# Fortuitous Flashpoint: How an Appalachian-Carpathian Mountain Conference Transformed my Life

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Documenting her unexpected deep connection to Romania, the Appalachian author shares her transformational experiences in this Eastern European country she embarrassingly knew nothing about prior to 2015. A conference call for proposals, co-authored submission on a whim, and subsequent conference acceptance changed her life in profound ways, both professionally and personally. The author's scholarly dedication to Romania over these brief years led to a 2021 Fulbright Teaching & Research grant. From teaching Appalachian literature at Transilvania University-Braşov, to conducting ethnographic research and interviews in the Jiu Valley, Romania's coalmining region, the author documents the depth of her professional and personal change after that fortuitous flashpoint of the 2015 Appalachian-Carpathian Mountain Conference.

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"I know what it means to go Anywhere with you: you are The moss on which I sleep."<sup>2</sup>

Romania took hold of my heart in 2015 and since then has consumed my mind and soul. As with any genuine commitment, my relationship with this beautiful, complex country has grown and deepened over time as I have learned of its many tragedies, as well as its many triumphs. I have surrendered myself to Romania. Dedicating hours listening to diverse residents, to studying and reading about the centuries-long creation of contemporary Romania, I unexpectedly have found myself serving as an unofficial Appalachian ambassador for Romania, a role I would have thought outrageous a decade ago. In full self-disclosure, I had never even thought about the country before 2015, embarrassingly knew nothing of its tragic history, even during my lifetime. Thus, in middle-age, as I continue to learn about

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Bugan, Carmen. 2004. *Crossing the Carpathians*. Manchester, England: Carcanet Press Limited. p. 37.

Romania and immerse myself in its various cultures, to visit its beautiful countryside and historic cities and villages, I call attention to the country, situating Romania on the map for family, friends, and colleagues. I share Romanian fiction and nonfiction alike with my academic peers and running companions, with my sons and nephews. Thanks to a Fulbright Teaching and Research Grant awarded to me in Fall 2021, I have dedicated my current scholarship to comparing my home region of Central Appalachia to Romania's Jiu Valley, both coalmining regions with long histories of pride, stoicism, tragedy, and political manipulation. Focusing on many of the regions' residents' present-day efforts to transition their economies, to reinvent themselves, while honoring their industrial heritage, I, along with my Transilvania University doctoral student, Iulia Salca, continue to gather incredibly moving stories and interview brave, innovative individuals committed to healthy, sustainable communities. My early connections to Romania have resurfaced and broadened in various, beautiful ways as I weave a richly colored Appalachian-Romanian tapestry.

Much transpired, however, before I grew so attached to Romania and found my geopolitical compass altered. Although I knew the country existed, thanks to junior high geography class, I had never given Romania much thought. Interestingly, my Bristol, Tennessee, seventh-grade science teacher was from Bulgaria, though even that didn't truly impact me as an early teen. Not until the spring of 2015, when Dr. Don Davis and Dr. Katherine Ledford issued a call for proposals to the second biennial Appalachian-Carpathian Mountain Conference over the Appalachian Studies listserv did Romania truly enter my orbit. Upon reading the call, I impulsively, but not really seriously, forwarded it to two dear friends and colleagues, Dr. Rick Roth in Geospatial Science and Dr. Christine Small in Biology. We had collaborated for several years, teaching students about the more-than-human environmental fallout, along with the human emotional toll, resulting from mountaintop removal coalmining. We discussed the loss of the commons and traditional foraging of medicinal herbs due to the annihilation of mountain ecosystems. During alternative spring break trips, we escorted students to abandoned mountaintop removal sites to plant hardwood trees. Our work fit well with the conference theme, "Researching, Documenting, and Preserving Highland Traditions." With great enthusiasm, we were notified by the conference organizers that our presentation, "Place Defense and Conflicted Local Resistances in Resource Extraction Economies: A Multi-disciplinary Analysis of the Central Appalachian Coalfields," had been accepted.

What began as a whim turned into reality as the three of us, Christine's mother, Vera, and my younger son, Campbell, flew to Bucharest in October 2015. While the formal conference proceedings were held at Transilvania University in

Braşov, the group traveled deeper into the Carpathian Mountains to Magura for the conference fieldtrip. I was captivated by the stories, the architecture, the mountains, and, most especially, the people. While touring the Old City Center of Braşov with Dr. Cristian Pralea and Dr. Georgeta Moarcas, we walked along the fortress walls that date back to the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Don Davis escorted us into the infamous Black Church, Biserica Neagră, dating back to the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Serving as an iconic image for the old city center of Braşov, this beautiful gothic church obtained its name from a fire in the 1600s. Unbeknownst to me, during an extension of my Fulbright, I would later enter the church in October 2022 to hear a newly acquired friend, Steffen Schlandt, who teaches in the music department at Transilvania University, play the restored organ at a service delivered in both Romanian and German. I would meet the Swiss couple, Ferdinand Stemmer and Barbara Dutli, who have dedicated their life's work to restoring organs throughout Transylvania and to teaching Romanians how to carry on this critical work. Thanks to a 2022 Romanian Fulbright scholar, Renee Louprette, who introduced me to the Swiss couple, our 2022 Appalachian-Carpathian Mountain conference participants heard Renee play the restored organ in the 13<sup>th</sup> century fortified church of Hărman, a Saxon village about ten kilometers from Braşov.

Another important 2015 conference connection developed after I met Gabriel Amza and viewed his documentary photography exhibit, the capstone of his M.F.A. focused on life in the Jiu Valley. Again, I would never have imagined then that in May of 2017 I would travel alone by several buses from Braşov to meet Gabriel in Orăștie to catch a small commuter van down to the Jiu Valley. With our home base in Petroşani, Gabriel and I explored the Jiu Valley coal communities via buses, taking photos of key historical sites and monuments and statues dedicated to the brave mining families. Of particular importance, Gabriel introduced me to Ion Barbu, former Petrila Mine cartographer, and his dear Hungarian friend, Kiss (pronounced quiche), a former Petrila coalminer. Thus began a pivotal relationship centered on my burgeoning comparative coal community research.

Despite seemingly disparate stories, rural coal communities of Central Appalachia in the United States and the Jiu Valley in Romania share similar historical and contemporary characteristics. Both regions have been dominated by single industry for well over a century, suffering or thriving at the hands of a few, whether private or state-owned hands. Now, these regions face unprecedented challenges as they transition to post-coal economies due to global economic forces, political pressures, and climate change. Driven to honor their industrial heritage and the personal sacrifices many have given in the name of progress, creative innovators in Central Appalachia and the Jiu Valley are working to reinvent themselves and their communities. They are employing resourceful and

imaginative tactics to build healthy, sustainable entrepreneurial ecosystems that provide a renewed sense of purpose for inhabitants. These case studies are critical to share with other rural areas facing similar hardships. Who are the individuals involved in this work? How were they called to engage in such challenging yet rewarding endeavors? What are their hopes and dreams? What challenges have they faced and continue to face? Through ethnographic research and purposeful interviews with residents in Central Appalachia and the Jiu Valley over the past two years, Iulia Salca and I are finding themes, similarities and differences, between these two rural regions and certain individuals' efforts to transform their communities. Building global entrepreneurial networks among under-resourced communities empowers those striving for innovation as individuals share lessons learned, collaborate on projects, and work together to secure funding. Additionally, this research contributes to efforts to distinguish between rural and urban entrepreneurship, a burgeoning and necessary field. Through qualitative methods, Iulia, a Radford University business colleague, and I are teasing out subtle albeit distinct differences between these two settings and point to the consequent need to vary measures of success. This work will appeal to entrepreneurs, scholars, and activists dedicated to rurality around the world.

One October evening in 2021, as I sat alone in my Braşov apartment on Strada Mureșenilor and reflected on my Jiu Valley connections, I crafted a blog post to document the stories I'd learned, along with my deepening relationships with several residents of Petrila, Petroșani, Lupeni, and Vulcan.

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#### Act I:

He wept, I was told. He wept openly, painfully, when the mine closed October 30, 2015. He wept as he witnessed the last coal car emerge from the oldest (and deepest) mine in the Jiu Valley, the Petrila Mine (circa 1859), a car fully loaded with the black rock that had defined his entire working life. I first met Kiss in May 2017 at Barbu's home, which could pass as art museum, thanks to my Romanian documentary photographer friend, Gabriel Amza. Sitting at the kitchen table surrounded by Barbu's signature cartoons and various literary quotes painted directly on the home's walls, I learned of the heartache, the existential crisis, brought on by the mine closure in Petrila. Kiss's entire life, his sole identity, was inextricably tied to mining coal. Much of Barbu's life, too, though as a mine cartographer.

#### Interlude:

In May 2017, as I rode a bus from Brasov to meet Gabriel to travel to the Jiu Valley for the first time, I sat with a woman about my age. When explaining life after the 1989 Revolution, she shared that her apartment in Cluj was still bugged, that she had to continue to be careful about what she said. Although communism theoretically ended when Ceauşescu and his wife, Elena, were executed on Christmas Day 1989 on national television, its remnants persisted well into the 1990s. The political system was neocommunism for the successors to Ceauşescu were the privileged and protected under his rule. Protests led primarily by students against the post-Ceausescu regime erupted in Bucharest in 1990, with Jiu Valley coalminers being used and infiltrated by the regime to break them apart in whatever ways necessary, including violence. I am still trying to untangle this troubled past, to make sense of the events as more research and stories emerge. This is part of my own research here in Romania, to attempt to understand the historical and contemporary miners' plight and compare/contrast that with the Appalachian coalminers of my home.

The media outlets have a way of interpreting events to serve different agendas. How has the media in Romania, as well as those in power, manipulated the miners' stories? As I'm teaching Denise Giardina's novel, *Storming Heaven*, to the American Studies students at Transilvania University-Brasov, I am reading my region's history through a different filter. While I have fixated on life in Romania under Ceauşescu, and the indiscriminate violence and terror tactics he enacted on basically everyone in the country, I acknowledge the same violence and intimidation and oppression in Appalachia. Most would think such tactics a thing of the past, as Giardina's novel is set in the early 20th Century, but no, they are not.

#### Act II:

October 30, 2021, six short years since the Petrila Mine closed, and I was supposed to be in Petrila today. Iulia and I had planned to drive to the Jiu Valley earlier this week to conduct several interviews in Petrila, Petrosani, and Lupeni. Yet, new Romanian government restrictions related to the COVID pandemic thwarted our plans. She and I remain in Brasov. We did interview Barbu today, the sixth anniversary of the Petrila Mine closure, thanks to technology. The timing of his interview seemed critical not only from an historical perspective, but also an existential one. How are those in Petrila and other Jiu Valley inhabitants recreating themselves? How does Kiss, who's currently in Spain because his health cannot

endure the cold, wet winters of Petrila, establish a new identity? Does he need to? Can he hold onto his coalminer persona with pride in spite of the mine closure, in spite of the historically complex and contested mineriade of 1990, 1991, and 1999 that changed many Romanians' views of miners?

#### Act III:

Much has been written on the mineriade, and probably will continue to be written, as the events were propagandistically portrayed at the time they unfolded under the neo-communist government. With the passing of time, however, different views exist, though not necessarily prevail. Even on my train ride from Bucharest to Brasov on October 10, I sat with a young man who lives in Cluj and works in administration at Babeş-Bolyai University. When I told him about my cross-cultural comparative mine research in the Jiu Valley and Central Appalachia, he shared his evolutionary understanding of the events. When he was in elementary school, he recalled the violent images emanating from the television screen, images of the miners attacking students protesting the neo-communist government that emerged after Nicolae Ceauşescu's execution. Only later in life did he come to understand how the miners had been infiltrated by government "plants" to stoke the miners' anger and provoke them to take violent action against Romanians "contributing to mining's demise." Ion Iliescu, who's still alive at 91 years of age, had assumed the presidency under the social democrat party and used the miners, tragically, as political pawns. After virtually interviewing one of my friends, Ina Berar, in Petrila this past week, I learned a Romanian insider joke related to Iliescu. When someone informs a friend of the death of a Romanian artist, actor, or musician, for example, the friend responds, "And Iliescu?!" As in, he's not dead yet? Despite his connection to myriad human rights violations, he never faced prison time and has lived well, now into his 90s.

## Act IV:

Barbu, trickster, provocateur, artist, social justice crusader, and kind human, seeks to create a Mineriade Museum in Petrila. Such a place would enable and empower the miners to tell their own stories, to speak back to the political messaging that shaped the country's perceptions of them for decades. In fact, in his interview today, he brilliantly and poignantly proclaimed, "If you give me a house, I will give you a museum." To Barbu, most everything contains artistic potential. Where most

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see ruin and destruction, Barbu sees possibility and promise. It is not hyperbole when I say that brilliant Barbu is one of the most influential people in my life. In his very being, to his core, he demonstrates compassion and courage, as well as a deep commitment to bettering our broken world. If only I could speak Romanian fluently to tell him this myself. For now, Iulia and Gabriel will.

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The teaching portion of my Fulbright grant provided the opportunity to teach Appalachian literature with a coal focus to third-year American Studies students at Transilvania University-Braşov. In addition to teaching Denise Giardina's historical novel, *Storming Heaven*, about the biggest labor uprising in United States history in 1921, the Battle of Blair Mountain, I taught Diane Gilliam's persona poems in *Kettle Bottom* as the poetry companion to Giardina's work. Next, the students read Ann Pancake's contemporary novel, *Strange As This Weather Has Been*, about a family's struggles and divisions amidst mountaintop removal coalmining in Southern West Virginia. Lastly, the students read selected poems from Chris Green's edited collection, *Coal: A Poetry Anthology*. Thanks to the generosity of Diane and Ann, I hosted virtual author readings in October and December respectively that were open not only to my students but also other TU students and faculty, as well as the community at large. Without a doubt, these were two highlights of the semester for my students and me as my students and colleagues were able to ask the authors questions and share their love of the authors' works.

Despite the pandemic restrictions, my students and I were able to meet in person, masked, the entire semester. This wasn't the case for my other Fulbright colleagues as I learned at our orientation in Bucharest. In addition to acquiring key information about diplomacy and logistical matters, we were fortunate to have a guided tour of the capital city before our departure. Upon my return to Braşov after the orientation, I crafted the following to document my lessons and emotions, to capture a fragment of the essence of my Fulbright experiences. Living alone in Romania, immersed in all things Romanian for months not weeks, I internalized my experiences in a more profound way.

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### October 9, 2021:

The deep, enduring trauma, the indiscriminate violence and bloodshed, seemed to penetrate my boot soles the longer I walked the streets of Bucharest, the more stories I listened to and internalized. My toes blistered raw, while strange

shallow gashes oozed red across the top of my feet. Arthritic aches took up residence in my hips. The stories are not my stories, the history not my history—yet, they have become a part of me, physically and emotionally. Voices of both established and new friends, voices of strangers on trains, haunt me as I reflect on my privileged past. Oblivious into my 20s, I, now in my mid-50s, am embarrassed by my youthful ignorance of international affairs and tragedies. Many live their entire lives in such oblivion, whether willingly or unknowingly. My travels to Romania, more than any other of my somewhat limited international travels, have jolted me into awareness, needed awareness to check my privilege. As a newly acquired friend shared with me, "I possess an acute bullshit monitor." She quickly apologized for her language, but I assured her it was fine with me and accurately described what I thought as she shared part of her life story. Only later did she confide that she rarely talked so openly about her childhood trauma in Romania.

While I enjoyed a safe childhood, even with my father serving time in Vietnam my whole first year of life, many of my Romanian friends, particularly those close to my age and older, suffered unimaginable tragedies. Even younger generations carry the traumas of older generations, despite being removed decades from the events. I learned this lesson firsthand, interestingly and poignantly, in Braşov in October 2019, when I met a man and his wife staying in a room next to mine at Hotel Drachenhaus. They were from Israel. His father had been married to a woman and they had three daughters. While his father had been sent to a labor camp, the woman and daughters were transported to a concentration camp, where all were killed. After World War II, his father met a woman, whose husband and son had been killed in a concentration camp. The man I met was the child of the man and woman who survived. And though he was born after the Holocaust, he stressed to me that he was indeed a Holocaust survivor for his parents' suffering impacted him and his life. "Yes," I responded. "I understand." Not only did his story make sense intuitively, but I had also read about the transference of trauma through DNA, with actual chemical marks on genes passed onto subsequent generations.

Walking through an old Jewish neighborhood in Bucharest, I peered into abandoned homes with remnants of lives lived, lives extinguished. Other seemingly empty homes, appearing condemned, sheltered squatters, those searching for a roof to shield them from natural and human forces. Did the Jewish families who survived and fled to Israel establish a better life? Do their descendants bear the Romanian antisemitic trauma in their genes? Does the land of their Bucharest homes harbor remembrances, contain chemical marks? Postcolonial ecocritics assert the land does indeed absorb suffering and distress, holds physical and spiritual atrocities, whether more-than-human or human.

As our guide ushered us throughout the meandering streets, pointing out significant buildings and architectural details, he explained the determined ingenuity of certain Bucharest inhabitants, led by the engineer, Eugeniu lordăchescu, who constructed railroad tracks to move entire churches off the boulevard before they were to be destroyed under the orders of Nicolae Ceausescu. Now nestled in alleyways, the saved churches can easily be missed by passersby unaware of this history. When our guide talked about the 1977 earthquake that decimated entire parts of the city, Mihai, who was at the University of Bucharest, confided to me that his fear from that time persisted. In fact, many scientists have predicted another earthquake at any time as the fault line runs along the Carpathian Mountains and shifts every 40 or so years. All the talk about communist Romania appeared to jar many memories for Mihai, a tall, slender man with gray hair and a gentle, kind spirit. As we stood before the "People's Palace," listening to our guide describe the insufferable ego of Ceauşescu, his horrid dictatorship, Mihai looked at me with his tender eyes and uttered, "It's difficult to describe the unimaginable humiliation we experienced."

I had no personal reference point to understand such humiliation. I only had the stories of others informing me, including the intelligent, vibrant art historian Mirella, who was born in Filiasi, in Southern Romania, but now lives in the US. During dinner the previous evening, we sat beside each other after bonding quickly the very first day of the Fulbright Orientation. After explaining her feminist research while in Bucharest, she shared the personal context and motivation for her work—her mother, who, like my sweet father, now suffers from Alzheimer's. Serving as a nurse in the local hospital, her mother helped women with various medical needs falling outside the "acceptable" communist realm of care. As a result, when Mirela was 12 years old, with one older brother, and two younger siblings, a 3-year-old brother and 8 ½-month-old sister, her mother was imprisoned. For four years. Significantly, the day her mother went to prison, Mirela experienced her first menstrual period. Although her father remained at home and worked days at a factory, he sunk into deep depression, hardly able to function. Consequently, childcare for her younger siblings fell upon Mirela's shoulders. Yet, she proclaimed that she and her family were among the fortunate ones because the children were not sent to orphanages. They had grandparents living in the country, where Mirela learned on her own, with her baby sister on her hip, to travel by train on the weekends to obtain food for the following week. When I marveled at her bravery and fortitude, she quickly noted that she was not unique, that many, many others, the vast majority of the country, had similar stories. In fact, she talked about the 80%, those, who like her, fell into somewhat oblivion because they were not the well-known, whether heroes or villains.

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The stories I listened to from new and old friends alike mirrored much of what I read while living in Braşov in the fall of 2021 and when I returned on a Fulbright extension in fall of 2022. One day as I made my way through the Old City Center, I ran into Romulus, poet and professor, whom I first met at the 2015 conference. He had just exited Librăria Humanitas, a beautiful bookstore located in an historic building, a place he frequents and where I purchased one of his poetry collections. When I told him of the profound effect of reading Carmen Bugan's memoir, Burying the Typewriter, he recounted the years when he had to register his own typewriter, when he had to revise his writing due to censors demanding he do so...or else. Related to censorship and thanks to a fellow Fulbright scholar, I purchased The Censor's Notebook: A Novel, written in 2017 by Liliana Corobca and translated in 2022 by Monica Cure. As I read Dennis Deletant's Romania under Communist Rule, I was haunted by the story of Caius, a man my age enrolled at the University of Bucharest while I was enrolled at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia. In the fall of 1987, our senior year of undergraduate work, Caius was taken into custody by the Securitate, the communist secret police, simply because of his studies and writing. Not only was he detained, but he was also beaten and whipped. I, on the other hand, was in the midst of one of the best years of my life, oblivious to and unaware of the human rights atrocities occurring in Romania. I gained many such lessons in humility during my Fulbright stint.

In January 2021, after touring the Braşov County Museum of History with Paula, a bright, young woman I befriended early in my Fulbright residency, she asked what aspects of Romanian history had the most acute impact on me. Her question was prompted by our viewing of a vast timeline of the country's history, including an exhibit on the Rebellion of Brasov, when workers from a truck and tractor factory went on strike and stormed the communist headquarters on Election Day, November 15, 1987. Without hesitation, I responded, "Contemporary events." Of course, I appreciate the long ancient history of Romania, its occupation by various countries, its evolution. But the country's traumas that occurred while I was alive occupy much of my thoughts. As I purchase a variety of groceries, I'm reminded of Cristian's childhood story, when he went to the store to buy bread but instead found shoes on the shelf. I think of Georgeta's story of having to travel to Sibiu with her parents, at least a two-hour car ride, to buy proper food at the store. These and other stories continue to humble me, to remind me of my great privileges. They inspire me to live with gratitude and to share these lessons with others. As I continue my Romanian journey, I marvel over the resiliency and fortitude of the people. I am fortunate to have developed close relationships,

familial in many ways, with many Romanians. And I am eternally grateful to have been granted a Fulbright and honored to become part of this amazing community.

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