

Thirty Year Old Grannies

What happens when the government butts into your bedroom? (Hint: you'll be barefoot.) Young Romanian moms with lots of kids clue **Rachel Louise Snyder** in

To get to Luminita Neagu's house in Bucharest, you've got to tromp through a dead lawn strewn with litter, junked-out cars and raggedy children, then hike up three flights of a concrete staircase with broken windows and several mangy dogs. Luminita and six of her seven children live in a 10-by-4-foot room. It has one bare lightbulb and a concrete block with electrical coils for single-pot cooking. A watch is nailed to the wall.

This crummy abode is not the only bummer in Luminita's world. "I only wanted two children," she says despondently, with the air of a woman resigned to fate, "so I could afford to buy them what they need, and we wouldn't have to live this way." Luminita is a tiny woman- her name means small light--with long blond hair. She clearly

loves her kids, but the killer job of raising them seems to have aged her, leaving her with sallow skin that reads way older than 32 years. She wonders if life would be better had she had time for a job, or if at any point doctors had at least uttered the words birth control. "I would have used something, had I known," she says.

But at that point in Romania, birth control for most was illegal and details about its existence suppressed. In former dictator Nicolae Ceausescu's drive to pump up the country's population (he believed more comrades would ensure commie stability), women were told they were great nationalists if they bore scads of children, deserters to the cause if they didn't. So he banned sex-ed, contraceptives, and abortions. Single or married, childless adults over age 25 faced a "celibacy



Luminita Neagu with her two youngest children (Photo: Ann Maxwell)

tax." Women were given OB/GYN checkups in their workplaces, in part to screen for cancer, but also to detect pregnancy. If positive, the delivery date of these women would be monitored. Meanwhile, the doctors were snooping around for scar tissue and other signs of abortion; there were even cases of doctors entering schools to examine girls as young as 16.

Anyone fishy was immediately narked on to the police. A medical worker who conducted exams alleges that reproductive outlaws endured long and at times violent interrogations, incarceration in scuzzy jails or increasingly frequent gyno exams. Some were also sent to work undercover, rafting out doctors who gave or covered up abortions. Because women were forced into back alleys, the maternal mortality rate from abortions reached almost seven times as high as it is under the current system.

Dana Proinov, a gynecologist during the 1980s, remembers all the times she and a team were forced to conduct exams on female factory workers. There'd be two or three naked women in a room, with several nurses and at least one doctor. "That job was humiliating," Dana says. She recalls women who came to her in the middle of the night bleeding from abortions they or other medically untrained people tried to perform. "It's hard to say how many women died this way," she says in an angry, measured voice. She explains that some doctors masked the true cause of death on death certificates, citing instead cardio and respiratory system breakdowns, to cover their tracks. "But basically the mother's death was not important," she says. "The important thing was how to justify the abortion because of other medical reasons."

Dana began to concoct ailments for women to allow them to have abortions or get access to birth control pills, which few women were even aware of (forget hearing about taboo stuff through the grapevine in a community rife with informers). And even though women over 45 (or those with five kids) officially qualified for the pill, it doesn't mean that doctors were forthcoming with that info. So Dana made up circulation or heart problems and prescribed medicine that contained birth control hormones. "I used all kinds of medical excuses," she laughs. "You got very creative." But even so, Dana had to watch out. "You didn't know if you could trust your colleagues; you didn't know if you could trust your friends," Dana says. She refers to one doctor who was suspected of performing an abortion and jailed for three years on trumped up bribery charges.

Luminita believed that women all over the world were in the same boat. "I had no source of information, so I just did what I was told by the doctors and the government," she says. While it appears that no one has ever done the math on the policy's quality-of-life damage, Miruna Buta of the Foundation for Child Protection points out that young women were particularly screwed in both education and job training. "I feel cheated," Luminita says bitterly. She drags deeply on a cigarette and shakes her head. "Not only me, but all the women who had to go through this." Her studies ended at middle school after she had her first child at 15. The kids started coming every two years, and she soon had to give up her job as a janitor in an office building.

Luminita tells me she is now separated from the father of her children. With no job training to fall back on, she squeaks by on the equivalent of \$24 a month in child support she says he sends her (the government kicks in a lousy \$8). Luminita believes that having fewer kids would've improved things between the two of them. "I would have had more time to take care of myself and pay more attention to his needs," Luminita says.

Giamina Radoi, 36, a dark-haired gregarious woman with gold hoop earrings and a blue head-scarf, had three children by the age of 19. After that, she was one of the few women approved for abortions because she'd been diagnosed with kidney problems. She thinks she had six or seven abortions, though she doesn't quite remember. Giamina says she felt the doctors mistreated her. "It was still hard to get an abortion, even with permission," she says, staring at the floor as if still ashamed. "The doctors didn't care. Under Ceausescu, it was necessary that women bear five children, and it was as though I was useless because I couldn't."

When Ceausescu was finally overthrown in 1989, Giamina says articles began to appear about birth control pills, condoms and IUDs, and she, like most other women, wanted to know everything she could about them. Dana says that the new government and media were totally lame in getting out this info and providing expanded access; rather, it was the nongovernmental organizations that did the most good. If you want to help, contact Dana at dproinov@usa.net or the Foundation for Child Protection at foc@dialkappa.ro.

Birth rates in Romania have since dwindled to 1.1 per female-they had, according to one statistic, been as high as 3.6-and the population of 22 million is expected to fall to 16 million by 2050. But

Jane - March 2001

there have been some weird repercussions: Even today Giamina thinks abortion is preferable to birth control pills. She says it is something she is accustomed to--not to mention that abortion is cheaper than the pill here. Dana also says that many Romanian women still think sex is only for procreation or for pleasing men. Luminita claims that the entire time they were together, she kissed the father of her children passionately on the lips no more than three times. (At press time, we heard that Luminita has married a new man. Better luck this time around.)

Dana tired of gynecology and stopped practicing. She now trains medical workers on family planning. At the 1992 conference for Society for Education in Contraception and Sexuality in Cluj, Romania, she suggested that governmental reparations for victims of botched abortions, for the families of those women who died because of a madman's archaic policies be given. "I was told it was too early, too sensitive," she says, clasping her hands together in what could either be a gesture of prayer or pleading. "And now I am told it's too late, we have other priorities."

What happened in Romania is not just a sad story of misguided agendas, but rather a big red flag for when any government fails to think through the impact of its reproductive policies. Maybe they forget that their decisions--which should be made by the family, anyway--affect people for a lifetime. Or that maybe they have no place in people's bedrooms to begin with. "The regime wanted control by entering the most private sector of a human," Dana says. "I never figured out what exactly they wanted with that control. But that memory exists in me. I have to live with it or it will destroy me."