

# Miniature Romania from Michael Guest's home

Washington D.C., last Wednesday, 19:30 local time. The cab drops me at the indicated address, a house with a nice façade, with all windows lit up. I open the gate, walk down the pathway and ring the door bell. What I get is the ultimate surprise: as soon as the door opens, right there, at the heart of Washington, I am welcome in the most traditional Romanian hospitality. I am greeted with bread and salt! My host, Michael Guest, ex U.S. Ambassador to Bucharest till last June, tells me that equally surprised by the bread and salt welcome was also President Traian Basescu, who, accompanied by his wife, had also set foot in the residence of the ex American Ambassador on a private visit, only an hour before me, at the end of a day full of talks culminating with the dialogue with President George W. Bush at the White House.

What I did not know, however, was that the series of surprises was just beginning for me there, at Michael Guest's residence. After the warm, friendly embracing, we took a seat in the small salon at the entrance that had been freshly decorated with a lot of good taste. On a sofa I saw a photo that had been brought to the ex Ambassador by President Basescu - a snapshot of both of them in front of the Stavropoleus Church at a ceremony marking the beginning of the restoration works on that architectural monument thanks to a donation made by Michael Guest a year ago while he was still Ambassador (and when Mr. Basescu was the Mayor of Bucharest).

I am served the traditional Romanian "palinca" in rustic clay mugs. "Noroc!" (Cheers!) say my hosts in Romanian. We set out recalling stories from Michael's term in office in Romania, recollections that are at times garnished with Romanian words by my host. The conversation was to prove to me once again not only that my interlocutor



had remained a refined connoisseur and observer of Romanian realities, but, first of all also a great lover of our country. Above which, in fact, he had never concealed when in office in Bucharest, a love that had grown in his heart with every trip he was making in the country to explore Romania's hidden beauties. "Even now I keep reading four Romanian newspapers on the Internet", says Michael, confirming to me that Nine O'Clock has remained one of them.

Nurturing a very strong bond with the Romanian mass-media, as well, with which he had collaborated so well during his term in Bucharest, and the freedom of which he had advocated so many times, the former Ambassador of the U.S. asked me to take his cordial regards to some of my fellow colleagues from the press.

## Museum-room

Like any welcoming hosts, my interlocutors then invited me to visit the rest of the house. The really big surprise was there waiting for me on the first floor where I was to see several miniatures of Roma-

nia. From the staircase one walks into an open lobby with a view towards the salon downstairs where we had had our chat. An entire wall of this lobby all painted in red is decorated with icons painted on glass that Michael had collected during his repeated excursions around Romania, a country that not only has he grown to know in its depths at the end of his three years in office, but also to love it equally profoundly.

While I was listening patiently to the story of every icon, of its painter and source region, my gaze was suddenly attracted towards a corner of the room dominated by an impressive carved wooden throne the back of which portrayed a lion's head in all its splendour. It was a piece of work where the author had obviously paid a lot of attention to the smallest of details. Next to the throne, against the same wall, there were several wooden pieces of cutlery hanging on a picturesque peg.

I had barely recovered from what I had seen that my eye sight was again diverted towards the opposite wall and I was again left speechless when realising that a room

door frame had been replaced with a miniature replica of a carved Maramures gate.

## Maramures gate

The true revelation, however, begins once you've been through the gateway, for one



has now the impression of being either in a room at the Village Museum or in one at the Museum of the Romanian Peasant in Bucharest, successfully evoking the traditional rural Romanian. The bed is covered in a rug embroidered in flashy colours, two alpen horns from the Apuseni Mountains and several embroidered peasant blouses from various Romanian regions are hanging on one wall. A pair of traditional peasant sandals (opinci) from Maramures, out of use nowadays, is hanging above the doorway. The entire wall on the right-hand side is decorated with clay plates painted in lively colours, popular masques and pictures of popular costumes from various regions of the country. In fact, clay and wooden vessels for Romanian dishes such as "sarmale", polenta or sour cream are everywhere around the room, each with its own little history Michael insisted on relating to me at leisure. In a corner there was a picturesque twig broom he had obtained in Targu Jiu and, on the wall, nearby, I saw

a painting the host tells me is from Sapanta, Maramures, with scenes from the renowned local Cheerful Graveyard.

I was to learn from my hosts that President Basescu and his wife had been just as impressed with the museum-room and with the rest of the Romanian corners arranged in the house as I was. They even wanted to immortalise their visit to the tiny Romania at Michael Guest's home in as many photos as they could take. The same as I did myself.

The reason why Michael brought small pieces of Romania to his house? - "I often tell people that I am not a former Ambassador of the U.S. to Romania, but an extra Ambassador of Romania here", said Michael Guest. "I keep Romania in my heart and I shall never forget it. It is the country where I have so many friends that a regular holiday would not be long enough to call on all of them", he also said.

I, too, took a lot of photos, congratulating Michael on his extraordinary perseverance in partly and tastefully transforming his home into a tiny Romania. We were even joking at some stage about the fact

that, in the course of only three years he had managed to get a better knowledge of my fatherland than myself. "It's a paradox, indeed", said Michael, admitting, however, to him not knowing his own country that well either.

Now that I have seen the multitude of small treasures of traditional Romanian arts homed by his residence, I am beginning to understand Michael's concerns before leaving Romania about transporting them here without being damaged.

I was not allowed to leave by my welcoming hosts before I had promised to visit again the museum-room that made such a powerful impression on me when next in Washington.

We then went together to a small local Asian restaurant in the neighbourhood where we were to call it a night, yet having a really difficult time parting as the topics of conversation were so many...

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