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The Outcome of the Forgotten

Alexandra Domingue

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Introduction

A little girl by the name of Csillo Portik-Tepertyu was born on July 4th of 1997 in Brasov Romania. She was part of an era of children known as the forgotten children. She was put in an orphanage not long after she was born. She was born cross-eyed which during that time period in Romania was seen as unworthy of life. In the orphanage, she lacked proper nutrition and medication. From being in a crib all day and not being nurtured, she began to start banging her head into the crib leaving bruises and cuts on her head. She suffered from constant ear infections which resulted in a non-cancerous tumor being formed from the lack of feeling in her ears. Not being nurtured correctly caused psychological issues with attachment to people as well as self-worth. This is one of many stories of the children in Romania. They are known as the forgotten children, and this is an unheard story.

It has been 27 years since the execution of Romania's communist dictator Nicolae Ceausescu. "The execution of Ceausescu and his wife on Christmas Day 1989 led to the discovery of the country's most disturbing secret—enough abandoned children to make up a city had been living in squalor for years, packed into unsanitary orphanages without appropriate resources, care, or stimulation" (Sullivan, 2014, pg. 1). 27 years later, the orphans of the Ceausescu regime still live with the aftereffects of institutionalized living. To understand the plight of the Romanian orphans, an examination of the policies of Nicolae Ceausescu must be undertaken. Under the dictator's edict, an effort was made to create a strong economic workforce for the future. It was Ceausescu's belief that large families were the key to Romania's future economic success, so he "outlawed abortion but also demanded that all women have at least 5 children" (Sullivan, 2014, pg. 1). Some financial compensa-

tion was given to these larger families, but for many, it was not enough to survive. The common belief held in Romania was the state orphanages were the best avenues to raise these children and many families placed their children in the institution believing they would receive the best care. Then in 1989, the dictator Ceausescu was executed for crimes against the Romanian people. Not long after Ceausescu's death, the government stopped supporting families, leaving Romania in financial peril. Without financial support from the government, many children were put into state run orphanages in order to ease family's financial burdens. This led to thousands of children being left in orphanages under government control. Unfortunately, with the death of Ceausescu, the government payments to these orphanages stopped or significantly decreased. "The children were being raised in overcrowded, state-run orphanages where child rearing was approached with Soviet-style efficiency. The result was a generation brought up without care, social interaction, stimulation or psychological comfort. Romania's institutionalized children displayed profound developmental delays and abnormal social-emotional behavior" (Silver, 2014). All to the detriment of these children, these babies born after Nicolae Ceausescu's execution from 1989 thru 1999 are known as the forgotten.

Reasons

"In the mid-1960s dismayed at Romania's low birth rate, Ceausescu introduced a series of regulations designed to guarantee a sufficient labor supply for his rapid industrialization plans" (Helsinki Watch, 1990, pg. 2). Regulations began in October of 1966, in which he banned abortion. Not long after the ban on abortion, in 1967, Ceausescu passed a law making the process of divorce nearly impossible. He continued regulating abortions and pregnancies of women by

demanding all women have a scheduled check-up once a month using military force. He continued instituting policies obligating woman to have at least 5 children, marry by age 15, and awarding compensation to families based on the amount of children they had. “Perhaps the most extreme measure was the menstrual ‘ police’: an army of gynecologists who would enter schools and workplaces, investigating non-pregnant women and miscarriages” (Silver, 2014).

Due to the regulations and policies implemented by Ceausescu, more and more families weren't able to support their children financially, prompting them to give their children to the government to cope with them. Many children were confronted with a lack of nutrition, nurture, cleanliness and activities involving movement, causing many children to develop physical, educational and psychological conditions that later turned into disorders. After the fall of Ceausescu and his wife on December 25th of 1989, a documentary went out on 20/20 revealing the hardship of the children left. “Children were tied to cribs, wrapped head to toe in sheets used as full-body restraints, with open wounds and bed sores all over their bodies, malnourished, and near death”(Ahern, 2006, pg. ii). Romania afterwards, as part of their “reform,” moved the children who had disabilities, into less visible institutions. “Our planning is like a man who wakes up every morning and says that he was going to paint his house. But somehow, he keeps taking and the house never gets painted”(Mental Disability Rights International, 2006, pg. Iv). Romania violated the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) as well as the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). Romania, in order to join the European Union, had to meet the Union's criteria involving the children. Romania appeared to achieve this with new legislations in 2005, but only by way of hiding babies in institutions. Law 272 protects the human rights of children as well as promotes it. The law also stated that children 2 and younger were prohibited from being placed into residential institutions. This, however, did not protect children under the age of

2 who were allegedly “disabled”. Countless children ended up in institutions for their disabilities, even though they might have not even had a disability until being sent. “None of the children, the nurse reported, had a severe ‘disability’ other than the disabilities they acquired from being institutionalized.... There are too many. They get disabled from being here”(Mental Disability Rights International, 2006, pg. 4). On top of that many children can’t be adopted due to lack of identification papers. Without identification papers, they can’t leave the institution, leaving more and more kids without any chances of success in life.

It has been 27 years. Yet, there has not been sufficient change to save the forgotten children. “I have worked here for twenty years and my heart has resorted to stone. I thought it would be better after the revolution, but it is not’-Nurse, Timisoara baby institution”(Mental Disability Rights International, 2006, pg. ii).

Physical Effects

In 1989, when the first group of reporters went into the orphanages after the fall of Ceausescu, many were left mortified with what they saw. Numerous reported seeing children tied up to cribs, rocking back and forth, not crying at all, being malnourished, some having been put in restraints, and many close to death. “Their foreheads are speckled with flies and with scabs...from banging their head on iron cribs... pale skeletons suffering from malnutrition and disease...several of the children are wrapped in dirty blankets”(Helsinki Watch, pg. 4, 1999). Due to self-abuse, children were wrapped up in blankets so that they couldn’t harm themselves, but from being wrapped (tightly) up for extended periods of times, their skin would come off when unwrapped or as some investigators would report it was as if they were “wasting away”.

In 2006 after new laws were instituted in order to benefit the orphans, the MDRI (Mental Disability Rights International) did a study on the orphans reporting any progress that had been done. One reporter recalls his experience when first walking through one of the institutions almost 6 years after the fall of Ceausescu:

“Children were tied to cribs, wrapped head to toe in sheets used as full body restraints, with open wound and bed sores all over their bodies and malnourished, and close to death. We found teenagers so emancipated that they looked like they were 3 or 4 years old. Their spindly arms and legs were twisted into contorted positions from disuse and atrophy. Their eyes were deeply sunken into their skulls, and they stared blankly at us when we entered the room. Ribs and other bones stuck out from their skin, which seemed to sag from their bodies without any extra flesh” (Ahern, 2006, pg. ii).

There were too many children, nurses would tell reporters; not every kid could be taken care of. The nurses who were willing to speak with MDRI explained how they tried their best, but due to the lack of material they had, and food and sanitary environments, many children were left without care. “They became disabled from being here’-Nurse” (Mental Disability Rights International, 2006, pg. iii).

Emotional Affects

The first two years of a child’s life have proven to be the most critical years in a child’s development. “Infants and young children expect an environment in which they are going to interact and receive nurturance, not only good, but psychological nurturance”(Pappas, 2012). Without the proper nurturing during the first 2 years, children are faced with lasting psychological impacts.

Without enough caregivers for all the orphans, after the fall of Ceausescu, many infants and young children faced emotional abuse that still scar them today. The most common form found in children was emotional abandonment, which resulted in “failure to thrive’ [that] causes both emotional and physical damage to children at a critical time in their development”(Ahern, 2006, pg. iv). Even if a child is given the proper food, emotional abuse can destroy them physically. Various children didn’t eat, resulting in malnutrition, which later resulted in death.

Andrea Tiron when turning 18 was released from the orphanage and thrown on to the streets. She was devoid of love and had nowhere to turn. She had no family and no friends to reach out to. “The only thing she took with her were the few possessions she owned and her rage, which had built over two decades of being locked in crowded rooms with other unwanted children”(Pappas, 2012). Andrea recalls being in the orphanage by talking about how she always would wait for her parents to come back for her, or to at least come and visit her. She stated that they never showed. “I would cry [Andrea told reports]”(Pappas, 2012). Numerous children like Andrea face the struggles of abandonment, on top of that, suffer from the absent of nurturing physically and emotionally. Many children due to lack of attention, would rely on other ways to feel emotion, such as cradling back and forth or staring out at the walls. “By the two, some children were banging their heads. Others were making rhythmic sounds... children who do not receive attention when they cry learn to stop crying...two-thirds [the babies in the orphanage] were awake, but there were no sounds of cooing or babbling, normal developmental sounds of babies that age”(Mental Disability Rights International, 2006, pg. 4).

Educational Affects

When released from the institution, Andrea left the orphanage with no life skills. She didn’t have a school education, couldn’t wash her clothes, couldn’t read, write, or care for any of

her basic needs in order to live. She was missing not only academic education, but also the education of living. “Andrea... has never been to a grocery store [age 24] or handled money. She had no idea how to do a meal or wash her clothes. She had no job skills, no place to live, and no ability to access social services”(Pappas, 2012). Having been in an orphanage for two decades, Andrea missed the opportunity to learn to cope with the basic needs of life. On top of that she was thrown on to the streets with little to nothing at the age of 18, like most orphans who are not adopted. Andrea’s story is among many of the forgotten children. Now young adults, they have to find out for the first time how to learn both academically and emotionally.

Conclusion

It has been 27 years, yet Romania is still struggling with the forgotten children era. Physical, psychological, and educational development in the institutions have left the forgotten children without a chance. With the fall of Ceausescu, a call for help was made public to the world. Thousands of children were adopted and brought over to the United States, but when Romania joined the EU, that changed. In order to join the EU, they had to fix their institutions because it went against the CRC laws that protected children’s rights. Instead of saving these children, though, many children were relocated to less visible institutions without documentation in order to meet the expectations of the EU. The requirements to join the EU meant that Romania’s orphanages were closed to outside countries, resulting in a comparable situation to the Ceausescu era. With no way out, being abused, not having love, not being taken care of, many children are left as young adults out on the streets with nowhere to go or any idea of what to be done. Physically, due to the lack of nutrition, many children became malnourished, which ended in either death, or stunted growth. Psychologically, the idea of self-worth was decreased. Children didn’t

cry. Instead, they would find ways to physically abuse their selves in order to experience something. They didn't speak. Rather, they cradled in place. Having little love or attention caused many to sufferer from depression and abandonment attachment disorders. Educationally, children were not taught and instead forced to become quiet. Organizations have now started going into Romania to help teach these, now young adults, how to live, but like most, they are coming a bit late. "Early childhood experiences can have lasting impacts on the brain"(Pappas, 2012). To help the forgotten children would mean having to change their brain chemistry that has already been developed due to the institutions. To help the forgotten children now means to help the children of today in Romania. Without access to international adoption, children in Romania are trapped in institutions where they will never be able to achieve success. In a country without a stable economy, families aren't looking to adopt rather looking for ways to justify their own. Access to international adoption would mean children having a second chance to be remembered and not forgotten.

The little girl at the beginning of the story was one of the lucky ones. She was adopted after spending 2 and a half years in the orphanage along with her 1 and a half year old half-brother. She immediately received medical treatment for her crossed eyes and vaccines and shots to help with the lack of medicine. She stopped cradling not long after being adopted and was able to stop self-abusing (banging head on things) with some therapy. It wasn't till 5th grade that doctors found the non-cancerous tumor in her ear, but due to her loving family, she was able to get it removed and receive the medical treatment that she would have not been able to receive in Romania. She still suffers from psychological issues regarding abandonment and connecting with people, but she has a forever home now and parents who love her. She is not afraid to share her

story in that it is what inspires her true passion of connecting with people through music. That little girl goes by the name Csillo-alexandra Domingue, and that little girl, who is now 19, is me.

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