

Thanksgiving in Romania

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I braced myself to feel especially homesick as the holiday season approached. It had only been a few months since I had moved to Bucharest, Romania, and only eleven months since the 1989 revolution that ended the Communist regime there. Nine of us Americans served together in the capital city as missionaries. We had come to bring the message of hope to university students.

The days had grown colder, and the grayness outside matched my mood. Life was rustic here. We had no heat, little water (only one hour per day), but an abundance of rats. I missed my family and friends. I missed America.

Our team made plans for a Thanksgiving feast. Wendy had tucked cans of pumpkin, corn, and peas into her suitcase when she arrived, earmarked for Thanksgiving. Marian bought already-kneaded dough from the bread store to make dinner rolls and pumpkin piecrust. Vicki and I were in charge of mashed potatoes.

We still needed the most important part of the Thanksgiving meal – the turkey. When I made “gobble, gobble” noises in the outdoor market, I learned the word for turkey is *curcan*. Everyone we asked agreed there were no *curcans* in Bucharest.

My roommate, Vicki, and I prayed every day for a couple of weeks before Thanksgiving. “Father, we know this is not anything important, but we also know that

you love us and you love to give us good gifts. You tell us in your word to ask, so that's what we're doing. We are asking you to please provide a turkey.”

In the evenings, international students from Arab countries made their way door-to-door through the Foreign Student Dorms. They peddled warm-up suits or demitasse cups. Every time they came, they had entirely different stock.

The night before Thanksgiving, we heard a knock at our door. Vicki jumped up to answer, expectant. Two young Arab men stood there with a bulging duffel bag.

Our common language was Romanian, a new language for all of us. I asked what they had to sell. One of them answered. The word didn't sound like *curcan*, but I couldn't understand with his thick accent. It didn't matter, because I knew what they had brought to sell us. I knew God's character and had experienced these kinds of coincidences so many times before that I had grown to anticipate them.

The other guy reached into the duffel bag and my heart did a flutter kick. He pulled out . . . a soccer ball.

“Is that all?” I asked, stunned.

Yes, that was all they had.

I pushed back hot tears. My hopes had screeched to a halt.

I made my way to the bathroom to cry alone. “Lord, was this too much to ask? We've given up so much to be here. Do we have to give up a turkey, too?”

The next day, the group began to assemble in Mark and Wendy's room for our Thanksgiving meal. Besides the Americans on our team, we had invited several Romanian students, all newly serious about following Christ.

A vase of mums stood in the center of the lace-covered serving table. One by one, we added our offerings, in chipped enamel pans. No one had pretty serving dishes. No one minded. We would eat from mismatched plates and tin-tasting flatware as we sat cross-legged on a double bed or on a scarce hard-backed chair.

Everyone had arrived except Daniel and Marian. I stood at the door as they made their grand entrance. Daniel carried a pan that spilled over with a plump turkey. Even Santa with a sack would not have been a more welcome sight.

We bombarded Daniel with questions. He had bartered for a turkey the night before with one of his many connections. He and Marian had decided to surprise us. They succeeded.

Our turkey did not come the way I had expected it. It didn't matter. We had a turkey. My immediate response of discouragement the night before did not stop God from giving.

As we gathered around, John explained to the Romanians about the original Thanksgiving. He said the Pilgrims wanted to thank God for bringing them through the first winter in their new land, and to share their bounty with their new friends. We did too. He went on to say that the Bible tells us to remember what God has done for us in the past and to thank him for his blessings. John gave us an opportunity to remember aloud.

"I'm grateful for this turkey," someone said. "It shows that God cares about the smallest details that touch our lives."

The Romanians chimed in.

"I have new life in Christ."

“I thank God for sending you to us to tell us about Jesus.”

“Finally we have freedom, and it is a precious thing.”

Their joy reminded me, once again, of my purpose in being there, worth every sacrifice in my spartan lifestyle.

We grasped each other's hands and thanked God together for his goodness to us.

I realized that I had never experienced a better Thanksgiving. Our turkey, a gift from God's hands, tasted divine. I had expected this to be a crummy holiday. Instead, we created new memories. We made it so special that even now, many years later, no other Thanksgiving has compared to that first one in Bucharest.