

**Three Days in Moldavia;
Treasures I didn't find in the archives.** *Jack H Bloom PhD*

I was one of sixteen intrepid explorers who following the 5th International Seminar on Jewish Genealogy abandoned the amenities and pleasures of Paris for Moldavia, Romania. We went to search the archives for fragments of the paper trail that chronicled the lives of our ancestors who walked the roads and imbibed the vistas of this stunningly beautiful area.

Organized and led by Rick Bercovitz, after a couple days of sightseeing we arrived at our base, the Hotel Traian in Iasi; (a no star hotel masquerading as a two star hotel). The next three days I had two wonderful experiences, neither having anything to do with archives.

On day one, new friends Nat and Lucille Abramowitz accompanied me and our interpreter Eugen Hriscu, a delightful, caring 20-year-old medical student whose English was learned living in a trailer park in the wilds of Texas as a Soros Foundation high school exchange student. I was thrilled to take the wheel of the group's Toyota minivan, and drive toward Hirlau and Frumusica, 75 and 90 kilometers from Iasi, respectively. These towns had been home to my mother's family, Segall, and my father's extended family, the Blums. The Blum's were quite well to do by the standards of the time. They even owned the building in which my maternal grandparents, the Segalls, lived. I have in my possession a copy of the building permit, granted to my relatives by the Hirlau authorities in 1907. They also built and ran the first movie theater in Hirlau, Cinema Lumina. My grandfather Yekutiel Zalman Blum was the exception. He and his wife Miriam (my grandmother) had moved 15 kilometers up the road to Frumusica, to be closer to the peasants from whom he gathered milk and eggs and other produce, probably for resale in Hirlau.

Hirlau

This was not my first visit to Hirlau. I had been there in 1981, when I knew little about archives. At the time, my cousin Chaim Zeilingher, z"l who lived in Bucharest, gave me a letter of introduction to one Gamliel Greenberg in

Hirlau. Gamliel who remembered my mother, showed me her home, my maternal grandparents graves and some graves of my fathers uncles and aunts. Back in 1981 joined by his friend, Yitzchak Abramovitz, Gamliel also showed me around the delightfully decorated Hirlau synagogue. where we were photographed together. For this trip, not knowing if Gamliel and Yitzchak were still alive I copied that photo and took it along, to show passerbys and ask if they knew the men in the photo and how I might contact them.

Arriving in Hirlau, Eugen found the "synagoga" by asking everyone and anyone where it was. I remembered it well. It had not changed. The graceful old building opposite, which had stored the records of the Jewish Community, had been torn down by Ceaucescu and replaced with nondescript block housing. Eugen asked two kids standing nearby, how one might get into the synagogue. They pointed across the street offering that a man who lived there had the keys. The man came out, and I showed him the picture. He pointed at the photo saying; "Dos bin Ich" (That's me). This was Yitzchak Abramovitz, now 79 and very much alive [see photo on next page]. I asked if Gamliel Greenberg, the other man in the original photo, was still alive. He said "yes"; Gamliel, though widowed, was now 83 and in decent health. Yitzchak had seen him headed to the bank earlier that morning, but when we went to his house he was not there.. We set out to find him. We could not locate him now.

Frumusica

Not wanting to waste precious time, I suggested that we would go up the road to Frumusica, which my father had described as having the horse at one end of town and the wagon at the other. I hoped to find my father's birth certificate (Dec. 29, 1894) and establish if there was a Jewish cemetery where I might find my grandfather's tombstone (I had been thrown out of Frumusica in 1981, but that is another story.) My father's birth certificate wasn't there. though the officials of the little town certainly did search. The 100-year rule had moved all old records out of local towns to the county seat, Botosani. There was a fenced-in Jewish cemetery, but in such dishevelment and disrepair that there was no way to find a specific grave, even if my grandfather had been buried there. I took a couple of photos, recited an El Maleh; said kaddish

for all those for whom this was their eternal resting place, I then headed back to Hirlau.

Back in front of the synagogue, Yitzchak and his granddaughter greeted us, piled into the van and off we went to Gamliel's home. After the proper greetings, Gamliel who may have been wearing the same suit and hat as in 1981, asked if we wanted to visit the Hirlau cemetery, of which he was now in charge. I had seen the cemetery in 1981 when it was in good repair. That was thanks to the efforts among others of Bernard Schwartz z'l, , a native of Hirlau, a good friend of my parents, and active along with them in the United Harlauer Society, a landsmanschaft in New York,. I wanted to see it again.

Gamliel went into his house to retrieve the cemetery plan. It was an old, very old, dog eared notebook, finger marked all over, which he simply rolled up and stuffed in the side pocket of his suit, which was half as old as he was. As we headed off to the cemetery, Nat tapped me on the shoulder, whispering in my ear;

"You have to get hold of that notebook-it's invaluable... when he dies, there will be no record... that cemetery plan will be lost. It is a vital document. Get it. Get it. Get it."

Nat kept at it , nudging and reminding me repeatedly as we made our way through the cemetery. We asked Gamliel if we could copy the notebook, not knowing if there was a copy machine in town-(If you had used the toilets in Romania, you would wonder too!) Gamliel had no objection. We found a store which had no phone, but where miracle of miracles, there was a Xerox machine, which at 400 Lei per page, could do the whole thing. Since it was going to take a while, I took everyone to lunch at the Hotel, across the street, (You shouldn't know of such hotels!) which as it turned out stood on the site of the Cinema Lumina , built by my aunt and her husband.

I returned to Iasi that first day without any death or birth records but with the cemetery plan of Hirlau, a document from the past, for the future. The first day was a triumph! Nothing more needed to happen for me in Moldavia. The cemetery plan of Hirlau alone made the whole trip worthwhile. And so we returned to Iasi, to our lodgings in the Hotel Traian.

N.B.(Translated by Rony Shaham who lives in Israel and with some pages later on recopied with the help of Eugen Hriscu, it now is in the archives of the Romanian Special Interest Group of The Jewish Genealogical Society. Nat Abramowitz, who passed to his own reward a couple of years back was absolutely correct.)

Frumusica again

Now the question was; What to do on day two? The Toyota minibus was being sent with a driver (not me) to Botosani. a two-hour trip, routed through Hirlau and past Frumusica. Having had no luck the first day with archival records in Frumusica, I could choose to go to Hirlau or return to Frumusica to search further, perhaps for my grandfather's death certificate, or my father's house. I now also knew that though Frumusica and Hirlau were less than 10 miles from each other, Frumusica's older-than-100-years records were in Botosani and Hirlau's records in Iasi. There were some vague indications in my family chart of Botosani origins on both sides of the family, so on a hunch, and without much hope, thinking that I could get off in Hirlau or Frumusica if the spirit moved me, I joined the Botosani expedition.

At my request, the bus stopped in Frumusica for fifteen minutes. I went into the town hall searching for my grandfather's death certificate (ca. 1906-7), and home ownership records from the beginning of the century, which if they existed might let me see the house my father grew up in.. Nothing useful resulted except to hear how impoverished the little town was and how they needed medical supplies, which if they got, they might then be able to refurbish the cemetery. So, empty handed, back on the bus to Botosani.

Botosani: A Surprise Encounter

On the bus, Bruno Segal,(no relation to my mother whose maiden name was Segall-the name is as common as Smith in the US) born in Romania and searching for his grandparents' graves in Botosani, suggested going first to the Jewish Community offices, where there might be a Botosani cemetery plan, rather than to the Romanian regional state archives. We arrived in Botosani, a

terminally gray city, and wandered around for an hour before we located the rather tacky yet dignified offices of the Jewish community.

Botosani once had over 20,000 Jews, and twenty-one synagogues now reduced to two. No doubt so that the 104 remaining Jews could say of one or the other. "That one I would never pray in."

Upon entering the offices, we were met by the Community head, (Rosh HaKehillah) whose picture appeared in a collage on the wall, officiating at Bar Mitzvahs, weddings, brises and other community activities. After two hours in the bouncing bus, I needed to use the "toiletin". So my initial attention was elsewhere. By the time I returned this man was gathering information as to the death dates of Bruno's grandparents, and their location in the Botosani cemetery. Though I had seen his visage on the walls, I had not heard his name and since we were about to leave, wished to at least say shalom to this man. I asked Naomi Lowi What's this man's name? She responded; **Tirer**.

TIRER! -I shouted!? Eyes growing wide I ran back in, and stood face to face with him.

Your name is Tirer?

Yes!

Do you know Chaim Tirer? (My father's sister's son)

Yes, of course; He's my cousin.

Well, He's my first cousin!

I then asked him about the family. He rattled off virtually all the names in both my father's and mother's family. There we were, holding both hands, kissing both cheeks, hugging each other, tears welling up, chills down the spine, exchanging addresses, taking pictures, gasping in disbelief. David, Naomi and Bruno later said it was, for them, one of the special moments of the trip.

I came to Romania seeking archival records of dead relatives and instead found a live one- Joseph Tirer, Rosh HaKehillah of Botosani no less. A cousin I didn't know existed. He wasn't even on my chart. It was one of life's peak moments.

The next day I was thrown out of the archives in Hirlau. But that's a different story.

