Romania

By the time I arrived in Bucharest in 1985, Romania had been suffering through four decades of Communist rule, half of it under the megalomaniacal Nicolae Ceausescu and his wife Elena.

Determined to pay back all western debt, everything that could be exported — wheat, oil, natural gas — was. Whatever could be imported — oranges, bananas, critically important medicines — wasn't. In the winter of 1984, the regime had the heat cut down to a minimum and an untold number of people froze to death in their flats. And Ceausescu was in the midst of a building campaign — the systematization — of cities and towns, in which old town squares were leveled and high rise blocs put up in their place. A fifth of Bucharest had been leveled for The Avenue of the Victory of Socialism.

But I had not come to Romania to watch the degradation of its people and its cities; I had come to document Rabbi David Moses Rosen's state within a state. Funded by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee and the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany, Rosen had created the most active Jewish community anywhere in the Soviet bloc.

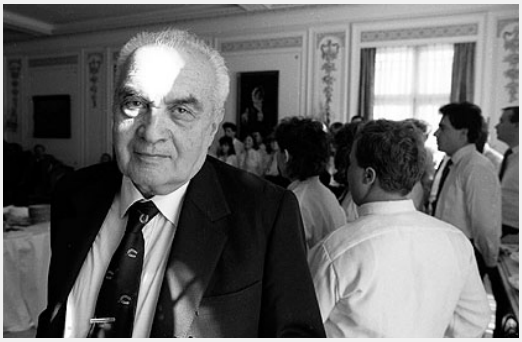
I made a half dozen trips to Romania in service to my first book, Out of the Shadows, and those trips took place between December, 1985 and August of 1990. But I continued to visit the country in the years after and continue to do so today.

Following is an essay I wrote for Out of the Shadows but it has been updated in 2017.

One night each week in Istanbul's Sirkesi station, they attach a single sleeping car onto the northbound train, and if you stay on it long enough, it will wend its way through Sofia, cross the Danube and stop in Bucharest, then make its way up to Iasi and into Odessa, where they turn it around. But on Christmas night, 1985, I stepped off the train in the glum Bucharest station and taxied my way through the darkened city to the once famed, now forgotten Hotel Athénée Palace and watched snow sweep across the square outside. The next morning, walking through the old Jewish quarter along Strada Sfanta Vineri, I decided on a whim to visit the Choral Temple and the Jewish federation's office next door.

I have recounted in the introduction how I met the legendary Rabbi Rosen that first day, and after meeting him, and before I went off to have lunch in the kosher soup kitchen, I spent the morning sticking my head into Jewish community offices, saying hello, taking a few pictures like the one on the left. Wry old characters would ask who the hell I was, and wanted to know, with a wink: what the going rate was for modeling these days?

President of the Bucharest community and former director of the national railway system, Teodor Blumenfeld (pictured below) walked me out to Strada Sfanta Vineri, dispensing East bloc-style Laertes advice as we strolled along. "Don't change money on the



street. Don't eat dinner in your hotel, the kosher kitchen will fix you up a sack to take along. Watch what you say to people, especially strangers you meet and they start criticizing the regime. It's the trap they always use. Call me if you have problems." Then he watched me make my way past the cranes and bulldozers devouring the city, building Nicolae Ceausescu's Avenue for the Victory of Socialism.

I found the kosher restaurant on Strada Popa Soara and was immediately set upon by a group of elderly pensioners. "They call us the Monte Carlo boys," they said as they pulled up chairs to chat and tell jokes.

"Say, you know why we keep our windows closed in winter? So people on the street won't catch cold."

"I bet you don't know what we used to use in Romania before candles" I didn't. "Electricity."

I had planned to stay in Romania for four or five days, but it would be three weeks before I left. I spent my time documenting community life, social welfare activities and going home with people in both Bucharest and Iasi. In Iasi, Simon Caufman, head of the community, drove me to the Jewish cemetery and showed me the mass grave where some 10,000 Jewish men were buried after the German and Romanian armies slaughtered them in June, 1941, hence the picture above.

In a country where almost nothing worked, Rabbi Rosen's team was delivering 1,600 meals on wheels in seven cities — six days each week, and I went along with Peter Fischer, in the photo on the left, as he brought a hot meal to Olga Hauswasser in Bucharest.

I returned to Romania for a month the next winter, then spent another four weeks there the summer of 1987 where I plunged into the countryside and met people like Rohrmil Drimer, pictured left, who was the only Jew in the village of Botiza. He worked for Rabbi Rosen as a ritual slaughterer and traveled four days every week to prepare kosher meat in northwestern Romania.

And throughout Romania you could stumble upon boys and girls studying for their bar and bat mitzvahs. That might seem quite normal to most people, but there were no bar mitzvahs going on in Yugoslavia, Bulgaria and Czechoslovakia then, with a precious few happening — at most, one every two years — in Poland.

Dorohoi: a sagging town far to the north of Bucharest in Bukovina, nestled under the belly of the Ukraine. When the 20th century began, Dorohoi was an outpost of the Austrian empire, where Jews spoke German as a mother

tongue, traded in grain, ran small shops and taverns, and helped supply the Austrian troops garrisoned there. Of its 14,000 residents, 11,000 were Jews. In 1987, 257 remained. "Some people call us the last shtetl in the world," Elias Rohlich (pictured, seated, on the left), a community worker, said one July morning as we walked through the town center. "The old people speak Yiddish and German, and we keep a community going with the lunchroom, a Hebrew class, an old age home — so there's a real community here — a kehilla."

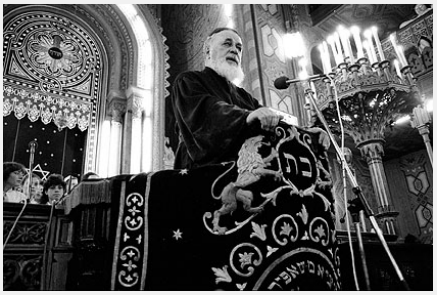
Dorohoi had something other cities in Romania didn't have: a rabbi. Mr. Waserman (photo left), a cheerful little man with a stubby white beard, spoke several languages, all of them with a Yiddish accent heavier than the lunch I was eating in the Dorohoi kosher kitchen. He held up fingers to count. "I lead the praying, I do the teaching, I'm the schoiket (ritual slaughterer) and the moihel (performing circumcisions). I'll tell you what else I am. I'm a bargain!"

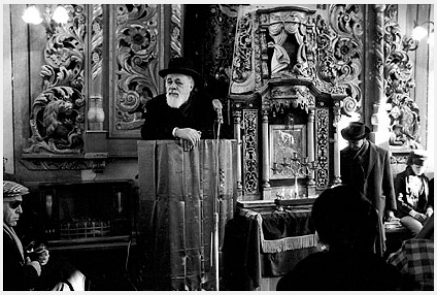
He was also irreplaceable. Like everywhere else in Romania, Dorohoi's community was shrinking and the only other rabbi, besides Rosen, was in Timisoara. Rohrlich said, "110 of our people are over the age of 60, and 36 of them are in the Jewish old age home. Last year, 27 Jews here left for Israel and 35 have applied to go. But it would be wrong to call this a dying community," he said. "Everyone here goes to Israel. Almost none of us use it for a way-station for someplace else. Romania's Jews are moving. They're not dying." Rohrlich had a point. According the the Ministry of Immigration and Absorption in Jerusalem, 385,000 Romanian Jews had settled in Israel since the end of the war, making them the single largest Ashkenazi minority group in the Jewish state.

During my summer visit in 1987, I met Rabbi Rosen in the hallway of the Jewish community office in Bucharest. By this time, he had heard I'd been coming back time and again and that I was documenting Jewish life in his country. The portly rabbi, who was talking to someone else when he saw me, steamed his way over, and while poking his finger into my sternum, said, "You will be here on 13 December so you can travel with me when I visit the communities for Hanukkah."

I looked at him, eyes widening. He paused, sighed slightly and said in a mock gracious manner, "Oh, would you like to come?"

If I have taken tens of thousands of pictures in Central and Eastern Europe over the fifteen years I dedicated myself to this project, I could easily say that Hanukkah in Romania was the most moving experience I had—and documented. Once each year, empty synagogues were swept and mopped. Giant industrial heaters were rolled in and turned on for days before the big event. And then Rabbi Rosen and his entourage, which consisted of a children's choir, officials from his office, local politicians and diplomats from Israel, would all file into the synagogue for singing and speeches. Afterwards, giant feasts were served with mountains of potato latkes, steaming bowls of borscht, and, as always, slivovitz.









In September of 1990 I drove into Bucharest from Bulgaria. Both countries were suffering mightily in those first years after Communism's collapse; shortages, electrical brown outs, crime, fear and uncertainty were the only things in abundance. Romanian ineptitude was as legendary as ever. A single passport worker was checking the car traffic over the Danube. It took me nine hours to cross the bridge.

Bucharest, however, was far from the dour, glum city it was before the revolution. Shops had little more merchandise than before but everyone in and out of them was dispensing opinions wholesale; loudly, vociferously, in print and on the street. Where television had been limited before to two hours each day — and most of that glorifying the Ceausescu family — now it was running full time and freedom of the press for broadcasters meant endless hours of rock videos. Work on the Avenue for the Victory of Socialism had ground to a halt. The dictator's gaping Palace of the Republic, its exterior completed just before his overthrow, looked like an overgrown wedding cake dropped in the middle of an empty, weed-filled yard. It would be another decade before it finally became the country's Parliament.

At the Jewish federation office, some of the elderly men I'd met on earlier visits had retired to Israel. A couple were in nursing homes. One had died. Teodor Blumenfeld was looking wan. He said his wife was ill. At the kosher

restaurant, most of the Monte Carlo boys were still there, but Romanian democracy, such as it was, brought them little joy. Again, their jokes were a reflection of the times. "A man lays down a bottle cap on the table, turns it over and asks a Czech, a Hungarian and a Romanian: what do you see? The first two say it's a bottle cap. The Romanian says it's a frying pan."

A few mornings later the car was loaded and before driving off toward Hungary, I swung by the Jewish federation office on Sfanta Vineri. Rabbi Rosen was standing at his window looking out on the courtyard when I entered. We shook hands, I thanked him for my kosher lunches, asked after his wife. He asked if I'd send a few pictures. Small talk concluded, I headed for the door but stopped to ask, "I guess things will be easier for you and the community now, no?" He turned away from the window to look at me. He had a blank look on his face.

"I mean, now that the government is democratic — so to speak."

"Democratic?" He smiled. "They're bastards. They're thieves. They're crooks," and he turned back toward the window. "But I can work with them."

David Moses Rosen continued to "work with them" until he died in 1994 and I continued to return to Romania throughout the 1990s, as I attended Hanukkah celebrations and visited the newly-opened Jewish school in Bucharest in 1999.

In 1999 I shot my own film about a Jewish soup kitchen in the Romanian city of Arad. While making that film, which ran on ABC News Nightline as Aunt Rosie's Kitchen, I visited a half dozen elderly Jews in their homes. As we sat in high-ceilinged rooms, they opened their family scrap books, pointed to pictures of parents, siblings or friends, and told me stories about a world that no longer exists.

As I sat there, I kept thinking that each of these people, like Rosie Jakab, pictured below, left, was like a library unto themselves. And when they leave us, as they invariably do at funerals like the

one I shot in Arad in July 1999, they would be taking all the stories in their libraries with them.

I decided to do something about that, and that is how my oral history institute, Centropa, was founded. But that's another story.