Even though she has been back to Romania many times since fleeing the country with her family in the 1980s, Magia Ghetu, a graduate student at Indiana University’s School of Library and Information Science (SLIS), said the next trip will feel like the real homecoming.

Ghetu, who received a U.S. Department of State U.S. Student Fulbright award to conduct research this year on the way Romanians archive information in libraries, said she still feels a strong connection to Romania despite having lived in the United States more than 20 years. “My intention has always been to return to Romania some day,” Ghetu said. “I feel it is right to be a part of the rebuilding process there. At last, I am ready to help.”

Despite its relative modernity, Romania’s systems for cataloging information are inadequate, Ghetu said. She hopes to share what she’s learned at SLIS with Romanian archivists, librarians, historians, and information scientists as the Eastern European nation continues to irrigate and seed an information wasteland created during Nicolae Ceausescu’s 24-year reign.

“During the communist era, the archives were neglected, sometimes on purpose,” Ghetu said. “Marriage certificates, birth records, death records, and personal files are sitting in boxes with no labels, no way to know what’s inside them.”

Without a computer database, or even a card catalog of those boxes, it’s almost as if the documents, film, and audio tapes contained inside them do not exist. Access to those records, Ghetu explained, gives the claims of historians, journalists, and archivists legitimacy. “In a country that still struggles with its history, these records can provide an anchor of truth,” Ghetu said.

Still, many Romanians may not immediately take advantage of the freer information when it is made available. Ghetu said those who lived through Romania’s communist years may have a visceral aversion to public records. “It used to be that information was seen as something you could hold over someone’s head,” she said. “Eventually, I think Romanians will come around. They have a tradition of being very curious and academically oriented. Besides, I think many people will be eager to get their hands on their own files. These records will feel very powerful to them.”

A new, freer Romania is coaxing Ghetu and her family to consider returning to the country permanently. Great supporters of the country, the Ghetu family might never have left if Magia’s father, a controversial artist, had not been targeted by the government for surveillance. “He had problems with the secret police,” Ghetu said. “He was harassed by the Romanian Securitate, not for political reasons, but because of his artwork and physical appearance. They interfered with his ability to sell his paintings and made his life difficult because he did not want to work in the factories.

“Eventually my father got fed up. He applied for an American visa in 1978, and even though the visa was granted that same year, we had to wait until he got clearance from the Romanian authorities to leave the country, which took three years. During this time the Securitate tried to find something incriminating against my father, but they failed. So in 1981, after we’d been stripped of our money, documents, and citizenship, my parents seized the opportunity to leave Romania.”

The Ghetus landed in Queens, New York, and moved to eastern Pennsylvania in 1987. Magia grew up speaking both English and Romanian at home. In 2001, after completing her bachelor of arts in English Literature at the University of Pittsburgh, she moved to Bloomington to begin her graduate studies at SLIS.

continued on page 16
The Fulbright research grant will allow Ghetu to spend 10 months to conduct interviews with archivists and other professionals and to assess the state of some of the country’s archives. She will be working closely with a number of Romanian professionals, including Ioan Dragan, national archives director in Cluj and archive researcher at Babes-Bolyai University.

“I’m not sure exactly what I’m going to find,” Ghetu said. “A Romanian manual of archiving practice that is currently being used there is dated all the way back to the 1970s.”

The Society of American Archivists has given Ghetu some materials to donate to the archival program at Babes-Bolyai University, Ghetu’s host institution during her Fulbright studies. Ghetu has also been asked by Dragan to organize a conference on American archival studies for students interested in history and archival practices.

Last year, Ghetu was named a Midwest Archives Conference Louisa Bowen Memorial scholar, a title and award for archivist graduate students that includes a $750 stipend and a one-year membership to the regional professional society. Ghetu credited several SLIS faculty with her success and with helping her to prepare for her work abroad.

“The special commemorative book of youth creative work will remain at the Chamtse Ling Temple.

Dedication continued from page 6

SLIS Student continued from page 7

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“Saundra Taylor’s course in manuscripts has given me confidence,” Ghetu said. “Phil Bantin is an inspiration with how much he takes on, what he’s taught himself, and his interest in international issues. And Carol Choksy has given me a perspective of records management in the business world. I have been working with her this summer to translate the current Romanian archives law and write an article about its relationship to the archival laws of other countries.”

—David Bricker
IU Media Relations