Anna Gigliotti-Skret – Romania

Taken from email sent to Rebecca Dunkley from Anna about her time working in Romania, 29/07/2024

I was working for Light into Europe charity as a volunteer GDMI. I noticed a severe lack of independence in the blindness community and a cultural attitude that would over protect and under utilise people. There was a lack of qualified O&Ms (zero) and the O&M at the school for the blind had two weeks training/education then was their school O&M. The school had a sighted principal and a totally blind director. The director did not use a long cane and was instead using human guides for all his movement around the school. I recall seeing one student who was given a really dull task of putting pegs on the edge of a piece of cardboard and when completed, the teacher removed the pegs and asked her to do it again. It was really sad to see these incredibly low expectations. The guide dog program I was with had challenges as we were in Bucharest which is a chaotic concrete jungle and the clients, without any cane or O&M skills, made it a real challenge for the dogs to perform.

Blog post about traffic conditions - 2013.

Let me tell you about the traffic here in Bucharest. Most crossings have the zebra stripes painted on them so all in all, I take it that the pedestrian has the right of way. Even so, it takes me about seven head checks before I decide to take the plunge and step out onto the street. It is unnerving to say the least. There are a lot of intersections with automatic pedestrian lights. It’s notable how much I have come to rely on the audio – not here! So I wait and wait, watching the locals cross against the red man, then I daydream and then I suddenly come to realise that my man is green and I hurry to get across while it is still my chance, making my seven head checks as I hurry along. At one congested corner some cars decided to reverse into the crossing, almost taking a few of us out with them.

Then of course there is the problem of parking and it is customary to park across the whole pavement. Often this is at corners as well so it may take most of your attention upon approach of the corner wondering how the hell to find the kerb. Once you negotiate your way through the parked cars you then need to decide when it is safe to cross. Being a small person, I can barely see over the parked cars to the road so it’s only once I am out in the centre that I can see if I might get across safely or not.

You are not even safe when you stand at the kerb waiting for the lights to change as it is quite common for cars to use the corner to drive up onto the footpath in order to park. The drivers give you dirty looks if you delay them and they will beep and glare until you move off “their” pavement so they can go ahead and park. This used to be a huge stress for me but of course we are adaptable creatures and I am now just mildly inconvenienced when I have to move aside.

In some areas, there are poles installed around the kerb edge in order to prevent cars from parking on the footpath. These poles are about knee height and are usually either grey or dark green. Instead of making it illegal for cars to park on the pavement, we have to contend with these additional obstacles.

So.. don’t go blind in Bucharest. And certainly if you are a wheelchair user, it would be an isolating city to live in as I am not sure you would make it far past your front door. I was discussing this with some friends and we agreed that we do not see any people using wheelchairs in the streets of Bucharest. We were sitting outside at a restaurant and that evening wouldn’t you believe it but two separate people in wheelchairs passed us! One guy even came to dine at our same restaurant. He was with friends who lifted him and the chair up the front steps. I guess that’s the only way to do it, because most gutters have steep steps on each side of the crossing, or if there is a ramp at the kerb it will be only on one side and not the other!

From a blog post I wrote in 2013 about Romanian sign language.

The charity I am working for, Light into Europe, have sent my housemate and I to sign language classes twice a week. Of course the classes are in Romanian so I am learning the basics of sign and the basics of Romanian which is very handy! Unfortunately not that much of the sign will translate in Australia. Firstly, the Romanian finger-spelling uses the French letters while AUSLAN uses the English finger-spelling. Then there are unique signs that refer to Romanian customs such as the sign for Saturday: you make a gesture of rubbing your hair because Saturdays were the day that the peasants used to wash their hair. The “cucumber” sign is a gesture on the forehead, because as kids they would stick the cut end of the cucumber on their foreheads. The sign for watermelon is to flick your fingers outwards. I was told it demonstrates how to test if the melon is good inside. I told them us Aussies know if it’s good inside because our watermelons are always cut and we buy it by the slice, not buying a whole one!

Light into Europe works with people who have hearing impairment and people who have vision impairment. Some of my colleagues here have profound hearing loss, so it has been a great pleasure to be able to now come to work and have some basic conversations, such as, “I am going to the seaside for the weekend, to Varna, in Bulgaria, and I will return on Sunday.”It possibly went a bit like, “Me. Varna. Bulgaria. Sea. Sunday return.” But hey, we ended with smiles and understanding – I call that a win!

Thanks,

Anna