



Voices from the Field

During one of my field trips, I had the opportunity to sit down with Péter Sándor, the chief of police responsible for the checkpoint in Ártánd, on the Hungarian side of the border. We met at the police station, which had once served as the border patrol center. He greeted us warmly in his office and apologized for the wait, explaining that his retirement was just a few weeks away and that his final days were packed with tasks to ensure a smooth transition. The conversation unfolded naturally, his words carrying the experience of someone who had spent decades at the border, observing its transformations. Through his stories, the border came to life—a threshold where histories, policies, and human narratives converged, each leaving their mark.

I started my career here as a sergeant, the lowest rank, on January 1st 1986. Over the years, I've witnessed significant changes, particularly before and after 1989, when the political regime shifted. Border control was exceptionally strict before the regime change, with both Hungarian and Romanian guards inspecting travelers. Four separate checks—two from each country—were required in both directions. Guard towers stood every few hundred meters, manned by soldiers who kept watch day and night. Crossing borders was heavily regulated, with the primary reason for movement being tourism. In the socialist era, destinations like the Romanian Black Sea coast were especially popular. However, obtaining a passport wasn't enough—you needed documentation justifying your trip, such as hotel reservations.

Back then, even shopping across the border was complex. Grocery stores were sparse, often stocked with little more than canned fish and pickles. Many would travel to Hungary to bring back essentials like butter, coffee, and spices. For items like soap, one or two were fine to carry across, but anything resembling commercial quantities risked confiscation at the border. Students and workers with proper contracts could travel more freely, but for most, it was a highly restricted process.

Illegal crossings were a common problem before the regime change. The designated crossing points had strict schedules, and the areas in between—the so-called "green border"—were where unauthorized crossings occurred. Those caught were handled according to procedures and often returned to Romanian authorities under a readmission agreement. Many would simply try again, determined to make it through. The border was never completely closed. I mean, it's impossible—you'll always have some kind of 'leaks,' let's say. One vivid memory I have from that time is of Alajos Chrudinák, a fearless journalist who ventured into war zones and danger. In December 1989, as events unfolded in Romania, the border was closed, but Chrudinák showed up. He told me he had been declared persona non grata in Romania just three days earlier and asked if he could enter. After consulting with the Romanian side and higher authorities, they surprisingly allowed him through. I accompanied him for safety. When we arrived, he was greeted as if he were a member of an important delegation. Not long after, the first Hungarian relief shipment for Romania, organized by the MDF, crossed this same border—a moment I'll never forget. Managing this border has always required adaptability. Whenever new rules arise, people find ways around them until enforcement catches up. It's a dynamic process, shaped by history, politics, and human ingenuity.

After the political transition, these stringent measures persisted until Romania joined the European Union in 2007. The free movement of goods eliminated most regulations, and trade and border traffic significantly increased. Today, the checkpoint here handles two to three thousand trucks daily, making it one of the busiest routes between Turkey and Western Europe. The gradual relaxation of rules brought new freedoms, but also new responsibilities. Learning to navigate this new openness required adapting to rules and limits that often lagged behind reality. Today, as Romania pushes to join the Schengen Area fully, the border will be as seamless as between Hungary and Austria.

In some ways, the border's flexibility has increased, but so too has its complexity, as EU regulations impose systematic checks. Migratory pressures have led to stricter controls for everyone, including EU citizens. What was once a minimal check is now a systematic and thorough process, reflecting broader global challenges.

The border itself has transformed. Surveillance towers that once stood every few hundred meters have disappeared, replaced by a relaxed vigilance. Boundary markers with identification numbers still line the border, and the old no-man's-land is now overgrown and neglected. The once-pristine areas, once plowed and monitored to detect footprints, now lie forgotten in a jungle. No one maintains them anymore. The border landscape has changed in every sense—physically, politically, and socially.

Maria

I met Maria at her restaurant during the quiet hours of the afternoon. Located just a kilometer from the border in Ártánd, her establishment is nestled along the main road leading directly to the checkpoint. Fortunate to arrive during a lull in activity, I found Maria with a moment to spare. She graciously sat with me, sharing her time to discuss her work and her relationship with the border.

I run this place with my husband. We've been managing it for several years now. The restaurant part was built 13 years ago. Before that, this place was a concrete factory, which was demolished. When we bought it, the land was just an empty lot. We're open every day until 10 PM. In addition to the restaurant, we operate a truck parking lot, catering to international truck drivers who sleep in their vehicles but come here to dine. For 10 euros, they get a meal voucher to use at our restaurant. Most of the trucks are Romanian, Polish, or Bulgarian. It's busiest around Sundays because trucks aren't allowed to travel on that day. The border is just a few hundred meters away, probably around 200 meters. Managing the truck parking lot has become a job in itself. Initially, we ran a smaller and more modest operation directly at the border. However, accessibility became an issue when national road authorities installed safety barriers, making it harder for clients to reach us. That prompted us to move to our current location.

I am originally from Romania. I came here 30 years ago to marry my husband, who is Hungarian, and we now have two children together. At that time, gaining citizenship was a significant challenge. It was far more difficult than it is today. When I went to the administrative office, I told them I was pregnant and hoped for a faster process. Instead, the official told me that I should have thought about my paperwork before becoming pregnant. It was a difficult experience.

Back then, most of our customers were travelers passing through the border. After the fall of Ceaucescu's regime, crossing the border became easier. Previously, only people



Maria's restaurant
in Ártánd

living within 5 to 10 kilometers of the border could pass freely, but with the changes, many more Romanians began traveling. They would stop by our place for a coffee before continuing their journeys. It was a time of growth, with buses, trucks, and cars constantly passing through. We saw travelers from Romania, Poland, Slovakia, and other countries, communicating with them through gestures or basic words. We put pictures of the different meals so they can just point at it. My daughters even learned a few words in Polish and Romanian to assist customers.

However, the newly constructed highway has changed traffic patterns significantly, reducing our customer base by almost half. Previously, the road led only to Bihar, forcing drivers to loop back into Nagyvárád. Now, new bypasses and infrastructure investments in Romania have diverted much of the traffic. This forced us to adapt by focusing more on hosting events like weddings to maintain our business. Three years ago, we decided to build a bed and breakfast to attract more significant events.

Living near the border also has its advantages. Many people cross into Romania for groceries or fuel, as prices there are around 10–20% lower. Real estate in Hungary, especially in this area, is also affordable, leading many to invest in properties here, even if they don't live in them. In Oradea, property prices have surged, so many people buy homes in nearby Hungarian towns. Looking ahead, further changes are on the horizon with the complete opening of the Schengen area. This gradual transition will bring new challenges and opportunities for us.

Nagyvárád is the Hungarian
name for the city of Oradea

I met Irene in Biharkeresztes, within the comforting walls of my grandparents' house. Upon learning the purpose of my visit, she kindly offered to take me to Romania. "I spent much of my life there before moving to Hungary. You'll see what the border means to us," she said. True to her word, she took me on a journey, tracing the contours of her past. As we wandered through the landscapes of Crisana, Irene spoke of her life divided by the border—how it shaped her home and her sense of belonging.

I was what they called a decree child, the third born to parents who, quite frankly, hadn't planned to have me. Back then, laws required families to have more children, and that's how I came into the world on February 18, 1964. My parents worked on a collective farm in the countryside, life was tough, especially with four children to raise. I grew up in Szántó, a small village just 3.5 kilometers from the border between Hungary and Romania. The village was entirely Hungarian; I never heard a word of Romanian growing up. My parents spoke Hungarian at home, and my mother never learned Romanian at all. My father, on the other hand, knew some because he had served in the army, where it was mandatory to learn the language. Romanian was taught as if we were native speakers, but none of us knew a word of it. On the other hand, Hungarian was taught as a foreign language, even though it was the language of our homes and community. As for me, I didn't learn Romanian until I started working in a factory years later.

As I got older, life brought me to Nagyvárad. Things were different there, but it wasn't necessarily easier. When I got married, we rented an apartment, but when the landlord sold it, we had to leave. The state built these apartment blocks—I used to call them cages—and brought in Romanians from nearby villages. They also set up factories and jobs in Oradea. It was all part of a plan to Romanianize the city on purpose. They made life tough in the nearby villages by not supporting them—neglecting their schools, cutting cultural opportunities, and taking away basic services like water

Since the 1960s, the Communist Party of Romania set ambitious population growth targets, aiming for 25 million citizens by 1990 and 30 million by the year 2000. To achieve this vision, the government implemented drastic measures, beginning with Decree 770/1966, which abruptly prohibited abortion. That same year, a tax was introduced on single individuals and childless couples, gradually becoming a significant financial burden. Additionally, Decree 779/1966 made divorce an exceptional and nearly unattainable legal process¹.

Nagyvárad is the Hungarian name for the city of Oradea

¹ Cornelia Muresan, "L'évolution démographique en Roumanie : tendances passées (1948-1994) et perspectives d'avenir (1995-2030)," Population 51, no. 4-5 (1996), 821.

and waste management. For people of Hungarian origins, it was harder to find an apartment and a job in the city. My husband wanted us to move in with his mother, but I refused. I was working in the city and couldn't imagine living with my in-laws. Desperate, I went to my workplace—a factory—and asked for help. I told them I was pregnant, separated from my husband, and needed housing. None of it was true, but I had no choice. They agreed to give me an apartment, but only if I allowed my husband to live there too. At the time, a single woman couldn't get housing on her own—only the man, as head of the family, had that right.

The apartment was basic, built during the communist regime, and had constant issues. The heating barely worked, and during the winters, we lived in temperatures around 16 degrees. We tried using electricity for warmth, but even that was cut off for hours every day. Work was no less grueling. I worked in a shoe factory with toxic adhesives. The company gave us a liter of milk every day to counteract the fumes, but I would take it home for my child instead. Milk was scarce, and buying it at the store meant waiting in line at 2 or 3 in the morning for the shop to open at 6. It was an absurd way to live, but it was our reality. In 1986, my father passed away, and my health began to decline. I weighed just 40 kilos, and my blood pressure was dangerously low. The healthcare system in Romania was really bad and medicine was way more expensive in Romania than in Hungary. I couldn't afford it. That's when I realized I couldn't stay in Romania any longer. The process was grueling. It took two years to get our passports. We had to give up everything we owned in Romania, including our apartment, in exchange for passports. We finally left on February 8, 1988, just before the fall of Ceausescu. Moving to Hungary was like starting over, but I knew it was the right decision. If I had stayed, I wouldn't have survived. The transition wasn't easy, but I had roots in Hungary. My grandparents were Hungarian, and with help from friends and contacts, I managed to settle. The process of gaining citizenship and finding a place to live was slow, but

we made it.

I still visit Romania sometimes. My sister lives there, and I go to the cemetery to visit my parents. The road passes by an old military building, now transformed into a stable. It's strange to see it like this. When I was younger, we weren't allowed anywhere near that area—it was off-limits. Too close to the border. Recently, I took my granddaughter to see the horses.

Looking back, living on the border has shaped everything about who I am. In Romania, we were Hungarians; in Hungary, we were Romanians. Even when I settled in Biharkeresztes, it didn't feel like home in the way I had hoped. Yes, I'm Hungarian—I know this because of my family, my upbringing—but belonging is more than a matter of heritage. It's a feeling, one I've struggled to find on either side of the border.

And then there's the pain of identity—the way others see us, the way they name us. Why is it so difficult to acknowledge the nuance, to simply say “Romani”? All I ask is a single letter, that small “i”. Instead, when people call me “Roman” it erases that part of me. It feels like a dismissal, as though my origin and identity don't matter. It still hurts every time I hear it.

Hungarians often refer to people from Romania as “Roman”, but this term is frequently used in a pejorative sense. However, by adding an “i”, it becomes “Romani”, a term that denotes someone who comes from Romania but is not necessarily Romanian.



Irene's apartment
in Oradea



EUROPEAN DISCOUNT

