A Gypsy Encounter
by Bradley J. Ruffle

With the driver pumping the brakes, the bus rattled and limped to a halt. I stood up, walked from the back of the bus, and thanked the driver before stepping down onto the dirt shoulder of the road. I knew the other eight passengers must have been scratching their heads in wonder. My face, not to mention my conspicuously large backpack, gave me away as a foreigner. What business could I, a twenty-eight-year-old Canadian tourist, possibly have in this small, remote Romanian village?

Maramures is a region tucked away in the Carpathian mountains in northern Romania. It is little known, a corner of the world forgotten by the Industrial Revolution and probably every other mass modern movement since then. Inhabitants in the villages of Maramures are largely peasant farmers who work their own land hard with hoes, scythes, rakes and their bare hands. Villagers, who wear traditional folk costumes, often live in small wooden homes and maintain the tradition of hanging brightly colored pots and pans above their doorposts. My guidebook noted the ten-kilometer stretch of road between the small villages of Desesti and Berbesti as particularly scenic. I decided to take a bus from Baia Mare, the largest nearby city, to Desesti and walk along the winding road to Berbesti, before picking up a bus again to Sighetul Marmatiei (Sighet) where I would spend the night.

As the bus faded in the distance, there I stood alone at the bus stop of Desesti marked by a telephone pole ten meters ahead. Beyond, a magnificent landscape opened wide. My feet carried me into that colorful, fall landscape. I was having a glorious time meandering along, eating apples from the trees that shaded the roadside and admiring the small, carefully crafted wooden homes with herbs, peppers and corn hung on cords from second-floor window sills to dry. I also observed farmers in their fields straining with the help of antiquated tools.

About seven kilometers into my stroll, I spotted three colorfully dressed teenage boys in the distance on the opposite side of the road walking towards me. When they caught sight of me, without hesitation they moved to my side of the road. Clearly amused, they took to grinning widely and laughing. My very first instinct was not to trust these smirking foxes delighted by the
appearance of this lone rabbit. My inner voice beckoned me to continue walking past them, without more than perhaps a courteous hello. But my curiosity deafened my intuition.

Strutting towards me, they cried out “Foto, foto,” laughing all the while. They posed off to the side of the road. I was on the verge of taking their picture when they yelled: “Casa, casa”. They pointed to their home down the road in the direction from which they had come. It seemed reasonable that their home furnished a more suitable background for a picture. I followed them to their home where I took a few pictures of them outside with other family members who materialized upon my arrival. I then indicated that I must be on my way for I intended to reach Sighet before sundown—a lot of hand signals to explain this one. (My Romanian consisted of only about ten words, two of which would later prove to be very useful.) Two of the boys responded by rubbing their bellies and motioning me to come inside. Not one to turn down a free meal and extremely curious to see the inside of this sloppily-put-together structure they called home, I accepted.

Quite unlike the majority of the homes in the area that were well-kept and charming, with intricately carved rooftops, this one, along with a sprinkling of others I had encountered along the way, was different. It looked as if it had been slapped together in a hurry, carelessly. The rooftop was uneven as was the assemblage of bricks that constituted the outside walls. Mud filled the neglected yard with only a spattering of grass patches and a gravel pathway leading from the main road to the front door. One of the boys led me through what appeared to be the kitchen into the living room, while another, Antan, rushed around to put together something for their unexpected guest. The third boy had not entered the home.

Antan returned with some bread, several days, possibly weeks, old. It was just about hard enough to use for croutons. They poured me a glass of a watered-down version of a local specialty, prune?, whisky made from prunes. The entrée consisted of filets of a white substance I guessed was fish. “You first,” I pointed slightly suspect of this sudden hospitality bestowed upon me by these fifteen- or sixteen-year-old boys. One bite into the white substance revealed that fish it was not. Pure fat. Heavily salted pig fat with the pig’s hide still attached. I ate just enough so as not to appear rude and then explained that I was full.

Antan’s friend asked to take a picture of Antan and me seated before this undeserved spread with us holding the whisky bottle. I reluctantly handed over the camera. We posed for a couple of
photos before the young photographer shot out of the house with my camera. Antan observed that his friend’s abrupt departure with my camera unsettled me. He reassured me that his friend was just going around the house to take more pictures of the family.

Screaming and waving her hands at me, Antan’s mother stormed in soon afterwards. I was startled by her dramatic entrance and by the source of her fury. Was the son not meant to have served me their hard-earned food? Perhaps the sheer sight of my pale white, foreign face in her home threatened her. Perhaps this was simply her usual manner of expression. In any case, her arm-wagging hysteria was my cue to leave and track down my camera. I hurriedly slung my backpack over my shoulders and exited the house.

Outside, the boy was nowhere to be found. Antan just shrugged his shoulders, explaining that maybe he took the car (“machina”) and went to Sighet. At last I began to clue in: I had been duped, set up all along. I too became a little frantic. I searched around the house and scanned up and down the street. Nothing. Maybe they believed me to be rich. Maybe they thought that I would not make a fuss about my camera and be on my way as I had originally intended an hour ago.

But I had no intention of relinquishing my camera so readily. My sense of justice would not allow it. “Five long, hard years of graduate school,” I prodded myself. “This trip is my reward for making it through. There are four months left in my trip with India and Nepal still to come. No way I’m giving up my camera without a fight,” I resolved. I unstrapped my backpack and placed it on a patch of grass in the yard by the road. In silent protest I would wait for the boy to return.

This attracted all kinds of interest among the neighbors. Several approached me. They tried in all sincerity to comprehend my cause for grief. My ten words of Romanian were too limiting. Still I understood offers from a few of the concerned locals to come to their homes, rest, even stay the night, but my well of trust had been sucked dry. Then, the mother of the house, having calmed down since our last encounter, approached and invited me inside. I accepted, thinking that this might lead to the reappearance of my camera.

On my return entrance, I was offered a seat in the kitchen. I sat at a small square kitchen table pressed against the wall. Across from me sat a woman whose almost familiar face told that she was the mother’s younger sister. She was occupied with carefully and unabashedly examining me. I caught her fixed stare but did not return it. Instead my eyes were hungrily absorbing every detail in this room in the way that one does when suddenly placed in unfamiliar and slightly threatening
surroundings. I could not fail to notice the flies swarming around the room and several stuck to the kitchen window as if pleading to escape.

The mother stood by the kitchen counter pouring me a cup of milk from a thick glass bottle. She had first rinsed out a couple of coffee mugs in a small plastic basin on the counter. She placed one mug in front of me and the other before her sister. I just then realized that my protest in the October sun had made me thirsty. I drank from the glass. Whachh! vibrated through my body at the taste. Watered-down cream, I guessed, and warm. Apparently, my visual inventory had taken into account only what was in the room, failing to note what was missing, like a refrigerator. And the tub of water, I realized, was in place of a sink. The home evidently had no running water. This struck me as odd when contrasted with the large twenty-inch, color TV I had noticed earlier in the living room. My face hid my repulsion at the taste of this white fluid. Somehow, perhaps as a result of my punctilious upbringing, I felt it rude to display my dislike for this liquid that had been offered to me.

Once more my sense of propriety was put to the test with the snapping shut of the front screen door and the entrance of a young, teenage girl who decisively walked over to the kitchen counter, snatched the same milk bottle from which I had been served, put it to her lips and gulped down a few mouthfuls. My stomach heaved in disgust.

I turned to the sister across from me. She was busy finishing off some slop from a tin can that sat open on the counter behind her. The lid of the can had been peeled back just enough for her to fit her fork inside. In between mouthfuls she paused to feel the fabric of my pants. She conveyed her intention to buy them from me. “No,” I retorted forcefully, by now wondering why I had been invited inside. After repeated attempts to which I was oblivious, she then turned her attention to my shoes, offering some price I failed to understand. The nerve of this woman. Her family had stolen my camera, and she wanted to do business with me!

The sun began to set, and I did not want to be stuck there for the night. Using two of the ten Romanian words I had acquired so far, I said, “dimineata, politia” (morning, police). I repeated this several times determined to make them understand that I would return in the morning with the police. The reaction I hoped for was not forthcoming. The two women offered a few dismissive nods of the head as I strapped on my backpack and headed for the door. The mother got up and saw me off with a seemingly friendly greeting or blessing.
The last bus to Sighet had passed more than two hours ago. I stomped along the gravel pathway to the edge of the road determined to hitch a ride. The first car that passed stopped and picked me up. “Finally, someone who speaks English,” I sighed in relief upon greeting the driver, a man in his early forties whose dress (a well-worn, off-the-rack, navy blue blazer overtop a dull, pale green dress shirt with a thin black strip that passed for a tie, down the middle) indicated that he probably spent his days in some office shuffling papers and generally trying to look busy. I quickly explained to him what had happened.

“Why did you go there? The family is a gypsy family,” he remarked solemnly. I had no idea, and I’m not sure it would have made any difference at the time. On the contrary, it might have piqued my curiosity.

He drove me to the police station in Sighet and translated my story to two officers who looked about as interested as two men attending a seminar on nail polish remover. It’s not their jurisdiction was the help they offered.

I spent the night in another crummy Romanian hotel room without hot water or heat. No matter, I was deeply engrossed in recalling the events of the day and planning for the morrow so that I barely noticed the accumulation of dust and grime on the old wallpaper, which was beginning to peel in the way that forty-year-old wallpaper does.

I slept impatiently, in anticipation of the events of the day to come. I rose early to call the only person I knew (and could trust) in the region to ask her advice, a woman I had met the day before on my way to the bus station in Baia Mara. I found my way to the telephone office in town, the only place with public phones, which is typical in most places in Eastern Europe outside of the major cities. The first three cabins I tried didn’t work. Also typical.

I approached the security guard on duty to ask for help with the phones. He asked whom I wanted to call and wondered how I knew this woman. I explained that I didn’t very well, and this led to my retelling of the previous day’s events. What impressed me most about Zsolt, a twenty-three-year-old ethnic Hungarian, was the genuine concern and compassion he showed while listening to my report. He stood completely still and attentive in order to absorb and feel the weight of my every word. Upon my completion he suggested we contact his karate instructor, Nicolae, who also teaches English at the university. Maybe Nicolae could take me to the local police in Sugatag, the village where the theft had occurred.
Before leaving to call Nicolae, Zsolt felt it necessary to identify himself to me, perhaps to gain my trust. He explained that he did not work at the telephone office, but was the security guard there (a point I had already understood). To convey this to me, he raised his sweater revealing his gun strapped to the belt of his pants.

While Zsolt was gone for a moment to call Nicolae, I thought to myself, “Who needs the police? This is perfect. I’ll return to the gypsy family’s home with an armed security guard and a karate instructor. We’ll bust down the door and demand they return my camera. This is right out of a Hollywood movie.”

The ending was much less dramatic but no less exciting for me. After a few errands in the morning, Nicolae drove me to Sugatag. (Zsolt apologized that he could not accompany us but must complete his shift). We went to the home of the Chief of Police in Sugatag. His wife informed us that the Chief was taking his afternoon nap. He took a considerable amount of time before making his appearance. When he did appear, he presented himself in full police uniform, complete with his cap, which he was just placing atop his freshly combed hair, as he trotted down the veranda’s steps to greet us.

Off we went in Nicolae’s car after he briefly explained the incident to the Chief. Since they did not translate their conversation to English, I wasn’t sure just where we were headed. The police station to fill out some paperwork? I was therefore surprised and delighted to pull up to the now familiar home of the gypsy family in Sugatag.

Oddly, none of the same people from the day before were present. All of the faces in the front yard and inside the home were foreign to me. After a quick inspection of the home, we spoke with one of the neighbors across the street who offered her account of what she had seen the day before. She tipped us off to the gypsy mother’s whereabouts in a neighboring gypsy family’s cornfield. We walked down the street to the backyard of the home in which the cornfield was located. As we neared the rim of the field, out came the mother. The shocked look in her eyes as she tried to maintain her composure revealed that she recognized me and perhaps the Chief too. The Chief asked her if she knew me. She responded in a frenzy, denying things about which she had not been asked. Her antics were those of a frightened kitten backed into a corner. Nonetheless we followed behind her as she retreated hurriedly to her home, all the time shouting in a fury.

This small village Chief of Police showed his experience in such dealings. He persisted, interrogating her in a similarly forceful tone of voice. Each question was met with a vehement,
animated denial of her knowledge of any camera or involvement in its disappearance. Nicolae reassured her that I simply wanted my camera back and that no further action would be taken.

After some further discussion, she called the Chief into her home to parley privately with him. I imagined them negotiating. With dusk upon us, Nicolae and I waited outside in the cool, fall air. The mother reappeared alone and slipped into the darkness down a path at the side of the house.

To fight off the evening chill, the three of us stood huddled on the driveway moving to and fro. The Chief spoke little of what had occurred inside. He himself seemed not to know what to expect next. The mood was somber. Small talk occasionally interrupted long pauses of silence. We eagerly awaited the mother’s return.

Her return was signaled by some rustling among fallen leaves on the path from which she had set out twenty minutes earlier. She emerged from the trees, her face solemn and fixed towards the ground. Resolutely, she walked right up to me and gently placed the camera in my hands. Surprised, I held it, rubbed my fingers over the camera, feeling its shape and texture as if to confirm that this was indeed mine.

“How is it?” Nicolae questioned me. “It appears to be in perfect order,” I responded, at which point I turned the camera on its backside. “The film is gone! My pictures of the fifteenth-century monasteries of Bukovina!” I exclaimed.

“Be satisfied, the gypsies must always get something from a transaction,” pronounced Nicolae. Satisfied I was. I felt triumphant.

We departed immediately. Beaming, I shook the gypsy mother’s hand. It was uncomfortably rough and worn as was her face. She was a woman of no more than forty-five I guessed. Yet her face told another story. Marked with deep lines, tanned and worn thin, her face gave her the appearance of a woman of sixty or more. Left to raise numerous children alone after the death of her husband and the imprisonment of her eldest son for stealing horses (these facts I had learned from the Chief on the ride home), her face, hands and heart bore the scars of these sufferings.

As she shook my hand, her deep, dark expressive eyes looked into mine. She spoke to me, wished me well and invited me to visit again. Her words sounded absolutely sincere. And her voice—I will never forget her raspy voice, feminine in pitch, with just a hint of huskiness. I liked this gypsy woman, her warmth, her expressiveness. In another world, she could have been a star on the stage.
A native of Toronto, Canada, Bradley Ruffle moved to Beer Sheva, Israel six years ago. When his duties as an economics professor at Ben-Gurion University are less pressing, he enjoys creative writing and photography. He recently married Tata Pyatigorsky.