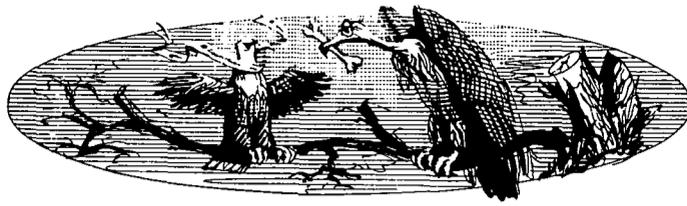


THE NATION'S PULSE



EAST SIDE STORY

by James P. Pinkerton

There are half a million people jammed into the eleven square miles of the Los Angeles Police Department's East Side Division. The newest immigrants are from south of south of the border, mostly El Salvador. The demographics are Third World: few old people, lots of children. Many are on public assistance, but the ambition that brought them to El Norte inspires them to work, starting with the gritty jobs citizens spurn.

Spend one Saturday night with the CRASH (Community Resources Against Street Hoodlums) Unit of the LAPD and you'll wonder how people could ever romanticize street gangs. On the screen they sing and dance in finger-snapping formation, fighting chivalrously for love and honor. In today's Los Angeles they idle amid alcohol and urine on stoops and porches, pawing at their women and toying with their guns, waiting for the next petty rip-off or drive-by shooting.

If the East Side Division has no relation to *West Side Story*, neither is it like *Fort Apache*, *The Bronx*, the 1980 Paul Newman movie that defined urban decay for the popular imagination. It is poor but upwardly mobile, a hub of light manufacturing, and home to the service workers who clean the offices, houses, and pools of the Anglophone affluent. A good analogy is Hell's Kitchen, the brawling, boozing Manhattan underworld that steeled the Irish for their climb up the ladder.

As a "ride-along" with the East Side CRASH Unit on a recent Saturday night, I watched twelve cops deal with about 5,000 "gangbangers." The "bangers" are the sharks of the East Side sea: predatory, yet part of the urban ecology. The dragnet of the law may catch the big fish—the green card counterfeiters, the wanted killers—but a wide legal mesh lets the rest slip through.

Ten p.m. My guide for the evening, Sgt. Knight,¹ has driven the black-

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and-white just a few blocks from the station before he points into a sidewalk crowd. All I see is a tableau of neon, white shirts, and shadows. "Crack dealers," he says, with the precision of an ornithologist. I squint, straining to identify a familiar visual cue. It feels like first grade, puzzling over *My Weekly Reader*, trying to count the giraffes hidden in the picture.

"Why don't you bust them?"

"Wouldn't stick," says Knight. "The lawyers would say, 'No probable cause. How could the arresting officer have seen the alleged transaction from a moving car at night?' Maybe the perp[etrator] plea bargains, or we can get him on a pro[bat]ion violation. So he does six months. These dudes aren't afraid of jail: it's an extension of their lifestyle, not much worse than the way they live now." What they do fear is deportation: a perverse tribute to the standard of living Amer-

¹The names have been changed to protect the innocent, the guilty, and the everyday heroic.



ica affords its prison population.

On the next corner a teenager signals. What does he want? As Knight stops the car, he has no way of knowing whether the kid wants to give him a tip or shoot him. The kid doesn't know, either. He's stoned; wants to get to Hyacinth Boulevard. Not tonight. LAPD's motto is "To Protect and to Serve": nothing about "to transport."

A bulletin blusters over the radio: "Three-CRASH-one. See the man, Ninth and Remington. Shots fired. Suspect described as Hispanic male, black pants, white T-shirt." Amazing: just like "Adam 12." We arrive to back up two cops who have five suspects hugging a wall. Barking at them in Spanish to keep their legs apart, their hands behind their heads, and their fingers locked, the cops frisk them roughly and thoroughly. It looks harsh, but they've learned that a tiny derringer can kill you just as dead as an AK-47.

However, these guys aren't out to hurt anyone. They're Hispanic Ralph Kramdens, working-class stiffs who were drinking *cerveza* on the street when the cops responded. They say they don't know who fired the shots. They may be gangbangers, but that loose term covers everyone from trigger-happy adolescents to the mellow middle-aged. (Hispanic gangs are generally territorial, organized into "sets" to defend turf. By contrast, the mostly black Bloods and Crips focus on money, sharing the city's drug traffic with Asian and white biker gangs.)

When the cops arrived, one of the men was cradling a shiny metal contraption with knobs and hooks, easily mistaken for a sawed-off shotgun. He finally persuades the officers that it's a carpet-puller. It's no crime to carry a gun look-alike, but it's not too bright in an area where so many carry the real thing. The carpet man gets his implement back, along with a lecture on street deportment.

Another shooting: the turf of the Loco Ponies, a wild bunch implicated in a recent drive-by shooting.

Adrenalin thrills through me as we race over. "Secret Agent Man," the old Johnny Rivers song, reverberates in my naive head ("There's a man who leads a life of danger . . ."). Then I think to ask whether the cops wear bulletproof vests. "Of course," comes the answer. A chill goes down my unprotected spine. The night was young, but the spring was out of my step. Naked prey that I was, I quickly adapted to crouching and terrain-hugging.

Our black-and-white and an unmarked police car converge from opposite ends of the street. Knight and the other driver kill their headlights; police never illuminate each other in unknown situations. Two teenage couples lounging on the stoop proclaim their innocence before the cops say a word.

More cops come and probe the darkness with their flashlights, finding more bangers in the alley. Soon a dozen teens line the sidewalk. The CRASH Unit knows most of them, but they carry packs of "field identification cards" to record new information, including "moniker/alias." Often fellow gangbangers know each other only as "Cuchito," or "Droopy," or "Juke." The boys are ordered to remove their shirts, revealing serpentine tattoos on their left shoulder blades. They've all been "jumped in" to the gang, an initiation that includes a brutal beating. If they can survive that, these "made" homeboys can laugh at a post-Miranda police interrogation.

Sometimes the girls are more responsive. But not Little Suzie. Asked if she's been arrested before, she answers with some pride that she was busted for GTA (Grand Theft Auto). When? Age 12. She was shot in the back last year. Having made a full recovery, she's an equal opportunity gang member.

Sergeant Knight escorts another girl, Serena, away from the group. He takes a fatherly approach: Why is she hanging with these losers? "I'm not in the Loco Ponies," she says, although she likes to kick back with them. Knight tells Serena that a girl her age was shot in a drive-by the previous Tuesday.

Serena shrugs. Knight presses: "We think the Loco Ponies did it."

"It wasn't us—I mean them. It wasn't the Ponies." Serena covers her mouth, winces, and looks away. She's scared now—not of Knight, but of her peers, who must wonder what she's saying to the cops.

"How old are you?" Knight asks. Serena says 18. Right. She'll be of age by the '96 Olympics, if she lives that long. Serena is from Glendale, an old-line suburb ten miles away. What can you say to a kid who commutes to be part of . . . this? Sgt. Knight shakes his head and returns her to the lineup.

A cop finds a loaded .38 in the bushes. Since nobody claims ownership, the piece will be taken to the lab for an evidence check and destroyed. As for the shots fired, no witness means no arrest. I look around and understand why the neighbor who anonymously called 911 does not want to come forward. Since loitering isn't a violation anymore, all the CRASH cops can do is disperse the bangers. They'll reassemble tomorrow, maybe even later tonight.

Cop talk here is a stilted jargon of Latinate words, acronyms, and numbers. They don't say: "Sgt. Knight talked to the girl and then let her go." They say: "The officer counseled and released the detainee." Cops never arrest someone if they can "apprehend the individual." Arrests for "CCW" (carrying a concealed weapon) and "ADW" (assault with a deadly weapon) are common. Armed robbery is a "Two-eleven," after its citation in the California Penal Code. Domestic disputes are "Two-seven-threes." A prostitute is a "Bee," for Section 647-B.

The gangs are on to the police patois. Murder is Section 187 of the Code: when bangers want to intimidate someone they spraypaint his name and "187" in conspicuous places. If that person should happen to die, the gangs superimpose a cross on the original graffiti. I thought of the ace of spades, death's calling card in the Old West. Same thing. The ancient Greeks did it, too. Small world.

Another shooting. Code 2. That means hurry, but don't use your "reds" or your siren. Code 1 means "Pick up your laundry on your way over," while at the words "officer down," all available radio cars scramble, and even the most fearless urban bicycle messenger is wise to stay on the sidewalk.

As we roll, Knight spots a derelict shambling across the asphalt. He brakes the car, deliberately blocking the intersection to prevent another vehicle from mowing the man down. One more

story in the naked city, which Knight would never think to log. Knight has been a part of these stories for his two decades on the force. Pushing fifty, he is still lean and taut, but also graying and wrinkling. Knight has no desire to be another black-bordered photograph on the wall at the station house; but unconscious courage empowers him to walk up to strangers in pitch-black alleys with only a flashlight in his hand.

Our Code 2 is a bug-eyed man silently clutching his bloody forearm. A .22 slug has made a clean entrance and a slightly less clean exit. It looks painful; if it were my arm, I'd share my feelings with the world. But then I've never used fortified wine or crack as an anesthetic.

"Who shot you?" the cops ask. Dunno, he says. Maybe he's in shock, or too wasted to remember. Maybe he doesn't want to fink on a buddy who plunked him. His mellow attitude toward ballistic trauma argues for the proposition that life is cheap. Knight opines that the crime will probably not be solved.

The ambulance comes, followed by a mobile TV news unit (they monitor the police frequencies). The emergency medical technician examines the victim, who refuses a gurney. "Okay, stallion, have it your way," the EMT sighs. He knows better than to challenge a man who barely notices a bullet wound. The mini-cam guys take off, too. Not enough blood.

That night, the number of drive-by shootings for the year surpassed 100 when three Lynwood kids were killed as they sat in their Oldsmobile. Three children were kidnapped. Another boy played Russian roulette—and lost.

Enforcing the law in this part of town is like picking mercury off a floor. In a city of 3.3 million, the 8,253 cops can move crime around with sweeps and barricades, but they can't clean it up. Last year the cops recorded 324,486 crimes, a quarter of them violent, including 873 homicides. For the most part, the police just process misery, like actuaries or epidemiologists.

The city is starting to turn the wheels of justice a little faster. The new Street Terrorism Enforcement and Protection Act (STEP) is what L.A. attorneys call "a baby RICO": if cops can "establish a pattern of gang activity," prosecutors can serve them with an injunction, which effectively relaxes search-and-seizure rules for the police. STEP will make a real difference if it survives a court challenge.

Driving past a herd of stretch limos corralled in front of an old warehouse, Knight identifies "Delirium," a trendy club for Hollywood slummers. As in the East, the hippest, hottest places are

in dangerous neighborhoods. Whites from the West Side, dressed in night-crawler black, queue up to boogie down. The knowledge that locals are shot and killed around the corner only adds to the fun of cruising down to the wild side of town, so long as valet parking is provided.

East Side is violent, but so were Dodge City and Al Capone's Chicago,

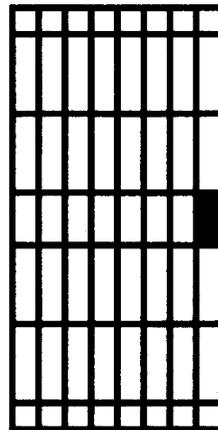
and the gumption and pluck that has brought people to the East Side, to the threshold of the American Dream, will someday soon carry them over. The newest hyphenated Americans deserve life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Their progress would be eased if they were physically safer, if a jaded avant-garde had to look elsewhere for violence to romanticize. □

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SPECTATOR'S JOURNAL



ROMANIA WATCH

by Victor Gold

On the eve of Romania's May 20 election, the student "hooligans" who had started it all last December were still talking it up in the square at Timisoara. An American visitor saw it as Hyde Park, Romanian-style; which is to say that not all of the speakers stuck to somber polemics. Some sang original revolutionary songs, others delivered comedy routines. But whether speaking, singing, or doing parody impressions of their late, despised dictator, all performed with the unleashed energy of young people who've had to bottle it up over the years, under penalty of death or worse.

There are two regnant theories of sidewalk justice that prevail when the fate of Nicolae and Elena Ceausescu is mentioned. One school of thought, which might be viewed as a kind of Romanian Civil Liberties Union thesis, is that the Ceausescus should have been brought before a Nuremberg-like tribunal, tried and then shot; the second is that, trial or no trial, they should have been dispatched in slow, painful stages.

To the extent that this second option might offend the civil sensibilities of a visitor, let it be said that it reflects not so much a cruel national temperament as it does the legacy of a quarter-century of Romania's systematic brutalization by a Marxist Caligula who preferred to maim rather than kill his victims. Hitler, relishing scratchy film of his enemies hanging lifeless from meathooks, had something to learn from Ceausescu, who once ordered his foreign intelligence aide Ion Pacepa to silence, not kill, a dissident Romanian living in Paris, in this way: "She should be beaten to a pulp and have her jaw, teeth, and arms broken, so that she will never again be able to speak or write," Ceausescu directed. "Beaten in her own home so that she and others will learn that no place is safe for people who

calumniate the proletarian dictatorship, not even their own homes . . ."

On the eve of the election following Ceausescu's overthrow and execution, one of the speakers in the square at Timisoara recalled that dark period in the life of his country, then ventured the hope that regardless of the outcome of the vote, Romania's tomorrow would be better than its yesterday.

Someone in the crowd shouted a response and the crowd picked it up. I asked our interpreter what they were chanting. He said it was, "Freedom, freedom, freedom!"

Of the impressions I brought back after traveling to Romania as an election observer, the strongest was that the revolution begun there last December was not yet over; nor would it be, until the crowds in Timisoara and in Bucharest's University Square said it was over. Middle-aged and older Romanians (notably labor-unionists), having known nothing but a socialist order since the end of World War II, might be willing to settle for some modified version of a statist society—Ceausescuism without Ceausescu. But young Romanians, having defied and defeated one of the most brutal dictatorships in history, aren't going to settle for the old order in a new guise. When they say "freedom," they have a model in mind and it goes far beyond

anything Mikhail Gorbachev and his post-Marxist reformers have in mind when they speak of glasnost and perestroika.

"Here," said a young election official, pointing to a copy of the U.S. Constitution translated into Romanian. "This is our guide." Then, in one of those goosebump-producing lines that Oliver Stone or Ed Asner would swear had been programmed by the CIA (or written on cue cards for Ronald Reagan), he added: "America is the beacon of freedom for the world."

On the following day, Romanians turned out to vote in record numbers. The frequently heard line is that they cast ballots in their country's first free election in forty-five years. More accurately, it was the first in Romanian history. They queued up in lines often two blocks long, then turned in their identity cards in exchange for official rubber stamps to mark their ballot choices. After voting, they returned the stamps to election officials to get back their identity cards; a primitive method, but as New Mexico Governor Garrey Carruthers, head of our observer team, pointed out, if it's the Romanian way to keep people from voting twice, who are we to argue?

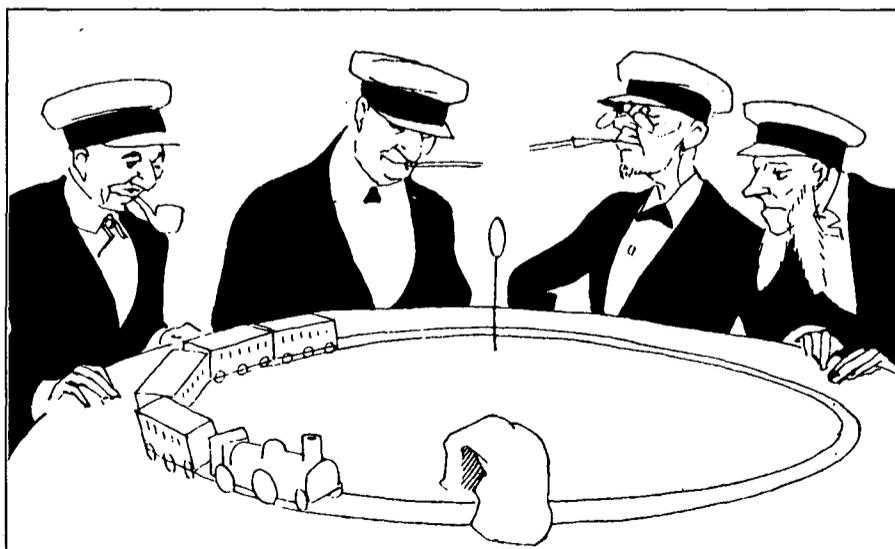
Was Romania's May 20 national election free and fair? News accounts told of voter coercion and fraud in some areas, but based on what our observer team saw and heard, I'd say

it was a valid election, applying generally accepted standards of what constitutes a free-and-fair vote. Not to dismiss reports of irregularities; only to say that in visiting fifty or so urban and rural polling sites in three widespread areas of the country—including late-night spot checks of the actual vote count—our group came upon no incident of fraud or coercion.

How then to explain the landslide victory of, as one television report loosely put it, "the closest thing to a Communist option" on the Romanian ballot? In this random observer's view, the main reason for this outcome lay in the fact that after a quarter-century of paralyzing Ceausescuism, the anti-Communist opposition in Romania was unequipped to conduct an effective national campaign on six months' notice. The most obvious evidence was the inability of either the Liberal or the Peasant party to achieve even a semblance of unity among those opposing Ion Iliescu and the National Salvation Front. Eighty-three parties were listed on the ballot, adding to the confusion of those participating in their first free election.

Compounding this failure, the opposition leaders challenging Iliescu for the presidency—Liberal candidate Radu Campeanu and Peasant party leader Ion Ratiu—were no match for the wily Iliescu when the opportunity came to reach a nationwide audience in a two-hour televised debate during the final days of the campaign. With Campeanu having spent a decade, and Ratiu thirty years, in enforced exile, Iliescu was able to press the point that, whatever the reasons they had for their absence, his opponents weren't in touch with Romania's needs.

In short, the NSF didn't have to rely on coercion and fraud to win the May 20 election. Nurtured on a socialist order, the majority of Romanians, though opposed to Ceausescu-style Communism, cast their ballots for democratic change-within-limits; though as subsequent events have



Victor Gold, national correspondent for The American Spectator, was a member of the official White House team sent to observe the recent Romanian elections.