

LAYMEN MINISTRIES

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TRUTH IN A TRASH BIN | THE GREAT CONTROVERSY

WE ARE AMBASSADORS!!

BY JEFF REICH

It was just about 11 PM. The streets were dimly lit, and the smell of coal and wood smoke permeated the air. “You stay here and do not talk with anyone. Keep your doors locked and windows rolled up. I will try to be back in a few minutes,” my Romanian friend warned me. On that cool early-May evening in the suburbs of Chişinău (capital of Moldova) in the year 1993, we were on a mission. No, not a secret mission but one that would open doors and hearts.

In a few minutes, my friend was back with a woman who was barefoot and muddy from running down an unpaved side street. She decided to run back to her house and had us follow her in our car. When we arrived at this simple home, which had no running water or indoor toilet, I realized that this was the pastor’s home we had been trying to locate, and this mysterious woman was the pastor’s wife.

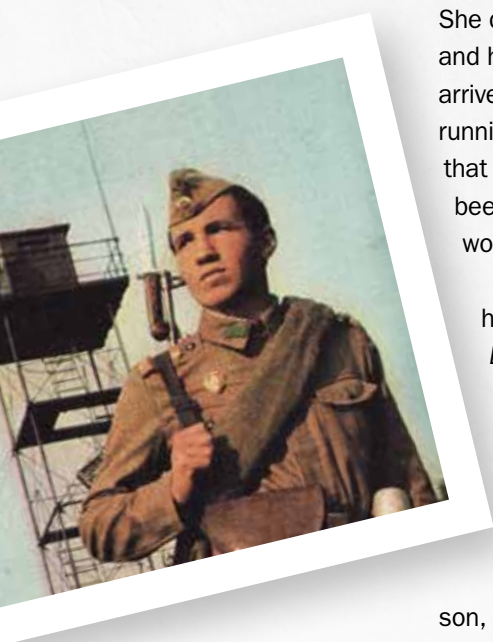
The reason we were there was to have some Romanian language *The Bible Says* lessons printed. I had taken the old *The Bible Says* series from America and had rewritten them for a Romanian culture that was just emerging from communism.

A Romanian friend, Val Burciu, translated the lessons and then his son, Liviu, typeset them. They were finally copy edited by Lucian Cristescu, who at the

time was Church Ministries Director for the Romanian Union. My Romanian friend who was with me was Nicu Butoi, a lay evangelist sponsored by *Laymen Ministries* at the time. He had heard that printing was a lot less expensive in the Republic of Moldova.

Moldova at one time was part of Romania but was annexed by the Soviet Union, so most of the people speak Romanian. In 1993 the average wage was around \$6 per month — yes, \$6. Today, in 2019, the average monthly income is around \$267 per month. Poverty was rampant, and the place was somewhat dangerous — thus the warnings about staying in the car with the doors locked.

We had expected to print about 55,000 thirty-lesson sets for about \$4,000. But God blessed, and we ended up with 100,000 lesson-sets printed for \$2,200. That’s 3,000,000 individual lessons.





▲ In Romania, 1993, Nicu Butoi (left) with the first Bible studies translated into Romanian for use among prison inmates.

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It cost about \$.02 for a collated, folded, and wrapped thirty-lesson set. For another \$175 we hired a truck to ship the lessons to the different conferences in Romania, leaving 10,000 sets for the Romanian-speaking people of Moldova.

After realizing the poverty in Moldova, we left an extra \$50 with the pastor and his family. They lived a simple, self-sacrificing life doing pastoral work.

THREE DAYS OR TWENTY MINUTES?

The next day Nicu and I were ecstatic. We were singing “How Great Thou Art” together as we headed back to Romania, but there was an unexpected traffic jam some nine miles before the border. As far ahead as we could see, there was a line cars and tractor-trailers. The highway was narrow, and some people tried to pull over to the side of the road, but most were stopped right in the driving lane.

Nicu rolled down his window and asked a man who was tending his goats along the road what the holdup was.

“This is the end of the line to get across the border,” the old man replied.

“How long does it take to get across?” Nicu inquired.

“About three days,” the shepherd informed him.

As Nicu rolled up his window and began to explain the situation, I became somewhat frantic. “We can’t stay here for three days!” I retorted “We only have a little bread and some olives! That’s not enough to last for three days!”

“Well, food is not our biggest problem,” Nicu had a concerned look on his face.

“We have Austrian license plates on this car, and since Moldova used to be part of Russia, people around here have guns, and at night thieves will most likely rob us.”

“What are we going to do?!” I exclaimed.

“Pray,” was Nicu’s immediate response.

I asked Nicu to pray. As soon as we finished, I glanced at my rear-view mirror to see two cars coming at a high rate of speed directly toward us. Maybe they did

not see we were stopped? Either way, they were going to crash into us, and I never even had time to yell, “Brace yourself!”

But at the last second, the cars zoomed around us so fast that our car rocked from their wind. Nicu looked at me and said, “Quick, follow them! They look like they know where they are going.”

I backed up our car, and we sped off — into the oncoming lane of traffic. We were flying past everybody! Finally, right before the border, we caught up with the two speeding cars. As all three cars, counting us, pulled up to the border crossing — in the wrong lane — border guards stood there with their AK-47 machine guns, scowling at us with looks that said, “What do you think you’re doing?”

One of the guards started arguing with the driver of the first car. Nicu rolled down his window to see if he could hear what they were arguing about. It turned out that these two cars in front of us carried Romanian and American diplomats. The guard would talk with them, then talk on his two-way radio. Finally, the guard went to the window of the first car and asked, “Passports!”

The Romanians and Americans held up their diplomatic passports. The guard walked over, opened the gate, and let the first car pass. Then came the next car. Again the guard commanded, “Passports!” And they held up their Romanian and American diplomatic passports. Again, the guard walked over, opened the big gate, and let them through.

Next, we pulled up. The guard came to my driver’s window and commanded, “Passports!” I lifted my civilian American passport, and Nicu held up his Romanian passport. The guard turned, opened the gate, and let us through!

In disbelief we looked at each other as we crossed over into Romania! “Can you believe that!” I exclaimed. God just took three days and turned it into twenty minutes! Think of the timing. What are the possibilities of something like this happening?

I was aware that if God could do that, then for sure, “The things which are impossible with men are possible with God” (Luke 18:27).

WE ARE AMBASSADORS

A couple years later, *Laymen Ministries* embarked upon the huge venture of printing 100,000 copies of *The Desire of Ages* for the prisons in Romania. When the books were finally printed, we had the joy of personally handing them out to inmates and staff at various prisons.

That Sabbath morning, we were running late, as usual, as we were supposed to be at the prison to meet with a CNN TV crew and General Major Ion Chis, the head of the Ministry of Justice for the prisons. As we came to the prison, the large steel doors opened, and we drove in. Guards, standing on both side of the car, saluted us. Then a head guard leaned over into Nicu Butoi's ear and whispered, “You are at the wrong prison!” Plans had changed, and we were not informed. We were supposed to meet at the maximum-security prison in Craiova.

We sped off, literally, trying to get to this prison on time. As we entered the city limits of Craiova, we were going really fast, and then we spotted the police! In fact two police cars were parked on the side of the road. Sure enough, lights and a siren came on, and we were pulled over. How embarrassing! We were on the way to visit the prison, and now we were going to get a speeding ticket.

The policeman came to our driver window where Nicu was sitting and asked, “Do you have the Americans that are supposed to be at the prison?”

“Yes,” Nicu replied with a bit of surprise.

“Follow me!” commanded the policeman. Soon we had a police car in front of us and one behind us, both with lights flashing and sirens wailing, as we were whisked through the city streets of Craiova. I was sitting in the back seat of the car and beside me was a friend from America who turned and looked and me: “I have gone to church

many ways over the years, but this is a first!” With a smile on his face, he said, “They are treating us like we are ambassadors or something.”

I hesitated for a second, giving the idea some thought, and then replied, “We are.” The following Bible verse was going around inside my head: “Now then we are ambassadors for Christ...” (2 Corinthians 5:20). We are ALL ambassadors for Christ. It does not matter where we are or who we are. If we have given our lives to Him, then we are His representatives — His ambassadors!

I love what the Bible says in 2 Corinthians 3:1-3:

“Do we begin again to commend ourselves? or need we, as some others, epistles of commendation to you, or letters of commendation from you? *Ye are our epistle written in our hearts, known and read of all men:* Forasmuch as ye are manifestly declared to be the epistle of Christ ministered by us, written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God; not in tables of stone, but in fleshy tables of the heart.”

We are not only ambassadors for Christ, we are letters of recommendation for Him. An epistle is simply a letter. People sometimes get letters of recommendation to help get a job. The one who writes such a letter recommends us to someone else. Such letters are we, to be read and known of all people. May we ever remember that as we go through our daily lives. Let your life be a shining letter of recommendation for Him wherever you go and in whatever situation you might find yourself. ♦

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► The Desire of Ages
for every inmate
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