The Alchemical Journey

Part 3



James L. Marshall, *Beta Eta 1971*, and Virginia R. Marshall, *Beta Eta 2003*, Department of Chemistry, University of North Texas, Denton, TX 76203-5070, *jimm@unt.edu*

This episode follows Part 2, which appeared in the Fall 2020 issue of The HEXAGON. *The Alchemical Journey is the story of how the Rediscovery sites were tracked down, beginning in the summer of 1999. The first choice of sought elements was tellurium reported from the Transylvania Mountains of Romania. This was the most difficult choice, because "If we can do this one," Jenny and I decided, "we can do them all." The Alchemical Journey began before the days of Google Maps; and archival maps had to be located. This 3rd episode continues with our trip to the Apuseni Mountains (Transylvanias) of Romania.*

The day after we arrived at Cluj-Napoca, three of us—Dana, Jenny, and I—all assembled at the Transylvania Hotel with our rented car, ready to travel to the Apusenis. Joining us was Dr. Valer Rosa, who was an adventurer and explorer in addition to his duties as Professor of Molecular and Biomolecular Physics at Babes-Bolyai University, and an amateur geologist – and he was our original contact in Romania (see "The Alchemical Journey. Part 1"). We struck out in our rented automobile, following the country highway to the Transylvanias







TOP: Figure 1. On the road from Cluj-Napoca to the Apuseni Mountains (Transylvania Mountains).

MIDDLE: Figure 2. The formal entrance to the Apuseni Mountains.

Figure 3. Goats that have just crossed the road in the Apusenis, slowing traffic occasionally on the road.

(Figure 1). An hour later we entered the mountains (Figure 2) and began our drive following hair-pin turns, and occasionally dodging a herd of goats crossing the road, nimble-footed dashing down the slopes from the left and dashing up to the right (Figure 3). There were no roadside parks in this wilderness—comfort stops were done the old fashioned way, reminiscent of my boyhood days with my family in Texas during the '40s—stopping by the side of the road, girls going one way, guys the other.

Two hours later, we entered the village of Zlatna (Figure 4), a historic gold-mining center of the region. From the propaganda we had heard on the western side of the Atlantic, we had anticipated it being an unattractive pollution-ridden village. But the waste from the smelting plants had now been considerably cleaned up. The miners were waiting for us, assembled on an outside porch of a restaurant. Sitting at a stone table with concrete benches were bearded men with ragged jackets and trousers, muddy boots—and a tall blue-jacketed blonde with a baseball cap, who was Virgil Berberich, the Australian leader of the exploratory team of the local gold mining syndicate (Figure 5).

We were introduced all around. Jenny was uneasy—what a motley crew! But her fears were quickly mollified. The Romanian miners, one by one, stood up, walked over and kissed



Figure 4. Zlatna, the historic gold-mining center south of Cluj-Napoca. The name comes from the Russian word for "gold" ("zoloto").



Figure 5. Meeting and getting acquainted with the miners at a Zlatna outdoor eatery. Left side, closest, Jim Marshall; next, Virgil Berberich. Right side closest, Valer Tosa; next, Dana Pop.

Jenny's hand tenderly, with words not understood by her or me. What a sweet primitive culture! Dana giggled. "That's what they do here!" she said, "These are very gentle folk." The Aussie did not kiss her hand, but politely extended a handshake to both of us. "Hi, I'm Virgil. "Order them a round of beer," suggested Virgil. "They're doing us a favor."

"How do I do that?" I asked.

"The bartender—standing in the door—just look at him and hold up a finger."

The finger trick worked just fine. Soon bottles were being passed all around. The miners were now smiling broadly.

"I understand you are looking for the lost mine of Fascebánya," Virgil said.

"Yes, nobody in the U.S. knew anything about it."

"We found it," Virgil said. "Here, let me show you."

He unrolled large maps over the stone table. He weighed down one corner with his beer bottle, and borrowed mine to set at the diagonally opposed corner. "This covers about 100 square kilometers. Here is Zlatna," pointing to the lower left. "Here, about 10 kilometers to the west, should be Fascebánya."

I said, "The names on the map, of villages and rivers, were very strange, like we saw in in the Budapest Hotel."

"The names are Hungarian," Virgil said. He motioned to one of the miners, "Anton speaks Hungarian and identified the mine on the map."

Anton came over and pointed to a star on the map, with a tiny inked letters, "Itt van [Here it is]," he said, "Fascebánya."

Virgil said, "We think we can get there via this jeep trail," as he pointed to a dotted line projected off the "main" highway, "and then we will have to hike up a trail to the mine.

"How do we get there?" I asked. "We have a Hertz car, that's all."

"We have jeeps. Two of them. Look outside." (Figure 6).

"Wow, let's go," I said.

"Order them a couple more rounds first," Virgil said.

I raised my finger and the miners became even happier.

Virgil, Dana, Jenny, Valer, and I chatted away about old gold mines, the historical influence of Russia, the mess they left, the clean-up, and the plans for Australia to revitalize the gold production.

Virgil looked at the group, and observing the miners were all content, announced, "Okay, time to go."

With the linguistic help of Dana, I settled accounts with the proprietor. Everybody was standing up, shuffling out to the jeeps.

"Where do we sit?" asked Jenny.

Virgil said, "Dana and I will ride up front in the first car, with you two and Valer in the back." It was open, with hard, steel seats, with no protection above. "You can hold onto the crash bar," said Virgil. "The other fellows can ride in the second jeep."



Figure 6. Virgil Berberich, the tall Australian gentleman with the blue cap, and his main helpers in front of one of land rovers used to reach the mine.



Figure 7. At the end of the jeep trail, the trail leads up to the mine area. Dana Pop is in the light blue jack to the left.



Figure 8. Jim Marshall and Valer Tosa stand on the huge talus slope (waste rock developed at the base of the mine), a sign of the once-active area above.



Figure 9. Virgil Berberich and Jim Marshall in front of the Faţa Băii Mine (Fascebánya), now boarded up and inaccessible.

Jenny cried, "This is going to be a hoot!"

Brave girl. She jumped in and settled down on the seats, and I followed. We assembled our paraphernalia—she with her bag and her camera, with her coat wrapped around her waist. Likewise, I with my coat and my GPS dangling from my belt.

"Put on your seat belts!" cried Jenny. But there were none. We gripped the roll bar, as we drove off, wind in our hair. We careened out of the parking lot and onto the main highway, a narrow two-line highway occasionally shared with cattle or sheep herders which Virgil expertly avoided.

Then we turned onto the mountain dirt road. Jenny was getting into the mood. "Whee!" she cried as we roared up the slope.

The second jeep was right behind us, we saw the blowing dust and gravel as they tried to keep up. For 3 kilometers we twisted and turned, Jenny was now a cowgirl in rapture; she was singing and enjoying herself, as if we were in Billy Bob's in Ft. Worth. Meanwhile, I was frantically making waypoints on my Garmin-92 so that I could make accurate maps for any future groups that might want to attempt to duplicate this frantic dash up the mountain. As we ascended, the forests became more plush and wetter, and the roads muddier and more slippery. Jenny wrapped her coat around her as the increasing chill bit into her cheeks. After a while Jenny's teeth were chattering and she wasn't saying "Whee!" any more—the metal seats had taken their toll on our anatomy and the chill was cutting into our exuberance.

But then we broke into a clearing, and there it was—a huge talus cliff, slanting off to an unseen mine far above. Two hundred meters of shattered white rocks, porphyry, an ancient volcanic rock were cascading down the mountain, still far above us, looking as if the entire mountain had collapsed.

"Look! Gold!" cried Jenny, pointing to glittering yellow pebbles intermingled in the talus.

"No, just pyrite," Valer said. "Iron sulfide, fool's gold. Must be tons of it here."

There were rusty rails and mine cars in the clearing. Decades ago the miners had brought down the ore, but now the mines were abandoned—obviously not from the ancient days of Müller von Reichenstein, but from the later years of the 1800s, when gold mining had become very profitable.

Screech! We were there. The second jeep was just behind us, and the bearded miners tumbled out. Virgil walked over and consulted with the second group, then returned.

"The ancient mine itself is still further up. "Time for a hike, pointing to a muddy ravine twisting up the mountains." (Figure 7).

Thank goodness we were wearing hiking boots!

Huff, puff, a half-hour later, we broke out into a clearing. "Where are we?" I asked.

Virgil motioned, "The mine has to be up there," pointing to slide of rocks. "There's a talus slope, must be refuse from the mine (Figure 8). We trudged together to the top, and spied a ramshackle wooden frame, barely above a human's height, on the side of a mossy bank, protected by a thick grove of trees. Inside the frame was darkness.

This was it! (Figure 9) This was Fascebánya – or "Faczebaya," (used by Müller von Reichenstein in his publications) or "Faţa Băii" (Romanian transliteration). Virgil was impressed—"Was this really where tellurium was discovered?" he asked.

"Yes!" Jenny was right beside me, "This is it? Can we go inside?"

"No," Virgil said. "It's blocked inside. Intentionally. It would be too dangerous to go inside. Broken-down frames, possible cave-in—muddy—slippery—you wouldn't want to go in, anyway."

Virgil said, "The miners are impressed that you guys are so excited."

"Just where are they?" I asked. They had not come up with us.

Virgil pointed down the hill beside the creek, where the group was sitting down in the bushes. "I see they have found a blueberry patch." We could see their faces already stained blue. "I'm hungry too." He and Valer wandered down the hill, leaving Jenny and me alone.

We sat down on a huge boulder, Jenny and I, wet with the drips of dew falling from the ascending Aspens. We didn't care about the



Figure 10. Jim and Jenny Marshall in front of the mine area, "If we can find tellurium, we can find them all…."

wet. We held hands and looked at each other.

"This is it," I said.

"This is it," she repeated.

"Do you realize, "this was the most difficult site for us to find. And here it is!"

"Yes . . . "

"And do you know what this means? If we could do this—I raised my hand and moved it through a semicircle, taking in the wet grove about us, "the most difficult site of all . . . if we could do this, this means we can do all the rest!" (Figure 10)

"Beginner's Luck," said Jenny.

"What?"

"You told me that Paul Coelho promised Beginner's Luck. And we got it. Tellurium."

"Yes, I had forgotten!"

"So what does he promise now?"

"Well . . . if I remember correctly, he said that when Beginner's Luck no longer is operational, then the usual discipline of perseverance is required. And boldness. And patience."

"We should be able to do the rest."

"We are Pierre and Marie Curie. We'll get it done."

Pierre was the dreamer, the poet, the writer, but Marie was the sustainer, the driver, the visionary. Several times when I would become discouraged, and just sit down on a rock in the middle of the forest, or a bench in corner of some remote village, slumped and fatigued and ready to turn back, she would sit beside me. She would grab my hand and say "Let's go around the next corner and see if we find something!" And we always did. Her sense for anticipating the exciting future was absolutely mystical. With her there was no limit to what we could find.