

## **A Week in Jassy (Iasi)**

Linda Hugle, 1996

In 1902, the STEINFELD family emigrated from Jassy, Romania to Philadelphia. Ninety-four years later, my 21-year old daughter Brandy and I returned to Iasi/Jassy in pursuit of whatever history and records they might have left behind. This trip had been her idea, a college graduation gift.

Our research expectations were fairly low for several reasons. Neither of us spoke Romanian nor could we read or understand Hebrew. In spite of the good advice of previous travelers (reported in ROM-SIG), we had neglected to contact the state archives in Bucharest in advance to request research permission in Iasi. We were also aware that most of Romania's Jews had emigrated in the 1970s to Israel so who would remain to guide us in our research? Nevertheless, we would be satisfied just to see this place, perhaps to feel the "ancestral pull" other heritage travelers had reported, and to learn a little of its history.

### Gaining Research Permission in Bucharest

Our trip began in Bucharest, two days of getting acclimated and wandering by foot. We were unimpressed with Ceaucescu's architecture and the tourist sites, particularly since nearly every museum and concert hall was closed for the summer season.

We did visit the Arhivelor Statului (state archives) at B-dul Gheorgui-Dej #29. The non-English-speaking guard sent us away, pointing next door to the Ministry of Justice, a scary place we walked into and quickly out of. Returning to #29, we scrawled a note in English and handed it to the guard, who then found someone to translate it. Mrs. Gabriela Birceanu then emerged and shepherded us through the process, even providing us with paper and pen (see how unprepared we were!) so we could write a letter requesting permission to use the Iasi archives for genealogical research. This was on Wednesday morning, but she said we could not research there until the following Monday. The letter had to include our research purpose and time period. Fortunately, I left this fairly broad (1800s) because I later learned they'd enforce this limitation.

### A Lucky Encounter

On Thursday, we took the IC (Intercity) train to Iasi. I was impressed with how comfortable and clean the train was--I had been told Romanian trains were miserable and dirty. We had the old-style tickets, with some mystery numbers on the backs, so just found a compartment and hoisted our too-heavy suitcases up onto the luggage racks. It quickly became apparent we were in the wrong cabin, but not before we met a true gem, a young woman returning to Iasi who heard our English and introduced herself. Nicoleta accompanied us the entire five hour trip, helping us find our cabin and joining us there. If I could give one piece of impossible advice to others heading to Romanian towns for research, it would be this: meet someone wonderful on the train on your way there. Nicoleta was our ticket to great success and a wonderful impression of Iasi. Translating and navigating by tram, she accompanied us nearly everywhere we went during our week

in Iasi. We ate several wonderful meals, prepared by her loving but non-English speaking mother, in her apartment.

### Impressions of Iasi

Iasi is quite a spectacular city. Nestled in a valley of seven hills, Romania's "Rome", Iasi sports some of the "communist architecture" seen in Bucharest, but unlike Bucharest still retains its own flavor. The people we met were well educated and multilingual. We were told that the university is Romania's oldest and Europe's third oldest. Certainly it holds great influence over this town of poets and scientists. One of the town's pleasant surprises was the proliferation of statues of poets and writers and the dearth of similar honors for warriors. A disappointment was Ceaucescu's demolition of Iasi's and the world's first Yiddish theatre.

We could not research until Monday at the archives, a blessing according to Nicoleta as, she assured us, workers are far more helpful on Mondays than on Fridays. Therefore, we spent some time taking in the city. The Botanical Gardens, the university frescoes, an orphanage where Nicoleta has committed to the support of a troubled 15-month old girl, the palace museums, handicraft shops, and the forests nearby occupied us.

Part of my mission was to find some local history books and maps, a mission I failed, unfortunately. However, in its pursuit I chanced upon another lucky encounter. At the Galleriile Anticariat on Lapusneanu Street #24, I met the owner, Maestro Dumitru Grumazescu. Mr. Grumazescu was wonderfully hospitable and interested in local Jewish history. From him, I received a copy of a 1926 book, "Romanii in America", which includes a chapter about the Evreii (Jews) who emigrated. Obviously a key figure in Iasi's intelligentsia, he introduced us to poets and to his fabulous postcard collection of old Iasi. His antique bookstore had been stripped of local history and Judaica by an Israeli friend recently, but he promised to locate more and ship them to me. Two fond memories of Iasi are drinking Romanian wine with Mr. Grumazescu and two noted poets in the anticariat and eating a gourmet meal prepared by his chemical engineer wife. Another feature much appreciated was the Vivaldi playing in his store, a treasured break from the bad American rock and roll heard everywhere else.

### The Jewish Community Center

We planned to visit the Jewish cemetery, but had read that the Chevra Kadisha records at the Jewish Community Center would provide a guide to burial sites. With this and the purchase of Mr. Kara's much-awaited book about the (now destroyed) old cemetery in mind, we visited the Jewish Community with our friend Nicoleta as translator. We were welcomed by three older gentlemen, none of whom spoke English. Since I had no death dates for my ancestors, they could not look them up for me-- apparently the books are chronological only and an approximate year could mean a records search of several days. Iasi's Jewish community had been quite large, after all. Besides, when I gave the year of emigration, the men laughed and one commented "We have only two times here--pre-regime and post-regime." A year as ancient as 1902 was too remote for them. This was disappointing, but inquiries about Mr. Kara were more productive. We were told he comes to the Center about 11:00 a.m. daily and we could

find him Monday morning.

We returned as scheduled and Mr. Kara introduced himself in perfect English. Kara is his pen name, he explained; his real name is Schwartz. I asked about the gravestone inscriptions book Paul Pascal had mentioned and he located a copy for us. He has written over 100 mostly unpublished manuscripts, many about local history. I mentioned the village of Codaesti (Koh-duh-yesht) and yes he had about a 10-page manuscript he'd written about that village as well. It was in Romanian and he offered to have it translated for us. The translator would charge about \$3.00 per page. I was to call him the next day to confirm, but was unable to reach him before our train left. I gave our friend Nicoleta the money plus an additional donation and she went to pick it up. Given the slow state of mail from Romania, I am still awaiting this treasure's arrival.

### Mishpocheh

One of the gentlemen at the Jewish Community Center on our first visit had asked my grandmother's name and recognized the unusual surname. Before I knew what was happening, he was on the phone to Mr. Leon Steinfeld, a retired lawyer, and we were given directions to Mr. Steinfeld's apartment. We visited Mr. Steinfeld and his wife, Rosalie, twice. On our first visit, we were warmly greeted by this distinguished and well-read gentleman in his eighties. We shared family histories and didn't see any immediate connections except one: both Steinfeld families had come to Iasi from the little village of Codaesti. On our second visit, we brought good news from the archives--his grandfather and my grandmother's grandfather were brothers! I'd never heard of family remaining in Romania and he'd never heard of family in America, but there we were.

Leon showed me a most amazing document: his father's Romanian citizenship papers. I made photocopies but am still stunned. Here was a man who was at least third generation Romanian, whose grandfather had come to Romania in 1810, yet who was granted citizenship only in 1932. Various stamps were affixed to the certificate, showing that even in 1932 Jews had to pay for the privilege of citizenship. Included were various testimonials including birth records, addresses and a copy of his parents' marriage certificate. Presumably, such documents would be available at the Iasi Municipal Archives (different building housing documents less than 100 years old) for interested researchers.

Leon's brothers, sisters, and aunts had all emigrated to Israel and their descendants were all there. Only he and his wife remained in Romania. He shared many stories, including the tragedy of the 1941 pogrom in Iasi. The Nazis had searched apartment houses, forcing all Jews they found to board a train where they were suffocated as the train traveled back and forth between Iasi and Podului and then dumped the bodies in the village of Roman. They also told of the woman, Agaviche, whose brave act saved the lives of the few survivors. The Steinfeld family had been living in an Armenian apartment building that wasn't searched. Rosalie, a Dorohoi native, told us of a massacre there when a Russian officer had ordered the execution of a Romanian and a Jewish soldier had protested and prevented it. In anger, the Russian officer shot the brave Jewish soldier. Yet when his Jewish friends and family came to mourn at his funeral,

Romanians arrived and slaughtered them. The horrors of Jewish history in this region were hidden just beneath the surface, often only in the memories of its oldest citizens. This did temper my enchantment with the Iasi of 1996. Nicoleta, a product of local education and the University of Iasi, seemed even more shocked by these tragic stories than we.

#### The Iasi State Archives on B-dul Copou

Our visit to the Archives began badly. First of all, we had a Ceaucescu-era street name, now changed, and had some trouble finding it. Then when we arrived, a notice on the door announced that the archives were closed for two weeks. A guard explained that everyone was on holiday. That would have ended our excursion and my story if not for dear Nicoleta. She explained to the guard that we were here all the way from America and had permission to research from Bucharest. We were admitted to the bustling, obviously quite open State Archives of Iasi.

We were directed upstairs to a small salon where a woman archivist and three researchers were working. Nicoleta translated and we asked first for the marriage record index (“Registru Tării Civile Oras: 1865-1899) for 1892, the date I had for the marriage of Morris Steinfeld and Pauline Loebelsohn. The index, an original ledger book, arrived almost instantaneously and we began scanning. The records were by year, but not alphabetical so all names and pages for each year had to be skimmed. In 1889, we found them: “Steinfeld, Moise Avram cu Dra. Leibilson, Paulina”. Nothing here will describe the excitement of that discovery. I had been seeking the Steinfelds since my grandmother’s death in 1981 and found little. But here they were, real people! The Leibilson name was a surprise since I’d been told Loebelsohn, but in the actual records it was repeated several times, though mostly spelled Leibelzon or Leibelson (why not Leibovici?).

Rodica Anghel, the archivist who became a valuable help to us, returned quickly with the actual marriage papers. They were about 20 pages long, including an application, notices for posting at the city hall and synagogue, the certificate itself (“Certificat de Casatorie”), and affidavits of the births of both bride and groom. I developed a deep affection for the Romanian bureaucracy at that instant. My great-grandparents may have found it burdensome and unnecessary, but oh what a boon for me! From this document, I learned my great-great grandparents’ full names and addresses, my great-grandparents’ correct birthdates and birthplaces, and the location of the synagogue where they were married (I later learned from Mr. Steinfeld that this synagogue was bulldozed to put in a highway). Naturally, we requested copies of these documents and were told we could pick up photocopies the next day, our day of departure from Iasi. Both Brandy and I sensed that these photocopies were not part of the regular archives services and may not be normally available.

We next requested an earlier marriage index, listing marriages from 1809-1865, hoping to find the marriages of Moise’s or Paulina’s parents. This index was much better organized (no explanation given or requested), arranged alphabetically by first initial of last name and then by church. At the end of each letter’s section was a listing of

“Israelite” marriages, though an incomplete one as Jews in this period often did not register their marriages with the state. Although I didn’t find the Steinfelds or Leibelsons, I asked if I could buy photocopies of each of the Israelite lists. This request was denied with the explanation that the state held “copyright” to these books and I might publish this information and sell it. Besides, I had only been granted permission to research my own family for genealogical purposes. Perhaps some other researcher reading this will find a valid purpose to obtain this information?

My third request was for the Catagraphy (census) of Sudits in 1859 I had read about in ROM-SIG. Ms. Anghel said there was none for 1859, but there was for 1851. However, they were all in Cyrillic, even the indices. I asked for clarification here, as I’d read the indices were not Cyrillic, but she repeated that they were. I hadn’t brought my handy-dandy transliteration guide, so was up a creek. At this point, the archivist asked for my family names and again remembered the Steinfeld name from some research she had been doing in the 1836 Catagraphy (are you following this incredible series of lucky breaks?). She ushered us into a smaller private room, where she located and read to us from an ancient book. The story of Avraim Steinfeld, age 66, a sudit from Galicia under Turkish protection began to unfold. From his white hair, tall stature, and “usual nose” to his wife’s birthing history, the census takers had kept meticulous records. Here I learned the relationship between my daughter and I and Mr. Leon Steinfeld of Iasi. I regret that I did not ask for a copy of this entry.

Rodica Anghel was both knowledgeable and helpful and we developed a friendship. She expressed frustration with the limitations imposed on archives research and was well-versed in both archives holdings and Jewish history and culture. I was surprised to learn we were only the fourth Americans to visit the Iasi Archives. Others planning to visit who might request Ms. Anghel’s help should brush up on their French or bring a translator--she speaks no English. I asked whether she’d be interested in presenting information at the 1997 Paris JGS Convention and she indicated she would, if the costs of attending could be covered. This decision, of course, will rest with the convention organizers, but she’d have my recommendation. Only recently are archivists allowed to travel, as the archives fall under the Security Department’s jurisdiction.

Whatever frustrations you may have encountered seeking your immigrant ancestors, like the Steinfelds it’s almost certain they too were caught in the Romanian bureaucracy’s net and their secrets await you in the old country.

### For Future Travelers

Those planning Jewish heritage travel in Romania will find Romanians welcoming and interested in Jewish people. Unlike before WWII, Jews are now a rarity and therefore higher in Romanian esteem. Today’s resented minority are the Gypsies who are both more visible and more numerous.

In less than a week, we met 14 people who befriended us or went out of their way to help. Until Iasi and similar towns become accustomed to and resentful of tourists,

expect friendly interest in your quest and be prepared with small gifts. Several young people we met were interested in studying in the U.S. and after returning home we shipped several TOEFL study books and college guides for foreign applicants.

Several we met indicated an interest in emigrating, whether to America or other places. While Jews were invited by Israel, others have not had the opportunity but take great interest in the outside world. Perhaps this has been fed by the repression of the Ceausescu regime or by the mandatory television in each apartment broadcasting American shows. Pictures of our family and home were of great interest to those we met.

Certainly our task would have been more difficult without our new Romanian friend and future travelers may want to consider hiring a student from the university to help them. A search for "Iasi" on the Internet brought up numerous university sites and might be a worthwhile place to start looking for student guides.

Finally, recognize that Romanians do not earn much money and what they have has been eroded by inflation. Do not flaunt your money and insult your hosts. In most cases, people who helped us did not want money and the few times we tried to pay someone for some small service it was refused. The exceptions would of course include taxi drivers and others in the "tourist trade", but those who offered to help freely seemed offended by cash offers.