

# LIFELINE ROMANIA with CHESTERFORDS AID

Autumn 2017

Registered Charity Number 1061999



## Living in a box

**M**any families in Mărășești live in blue boxes. Some live near the town centre, others live nearer the gipsy suburb. One of the latter was the Toader family. We visited them at their home in Orchid Street. Orchid Street sounds a beautiful place to live, but nothing could be further from the truth. A muddy track, some weedy grass, and some *very* nosy neighbours. Every home on Orchid Street was a 20-foot by 8-foot blue shipping container.



Not a flower to be seen. The red-roofed building belongs to the Red Cross. The containers are supposed to be temporary council accommodation, but for some families,

In the Toader family, “Mum” is 57 but looks a lot older. She isn’t just Mum though, she is Mum, grandma, and auntie to the residents of that little container. It took us a while to unscramble the relationships of the various people. Our problem was made worse by the Romanian language which uses the same word (*nepoată*) for both niece and grand-daughter. Also a “nepot” could be a nephew or a grandson. “Dad” had died.

“Mum” told us that she had 6 children, aged from 25 to 40, but she couldn’t remember the ages of all of them. She just about managed to recall their names. Most left home before the fire that destroyed their house and caused the rest of them to be moved to the container.

The youngest girl is 25, on the left in the photo. She has a mental age of about 3 and has never spoken a word.



Second from left is Dănuș, her 16-year-old grandson who has lived with her for 9 years. He is also unable to speak. There was another grandson, a year older, but we were told that he was mentally ill. He and his wife were told to leave after he attacked his grandmother and tried to kill her. The 2 boys were on a railway station recently when some hooligans attacked Dănuș. His brother leapt to his defence but they all turned on him; he was taken to hospital with 2 black eyes and a broken nose. Those boys are the children of the 38-year-old epileptic daughter.

The girl on the right is 30 but mentally much less than 30. She is a niece. There are others but we didn’t meet them. There is a grand-daughter with a baby; they were homeless and slept on the floor.

Seven people in a little box, and no hope of ever getting a better place.

## Churches in Panciu, Haret and Răcoasa

The church in Panciu has been established for 15 years, although only 5 in the current building. They are outgrowing that though, and sometimes the children have to sit on the stairs. They have started to build a new church in a much better location. We went to Panciu on our first Sunday in Romania, and afterwards we gave bags of clothes, stationery, toiletries and toys to the children. We pack these bags in England, for every child in four churches.



In the evening we went to the church in Haret. This is the newest of the churches that we go to and most of the congregation are children. They have started to bring their parents along. The building is not quite complete yet; they are planning to put a porch on the front of it.



The inside is finished though, and has been in use for about two years. There is a small flat built on to the back, and this was intended to be used by the minister in the future; they don't have one yet. At present the church is run by Cris, who also is the pastor of the Baptist Church in Panciu. For the time being, the flat is being used by a young family who needed a place to live while they built a home of their own.

We visited Haret on two Sunday evenings. On the second Sunday Roger was telling the story of blind Bartimaeus, and so Manu was dressed up as Bartimaeus and "interviewed" about life without sight. Manu (his full name is Emanuel) is a student at the Baptist Bible College in București and so this was good practice for him.



On our second Sunday morning we went to the Baptist Church in Răcoasa. This church is going through a difficult time. The minister had to move away from the village and up to now no-one has been willing to take responsibility for it. They have an occasional service, once or twice a month.

The adults who attend that church are Christians already, but Roger needed to explain to the children how they could also become Christians. He told them that Jesus would pull them one way, and various sins would pull them the other way. Who would win? They acted it, with Valentin being pulled both ways. We hope they understood!



## Charity shop in Mărășești

We opened a charity shop for the first time over ten years ago. It is situated in the centre of Mărășești, overlooking the park. which is a pedestrian zone and so plenty of people walk past the shop – and quite a lot of them come in.



On this occasion we attracted a few new faces due to our special offer of new woolly hats at a bargain price. With winter fast approaching, all the children needed hats and some of the adults too. During the summer we had been given a vast quantity of new hats – 2 cars full! – from a shop which closed down. These were given free to the poorest families and sold to those who could afford to pay.

One lady didn't look poor. She came in and within a few minutes she had bought our best dining table. That afternoon we unpacked another dining table, which came with 6 chairs. The next day she was in again – and bought that table too, with the chairs. We asked how big her house was, if she needed 2 dining tables! She explained.... "yesterday's table and today's chairs are for my brother. Today's table is for my mother". We hadn't finished when we took the money; Roger and Cris had to wrap the table up



with blankets and clingfilm, to protect it on it's journey home. For us, it was deja vu, as we had already packed it at the barn.

Another lady came in and saw two coffee tables displayed, at different prices. She wanted the largest table at the smallest price. I offered her the smaller table for the money she was prepared to pay, but she didn't want that. She wanted the biggest. After a few minutes she paid full price. She and her husband carried it out of the shop, and tried to balance it on the back of his bike to get it home. The bike was a totally unsuitable vehicle. She then asked for some free string to tie it on. We gave the string, and I then left before she could ask me to carry it home for her! Some people expect free deliveries.



As usual the shop was very crowded the first day but calmed down after that. Four beds were sold the first week and many other pieces of furniture. Clothes, jewellery, and household goods were going as fast as we could unpack them, and over 100 of our "special offer" hats.



Regretfully, we had not received many Christmas trees or decorations. These are always popular, but this winter we will be short.

## Helping some very poor families

**H**elping families starts with your donations. These have to be sorted and packed into many different categories. Without your help, we can't do a thing in Romania. Then we need help to load the lorry, and at the other end we need help to unload. Then, and only then, we can start to help the local families.



Some are poor because of illness or handicaps, such as the family on the front page. Many are poor because they have had a house fire, or a flood; these events are more common in Romania than in England. Some are poor because there is only one parent, who can't work because they need to look after the children. Some are unemployed because they are illiterate and therefore almost unemployable.

Others, like **Catalin and Iona's** family, are poor because they have more children than they can afford. With nine children aged 14 months up to 17 years, they needed help. They were clearly short of soap in their house, but through the dirt on Adrian's feet I could see corns. He was wearing flip-flops on a cold October day. We



supplied plenty of shoes, socks, and soap. During the summer we had been given thousands of new hats, from a shop that closed down. Every child was given a new hat, all different, and Adrian was especially pleased with his "bandit hat".

In contrast, **Costina and George** had just one child, a boy with trousers torn at the knees. That is not unusual, but what surprised me was the attempt to repair the holes – parcel tape!

Some families tell us that they have never been to us before. They think that they will be given more goods if it is their first visit. **Liliana and Nelu** tried this in October, but they were given less because we keep records and we knew that it was at least their third visit, maybe more.

**Amar and Vasilica** were not strangers to us; we have known them for many years and particularly when their seven-year-old daughter became blind four years ago. We helped to pay for her cataract operations. Now she needs new glasses and they can't afford to pay for them. We told them to get the new glasses immediately after Dad was paid (he is a rubbish collector, so not a lot of money). They could then take the receipt to our charity shop, and Lidia would reimburse them. That is one of the things that we do with shop profits. We wondered why Dad was named Amar; it is a name we have never seen before and it is the Romanian word for "bitter".



Apart from the 3 children that Amar brought to us, there were 2 older daughters, both in their 20's. One was expecting a baby very soon, and we asked her whether it would be a boy or a girl. She didn't know.... but Grandma knew! We wondered how Grandma knew when Mum didn't.

**Radu and Nela's** family brought their daughters but came without the boys. This family goes to the church in Panciu and we have known them for nearly 20 years. They needed a bike for their eldest son, Daniel. Daniel needed it to get to work, many miles from home. He has done well to get a job, because he can barely read, write, or speak. It is due to a genetic problem which also affects two of Daniel's siblings. Despite his literacy difficulty, Daniel is a Christian. Daniel works in a car-wash but he will never be able to drive.



**Nicu<sup>o</sup>**r's family lived in the worst block of flats in town. None of the flats has plumbing or gas, and many don't have electricity. Dad worked at the Town Hall, but not in a good job. No-one with a good job would dream of living in those flats, commonly known as the Phantom Flats due to the lack of windows when people first moved in.... just black holes. The flats are at the edge of the town, next to the cemetery. As usual, we offered furniture as well as all the other things that we give. They were reluctant to take it because of their poor accommodation; they did not want to take something that would be ruined by the water which runs down their walls. We were impressed by their honesty; some of the residents of those flats would have taken the best thing they could see and then sold it – that is illegal. We gave them some plastic stacking chairs; they can't come to much harm even in a wet place. They told us they were trying to build



a small house for themselves, but had only done the foundations. At that rate, the older children will have left home before the house is complete.

**Teofil** and his wife had only two children but were poor because of Teofil's health problems. He had leukaemia, and had been receiving treatment for this for 19 years. The treatment would not cure him, it simply kept him alive. He was only 43 but looked years older. He was unable to work. They chose to take a bedside cabinet.



**Camelia and Sergiu**, also from Phantom Flats told us that their apartment door was broken, and there were no internal doors. We were able to remedy that problem due to having received a lot of doors within the last year. They came near the end, and so they were given more furniture than usual. We didn't have space to store it!

**Maricela and Nicu** were not married but had ten children. They had a small house, which was clearly congested particularly at night-time when a dozen people needed to get into bed. They needed more beds, but didn't really have enough floor space for another bed (or beds). We gave them a folding bed, which would probably be used by the oldest boy; we felt that they could fold it up every day and regain the floor space until bedtime. Despite their overcrowded



house and poverty they seemed to be very happy family. The children were playing and laughing, and unusually, the parents joined in the fun.



**Angelica** was divorced and remarried, with one child from each relationship. The family had just one double bed for all four people. We thought that the 12-year-old girl should not really be sharing a bed with her stepfather, so we gave her a bed-with-a-bonus; it had a cupboard built into the base. The first husband was paying maintenance for his daughter, and apart from the maintenance money their only income was about £16 a month. They didn't own a house or flat, but they rented 2 rooms in someone else's house.

**Valerica** was a Christian widow; we know the church that the family attends. Valerica was left with 4 children when her husband died very suddenly at the age of 43. He had liver cancer, which was being treated. That was not the cause of his death though. He had varicose veins in his oesophagus. One day a vein burst, there was internal



bleeding, and almost instant death. We were able to help a little with 7 pieces of furniture.

## Can you help?

We are planning our next visit to Romania in April 2018, but we need the goods as soon as possible, and ideally by the **END OF FEBRUARY**. This allows us time to pack them and complete the paperwork which has to be done before every trip. Please don't leave goods until the last minute. We have more than enough to do in the last few weeks and it really doesn't help if we go there already exhausted!

### THESE THINGS CAN BE NEW OR SECONDHAND.....

**Bags** – shopping bags, rucksacks, holdalls, transparent plastic bags.

**Beds** – single, bunk, cot, sofa-bed, Z-bed – *must be clean and in good condition.* No double or king-size beds please.

**Bedding** – single and double, but double size is especially welcome because we never get enough of it. Sheets, especially flat sheets, pillows and pillow-cases, blankets, duvets, and duvet covers. Must be clean. No cot bedding; they don't have cots.

**Boots, shoes, slippers, sandals** – If used, must be sturdy, very clean and in good condition.

**Building materials** – doors, small windows, roofing, wood, and other simple materials for building houses. Also basic tools.

Paint.

**Clothes for adults** – all sorts! Costume jewellery.

*Must be clean and in good condition.*

**Clothes for children over 3 years old – WE NEVER GET ENOUGH CLOTHES FOR CHILDREN!**

**Educational goods** – exercise books, pencils, pens, crayons.

**Furniture** – small furniture is sometimes useful; please phone and ask us because some furniture is not useful in Romania, and some does not travel well. Cupboards, chests of drawers, dining chairs and tables are needed.

**Household goods** – crockery, cutlery, saucepans (especially BIG pans), towels, rugs, irons, mirrors, clocks, spindriers, etc. *Anything electrical must be in perfect working order.* Christmas trees & decorations.

**Mattresses** – Standard sizes. Must be clean and in good condition.

**Medical** – wheelchairs, crutches, zimmer frames, walking sticks, plasters, bandages. *We can't take any kind of tablets, medicines, creams, etc.*

**Money** – without this, we cannot pay for the lorry to take all the other goods. Cash, cheques, (payable to LRCA), trust-fund vouchers etc.. If you are a tax-payer we can reclaim a further 25% of your donation from the Inland Revenue at no extra cost to you.

**Socks and tights** – we never get enough to meet the needs.

**Toys for children over 3 years old –**

Nothing that requires a knowledge of the English language. Educational toys are particularly useful. Must be clean, complete and in working order.

### THESE THINGS MUST BE NEW.....

**Clothes for children under 3 years old**

**Toiletries** – basic toiletries only. Soap, shampoo, conditioner, toilet rolls, sanitary towels, toothpaste, toothbrushes. **NO**

**AEROSOLS.** *Must be well within use-by date.*

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## LRCA Committee

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## Unemployment

One evening I looked at the Romanian news on the internet. I saw that 2.5 million young people were employed, and 2.36 million were unemployed. For the purposes of these calculations, "young" meant aged 15-34. This is partly why so many younger Romanians emigrate to various countries in the rest of Europe – they are not all in UK. If they didn't emigrate, then the numbers would be different; maybe the unemployed figure would be double or treble the employed.

The news also said that a third of young people obtained their first job from a friend or a relative. This system makes it particularly hard for children from very poor families – or those in care – to get a job.

Also, only 4% of people, young or old, were prepared to move house in order to find a job in another part of the country. Unlike here!

## Old and new houses

There are some decrepit old houses in Mărășești, with leaky roofs, tumbledown walls and broken windows. These old houses lack plumbing, gas, and in some cases, electricity. They are often overcrowded and badly maintained. Many belong to gipsy families.



On our most recent visit to Romania we were surprised to see quite a lot of new houses being built. At first we assumed that the owners of these new places had worked for many years in another country in order to save up enough money to build a new place. We know people who have done this, and others who are currently working for this purpose.

We were told otherwise. Many of these new houses belong to dishonest gipsies who have developed a scam to get money from the British government... and probably from some other countries too. They come to England for a short time and bring the birth certificates of their children. Then they borrow Romanian children who are living here, and go to a welfare office to claim benefits. The English people in the office are fooled into thinking that the children belong to the claimant. The claimant then goes home, and draws the money from the local bank. The English benefit office thinks they are still in England. Some families have been doing this for years without being caught.

Not all gipsies are dishonest. We know one gipsy who is both a builder and the leader of a local church. He admired one of the houses and said he would like a house like that. He needs a better house! He was offered the chance to participate in this scam, but when he heard the story behind the new houses he refused to have anything to do with it. Costel is honest, and would prefer to live in honest poverty than dishonest luxury.

## Mariana

We have known Mariana for many years, ever since she came to live in Mărășești. She wasn't impressed with the town, having spent her first 11 years in Brașov, a beautiful old city in Transylvania. A child in care has no choice; they have to live wherever they are sent. She was determined not to be unemployed, and after leaving school she found a job in a local supermarket which had just opened a new branch in Mărășești.



She was able to work her way up through the shop and get herself a tiny rented bedsit. For a child who has never known her family, she has done well.

She has always wanted to return to Brașov, but thought it would never be possible. Brașov is an expensive area. Then an opportunity arose; the supermarket is one of hundreds in the country and one of the 18 Brașov branches was looking for an experienced person to take on a good job. Mariana applied and got the job. The company has found a flat for her, and our Romanian charity has helped her to move, about 100 miles west of Mărășești.

We will miss her, but we wish her well. She has had a hard life, but she has worked hard and she deserves this new opportunity.

## Andreea

On our October visit to Romania we had to say goodbye to Mariana, but we said "Hello again" to Andreea. We had not seen her for 10 years or more and there was such a difference. She is the daughter of an old friend who emigrated to Italy to find work. He said he would go to Italy for 2 years; it is now 13 years and he isn't back yet. He went to earn the money to build a house. He had to leave his 2 children in Romania until he could afford to get them to Italy.

Now Andreea is back in Romania as a language student at the university in București. She speaks Romanian, Italian, and English, and she was a great help to us during distribution, and later in the shop.

## Progress in Panciu

**W**e have been associated with Panciu Baptist Church for well over 20 years; for most of that time Cris Popa has been the church leader. He also works for our charity in Mărășeșt. When Cris took over the leadership of the church, they met for a short time in a rented room in the local business centre. That only lasted a few weeks, until the owner of the business centre discovered that his new tenants were Baptists – then the lease was cancelled. Baptists were regarded as a cult, and many Eastern Orthodox people would have nothing to do with them.

Unable to rent anywhere else, Cris and his wife Lidia vacated their bedroom and started to sleep on the sofa-bed in the living room. Their bedroom became the new meeting place for the church.

It was soon too small for their needs. People sat – and sometimes stood – in the former bedroom, and the overflow was in the entrance hall and another room, where they could hear but not see. Another solution was needed.

Cris demolished an old barn on his property and started to build a church. His house was far too small for their needs, so the new building was dual purpose, being a church, and a house for him and his family. It was built with financial help from LRCA and a few other people. Cris did the construction work, with some help from his family and friends.

Now that is too small. The church is growing. They needed to make a new purpose-built church in the town centre. Their house is down a narrow lane on the outskirts of town. The town centre should draw a lot more people, maybe those who have never found the current place.

Cris explored sources of funding because the church members could not possibly afford what was needed. The Moldovan Bible Mission have a construction programme funded by churches in USA. They told Cris to obtain the land (which he did with help from an American doctor), and then to get planning permission and make the foundation and floor. He did this, with help from LRCA.

Then there was a problem. The Moldovan people were unable to keep their promise due to financial overspend on two churches in Moldova. Cris decided to continue building, doing the walls with the money still available. The plan is for the Moldovans to come back later to finish off the job when they have money available again. Panciu church is next on their list. Meanwhile Cris is exploring other sources of financial help.



We were able to visit the building site several times during our recent trip. We met Ruslan, from the Moldovan Bible Mission, we met the builders, and we saw the walls growing higher. Cris would like to get the roof on before the winter, but it is looking increasingly unlikely.

The wire “cages” in the picture are the steel reinforcing rods; these are needed because Panciu is in an earthquake zone.

While we were there, Cris needed another delivery of bricks. It was not simple; in Romania it is not possible to put a Visa card in a machine and enter a PIN. It is necessary to go to a bank, withdraw the money, and go in person to the office of the brick supplier. This was made even harder by the fact that Mărășeșt no longer has a bank. He travelled to Focșani, took the money out of the church account, paid for the bricks, and the lorry approached the site. Then the plan unravelled; the lorry broke a hydraulic pipe as it reversed in, and had to wait 5 hours for another lorry to come and lift the bricks off.

Nothing is straightforward in Romania, but with God’s help they should eventually get there.