



CHERYL MAGNUSSON is not a sentimental woman, but when she describes her three-year old daughter Alexandra as a "little sleeping beauty who was just waiting for someone to wake her up" she is not exaggerating.

The child with button-bright eyes gleefully bouncing a green balloon around the living room of the Magnusson's home in Ucluelet has come a long way since Cheryl first found her eight months ago in an orphanage in Rumania.

At that time Alexandra was just one of thousands of forgotten children languishing in Rumanian orphanages, victims of the repressive regime of Nicolae Ceaucescu. Denied access to birth control or abortion until they had at least four children, many families were, for economic and emotional reasons, forced to put their children into the precarious care of one of the many orphanages throughout the country.

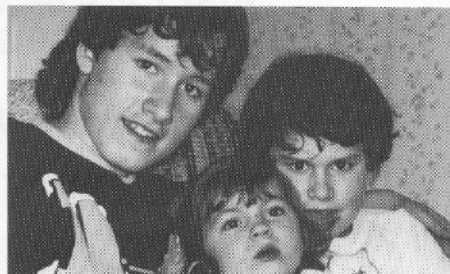
The conditions in which Cheryl found Alexandra living were not untypical, and may perhaps have been better than many.

Confined to their cribs for much of the day, more than one hundred children lived in the orphanage in Braila, 200 kilometres northwest Bucharest. Often left for hours in their own filth, the children were unstimulated, uncherished, underfed, and de-

Adopting Alexandra

A Labour Of Love And Paperwork

Story and photos by Lois J. Peterson



prived of the most basic medical treatment.

When Cheryl first saw Alexandra she weighed only seventeen pounds, did not know how to walk or talk or play and did not like to be touched. "She just rocked and sucked her thumb and didn't even know she had a voice," says Cheryl, as she proudly watches her daughter precariously filling a

visitor's plate with pieces of cake and calling 'bye-bye' as her brothers leave the house to play with their friends.

Cheryl's first involvement with Rumanian orphans came when she was asked to help with fundraising efforts on behalf of prospective adoptive parents in North America, and when she was approached about accompanying a group planning a trip to Rumania she didn't have to be asked twice.

"Everything just came together then," she says. "We had been thinking of adopting a

child for years and had been on the province's waiting list for two years with no luck." Cheryl and her husband Arnold already had two sons, 11 year-old Darren and 12 year-old Shane, and they wanted another child to complete their family.

Cheryl went to Rumania last July, expecting to be there for four weeks. "It took me just one week to find Alexandra and seven weeks to bring her home," she says. The extended trip was caused by the need to fulfill the cumbersome demands of the Rumanian beurocratic process, and to meet all the requirements of the Canadian immigration authorities. Cheryl's trip which was expected to cost about \$2,500 ultimately cost nearly \$10,000.

While Cheryl and other adopting fam-

ilies arranged all the necessary formalities, Cheryl would visit Alexandra as often as she could. She and other parents hoping to adopt children from the same orphanage would make the three-hour train trip from Bucharest where they were staying, bearing gifts of toys, clothes and medical supplies. By their next visit, the gifts had usually disappeared, taken home by the orphanage attendants. "But who can blame them," says Cheryl. "They had nothing either."

The orphanage itself was poorly equipped with supplies or equipment. The Rumanian government at that time was supplying only about 25 cents a day for each child's care. Two doctors were assigned to Alexandra's orphanage, but without adequate medical equipment or facilities they were unable to take even the most basic care of the children. Cheryl noticed that the medical books they used were at least 25 years old and even the simple medical equipment the visiting North Americans took with them was of little use, as the doctors did not know how to use it. The children were fed a subsistence diet of two or three meals a day of cornmeal mush with a couple of slices of tomatoes, but Alexandra did not even have that. Suffering from a stomach ailment brought on by poor hygiene, she was given mugs of hot liquid and little else.

Alexandra's birth mother had already signed consent for her adoption, but formal adoption hearings had to be arranged, medical tests conducted and evaluated in Greece, exit visas obtained, and a whole labyrinth of paperwork attended to. Complicating this process was the need to bribe officials at almost every step, the currency being money, perfume or liquor. A doctor who conducted Alexandra's medical tests was paid an additional twenty dollars and a bottle of whiskey for his services. Cheryl heard of one judge who was demanding \$500 just to schedule a date for an adoption hearing.

Although Canadian Immigration requirements state that children can be brought into this country as long as they do not have heart problems, Cheryl and her husband Arnold had already decided that they would not bring a child home if it was infected with AIDS or hepatitis. Reluctantly, Cheryl took Alexandra for more tests, noting with dismay the filth of the medical facilities and suppressing her fear that the needles and other equipment might not be sterile. The results showed that although Alexandra was not infected with AIDS, she did test positive for Hepatitis B. "But by that time it was too late," says Cheryl, grinning. "I called Arnie and told him that I was bringing her home." By that time Cheryl was so attached to Alexandra that she already considered her a part of the family and



she was not about to come home without her. Medical tests conducted once Alexandra was home in Canada revealed that she was infected with neither disease, although she will undergo further testing in about six months.

Alexandra has now been home with her new family for six months. In that time she has doubled her weight, has learned to play with her roomful of toys, and is a friendly and affectionate child. The Magnusson's took Alexandra for developmental testing at the G.R. Parkes Centre for Children in Victoria soon after they arrived home. At that time Alexandra tested at a four to six month level, but recent tests show that she has advanced to the level of an eighteen month to two year-old, and in some areas she is already on a par with other three year olds. Language is slow in coming, but she

can greet visitors, identify familiar objects and hum along with the songs her mother is teaching her. Cheryl remembers the first sounds Alexandra made. "You should have seen her face. She was shocked." Alexandra had found her voice.

Cheryl and her family have spent long hours teaching Alexandra new skills, talking to her constantly and getting her used to being touched and held. She will now climb up next to a visitor and cuddle up close, and she happily takes off her pink socks so that her mother can play 'This Little Piggy' with her toes.

"Alexandra no longer needs so much special attention, but she does need lots of our time," say her parents. But even arranging this has not been easy. Before she left for Rumania Cheryl approached her employer, the Ucleulet Co-op, for adoption leave. At first she was told she had to show on paper that the adoption process had been completed before leave could be granted, but at that time Cheryl hadn't even found the child. Cheryl's union, the UFCW Local 1518 went to bat for her, finally believing that they had obtained six weeks leave on her behalf. However, when Cheryl returned, she was told by the Co-op manager that she had only been granted two weeks, and had already exceeded that time. He gave her two choices - she could return to work immediately or take further leave on condition that on her return to work she sign a contract saying that she would not restrict her hours of work to part-time. Cheryl found herself between a rock and a hard place. Alexandra needed her constant attention right away and would need lots of her time for a prolonged period. So she was forced to quit a job she liked and was good at.

While Cheryl, her husband and their two sons are busy helping Alexandra to find her place in her new family, Cheryl continues her efforts on behalf of other children still in Rumanian orphanages. She shares her experiences with other prospective adoptive parents, sending them videos, newspaper articles and information on how to work their way through the interminable paperwork the Magnusson's successfully negotiated to bring their daughter home.

But Cheryl still worries about the children who are left behind. "You think of their little faces, and you want to bring them all home," she says. "It's the children who are caught up in all that mess, and they will be until someone can get them out of there."

And then Cheryl gathers her wiggling 'sleeping beauty' in her arms and carries her off for a nap. A child who once placidly spent almost all of her time uncomplaining in a crib, is, thanks to a loving family, learning that there is a larger world to be enjoyed, one she is eager to be a part of.