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## Expat Life



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EXCLUSIVE

### A 700-km walk across Romania with Peter Hurley

by Diana Mesesan

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At a certain moment in his life, Peter Hurley took a look back, took a look forward, took a look around and understood he had to start on a different road.

In a fancy cafe from the Old Center of Bucharest, a man carrying a big rucksack and hiking clothes gets in. He has either just arrived from a



The man, a 40-something red-hair guy with shining eyes, takes off the heavy pack, puts it on a chair and takes some books out of it, with a white, simple cover. It shows a drawing of a small wooden church, a cross and the title "The Way of the Crosses". Below is the name of the author, Peter Hurley, who happens to be the guy in front of me. He has already ordered a long, black coffee, "the longer, the better".

He started his day in his apartment in Balta Alba, loaded his rucksack with books he ought to send to some acquaintances in Austria, Ireland, his homeland, or here, in Romania, where he had moved many years ago, so many that it's almost useless to actually count them. It was around 1994 when Peter arrived here, a 26-year-old man, a bit confused and still searching his way, like all 20-something people are. He had traveled to the Czech Republic and was impressed by a certain feeling about this Eastern area, a certain spirituality, hard to define, but which got him hooked and made him move over here and start a marketing business with a friend.

The first impression is that, well...Peter is quite an introvert guy, who answers briefly and who will most probably won't let himself dragged into the narrative of his own story. But I'm wrong. He does wait a few seconds until he answers. He does start a bit reluctantly and seems like he'll limit his answer to some very few sentences. But then, just like a mechanical clock that it's switched on and suddenly starts working, some internal trigger goes off and Peter starts talking. Without even realizing it, you're the one who's absorbed into his story.

Five years ago he kind of quit his job, sold all his shares in the advertising company he helped founding, Mercury 360 Communications and retained a very small stake in the market research company Mercury Research. "A few things happened at the same time. I sort of founded myself in an isolated personal situation that made me draw a line and made me reevaluate. I took a look back, took a look forward, took a look around and understood I had to start on a different road. At the same time I knew that there was a reason why I came here, a reason that I later had forgotten."

Along the years he came to the conclusion that there were some great things about Romania. Foreign investments, expertise and intelligence, they are all so important, but equally important are "the things that are from Romania and I thought the the balance was too far over along one side. Too many things coming in and the Romanians would go: Who am I? What do I have? What is this about?"

Peter Hurley started organizing a festival called "The long road to the Merry Cemetery", in Sapanta, in the Northern part of Romania, in Maramures county, trying to save the traditions which he considered so important. Save the traditions...that's a big thing to say. But Peter found something really valuable here and he slowly began to understand that it isn't about the tourism, nor about IT, or similar things which get promoted, it's about people's values. "We are talking about knowledge, living knowledge and until the last man dies, it's not dead. The more people know, the more relevant it is."

"For three years I've been investing in the festival and I lost everything, but I'm a really stubborn Irish guy, once I've done something and I think it's a good idea, I'll keep doing even though it's difficult and maybe misunderstood by people."

While he's talking, you can feel his enthusiasm, how serious he is about the whole thing and not in the sort of an idealist guy's way, who is disconnected from the actual reality and tries to preserves a myth. And you can also sense the disappointments he went through, because this isn't a country where many people actually care.



But then on the 7th of October, 2012, he got a different idea.

“I was on a harvest festival in a village, in Romania, that was promoting the rural civilization. I could see that this festival was getting all the support of the organizations, local municipality, but in fact most of the music was prerecorded, nobody was playing live, most of the food sold there has been busked in, sausages from Carrefour, the local politicians were using this in order to be re-elected and a television was filming this. It was an anomaly, a parody. The only people that came with instruments to actually play sounded the worst because there weren't any microphones. The traditions are dying and these sort of artificial events are only accelerating their death.”

He understood then he had to pursue his goals in a different form, by walking 700 km from Sapanta to the Peasant Museum in Bucharest.

“And why am I walking? Well, I've spent all my money. There's nothing left. I'm pretty sure no one listens when you talk, so there seems to be no point. All I have now is my body, my mind and my spirit. They're still in good shape; I can do things. And this walk is the best idea I have right now,” he wrote in his book.

The same rucksack which he stuffed with books to send them away at the post office had been used to carry only the essential during the long walk. It was hard deciding what not to take. “I gave up the soap, the vitamins, even the toothpaste. All the books. I was left with the clothes I had on me, three pairs of socks, two changes of underwear, a t-shirt and pajama pants to sleep in, and then my additional winter clothing,” Peter wrote in his book.

“At first I thought I would do 3.4 km an hour. I thought I'd be able to do 30 km a day in 6.7 hours. I thought I would be leaving early on in the morning at 8 and it would be early afternoon when I got to the destination.” He realized pretty quickly it was taking him much more time: 12 – 13 hours of walking a day.

The night he got the idea, he looked at a map and realized that if he were to do this walk he knew some people and these people should know other people. And where he would not know anybody, he would simply knock on the door. He started his walk on the 26th of November, from Sapanta.

“Of the whole 26 nights there were four nights where I knocked on the door of complete strangers. Three nights I got it pretty much from the first knock, but on the fourth night, I got it only from the third try. You gotta struggle with yourself to go on and knock on somebody's door. It's very hard to get up and do this. The hardest was when I tried it in a town, Valenii de Munte, it was very hard, hard, hard.”

“The best experience I had was a night before the general elections, on the 9th of December. It was heavily snowing. I had a long long day. I knocked on the door of this house and a voice from inside said: come in. I opened the door and a man in his 60s from his bed said, “Come in, I'm, so glad you're here.” “You're so glad I'm here?” I asked him. “I mean I'm so glad you're not outside, it's such a horrible night.”

There is a big pause after he recounts this episode. I recall a story I listened to on the This American Life radio show, about a black man in his 20s, in the USA, who gave up everything he had and tried to make a similar walk across the United States, “The peace pilgrim”, hoping to get shelter and food from strangers. He had been on a long search for spiritual truth and this walk was meant to really bring some meaning to his



you doing? I'm walking across the country. Why? Why not in the summertime?"

"Why didn't you have the patience to wait until summertime?" I also ask him. "Because I don't have much patience. Also I had worked so hard in 2012, I didn't have a day off and the project that I was working on had a two-week break, in the middle of December. I realized it wasn't going to start again until Christmas. From my experience, I know you can be lucky before Christmas, you can have good weather, without snow."

He didn't take any notes, just a few photos. That's all. "I didn't have time. I was exhausted. The people that you just met or bumped into, you gotta talk to them. There is a physical and psychological recovery that needs to take place."

"With all the money in the world I couldn't have done that walk. You couldn't do that staying on your own in a hotel in nighttime. Watching TV. You would become overwhelmed by a complete sense of futility of the whole exercise. But then I realized that these people were picking you up. In some cases I helped them and in all cases they really helped me. This exchange of energy was really powerful."

"The idea of abandoning yourself, that was what it was. Abandoning yourself to the will of the people that you meet. That became central to the motivation of keep going. If you have the money to choose the chocolate bar, the bed, the bus, then you're grabbing control of the spirit that should be guiding you. The Indians have a word for that, the South-Americans too and maybe we would call that spirit God, whatever you wanna call it, whatever your gig is. It doesn't really matter."

Getting home was amazing, Peter says, and he throws a big, big laugh. "Amazing. amazing! I can't describe. There was an amount of regret that it was over, a tiny one, but compared to the feeling of achievement. Not like I've won, I've got the gold, but rather like..I can't believe that God gave me that."

"I think when you're walking, you're giving God a chance to line everything up.. If you are driving fast in a car the faster you drive the further you are from synchronicity with the planet. I used to drive, I still drive, I also drive fast, it's good for you when you are in a hurry, but you do have to recognize...when you're walking you give things the chance to line up."

After the whole thing ended, he decided he should write a book about that walk. "Writing the book was so much harder. In the last five years the easiest thing I have done is that walk. The hardest was to write the book and to get it by the deadline."

But he did and with the help of 54 master students of the Faculty of Letters he got it translated into a record time. He then made the walk backwards, this time driving, visiting again all the people he met and offering them the book.

"When you're walking, you detach and you're able to get into a meditative state of mind. The big challenge is being able to keep this concept in this active life, in this urban environment." So how do you keep it alive? I ask him. "That's the idea, you don't. It has to be a way but I didn't find it yet. But you have to keep trying."

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