

51 OF 172 / Set 1 Copyright (c) 2001 Los Angeles Times 000056966

Love and Loss in Romania

* In a country where child abandonment is legal, Nannette Gonzalez is intent on finding homes for the unwanted.

By MARNELL JAMESON, SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

Los Angeles Times Wednesday July 11, 2001

Home Edition Southern California Living Part E Page 1 View Desk
44 inches; 1543 words

SAN DIEGO--Falling in love is an occupational hazard for Nannette Gonzalez. So are lice, scabies, HIV, hepatitis and the psychological burnout that comes from helping children with lots of problems and little hope. But in the seven years the California native has spent nurturing abandoned babies in Romania and helping them find homes, she's been spared most of these liabilities. Except for the problem of love, and its attendant loss.

His name was Carlos. And he even looked like her. He was 7 months old when his mother dropped him off at Victor Gomoiu Hospital in Bucharest, where Gonzalez works. He weighed only 10 pounds, had acute bronchitis, scabies and showed signs of neglect. His mother didn't check back on him for almost three months.

During that time, Gonzalez nursed him back to health, helped him learn to sit up, coaxed him to smile and laugh, kissed him and loved him as if he were her own. Then, when the mother returned, handed him back and prayed.

Carlos is just one of many who end up at Romania Outreach to Christ's Kids, a nonprofit organization Gonzalez founded in 1997 to care for abandoned children, mostly newborns and toddlers, though some are as old as 15. Based in a 40-bed ward of a state-run hospital, the organization's staff provides the hands-on care that abandoned children need. In Romania, baby abandonment is not only legal, it's state-supported.

The ward is a large unadorned room lined with rusting metal cribs, the white paint peeling off their chain-link sides. On one side of the room is a sink and changing table. In the center, on the white and gray linoleum, are chairs and floor mats, and on them grown-ups holding babies.

The group's mission is to get kids out of the institution, and prevent

more from coming in. Ideally, it aims to reunify children with their families. Failing that, the staff looks to foster care or adoption.

Gonzalez, who is 42, single and childless, is on a visit to San Diego, where she comes once a year to speak, raise funds and see family. "At first I couldn't understand any woman just giving up her baby, but then I've never been that poor," she says. Some mothers, she now understands, leave their babies out of genuine concern. They think if their baby has food and shelter it'll be better off, because that's more than they can provide.

Mariana Clichigi, for example, had three children and no husband. She could provide for her family as long as her grandmother cared for her children while Clichigi worked. But when her grandmother died, Clichigi had to leave the children in a state-run orphanage, one that Romania Outreach worked with. To put the family back together, the organization bought Mariana a home for \$5,000 and gives her a stipend of \$100 a month so she can stay home with her children. That kind of money goes far in Romania, where the average family makes do on the U.S. equivalent of \$110 a month.

On this day, Gonzalez is sitting in an art-filled home that belongs to friends with whom she's staying. As she talks, the happy noise of children playing at a nearby elementary school fills in the background like a well-chosen soundtrack. Dressed stylishly in red-flowered capris and a crisp white sleeveless top, Gonzalez looks like Marie Osmond with edge. Her red-glossed lips match her painted toes, which match her sandals. "I remember wondering when I decided to become a missionary whether I could still dress cute," she jests.

But mostly her talk is serious. The reason so many children are abandoned in Romania involves poverty, politics and precedent. After the ouster and subsequent execution of dictator Nicolae Ceausescu in 1989, which ended his 24-year regime, western media uncovered the horrific fact that more than 200,000 children were living in orphanages not much better than concentration camps.

Many were the product of Ceausescu's maniacal goal of increasing the population to 30 million by the end of the century. Romania currently has 24 million people living in a country the size of Oregon.

Ceausescu outlawed birth control and abortions, and required every woman of childbearing age to have five children or be heavily taxed. Couples who had kids they didn't want or couldn't afford simply dropped them at the local hospital, no questions asked.

Though the mandatory birth policy and communism officially ended in 1989 when the country became a democracy, the poverty lingers, along with the mentality of bearing and then institutionalizing children.

And while birth control and abortions are now legal, many women continue to have unwanted babies, which Gonzalez attributes to a lack of education.

Worldwide attention to the orphan problem has helped. Many of the children were adopted internationally, others have since grown up. Now, Gonzalez estimates, there are closer to 80,000 orphans in institutions throughout the country, but perhaps an additional 100,000 children are living on the street. It's still a daunting number, but one Gonzalez and her staff work to reduce, one child at a time.

Of the 1,000 or so kids Romania Outreach has helped, Gonzalez estimates that 50% have been successfully reunited with their families, 30% have gone into Romanian foster homes and 15% have been adopted, mostly by Americans, though Gonzalez would like to see more adoptions within Romania.

A third-generation Mexican American born and raised in Bakersfield, Gonzalez was one of five children. A trip to Tijuana when she was 20 changed the course of her life. "I saw so much poverty, people living in cardboard boxes. I wanted to help them."

Eventually, she went to an interdenominational missionary school at the University of the Nations in Kona, Hawaii, where she took classes in the Bible and self-denial.

Both have come in handy for the frustrating, pared-down life she lives in Romania, a country where hot water is a luxury, appliances are scarcer than thousand-dollar bills, and, as she puts it, "everything takes twice as long, except having babies." Her own three-room apartment, with its view of a gypsy den and a trash yard, has no microwave and no dryer. But, she says, "It's comfortable, nicely furnished and big considering most Romanian families share a two-room flat, which makes me feel a little guilty."

Despite the worldwide publicity, Gonzalez didn't know about the country's orphan problem until she saw it firsthand in 1994. She was doing missionary work in Spain that year when friends asked her if she'd like to come with them to a Romanian hospital to hold babies badly in need of attention. Studies have shown that babies deprived of human touch fail to grow and develop normally, and often have difficulty forming attachments and socializing.

"They didn't even cry," she recalls. They'd learned how useless crying was since no one ever responded. Instead, they just stared, lying in their own waste, in cribs some had outgrown. Overworked nurses came by just three brief times a day to prop bottles in their mouths and change diapers. Some babies never left their cribs. Some were never held upright, so at 14 months old they couldn't sit up, let alone walk.

She founded Romania Outreach a few years later and today the organization, based in San Diego, has a staff of 37: 30 Romanians, five American missionaries and two Americans here. The group is supported through fund-raising, says Gonzalez, with 80% of its finances coming from individuals. Donations last year totaled \$325,000. After she meets payroll, which runs about \$10,000 a month, remaining funds go to helping kids and finding them homes.

And to families like Maria Jabala's. When Jabala could no longer make her monthly pension of \$35 stretch to care for her daughter's three children, she brought them to the Bucharest hospital, where she knew they'd at least have food and a bed. Their mother had already abandoned them once to start a new family with another man. Romania Outreach kicked in \$150 a month--\$75 rent for a better apartment and a \$75 monthly stipend--to allow Jabala to keep the children.

Abandonments that aren't strictly economic are tougher to remedy, but not impossible. When the staff made a home visit months after Carlos' mother reclaimed her baby, they found Carlos with cigarette burns on his back and, at 20 months old, he wasn't yet walking. They asked the mother if they could help. At first she resisted. Then she agreed to let them put her son in foster care, where he is now thriving again.

"The mother didn't even cry when they took him away," said Gonzalez, who herself is tearful as she relives the story. "His foster parents sometimes let me take him home on weekends. I wish I could adopt him."

It's not the first time she's felt so attached. "It's hard. I'm 42 and I pray every night that I will get to experience having my own kids. But I think kids need a mom and a dad. That's God's design. If I had a child right now, like Carlos, that would really slow me down."

Though engaged twice, Gonzalez hasn't had a significant relationship in 10 years. "Sometimes I think people think my name is 'Nun' instead of 'Nan.' I think I'm cute. So what's up with that? It's just God. So for now, I'm a mother to the motherless."

She's also their advocate, working at the government level to change laws.

As chairwoman for the ProChild Romania Federation, a group representing more than 80 Romanian organizations serving kids at risk, Gonzalez is working with government officials to make it more difficult for women to abandon their babies.

Barbara Nichols, a home health nurse who lives in Santa Ana, volunteers for Romania Outreach four months a year. She says Gonzalez's style is what makes her effective.

"You have to make changes very slowly there so you don't offend anyone," said Nichols, 59. "They've come to trust Nannette because she's not judgmental and she's assimilated. She's learned the language and lives like they do. They respond to her sincerity and commitment."

Over lunch, Gonzalez unrolls plans for the next phase of that commitment: Bedrock Falls Ranch, a place for abandoned children to live, which she hopes to complete by the end of next year, depending on the snowfall. She already has the land, 10 acres about 25 miles outside Bucharest, which she bought for \$2,000.

"It will be a home outside the hospital for the kids whose parents won't take them home but won't give them up either," she says.

She points to a large central building on the plan. "Here's our main area, groups can gather here, counselors can talk to us, and it will be a training center to teach women how to be moms. Many don't even know how to bathe a baby. They hold it up like it was a piece of chicken and use cold water."

Here, she points again, will be shelters for women needing refuge from domestic violence. Here are buildings to house foster kids and their parents. Here a barn for animals and space for a garden. "I want to build a place where these people can have hope, where they can dream. Romanians don't dream. They think they're stuck."

*

For more information on Romania Outreach to Christ's Kids, call (909) 877-3323, e-mail rocksandiego@rockministries.org, or visit <http://www.rockministries.org>.

PHOTO: Nannette Gonzalez shows photos of young children she has helped through her organization, Romania Outreach to Christ's Kids.
ID NUMBER: 20010711geu763ke

Descriptors: GOOD SAMARITANS
NONPROFIT ORGANIZATIONS
CHILD ABANDONMENT -- ROMANIA
CHILDREN -- HEALTH
ORPHANS
CHILD CARE
MEDICAL TREATMENTS
ROMANIA OUTREACH TO CHRIST'S KIDS