

SEEKING THE LIGHT

Caroline Juler visits Romania's increasingly confident environmental movement

October 1998. A golden day. Roşia Montană lay below us, its mining scars hidden by trees. A couple of spires peered over the treetops, but the surrounding forests were so thick that there was no sign of the 1970s' pit – or the trouble that was brewing in it. Instead, there was Nature, the kind of Nature I had only dreamed about, made of dense woods in an array of autumn colours whose glorious visual romp was interrupted only by velvety pastures, small fields, a pitched wooden roof, and the occasional lollipop haystack. The woods rolled for miles over hills and dales to the zigzag horizon of the Apuseni Mountains. It was beautiful, and all the more so, I thought, because it belonged not to me, but to everyone: the plants, animals and people who had created it. All the gold in the world could not buy such a view.

I was researching the *Blue Guide Romania*, and had teamed up with Horia Ciugudean, an archaeologist who had grown up in the Apuseni and loved them with a passion I had rarely come across. He told me that Roşia Montană was one of the most extraordinary sites in the country: a prehistoric mine that had gone on to bankroll the Roman

Empire, and continued in use, mainly underground, to this day. We had driven through Zlatna's apocalyptic industrial wasteland, past the 20-foot-tall banks of sterile earth outside Abrud, and turned north along a pot-holed road. If you faced one way, the land was a verdant paradise; swing round, and it was dead. My picture-book view of Transylvania was falling apart.

A year later, I read that Roşia Montană was to be transformed into an even bigger pit, from which all the remaining gold would be extracted. This meant that 2,000 people would be displaced, woods dug up, farms smashed, a cyanide tailings lake installed, and five mountains razed, all for the lure of gold and silver – and possibly uranium. Arguments for the mine said that it would bring much-needed jobs to an area that was already depressed; and, as this part of the Apuseni had been wrecked by copper quarries, and its main river rendered sterile, what difference would more pollution make?

Not everyone agreed: a small resistance had started. It consisted of some working miners, a history teacher, one of the village priests, a writer from nearby Sântimbru, and



Recent protests have used this partially submerged church as a symbol of destruction, to remind those in power of the impact mining has on Nature and life
The old church of Geamana, close to Roşia Montană © Bogdan Cristel/REUTERS

Horia. They were exceptions: their countrymen and women were habitually cowed.

What was at stake? Cultural, social and environmental devastation for short-term gain; a partially crippled but still luxurious landscape, against a cyanide-tainted desert; badly paid jobs for 20 years at most, with the lion's share of the profits going abroad, against the potential for centuries to come of income from the area's archaeology and history, its wildlife, its craftspeople, its small, mixed farms and its forests.

Enter Stephanie Roth, a Swiss activist who has been helping to stop a Dracula theme park from destroying 500-year-old oaks near Sighișoara. For Stephanie, compassion is crucial. Her kindness and enthusiasm attracted other people, Romanians and foreigners, who were furious about environmental crime. Many local people were in shock, horrified by the idea of seeing their smallholdings destroyed. Stephanie joined them. They called themselves *Alburnus Maior* (AM), after the ancient Roman town on which *Roșia Montană* had grown.

It took a couple of years before AM joined the internet revolution and founded its website, *Salvați Roșia Montană* ('Save *Roșia Montană*'). As communication systems improved, so did Romanians' ability to travel. Young Romanians studied at the LSE and Berkeley; they too raised the green movement's game. At the same time, *Apuseni* farmers showed their legendary stubbornness, summed up in the statement, "Here I was born, and here I shall die".

Over the past decade, AM has achieved a lot: it has organised peaceful demonstrations in the county town, candlelit vigils in Romania's capital, Bucharest, and rock festivals in *Roșia Montană*; it has informed schoolchildren, and used the law to root out fraudulent approvals and land deals; crucially, it has proposed alternative scenarios, including organic cheese production, ecotourism, Nature and history trails.

AM inspired others to voice their concerns, but it wasn't the first green organisation in Romania. One of the first was *Clubul de Cicloturism Napoca* (CCN), Cluj's cycle touring club, founded in 1992 to promote cycling and also to raise awareness about the mountains.

Lavinia Andrei masterminded *Terra Mileniul III* (TM3, 'The Earth's Third Millenium', terramileniultrei.ro) in the early 1990s. Based in Bucharest, TM3 promotes sustainable development in the fields of energy, transport and climate change. One of its most important services is making inventories of companies' greenhouse-gas emissions.

"After the Central and Eastern European countries joined the EU, a lot of environmental policies started going slower, or in the wrong direction," Lavinia told me. "For them, it's important to see rapid economic development, while Nature suffers. It's time for solidarity around Europe; the green movement should be united."

"We are like watchdogs," she added. "We don't have any relationships with big business and they don't appreciate our activity. We still need a lot of expertise, such as impact studies and case studies."

Lavinia got involved in the *Roșia Montană* campaign

around the same time as Stephanie, and used the opportunity to create a hub for like-minded bodies. In 2002, 40 organisations signed TM3's declaration of unity; today, it's a forum for 70 Romanian NGOs that campaign for social justice as well as green issues.

The demands for environmentally friendly solutions to Romania's social and economic issues are making themselves felt in ever-widening circles

Most of the country's organisations dedicated to environmental protection are based in Transylvania. But there are plenty of others, notably in Bucharest, the Danube Delta and *Timișoara* (western Romania).

"We've got a long way to go," says Bogdan Papuc of Romania's Ecotourism Association. "Our government is weak and its policymaking role is very unstable. But before *Roșia Montană* happened, people were totally inert; it was a turning point for environmental problems."

A year ago, hundreds of people held hands in a circle around Bucharest's parliament building. They were a small proportion of the thousands who came out to protest about the corporate rape of Romania after clashes over fracking proposals in *Pungești*.

Roșia Montană Gold Corporation has been throttling *Roșia Montană*, buying people out of their homes and stifling alternative regeneration schemes. But the protesters' doggedness and the growing demands for environmentally friendly solutions to Romania's social and economic issues are making themselves felt in ever-widening circles.

In June 2014, two EU-funded bodies, *Europa Nostra* and the European Investment Bank Institute, issued a press release saying that *Roșia Montană* should become a model for sustainable development in Europe. On the face of it, this is a great move: *Europa Nostra* consists of 250 EU-wide heritage organisations that could make a great difference to future conservation policies. But the wording is vague, and in the absence of more specific plans we should be wary. I'm putting my faith in grassroots schemes such as the one initiated by AM whereby volunteers can help buy and restore some of *Roșia Montană*'s handsome townhouses, damaged by neglect. It is a brave and hopeful action that confronts the mining company's hostility.

If you squint, the view from the hills above the village is still leafy. We don't know how much longer it will last. We do know how greedy politicians can be. One thing is certain: if the opencast mine goes ahead, you won't need to squint, because there'll be nothing left to see. R

Caroline Juler is a writer and artist with a long-standing interest in Romania. www.mamaliga.co.uk