

Brave New World

**Romanian Migrants'
Dream Houses**



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Edited by Raluca Beta and Beate Wild

Bucharest 2016

CIP Description of the National Library of Romania

Brave New World – Romanian Migrants' Dream Houses

ed.: Raluca Betea, Beate Wild. – Bucharest: Romanian Cultural Institute, 2016

Includes bibliographical references

ISBN 978-973-577-679-4

I. Betea, Raluca (ed.)

II. Wild, Beate (ed.)

314.7

Generously supported by



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The Left-Behind Kids are Alright

Lina Vdovii

"The Left-Behind Kids are Alright" is an essay about young Romanians and Moldovans who grew up with their parents working abroad. It is a personal approach to the phenomenon of children left behind, including the experience of the author, Lina Vdovii, a Moldovan-born journalist working in Bucharest, Romania. Rather than recounting the disadvantages of migration, the article focuses on its positive aspects. Some of the children left behind became resilient and turned the absence of their parents into a unique way to thrive.

I can't remember when my father first left to work abroad.

My oldest memories of him are from when he was a mechanic at the National Circus in Chişinău, Republic of Moldova; my childhood was filled with clowns, monkeys, trained puppies and amazing acrobatics.

Then, a few years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the circus closed and my father attempted a career change.

For a while, he repaired refrigerators at a workshop in our town. That place closed and he started to buy goods from Moldova in order to sell them at a local market in Iaşi, eastern Romania. After a few months, he decided to become a taxi driver. It sounded promising, but the income was still too low. Somewhere in-between these attempts, he set up a small rabbit farm.

Everything, quite obviously, failed.

At that point, many of my aunts, uncles and cousins had already migrated for work to countries such as Greece, Israel and Germany. My father followed their lead and, after a dangerous and illegal journey, arrived in Israel.

I am, as the media would describe me, a left-behind child. I and 177,000 other children from Moldova and 350,000 from Romania share one thing in common: we grew up with one or, in some cases, both parents abroad.

I never gave it too much thought when I was little. It was a normal thing. You could count on the fingers of one hand how many children in my classroom had both their parents at home.

Then, I moved to Romania, became a journalist and started reading stories in the media about other kids like me. Those stories were always written in a tragic tone. Titles such as "Children on the edge of the abyss", "The terrible drama of the 'Euro-orphans' of Romania" or "The country of the abandoned children?" introduced articles covering the most extreme cases: children who tried to commit suicide or turned violent. In most of those media reports, my generation was depicted as a failed one.

As a journalist, I knew that it was an exaggeration. I looked around at my friends, at my cousins, at my colleagues at university and even at my boyfriend. We were all the same. We all grew up with one or both parents abroad, but for us, being left behind was an opportunity to thrive.



1. Mădălina Opreşan and her sister, Ioana, in a park in Bucharest, 2014.

Education via Skype

Mădălina Opreşan was 13 when her mother first left to work as a cleaner in Israel. In the 15 years since then, they have seen each other just five times.

In her home town Bacău, northern Romania, she and her younger sister, Ioana, moved in with different aunts. Mădălina was shy and timid. Her school grades were mediocre and she was seen as having no chance of getting a university degree. She had a troubled family history – a father who rejected her and a stepfather who was violent.

But, after her mother left, the girl blossomed. She took part in school competitions, had her own page in the local newspaper, graduated from the best high school in town and studied journalism in Bucharest on a scholarship.

"It was hard for me to be raised like this, via Skype. At the same time, it made me stronger", Mădălina, now a thoughtful 28-year-old, says in a restaurant in central Bucharest.

In Romania, the phenomenon of children being left behind first received national attention a few years after the country was hit by a massive wave of migration. It happened when the European Union lifted the visa restrictions on entry into its Schengen zone.

Millions of Romanians found jobs in Western Europe as builders, cleaners, care workers and agricultural labourers. Their children stayed behind with the other parent, with grandparents, or with members of the extended family.

TV journalists and newspaper writers started looking into the consequences of the movement. In 2007, ProTV broadcast a campaign entitled “Do you know how your child is?” about children whose parents never came back, often starting new families in Western Europe. A documentary a few years later called “Home alone - A Romanian tragedy” detailed the stories of three children who ended their lives because of their parents’ absence.



2. Mădălina Opreșan, a left behind child, in a park in Bucharest, 2014.

These stories triggered shock waves across the country, and attracted even more media attention. Alarming headlines led to readers’ comments such as “What kind of parents are these? They deserve to be sent to labour camps”.

Such coverage created a distorted picture. “There are a few isolated tragic cases and the media is using them to attract an audience”, says Victoria Nedelciuc, former migration expert at the Open Society Foundation in Bucharest. “But there are many advantages to migration.”

Nedelciuc says that the money parents send back enables children to buy computers and learn how to use technology, to go to better colleges and universities and to travel abroad.

Changing the social status

Mădălina wouldn’t have achieved what she did if her mother hadn’t made the difficult choice to leave. “Our parents tried to change our social status”, she says. “They went to foreign countries to work as unqualified workers with the sole purpose of building a better future for us, the next generation, in our home country”.

She remembers with a grim expression when her mother was selling newspapers, cans of food from Turkey and cigarettes from Moldova.

“If she’d kept working for 300 Euros a month, she couldn’t have sent me to college, paid for my private classes or my trips”, she admits. “I saw Paris before Bucharest”.

After graduation, Mădălina worked as a reporter for the leading Romanian commercial television station, ProTV, as a communications manager for a non-profit and then in the same position at a beauty company.

I am an award-winning journalist living in Bucharest.

Adrian Lupu, a sociology professor at Alexandru Ioan Cuza University in Iași, eastern Romania, took part in the first study of children with parents working abroad in 2006. He and other experts use the term ‘resilient’ to describe those who overcame the hard times and managed to succeed in academic and professional terms.

“The migration phenomena have always been exploited politically”, he says. “If one wants to press some specific buttons, one will insist on the necessary aspects. Some experts tend to say that it is a demographic catastrophe for Romania, that the birth rate is going down, that the labour market is affected ... All these, when you study the risks only, could be true. However, there are positive effects as well”, he adds.

The benefits include learning and adopting norms and values from the parents’ host country, sending their children to better schools and shaping a brighter future for them.

In order to help children develop resilience away from their families, Save the Children has introduced a programme called “We grow up together” in 17 schools around the country.

More than 4,900 children have been helped by specialists who assist them with homework, provide access to computers in order to establish better communication with parents, and offer individual psychological counselling.

Two-thirds of the children have received better school grades after the intervention efforts, and 80% of them have developed new communication and networking abilities.

In 2015, the organisation also launched a hotline for parents and children affected by migration and for their guardians.

The emotional cost

But, for both Mădălina and me, the success came with an emotional cost.

Studies published by organisations such as Alternative Sociale, UNICEF Romania, Save the Children and the Soros Foundation Romania have revealed differences between children with parents at home and those left behind.

Fifteen per cent of children with parents abroad had problems with the police, compared to only 10 per cent of those living with their parents. More poignant, though, was the emotional impact. Thirty-six per cent of children with both parents abroad said they felt lonely, while 22 per cent believed no one loved them.

While Mădălina’s younger sister maintained a relatively close relationship with her mother, the older sister has largely broken off communication.

“She left before I had my first period. I was at my aunt’s, harvesting potatoes, and I got very scared as nobody warned me”, Mădălina says. “It’s too much time spent apart”.

In my family, the absence of my father affected his relationship with my mother. It led to fights and misunderstandings. To a couple of good days at the beginning of his visits home,

followed by a number of bad days. To ice creams and dinners at McDonald's accompanied by interrogations and "you are not allowed to stay outside after 9!".

At the beginning, when he was in Israel, the means of communication were extremely poor. There was no Internet or mobile phones, so we talked through letters and landline phones. My father used to call a few times a month and the calls, quite expensive, were short and concise. "How is school? What grades did you get lately? Are you listening to your mother?".



3. My family and I, when my father returned from Israel and took us for the first time to a recently opened McDonald's in Chişinău, Republic of Moldova, 2000.

No questions about friends or feelings. There was never enough time for that.

Then, the means of communication diversified. A man with a camera started to come to our apartment once in a while to film me and my sister. He would sit on the sofa, push the record button and film us while we recited all the poems we knew from school, sang all the songs we played in the house, showed him all the new dance moves. An entire performance meant to close the geographical and, later, emotional gap.

When the show was over, the cameraman filmed my mother, my grandmother and my uncle, all gathered there for that specific occasion. "Hi, Pavel, how are you? I hope everything is fine and you are well. We all miss you", my mom would say at the end of the video message.

The tape would arrive at his home three weeks later. After watching it, he always called home in tears.

After two and a half years of no visits, he returned to Moldova. In 2001, he left again. This time, to Italy.

For better or for worse

According to the Romanian Department of Child Protection, more than 91,000 children have one or both of their parents working abroad. However, non-governmental organisations estimate that the true number is around 350,000 – the highest of any European country.

Advocacy groups fought for years to obtain greater legal protection for children with migrant parents. After going through eight drafts, the Romanian Parliament adopted a new Law on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of the Child in September 2013.

The law includes a fine of 500 to 1,000 Romanian Lei (about 115 to 230 Euros) for parents who do not inform authorities that they are leaving to work abroad and secure a judge's approval of a guardian for their children at least 40 days before they depart.

As a result, between October 2013 and December 2014, around 5,400 parents from Bucharest notified the authorities of their departure.

Also, in 2014, the government voted on some amendments to the National Strategy for Protection and Promotion of Children's Rights specifically dedicated to children left behind.

When I grew up, there were no laws or special projects for children like me. Every time I missed my father, I took a paper from one of my school notebooks and wrote him a letter.

It happened quite often and it wasn't easy, but now, looking back, I realize that the long-term benefits were more important.

When he first left, I lived with my mother and my sisters in a two-room apartment. We had no TV, no vacations and very limited financial resources. I will never forget the times when all we had for dinner were beans or potatoes.

After a while, good things started to happen: the most beautiful toys in the world showed up in the house and my mother bought us new clothes, new shoes and wonderful pink backpacks.

In a couple of years, the situation improved considerably: we moved to a new, much bigger apartment in the central neighbourhood of our town. We had a computer and mobile phones.

But the most important benefit of my father's absence were not jeans and laptops. It was the ambition I developed, the desire to be the best in my class, to win competitions and scholarships and to contribute to a society that I or my children wouldn't have to leave behind.

"I always told Ioana that she can get the best or the worst out of this story", Mădălina tells me about her sister. The thing is, we did both.

Picture credits

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ISBN 978-973-577-679-4