

In my twenty-two year-old mind, Romania had been little more than a gray country filled with gray people. I had seen pictures, mostly of old women in bread lines and soot-blackened men posed in front of mines and factories, but it wasn't a real place. Only two facts about Romania had ever stuck with me. One: that was where Dracula was from, and, two: it had a communist dictator during those decades when we were and weren't at war with half of the world.

In 1999, I traveled to Satu Mare, a city of 80,000 people in the northwest corner of Romania. My girlfriend, Hope, had joined the Peace Corps, and I was making my first trip to see the place that she had come to call her home.

After Hope received her assignment, I began reading Romanian history. I was startled by the stories of the Ceausescus megalomania as well as by their secret police, the Securitate, and the way neighbor was turned against neighbor in one of the largest instances of state-sanctioned paranoia the world has ever known. After I arrived, Hope filled in a few more details and took me on a walking tour of her new city. Heading toward the city center from her apartment, one building dominated the horizon.

The central planning building rises like a jumbled mass of half-finished construction projects piled one on top of the other. The bottom half is shaped like a rectangle, but above the sixth floor, juts and zigzags appear, along with what look to be doors opening out into empty space. The Peace Corps volunteers call it the "Darth Vader" building since, from certain angles, the top floors possess a passing resemblance to the helmet worn by Luke Skywalker's father. The Vader building can be seen from almost anywhere in town, which was the idea when Ceausescu's engineers built it. In a humorous twist of fate, this monument to totalitarianism is now home to several of the Non-Governmental

REMAINS

ROMANIA AFTER THE FALL

by Chris Sullivan

Organizations (NGOs) entrusted with the unenviable task of rebuilding Romania's economy. Hope spent two days a week on the eighth floor helping one of them learn the ins and outs of grant applications.

