

**Lancashire Constabulary  
&  
Tawd Vale Lions**

**10<sup>th</sup> Annual Relief Aid Convoy to**

**ROMANIA**

**2000**

**Assisted by:**

**ASDA**

**Heinz**

**Johnstones Paints**

**SCA Hygiene Products**

**Fellow Lions Clubs (District 105BN)**

**And many others.....**

**PROJECT REPORT**

**June 2000**

## **Introduction**

The following is a very personal account of my trip to Romania and the experiences it brought me. While I have worked in African countries and seen some of the poverty there, it was my first experience of travelling across Europe and visiting Romania. And it was my first direct experience of bringing aid to people in need. So it was with a fresh pair of eyes that I saw, first hand, what it means to put together such an aid convoy and what impact it can have. Through meeting with those people in Romania who receive the aid I have felt some of the emotions that go with the giving and receiving of aid. I hope that with this report I can share some of that experience with you. Others, on previous visits to Romania, have given a clear account of the daily progress of the convoys. I recommend those accounts to you if you have not seen them before. Here I hope to give a slightly different view, more impressionistic but hopefully, just as real. For those who have given so generously, perhaps you will see what difference your gifts and effort make. For those new to the Lancashire Constabulary's Romanian Appeal, I hope you begin to see why your support will be so important. It was a privilege for me to be able to take part and to have the opportunity to help in some small way. I hope you find my story interesting....

## **The Beginning**

A May Bank Holiday Sunday morning at the Red Scar warehouse in Preston and the adventure begins. The weather mixed with bursts of sunshine between threatening clouds, like my emotions. The exciting prospect of all these new experiences jostling against the thoughts of the challenges of driving across Europe and the uncertainty of my emotional reaction to what we will find in Romania. Of course, I had seen the videos of previous visits but what will it be like to be there in person? How will I handle meeting the orphans and others who depend on this aid we are bringing. I hope I measure up to the challenge. Everyone has put so much into this trip over the last twelve months; I don't want to let them down.

Before you know it, the photos are taken and we are pulling out of the warehouse and heading for the motorway. After some frantic waving to friends on motorway bridges we settle into the rhythm of the journey and get a chance to reflect.

It had been a shock to see the warehouse nearly empty except for the loaded vehicles and the send-off party. I had got used to the pallets of things that we would be taking as they slowly accumulated in corners of the warehouse: the nappies and toilet rolls, the medical supplies and shampoos and mounds of Heinz tinned foods. But over the last few weeks it had really started to fill up with all the last minute donations such as crisps and the materials like flour and disinfectant that we had had to buy. At the meetings we had discussed the essentials such as flour, washing-up liquid and disinfectant and where we were to buy them if we could not find someone to donate them. In fact we were able to get much of it at discount prices thanks to managers who could enlist the help of their organisations. It was only later, when we reached Romania, that the idea of what essential really meant would sink in.

At one time it seemed like we would never be able to fit it all into just five vehicles. Then, in just a week, nearly a hundred tons of generosity had been transformed into loads for the vehicles and somehow stowed on board. I say stowed but once the main, heavy items were on as a base layer, the remaining lighter items went on as best they could until there was no empty space. No corner of the wagons was wasted.

Even before that there were all the fund raising events and all the reports of donations at the monthly meetings as a source for each little thing was found; a barrel of diesel here, some medical supplies there.

Just when was the start? Was it the day that the Tawd Vale Lions were invited to take a direct role in the 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Convoy? Was it before that on the day that Lynne came to a Lions meeting to ask for our support and told us about the last trip and the plans for 1999. Perhaps the truth is that this convoy can trace its roots back to every effort that anyone had made over the last ten years. Each was a start of something or for someone. Without that sustaining effort over the years we would not be on our way now with five trucks loaded with nearly a hundred tons of support for the less fortunate of one part of Romania.

A stop at the motorway services set the tone for the next couple of days; cups of tea and bacon butties – the staple of any self respecting convoy! It was as we crossed the Dartford Crossing, with the magnificent view of London from above the Thames, that I really got a sense of the Convoy as a group. For the first time we formed up into a line of six vehicles to get through the toll booth. This time it was straightforward; a few minutes and we were through and on our way again. It gave no warning of the coming challenge of border crossings, but more of that later. For now we sailed on across England's countryside and down to Dover.

While we waited for our cut price ferry space on P&O we listened with some concern to the weather forecast and the details of the gales blowing through the channel. After a short wait we boarded and headed for the on-board transport café and our evening meal. However, lady luck was with us and as we pulled clear of the harbour walls I was relieved to find a calmer sea than I had anticipated – I'm no great sailor. A pleasant sail put us on mainland Europe and a short drive found us at our first nights stop.

The next few days sped past; the weather gradually improved and the temperature started to climb. The flat country of Belgium gave way to the wooded hills of Germany and Austria. All the time the signposts spoke of associations with other times and other cultures. The First World War and the tragedy of Flanders and the sacrifice of the young men of that generation. Our first night had been spent in Dunkerque which will be forever linked to the tragedy in the second World War. At Frankfurt we saw the prosperity of western Europe in the form of a new railway link and shiny new station. Nurnburg and the recent Grand Prix. Finally Hungary and the exotic associations of Budapest. This was somewhat deflated on the ring road around Budapest by the IKEA sign and a warehouse surrounded by Tesco lorries!

It was during this time that Alan and Christine had the busiest of times. Driving the minibus carried with it the vital responsibility for the 'on the road refreshments'; tea, coffee and meals on the move. Bacon and egg butties were the staple for breakfast, usually eaten following a couple of hours driving to ensure we had an appetite. Lunches were sandwiches and soup. Before each stop they had to get ahead of the trucks so that when we arrived the kettle had boiled and we lost the least amount of time.

In Europe we motored across borders without a second thought. A moments hesitation at the Austrian boarder to purchase our road tax. Getting across the Austro-Hungarian boarder took a little more effort; some small contributions to the tax system and no little frustration at the paperwork. At the time the three hours seemed such a long time. But none of this prepared us for the ten hour challenge of the Hungarian-Romanian border and the threat of a £800 fine. However, the

negotiating skills and patience of the experienced convoy members saw us through and at 9:30 at night on the Thursday evening we started the five hour drive into Romania, the final leg to Hateg, our base for the stay.

### **Our Time in Romania**

There was a brief respite for us while Mick Amos dealt with the customs clearance on our first morning in Romania. His efforts enabled everyone else to laze around in our host's (Titus and Ligia) garden and make the most of the sunbathing weather. But at 2 o'clock the word came through that we could start and the gang swung into action. Everyone piled into the minibus and together with the Bowkers wagon, driven by Chris and Frank, we were off to Zam. Zam is a psychiatric hospital some 80 kilometres from our base in Hateg and perhaps the furthest drop of the whole trip.

The journey to Zam was our first opportunity to see something of the country; our trip from the border along the same route being done in the dark. What I saw was a productive, agricultural country, something like I imagine England was like before the first World War. Very green (or sometimes red due to all the field poppies), very lush with people working in the fields either behind horses or with hoes. The fields are small; the size that one man can plough with a horse in a single day. There were no mechanical aids here. The horse and cart was not an uncommon sight on the roads and the verges were being cut by scythe not tractors. Also along the way, we passed the rusting hulk of a dilapidated steel plant. It went on for a couple of miles. Once the employer of some 30,000 now, since the revolution, derelict. A reminder of the riches that once again lie untapped below the surface of Romania.

When we arrived outside the hospital in Zam we were joined by Benny and some of his cohort of helpers. Benny is one of the contacts in Romania and he is setting up a summer camp in the hills for the disadvantaged kids. During our time in Romania he helped us by giving us background information and translating for us. He also helped unload the trucks, just like most of the other Romanians we encountered; both young and old, sick and able bodied.

As the vehicles pulled up in the grounds of the hospital the air of excitement built among the patients, or perhaps inmates is a better description. Gradually they appeared to help us move the donated goods from the truck to the storeroom. As the loads were moved, some of the men competed to show how strong they were. The women helped too and any accidental spills, the odd dropped shampoo or hand cream, was collected up and carefully cosseted inside a cardigan or secreted behind a hedge. These things, to people with so little, were real treasures. Once the storehouse was replenished we were given a tour of one of the wards. It was a locked ward, overcrowded and with no sign of decoration or personal possessions. We had no way to judge if this was typical or one of the better examples. With pride the staff showed us the progress that had been made on refurbishing the shower block. Indeed, the tiling was a pleasant change from the other facilities. However, to our Western European eyes we saw what remained to be done to make the facilities usable. And everywhere the smell of inadequate sanitation. Yes, the detergent and soaps truly are a necessity here.

We were told that some of the younger patients were actually sent there by the courts - the conditions were better than in the prisons. My

imagination reeled at the thought of what conditions in the prisons must be like. Seeing the hospital in this lovely warm weather, with the older men playing chess in the shade of the trees, made me wonder what it was like in the winter - the ageing boiler house didn't look like it was up to the job.

There was such a range of people here; some severely physically disabled, some who seem heavily sedated and others who appear quite normal. But for all it appeared that it supplied a roof over their heads, a bed and a little food, but precious little else. I didn't see any personal possessions. If there is not enough money to pay the staff properly, what hope of resources for the inmates. If we did not supplement their supplies each year, what would they have to do without?

All too soon we were off again and leaving the hospital behind. Although I didn't speak the language, and had been there for so little time, I felt I had met a few of the patients and made some kind of contact; the universal language of a smile. In comparison with their deprivation I felt very rich. The most shocking thing was that they look just like people I see everyday in Liverpool or Preston yet their lives are so different.

The drive back to Hateg and everyone was quieter in the minibus. Us new recruits had been bitten by the Romanian bug - we just didn't know it yet.

The next drop was a day centre in the center of Hateg where the food we supply helps them attract the local unemployed youth. Along with the food they receive some education. Here some army cadets helped us unload the truck. They were in town to help with the forthcoming

election. It was here that I learnt that a football is viewed as a luxury. Good job we have brought a dozen for the various schools and orphanages.

Next was a Kindergarten, just around the corner. The day was wearing on and before long it was dark and we were unloading by the light of the minibus headlights. This made Cornel's job more difficult; he had the job of compiling the inventory of all that was delivered at each location so that checks can be made and the aid accounted for. The late start meant we didn't finish until 10:30. At our request, the customary thank you meal from the staff was replaced with a bottle of the local beer. Very welcome after the days efforts and a much better arrangement as we returned to our hosts home for the evening meal - something of a midnight feast.

The next couple of days passed in a blur of activity. First the school by the river, Pesteaná. It was the turn of the C & T truck and the Graham brothers, Barry and Darren, to make the delivery. A beautiful setting and they take very good care of the kids. We unloaded the truck which filled one of their rooms; tins of Heinz food, crisps, flour, toilet rolls and much more besides. The business done, it was time for the sweets; you have never seen such delight in the faces of the kids. For us there were doughnuts and beer. Then the football came out and there was a rehearsal for the world cup, they won! The children who had so little would come round and offer you some of their precious sweets.

Next came the orphanage, Paclisa. The kids worked so hard helping with the unloading and each ended with a bottle of shampoo or something under their sweatshirts. So precious to them when, normally, they get one bottle between fourteen of them and it has to last a week. Then,

while the staff plied us with the customary cold beer and coffee, the children sang us songs under the trees. Here the years of support via the police has enabled the staff to start up some workshops for the children; making cloth dolls, painting on glass and repairing shoes. The staff and children were so proud to show us what they had achieved and Benny's voice broke as he translated for us. A small but very important beginning and a tangible sign of the cumulative effect of our support.

Then another school, Sacel, but here they could not resist the tradition and a small meal was laid on for us. Once again the kids lined up to transfer the goods from the lorry to their yard. Immediately the meal was over it was a case of changing to the TNT lorry and we were on to a storehouse from where goods are distributed to local needy groups. At each stop it is the crew of the truck that play a major part in the strenuous task of unloading from the trailer to the waiting helpers. This time it was the turn of the two Micks, Mick and Mike. It was quite a distance from the road to the store and the wheelbarrows we had brought really came into their own for unloading cans and shower sized shampoo bottles. Then back to Hateg to Club Copiilor which provides opportunities for kids to learn artistic skills and computing. A very tired group returned to Titus and Ligias for a well-earned meal. For some this revived them enough to test out the local discos. There was no doubt that the music was very European. Millennium was popular but so were some more local tunes. Often they sounded just like disco tunes in England but with an undercurrent of a middle eastern beat; it was almost south american and the same went for some of the dancers! This and the atmosphere in the discos reinforced my growing sense that Romanians are a gentle, sensuous people.

The last day of deliveries started at the main hospital in Hateg which provided a secure yard for us to store the trucks. Then, off with the T&T wagon with Steve and Scully to another orphanage, La Violetta, in Hateg memorable for the kids eating Easter eggs and playing football while holding onto the toys they had just been given. Putting them down for even a short while was not an option. By the time we reached the next drop, an old peoples home, the temperature had climbed to 36 degrees Centigrade. Working inside the trucks was doubly hard in the heat.

It was touching to see the old people queuing to take a turn unloading but I will treasure especially the sight of an old lady sitting her refurbished wheelchair carefully studying a hand made blanket we had brought. That smile, like those of the children at other drops, spoke eloquently of the simple joy these things brought with them. The staff at the old peoples home had made good use of the resources freed up by the aid in refurbishing the home. It was very clean and did not have the smell associated with most of our delivery points.

The unfortunate thing is that as somewhere like the old peoples home Geoagiu gradually improves it raises the question 'Is it time to move on to somewhere more in need of this aid'. It somehow seems like you are abandoning them but at the same time there are many places in need of assistance.

The last visit was a trip up into the hills to visit the camp being established by Bennie. Now it was the turn of Lynne and myself with the seven and a half tonne truck. The latter part of the journey was off road, on a dirt track which proved not to be as bad as had been

described. Many of the pot-holes had been filled but I for one would not have wanted to bring one of the big trucks up there. The main delivery here was a ton and a half of plasterboard for the new building but we had the promise of a barbecue. A more idyllic setting for such a camp would be difficult to envisage. Amongst the wooded hills and farmland of the Carpathian Mountains, it was like something out of the sound of music. Indeed the overwhelming impression was one of sound. The local pastures were full of crickets, as well as wild flowers, and their noise nearly drowned out the birdsong. One can just imagine the contrast for the children from local orphanages in towns once they visit here.

The barbecue was a delightful end to three days of hard physical labour. As Christine had said at one point on a particularly hot day, "You wouldn't work at home like this, whatever the pay". The drive home that evening brought a sense of accomplishment. All that remained was to tidy the trucks and do a little sightseeing on the Monday before setting off home on the Tuesday morning.

### Looking Back: The Way Ahead

And what impressions am I left with, from the time in Romania and the trip.

Firstly, there are the pictures I carry with me. The old lady in the old peoples home Geoagiu, sitting in her wheel chair studying the blanket so lovingly knitted 2000 kilometres away. The children in Pesteană, clutching their toys and playing football with these visitors who bring such gifts; there is no way that they will put down that toy for even an instant. The line of patients in Zam struggling to man-handle the heavy

boxes of shampoo and soap, perhaps to prove something to us, their fellow patients or even themselves. The joy on the faces of the children when the little extras appear, teddies, Easter eggs, footballs, bicycles and sweets.

Then there were the sounds, and not just the infectious giggles from Barry at the snoring 'boys' choir that performed most nights. There was the laughter of the children once the sweets had been eaten and the football begun. And the sound of those myriad crickets and birds in the Carpathian Hills. And the gentle, singsong voices of the Romanians that we met.

And of course, there are the things I carry a little deeper inside. The sheer range of emotions experienced during the visits, the joy, the sorrow, the hope, the desperation, the smiles and the tears. These feelings contribute towards a desire to help these, my neighbours. I have seen first hand some of the poverty in the Sahel in Africa when the droughts came. The nomadic tribes of the Sahara suffered terribly. But Romania came as such a shock because of the poverty amongst people so like ourselves in appearance and culture. Some of these orphans could be the kids next door. And to think there are estimated to be some 90,000 of them throughout Romania in a population half that of our own!

Certainly, I believe I have a better appreciation of the some of the needs of these gentle people. While Romania does not suffer the extreme poverty of a third world country, it needs a helping hand while it gets back on its feet. The people have so little that there is not enough to support even a basic health service or social security system that the sick, the elderly and the orphans need. What system that does exist

survives through the good will of the people who work in it and the generosity of those abroad to supplement what little the government can supply. However, I see a country that, with the right kind of help and support will convert itself into a valuable member of European society, and eventually a member of the European Community. There are riches both in the land and in the people of these our furthest neighbours. The mineral wealth and the fertility of the land will support them and their rich culture will sustain them and attract us to visit them in the future. Perhaps, as the demand for organic produce increases, we will come to appreciate some more of what Romania has to offer.

I certainly have a knowledge of just how much difference those donations make to the everyday lives of the children and adults on the far side of Europe. I have met some of the children who will over the next few months be eating the bread made from the flour we were able to take. I have seen some of the projects that have been started using some of the resources we have supplied or that they could release based on our help.

That the hundred tons we were able to take represents hundreds of hours of effort in terms of fund raising and 'begging' letters is clear. It also represents the thousands of people who, each in their own way, have made some contribution towards the success of this and other trips. For some it has been a donation, buying a badge or a raffle ticket. For others it was persuading their company to let us have something at cost, a vehicle or some disinfectant or flour. All that combined effort to help get some of the things needed to those friends in Romania with the limited funds we had. Some were in a position to get us goods for free; perhaps end of line stock or bottles with substandard labels or wheel barrows that do not meet their quality standard. Other people made

things, knitted a blanket or refurbished a bike or wheel chair. Every single one has made a difference to the lives of people they may never meet and shown that it is not just a materialistic world we live in.

May I offer my own thanks to you for making it possible for me to have had this adventure which I have tried to share with you through this report. Peace be with you.

**Keith Rea**



At Zam the patients help to unload the aid and place it in the store room.

The psychiatric patients in a locked ward have few possessions and nothing to occupy their time



The children in the orphanage at Pesteană delight just as much in being photographed as they love the visits from the police. As well as the essentials of soap, detergents, flour and tinned food the visit brings crisps, chocolate, toys and a chance to beat the police with the new football.



The children at the Paclisa Psychiatric Hospital are proud of the help they can give with moving the tons of aid

At Sacel School and Orphanage lessons stop while everyone lines up to stack the coming months supplies in the yard.



The improvements at the old peoples home of Geoagiu since the aid started to arrive are obvious but still a simple blanket brings delight to the residents even in the heat of the day.