

# Romanians Must Now Build a Society

By Alex Kozinski

"We are free, Aliosha. The nightmare is over," says Lidya's faint voice at the other end of the line. After a few moments of silence, during which I hear sobbing, she adds, "I didn't think I would see it during my lifetime."

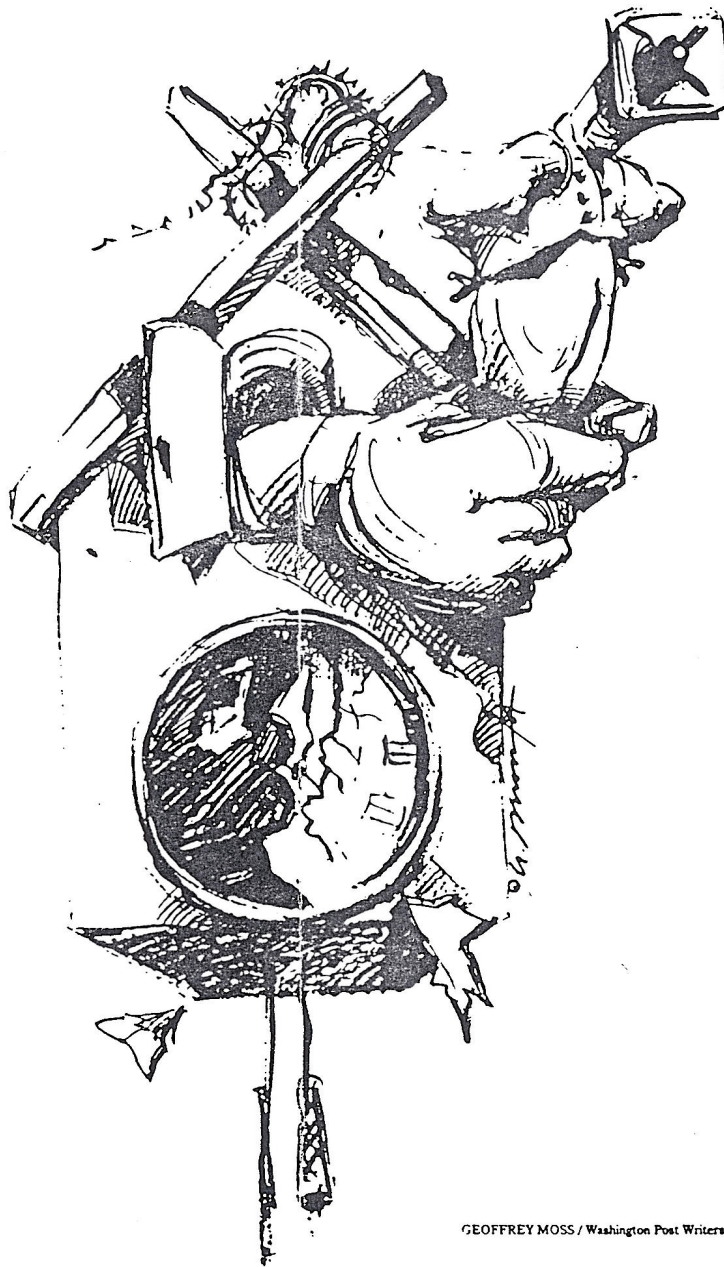
It had been a young Lidya who saw me and my family off on that windy, snow-covered railroad platform 28 years ago, the day we left Bucharest forever. For us, it has been a quarter-century of freedom and prosperity; for her, like the others we left behind, the nightmare that would become the Romania of the '60s, '70s and '80s. Now, at the threshold of the final decade of the 20th century, middle-aged and somewhat broken by an ordeal few of us can imagine, she is overcome by joy, relief, disbelief. Like 20-odd million other Romanians, her capacity for absorbing the changes of the previous three weeks has been taxed to the limit.

What next? She doesn't know, but the future must surely be better than the past.

Romania presents what may be the extreme case of the dilemma faced by the newly-liberated peoples of Eastern Europe. United for a brief moment by hatred for the system that has oppressed them for two generations, they have managed, against all expectations, to topple even as cruel a dictator as Nicolae Ceausescu. But what lies ahead may be even more difficult. How do you build a modern industrialized society in a country whose industrial base has been reduced to rubble through decades of destructive centralized planning? How do you establish a democracy among people who have never, in their lifetimes, participated in democratic government? How do you keep a lid on centuries-old ethnic and regional rivalries to build a workable economic and legal system?

These are the very real problems the people of Eastern Europe will have to grapple with as the flush of victory passes and the reality of self-governance sets in. In Romania the problem is made even more difficult by the absence of any experienced leadership, a result of Ceausescu's ruthless elimination of anyone who might have challenged his iron-fisted domination over his fellow citizens.

They will surely succeed, but the degree and speed of their success may vary dramatically, depending on the choices they make in the next two or three years. Some in the West have sniffed that Roma-



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nia has already taken a wrong turn by executing Ceausescu under circumstances reminiscent of his own tactics. In light of the unprecedented events of recent weeks, this is a misperception. While, under more sedate circumstances, a secret trial and execution would certainly have been unacceptable, we are in no position to pass judgment on a people in the midst of a revolution whose outcome was, at the time, still in doubt.

The number, training and fanaticism of the Ceausescu loyalists, even after their

leader was killed, attests to the real danger — to say nothing of the perceived danger — in which the fledgling freedom movement found itself. As Aristide Buhoiu, the editor of the U.S. Romanian language paper *Universul Liber* noted, "When you are battling a dragon, you must cut off the head." Of far greater significance is the fact that, order restored, the new government has refrained from any acts of revenge against captured members of the securitate, who kept the country in Ceausescu's clutches for al-

most 25 years.

Mistakes will yet be made; early American leaders certainly made their share the most serious of which — acceptance of slavery — we are still paying for today. But the Romanian people, like the other people of Eastern Europe, have far too vivid a memory of the evils of despotism; they are unlikely to sink into the same morass. The societies they build may not resemble ours in the short run, but surely they will far less resemble what has just passed.

There is much we in the West can do to help Romanians and the other peoples of Eastern Europe find their destiny. I don't mean by way of government aid, although that may have a role to play. Far more important is the aid that comes from the heart, as our citizens and private institutions reach out to embrace the newly liberated peoples of Eastern Europe. What Romanians now need most is an influx of Western ideas from which to choose in molding their own destiny. The ability to communicate with someone from the West — freely, without fear — is something most Romanians have never experienced. American universities can contribute immensely to the development of that country by making room for Romanian students; private institutions and individuals can help by making financial aid available. For the great majority who cannot travel outside the country, visits from American scholars, businesspeople and tourists can provide an invaluable opportunity to exercise the newly found freedom of debating ideas with individuals from other societies.

And, in the short run, a letter or a card, together perhaps with a few dollars, from someone in the United States can provide an immense measure of relief and encouragement to a people just waking from a very long, very horrible nightmare.

Outside my home in L.A. flies a tricolor Romanian flag, with a large hole in the center where the Communist insignia once was. Every day a few people stop to give a word of encouragement, to say they are with us. Unfortunately, most Americans don't know how to convey their sentiments to the people who most need to hear them: the rank-and-file Romanians in Romania.

To those who wish to help, I suggest they contact members of the organized Romanian community. Buhoiu's paper is one: *Universul Liber*, P.O. Box 529, North Hollywood, Calif. 91616. There are others, I am sure, in every large city. It is difficult to explain the good that individuals can do by taking the time and trouble to make a personal contact of that sort. And in doing so, they may well find a friend and become part of history.

Alex Kozinski is a judge on the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals. His friends in Romania know him by the diminutive "Aliosha."