

Prins Bernhard Cultuurfonds
Het belang van vertalen/The importance of translation

My Romania – *a reflection following the award of the 2019 Martinus Nijhoff Translation Prize to Jan Willem Bos.*

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In his excellent book *My Romania*, Jan Willem Bos explains his love for the country thus: “My personal development took shape within a symbiotic relationship with Romania. I grew into adulthood during my trips to that country. I learned about literature through Romanian literature (...). I learned about history through Romanian history.”

The journeys that you make as a young adult are those that most shape you as a person. It's these early introductions to another language and culture, at a phase in life when everything is still unfolding, that can have a permanent influence on you, if you are open to it.

In my early twenties, unlike most of my peers, I didn't travel to France or Spain, i.e. South-West Europe, but, like Jan Willem Bos in his younger years, to the South East. Like him, I got to know the region at a young age, although in an entirely different period of its history. Following in the footsteps of Jan Willem Bos, I'd like to tell you briefly what Romania has taught me.

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As a child of the newly restored European unity – I was born on 9 June 1989, exactly five months before the Wall came down – the east lay open to me like a wondrous new world that was the same and yet totally different. Between my 20th and 25th, I travelled eastward every year, either with friends in a second-hand car, or with other history students on study trips. I saw all the Balkan countries, from Slovenia to Albania, visited Romania, Moldavia and the Crimea, and journeyed through Russia and Georgia. And I must say, you become a different kind of adult, and a different kind of European, if during your adolescence you travel to the east rather than to the west.

I would like to try and explain that here, by zooming in on one specific day, a day which immediately came to mind when I was asked to provide this contribution: 9 June 2010, my 21st birthday, which I celebrated in Romania. It was the start of a history study trip with around twenty other history students, and in the twenty-four hours of that hot summer day, I travelled from the Transylvanian university town of Cluj northwards to the border town of Sighet, ending the day in a fairy-tale guest house in rural Maramures. It was a symbolic day, a compilation of a wealth of Romanian culture and history, and a good example of the way in which your perspective can change.

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We spent most of the evening of 9 June in a club in Cluj, dancing like gypsies with Romanian students. In the early morning we boarded a bus heading north and drove through a magical landscape: misty valleys full of meadow flowers, little villages with richly decorated wooden houses and church steeples, old monasteries and castles. My newly turned 21-year-old self stared out the window of the bus, listened to Romanian music, read poems by Eminescu and was enchanted by the mystique of the landscape. I wrote my thoughts in my travel diary:

“In my imagination I lived in ancient gypsy stories. Clapping and dancing girls with brightly coloured headscarves and long swishing skirts. Stamping, swinging music, endlessly thrilling. Grim-looking men in old suits and dusty shoes. Intoxicated butterflies and black ravens in a dizzy delirium of colour and fire.”

A little high-flown, I admit, but let's just say I was swept up in the magic of Maramures.

An entirely different, darker side of Romanian history awaited us in Sighet, a Hungarian-speaking town on the border with Ukraine. We visited the prison where countless political prisoners of the Ceausescu regime were detained. With dumbstruck, dismayed faces, we looked at the cramped concrete cells and the memorial for the victims of Communism. We then walked to the house where holocaust survivor and Nobel prize winner Elie Wiesel was born. Someone read from his work, and the warm summer sun couldn't take away the chills of past horrors.

Back in the bus, we drove on through the Eastern Carpathians. Via the crackly bus microphone and in the most doom-laden voice, our tutor read – inevitably – from Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. Towards the evening, we arrived at an isolated guest house in the hills, where we, a company of sweaty students in crumpled t-shirts, were welcomed by Romanians – in snow-white shirts and colourful aprons – who overwhelmed us with music, bread and drinks. We took our places at long wooden tables on which mounds of food and jugs of palinka (plum brandy) were served, and were refreshed by a hospitality, a warmth, a feast that humbled me as a westerner. After the dinner, the owner of the guest house asked if I wanted to try on her traditional Hungarian-Romanian costume. She helped me into three skirts, an apron and a beautifully embroidered bodice. I tied on a headscarf, and danced pirouettes across the courtyard.

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What did this one day, my Romanian birthday, leave me with? Admiration for the richness and diversity of Romanian culture. A deep awareness of the brutal impact of history, the dangers of suppression and dictatorship, and the resilience of the Romanian people. A renewed appreciation of freedom, but also of tradition. Self-assertiveness and a lust for life. And a suitable tempering of my West-European ego.

If we want the Iron Curtain – which still hangs like a shadow between the two halves of Europe – to remain firmly in the chronicles of history where it belongs, we must take an open and curious look towards the east. If not through travel, then through reading – and in this, good translators such as Jan Willem Bos are essential. People who immerse themselves in another culture and bring its pearls to the surface for the rest of us.