

Tichilesti - a community of isolation

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The road to Tichilesti was a road to discovery. We only knew that at a point, on the road from Tulcea to Galati, Romania, we would just see a small and almost unnoticeable sign pointing a path to the hospital of Tichilesti, the leprosy hospital.

We were going to find a world where time has stopped, where people are living beyond the fast pace of everyday living, just because they have a different world, a world where others are coming to hear their stories and to be amazed how peaceful they are, how resigned they tell you their story of a life of isolation.



We arrived there on a Friday afternoon, when almost the entire hospital staff was already left. There were only two nurses outside, which were sitting at a table in the yard of the hospital, with a few of the patients. The atmosphere was of a family, having their time in the middle of the splendid nature that surrounds the hospital, like they were having a picnic. Indeed, the place is very isolated, impossible to be seen from the main road. During Ceausescu's time, the gates were closed, nobody was allowed in and there was no sign on the main road to point the direction to the hospital. Now things are changed – considering the facilities – but their life, people's life inside the hospital, is the same, in respect to their preoccupation and relationship with each other. Although they can now leave the hospital, to go and visit their families, they come back and live there – where they feel they belong, where even some of them were born.

First we were invited by Mihai Dinescu, to see his room. He is 61 years old and he was hospitalized at the age of 50. He was born in Sarichioi, a village in Tulcea district. His mother was also hospitalized at the age of 50 and he lived there for a while with her, until she died at the age of 78. Then he tried to have a life outside of the gates of Tichilesti, but the disease returned and 11 years ago he came back, this time to stay... He is the father of two children that are living in Tulcea and have their own families. His room is facing the hospital building, in a compound for the patients with small rooms that only contain a bed, a small stove and a table.



After we left his room, we met outside a group of men, sitting on a bench, in the shadow of a big tree, all blossomed and filling the air with a sweet, strong essence. They were announced by the nurses about the visit of some foreigners. There was no restraint, no trouble for them to be visited and to tell their story. Before us, there were many others that came to talk with them, because of different reasons. Ours? To meet a

world that we never thought that exists and to interact and communicate with this people that are so willingly to be treated like any other healthy person. They welcomed us like any other old person that would have welcomed their grandchildren, eager to tell their memories.

Between the men on the bench, the one who had the most to tell was Olescu Vasile, at the age of 56, who lives again in Tichilesti from the age of 45. He was born there, from parents affected by leprosy. He was the one who told us that after the hospital was established (in 1918), after a short time, the number of the patients of Tichilesti was reaching 180. There was only the building of the hospital and they were all living in common rooms. But they were also allowed to get married and because they couldn't have



separate rooms, they were building houses around the hospital and have their own kitchen where they were cooking for them and the children resulted from their marriage. Some of the houses are still standing, Vasile being one of the people leaving in the house built by his parents. Now, the food is provided only by the hospital, and they use their kitchen only if they want something else to eat or to make something to their own preference.

Vasile told us also that all the children that were born there, were treated with medication against leprosy from their first day of existence. They were free to go to schools and have a life outside the hospital. Most of them had it, but after a certain age, the disease came back and they were in the position to come back to Tichilesti.

Talking like from the Bible, Vasile said to us in a very serious tone that this disease can't disappear until the ninth generation of a person.

There was also Tuta Aurel, an example of a life lived outside Tichilesti, in normal conditions, that has six children and lived in Arges district where he still has an apartment of his own , but who also had to come back. The disease didn't forgive him neither.

Most of the patients of the hospital died very old, at the age between seventy and eighty and the oldest patient today is Miscov Ioana who was born in 1929. She came at Tichilesti at the age of twelve. In 1950 she bought a house inside Tichilesti. The house was owned by the Baptist preacher of the church existing inside the gates of Tichilesti hospital. The preacher sold it after his wife died. The Baptist church, right near her house, has now about 10 members. The pastor now is a man that used to be a patient of the hospital, but he is married with a woman from Braila district and comes every week to Tichilesti to take care of the small group of Baptist members.



Ioana told us that while she was still a child in Tichilesti, there were a lot of sick people coming from Bessarabia, before the end of the Second World War. She also got married and she gave birth to a girl. Even now, after so many years, we could hear the sadness in her voice when she told us that right before her daughter was born, her husband lost his sight because of leprosy and that he was never able to see his child. He died at the age of 75, after leaving in a marriage of 52 years.

Domnica, the daughter, left Tichilesti at the age of 13, to go to school in Tulcea. She remained in Tulcea where she established her own family, having now a son of 37 who is living in Bucharest. Domnica is spending a lot of time with her mother who is seriously affected by the disease and is not being able to walk or to feed herself. She is also taking care of the garden where she planted a lot of vegetables, with the effort to provide to themselves natural, good food. This why they also raise ten chickens and a rooster, being very proud with their small farm.

We left soon after talking with Ioana and Domnica. It was almost eight in the evening, time for their retreat in their small rooms from the small world they live in. We had the feeling of leaving from a visit of a big family that shares a distinct state,

so not understandable for the world outside their circle. The path to and from Tichilesti is so narrow that is impossible for two cars to pass in the same time. That path was never thought to be travelled. A place that was seen - and maybe still is, for some people - as a place for hiding a divine punishment that was not supposed to be reached. Even after the treatment proved to be effective and not let the disease to be spread anymore or to affect too much the life of the sick people, there is still a lot of bias from all of those who sees it more than just an affection of human body that troubled the human kind from the oldest times.



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