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Falsani: Horror doc with a spiritual side

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Romania probably isn't the first place that comes to mind when you think about the global AIDS epidemic.

And yet the eastern European nation was the setting for one of the most shocking and little-known chapters in the history of HIV/AIDS worldwide – a story told in the powerful new documentary "After the Fall: HIV Grows Up."

Between 1989 and 1995, an estimated 13,000 Romanian children were infected with HIV at state-run hospitals and orphanages, where so-called "microinfusions" of unscreened blood administered by

doctors in an attempt to boost the children's immune systems, was commonplace. (In the United States, the dangerous practice had been banned since the 1930s.)

At the beginning of the AIDS epidemic in Romania, 94 percent of all reported cases of the disease were children under the age of 13, according to a 1991 article in the journal *Lancet*. By the year 2000, 60 percent of all pediatric AIDS cases in Europe (and 80 percent of reported pediatric AIDS cases worldwide) were found in Romania.

Romanian orphanages were filled beyond capacity then – a result of communist dictator Nicolae Ceausescu's cruel policy of natalism, which encouraged ("required" is a more accurate word) Romanians to have as many children as possible to boost flagging population growth. The government denied women access to contraceptives until they had given birth to five children.

Before Ceausescu's execution by firing squad in 1989 during the Romanian revolution, doctors were forbidden to discuss or even diagnose the disease. As a result, thousands of children – many of them infants and toddlers – suffered slow, horrific deaths from full-blown AIDS.

In March 1989, 32 children died in a single institution in Constanta, a port city along the Black Sea in the nation's southeast corner that is believed to have been the entry point for AIDS in Romania.

Nearly 80 percent of all Romanian AIDS cases were centered in five regions, the vast majority of them in Constanta, where prostitution boomed and sex workers regularly made blood donations in exchange for cash. That blood, unscreened for HIV and hepatitis, made its way to hospitals and orphanages.

"After the Fall" follows the story of Romanian pediatrician, Dr. Rodica Matusa. She ran the one-room clinic outside Constanta's municipal hospital where, beginning in 1990, all of the region's pediatric AIDS patients were sent. With a tiny staff, no effective drug treatment, and scant resources – five children to a crib, five nurses working 12-hour shifts and running water for only a few hours a day – the doctor and her staff did everything they could to lovingly care for gravely ill children.

Fear of the disease was, and remains, rampant in Romania. The government banned media from hospitals, hoping to keep the country's pediatric AIDS epidemic a secret. For years, it worked. Few people – inside Romania or out – knew about the horror that was unfolding.

Shortly after the 1989 revolution, French photojournalist Frank Fournier was among the first to gain access to hospitals where the children were being treated. His haunting photographs are featured throughout the film.

"It's hard to describe. It was a nightmare," Fournier says. "These kids, they were suffering so much. You will see them and spend time with them ... trying to get them to smile, something. Trying to make them comfortable. And then you will leave and come back and they would be dead. It was terrible. One after the other."

Many of sick children were not aware they had AIDS. Their parents didn't tell them because of the stigma or a wish to let their children live their brief lives as carefree as possible, or perhaps a little of both.

Starting in 1997, when effective drug treatment for HIV/AIDS, in the form of generic antiretroviral drugs (ARVs), became widely available in Romania, Matusa made sure her young patients received them and the hope they brought for a brighter future.

Today, more than 7,000 HIV-infected Romanian children are long-term survivors.

Kathleen Treat, executive producer of "After the Fall," first learned about Romania's pediatric AIDS crisis in 1997 when, through her family's charitable foundation, she agreed to support a "kids club" for HIV-positive children at one of Constanta's institutions run by the international Christian relief organization World Vision.

Treat, who spent her teen years in Bakersfield, visited Romania for the first time in 1999. There she met Venera Batescu – the nurse in charge of the kids club – and Matusa, whom she quickly realized was much more than a doctor.

"The AIDS ward was packed," recalls Treat, who screened her film earlier this month at Pepperdine University. "Dr. Matusa supervised the children, had school lessons, and fed them all. It was not a hospital – it was a home for these kids.

"I vividly remember one boy on the brink of death," she says. "He was lying on a bench in the schoolroom so that he could be close to his friends. He did not want to die alone in his room."

In 2006, Treat returned to Romania. Though many children had died of AIDS, due to years of ARV treatment many more were alive and thriving. Moreover, despite the harsh and nearly universal societal stigma of AIDS that remains in Romania to this day, many of the now-young adults Treat encountered were surprisingly open about their plight.

"Not only did they finally know about their disease, they were becoming advocates and activists," she says. "They were going on radio shows, passing out safe-sex information on the beaches, speaking with government officials."

Upon her return to the States, Treat began to think about what she could do to share their stories with the world. "I wanted to be a megaphone," she says. And the documentary film was born.

Filmed on location in Bucharest and Constanta from 2008 to 2010, "After the Fall" showcases Matusa and three of her patients, all abandoned at by their families after they were diagnosed with HIV as young children.

Ashica, Mioara and Georgie have spent most of their lives at a group home where nurses such as Batescu cared for them as if they were their own children. They have grown up together, learned to cope with their

health challenges, and charted a path toward independence and a "normal" adulthood, with all that entails.

When it comes to cultural sensibilities about HIV/AIDS, Romania today is stuck where the United States was in the early 1980s, when fear of and misinformation ruled. During the course of the film's production, Treat and her collaborators spoke to many HIV-positive Romanians, but most were reluctant to let their faces be shown or talk about the disease publicly for fear of retribution.

Those fears are not unfounded. Advocates for Ashica had to wage a legal battle to enroll her in school after parents of other students balked. Georgie wanted to learn how to folk dance, but gave up after the teacher told other students he was HIV-positive no one would dance with him.

"I used to be afraid," says Mioara, who didn't learn of her HIV status until she came to live in the group home. "But as the years went by, I said 'Stop.' I have so many dreams that I want to come true.... You have to look to the future. No matter what."

Mioara's story will take your breath away. But I won't spoil it here. You have to see it for yourself. (Hint: Bring a tissue.)

Suffice to say, "After the Fall" is wholly unforgettable and proves that when hope is present, even the most horrific story can have a happy ending.

To find a screening or request a free DVD of the film, visit www.afterthefallfilm.com.

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