



[...] Bucovina is a region, now split between Romania and Ukraine, which has been fought over for centuries. It's a Slavic word that means the "land of beech trees."

Poland, Turkey, Romania, and Russia have all governed Bucovina at one time or another. From 1775 until 1918, it was Austria's turn.

Just as Romania took the opportunity of Russia's collapse at the close of World War I to incorporate Basarabia, it did the same with the defeat of Austria-Hungary, bringing Transylvania and Bucovina into Romania. Bucovina's population was predominantly Romanian and Ukrainian, with significant German, Polish, and Jewish minorities. Today, half of Bucovina is in Ukraine, half in Romania.

The Jewish community was especially prominent in Cernăuți, the regional capital, an hour's drive north of the Romanian border. Cernăuți, or Czernowitz in German, was the town where, in the early twentieth century, the big debate among the Jewish intellectual community raged between those promoting Hebrew and those advocating Yiddish.

Many Jewish Americans trace their roots here. Former U.S. ambassador Max Kampleman, a top aide to former vice-president Hubert Humphrey and then a top Reagan administration arms control negotiator, was born in Czernowitz. Felix Rohatyn, the New York investment banker who was U.S. ambassador to France when we were in Romania, told us he lived in Cernăuți for a few years between the wars when his father, who was from Vienna, ran a brewery there. But by 2001, the census counted just 1,300 Jewish people in Cernăuți's population of 236,700.

TRAVELS WITH RADU

ANOTHER JEWISH AMERICAN WHO began life in Czernowitz is John Klipper, president of the Romanian American Enterprise Fund (RAEF). The family later moved to Bucharest, where John's father developed his successful lumber business, and where the Communists arrested him in 1950. He was diabetic. His jailers caught him writing a letter to his wife, his son told us, and withheld his insulin as punishment; he died within a few days in the basement of the Communist Party headquarters - the building where the Romanian Senate met after the Revolution.

In 1960, John emigrated to Israel, and then to Vienna to finish his engineering degree. He was twenty-four when he came to the United States in 1962. One of the first engineering jobs he applied for was in New Jersey; he told us the interviewer looked at his résumé, looked up at him, and asked, "Where the hell is Vienna?" Klipper said he laughed, and didn't get the job.

But he did find engineering work at a French firm operating in the United States and forged a business career here. After he retired, he served on the original board of the RAEF, then as CEO.

John told us that he had never been back to the city where he was born. We were already interested in visiting Cernăuți because of its close ties to Romanian history, and because today it has such a concentration of Romanians.

The month after Jim left his job as ambassador, John proposed we visit the city with his older cousin, Radu Comșa. Radu was born in Cernăuți in 1925, after it became part of Greater Romania, and lived there until he and his parents fled in 1940 as German troops invaded. He had not been back to Cernăuți in all the ensuing decades. Seeing the old city through the cousins' eyes seemed like a wonderful opportunity. We said yes.

Unlike John, Radu Comșa had stayed in Romania throughout the Communist period. He earned a degree in chemical engineering, but with his strong language skills, went to work right out of college in the Foreign Ministry. His first overseas assignment was during the Korean War. Most of the Communist countries kept their diplomats in China, but Comșa and one other Romania diplomat, his boss, were stationed in North Korea. He told us the food shortages were so severe, they did long-term damage to his stomach. In the 1950s, he was posted to Belgrade.

Romanian diplomats would sometimes drive to nearby Trieste for shopping, he told us, but they were a bit apprehensive when one of the embassy drivers headed to Trieste on his own. After all, he spoke only his native tongue. "No problem," he told them when he returned. "Everyone there in Italy speaks Romanian. They speak very bad Romanian, but still ..."

In the 1970s, as the Securitate came to dominate the Foreign Ministry, Comșa left to work in the Department of Chemical Engineering in the Ministry of Trade. From his perspective, the new job was less political. After the Revolution, he was appointed ambassador to Germany, his last government assignment before he retired.

We met Comșa in Suceava and drove north, a group of three Americans and two Romanians, including Richard Popa, the driver provided by the RAEF.

At the border, the Romanians were very friendly and cheerful. But when we got to the Ukrainian side, we were held up for almost two hours, then directed inside an office to fill out forms. We knew we needed visas, and had gotten them ahead of time, but now they asked for a payment in lieu of medical insurance, citing our failure to have Ukrainian medical cards. On the merits, it didn't seem unreasonable, although we couldn't remember such a fee being charged in any other country we had visited.

Comșa talked with the border officials at great length in both Ukrainian and Russian. When he finally came back to our car, he was angry. "Who holds you up two or three hours and sends you to different checkpoints, insisting that you pay this and pay that?" he said. "We paid a lot of things, and then they charged us again."

We asked if they wanted to charge extra because we were foreigners.

"Yes! I protested, of course."

"What did they say?" Sheilah said.

"The Americans have to pay more because they are Americans,' they told me. I said, 'You cannot make such a difference between people. Romanians, Americans - we are all the same. We are all foreigners here. You cannot treat us differently.'"

In the face of Comşa's indignation, the Ukrainian officials ultimately backed down.

"I think they wanted something - cigarettes, money, or something like that." Comşa said, fuming. "It was outrageous. You can see yourself the difference between Romanian border police and what happened to us on the other side of the border. Beginning with that moment, I became very sad. This was a different world we were coming into. Yes, a different world."

The road to Cernăuți was lined with farmland. The drive was less than an hour, but it was almost dark when we arrived at our hotel - a tall, 1960s-vintage building.

"It was built by the Hungarians under the Comecon," Comşa told us, "which didn't exist when I was a child."

Under a high ceiling, the lobby looked almost empty. Later, when we checked out, the front desk clerk made sure we had a receipt so we could show the border police where we had stayed, and that we had checked in and checked out.

We went out to dinner that first night at a fancy restaurant that featured, for no apparent reason, a Napoleonic theme. A Napoleon-era military costume festooned the wall, and the waitresses were dressed as if they had just stepped out of the French army, circa 1800. They handed us elaborate bound illustrated menus listing many entrees, but the kitchen had only two dishes available to serve.

The next morning, Comşa took us on a tour of his birthplace city. It looked much different than the Romanian cities we had visited. The grand, nineteenth-century public buildings downtown were clean, and had been painted bright colors, so they looked to be in better condition than many buildings of comparable age, even in Bucharest. We were told they had not been privatized and that the mayor wanted his buildings to look good. And they did.



In Cernăuți, Ukraine in front of statue of Mihai Eminescu, the great Romanian writer: Jim, a local Romanian professor, John Klipper, Radu Comşa, and Richard Popa

But the rest of the commercial area looked much poorer than Romania. A couple of restaurants we stuck our heads into - not fancy ones like the Napoleonic one - were threadbare. There seemed to be little food, few customers, and less maintenance.

Napoleon may not have slept in Cernăuți, but Potemkin would recognize one of his villages.

A friend of Radu Comșa, a Romanian professor who taught at the Ukrainian state university, joined us for part of our tour. We walked around the high school Comșa had attended - the same one where the beloved Romanian poet Mihai Eminescu studied a century earlier.

"I was a student in the so-called power middle school," Comșa explained. "After four years of primary school, I was supposed to go on to eight years of lyceum - altogether, twelve years of schooling. It didn't matter, though. In the fourth year of my lyceum, the Russians came in. It was over."

Comșa took us to the apartment building where his family had lived. It looked like any pre-war apartment building in New York or Bucharest.

"We lived on the higher basement and had six big rooms there, well-furnished. As far as I remember, I was born in this apartment."

He showed us a synagogue, now converted into a movie theater.

"Not only synagogues were converted, but churches, too - they were transformed into stores," Comșa said. "It's a big pity. Sixty years earlier, Czernowitz was a beautiful city with a great sense of the centuries."

We visited the Romanian Orthodox cathedral.

"A big church, with many beggars around," Comșa noted.

We passed the opera house, where a program was playing. We were invited in, but Jim was madly - and successfully - trying to avoid the opera.

John Klipper was born in Cernăuți only because it had the closest good hospital to Vatra Dornei, the small town in what is now northern Romania where he and his family lived. Afraid of deportation because they were Jews, his family moved to Bucharest when he was a toddler. That's where John grew up.

Comșa lived in Cernăuți until he was fourteen years old. About one-third of Cernăuți was Jewish at that time. We visited the Jewish cemetery to see if we could find any references to family names of American Jews who trace their roots in one way or another to Cernăuți.

Comșa remembered anti-Semitism as rampant in Cernăuți.

"There were rallies and some Jews beaten up. Of course we were afraid, and we knew what the end would be if the Iron Guard came to power."

We asked how that anti-Semitism compared to the prejudice of Vadim Tudor, former Mayor of Cluj, and other Romanian nationalists of today.

"Not the same," Comșa replied. "It was very different and very dangerous. The anti-Jewish education didn't start with the Iron Guard [in the 1930s]. Anti-Jewish legislation started years before."

So, we asked, why did Jewish people stay in Cernăuți?

"They had no choice," Comșa replied. "You could not move in three days. Couldn't get an American visa. Israel hadn't yet been created. I don't know where the Jews could go. In Romania, seven hundred thousand Jews had to decide where to go, how to go, how to get money to go."

"My parents didn't have Zionist ideas. They were assimilated people," he said. "My father was a medical doctor. For more than one hundred years, until 1914, Bucovina had belonged to Austria. So my father had studied in Vienna." Dr. Comşa's patients were Romanians, Ukrainians, and Germans, gentiles as well as Jews.

"There's a very small mountain next to Cernăuţi where we skied. I remember my father saying, 'I cannot find such a place in Israel.'"

We asked Radu Comşa what Cernăuţi was like when he was a child.

"It was a wonderful city, with Austrian influence, as you have seen from the buildings, and with a population which spoke mainly German. Of course, there had been 120 years of German influence."

He learned to speak Romanian in school.

"My parents had learned some Romanian. I went to kindergarten and learned Romanian. At home, we spoke German. That went on until 1939, when this unfortunate Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact was signed. Basarabia and the northern parts of Bucovina were forcibly taken over by Russia.

"And that was the start of a new era in Romania. A year later, the northern part of Transylvania, because of the Hitler-Mussolini dictate, became Hungarian. Parts of Dobrogea were given to Bulgaria. That was the start of the Antonescu dictatorship. Romania became a satellite of Germany, of Hitler.

"I left in 1940 with my mother. My father was already in the Romanian army. At that time, many, many reservists were called into the army. As a doctor, my father was made a captain in the Romanian army."

We asked what would have happened if he had stayed in Cernăuţi.

"I don't know what would have happened, but we were afraid," he said. "In my family, we were not great Russian sympathizers. And my father - he was somewhere in Romania, we didn't know quite where. My mother had two brothers who lived in Bucharest. So we left everything but what we could fit into small luggage. The Russians gave us three days. Whoever wanted to leave had three days.

"I knew a lot of people who left," Comşa recalled. "But it was very hard, because trains were overfull. The army was evacuating official buildings, institutions, and their archives. It was terrible."

Sheilah's language teacher, Gertrude Ştefan, also spent her childhood in Cernăuţi. She remembers the evacuation very clearly.

She was about ten years old when her father, a Romanian citizen who was a lawyer and a veteran of the Austrian army, got word that Romanians who wanted to leave the Russian territory should register. Gertrude remembers adults discussing whether the offer was a Russian trick, then registering, and then waiting for permission to emigrate.

The permission didn't come until Gertrude's father visited a well-connected official who extorted a bribe, Gertrude told Sheilah.

"She said, 'Do you want to leave? I give you the permission in twenty-four hours - but you give me the apartment, as is, furnished.'" On the spot, her father agreed, Gertrude said, and "we were jumping to the ceiling with happiness. We wanted to leave. We were scared to death.

"We were not allowed to take valuable things. Only the wedding ring was allowed. My father had a diamond in a crown, in a tooth. And we were hiding a watch with diamonds. No money, of course, because there was a search at the border - yes, I remember, they searched even the pillows. They opened the pillows with a blade. And of course, if they found something, they took it away."

They left Cernăuți in March 1944. Gertrude said she remembers the moonlit night, the wooden archway at the Romanian border, and the slender blond Russian soldier standing near it who laughed at the emigrants huddled on a truck. Gertrude could still mimic his sneer. "Hah, hah, hah, you are leaving. We are coming after you."

Gertrude's family is gentile. Jim asked Radu Comșa, "Did Jewish families react differently than other Romanians?" and got a heated reply.

"There are in Romania some people who want to restore the Antonescu reputation. They say that one of the reasons Antonescu ordered the Jews to be deported from the northern part of Bucovina was their behavior toward the Romanian army, when the army left for those three days. That's their argument. I must say to you it's not true, because I was there. Of course, there were people who saluted the incoming Russians. Maybe there were some Jews, too.

"But of the fifty thousand Jews who were in Cernăuți, forty thousand were anti-Russian. Because in Cernăuți, people were rather rich. They had a good life. They owned stores, they were trained in the professions, they were intellectuals. They had nothing in common with the Russians. And the best proof of this is one year later, three or four weeks before the German-Russian War started, when the Russians deported a lot of Jews to Siberia - including one of my aunts.

"So it is a lie. But they wanted an explanation for why Antonescu deported to Transnistria two hundred thousand Jews from Basarabia and the northern part of Bucovina. Most died from typhus and hunger and cold. That, I think, is important to stress, because it is a big lie. And it has no reasonable support. Because more than in Romania, maybe, the Jews in Cernăuți were not pro-Russian and not pro-Communist."

What was the Jewish community like in Cernăuți?

"One-third of the population of Cernăuți was Jewish," said Comșa. "There were some Germans, of course. There were Poles and Ukrainians and Romanians. Cernăuți was a very, very cosmopolitan town, and there was very good communication between all those ethnic communities. I remember my father and my mother having friends who were Romanian, and also German. Maybe you can find the same thing today in Timișoara, where you also have such a mixture of populations. But Cernăuți was a very special case."

Was the Jewish community in Cernăuți affected in the 1930s by the Iron Guard?

"Of course. I remember it very well. I was the only Jew in my class. It was the best school in Cernăuți, by far the best school. And I wanted to speak good Romanian. I had in mind that maybe later I would study in Bucharest."

He remembered his child's-eye view of the Iron Guard and fascism.

"I saw it personally in school, in the attitudes toward me, by students, not teachers. 'You, Jew, must leave. What are you doing in this school?' And so on. But, as I told you, I was an ambitious young man and I insisted on staying. And at the end, I had some friends. In 1939, the prime minister Armand Călinescu was assassinated. Afterward, the police came to the school and arrested several of the young people who were members of the Iron Guard, which had big support, by the way, in the northern part of Bucovina, because Codreanu, the chief of the Iron Guard, was born in Bucovina."

Visiting his hometown for the first time since he was fourteen years old, Comșa was not pleased with what he saw.

"It is a big pity what happened to Cernăuți," he said. "Sixty years earlier, it was a very beautiful city with a very high level of cultural life. It is a pity so see that nothing has happened in the city since, and that a lot of strange people came from different parts of the Soviet empire, having nothing in common with the old Cernăuți.

"My second feeling is that they have not yet been touched by any democratic sense. Remember our discussions with the Romanian professor there, and with the Romanian guide we had - they were very afraid of having too much public contact with us. They were afraid of repression by Ukrainian authorities. They told me how difficult it is for them to have a Romanian newspaper, to learn Romanian, or even to *speak* Romanian.

"But that's history. We can't change it. Maybe there will be a better time, but I don't think so. It's too late."

CARING FOR THE JEWISH HERITAGE

LEAVING UKRAINE WAS LESS onerous than entering. At the border, we were directed to several different buildings to pay several different fees, present proof that we'd settled up for our hotel stay, and have our passports deeply scrutinized. Then we crossed into Romania, and were struck by a sense of hospitality and disorganization - no one could tell us where to park ourselves.

"I feel a little depressed," Ambassador Comşa said solemnly. "In Ukraine, we had so many papers. Now, I have only my passport. I feel naked."

It was a quick drive to Rădăuţi, a lovely old town of about 25,000. Tanya Gruenberg, the secretary of the tiny Jewish community, showed us the synagogue, which was built and dedicated in 1886.

Before World War II, she said, 8,000 Jews had lived in Rădăuţi. Only three were spared deportation to Transnistria - a lawyer, the gynecologist, and the distiller. Only a few returned from Transnistria. "Now, there are 76 Jews here," she told us, most of them elderly.

We talked about her efforts to get back from the government Jewish properties that had been seized, to rent them out and use the income to support the community. But Tanya herself died a few years after we spoke with her, setting back efforts to restore the synagogue and the Jewish cemetery.

About fifteen miles away, in Siret, we heard a similar story - a rich Jewish heritage, but no one to care for it. John and Radu showed us the three cemeteries that testify to generations of Jewish life and faith here. Rows of stones march across a plateau and up a hill like soldiers breaking ranks. Intricately carved lions of Judah stand proud, and gracefully sculpted hands rise in perpetual blessing. In the oldest of the three cemeteries, high on the hill, the epitaphs are all in Hebrew, some dating to the sixteenth century.

Back in Bucharest, the president of the Federation of Jewish Communities in Romania, Dr. Nicolae Cajal, told us that more than 700 Jewish cemeteries are located in Romanian towns without a single remaining Jew.

Cajal called the situation "catastrophic". More than seven out of ten Jews in Romania are over the age of 65. True, he said, since the Revolution, more young people have been identifying themselves as Jewish, though their parents carefully ducked the designation during Communism. But that's not enough, Dr. Cajal told us.

"If the situation continues like this - two, three hundred deaths a year and no births, no new children - we will have no Jewish communities in Romania in 15 or 18 years."

That's possible. But Romania has seen a surging Jewish presence in Romania since 1989. Israelis and others are coming back to invest, trade, vacation, and even gamble. In spite of the horrors and struggles of Jews in Romania's history, many return - at least as frequent visitors. How many will plant roots and raise families in Romania, no one knows.

Dr. Cajal and his wife Bibi worked tirelessly to find the resources the Jewish community needed. He told us he couldn't have done as much as he did without The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, often referred to simply as The Joint.

Dr. Cajal was in his 80s when we knew him, still working almost daily at the Institute of Virology, which he had headed since 1966, and as a professor at the University of Medicine and Pharmacy. He came from a family of doctors - his father Marcu Cajal, early in the twentieth century, was one of the first pediatric specialists in Romania. And none of the many scientific honors Nicolae Cajal earned during his long life gave him as much pride as his granddaughter Catherine, a surgeon in Los Angeles.

He began medical school before World War II in Cluj, and then was forced out because he was Jewish. Just as the war was ending, he finished at the medical school his father had organized for Jews. A year later, he got a prestigious fellowship to work at the Pasteur Institute in Paris. When he left, with Bibi at his side, even his father-in-law assumed he would not return to Romania. But he couldn't see leaving his family, and he told us decades later he was glad he'd come back. "I did what I can to be useful," he said in his gentle way.

In 1994, Dr. Cajal was chosen to succeed the legendary Rabbi Moses Rosen, who, as head of the Jewish federation had helped Romanian Jews emigrate for forty years. The Jewish community that remained was small. Dr. Cajal focused on helping the elderly, preserving cultural monuments like the cemeteries, and promoting understanding of what Jews had contributed to the country.

Jim asked him, a year and a half before his death at age 84, whether he thought the attitudes of Romanians toward the Jewish community had changed over that sweep of time. His answer was characteristically moderate.

"I don't speak about anti-Semitism, I speak about anti-Semites. Romania is not a country of anti-Semitism, because the majority of people are not. But we have a lot of anti-Semites - stupid young people who don't know, like Vadim Tudor," he said, naming a notoriously nationalist politician. Still, Dr. Cajal's hunch was that only about 10 percent of those who voted for Vadim Tudor were anti-Semitic. Most, he said, were just voters looking for change.

For his part, Dr. Cajal wanted to focus on promoting what he called Semitism, and the 700-page book he compiled detailing the contributions of Romanian Jews to science, culture, and civilization.

To us, he sounded like Dr. Norman Vincent Peale. For a beleaguered, shrinking community of Eastern European Jews, positive thinking can be a powerful force in the twenty-first century. [...]

Sheilah Kast, Jim Rosapepe: "DRACULA IS DEAD - How ROMANIANS Survived Communism, Ended It, and Emerged since 1989 as the New Italy", p. 364-377, Bancroft Press, Baltimore, 2009, www.bancroftpress.com