



America's Newspapers

Pastor builds a bridge from Romania

Oregonian, The (Portland, OR) - Monday, October 24, 2005

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SUMMARY: Portland's large Romanian American community is interwoven with ties to one man

The Monday profile Neculai "Nicky" Pop Pastor builds a bridge from Romania

Elegantly dressed women fill the pews on the right, heads covered in gauzy scarves. Men in suits take the left. Some whisper to themselves. Others pray aloud or wail in the singsong language of Romania. And in a throne-size chair up front sits the immigrant who takes responsibility for all of them.

Neculai "Nicky" Pop, 68, presides over what may be the largest Romanian church outside his homeland. On a typical Sunday, 3,000 people convene under the wooden dome of his Romanian Pentecostal church, all of them Romanian immigrants or the children of Romanian immigrants.

Since 1979, when he arrived in Portland and started holding religious services in his bedroom, Pop estimates that he has sponsored or helped sponsor 15,000 immigrants, about half the Romanians living in Oregon.

"Nicky came here in the first group of Romanians, and his biggest achievement is that he helped people to come over and start a new life," said Mircea Lubanovici, co-owner of Gresham-based Romanian Times newspaper, which has served the community for five years. "And that's why he has the biggest church. Lots of people, lots of hard, hard work."

Thanks to Pop, Portland is home to one of the four or five largest Romanian communities in the United States.

When Daniila and Miroslav Radukan left their Romanian village in the Ukraine and headed to Oregon, Pop paved the way, sponsoring the couple as he had done for their uncle Iliya Shotropa.

"Immigration was not difficult," said Miroslav Radukan, "because the church was here to help. . . . Nicky Pop was calling all the time and checking how we are doing until we got a job, also through a church member, and adapted to this country."

Churches are the main provider of services in Oregon's Romanian community. Church members helped the Radukans with food, rent and home furnishings, and two years after immigrating, the Radukans still attend church services or functions several times a week.

Without the church, Shotropa said, "Our coming here would have been impossible."

People come to Pop's office for help with immigration issues, for family counseling, to seek or offer a job, to find a lawyer or a doctor, to pass a driving test, or to find cheap housing. Pop acts as community liaison and often announces job or housing opportunities during Sunday services.

In July 2004, when a Romanian couple and three of their children died in a car crash, church vans transported the five bodies from California to Portland. The church hired a nurse to take care of the surviving children and grandmother, and arranged a large funeral for the whole community, paying all expenses.

"People ask for almost everything a normal person needs," Pop said, and "because of the language barrier, we provide them with help."

An arduous life

Nicky Pop's hands are large and rough.

In the United States, he worked briefly as a janitor and held down a full-time factory job well into his 50s. In Romania, he worked as an agricultural engineer and food inspector while running an underground ministry.

He was the only Pentecostal in his family and the only one who didn't belong to the Communist Party.

As word of his religious views got out, Pop was frequently arrested and interrogated, and eventually dismissed from his job. In 1978, he was deported to the United States. His wife, Anna, a French professor, lost her job about the same time, and in 1981, she and their children joined him.

In quick succession, Pop came to Los Angeles, moved to Chicago and then to Oregon, where he took a loan from the Assemblies of God to build an affiliated church. For many years, he and his wife also operated an adult foster care home, as many Romanians in Oregon do, and still care for one elderly person.

For most of his life, the church work has been voluntary, but Portland's Romanian community is stronger than ever, and Pop now takes a church salary of \$3,000 a month, plus health insurance. Recently, he went to Hawaii for what he said was his first paid vacation in 26 years.

A Romanian island

Last December, when Romania held presidential elections, Portland's turnout was the fourth-largest in the United States.

Oregon's 18 Romanian churches estimate that 25,000 to 30,000 Romanians live in Oregon, a number that could be low, because some don't attend church and because some who fled the former dictatorship are reluctant to register with authorities.

In recognition of those numbers, in August the U.S. State Department approved opening Oregon's first honorary Romanian Consulate.

"There is a growing need for economic and cultural exchange with Romania," said James Rudd of Lake Oswego, the honorary consul and chief executive officer of Ferguson Wellman Capital Management.

Lubanovici, the Romanian Times co-owner, estimates that 900 Romanian businesses operate in the Portland area, many of them doing business with the homeland.

Pop is responsible for much of that growth.

His church was a sanctuary for immigrants during the reign of Nicolae Ceausescu, who ruled Romania through fear imposed by the political police, Securitate. After revolution erupted in 1989 and Ceausescu and his wife were executed by a firing squad, the United States continued for a time to recognize Romanians as refugees, and the stream of immigrants flowed accordingly.

Today, most Romanians who come to Oregon are sponsored by a relative or an employer. Others apply for a green card in the lottery system, which grants a number of visas to hopeful immigrants from around the world.

Although fewer than 4,000 immigrants arrived from Romania in 2003, the latest year for which statistics are available, refugees of Romanian heritage still stream into Oregon and the United States from Moldova and the former Soviet republics.

A powerful force

The reach of Pop's church goes far beyond religion, which has sometimes been a point of contention.

"The church has more than ecclesiastic duties," said Christian Ioanide, editor of Romanian Times. "It also has social roles, and this creates a kind of political relationship."

It's politics --and money --that cause the most complaints.

Church members tithe 10 percent or more of their income, putting Pop and the church in control of large amounts of money, often shared with new immigrants and church members in need. Pop said the church sends \$15,000 to \$20,000 a month to help in the homeland.

Critics have accused Pop of craving power and building his congregation to increase his standing in the community. They say he and Oregon's Pentecostal churches make life difficult for Orthodox Romanians, refusing to help them with jobs and housing.

Pop said his church helps everyone, not just Pentecostals, and attributes some of the tension to resentment. In Romania, Pentecostals are a growing religious minority to the dominant Romanian Orthodox church, one of several nearly autonomous Eastern Orthodox churches. But in Oregon, Romanian Orthodox believers are the minority.

Some Romanian community leaders say those traditional divisions are starting to break down. Last year, they organized the Romanian American Society, which brings together business and spiritual leaders.

"We came to a point where we said, 'Let's put on the table the things that are uniting us,' " Lubanovici recounts. "We have one God, we are all Romanian, and we live in the same area."

"It's amazing how America changed us --we learned to live together. I feel bad it took us so long, but we did it, thanks to God."

Pop shares that view.

"I'm not a superman, nor a super-Christian," he said. "I'm just trying to support people who come to this country. Because it's in the United States that we Romanians understood for the first time in our life what freedom means."

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Edition: Sunrise

Section: Local News

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Record Number: MERLIN_6938388

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