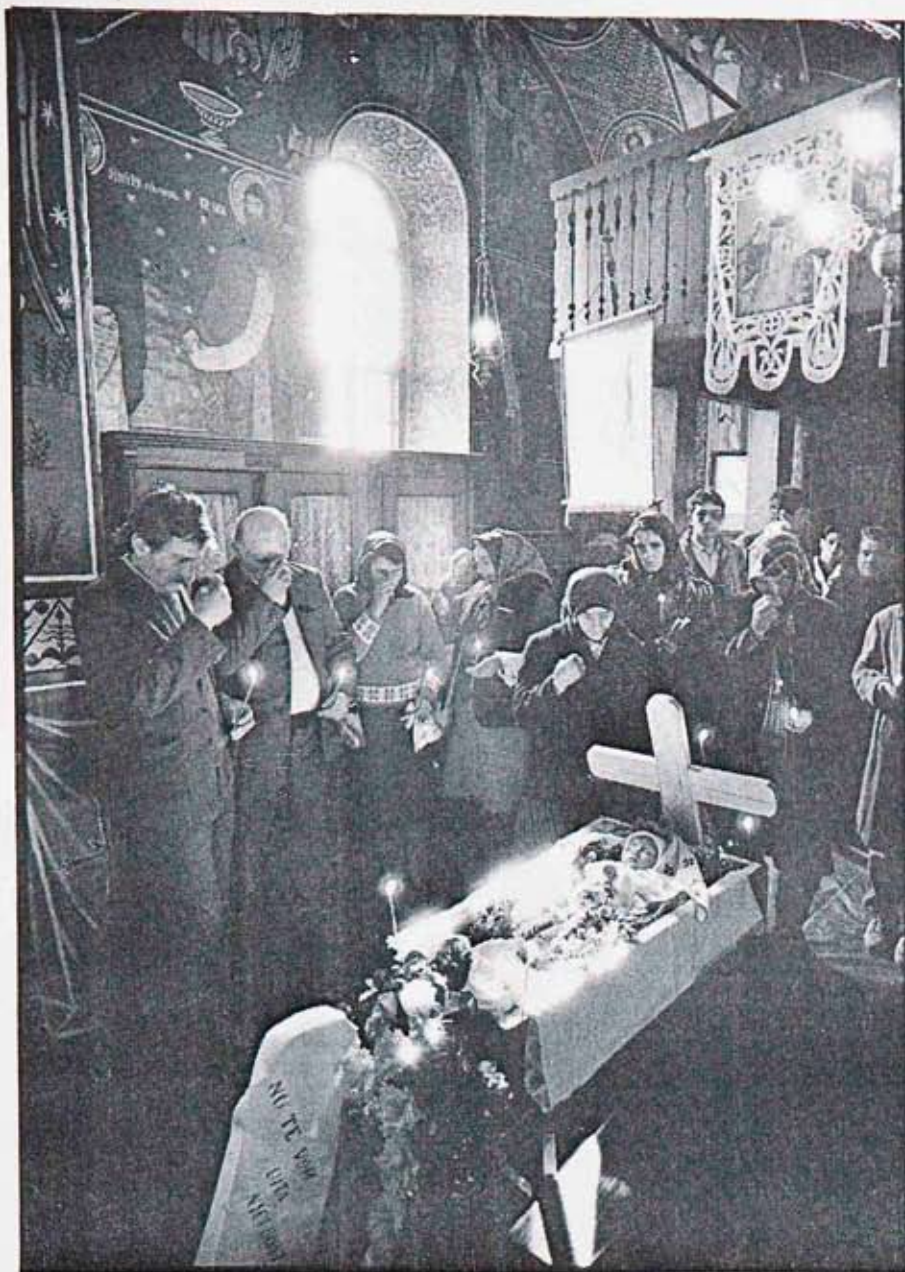


CEAUSESCU'S LEGACY



FAMILY MEMBERS AND A FEW NEIGHBORS PRAY BEFORE GABRIEL'S CANDLE-BEDECKED COFFIN IN-THE ROMANIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH IN BRAVU.



HER UNCLE STANDS BESIDE A CAR ON WHICH GABRIEL'S COFFIN IS STRAPPED OUTSIDE THE HOSPITAL MORTUARY.



WOMEN WEEP BESIDE GABRIEL'S COFFIN PRIOR TO THE PROCESSION TO THE CHURCH.



GABRIEL'S BODY IS TRANSPORTED TO THE CHURCH IN A HORSE-DRAWN WAGON AS MOURNERS FOLLOW ON FOOT.

A LIVING HELL — AND LITTLE SOLACE IN DEATH

Story and photos by Michael Carroll

BUCHAREST — Gheorghe Iatan was standing beside a car with a tiny wooden casket perched on top, a casket for a child. It was for his niece, 18-month-old Gabriel, who had died of AIDS, and Iatan was helping prepare for the funeral the next day.

Gabriel was being dressed for burial in the mortuary of Victor Babes Hospital. The mortician, Augustin Petrescu, said that he must first speak to the hospital director before he could allow me in. When Petrescu returned some time later, he said, "We have a problem. The director doesn't want you to see what's in there. There are 22 children who've died of AIDS, and the hospital doesn't want to admit to the cause of their deaths. They're undeclared and abandoned."

Then he said he was going to defy orders. "I want you to take pictures and show the horror of what I've been living with for these past three years. I and my assistants feel we will die of AIDS now anyway, and we can't be in collusion anymore with a government that is this criminal."

He opened the morgue — a dank basement with dark, peeling paint, and we went in. The women from Gabriel's family were there, weeping over the body of the child. In another room, from an unrefrigerated concrete bunker, Augustin pulled out several stretchers with five, six or seven dead children on each. Some of these children had been dead for up to two years and were decomposed; others had died more recently. The utter depravity of it really shook me; it was the closest to hell I've ever seen.

The stench of rot was sickening, and the children's eyes were open and hauntingly penetrating. One child in particular caught my attention. It was the birdlike boy I had seen the day before in the AIDS ward. His torment was over, death had given him the solace missing in his life.

As we left, Augustin pointed to a back door to the morgue. He said the door was installed in the last few years as a way for the Securitate to take the babies' bodies out unnoticed and dispose of them. He said there have been at least 70 others.

The village of Bravu 40 miles outside Bucharest is a bleak collection of muddy, impassable streets and rundown cottages. There is only one telephone for the 700 people who live there, and it frequently fails to work. Iatan owns the only automobile in his 40-member extended family. Like the phone system, the car constantly breaks down.

The Lixandrus have experienced a living hell. Both of their twins, born in August 1988, have died of AIDS. Marian during the Romanian revolution in December,

Gabriel last month.

Inside the house, on a small table surrounded by candles, sat Gabriel's coffin. Family members had placed cookies and worn, soiled money, a bottle of water, local wine and flowers into the coffin. I put in two dollars, which I later realized was worth more than all the rest of the money and spoils combined.

After a series of prayers and ritualistic pouring of wine and offerings of incense, the village priest led the small procession to the church. The baby's coffin, still open,

was placed on the horse-drawn wagon. The women, led by Gabriel's great-grandmother, mounted the wagon and began an orchestrated sobbing and rocking that continued all the way to the church.

Normally in Bravu, a funeral would bring out the whole village and a procession of hundreds of people. But Gabriel died of AIDS. Only her family and a handful of very close neighbors walked the mile to the church. None of the village onlookers even crossed themselves as the procession passed.

In church, an elaborate Romanian Orthodox structure, Gabriel looked like an angel. Her hands were folded across her chest. Wax was melted on her casket and burning candles stuck into it. It was surprising how little the AIDS virus had ravaged her body. She was fortunate, in a way, to be less of a survivor than the birdlike boy I'd seen alive one day at Victor Babes Hospital and dead the next day in the morgue.

Gabriel's body was buried beside her sister's in the cemetery on the outskirts of the village. The matriarch of the clan, Gabriel's great-grandmother, visited all the graves of departed relatives to beseech them to ease Gabriel's transition from this world into the next. The service at the graveside was a simple one. More wine and cakes were placed on the coffin, and a live chicken was passed over the grave three times before the casket was closed and the gravediggers completed their work.

In all the time I was with the Lixandru family, I never heard or saw Gabriel's parents speak to anyone. Their grief and their shame had separated them even from the members of their own family.

Michael Carroll is a free-lance photographer in Pepperville.



GRAVEDIGGER AT THE CEMETERY ON THE OUTSKIRTS OF BRAVU PREPARES TO CLOSE GABRIEL'S COFFIN FOR BURIAL.