

# ANDRICA

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## What One Person Can Do

by Alan Tillier

### MAN ON A BRIDGE

The most compassionate newsman I've ever known is Theodore Andrica, a short, roly-poly man with thick spectacles and a thick Rumanian accent, who has just retired after forty years with *The Cleveland Press*. Ted's beat was Eastern Europe from the Baltic to the Black Sea, and his title at the *Press* was nationalities editor.

If that title sounds a bit strange for a reporter to carry around, it ought to: Ted is the only American newsman, so far as I know, who has ever been listed that way on a masthead. The title meant, simply, that Ted bridged Eastern Europe in the postwar decades, keeping open lines of communication between 500,000 ethnic-group Clevelanders and their relatives abroad.

For Cleveland's Hungarians, Rumanians, Poles, Czechs, Slovaks, Slovenes, and Germans, Ted was not just someone to read. He was a human bridge with the homeland, someone who took letters, messages, food parcels, and medicines to relatives and made on-the-spot checks of conditions all over Eastern Europe. He will be sorely missed in all those Eastern European towns and villages where his visiting card was a cheery "I'm from Cleveland," delivered always in the local tongue.

Communist authorities, on the other hand, will heave a sigh of relief knowing

that the "Cleveland man" will no longer be around to make their life troublesome. The security men, with their obsessive interest in a newsman's movements, spent many a year puffing after the indefatigable Ted as he bounced across half a continent.

In his days as a roving reporter, he used every mode of transport, from donkeys to a Chevvy with a special 100-gallon tank; he covered half a million miles, and when he retired recently at seventy-three, it was because his wife had finally put her foot down, saying he should spend more time with her and his dogs.

TED HAD two bases—Cleveland and Vienna. His desk in the corner of the *Press* city room had a salami as a paperweight, for Ted was as Balkan (if he will allow me to use the term in the non-pejorative sense) as the people he wrote about. He had walked into editor Louis Seltzer's office in 1926 (when he was in his mid-twenties) asking for a job. During the interview that followed, he talked about his background—boyhood in Rumania, immigration to the United States, two years as parish priest of the Rumanian Orthodox Church in Buffalo, New York, a bit of mash-mixing for a bootlegger, and clerking in a bank in Canton, Ohio. His journalistic credentials consisted of having covered the activities of the foreign-born for a Canton newspaper and writing a lovelorn column under the name Molly Stark (shades of *Miss Lonelyhearts!*). He told Seltzer that the *Press* should help immigrants, while

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The "Broken-English Editor"—Andrica, right, meets with visiting Italians.

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boosting its readership by writing about their activities.

Seltzer was not sold easily. "Those people don't read us," he said, "because they don't trouble themselves to read English." The quick-witted Andrica shot back: "And the only way to make them read English is to write about them." That did it! Ted got the nationalities editorship, the first and only title of its kind in U.S. journalism. Soon he was covering the Germans on Cleveland's West Side, the Czechs around East 116th Street, and the Slovenes and Croats along Saint Clair Avenue.

He dragged immigrants out of their isolation by organizing festivals, dances, and, in 1930, an All-Nations Exposition. Then he set off on the first of dozens of trips to Europe. Before he sailed, the newspaper published coupons so readers could fill in the names and addresses of kin they wanted Ted to visit. Ted was to collect thousands on thousands of coupons over the years. When I went to his apartment behind the Opera House in Vienna, I usually found him looking through bundles of these slips, noting down names on region-by-region lists, which he always carried with him.

In the years before World War II, his mission was to corroborate information about relatives that flowed back to Cleveland in letters. The war and its aftermath changed his "beat" entirely:

Now, at his readers' urgings, he checked on who had died and who had survived. His Jeep, loaded with food parcels, letters, and gifts of clothing, became a familiar sight between Berlin and Sofia. He overcame restrictions within occupation zones, fought for and obtained visas even after the Iron Curtain slammed down, and somehow, perhaps by always addressing them in their own language, won over even the Soviets. He loves to tell the story of how he sought traveling papers from a Soviet political officer in Hungary, and how the man leaned over the desk and whispered: "I have relatives in Cleveland." He got the papers immediately.

THE LOAD on Ted during the Fifties grew and grew; the demand for his services always expanded in times of crisis—times such as the bitter Trieste dispute of 1951 and the ugly Budapest weeks of 1956. In some Eastern European cities, his hotel room looked like a doctor's waiting room, as people literally queued up to see him for news, parcels, and medicines.

During the 1956 Hungarian uprising, he chartered a jet airliner to fly tons of clothing from Cleveland to refugee camps in Austria. Hundreds of telegrams arrived asking him to do something, anything, to help relatives of people back

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home. He helped some families leave Hungary, watched over them in the Austrian camps, then guided them through the formalities that enabled many to reach the United States.

Ted was always full of these tales because it helped him remember names and addresses, although he never divulged them. They were not nostalgic yarns spun by an old newsman, for Ted rendered the same services after the Soviet invasion of Prague. He was always on the move. You had to be up early to catch him, and if you went along, you would find him veering from the foreign ministry and the Western embassies toward the markets and the back streets. I personally witnessed the warm welcome he got in Budapest, where the families he had helped had quickly gathered to meet him; in Bucharest, where the scene was identical; in the Slovak capital of Bratislava; and in various tiny Hungarian villages.

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**"Forget the highfalutin stuff and come meet my sort of people."**

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Ted had a tremendous constitution. It enabled him to survive the four or five meals thrust on him daily, a few hundred kilometers of daily driving, long

conversations with peasants in the field, and encounters with priests, customs officials, and youngsters. Always he had great patience, good humor, and a story or a joke to top anything. In the *Press's* city room, they always called him, jokingly, the "broken-English editor." Andrica's accent was thick, but his mind was as sharp as his memory. He remembered thousands of faces and names, and he always obtained, privately and at first-hand, information few other journalists ever came by.

When, as a fellow reporter, I sometimes traveled with him, we would rise early and hurry from house to farm to marketplace, meeting "the relatives." Ted often perspired in the sticky Balkan weather, grumbling in a good-natured way. But he kept going—talking, questioning, listening. Inherited Rumanian shrewdness always helped him stay one step ahead of the Communist regimes, and in his articles he would finesse points past censorship. "Chickens are plentiful in Budapest," he once wrote, "which is marvelous for people who have not seen veal for twenty years."

His personality was always his best tool in trade. "I am Balkan myself, and I understand how these people talk, how they view life, and I feel, along with them, their love of their soil." He would add this basic truth about Eastern Eu-

rope: "People remain people despite the political system. I have seen them dig in their heels in the face of coercion, and today only five percent of the population are what you would call activists. You don't meet many now who proclaim the virtues of the party, thump their chests, or call for a New Man. They have come to appreciate the enormous and enduring power of traditional values, including nationalism, and the 'ultras' are trying to harness these old forces."

IN RECENT YEARS Ted undertook another service: checking into the ancestry of his readers and satisfying their new pride in their ethnic stock. There was less need than before to deliver clothes and food, because times, even in Eastern Europe, have improved. Most mail is opened, but it gets through. Ted would still travel to a remote village to light a church taper on behalf of an old-timer back in Cleveland, row out into the Adriatic to throw a wreath upon its waters for a lost sailor, or act as proxy best man or godfather at East European weddings and baptisms.

I always wondered how Ted found the energy at the end of a day to sit down at his battered typewriter. He would write about the situation on East European farms and often foretold cyclical disasters in Communist agricultural management. He wrote about prices, about relations between Communist fathers and their Western-oriented teen-age children, about incomes, about the standard of food in factory canteens, about jokes, about housing conditions, about what people thought of the Russians.

The first time I met Ted he said to me: "Forget the highfalutin stuff" (by which

he meant the communiqués in gobbledegook party prose), "and come and meet my sort of people." All his life he carried those lists of relatives with him, checking off the names one by one. Back in Vienna he would study more lists and work out his next itinerary. In all of Ted's tales, the names would be omitted, for long experiences had taught him the need for discretion.

He was loved in Cleveland, where, he estimates, he had attended some 14,000 ethnic dinners and where he will now run a travel, advice, and research agency for his former readers. He was loved, too, in Eastern Europe. He would sit long into the night passing on information about the other half of the family, jotting down a note to take back to Cleveland. His years in the Rumanian Orthodox ministry date back to the Twenties, but in a sense the vocation remains alive. In another sense, he became a latter-day Ernie Pyle. His persistence enabled him to overcome considerable physical obstacles in the form of blocked mountain passes in Yugoslavia, terrible roads, little sleep. His warmth of character melted all but the hardest of Communist officialdom.

Once, when we were taking a quick breather on a café terrace in Budapest, Ted peered at me through his thick spectacles and said: "I've never been an intellectual. I'm as hardheaded as my readers"—which was not true. Former Mayor Carl Stokes in 1970 proclaimed "Theodore Andrica Day" to laud what he called "our ambassador of good will to international understanding." Ted's old editor, Louis Seltzer, added: "He has been good for this world—for America and for Europe." □

