

## 2007 – Moldova: Memories of a Brief Interlude as Acting Peace Corps County Director

I arrived in Moldova at the beginning of September, 2007 with a similar assignment as in The Philippines: serve as Acting Peace Corps Country Director while the CD was on medical leave and prepare to remain permanently if he did not return.

This was my first experience living and working in a country that was formerly part of the USSR. Moldova, with a population of about 4.3 million people declared its independence at the collapse of the USSR in 1991, and became a United Nations member in 1992. What was different for Moldova was that it had never had a history as an independent country, having always been part of greater Romania (Moldavia), the Ottoman Empire, or the USSR. So, imagine the challenges of learning to self-govern, write a constitution, and establish a free-market economy. To make matters more difficult, the only real industrial base of the economy other than agriculture remained across the Dniester River in an autonomous zone known as Transnistria “protected” by Russian troops. To the west is Romania, and Ukraine otherwise surrounds the landlocked country.

As Romania had just become a full EU member in January of that year, Moldova was at the front line for Russia’s interface with the West. Interestingly, the apartment complex where I lived housed the Moldovan President, who chose not to live in the official residence. About a block in one direction was the KGB office and a block in the other direction the UN offices.



A couple of anecdotes about the apartment. The central heat was supposed to be turned on starting October 1. However, so many of the renters had not paid the common-area-maintenance fees that management simply didn’t turn on the heat until November 1. It was so cold I used a rug to augment the warmth from my quilts and blankets. The apartment blocks were either of the Stalin era, with large, high ceiling rooms and stone/concrete block construction (mine) or Khrushchev-era with much smaller rooms and pre-fabricated panel construction. Also, there was an always-on radio in every apartment that had been used to broadcast news and other programming to everyone.

Moldova’s natural resources include very rich soil which had, unfortunately, been degraded by excessive use of chemical fertilizer, pesticides and herbicides during almost 50 years of Soviet collective agriculture. The abundant forests had also been substantially denuded as wood was the primary heating source.

Moldova is comprised 75% of ethnic Moldovans, with 7% Ukrainians, the vast majority of whom had been farming the territory for centuries. By the time I was there in 2007, the population

had declined to just over 3.6 million and is about 2.6 million today. The decline is accounted for initially by out-migration primarily of Russians and Ukrainians, followed by low birth and high child mortality rates, and then substantial emigration to the EU of the working-age population to obtain jobs. Within Moldova the urban population has increased to about 43% as the services industry has grown. The capital, Chisinau, is the largest city, with about 650,000 population. Tiraspol and Balti, each with about 100,000 population, are the only other sizable cities.



Chisinau has a public transportation system of trolleys and buses as well as marshrutkas (vans) which run on fixed routes at a fixed fare in the areas not served by the others. There are inter-city buses and there is a relatively extensive railway network built during the Soviet era. It operates on the Soviet gauge of rails so when you cross into Romania there is a process of switching the undercarriages of the coaches to “standard” gauge, the

same process I went through some years later (2010) when entering Poland from Lviv, Ukraine. Russian was the language of the rail operation.

The national language is Moldovan, which is virtually identical to Romanian, with Russian as a common second language. Use of Russian was strongly discouraged during my time there and I often experienced walking into a shop where I could tell the staff were speaking Russian and they immediately switched to Moldovan upon my entry. In some areas, signs were only in Russian.



In the north the agriculture was primarily grain, tobacco and sugar beets. In the central/south regions fruit orchards and vineyards predominate. Wine (including “champagne” and brandy, known as Divine) form about 25% of the country’s GNP. In 2006 Russia had imposed an embargo on Moldovan wine imports which was supposed to have been resolved by early 2007 and was not. This was a huge blow to the economy as Russia was their major export market.

The Peace Corps program was relatively large with 130 volunteers serving in TEFL, Health Education, Agriculture/Rural Business Development and Community/Organization Development. 40 new trainees arrived during my second week which gave me the chance to observe a great deal of the Pre-Service Training (PST). The training manager (Moldovan) was new in the position and the Program and Training Officer (PTO American) position was vacant. Overall, Moldova had an excellent training program. They made effective use of second year volunteers as trainers, used a lot of role playing and participative techniques and benefitted from only having to teach two languages – a few of the volunteers would be assigned to sites where Russian was still the primary language spoken.

Because food and dance are part of every Moldovan special occasion, the trainees were also taught dance, food preparation and proper food presentation.



Just before my arrival the prior trainee group, 28 TEFL and HE PCVs had sworn in. The health education PCVs had a huge challenge as they began their work using only Moldovan language to communicate immediately upon arrival at their sites. All volunteers lived with host families throughout their service and accommodations varied widely between those

located in rural communities versus cities.



Staff and volunteers were engaged in a process of streamlining the number of secondary project activities that were volunteer-led and should have been transitioning to community leadership. I also gained a nickname (something with the word witch in it) when we (I together with Moldovan staff) decided to cancel a traditional All Volunteer Conference over the Thanksgiving weekend. This had evolved into a primarily social occasion, with volunteers actually preparing a thanksgiving meal for U.S. Embassy staff and served as a poor example for the newly-sworn in PCVs. Peace Corps philosophy stresses the opportunity to share such American cultural occasions with the host family and community. The budget saved from eliminating this “training” allowed us to add additional hours to other in-service trainings in the areas PCVs had identified as desired. Here are some photos of a Hallowe’en celebration at a

school, English classroom teaching, and exercise time for students (note the neighbor ladies looking on).



I have many impressions/memories of Moldova to treasure. In Chisinau, in the morning all the building caretakers (men and women) were out sweeping the sidewalks and driveways with very long-handled brooms made of out of sticks. The sweeping noises were loud enough to be heard inside the sturdily-built apartment building and reminded me of the donkey hooves that I heard awake to in Morocco. They started their work between six and seven a.m. so everything was pristine by the time people were en route to work. Chisinau is a beautiful city with many huge parks that are filled with trees, benches, statuary, fountains and walking paths. In the late afternoons and evening the benches tend to be filled with young couples sharing some quiet time together. The Eternity Memorial Complex with its eternal flame to an unknown soldier is another such park.



Marriage is big here, especially in the autumn after the harvest in an agricultural country. Stefan cel Mare is a national hero (he unified the country in the 15<sup>th</sup> C) and there is a statue of him in the center of the central park named for him. I was fortunate that the park was on my walking route between my apartment and the city center.



After the wedding ceremony and before the reception, brides, grooms, family and their “nashas”, a couple who act like marriage mentors/sponsors to the newly-weds, come to the statue, take photos, and place the bride’s flowers at its base. There was often a line-up of brides waiting their turn every Friday, Saturday and Sunday. The pile of flowers at day’s end is truly impressive! The wedding reception is usually an all-night affair with many rituals during the course of the evening. Mostly guests bring money as gifts to help the couple finance the party and get their start on life. Today in addition to the civil ceremony most couples also have a church ceremony.

The Church (Eastern Orthodox) was suppressed but not eliminated during the Soviet era and is a very important institution today. One of our staff members got married during my time there which was very exciting! Here are some photos of the church service with the male nasha holding crowns above the bride and groom (all of us standing for a mass of well over an hour).



The reception was a highly alcoholic affair with each table of 8 people set with a bottle of Divine and multiple bottles of “champagne” and wine, all of which were continuously replenished as consumed. I left about 2 am and the party was still going strong.



As a florist's daughter I really appreciated the importance of plants and flowers. In every school and public building, the lobbies and individual rooms were filled with houseplants. And you brought flowers on every occasion. Following cultural performances there was a long line of children and adults bringing flowers to the performers. The flower markets are extensive and open 24 hours a day. It is customary to bring an odd number of flowers to all occasions but funerals, when an even number (especially 4) is the order of the day. This is not only in

Chisinau but everywhere in the country. And everyone with a small plot of land grows not only vegetables, but flowers.



Chisinau was very chic. The women were beautiful and leggy. Fashion was either skin tight jeans or micro-mini skirts and mesh hose, both accompanied with the most amazing collections of boots I had ever seen or could imagine existed! And when winter arrived fur was everywhere – trim on coats and hoods, fur hats, and coats.

The shops had beautiful clothes in all the latest styles, but there was also a central Piata (market, souk) with stalls where you could buy everything from clothes to food to household items at fair prices. I found a Polish designer I liked and bought a few items.

There were art galleries featuring local artists and I bought a couple of pieces – this batik by a woman Ukranian artist living in Moldova, a doll in traditional dress, and this pair of lithographs.



I also bought a pottery serving dish usually used for garnishes and a handwoven rug for my Paris apartment.



There are many performance facilities in Chisinau, a ballet/opera theater, a philharmonic hall, a national theater, an organ hall, and several stage performance theaters. In this brief introduction to Eastern European/former Soviet Union life I enjoyed revisiting European culture – ballet, opera, and symphony - of the highest caliber at amazingly low ticket prices!



There was also a very active night life of disco as well as casinos. The restaurants were abundant, varied, and excellent.

Every regional center had a cultural center where a similarly wide variety of cultural events occurred.

Traditional artisan activities abound in Moldova. Here is an exhibition with examples of the wide variety available.



One Saturday night a colleague and I went to a restaurant where one of our staff members was playing harmonica in a rock band which was the warm-up group for the later entertainment. As I love rock and roll, I ended up dancing, especially the twist, for much of the evening. I had neglected to pay attention that I was wearing rubber-soled shoes and the next morning I woke up with cripplingly painful knees. It was the day I was scheduled to go on a tour of the cave monasteries and I was in agony climbing up and down the hillsides and into and out of the caves. Served me right!



It is also customary to have new possessions blessed.





Driving into the countryside (and that is the vast majority of Moldova) most of the highways (2-3 lane asphalt roads) are lined with walnut trees in the right of way. Walnuts are a high value crop and one of the challenges was who had rights to harvest and sell the walnuts.



Much of the rural area was still served by dirt roads and horse-drawn transport.

During the post-WWII Soviet era, Moldova was a “breadbasket” for the USSR. Following independence in 1991, a re-organization of land from collective farming to individual ownership began to occur. What you see as you travel around the country is large vistas of rolling hills, divided into strips where individual owners are doing different things: corn, wheat, sunflowers, vegetables, grapes, berries.

Wine is the number one product of Moldova. Every family makes their own. Plus, there are huge state-owned producers/bottlers with massive storage facilities underground in former limestone quarries. Finding the balance between Moldovan hospitality (which includes not only the wine but Divine and vodka, also produced there) was a challenge for our volunteers.



One of my daughters visited and we toured Milestii Mici winery in Chisinau, known to have the largest number of bottles in its wine cellar in the world, 2 million. We did the full tour which



included a sit-down lunch with several courses and a wine paired with each course. None of the wines was younger than 20 years old!



Here are a couple of the rooms where such events can be organized.



We also attended a splendid ballet performance



For Moldovans their house is very important. They are sturdily built and most available income seems to be invested in them. They tend to be centrally heated by a stove/chimney/oven called a soba which runs up through the center of the house. Running water is still relatively rare in the countryside and outhouses are the norm. Not only do many houses have their own wells but there are community wells everywhere. They often have a beautifully ornamented tin roof and are accompanied by an equally beautifully ornamented crucifix.



I wondered why people had invested in large-screen tv's when they still had outhouses until I realized the government has to have invested in a sewer system for indoor plumbing to be feasible!

You also find religious memorials (crucifixes, statues) very frequently along every road. And many of the Orthodox churches have been splendidly restored.

On one site visit to volunteers I visited a breeder of Orlovsky horses. They are a beautiful species often used for harness racing, but actually versatile enough for almost any type of equestrian activity.

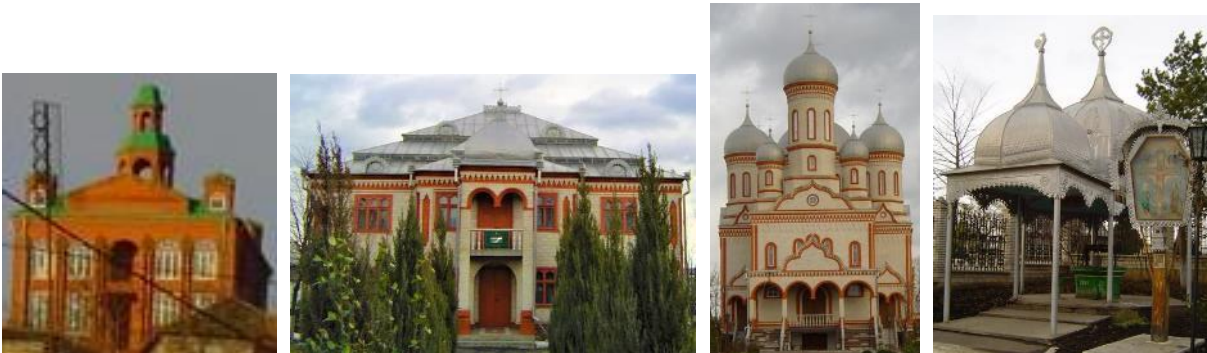


Another such visit was to Soroca where there is a fortress from the 1550's. Soroca is on the



border and we had a beautiful view of the Dniester River.

A small community of wealthy Roma specialized in building enormous houses (in an area known as gypsy hill) reminiscent of famous buildings such as the Bolshoi Theater, the Hermitage, an Azeri mosque or a Greek temple.



Fall was beautiful. The colors were mostly gold and orange – not really the deep reds of New England (except in areas with some red-leafed shrubs). There were huge vistas as far as the eye could see of fall colors and harvest, followed by land preparation for the next planting season. And a few weeks later the winter wheat had been planted and sprouted in many areas and everything was a soft green, similar to the winter wheat phenomenon in Morocco where I lived in the Anti-Atlas foothills. The summer had been a major drought in the country and crops were lost. The U.S. among other donors made sure that farmers received seed in time to plant a winter wheat crop. Part of what makes the country picturesque is that people live clustered

together in villages (although usually with some usable land associated with each house) and so the farmland is very extensive and pleasant to the eye. But people work very hard. There is always work to be done between the fields, animals, house upkeep, water hauling, etc.

The U.S. Marines celebrate November 10 every year as the day they were established in 1775. U.S. Embassy Marine Security Guard detachments worldwide host Balls to honor the Marine Corps, its accomplishments, and also to build camaraderie among peers, including members of the Embassy community and the host country. It also serves as a fundraiser for the community support activities in which the Marines engage in each country. I was fortunate to be able to enjoy this formal evening in Chisinau.



Moldova has a major problem of exportation of its people. There is very little industry, mostly subsistence agriculture, and a highly educated population. So, unfortunately, in order to generate cash income, family members emigrate on short or long-term basis to Russia or to Europe. This leaves a country primarily made up of the older population and their grandchildren, whom they are raising. Those children who aren't so lucky as to have immediate family to care for them often are placed in facilities that resemble orphanages. They and other youth are at risk to be offered "employment" outside the country that is both illegal and immoral. Several organizations were/are active in education and prevention of such human trafficking.

So, while there are contemporary problems, there is also a rich and ancient history. At various times having been part of the Hapsburg, Ottoman and Russian Empires, vestiges of all remain in every aspect of the culture and in some cases the architecture. Culturally I felt a very special connection to my own youth. I realized that many of my friends' families originated (as WWII escapees) from this part of the world. So, from the food – soups of borsht and zeama (every Jewish mother's chicken soup that cures all ills), stuffed cabbage leaves, dumplings of all sorts – to the national dance (a circle dance I grew up doing called the hora), I felt amazingly at home! I also enjoyed beginning to learn Romanian. Its closest affiliate seemed to be Latin, which I studied for four years in high school. And while that was a very long time ago, those verb conjugations still seemed to be stored in my brain. I love the cadence of the language, but struggled with the fact that most letters are pronounced (unlike French) and the syllable that is emphasized is never the one where I would naturally place the emphasis. I was disappointed not to take this language further – I was enjoying it!

Because, happily, the CD did return. I had made an agreement with my boss that if that happened, I would be allowed to work instead of as a CD, as a PTO where I felt I would be closer to the volunteers work. So, it was on to a new language – Thai. I had never been around a tonal language before. And the written language is beautiful to look at (as is Arabic) but a bit foreboding. So, onto yet another life challenge!

