

ADOPTING IN ROMANIA

**Presented to the Rotary Club of Honolulu
by Kent & Elizabeth Keith
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Kent: Thank you for the opportunity to be with you today to share with you a little about one of the most traumatic and chaotic experiences of our lives— adopting in Romania.

Elizabeth: A year ago today, we were in flight with two babies. We were headed back to Hawaii with Spencer Doru, who was then 14 months old, and Angela Virginica, who was then 8 months old. The first leg of the trip was 30 hours, continuous, on three different airplanes, from Bucharest to Prague to Frankfurt to New York to Los Angeles.

K: It was the longest trip of my life. And also the happiest.

E: It all began on December 6, 1990, when we visited Rainbow Families, an adoption agency located in Kailua. We adopted our first daughter, Eriko, in Japan, and we wanted to keep expanding our family. We knew that Eriko wanted a baby sister.

K: Since we had had no luck in adopting locally, we reviewed the situation in several countries, and decided on Romania. The adoption process there could be comparatively fast, and the need of the children there was dramatic— nearly overwhelming.

E: It was a risk to travel to Romania during the Gulf War. Only a few days before we left, Saddam Hussein had issued a proclamation, calling upon all Iraqi terrorists to bomb all things American. We would be flying Pan Am, the only foreign carrier flying into Bucharest. Pan Am flew through Frankfurt, a likely terrorist target, as well as Zagreb, where we could be caught in the cross-fire as Yugoslavia fell apart.

K: While it was a risk to fly during the Gulf War, it turned out that we went at the right time. Six weeks after we made it back with our babies, the Romanian government closed down the adoption process.

E: So, after nine weeks of filling out dozens of forms in triplicate notarized originals, and hours of briefings from Rainbow Families, we boarded a Pan Am flight on the evening of February 13, 1991 and headed for Romania.

K: We took ten suitcases with us, six of them filled with medical supplies, food, and stuffed animals for the babies in the orphanages and hospitals that Rainbow Families worked with. We took food and clothes for our new baby, and canned food for us, in case we had trouble getting food in Romania. And we took thermal underwear, boots, sweaters, and long coats.

E: After forty hours in transit, we arrived at Otopni airport in Bucharest during a dark, cold afternoon snowstorm. We were greeted by Dr. Valeria Balanaen, a young Romanian woman who was the pediatrician in the Rainbow Families team. She took us to the apartment in the center of the city which they had arranged for us to rent at a modest rate.

K: It was an old apartment building, like a 1930's Brooklyn walk-up, but it had a newer cement facade.

E: There was a foot of snow everywhere, and the cold wind numbed our faces.

K: Romania is located between Hungary, the former Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, the former Soviet Union, and the Black Sea. The major provinces are Wallachia, Moldavia, and Transylvania, the latter made famous by Count Dracula.

E: Romania has a population of about 22 million. Its major industries include corn and wheat, oil refining, and the manufacture of steel. It is the poorest country in Europe after Albania.

K: The Romanians we met were proud of being descendants of the ancient Dacian tribe and the Roman soldiers who were garrisoned there by Emperor Trajan in A.D. 106. The language is a derivation of vernacular Latin. In fact, Romania has been referred to as a "Latin Island" in a sea of Slavs and Magyars.

E: Bucharest is the capital, with a population of about two million. In the late 19th century, the Romanians wanted Bucharest to be the Paris of the East—the city even has its own Arch of Triumph like the one in Paris.

K: Prices were very low by U.S. standards. We could get a good three-course meal at a hotel restaurant for two American dollars. Of course, each time we went back, they seemed to have only the same three courses. Two dollars wasn't much for us, but we were told that the average salary of a resident of Bucharest was only \$25.00 per month in U.S. currency. We saw long lines of people waiting to buy food; the average wait for bread, we were told, was about three hours.

E: An underground, black market, barter economy also thrives. We knew that certain items were prized by Romanians because they were hard to get. So we took lots of cigarettes, chocolate, nail polish, perfume, soap, canned hams, and other items to Romania to give as gifts.

K: We took these items as gifts, but they turned out to be bribes. You see, a gift is something you give to someone out of affection or thanks for something they have done. A bribe is something you give to someone because they won't do what they are supposed to do for you, if you don't give them something to help them remember that they are supposed to do it for you.

E: For example, it took regular bribes to remind the nurses to change our babies' diapers, to get tickets for a train ride, and to clear up major legal problems such as the official seal that was round when it should have been square.

K: Armed soldiers were especially persuasive. At the airport in Bucharest, you cannot get to the departure lounge without passing a soldier with a submachine gun who blocks the corridor, saying "Dollar for the soldier."

E: We gave him the dollar.

K: It seemed like a good investment.

E: The constant bribes became a way of life for us, just as it was a way of life for them. We walked around with cigarettes, nail polish, chocolates and soap, handing them out as we went.

K: I came back after a week and a half, to continue work at Chaminade, and to file an amended I-600A form with the INS to allow us to adopt two children instead of one. For six weeks, Elizabeth was in Bucharest and I was back in Honolulu.

We found that communicating was not easy. There was only one known fax machine in all of Romania, at the Inter-Continental Hotel in Bucharest, and it was often out of service.

E: To call Kent by phone, I had to walk in the snow and ice to the central post office, and wait an hour or two for a government operator to place my call to Hawaii. I sat there waiting my turn with Nigerians, Arabians, and Ethiopians. When the government operator called out "Hawaii, cabin number four," they all stared at me.

K: Meanwhile, the mail system was not reliable. We could only be sure that something would get through if it went by courier, and the only couriers available to us were other couples going to Romania from Hawaii.

E: The Rainbow Families support network included drivers, interpreters, and a lawyer. They helped us find Spencer in an orphanage in Buzau, 80 miles north of Bucharest. He was a happy one-year-old baby who had been abandoned at birth.

K: Spencer had survived on the orphanage's rice gruel, but he didn't know how to crawl, because he was kept in his crib, and had no place to crawl to. He only knew how to rock his head back and forth in his crib. Other children were literally beating their heads against the sides of their cribs, they were so desperate for stimulation.

E: We found Angela in a hospital in Bucharest. Her family had been too poor to feed her during her first four months, and when she became sick, they abandoned her at the hospital. When we first saw her she was six months old, only ten or eleven pounds, fighting the last stages of whooping cough, and so congested throughout her head and chest that she had difficulty breathing. Pus was oozing from both her ears. She was bound up in a mummy bag, so she couldn't move her legs. They didn't change her diapers very often, so she had bleeding open sores on her back side. She didn't move when I first held her in my arms. She just looked up with her big eyes, and clasped her hands together as if in prayer. She was just barely clinging to life.

K: Although we went to Romania to adopt only one baby, after meeting Spencer and Angela we decided that we wanted to make both of them part of our family. That decision made our experience in Romania especially difficult. The week after we arrived and found Spencer and Angela, the Romanian government established a Commission on Adoptions. The Commission soon announced that couples would be allowed to adopt only one baby.

E: When we decided to adopt Spencer and Angela, we began to love them and care about them. We began to visit them, and hold them, and treat them like our own.

K: We knew that the paperwork had only started, and we had no legal rights. But in our hearts and minds, they were already our children.

E: Our lawyer, the social worker, the Commission officials, all told us to choose one baby and give up the other one. But we couldn't do it. I promised myself that I would not leave the country without both of them. And I didn't.

K: When I think of Elizabeth's daily courage and tenacity, it is clear in retrospect that the Romanian government never stood a chance. So far as we know, we were one of the last couples to succeed in adopting two babies in Romania.

E: There were dozens of approvals and stamps and documents we had to obtain, all related to the three basic steps in the process. First, we had to get the approval of the birth parent or parents to adopt each child. Second, we had to get Romanian court approval of the adoption. Finally, we had to get U.S. visas to bring the children home.

K: The creation of the Commission on Adoptions, which went into action the week after we arrived in Bucharest, turned the U.S. Embassy into an anxious rumor mill. What was the jurisdiction of the Commission? Nobody knew. It turned out that the courts in Bucharest would not recognize the Commission's jurisdiction, because the Commission had been established by administrative fiat, not by a parliamentary act. However, the courts outside of Bucharest did recognize the Commission's jurisdiction. We had one baby in Bucharest, and one outside Bucharest.

E: The Commission said that our two babies had to be put on their adoption list, or we couldn't adopt them. However, once our babies were put on their list, the Commission could give them away to somebody else.

K: It was a high anxiety environment, with high stakes. The rules were uncertain or changing, and the bribery was rampant. It was difficult to know what was going on, or what to do about it. Elizabeth will share with you two days, March 11 and March 12, 1991 which are examples of the highs and lows, the breakthroughs and reversals, which were so typical, day after day, week after week.

E: From my journal:

March 11, 1991. This morning the other Hawaii couples gathered at my apartment and we walked to the Commission office, arriving at 11:30. Our appointment was at 12:00. We were all surprised to see about 50 people jammed into the narrow hallway of the government building. There was great confusion and people pushing toward the door. Every time the door opened and someone came out, the crowd surged forward trying to get in... I was asking people, "Do you have an appointment? We're supposed to see Dr. Zugravescu at 12:00."

"Appointments don't mean anything," a lady told me. "I had a 9:30 appointment. Besides, Dr. Zugravescu isn't going to be here until 1:00."

I thought we should at least tell the Commission staff that we were there, but I heard a voice scolding the people who forced their way in through the door. "Ve vill call you one at a time! Vait until your name is called! Please go outside!"

Our doctor, Valeria, came. At that point, we didn't know if we would get to see Dr. Zugravescu or what was going to happen. When the staff lady came out, Valeria asked her about our appointments. "You're not on the list for today," the lady said. "What?" I said. "I called last week and spoke to Elena, and Thursday, I met with Octavian, who said I still had my appointment." I was getting frantic. The new appointments they were giving out were for June, three months from now. I couldn't afford to lose today's appointment and wait three months. The lady went back in after muttering something about how Octavian no longer worked there, and Elena didn't come in today.

Finally, the staff called the numbers of the three Hawaii couples. My number was second. I sat there, reviewing my documents, going over for the hundredth time what I was going to say when I got inside. Then it was my turn. I walked in and there were four women in the room at their desks. I said, "You are all so busy with so many people waiting— do you have time to eat lunch?" "No," they said. I offered them an apple to help tide them over. "No thank you," they said, "but we'd like to make some coffee." "Sure, go ahead," I said.

I was desperate, but I didn't want to look desperate. I had heard from one of the women outside while we were waiting that another woman had broken down and cried during her meeting with Dr. Zugravescu. When that happened Dr. Zugravescu had said coldly, "You are not fit to be a mother," and sent the woman away without a baby.

When the four women came back with their coffee, I started out with a description of Kent's background, and then my own, and how we had learned about Spencer, and had begun the process before the Commission was even established. I showed my photo album to them— they all wanted to see the pictures of Spencer...

"He is a beautiful boy," Elena said after looking at the photos. "I will be glad to help you." I almost couldn't believe my ears. She began filling in a form and asked how to spell our names. As I gave her the spellings, I realized that she was filling out an authorization form! She said, "Dr. Zugravescu must sign this, so please wait outside. I will call you when she signs this."

I went outside. Our lawyer had met with Dr. Zugravescu, who said that she would not allow two children to be adopted by any couple. Would Dr. Zugravescu recognize my name as the one who wanted to adopt two children? My appointment request form had the names of both Angela and Spencer on it. Why didn't the staff members ask me about Angela? Officially they must refuse anyone trying to adopt two children.

I sat outside and waited. Finally, three hours later, at 3:30, the door opened and my name was called. They handed me the authorization to adopt Spencer, signed by Dr. Zugravescu with an official seal on it. I had surmounted one major obstacle on the road to his adoption.

K: The process with Spencer could move ahead. Elizabeth was elated. The next day, however, was one of despair.

E: From my journal:

March 12, 1991. Today I feel sick to my stomach. I went to the hospital to see Angela and deliver a gift from another Hawaii couple to Dr. Chikovitch.

When I arrived, they wouldn't let me in. Angela wasn't in her room, where I had visited her so many times before. The dark-haired doctor who speaks a little English said, "Angela is very, very ill. This is serious, very dangerous."

"Where is she?" I asked...

"She is in intensive care. Very serious, very dangerous. You cannot see her. Nobody can see her."

Visiting the hospital had never been pleasant. The nurses at the hospital were extremely prejudiced against gypsies, and Angela was a gypsy baby. "You don't want to adopt her," the nurses said.

When Kent and I first saw Angela, she was ill, she had nobody to hold her, and her crib was bare. So we gave her a pink bunny rabbit, to look at, and cling to. The next day, it was gone. We couldn't believe that a hospital staff member would steal the only thing that a sick baby girl had to cling to, but one of them did.

Later, the nurses had told me that Angela was going to die. It was clear that they weren't going to do anything to stop her from dying. "She's going to die before you can adopt her," they said. "Pick another baby."

All of that was coming back to me now. I asked the dark-haired doctor, "Is she going to die?" "Talk to Dr. Chikovitch," she said. "Please come back tomorrow."

I walked all the way home, an hour and a half in the snow and cold. While I walked, I talked to Angela out loud. "Hang in there, Angela. We're going to take you home, so be strong. You'll do fine once we get home, just hang on." I kept repeating those words out loud, all the way back to my apartment.

K: We don't know exactly what was going on. We do know that the Commission gave Angela's name to another couple who arrived in Romania long after we did, and that couple apparently made substantial gifts to the Commission and the hospital director.

E: The director couldn't make a deal with the other couple if the couple saw me with Angela, so Angela was put in intensive care, where I couldn't be with her anymore. Even when I obtained the court decree of adoption and went to the hospital to take legal custody of Angela, the director was reluctant to give her up. Apparently, she was still trying to work a deal with the other couple.

K: The process with Spencer had its snags as well. Spencer's birth mother and grandfather lived in a village outside of the city of Buzau. It was a rustic 19th century setting, with dirt roads, horse-drawn carts, brightly painted earthen houses, and no visible sign of electricity, plumbing, or telephones. There was a village well for water. Inside were tiny rooms with high wooden beds, small tables, and ovens for cooking and heating. Above the village, rising with simple majesty, was the church, complete with onion-top steeples.

E: The most unusual obstacle in adopting Spencer, after we got the Commission approval, was a rumor in the village. The rumor was that Americans adopted Romanian babies in order to take them back to America and sell their body parts. Spencer's birth mother and grandfather had heard the rumors, and weren't sure they wanted the adoption to go forward. It took some time to convince them that we loved Spencer and were shocked that anyone would believe such a rumor.

K: The rumor persists. A few months ago, a Romanian government official actually came to Hawaii to make sure that adopted Romanian babies were being cared for, and were not, in fact, being sold for body parts.

E: We know that our own country is not perfect. There are children in America who are truly in need, and there is much more we must do to help them. Kent and I have a lot of respect for Foster Parenting programs like the one supported by this club.

K: We have also learned to respect other cultures and values which may differ from our own. Having said that, we have never seen such systematic inhumanity perpetrated by a nation on its own children.

E: We have concluded that the situation there is so bad, that the Romanians just can't bring themselves to face it.

K: Romania has created what I call an "Auschwitz for children."

E: Former Communist party boss Ceausescu wanted to increase the Romanian population to have a bigger labor force for greater industrial production. Unfortunately, he didn't succeed in building the economy and raising the standard of living. The result was that families grew faster than the economy could support them. Parents didn't have the money to feed and care for their own children.

K: The number of children abandoned or given up to orphanages and hospitals grew to an estimated 100,000; the number may be as high as 150,000. As reported in the Western press, most of these children lived— and were often left to die— in conditions of squalor and neglect unlike anything the world has seen in modern times.

E: After Ceausescu was executed in December 1989, steps were taken to make sure that more and more children would at least be fed. However, even in the better hospitals and orphanages, the children are still not held, or taken out of their cribs for exercise. They are not given toys or objects to play with, for stimulation and growth. Left in their cribs, they do not develop normally. They may be born healthy, but their brains do not develop, and they become retarded.

K: Knowing this, Elizabeth began going to the hospital almost daily to hold and exercise and talk to and sing to Angela. The nurses clearly resented this, because it made them look bad— they didn't hold or exercise or talk to any of the babies.

E: It made us angry to see the nurses close the doors on screaming children, so they could sit around smoking and talking out in the lobby. Every few hours, they would enter the wards and rush around with heavy glass Fanta bottles with rice gruel, sticking the bottles into the babies' mouths and then rushing back to the lobby. The babies didn't really get fed, because the bottles were too heavy for the babies to hold.

K: It shocked us to see nurses doing nothing, while the children under their care desperately needed to be held and walked and loved. Abraham Maslow, the noted psychologist, wrote many years ago that love is as essential to the growth of the human being as vitamins, minerals, and protein. Romania has tragically demonstrated this truth. We will never forget the faces of those children who were condemned to disability and death by people who refused to give them something that all of us are able to give— simple human attention.

E: Finally, the paperwork was done, I gained custody of the babies, and Kent

returned to Bucharest to help us home. On Saturday, April 5, Kent and I and Angela and Spencer went to St. Joseph's Cathedral in Bucharest. I had been there often to pray during my seven and a half weeks in Romania. As we walked into the Cathedral with our babies, the choir was singing, the rose window was glowing, and the altar was a bright gold. Tears ran down our cheeks. We lit candles and thanked God for our good fortune.

K: Early the next morning, April 6, we sat in our plane on the runway at the Otopeni airport in Bucharest, buckled into our seats, our babies in our laps. Outside, we could see the armored personnel carrier, with its gun pointed at our plane, and troops with submachine guns marching back and forth. There were a dozen couples on the plane with adopted babies. It wasn't something we planned, but when the plane left the ground, we all began to clap and cheer. We had finally gotten out. We had become new families, and we were going home.

E: We arrived back in Honolulu on April 8th, a year ago tomorrow. We immediately took our babies to our local pediatrician. He said that both of them were only half as far along in their development as a normal American baby would be at their age. Angela was significantly underweight, and Spencer's body was "floppy."

K: Within four months, however, each baby had caught up to the normal range. Spencer, who didn't even know how to crawl when we adopted him, was walking within two months. Angela, who couldn't even roll over when we adopted her, was walking within four months. It has been a great joy to see them grow. They have been busy touching, feeling, crawling, walking, laughing, and crying with great vigor.

E: They have also eaten with great vigor. Angela went from 12 pounds to 24 pounds in only six months; Spencer went from 19 pounds to 28 pounds in the same period. Angela has grown 7½ inches, and Spencer has grown 5½ inches in the year they have been with us. Since they both love pizza and Sesame Street, we have no doubt they are going to do just fine in America.

K: We know that vitamins and minerals and protein all played a role, but we have also done our best to love them, and they have responded dramatically. We are grateful to our family and friends who have welcomed them so warmly and supported us this past year... And now, let us introduce Angela and Spencer.

E: Our friends Marianne and Elodie have brought them down to say hello...

K: This is Angela...

E: And this is Spencer...

K: Thank you..!

E: Thank you..!