

IllumiNations

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Dedicated to the Memory of Henya Federman - beloved and devoted Shlucha in the Virgin Islands

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The Rav of Klausenburg

By Chaya Chazan

It all happened pretty quickly. We were busy working local jobs in Kfar Chabad, but we decided we wanted to do something more impactful; something more than just working 9-5 for a paycheck.

We searched through shluchim websites, where we found a posting in Romania. We applied for the position. A month later, we met with Rabbi and Mrs. Deitsch, the shluchim in Bucharest. Two months after that, we were on a plane to Romania.

Romania is a country steeped in Jewish history. Its shtetlach nurtured famous Chassidic dynasties whose chassidim number in the thousands. Millions of Jews called Romania home. Now, after World War II decimated the European Jewish population, only about 8,000 remain. It is our honor and privilege to reach every one of those Jews and return Romania to the spiritual oasis it once was.

We spent four years in Bucharest, working hand-in-hand with the Deitsches. We knew the city of Cluj needed a fresh infusion of Yiddishkeit. One Chanukah, my wife fried endless batches of donuts, and I packed the car for the trip. I drove for seven hours, reaching Cluj in time for the second lichtel. I invited some students to join me

for a Chanukah party, and started making contacts in the city. It was another two years before I convinced my wife to move there permanently, but on Chai Elul 2018, Chabad of Cluj-Napoca proudly opened its doors.

Cluj, originally known as Klausenburg, was the seat of the Klausenberger Rebbe before the war. I had a chance to visit the current Klausenberger Rebbe with my wife's grandfather, whose father had been with the Klausenberger Rebbe in Auschwitz. When I walked into the office, I was greeted with, "Ah! The actual Klausenberger Rav!"

The beginning of our independent shlichus was slow. The first Shabbos, just myself, my wife, and our children sat around the table. On our second Shabbos, our table was expanded by two students. Now, five years later, we expect between 70-100 people every Shabbos. Our table is a colorful mixture of locals, tourists, and students, so our meals are multilingual! We speak in Romanian for the locals, Hebrew for the tourists, and English for the students.

We are so thankful for the Nigri Shluchim Online School, which allows our children to have a well-rounded Jewish and chassidische education, although they only meet their classmates once a year. It's a mesiras nefesh to exile ourselves from a place of Torah, but our children's chinuch is a value we will never sacrifice.

I visit local prisons every so often, searching for Jewish prisoners in need of connection and inspiration.

I was getting ready to start out on one of these visits, but my car wouldn't start. I didn't have time to tinker around with it, so I called a taxi. As I climbed in, I noticed the large cross dangling from the rearview mirror, but I didn't say anything.

The driver kept glancing at me in the mirror, noting my black suit, hat, and beard with curiosity.

"Are you Jewish?" he finally blurted out.

"Yes," I answered. "I'm the rabbi in Cluj."

He was silent for another moment. "I think I have Jewish roots," he finally said. "My mother's mother survived the war. I think she was Jewish."

It was a painful reminder of how much the Nazis ym's destroyed. Not only did they murder six million innocent souls, hundreds of thousands more were left orphaned, confused, and unsure of their identity. Romania is full of their descendents, who have only the vaguest idea that they're Jewish. For many of them, recent history is too traumatic to even admit to their Jewishness.

I was so happy to make Andrei's acquaintance - one of these lost souls who was willing to admit his Jewishness - and even explore it! When we returned to the Chabad house, Andrei put on tefillin for the first time in his life. It was a moving and emotional experience for both of us. Andrei is becoming a member of our community, rediscovering his grandmother's heritage.

The first public menorah lighting in Cluj was in Kislev, 2021. I was in the middle of addressing the crowd when I felt someone tugging my coat. I looked down to see a wizened old man, his eyes shining with unshed tears.

"How can I help you?" I asked him.

"Please, Rabbi. I want to say something," he begged.

I couldn't refuse. He stepped up to the microphone and began to speak, his voice shaking with emotion.

"If anyone would have told me, when I was a child, that I would stand in the center of Cluj, with a huge menorah behind me, surrounded by Jews singing Haneros Hallalu and eating donuts, I would never have believed them. Never!"

The elderly gentleman broke down in tears, while the menorah behind him seemed to shine more brightly.



The first time Sergiu called me, I was in New York for the annual kinus hashluchim. I told him I'd be able to speak to him more when I returned.

He called back the next week and we spoke for a long while. He lived in Satu Mare (originally called Satmar), a three hour drive from Cluj. He asked to meet face-to-face. I agreed, but told him I'd need to clear my schedule for the long drive.

Two days before Chanukah, I finally met Sergiu. His hair was grayed, and his back was bent with age. He told me he'd read about Chabad of Cluj somewhere, and wanted to meet with an Orthodox rabbi.

"Here I am!" I said, cheerfully. "What can I do for you?"

Sergiu shared his life story with me. He'd grown up in Transnistria, a German-occupied strip of land between Moldova and Ukraine. Many Romanian and Hungarian Jews were transported to Bogdanovka, a labor camp in that area. He'd led a fascinating life, eventually joining the Securitate, the secret police of the Communist regime.

"I called you because I wanted to reconnect with my Judaism," he concluded.

"What made you seek me out now?" I asked him.

"Last Yom Kippur, I attended synagogue for the first time," he explained. "It woke something up inside of me, and I decided to contact you."

He refused my offer of tefillin, and all other suggestions of practical mitzvos he could do. I left feeling like I'd wasted a day, just listening to an old man recount his life.

Two days later, Sergiu sent me a picture of himself and his wife next to a lit up menorah, along with the caption, *Rabbi, you've warmed my heart.*

Seems it hadn't been a waste after all.

I visited a quaint little village just outside of Cluj called Cojocna. There was an old mikvah there, in the basement of an abandoned building. Although the mikvah was no longer usable, the steps leading down into the bor were clearly visible. The man that had brought me there was thinking of making it into a tourist attraction for Jewish visitors, but I could see there was no real promise in the venture.

The Baal Shem Tov taught that Hashem ordains every step a person takes. Anywhere you find yourself, Hashem sent you there to accomplish something specific. So although the mikvah hadn't panned out, I knew I had

to use the opportunity for shlichus. I asked my friend if there were any Jews in the area.

"Not since the war," he told me, shaking his head.

We continued driving through the village.

"Wait," he said, suddenly. "Turn here!"

He led me through a bewildering number of turns, until we parked in front of an old farmhouse, seemingly in the middle of nowhere. Chickens and pigs grazed freely in the yard, supervised by an old man.

"He might be Jewish," my friend said.

I approached the farmer and introduced myself. Emil, the elderly farmer, was 92 years old! He was born in Austria, pre-World War II, to a Jewish mother. His father was from Cojocna, and they relocated there when Emil was just a boy.

Meeting a rabbi so randomly was a shock for him. Surrounded by picturesque scenery and snorting pigs, Emil wrapped tefillin around his arm for the first time in his life.

While we completed the construction of our own mikvah, we used the one in Dej, about a 45-minute drive. The Dejer Rebbe visits Romania often, and built this mikvah to use during his visits. In winter, the heating apparatus doesn't always work, and the water temperature can reach 20 below! As the rebbetzin in charge of escorting women to the mikvah, many of them for the first time in their lives, it's a difficult "sell."

It took months to convince Adina to use the mikvah. She'd grown up frum, but had abandoned that way of life years ago. It wasn't easy, but I finally got her to accompany me to Dej. It was a frigid winter night, and I was nervous about the heating. When we got there, my worst fears were realized. The water was freezing.

I texted my husband frantically. *What should I do? It took so much effort to get her here!*

Maybe you can convince her to toivel just this once, he texted back. Promise her that next time, she'll be able to use our new, heated mikvah in Cluj.

Adina surpassed my expectations. She agreed to toivel in the freezing waters, and even returned to the Dej mikvah a few more times after that! Now, baruch Hashem, we have a beautiful mikvah right here in our Chabad house. The days of cracking the ice and defying hypothermia are over!

When war broke out in Ukraine, Rabbi Shlomo Wilhelm, the shliach in Zhitomir, Ukraine, urged me to prepare at least 200 hotel beds for incoming refugees.

"Of course! Be'ezras Hashem, it will be done," I answered.

"No!" he told me. "I mean *tomorrow!*"

I immediately started looking for places. I called an Israeli businessman in Cluj and asked him to help me find a hotel that could house 200 refugees. He suggested a very fancy, expensive hotel downtown.

"They're not going to be able to afford it!" I argued. "Isn't there anything else?"

"No, Rabbi," he said. "This is the only hotel big enough for that many people."

Left without much of a choice, I booked the hotel and hoped for the best. We were expecting 200 refugees, but over the next few days, Cluj was inundated with over 600 Ukrainians fleeing for their lives. Rabbi Wilhelm brought all the orphans and staff from his evacuated orphanage in Zhitomir, and Rabbi Axelrod led another group of refugees from Cherkassy.

My Israeli contact connected me with the owner of a bus company. I called him so often, we became good friends! Buses were extremely hard to come by, but when I called him at 2 in the morning and asked for a bus to meet a group of refugees at the border, there he was. A few hours later, his bus was saving another group at another part of the border.

Buses pulled up one after the other from the Ukrainian border, discharging group after group of frightened, homeless refugees. The hotel was a bracha! We kashered the kitchen, hired a chef, and gave the refugees some respite and relaxation from their dangerous flight.

We are lucky to live in a place with so much Chassidic and Jewish history. Soon, Romania will once again be filled with the sounds of Torah learning and Jews walking proudly in the streets.

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