

Leaving Egypt in Romania

By Steve Lipman

It was the first night of Pesach, and on a holiday that celebrates questions, I began by asking one.

“Where are we tonight?”

We were 150 people, participants in a communal Seder I led last year in Timisoara, a Romanian city in the western part of the country near the Hungarian border. We were in the utilitarian dining hall of the Jewish community building, turned for two nights into a festive setting of tablecloth-covered tables crowned with Seder plates and bottles of kosher wine.

But Timisoara or the Jewish community building was not the answer I was seeking.

“We are leaving Egypt,” I said in my best stage delivery, my words rendered into Romanian by an interpreter sitting at one of the tables. “We are in the desert.” I suggested everyone close their eyes and use their imagination. When they opened their eyes, I pointed left. “There are the houses you lived in.” I pointed right. “There is the Dead Sea.”

Then I set the evening’s Exodus theme. “Look around. You see three million other Jews and their cattle and goats. And the Egyptian army is chasing us.”

For five years I have stood at the head Seder table in small Jewish communities in countries that were once Communist (Romania, Serbia, Belarus and Kazakhstan) or still are (Cuba). With support from the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), which helps keep *Yiddishkeit* alive in these often-isolated corners of the Jewish world, I lead the Seders for Jews who for decades were not able to celebrate Pesach as it was meant to be celebrated.

In some of the places I’ve visited after the Iron Curtain fell, community leaders who have some knowledge of Judaism (as a result of attending a few classes in either Israel or in their native countries) have led the Seder. In places like Timisoara, a few local rabbis who were allowed to perform their religious duties under Communism did that sacred duty

for years. In all of these countries, communal Seders are the norm; no one feels competent enough to conduct a Seder at home, as is the ideal.

The Choral Temple Synagogue in Bucharest, Romania.

Photo courtesy of the JDC.

Mr. Lipman, a staff writer at The Jewish Week in New York, is at work on a leader’s guide to the Seder, based on his Pesach experiences overseas. Mr. Lipman’s Seder destination this year is Lublin, Poland.

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So I look at the Seder hall each year as a classroom. With stories of Seders I have attended in the United States and in Israel, and with advice for what these parents and parents-to-be should do if they decide to lead their own Seders one day, I teach.

My students usually range from toddlers to senior citizens; the latter, who have memories of pre-Nazi, pre-Communist Jewish times, usually predominate. Because many of the Jews in these countries are residents of spread-out cities that have no central Jewish neighborhood, the Seder—sometimes the community arranges only one—is one of the few times during the year the whole community gets together. It's a social night and they're there to shmooze.

Respectful of the night's significance, some of the people, especially the elderly, come in their best garb—simple suits and dresses. In the former Soviet Union, the men affix their rows of wartime medals to their jackets. Others come more casually, in work clothes or jeans.

My instructions in each place are the same—finish the first part of the Seder, from Kiddush to Shulchan Aruch, in an hour or less. The participants aren't used to long Seders, if they've ever been to a Seder at all. Almost no one is *shomer Shabbat*.

A stranger, I am introduced by a leader of the community seated next to me at the head table. The challenge for me—and for the Orthodox and non-Orthodox volunteers from organizations such as Yeshiva University's YUSSR,

Chabad and a host of *kiruv* groups who travel around the world to assist in making communal Seders—is to capture the people's attention immediately.

I try to make the Exodus experience come alive for those who were deprived of a Jewish education, whose encounters with anti-Semitic oppression

slave's mentality to the status of free men and women.

In Timisoara I asked more questions, all of them rhetorical. "What's one of the first things you do when you're preparing for an overseas journey?" Someone shouted out the right answer. "Get a passport and visa."

"Did anyone get your visa for tonight?" I asked. No one, of course, had.

"You're in luck," I informed everyone. "I have your visas." A few young volunteers in the hall began handing out my photocopied collection, topped by an official-looking visa application, all in Romanian, with a red hieroglyphic stamp. The ersatz visa form contained such information as occupation (slave), reason for leaving (freedom) and the Hebrew date of the Exodus.

"I filled in most of the information for you," I announced. "The only thing I left blank was your name."

Then I explained another Jewish tradition—

Tefillat Haderech. "A traditional Jew always recites this before starting on a trip to ensure his or her safety." I had included the Hebrew text near the top of the photocopied collection, as well as a short Romanian version. I invited everyone at the Seder to stand and recite the Romanian words.

"Now we're ready for our journey," I declared.

It's always a challenge to get the Seder guests involved. Lacking Jewish knowledge, they are usually embar-

Visa Application
Wilderness of Sinai

Last name _____

First name _____

Address 613 Moshe Blvd.

Residence Goshen

Job description Slave

Eventual destination Promised Land

Reason for leaving Freedom

Effective date 15 Nisan 2448

Expiration date 1 Tishrei 6000

Today's date 15 Nisan 5768

Witness signature King Pharaoh

were more personal and more recent than a Biblical story.

Armed with a collection of photocopied background materials about the holiday (cartoons usually get a chuckle), prizes for people who ask a question (matzah-design neckties are most popular among the men) and props for the Ten Plagues (toy frogs are always a hit among the kids), I explain we're going on a journey—a physical journey, from Egypt to freedom in the Sinai wilderness, and a spiritual journey, from a

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*In the warm glow of
the holiday candles,*

a family celebrates the Passover redemption
with a lavish and wholesome spread.

For Bubbie, enjoying a fluffy SPELT MATZA
BALL in her soup, the celebration includes
freedom from allergies and rock-hard kneidlach.

For Ima, spreading chumus on her WHOLE-
WHEAT MINI-MATZA, it means freedom from
holiday weight-gain anxiety.

For Abba, munching on a COCOA COATED
MINI MATZA, it heralds a new horizon of
delicious and healthy pre-packaged desserts.

But for baby, hiding under the table with the
afikoman and a handful of MINI-EGG
MATZAS, it just means great flavor,
wonderful crunch, and the most delightful
crumbs to play with.



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rassed to answer the questions I pose about the Haggadah's details. Products of Communist systems that quashed individual initiative, they are reluctant to stand up or stand out. Often, they don't even open up the Haggadahs—assuming some are provided.

When you lead a Seder in such places, you're the whole show. And a show is what it has to be. Theater keeps the people interested—some tales and some jokes. A little singing, if

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someone competent is around to help; in Timisoara, veterans of the Jewish choirs established by the late Rabbi Moses Rosen sat at a table, adding beautiful melodies to my animated explanations.

Reserved by nature, I become a ham when standing at the head table. I move around the room. I do shtick.

I try to keep to the theme of a spiritual journey, of a nation immersed in *tumah*, impurity, becoming an *am kadosh*, holy nation. I try to show how the *mitzvot* we do at other times, like Kiddush and *benching*, have a unique, Pesach-related meaning when we do them at the Seder. I keep things simple, summarizing large chunks of the text instead of reading every word. I edit myself throughout. I try to make the people, isolated for years from the rest of the Jewish world, feel like they're a central part of it for at least one night.

Everyone is respectful. No one asks the Fifth Question, "When do we eat?" No one—though all grew up or suffered under atheistic systems—objects when I talk about God and His miracles.

When no one raises a hand to ask a question, I move on, asking and answering a question myself. Everyone is the Fourth Son, the *sheaino yodeia lishol*, the one unable to ask. A *ta'am*, a simple son, would be welcome.

At least, I comfort myself, they aren't the Fifth Son, the one who didn't come to the Seder at all.

These people came.

Every year, I wonder, do they understand my lessons? Every year, the answer is yes.

In Santa Clara, Cuba, one young couple asked if they could keep the box of *shmurah matzah* I had passed out to hang on their wall. "Because it comes from Jerusalem," the husband explained.

Do we understand *kedushah*, holiness, that well?

In Grodno, Belarus, a charming seventy-something-year-old woman with flaming red hair said she faithfully attends community Seders. How, I asked her, was she able to keep feeling like a Jew when there was no Jewish education and no synagogue for so many years? She pointed to her heart. "I had my synagogue in here."

In Karaganda, Kazakhstan, a woman who had lived through the Nazi and Communist years told me that as soon

as the Soviet Union, and its prohibition on religious life, ended, she started to study Jewish traditions. "Why?" I asked.

"All my life," she answered, "I suffered because I was Jewish" Her voice trailed off, leaving the obvious unsaid—she wanted to find out what else it meant to be Jewish.

In Zemun, Serbia, an urban suburb of Belgrade, a middle-aged woman introduced herself after we held the second Seder in a small room rented by the Jewish community. She told me her life's story: she was raised with no religion; her mother, on her deathbed, revealed that the family was Jewish. A Holocaust survivor, the mother had cut all ties to Judaism. The daughter, upon learning that she was Jewish, started studying the religion and interacting with the Jewish community. Her *avodah*, work, was knitting large *kippot* with prominent Magen Davids. She gave me one as a gift; I told her I would wear it at my Seders each year and relate her story—a promise I have kept.

In Timisoara, I got the best confirmation that my lessons were understood. The second night of *yom tov* I deferred to two members of the community, men in their eighties, who had led the communal Seders after the city's longtime rabbi had died a few years ago. At their insistence, I still sat next to them at the head table. Some new faces were in the hall. As is done at most Seders, the men read the text in Hebrew and paragraphs of explanation in the vernacular. I kept quiet. Then one of the men turned to me. "Can you pass out your visa now?" ●

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