

Wilderness between the high-rises

Rica, 13, was born and grew up in a wild, green area, criss-crossed by narrow rivers, just outside the city of Bucharest.

Long before Rica was born, his dad Gica left the poverty of rural Romania and moved to Bucharest with his horse and cart. As he was entering the city, he noticed an area of wilderness that lay hidden behind the grey concrete. He built a little house for his family and moved in.

City expands

As the city grew, the grey high-rises came closer. Suddenly there was rubbish in the water and the grass. Old tyres, plastic bags, cardboard boxes and cans, even a fridge. Many blamed the rubbish on the Roma families that were living in the park. But actually it was the people in the city who thought it was convenient to chuck their rubbish in the area of wilderness.

Area becomes a park

One day, the area was discovered by a group of environmental activists. They are

overjoyed to find that 100 different species of birds and animals, including turtles and otters, were living so close to the city. But the area was under threat from poaching, illegal fishing and rubbish. After four years, the environmental activists managed to get the Romanian government to turn the area into a protected park. Lots of people now wanted the Roma families to move out. Gica refused.

"I'll never leave my home," he said.

In the end, the environmental activists realised that Gica could help them and they made him a forest warden. He is the only one who can live in the park now, and protect the animals and their natural habitat.

"Mum and all the children and grand children sleep in a flat in town," explains Rica. "But we visit dad every day. When I'm there, I miss things like running water and heating. But in town I miss the peace and tranquillity of nature." 🌍

9:00 a.m Good morning!

"We get up much earlier on school days, but on the weekend we get a lie-in," says Rica. His big sister never got to go to school. She got married and had children when she was a teenager.

"Things are different now," she says. "My daughter and my younger siblings will go to school first."



9:30 a.m To Ferentari

Today it's homework help and then football at the Alternative Education Club in Ferentari.



Artificial area gone wild

It was Romania's former dictator Ceaușescu who wanted to build an artificial lake in the area where the park is now located. The dictator was killed in the 1989 revolution, and the half-finished project was forgotten. But the water spread of its own accord and turned into a vast water delta. Wild animals were drawn here, and rare plants and

flowers began to grow. Some businessmen wanted to build high-rise flats and factories on the land. Some say that people set fire to the forest to destroy the area so they could build. But the wilderness was turned into a protected park instead.



Rica, 13

Lives in: A flat in Bucharest and in Vacaresti Park.

Likes: Football and music.

Loves: My family, our dogs and cats.

Wants to be: A forest warden like dad.





10.00 a.m Homework help

"When we first started coming to the Club, we'd never been to school before," says Rica. "Valeriu and the other adults did all they could to teach us to read and write, but it was difficult. Now it's going better. I learn something new every day."

1:00 p.m Time for football

"After homework help, everyone runs to the sports hall. There's football training for girls and boys."



3:00 p.m To the wilderness

Rica and his siblings take the bus and walk through the city to get to the wilderness. The last part of the journey is by the family's boat. It's got caught up in the reeds!



Still rubbish lying around

After all the years Bucharest's inhabitants spent throwing their rubbish in the park, it's going to take a long time to clean up. But Rica's mum does what she can.



4:00 p.m Finally home

The house that Rica's dad built all those years ago has been patched up and fixed many times.





4:30 p.m Fetching water

The park has a well with clean water. Rica's younger brothers fetch water for Gica, who is getting older.



5:00 p.m Checking the pigeons

Rica sees to his pigeons and feeds them corn and sunflower seeds. He and his dad have some 60 pigeons, and sometimes they let them out. "They always come back, unless they get caught by a hawk."



"We have three dogs and ten cats. Some of them have been best friends since they were little. I miss our dog Leo, who was run over by a car when he ran out of the park."

The rabbit doesn't like being picked up!



5:30 p.m Chopping wood

Rica fixes wood for dad's fire, so he can keep warm at night.



6:30 p.m Evening football game

Valeriu comes to visit in the park and plays an evening game of football.



8:00 p.m TV time

When Rica gets back into town, he puts on the TV, although he prefers listening to music. Soon it's bedtime, and then he longs for the silence of the wilderness.