible for gathering the hay and feeding hundreds of cows. At this part of the story his face suddenly changes and the man who was completely enthralled standing out in the

field emerges again. It was during the few weeks that he worked at the farm that Nicolae was also able to be with his first sheep and this appears to truly be the beginning of his life, or at least the part he chooses to share.

He was paid a nominal sum for his few weeks of labor but it was enough for Nicolae to buy his very first sheep. The fact that it was 30 years ago is irrelevant; he offers the most enormous smile when he announces that he was

He was paid a nominal sum for his few weeks of labor but it was enough for Nicolae to buy his very first sheep. . . he offers the most enormous smile when he announces that he was only 12 when he had his first flock.

Above: Nicolae enjoys a playful moment with one of his herding dogs. Left: Although he appears gloomier than the weather, this livestock guardian dog loves his job!



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only 12 when he had his first flock, and now I understand why my opening question invited such a lengthy response.

"Nobody has ever given me anything," he says. "Everything here is because I have worked." There was one minor exception, however, and that was a young gray calf he fell in love with when he was 8 or 9. The calf belonged to his grandfather who told Nicolae he could have it some day. Not long thereafter the cow was hit by a car and died.

"I don't want gifts from people," he says. "I know what happens. It is better to work for things. A man who gets everything will never appreciate what he has."

With his love of animals firmly engaged, Nicolae decides to move on to his other love, his wife. And with that his smile becomes irrepressible.

"I fell in love before I met her," he says. "It's true."

Nicolae was 18 and worked as a shepherd at the state animal farm. The conditions were wretched but he wanted to be with the animals. His brother was still at the vegetable farm and as the story goes the two brothers along with a friend of Nicolae's brother were sitting around drinking one night when the young man began talking about the pretty 16-year-old who had just started working at the vegetable farm. "You should see her, she is so sweet," he said. The friend went on to say that the young girl looked very much like one of Nicolae's friends from the neighborhood.

"Really?" said Nicolae. "Are you sure?"

The friend vowed that it was so and with that Nicolae announced to his buddies, "OK, I don't stay with the sheep, I go to the vegetable farm and she will be my love."

It was several weeks before Nicolae could arrange to leave the animals but as promised, he went to the vegetable farm and there in a field of 30 people handpicking spinach, he saw for the first time the woman he was already in love with.

Ildiko has been very quiet throughout the interview, spending most of the time tending the fire or sitting quietly to the side. But now she is listening to Nicolae retell the story of their first encounter and is looking at him in much the same way as I imagine she did standing there with a fistful of spinach.

They became friends but soon Nicolae went into the army and they lost touch. When he came out of the army a year later he asked his brother if he knew where Ildiko was. He did, they reconnected, and in 1992 Nicolae and Ildiko were married. He had 20 sheep and one cow, and they lived with her mother.


Year by year, Nicolae's flock got bigger. He milked the sheep, he sold their wool, and he culled as needed for the meat market. Life in Romania was difficult – very difficult. "We wanted freedom but now we are poor," he says.

In 1995 Nicolae decided it was time he bought his wife a proper house and the only way that was possible was to sell the sheep – all of them. The flock had grown to 50 and

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along with the price of the cow he had enough money to buy a small house. It was no bigger than the modest entryway to his present home but it was theirs.

Nicolae worked constantly. He was a “taxi driver” with a horse cart hauling various loads for people around the village and eventually he became the village shepherd, the one who led the other animals out to pasture. “In the morning I would go down the street and collect the cows and take



them to graze,” he says. “By evening I would bring the cows back down the street and take them to the families.”

By 1998, Nicolae finally had enough money to buy a few sheep and for the past 10 years he has been able to support his family solely from the bounty of his land. He has a successful cheese



business that involves going to the market three times a week. Up until 2007 he traveled to the market by bicycle, carrying 30 kilos of cheese on the back. But now he has a driver’s license and a motorbike. He built a little cart to go behind the motorbike and now he can take twice as much cheese to market.

“What about the money you get from the wool? What is that worth?” I ask.

“Nothing. Nothing at all,” he answers.

During communism wool was important and people were paid a good price. The soldiers’ uniforms were made of wool. Bed covers were made from wool. Mills were spinning yarn to make socks for everyone and a man could have bought a car with the money he made from the wool of 300 sheep. Now there is no place in the village to even throw it away so Nicolae stores it hoping that perhaps some day soon it will have value. It certainly doesn’t make him love his sheep any less.

Before I leave I ask Nicolae if I can take a picture of him with his family and naturally he obliges. His three children have been absolutely perfectly behaved, sitting quietly on the beds while I interview their father. They have no television, no computer games, absolutely none of the things

Top left: Nicolae sitting in the living room telling the story of why he became a shepherd. Bottom left: Apparently there is only room for one cat underneath the woodstove.



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Left: Nicolae with his wife and three children.
Right: Nicolae and Idilko outside their home.

so many young girls and boys in western countries are immersed in. They have each other.

Yet somehow just saying “thank you” doesn’t feel like enough. I have been so deeply touched by my visit that I vow to Nicolae that I will do my best to share his story with others. It seems our delight is mutual and without hesitation he reaches behind his daughter and takes a picture of an Eastern Orthodox Madonna and child off the wall and hands it to me.

“Please,” he says in a gentle but firm voice. “I want you to have this.”

Tears begin to slowly fall down my cheek,

and I have no words to say. How can I possibly share what this man has given to me?

We all walk out to the car together and just before getting in I ask Nicolae if I can have one last picture of just him and Idilko standing in front of their home. Despite the cold I ask her to remove her black knit cap that is hugging her face. She obliges and as she removes the hat she gently shakes out her hair into a cloud of beautiful brunette curls.

Nicolae takes one look at her and leans over to kiss the top of her head. And that is the picture that will forever remind me of a moment in paradise. *WF*

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