

Da-mi o sansa sa ajung aproape de inima ta...

Give me a chance to reach your heart...



Romania League for the Defence of Animals

**Animal Shelter
Galati, Romania**

Proposal for Sponsorship

September 2008

The story so far...

The billboard sits at one of the main intersections in the financial district of **Galati**. It features the long, shapely legs of a woman on a grassy verge, a dog sprawled at her feet.

Whilst the legs unsurprisingly attract attention - particularly among the local red-blooded male population! - it's a sad fact that the sentiments behind the poster go largely unnoticed.

The dog – and the legs – belong to **Dana Costin**, the founder of Galati's dog shelter, ROLDA. The billboard is just one measure in Dana's campaign to raise local awareness about the issue of stray dogs.



The caption reads: *Da-mi o sansa sa ajung aproape de inima ta...* Give me a chance to reach your heart...



Dana feeds the street dogs in the grounds of Arcelor Mittal steelworks.

But with thousands of stray dogs dodging traffic, cowering under bushes, scavenging in dumps, hobbling through industrial sites and decaying in roadside gutters - it's not really an issue that lacks awareness. What it clearly lacks is a solution.

"The problem is people don't want to see the reality. They just hope one day they will wake up and it will have disappeared," says Dana.

"But this won't ever happen, at least not until the community and the city hall start working with the local animal-lovers to find a long-term solution."

Galati, a poor industrial city, is home to Arcelor Mittal, the largest steelworks in Romania. It dominates the horizon with its vast spewing chimneys and sullen industrial landscape. A couple of miles to the north over the rail tracks that criss-cross Mittal's sprawling complex, is ROLDA, a haven for the lucky dogs which have found a home there.

At first sight, the shelter appears to be a rather humble affair. Approached along a narrow rustic lane which cuts through weathered hills, it's made up of three separate buildings, plus a small wooden two-up, two-down house where I lived for the week.

The design of the makeshift shelter bears the hallmark of practicality. Built on an incline to make use of natural drainage, the two main buildings are each divided into a dozen separate pens, allowing the dogs to have their own space or to share with a close companion.



The ROLDA shelters – the 2-up 2-down house in pink – and the open air pens.



Snowy - Eager to welcome me to ROLDA

The dog in the first enclosure, a scruffy three-legged mongrel by the name of Cezar, spotted me straight away – and he let me know it! Tidal-like, his neighbours bounced into action, adding their voice to the deafening doggy din!

No wonder the shelter is based outside town! The noise would have many people turning tail... but this dog-lover is made of sterner stuff!



Cezar

I made my way along the passage, stopping at each pen in turn. The sight of so many eager faces pushed up against the wire mesh, tails a-blur, clamouring for attention, immediately made the trip feel worthwhile.

Each pen was divided into a run at the front, and a separate sleeping den at the back, from where one or two of the more timid dogs peeked at me – torn between their fear and their curiosity.



Frank demanding a fuss

Beauty, a frightened mongrel who had been at ROLA for over a year, emerged from her den as I passed by, barking boldly at my retreating back.

But as soon as I turned to her, and stooped down, she panicked, skidding on the spot like a caricature of *Scooby Doo* in her desperate bid to return to the safety of her sanctuary – from which she stared suspiciously, eyes glued to my every move.

What or who has made this dog so frightened of man is anybody's guess.

Over the week I got to know Beauty a little better, but she is clearly scarred and will probably always be scared of people.



Beauty

ROLDA is run on a simple routine – and all the dogs seem to know the drill. The floor, a colourful mosaic of salvaged tiles, is kept scrupulously clean by Flori. She works seven days a week to ensure the dogs are comfortable and conditions remain hygienic. Some watch patiently as she meticulously cleans their pen whilst others, even the 3-legged Cezar, leap up, demanding her attention.



Flori plays with Snowy in the garden

In turn, dogs are moved out into a grassy enclosure.

There they can feel the sun on their backs... dig holes... tussle & play.



Trying to cool off in some shade!

There's the odd scuffle, especially when they think they're missing out on something! But generally speaking the dogs at ROLDA are happy. They are well fed, sheltered and cared for...

Not so for the unfortunate dogs who are destined to live out their final days in either one of the two city pounds. Dana calls them the 'concentration camps', places which offer no quality of life and no hope of freedom. And having seen them myself, I can understand why...

On each of the visits I made to Baza de Ecarisaj – home to 250 strays - I was shocked at the conditions I found, conditions which fall way below anything ROLDA has to offer, and which break all international standards in animal care.

I learnt that during the Communist era, it was a place where dogs were electrocuted and skinned.

It is one of two city pounds... The other, a former duck farm, accommodates between 400 and 600 dogs in equally appalling conditions.



Baza de Ecarisaj



Some cages housed up to 8 dogs.

At Baza de Ecarisaj, at least fifty dogs were roaming freely around the main enclosure, and as I entered through the main gate, I met them all - full on!

Dogs literally flung themselves at me - leaping up, pawing at my coat and nuzzling at my hands. Unsocialised and untrained, but nevertheless desperate for human attention. Some shadowed me as I wandered through the pound, tugging at my coat. One dog trailed after me, persistently trying to push a piece of old tyre into my hand for me to throw for him.

Some dogs became possessive of me, snarling as rivals tried to muscle in. It can very unnerving, even for a devout dog-lover like myself, to have sudden scraps break out inches from tender ankles!

I counted 19 cages along one wall, each no bigger than an average sized shed. Some were home to as many as 7 or 8 dogs, a confined captivity which I was told was for their own safety

Dogs of all shades, shapes and sizes stared at me from their concrete confines.

Some cowered at the back of their soulless homes, muscles wasted from lack of exercise, eyes dulled from lack of joy.



Frightened...



Friendly...

Others, clamouring for human contact, pressed their faces against wire mesh fences, puppy-like in their eagerness to play.

Through Dana, Mr. Cenac, the man responsible for the pound, explained how he tried to operate a rotation system, to allow all dogs some time to run freely.

But sadly, as he worked alone, it wasn't always possible, such was his concern for the potential risk of a vicious fight breaking out among the free-roaming dogs.

And he certainly has his work cut out for him – working a 7-day week to see to all of the dogs' basic needs, from cooking scraps on the primitive stove to dressing an endless array of wounds.

But, in spite of his efforts, it's nowhere near enough. "The mayor won't fund anyone else," explains Dana.

"So, Mr. Cenac has to do everything himself. I can't imagine what would happen to the dogs if he was ever ill. They love him. He is their saviour."



Primitive conditions...

The conditions are primitive, with occasional water shortages, lack of food, cramped cages and little in the way of medical care. "What's needed is investment, but nobody at city hall cares," Dana adds sadly.



Mr Cenac with one of his dogs

As I watch Mr. Cenac with his dogs, I wonder whether they might recognise, on some level, that he is their only true human champion.

Because, as we approached each cage and he lovingly pressed his face into their furry necks, it was clear to me that this man genuinely cares for these dogs.

And judging by their reaction, frantic to lick his face, the dogs appear to love him too.

“Here is a dog I try to take extra care of,” he explained, as he introduced me to a blind, lame mongrel.

Both front legs, he tells me, were broken when the dog was struck by a car – but with nobody willing or able to fund the vets fees, the bones were simply left to set at acute, unnatural angles. The unnamed dog was never able to walk again.

Eyes clouded with cataracts, he hung limply in Mr. Cenac’s arms.

Every shed in the pound seemed to tell a story of its own... I pulled away a heavy tarpaulin to reveal a doorway into a large lean-to. Over a dozen dogs lived there in the dark, clearly too afraid to venture out into the sunlight.



Mr Cena’s special friend



Claiming his territory

Another hut housed a stove, on which Mr. Cenac boiled the meat from bones donated by a local butcher. A few dogs hung around inside, eyeing me suspiciously from an old kitchen unit.

From other doorways, I saw traumatised dogs hiding beneath chairs or cowering in makeshift beds.

One mongrel laid claim to a small tin bath, whilst another dog, anxious to protect his territory, barked a warning to any rival who might consider declaring an interest in *his* top-shelf domain.

These dogs represent just a handful of the thousands of strays that roam the street. And the pounds - little more than a quick-fix ‘solution’ for political expediency – are as cruel as they are ineffective.

It was the sheer scale of the problem in Galati that led Dana, and her late boyfriend Rolando, to set up the charity in the first place.

ROLDA – an amalgamation of both their names – is the **Romanian League in Defence of Animals**.



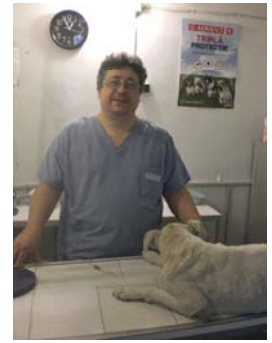
Entrance to Baza de Ecarisaj

Asked about why she first set ROLDA up, Dana becomes reflective. “I was out walking in the park and saw something moving in the grass up ahead of me. As I drew closer, I realised it was a dog, although at first it was difficult to tell exactly what it was. He was covered in blood and writhing in pain. I didn’t know what to do, so I sat with him, holding his paw, willing him to live. When I saw a car, I flagged it down and, with the help of the driver, managed to get him to the vet. Whilst he was being treated, I was very emotional. Already, I looked upon him as *my dog*. So when the vet said he had done all he could, and that he was still in danger, I was in tears. I took him home and very gradually he got better.”

Printz became Dana’s favourite dog. “He was loyal, protective and very loving. He would pine if I ever had to leave him and refuse to eat. I felt he would give his life for mine. And although he did get better, he never fully recovered. I suspect he was used in dog fights, and probably abandoned when he lost his edge. I had him for three years.” When Printz died in 2001, as devastated as she felt at losing her beloved dog, Dana knew she had to channel her grief in a positive way. And ROLDA has become a fitting legacy to her beloved pet.

At ROLDA, dogs in the same desperate position as Printz – frightened, injured and hungry – find relief, shelter and friendship. Dana ensures that all the dogs are seen by the vet Dr. Gingarasu Cornel, who genuinely cares about street dogs.

He and his team at **Vetimed** offer ROLDA a subsidised service, but often even their combined efforts barely dent the scale of the problem. **Altogether, over 300 dogs were spayed or neutered in 2007, and nearly 500 strays were treated for injuries, wounds or disease.**



Dr. Gingarasu Cornel

But with thousands of unsterilised dogs roaming the streets, they know they are fighting an uphill battle.



I joined Dana several times during trips to Vetimed, the first time with an old white boxer bitch.

She was found hiding in a hole she'd dug herself into by some young boys who brought her to Dana. When she arrived at the shelter, her ribs were clearly visible beneath her scabby, flea-ridden coat.

She was starving, dehydrated and terribly emaciated. Her chances, according to Dr. Gingarasu, weren't great. Her age, combined with the chronic liver and kidney conditions he diagnosed, meant she might never recover.

Skin and bones

In spite of her slim chances, every effort was made to treat her. She never complained when he injected her with a saline drip. She accepted, with the long-suffering patience of a genuinely sick animal, all the probing and poking.

But within 48 hours, this pitiful dog was clearly on the road to partial if not total recovery. Appetite returning, she even managed to wag her tiny tail and bark her disapproval of the badly behaved pup in the next cage along.

An amazing transformation given her earlier state – and yet another success story for Dana.

And she's not the only one...

Many dogs recover at ROLDA from the most appalling injuries – sustained on the roads, from dog-fighting and from the cruelty and neglect inflicted by human hands. Disease and starvation are equally common.

Some are lucky enough to be adopted by sponsors... and the most fortunate even find themselves flying to new homes across Europe!



Blanche recovering at ROLDA after being struck by a car. Her hips and spine were damaged and her broken leg was put into a primitive splint made from household tape.

ROLDA can only exist because of the support that Dana teases, coaxes, cajoles and demands from the local community. In fact, the directors of the Mittal steelworks know only too well just how persuasive she can be!

Not only did she persuade them to put a stop to their regular dog culling measures, but Dana also managed to get the industrial giant to sponsor the construction of a brand new shelter.

“Arcelor Mittal is our greatest ally. They funded all construction work and even purchased the land in ROLDA’s name.

“It’s a modern facility with vets and round the clock care for hundreds of dogs,” she explained, her excitement as she shows me around the new site clear to see.



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paddocks (100 kennels) sheltering the homeless dogs claimed from the grounds Arcelor Mittal Galati premises

But in spite of this support, funding continues to be an inescapable problem for Dana:

“We can’t rely on one source of funding, because who knows what the future holds? Even operating on a simple scale, our new shelter will have significant overheads... food, bills, maintenance and staff. Most urgently, we also need to raise money to buy drugs and vital medical equipment, without which lives will inevitably be lost.”

Equally important to the future success of ROLDA is local education. “I want people from the community to visit us and adopt a stray. I want them to see that these dogs aren’t bad, but can be trained to become loyal and loving members of the family. I am working with schools, trying to get this message across to children. Without this change in attitude towards strays, I think this problem will just grow and grow.”



Dana, however, remains optimistic:

“I know that the problems we experience in Galati are happening elsewhere in Romania, but I have plans to expand, rolling out similar shelters in towns throughout the country.



A pair of dogs enjoy the sun on their backs in the grounds of the ROLDA sanctuary....

But it’s early days and I am committed to make this shelter work before I move on elsewhere.”

...whilst those in the concentration camp look forward to a winter exposed to freezing temperatures.

As she gently curls her fingers through the glossy coat of a mixed-cross spaniel, lost in thought about her future ambitions, it is clear that this young woman is driven by a deep love of dogs and will do anything she can to make a success of ROLDA, in memory of both its co-founder Rolando – and of her equally beloved Printz.

Baza de Ecarisaj

