

A citizen diplomat reflects

'Bucharest Diary' is a vivid memoir by a former US envoy to Romania

By Norman Eisen

ALMOST 250 years ago, the fledgling democracy of the United States sent its first citizen diplomats – including luminaries such as Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin – to a dubious Europe dominated by 18th-century monarchies. To this day, we continue the practice, supplementing our now large core of career diplomats with amateur envoys – political ambassadors who have enjoyed success in other fields before turning to diplomacy.

Even with all the changes that the world and Atlantic civilization have seen in the past two-and-a-half centuries, the challenges and opportunities of such citizen envoys have remained remarkably constant. Vivid proof is found in *Bucharest Diary: Romania's Journey from Darkness to Light* (Brookings Institution Press, 2018), Alfred Moses' outstanding memoir detailing his experiences as United States ambassador to Romania during that country's turbulent transition from communist rule to democratic governance. As a former citizen ambassador myself (representing the US in Prague), Moses' struggles were familiar, and his story of transcending them gripping.

Moses came to diplomacy via a circuitous route: unlike some political-appointee ambassadors, he had engaged with the country of his posting, having led an American Jewish Committee delegation to Bucharest in 1976, when the country was under the thumb of communist dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu. There he met a young Jewish boy who told him that Jews in Romania were blamed for all of the country's ills.

This encounter spurred Moses' work for the next 13 years as a point man and leading advocate for getting Romania's dwindling Jewish community out of the country. That mission was one he accomplished with aplomb, using Most Favored Nation (MFN) trade status as a carrot to get Ceaușescu to commit to Jewish emigration, and working to save Bucharest's Great Synagogue from demolition. By late 1993, after the demise of the Iron Curtain, Moses



Alfred H. Moses, chairman of the board of Beit Hatfutsot and former US ambassador to Romania

had concluded that the Jewish community in Romania was safe at last, and recommitted himself to his law practice at a prominent Washington law firm.

However, Moses' president had other plans for him. In November 1993, the White House asked if he would be ambassador to Romania. Like so many citizen diplomats before him and since, Moses agreed to serve his country, but he encountered one of the harsh realities of ambassadorial life before ever setting foot in Bucharest.

As desirable as ambassadorial jobs are, they can entail family sacrifices. Moses was devastated when his wife, Carol, was diagnosed with Stage 4 ovarian cancer. Though he nearly withdrew from his ambassadorial role, Richard Holbrooke, then assistant secretary for European and Canadian affairs,

persuaded him otherwise: the United States had not had an ambassador to Romania for over a year, and his services were needed; furthermore, Moses could return to Washington any time Carol needed him. Moses assented, and, through the course of three years in Bucharest, returned to Washington every month for 10 days for family reasons.

When Moses arrived in Romania, he, like so many other citizen diplomats, found himself thrown into the deep end without much guidance. "When I took up my ambassadorial duties, I was only vaguely aware of official happenings on the ground in Romania or what our government expected me to accomplish," he writes. "Except for one breakfast meeting with Dick Holbrooke (who had never been to Romania), no one briefed me on goings-on in Romania or discussed our

policy and goals. Career US Foreign Service officers have a big advantage in that they know the ropes and are plugged into the State Department system. My two-week course at 'ambassador school' focused on procedure, not substance. There was nary a word about Romania."

However, as the best of our diplomats do (whether career or political), Moses soon adeptly figured out the political and economic situation. His volume at its core offers an invaluable and detailed account of his on-the-ground diplomacy. Not content to remain in Bucharest and have official meetings, he explored the country at every opportunity, ultimately visiting most of Romania, and this energy served him well. He explains that Romanians were pro-American, and saw the United States (and therefore Moses) as the key to both economic growth and, even more critically, accession to NATO, which they sought eagerly.

When Moses arrived in 1994, Romania was a functioning democracy, thanks in large part to the actions of its new president, Ion Iliescu. However, where it struggled was its economic transition from a communist planned economy to a free market capitalist one. Realizing that the United States possessed the technical business skills that Romania so desperately needed, Moses coordinated with USAID to build the Romanian stock exchange. He also detailed economic and other reforms that he believed Romania needed to undertake, using his bully pulpit to persuade Romanians, great and small. His efforts came to fruition when in 1996, Congress approved permanent MFN trade status for Romania.

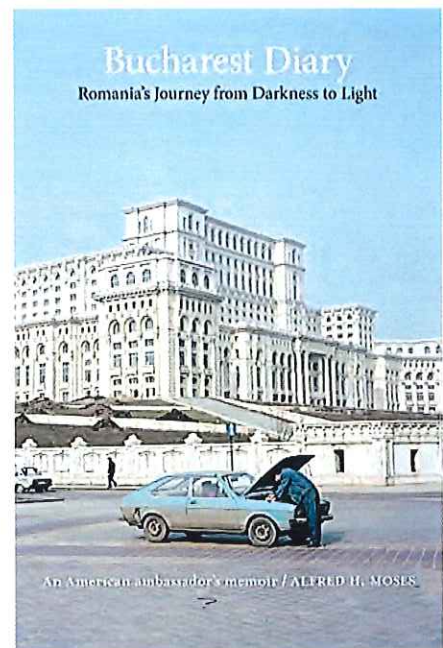
Moses astutely realized that Romania's desire to join NATO was an incentive the US could use to spur positive change in Romania, including to encourage the country to reject political extremism and respect the political rights of the opposition. He relentlessly advocated for these principles throughout his three years in Bucharest. Moses was undeterred even when it became

clear that Romania would not be among the first post-Soviet countries admitted to NATO, which would reduce the importance of the United States in the eyes of the Romanian government and therefore the United States' ability to get Romania to do what it needed to do in America's own interests. He drafted a letter for then secretary of state Madeleine Albright to send to the Romanian president, assuring him that NATO accession was still possible for the country, even if it would not be admitted in the first round. He continued to push for Romania's accession to NATO throughout his ambassadorship, keeping Romanian hopes – and with them, US leverage – alive.

Moses faced another, more personal challenge that will also engross readers: he is Jewish, and Romania, as he explains, is "a country with a long history of antisemitism, marked by the death of 400,000 Romanian Jews during WWII." In some of the most moving portions of the book, Moses explains how he parlayed his background and prior activism on behalf of Romanian Jews into a strength – his Jewish heritage granted him legitimacy in negotiations for the restitution of Jewish communal and personal property in Romania.

Alfred Moses has written an invaluable tome that describes the realities of what an ambassador's life is like day-to-day, and provides unique insight into Romania and more generally the transformation of life in post Iron-Curtain Europe. Through his eyes, the reader sees Romania grow from a little-examined post-communist country to one that, at the end of Moses' tenure, received the president of the United States on an official state visit – its transition, as a justifiably proud Moses puts it, from "darkness to light."

The journey is a fascinating one for all those interested in democratic transitions and the work that a dedicated amateur diplomat, in the right position at the right time, can do to advance both his country's interests and those of his host country. ■



Bucharest Diary: Romania's Journey from Darkness to Light Kindle Edition

Alfred H. Moses

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