

20 YEARS ON — A HUMANITARIAN & PHOTOGRAPHIC JOURNEY

ELISABETH BLANCHET is a French-born photojournalist working in London. Twenty years ago she went to Romania to photograph children at an orphanage and recently she returned to try to find her friends. In March 2012, the Romanian Cultural Institute in Paris will exhibit her resulting photo project. It marks a huge personal achievement for Elisabeth to have her work supported by a Romanian institution



Above: 'B' and 'A' in 1997 when they were 12. Opposite page: 'B' in April 2010 in Switzerland, where she works as a nanny. 'B' wants to remain anonymous because she is an illegal immigrant and has had a traumatic life. She was sold by her own brother and sexually trafficked to Italy, where she worked in an illegal brothel. She was rescued in a police raid and sent back to Romania, after which she decided to take a chance in Switzerland.





Their saucer-eyes peered out from behind bars; their scrawny bodies were strapped to the beds in which they slept. Who could forget the terrible images of the Romanian orphans that stared from newspaper front pages and television screens after the fall of the Romanian dictator, Nicolai Ceausescu?

After Ceausescu's execution in December 1989, it emerged that hundreds of thousands of uncared-for and mistreated children had been hidden in crumbling institutions all over the country. The situation was shocking and the outcome of policies that Ceausescu had set up in the 1960s – the state obliged women to give birth to at least four children and to be over 40 (later 45) before they could access ▶

Above: Dragos, in the middle of the picture, at the orphanage of Popricani in 1993 when he was 11. **Right:** Dragos in October 2011 in the dining room of the Sihla Monastery in Bucovina where he has been a monk for the past six years. Dragos, who has always been very religious, is in charge of the kitchen and dining room of the monastery. "I am very happy here, I found my place," he said.





contraception and abortions. Anyone who disobeyed the regulations faced prison. Ceausescu wanted a young nation and said that if families could not look after all their children, the state would do it for them. As a result, thousands of institutions flourished all over Romania as they filled up with children, mainly abandoned as babies.

A HUMANITARIAN EXPERIENCE

I witnessed the lives of these children first-hand when I worked in Romania with a French charity, called Action Orphelins, that I had created with friends in 1993. At that time, most of the humanitarian aid had moved to the Balkans where war had broken out in Croatia and Bosnia – Romania was not a priority anymore. Yet the situation had not changed in three years.

Serge, one of my friends, who was involved in the charity at that time, recalled: “I remember the first time I arrived at the orphanage in 1993. There were kids everywhere; they were all over me and wouldn’t let me go, just because I had shown them a bit of attention.” I felt exactly ►



Above: Radu Esanu in Scotland in summer 2007. He came to work for the season as a strawberry and broccoli picker. Top: Radu with a friend at the orphanage of Popricani in 1993 when he was 15.



Above: Corina with her husband, Ciprian, and their three children. They live in a tiny rural house which belongs to Ciprian's parents. They are very poor and live from the vegetables and fruits they grow on their small piece of land. Opposite, top right: Corina at the orphanage in 1997 when she was 12.

“After teaching maths for nine years, I radically changed my career when... I gave it up to become a professional photographer and started freelancing for *Time Out* magazine.” Elisabeth Blanchet

the same, just because I had taken hold of a few hands and shown some interest in the children.

Between 1993 and 2000 we visited the same orphanage in the village of Popricani, near Iasi, in north-east Romania. We had decided to focus our help on this orphanage, where living conditions were particularly appalling. We set up a sponsorship programme for the children there, because we thought it would be the best way to improve directly every child's living conditions and outlook.

A PHOTOGRAPHIC ADVENTURE

Photography has always been my passion since my grandfather bought my first camera for my 10th birthday; since that time I have always carried one of these wonderful objects with me. So I embarked on a photographic journey, portraying the children and documenting life as it was at the orphanage.

Back in the 1990s the digital era had not really taken off; cameras were hugely expensive

and cumbersome. I went to Romania with my old Nikon F4, shooting the old-fashioned way on Kodak's beautiful Tri-X films; shooting in black and white was natural for me. I also developed my negs and prints, but still considered myself an amateur photographer – I had no idea all of my pictures would one day be part of a photographic project.

A PHOTOGRAPHIC CHALLENGE...

After teaching maths for nine years, I radically changed my career when eight years ago I gave it up to become a professional photographer and started freelancing for *Time Out* magazine in 2004. As Romania was to join the EU in January 2007, I persuaded the news editor, Rebecca Taylor, to accept a feature on a young Romanian who had decided to come and work in the UK.

I got in touch with a Romanian friend, Dan, who used to be a social worker at the orphanage. “I've got someone for you,” he said straight away,

“do you remember Radu? He is planning to come and work on a farm in Scotland.” Of course I remembered Radu; he was one of the very few children from the orphanage who had gone on to university.

Meeting Radu 10 years after I had last seen him was a very emotional experience. I followed him in his everyday life in Scotland and back in Iasi. Inevitably, I bumped into some of the other children who had grown up at the orphanage. The journey became increasingly emotional as the days passed and it inspired me to trace as many of those kids as I could and discover what had happened to them 20 years on. A story was starting to form.

Back in the UK, I went through all my Romania photos from the 1990s; I rediscovered hundreds of forgotten faces staring out of the images from my past. I spent hours trying to sort them out. Names came back almost naturally and, thanks to Dan, I undertook the extraordinary adventure of tracking down the kids in my photos.



Above: Daniel Hostic at the orphanage of Popricani in 1997 when he was 14. Right: Daniel in October 2008 in the room he rents in an typical old house of the village. Daniel is a full-time builder in what used to be the orphanage.




... AND REUNION

During my recent trips to Romania, I managed to find 30 of the orphans I had known. Among them was Corina, who had become a mother of three and lived with her husband in the village; Daniel, who had become the handyman of the orphanage; and Dragos, a monk in the Sihla Monastery in Bucovina, where he told me he was very happy and had “found his place”.

Others had been less lucky. ‘B’ had been sold by her own brother and sexually trafficked to

Italy before being rescued and returned to her village. Adriana had become a single mother, begging on the streets of Iasi, and Carmen had died years earlier after falling ill. There were few ‘happy’ stories to tell.

I decided that the best way to show my images would be as diptychs, with a black-and-white portrait of each child in the 1990s alongside a colour shot taken from my recent assignment. I explained my project and asked to capture them in their lives now, and none refused my request.

On the contrary, they posed naturally. Even the girls who had moved to Switzerland illegally and wanted to remain anonymous suggested how their pictures should be taken. They all showed a lot of interest in the project and were as interested as me in wanting to find out what had happened to the other kids. They were fascinated to see what their old friends were doing now – my project had re-established a sort of link between them. 

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