

City Life

Irina Nicolau

Large or small, old or new, Romanian cities have one thing in common: unlike Western European cities, which have evolved for several centuries entirely separate from the village, they preserve strong connections with the rural world. This is evident especially in the way city people form relationships within families, among neighbors, friends, and even in the workplace.

Traditions and customs that revolved around the court, the churches, and the various guilds once thrived in Romanian cities. The calendar was filled with holidays and festivities. People were religious but also eager to celebrate. In the 17th century, for example, Bucharest had 100 churches and over 3,000 pubs and liquor stores. It was as if Bucharest dwellers divided their lives between wine and God.

Most of the older urban traditions faded in the 19th century with modernization and later with the mass culture that was imposed by 45 years of communism, rejected after 1989. Traditional folklife in Romanian cities persists, though, in family ceremonies (baptisms, engagements, weddings, funerals, starting a new home) and holiday celebrations (Christmas, Easter). Happy or sad occasions become opportunities for people to get together, eat, drink, bring each other presents, dance, and sing. Romanian city people don't like the anonymity and loneliness that are common in Western urban life, and so such gatherings are taken seriously. Parties



Guests dance a *hora* at a recent wedding reception at the Moldova Restaurant in Bucharest.

Photo courtesy Andreea Derșidan

on residential streets with private houses are known to involve the entire neighborhood. Things follow the same pattern in apartment buildings, which function as “vertical” streets: people lend each other money, a cup of oil, or extra chairs for a party. Such gestures are reminiscent of the solidarity we find in the smaller villages.

As for recent changes in city folklife, young people show a keen interest in new and foreign influences. As an example, Halloween began to be celebrated by some in Bucharest in 1998. On the other hand, a very popular form of city folklore, *bancul* — anecdotes or jokes told at work, while standing in line, on the bus, or during any get-together — has been

observed less frequently since 1989. Economic and political realities demand more of people's time and dampen their sense of humor.

Irina Nicolau holds a Ph.D. in ethnology and is a department director at the Romanian Peasant Museum. Her specializations are oral history, urban ethnology, and the cultural history of Balkan Romanians, and she is the author of three books.