

RETURN TO ROMANIA



The Martin Hawkins group.

Even as we boarded the plane at Heathrow I still could not believe that I was going back. I had said to myself I would never go back. Romania had that effect - it was that kind of experience. However, it also fascinated me and, like most of the "Challenge Aneka" viewers, I wanted to see the long-term effect of all the work, clothes, goods and help that had been given one year ago; and to discover whether the numerous reports in umpteen newspapers concerning stolen or misplaced items, babies back in the basement and a general relapse, were actually true. I had got close to some of the older kids, who repeatedly followed us around and helped carry our equipment, and I wanted to know what fate had befallen them - it would be great to see them again too.

It was a much smaller crew this time around. The team was Jannine Waddell, Producer, John Needham, Director, Mary Keevil our PA, Dave Chapman as usual on sound, Lynn Mitchell my camera assistant, Dave Haw my electrician, Raoul our translator, and myself. Eight people and forty bags. (Twenty-two equipment, six food and supplies and twelve personal bags). We were to shoot for eight days. Annie was to join us after five - she was filming for Children in Need and was not available for the early part. Therefore, the plan was to shoot most of the sequences and general views without her and then do the interviews at the end of the shoot. Not the best way round but there was no alternative.

I knew ahead of us lay a difficult journey, even Heathrow at 7 o'clock on a

In November 1990, the Challenge Aneka team went to clean up an orphanage in Siret, Northern Romania (see Zerb Spring 1991). In response to a request from the BBC for a Christmas Special, Mentorn Films returned there in November 1991 to document the current state of the orphanage.

Martin Hawkins - the cameraman on both occasions, takes up the next part of the story.

dark and damp Monday morning seemed a bright and cheerful place compared to the memory of our destination. Unfortunately we did not have the luxury of a direct British Midland flight to Sucheava Airport but this time it was a series of stops and baggage checks. First at Vienna, and then a change of plane to Bucharest.

Although only a two hour flight, the difference going from East to West is very apparent. Everything is so different. It was much colder. There was no colour in the things that surrounded you and the clothes

were all a mixture of grey, brown and black. Looking out through the windows, even the grass seemed less green.

To our relief at Bucharest International Airport all forty bags eventually arrived along a rather worn out conveyor belt and they and us somehow got loaded into about eight or nine clapped out and dirty cars they called taxis. Complete comedy! By this point Raoul, the translator had already earned his ticket. The taxis were taking us about six miles to Bucharest Domestic Airport where we were to catch a much smaller plane to fly up to Sucheava in the north of Romania. Loading and unloading, counting and checking was starting to become a routine. Just as we checked in with the forty bags, they told us that Sucheava Airport was closed as it was too foggy to land.

It was ironic as Dave (Sound) had just said how well it was all going. Our choice was either to reclaim the forty bags, find some more taxis and get the overnight train - which would

take seven hours but at least get us there by morning - or stay put and hope the fog cleared. No decision - it was well past time to break open the duty-frees and have our first production meeting.

The Terminal (for want of a better word) was a very grim place and I'm amazed that so few people smoking can fill such a large place so full of smoke. Jannine the producer was taken away by Raoul to sort out a problem over payment for the excess baggage. For some strange reason they did not want to take dollars which was very

bizarre for Romanians. Then we are told that the plane can fly half way to a place called Bacau and, if the fog has cleared, onto Sucheava. If it hasn't, then it's a train or some sort of coach from there. We vote to go for it.

The flight that followed was rather bumpy, but it had been a long day and it was an opportunity to catch up on some sleep. We landed at Bacau and entered another dim terminal building to wait for the news. Lynn and Dave played cards while the plane was refueled. Two large men dressed in dark army uniforms guarded the door, machine guns in hands. There were a lot of wall and ceiling lights but hardly any of them were working. Good news was not long in coming thank God. The fog lifted and we could go onto Sucheava and the comfort of our hotel beds.

After another bumpy flight, some rather disgusting black liquid they called coffee and a bit of help from our duty-frees, we land at Sucheava. Although quite late and some twelve hours into our journey, we are met by various important people who welcome us back to Romania. This suddenly brings it home to me how much the programme and the aid did for these people. Again, the forty bags get counted off the plane and into the small but cold terminal building and then onto a waiting bus which took us to our hotel.

The reception was buzzing with staring Romanians. We checked in and found that all these people were in fact waiting for

the lift! Our rooms were on the first floor, so we did the British thing and carried the forty bags up the stairs. Funny how they seemed to get heavier as the day got longer. We do not like the hotel but for tonight it will have to do. It's the end of our first day - only nine more to go.

The following morning Jannine came down to breakfast looking quite pale having noticed that the lift is covered in blood stains. Suddenly shifting the forty bags becomes a pleasure and while I go and shoot a few general views, Jannine and Raoul go in search of a new hotel.

Before we left London we spoke with the Birmingham Catholic Partnership, the charity running the project, about what the last year had been like at the orphanage, and they said that things had gone well and were even improving. After we left last year, a steady flow of helpers passed into Siret. The nurses and carers staying between three and four weeks at a time, and the workers returning to do some more repairs on the orphanage and then turning their attention to



The crew waiting to videotape the vital children's operations.

the needs of the town. Apparently the orphanage was still looking bright and the kids all seemed better off. I wanted this to reflect in the pictures.

The first part of the programme was to be a flashback to our first arrival last year and I was keen to make some visual difference between then and now. Last year we used Sony BVW 300 cameras and then added 9db of gain to give the pictures a grainy feel and to establish a 'look' to the programme (the extra stop wasn't wasted either!). This time round I had the advantage of the new Sony BVW 400 camera with the hyper-HAD chip, so the extra stop was already in hand and the grainy look was not required but I felt some sort of filtration was.

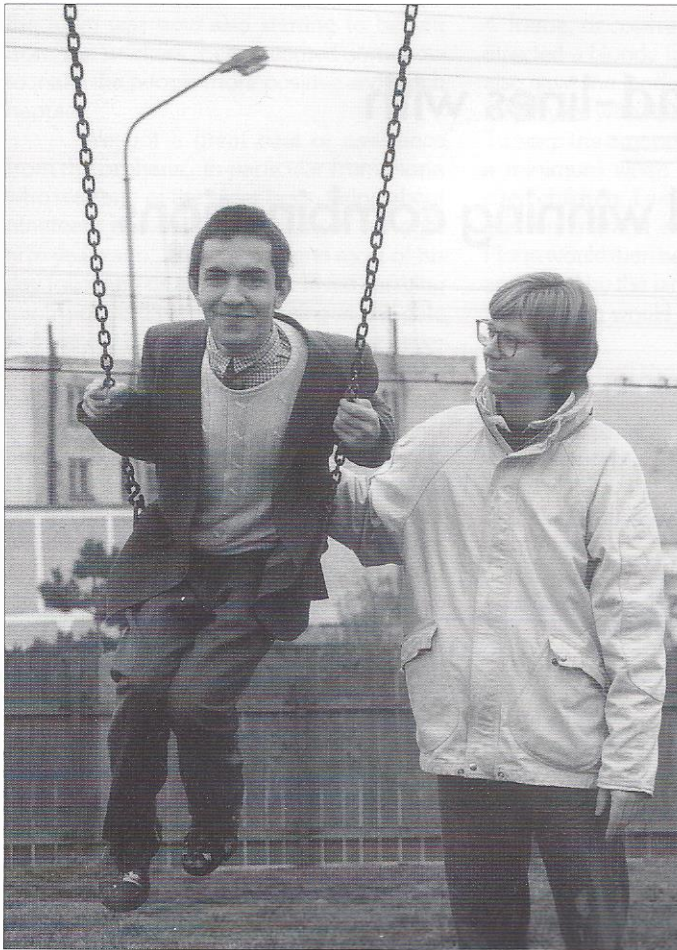
I had taken the basic lighting kit - a blonde, two redheads, three mizars, two sunguns and an assortment of photofloods and lightbulbs. I also included two collapsible 4' x 4' frames that could have white 'bounce' material or Rosco 216 stretched over them, thus keeping the light as soft and natural as possible.

The orphanage rooms all have large windows and, on a clear day, the sun pours in with no way of controlling it. Although it's getting much better with the newer cameras, I still don't like the way video handles these heavily over exposed areas and so I decided to take the harsh 'edge' off and give the programme a new 'look' by filtering, which I love to do if I can anyway. A ten denier Dior black stocking on the back element of the lens proved the ideal way to handle the windows, as well as the hotspots from the bare practical bulbs hanging in some of the smaller, dark rooms.

An added advantage of a behind the lens filter was that the children loved touching the camera. There are no mirrors in the orphanage so the younger children would put their head right up to the lens



The crowded but much cleaner and happier dormitory.



Florin and Martin - friends for life.

and, out of fascination rather than vanity, gaze at their reflection and then try to touch it. I felt it too dangerous to risk the diffusion filter being in the matte box. As it was, Lynn my camera assistant, was constantly cleaning the safety glass protecting the front element and fending off sticky fingers.

Back to the story. We had arrived in Romania having moved a lot of boxes and cases from here to there and now we were to move them for the last time to a new hotel. A coach arrived and the eight of us piled in and went off to the airport. We were to meet a team of doctors and nurses from the charity "Bright Eyes" led by a top plastic surgeon, Dr Paul Levic, who were coming out from England to perform operations on the children who most needed help. We wanted to shoot them coming off the plane, and had been told that the plane was delayed by three hours. It arrived one hour early! Typical of a country where things happen, sometime and somehow. The bus driving through the Romanian countryside was thought to be quite a good opening instead! To my mind it was not an ideal beginning but at last we were now starting to shoot and things were picking up.

We recorded some good vox pops with the medics and some pretty shots of the bus travelling the long, straight roads in the sunshine. It was the same road that we travelled down last year and the nearer we got to the orphanage, the faster my heart beat. We pulled up at the gate and were

of that day shooting the selection of the children they would operate on during their week's stay. The following day we would follow the sequence through and shoot the children having the operations at the hospital. I have to admit that I do not like hospitals and I have never had or even seen an operation. The thought of shooting one scared the hell out of me, but tomorrow is another day.

The alarm went at 6.30am and I didn't want to get up. It was very cold outside and my bed was very warm, but about eight children were already on their way from the orphanage in Siret to Sucheava hospital for operations, ranging from re-forming a cleft palate to cosmetic surgery on a little girl who had been badly beaten by her mother. Her face was severely scarred as the cuts and bruises had never been treated. Today was also the day that Romania played Bulgaria in its World Cup qualifier, so our coach driver was very keen for an early wrap.

Most of us who would be in the operating theatre had to put on the usual clean white clothing, except in Romania, it was not very clean and not very white - more like cream coloured but still good for a crew

greeted by dozens of surprised children. They were obviously delighted to see us and kept asking where Anneka was. The sun seemed to shine from the children's faces.

We entered the building and I can't explain how glad I was to see it looking so bright. The designs and murals were still on the walls and best of all, the place smelled of disinfectant and not the dreadful odour that prevailed last year. It seemed a much happier place and certainly much cleaner. Most of the children had hair now and you could distinguish the girls from the boys.

We collected our gear from the bus and shot the arrival of the medics at the orphanage. We spent the remainder

photo. Sucheava hospital had given a theatre to the medics for a week. They immediately set about turning a very drab old room into an operating theatre of a reasonable standard. Dave (Sound) went about pinning on radio microphones and Dave (Electrician) and I rigged the lamps and 4'X 4' frames. The medics were under a lot of pressure so we tried to keep out of their way as much as possible. I started to get a bit nervous as the various instruments of torture were brought out one by one. Like most buildings in Eastern bloc countries, the room had several light fittings but only a few of them worked, so our lights gave the dull room a lift.

We decided not to shoot the first couple of operations as they were fairly small and it would give the medics a chance to settle in (a decision I did not mind one bit!). We went for coffee and were shown into another operating theatre and were told to use it as a rest room. As usual, Mary (PA) had packed a case with food and half a dozen flasks for breaks and lunch, so we were able to enjoy the time eating Mars bars, and sipping coffee while sitting on an operating table equipped with leather straps. The jokes were numerous and photos plentiful!

Then the call came that they were ready for us and I remember walking into the room with sweaty palms as if it was me who was about to go 'under the knife'. I turned the camera on and a young boy was led into the room. I could not believe the Romanian way was to put the person 'under' in the theatre and not in a room elsewhere. Instead they have to suffer the sight of all the theatre staff in their robes and masks and all the tools laying next to the table, not to mention the added bonus of myself and camera, along with Dave (Sound) - and he's enough to scare anyone, even with a mask

on! This little boy was so brave that it put my fears into perspective. I was not being put through anything like he was.

To keep numbers of crew in the room down, we had a colour monitor in the corridor

They have to suffer the sight of all the theatre staff in their robes and masks and all the tools laying next to the table!

for John (Director), Jannine (Producer), and Mary (PA) and by all accounts, they were suffering a lot more than me. I was relieved to find you're OK as long as you keep your eyes in the viewfinder!

The next couple of days were spent at Siret following the half dozen or so builders that had come over from England - for some it was their fifth trip. They had done as much as was possible for the orphanage and had now moved out and were working in the old people's home next door, and a boys school down in the town. Their plan then was to concentrate on the hospital and the pumping station where a lot of the town's water problems began. The fact that

the town was now also starting to benefit from the workers' help, seemed somehow to make the people more positive and much happier.

We got a great deal of assistance from the orphans. In particular from Florin who was one of the older boys, being about nineteen, and had lost the use of his right arm years ago. He would spend most of his day following us around. He loved carrying my tripod and would be waiting at the gate to meet our bus every morning. I have never seen enjoyment on anyone's face when handed a two stage tripod and head and told to carry it up four flights of stairs. In fact Florin did not stop smiling the whole week. He loved me, as he kept telling me throughout the week. Each day as we arrived and as we left, we would spend at least five minutes hugging him, he would wave us goodbye and say in deep Romanian English, "See you tomorrow". I was not looking forward to our last goodbye.

The days continued and our daily visit to the orphanage became more and more routine. It became more like a second home from the hotel, so it was a breath of fresh air when Annie arrived with Lucy, the Editor. Thankfully, they had brought fresh supplies with them which refurbished our depleted food and spirit stocks and kept us going. They were immediately introduced to the "den" at our hotel, which was a converted bedroom where we kept our camera equipment and playback facilities. Mary (PA) had equipped it with a fully stocked bar, food snacks, mini burner, kettle and walkman sound system. It was also our escape from the Romanians, and a place where we could discuss the day's events and "The meaning of Life" into the small hours of the morning.

We spent their first morning viewing rushes and working out a structure for the programme. Annie couldn't wait to get to the orphanage and talk to the children, nurses, Romanian carers and English workers. We shot these interviews in a fairly relaxed style as they went about their daily business. This meant I could not drag them off to a nice quiet location. It also meant there were also a lot of children around, which became a nightmare for the two Dave's.

To keep things simple and looking as natural as possible, I usually 'lit' the subject by bouncing a blonde or redhead off the 4' x

4' frame, or covered it with Rosco 216 and directed a blonde through it. This small rig also gave the worker or nurse a bit of room to carry on with their daily childcare routine. To keep the amount of mains cable down to a minimum when surrounded by over-excited children, I would have to use the sun-gun on a stand as a backlight or kicker. Florin would then become a temporary spark and stand by the lamp to make sure none of the children would knock it over. He loved it!

We had shot in the town, at the boys school and at an old people's home. It was a very sad place. The plight of the old folk was desperate - they just sat on their beds and stared, just as the babies would do back at the orphanage. They had no stimulation or interests. It was so quiet, no one spoke and there was no music. Most of the old people had spent their entire lives in some sort of institution and it brought home to me that this was what lay ahead for Florin.

The day before we were due to leave, Florin gave me a present! It was a little China dog, and a letter written in his best Romanian. Raoul translated it for me. It said how much he had enjoyed the week and that he would never forget us, he said he loved me and there would always be a place in his heart for me. He hoped I would remember him and come back and visit the orphanage again...and could he have my Sony Walkman! His card and his present really knocked me back. Raoul had found out that he had spent

as he was getting too old to remain. His unusable arm meant that he would probably never get a job and so would have to go to another institution and then eventually on to the old people's home to see out the rest of his life.

On our last day I turned to say goodbye to him and he said with a big smile on his face, "See you tomorrow" - I said, "No Florin, tomorrow we go home". He started to get upset and I took off my yellow coat and gave it to him, then my jumper and then my cap. He started to smile. I then dug out my walkman and tapes, and all the spare batteries Dave could find in his soundkit. A bottle of aftershave and some bars of chocolate - in fact, just about everything I had on me. It did not make our leaving any easier, but at least it was something for him.

The plane which was to take us home had been cancelled, so our return trip started in the small hours of the morning at a remote Romanian railway station just outside town. There was complete confusion as to which track our train would arrive at. The Romanians hadn't decided. Finally a train arrived at the far side of the station and our 'thirty-something' bags (due to depleted stocks), were dragged over two sets of tracks, through a stationary train and thrown into various compartments, the last bag just landing aboard as the train pulled out of the station. It was the start of one of the longest train journeys I had ever experienced - but it was good to be going home.

I kept thinking of Florin and just what might happen to him. It had been a good trip with a great crew and now it was down to John and Lucy to do their best in the edit suite. As a cameraman you have your own ideas on how a shoot should 'look' and 'feel' but I always find it interesting, come the final process, how other people view your work and how your shots get put together...or don't get put together! My two trips to Siret have without question been

the most emotional experiences of my life and at the tender age of 34, I have to wonder what the next 25 years can possibly throw at me!

In January this year Florin sent me his first letter, informing me that some of the boys had broken his headphones, but he was well ... and could he have a new set ... and, if it was possible, a Sony ghettoblaster! I don't think I'm ever going to lose the memory of Florin or the orphanage. ●



Farewell Florin.

all the money he had saved and had asked one of the carers to go and buy it for him. Florin had been at the orphanage since he was four years old and, although the children do not get shown a lot of love, he still had feelings, he could still feel love and knew what it was when shown it. As for being given the chance to find love, I think for most Romanian orphans, it's unlikely ever to happen. Florin's younger sister was also there, but he would have to leave her soon