

Bucharest '77 — Richter 7.2

by FRANK LAMSON-SCRIBNER, '46

The night is beautiful. The moon through thin cloud cover is soft. Friday, the streets are full, the people festive, as I walk back to the hotel.

In my room I slip into my pajamas and settle down to read my new John Jakes paperback, *The Furies*. Much better if I finish it so I can leave it with some friend. English books are valued and in short supply in Romania. Occasionally my mind drifts; just a few days and I will be on my way home—to finish fixing up the boat, to repair the ice-ravaged pier, and then to enjoy spring sailing. I am not sure of the time—about 9:30 p.m.

Suddenly, a thundering roar. Perhaps a jet breaking the sound barrier. My mind is not prepared to think of earthquakes. If it were California or Tokyo, yes—but not Bucharest. Now the room rocks and sways violently, but mostly bounces up and down as if I were sitting on a rapid pile driver. Oh, God, is the building collapsing floor by floor? The thought of 19 floors above me is chilling. I stumble to the window—panic, a throng of screaming pedestrians, a deafening roar as a building across the street collapses in a cloud of dust, all illuminated by arcing from the wires of overhead trolleys.

Get out—get out. Pants over pajamas, shoes without socks—I can't find anything. I suddenly realize the lights are out as the floor still heaves and sways almost like a boat in choppy water. Grabbing my car coat, I stumble into the hall, making my way to the emergency exit. There I find per-

haps six people, one leading with a lighter that he works like a strobe. Behind me a man with a candle catches up. I pass him to the front of our little parade down a circular staircase covered with plaster debris.

Down, down, we go. Where to get out, nobody knows—the doors all seem to be “one way.” Finally, in the second or third subbasement we find an incoherent Romanian young lady, and I coax her to lead us back up. It seems to take forever. Finally, we are in the restaurant, the lobby—hurrah—we can really get out before there is another tremor.

Confusion builds, people mill about. I yell, “Get out into the open square.” Even a few of the hotel people take my advice.

The first casualty I see is a lady hotel employee, lying on a sofa. After conscripting three or four others, we carry her out, sofa and all. But first we have to find the key to the large (not revolving) door. What thoughts, or lack of thoughts, people have. Why hadn't it been unlocked before? Safely away from the hotel, we put the lady down. Later, doctors determine she probably has two broken legs and a broken back.

Cars are racing along the boulevards, each without doubt trying to get home. I meet a young German businessman who has also been helping. We decide to take a walk. I surely have no intention of going back to the hotel very soon.

We walk in the middle of the street, if possible, so as not to be hit

by falling debris. I finally remember to tie my shoes. Several buildings close by have completely collapsed. Tragedy and hysterics abound. A young woman, with one or two others around her, lies huddled. We try to help. Is she injured? Physically, no, but across the narrow street is the building where her father, mother, and baby were. There is no hope.

As we walk, I am seized by a young Romanian girl—21, we find out later—in a fluffy fur jacket and roundy hat. Beautiful—a veritable image of Lara in *Dr. Zhivago*. “Where is the Intercontinental Hotel? My parents are there.” We take her there as she sobs. Our communication is in an Esperanto of Romanian, French, German, and English, one sentence in one, the next phrase in another. Misunderstanding her story, we think her parents work in the hotel, but it turns out they were just to have dinner there. The doorman will not let her in—only hotel guests are allowed. She dissolves in tears.

Though my German friend and I are almost comrades in arms by now, we introduce ourselves. “I'm Earnest,” he says. “I'm Frank.” The young girl breaks out laughing, only then realizing that all of us are strangers. “I'm Cory, really Cornelia,” she says. We are now fast friends. Earnest and I convince Cory that she must return home, that her father is probably there and worried about her. No taxis, so we walk. Along the way we pass the Academy of Economic Science, an old building whose dome is crowned with a bronze casting, on the top of which is a sphere—too high to tell if it's the world or what. Local legend has it that if any female student who is still a virgin walks through the Academy's door, the “ball” will fall. I break into laughter—the ball remains. If an earthquake can't unseat the ball, what power is virginity?

Somehow, Cory attaches herself to me—a father substitute, no doubt. We

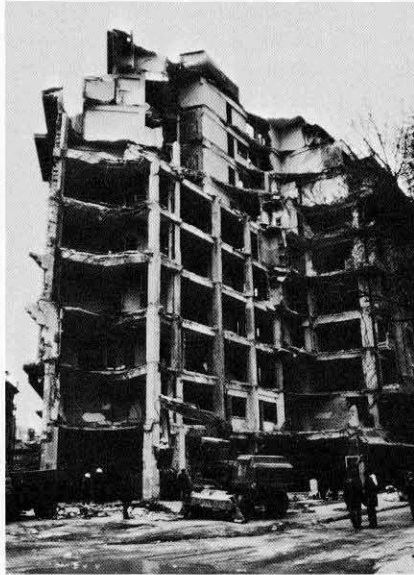
walk hand in hand, with her occasionally taking Earnest's arm, the three miles to her house. She says her father is a Romanian diplomat. She has lived in Tokyo, works at some unknown place in the daytime, and takes University courses at night. If I were 20 years younger and she weren't so worried about her family, I definitely would suggest that Earnest get lost.

We reach her house, but her father is not there. Exacting a promise that she will stay there, Earnest and I hitch-hike back to the center, but several blocks from our hotel, debris prevents our getting through.

Without electricity, we depend on the moon and the marvelous accommodation of the human eye. It is now perhaps three hours since the quake. Volunteers and a few police direct traffic around those streets that are impassable with the rubble of demolished buildings, some of which have lost their fronts so all the rooms are exposed as in a doll house. Others are severely damaged and are being evacuated. At last the word has been posted to get out of the buildings in case of another quake. Families huddle in blankets, sitting on park benches in the cold.

The "refugees" now start appearing among their belongings on the sidewalks and in the streets. A little lady, shriveled and old, perhaps 4'10" and 80-90 pounds, sits on her pile—a carpet, folded up, for a chair, piles of clothes, and a radio. I almost cry with the thought of her starting over at what must be the age of 80 or more. But at the next pile I almost split with laughter. Against a TV is a beautifully framed picture, 2' by 3', obviously a point of pride to its owner. In all truth, peering at me, illuminated by the moon, is that serene enigma of all time—*Mona Lisa*.

On the outside, most of the older, heavier buildings, such as the University, appear untouched, but all evening I have worried about the multi-



A building in Bucharest, its front sliced away, still has perhaps a six-foot width of rooms and hallways.

tude of newly built apartments on the outskirts of the city; I find out the next day that none of these collapsed, luckily. In Romania there has been a housing shortage since the War. Families live in one-bedroom apartments; parents in the bedroom and children in the living room, or vice versa. When the young get married, the vast majority merely move in with one set of parents or the other. Considering this, the population per apartment building is high, and the thought of the number of casualties in the collapsed ones turns one's stomach.

Finally, I am exhausted. I start back to the hotel. On the way, I marvel that at least downtown I have seen no fires. How very lucky, considering the gas lines in the streets and that most people cook with gas.*

One thought that has concerned me the whole time is that my family may

*The lack of fires, which I attributed to luck, was not luck at all. I was told that both electricity and gas had been turned off before the tremor stopped—certainly the electricity had. I marvel at the discipline. Though many store windows are gone and goods are there for the picking, not once have I seen any looting.

be worried about me. I am all right, but, considering time differences, by the 7 or 11 o'clock news, Caltech seismologists will tell the world there has been a major earthquake in Romania. So, I make my first call on the American Embassy, though I have been in Romania eight times totaling almost seven months. Communications have been stopped for the night, but I leave my name and U.S. address. The Embassy is full of its staff (and families). I surmise some have lost their homes and are trying to fly out quickly since an airline man is checking flights in the airline guide. A Pan Am pilot stands quietly in a corner, saying that he will fly in the morning if the runway allows it.

I return to the hotel, and curl up in a corner of the lobby, hoping to sleep, but where I can run outside if there is another quake. The lobby is full of ghost-like blanket-covered figures with similar thoughts. But it is noisy and cold. The wind has picked up and blows through broken windows. Someone's radio is turned loud with the "news," but I understand only a little Romanian, and there isn't much news anyway—just a proclamation, point 1, point 2, and so on, to conserve electricity, don't drink water, and the like.

With a short prayer, and a fatalistic approach, I decide I would rather be dead in bed than die of fatigue and exposure. I return to my room by candlelight and drop on the bed, exhausted, but still tense and nervous at every sound or vibration.

Saturday's dawn comes. After fitful sleep, I decide to get up. No water or electricity. I get dressed and go to the Government office that is my contact, arriving just as my good friend, a high official, does. Thankfully, he, his family, and his house escaped serious harm. He has no news either.

Back to the hotel. Electrical power is back on; brown water runs from the tap. Rather than rest, I watch the first

organized efforts on the collapsed building across the street. By 9 a.m., less than 12 hours since the quake, a number of dump trucks have appeared (and hamper traffic). They start to work, with little system, and progress is slow.

It is easy but saddening to tell when those who perished are found in the debris. First, someone will see the body, and halt the earthmoving equipment. Then a small group, four to six, sometimes soldiers and sometimes workers, climb up the pile of debris. With care, bricks, concrete, or whatever is picked away. Usually there are sheets or blankets among the debris, and the body is wrapped and carried down the "mountain." The ambulance is loaded, pulls away quietly, without flashing light or siren. There are many trips.

Man's obsession for possessions is also evident. A building, its front half sliced away, still has left its rear walls, the hallway of the apartments, and perhaps a six-foot width of rooms, the whole face exposed. Several occupants return, creeping through the back halls to collect light furniture, clothes, pictures, TV's, and stereos, despite the danger. In the normal houses, which are extensively damaged but without the crushing weight of tons of concrete, groups of volunteers help owners move out everything from the smallest object to wardrobes six men must carry.

I walk the streets. The day is pretty—blue sky with cottonball clouds—but a strong wind chills. Lunchtime. (Where was breakfast?) I go to the University Club and find it scarcely operating. I manage to get the last piece of meat and a bit of last night's bread. No beer, so I order a kilo (about 1½ bottles) of wine. Perhaps the afternoon/evening will be more pleasant through a haze. One of my closest friends, a professor, and his daughter come in. They are too late for lunch, but we all have large jars

of yogurt (18 oz.), and he helps me a bit with the wine. And now I get the first news. The earthquake did not just hit Bucharest, though it is the most heavily damaged. The area badly hurt was vast, ranging southward from the Carpathian Mountains.

Saturday morning there are lines to get bread and food. Radio announcements are explicit in what arrangements are being made. By afternoon in areas I walk in, the food situation appears close to normal. The fresh vegetable and fruit market operates as well as before, with good supplies of produce. The flower market next to it is the scene of tragedy as floral arrangements for funerals are piled into cars.

Saturday evening, the cleanup work now proceeds in earnest. Systems have been worked out. Lights are rigged to allow work through the night.*

Sunday morning. I am rather dirty, having not yet ventured a cold, brown shower. Don't know if I would be ahead or behind if I did. My hair, thick with blown dust, looks like the "before" of a shampoo commercial. My legs are so stiff from walking that I have adopted the gait of an 85-year-old man. As I start to write this, I am thankful to be able to do so. All the walls of my room are cracked from one end to the other. The most severely cracked is next to my bed. Only the vinyl wall covering holds it together. A 15-20 pound piece of plaster has hit the bed next to where I was at the time of the quake. Whether this happened while I was still in bed, I'll never know. With just a little difference, I might have had a whole wall as a bedmate.

After writing this, I venture down for a walk, stumbling on stiffened legs. The lobby is now almost more con-

fused than during the quake. There has been an invasion—the press has come, NBC, CBS, TV equipment, Italian paparazzi with cameras. Though many of those in the hotel when the quake occurred raced away Saturday morning, I think we have filled again—a few people from damaged hotels, diplomats, "western" families who are homeless, and now this horde of newsgatherers. I ask some of them for news, but the only thing that seems to be reliable is that the quake measured 7.2. My ignorance is shared by all.

Looking outside—what a change. Yesterday, Saturday, the open areas were filled with Romanians watching the clearance operation; today the area is clear. Remarkable, since it's Sunday, the day most families walk. I go outside and find out why. Soldiers, reserves, and other organization young men are prohibiting sidewalk superintending. "Circulante. Circulante." Keep moving. Keep moving. I think the whole of Bucharest is being jostled along at 5 km/hr. Much of the center of the city has been barricaded, and most cars have been prohibited. Work now proceeds without danger to onlookers or interference to salvage equipment.

Between barricades and pedestrian lines, going outside the hotel is virtually impossible. I am a prisoner. And the prison isn't in the best condition. Without gas to cook with, the menu is shorter than a pizza parlor that only serves pizza. But, so long as the beer holds out, I guess we are OK.

Sunday afternoon, still hemmed in, with fear and trepidation I decide to finish *The Furies*, hoping that this does not loose another tremor. I debate taking the book outside, but there is no place to sit. With courage, in my room, I open it and start to read. No tremors. I finish the book and put it aside. But I can't put aside thoughts of Bucharest '77, Richter 7.2. I'll carry those forever. □

*The mobilization of effort in the 12-24 hours following the quake was fantastic. In my opinion, this was done much faster than it would have been done in most cities of 2 million people in the United States or most other countries.