Wilderness between the high-rises

Rica, 13, was born and grew up in a wild, green area, crisscrossed 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 tranquility of nature.”

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.
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!

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.

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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.
4:30 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."

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.