Aristide Streja

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Bucharest
Romania
Interviewer: Anca Ciuciu
Date of the interview: April 2004

Aristide Streja is an active retiree; although he is 82, he still works for the Jewish community as a guide and custodian of the 'Moses Rosen' Memorial of the Jewish Martyrs. An architect by trade, he was a head of workshop at the Institute for Designing Standardized Constructions. He designed and erected many public and industrial buildings. He co-authored with Lucian Schwartz 'Sinagogi din Romania' ['Synagogues of Romania'] (1996), a book that testifies on the situation of many of the synagogues of the Jewish communities in the country. The Great Synagogue where Mr. Streja works now was built in 1846 and was declared a historic monument by the Romanian Academy. In 1980, it started to shelter the 'Moses Rosen' Memorial of the Jewish Martyrs, a reminder of the Holocaust of the Romanian Jews and of the Jewish quarter that once lay around the synagogue. Seventy years before, Aristide Streja would play with other Jewish children in its courtyard, while the parents attended the religious service. He had his bar mitzvah here. And today, in one of the offices adjoining the synagogue, he is preoccupied with its maintenance and restoration.

Family background

My paternal grandparents passed away before I was born and before my father came to Bucharest. They both lived and died in Namoloasa [a commune in Southern Moldavia, in the Galati County], long before World War I, leaving behind a family of several members. My grandfather's name was Haim Maier Wechsler. My grandmother's name was Feighe. My father, who was their oldest child, had to support two sisters. I don't know what the circumstances of their deaths were. I never asked about this in my childhood and, when I grew older, these things were not talked about.

Blimette Benjamin [nee Wechsler], one of my father's sisters, married Aron Benjamin. Blimette had two boys, Mauriciu and Carol, and a girl, Bori. She emigrated to Israel early, around 1955. She lived with Carol in the Nir Yitzhak kibbutz, on Doar HaNeghev St. Blimette died in the 1970's and I don't know what became of the rest of her family. When she was alive, we kept in touch with her. She told us [in her letters] about the way she lived in the kibbutz.

I can't tell you too much about Betti Lupu [nee Wechsler], my father's other sister. She had a housewife's education and no special training for any profession. She had learnt to tailor and she

was into ready-made clothes, underwear mending, and women's clothes. Her husband had a fragile health and worked with her. They had a family workshop, not a real business. Betti was the main provider in the family. She worked very much as a housewife and as a tailor. They lived in Bucharest - I don't know on what street. They were religious people. Betti had one son and two daughters. The son, Adolf Lupu, was a physician specialized in internal medicine. While he was serving as an army doctor, he was shot to death by a Legionary 1 officer [during World War II]. Franchette Recu [nee Lupu] married Misu Recu and had two daughters. Evelina was married, but had no children; she emigrated to Israel. Betti was very affected [by her son's death]. Her husband died, and she followed him. Little of this family survived World War II.

My father, Haim Maier Wechsler, was born in Namoloasa, in 1883. He changed his name to Iulius Wechsler before 1910. He got married in Ploiesti, in 1912. My brother and sister were born before the war [Ed. note: 1916 was the year Romania entered World War I.]. My father came to Bucharest around 1900. His parents were dead, so a part of what he earned from the small businesses he did was destined for the support of his sisters.

I know more things about my maternal grandparents, the Letzlers. My grandmother was named Eva Letzler, and my grandfather was named Maier Letzler. They were born around the middle of the 19th century. My grandmother died at a relatively early age. My grandfather re-married, but not officially - with Jews, if you live with a woman for a long period of time, it's as if you were married to her. He had a woman whose name was Eva too. Eventually, they also got married at the civil status office. Being a rabbi and a shochet, widely known in the Jewish community of the town of Ploiesti, he wasn't allowed to re-marry immediately after he became a widower. I hardly met my grandmother [my grandfather's first wife]. She was slim. She was a very nice woman who had received a moral upbringing; she was very quiet too. She was a housewife who had been raised in the strictest spirit of the Judaic religion. My sister, who was older than I was, and my brother were students and the only topic of conversation they could share with our grandmother [when she came to visit us] was how to look after children. She got ill and she died approximately at the end of the 1920's.

My grandfather was very religious. He shepherded a shul in Ploiesti. My grandfather had received a 100% Jewish education, just like my grandmother. I don't think they had schools organized by the State or something like that. They went to the yeshivah, where they studied in Ivrit, but also in Romanian. They used Yiddish at home. I don't think they spoke other languages. My grandfather dressed like a rabbi: in black, with a long caftan; he used a walking cane. I met him, as he would come visit us on holidays. It's understandable how my mother got her religious education. We, the children, were not very religious, and every time our grandfather came by, he asked our mother why she tolerated her children being disrespectful. My sister was more liberal in thought, almost a Communist, not very religious. She didn't go to the synagogue very often, and all these would make our grandfather say: 'How come you let her stay home instead of going to the synagogue on Saturday? Is this the way to raise your daughter? With this kind of thoughts?' Grandfather Maier Letzler died before World War II, approximately in the 1930's. I don't know where his relatives were scattered, if he had any.

I once went to Ploiesti with my mother to see my grandparents' house. It was a large, one-floor house that was rather decrepit - but I suppose that it had looked better while they were alive. Next to it there was a large hall where the shul was. The shul is an ordinary dwelling converted or a

small room where a minyan of men gathers. The synagogue is a place specially built where a minyan of men or a group of women congregate.

My maternal grandparents had four children. The youngest died because he was sick. I can only remember the names of those who lived. They were: Simon Letzler, the older son, Pene Letzler, the younger boy and Estera Letzler, my mother.

Simon Letzler, my mother's brother, was born around 1885 in Ploiesti. He went to Law School in Bucharest. As he came from Ploiesti, he was hired by an American oil company and he left to America in 1915, just one year before the war [World War I] broke in Romania. He first worked as a newspaper salesman, and then he got a job as a clerk for another oil company, because he had the necessary experience. He married a local Jewish woman and they lived relatively well. They had four children: one girl and three boys. The girl, Ana Letzler, was married, but got divorced and didn't have any children. The boys were named Edy, Alfred and Hary Letzler. I didn't meet any of them. Ana came to Romania a few times. All her brothers have children and grandchildren. They all had intellectual professions. One of them was a lawyer. These are the successors of the family in America, in the New York City area.

Pene Letzler, my mother's brother, was born around 1890, in Ploiesti. He went to college in Bucharest and became a lawyer. He was a famous lawyer in Ploiesti and he was also involved in the Romanian politics - he was the deputy prefect of the Prahova County. He served as a lieutenant in World War I. Being a Jewish lawyer in the 1930's (when the anti-Semitic trends began in Romania) was not easy at all. He lived in Ploiesti and was married to a lady named Mili Letzler. She wasn't too rich and she wasn't too cultivated either, but the two of them were in love. She was Jewish. It was difficult for a rabbi's son to marry a non-Jewish woman, especially in a provincial Romanian town. They only had a daughter, Dora Letzler, who studied Law too. The Letzlers had a very good financial situation. They were rather well-off, owned their house (which meant a lot back then) and lived on a main street in Ploiesti. Their house looked like a boyar's house [Ed. note: The boyars were the Romanian nobility. They usually owned estates and lived in houses built in the local style.]. It had a ground floor and an upper floor, a metal fence, an extra pavilion to shelter the maids, a place for the car and a place for growing pigeons. During World War II he was disbarred. He could no longer practice and, of course, he had to stop doing politics too. His file looked very bad. He was 100% bourgeois and he had become undesirable from a social point of view. He was wealthy enough to survive though. His daughter married a director from the Ministry, came to Bucharest and became a magistrate. She had to leave her office when the Communists came to power because her social origins were considered unhealthy [bourgeois] and she turned into a housewife. She brought her father to Bucharest. They sold the estate [in Ploiesti] and got enough money to live from and to buy a new estate in Bucharest, on Lacul Tei Ave. He died from skin cancer in the 1970's. His daughter died in the 1980's. She also suffered from a disease - it was something degenerative, related to the collagen, that couldn't be cured at the time.

Simon and Pene were rather modern Jews. They weren't religious, they celebrated holidays mostly at home and they went to the synagogue very seldom. Though they weren't religious in the mystical sense, they did observe the holidays and admitted being Jews.

Estera Wechsler [nee Letzler], my mother, was born in 1888, in Ploiesti. She attended a boarding school and spoke German and French. Naturally, she had also learnt Yiddish at home. All she told

me about her childhood was that she used to be a good student and that her teachers thought highly of her, especially because of her skills in painting and drawing. Unfortunately, or maybe fortunately - who could tell? -, my mother married a tradesman from Bucharest and moved with him. She interrupted her studies. She would have liked to go to the Arts Academy [in Bucharest], and her teachers had encouraged her about going to college. My grandparents had had a religious, bigot upbringing. Religious Jews believe that girls should get married at an early age, and, if possible, to a rabbi - which is considered to be all that a young girl could wish for. This was my mother's fate.

My mother made many paintings - I still keep some of them at home. When we were children, she used to do many things related to this decorating skill of hers, including weaving Persian rugs starting from a model. My elder brother would copy decorative models from magazines on a large canvas with little squares and my mother would look at the small model and on the canvas on which it had been copied and would weave the rug. She would also weave decorative pillow covers. I gave one of these to a nephew of mine and I keep another one at home. My mother's culture was rather rich. She spoke foreign languages and she read literature in Romanian and in other languages too. My father's intention was to send us to school to get some education, but it was my mother who insisted that we go all the way from elementary school to college.

My parents met through a matchmaker. It was probably someone from Ploiesti who saw that my grandfather had a daughter who had reached the proper age for marriage and who thought about finding her the best match. So it was through this intermediary that discussions were held on whether she wanted to marry the man and whether she found his situation acceptable. My father's social position was of a tradesman. Since most of the Jews were craftsmen, tailors, shoemakers etc., being a tradesman meant a good position for a Jew. My mother, who was more educated than her suitor (she had attended a boarding school, spoke foreign languages, had painting skills etc.), accepted to marry the man because of his material situation. Being a very beautiful woman, all her children were beautiful, except me. She agreed to this match with my father knowing that they both thought they would make a happy married couple. And so they did.

Growing up

We lived in a house with a courtyard; there was another family next door. My father had no employees and, by God, he worked like a slave in order to keep our household afloat. Back then, housework was no easy job. My mother, apart from looking after us, the children, had to do all the washing too, since washing machines hadn't been invented yet. My mother's typical day was a very difficult day. She had to wash every one of us using a wash basin - we didn't have bathrooms and bath tubs in those days. All we had was plumbing and sewerage from the public network - and that was already a great progress. We had running water in the kitchen and that was where all the washing took place. It got very difficult in winter. The kitchen was heated with a metal stove. Fire wood was kept in the courtyard. My mother had to complete lots of difficult chores. For the winter, barrels would be filled with pickles, green tomatoes, bell peppers, cabbage - and someone had to buy them and prepare them. My father would give a hand too. Our household looked a lot like a countryside household, only we lived in a town. A woman's work was very hard. Of course, men didn't have an easy time either, as they were in charge of earning money and they also had to do some things around the house. Money was painfully earned in a time when capitalism was at its beginnings. People didn't work 8 hours a day, they worked 12-14. Life was very hard, especially for

the petty tradesmen.

My father was very busy because he used to go to fairs. I went with him too. There were these fairs in various towns of Walachia. They would be organized on special occasions. Each town had its own times to hold a fair. Those trade fairs would get a lot of attention, as there were no cinemas or bands back then. [Ed. note: Even today, some traditional fairs related to certain holidays are still held. Various tradesmen and craftsmen sell their products there.] They served snacks and meat rolls. Every town had a certain period in which it would organize a fair; periods could coincide and it was possible for two towns to have fairs at the same time. Tradesmen would build some shacks made of wood, many of which were covered with cloth. They were erected directly on the ground and people lived in them. Imagine a curtain with benches to sleep on behind it. Of course, toilets were far away - they were public and had no water. The water supply was a fountain. This is how tradesmen lived for a while - at the outskirts of the towns, in the field, in those shacks built next to one another which had counters to display the goods. My father sold underwear. I often accompanied him to fairs to help him sell his merchandise, during my summer vacations.

My parents had three children: Stefania, Sebastian and Aristide Wechsler. Stefania Rubinger [nee Wechsler], my sister, was born in 1914, in Bucharest. Her story is hard to tell. She was married when World War II came. Her husband, Rubinger, was a painter. He was a man of an extraordinary beauty, tall, robust, highly cultivated and talented. My sister may have gone to the boarding school, but her husband had an artistic culture. His works are now in Israel, Germany and Romania. He worked as a set designer for all the major theaters in Bucharest: the State Opera, the Youth Theater, and the National Theater; he worked for the Jewish State Theater 2 for a long time too. He met my sister by accident. He wasn't rich, and my sister wasn't rich either. They were relatively poor, but they married for love. They lived in Bucharest until the 1970's, when they emigrated to Germany. It was a time when Germany accepted German- speaking immigrants of German descent. He had been born in Cernauti and spoke German; my sister spoke German too. She received a pension in Germany. Her husband received a large pension, because he had worked a lot and his activity was taken into consideration. They settled in the town of Dusseldorf and stayed there. My sister now lives there by herself, as my brother-in-law died two years ago [in 2002]. He was run over by a car on a pedestrian crossing, at the age of 92. My sister is about 90 now. The two of them have two extraordinary children: Irina Rubinger and Adrian Rubinger. Irina is the elder child; she was born during World War II. Adrian was born later - he is now about 52 or 53. They both grew up in Bucharest. They currently live in Paris. On their way to becoming immigrants in Germany, they passed through France and stayed there.

Irina Rubinger, a student in Biology, graduated in Paris. She worked in research and she taught courses in higher education. Not so long ago, she used to be a lecturer for a medical school in Paris. She married a Romanian actor, Iulian Negulescu. The two of them had a daughter, Ilinca. Eventually, they got divorced. Ilinca studied the French literature at Sorbonne and attempted to start a career in drama. She now works in the film industry. She married Julien Cohen in Paris. She recently gave birth to a baby girl who is now only a few months old.

When he got to Paris, Adrian Rubinger passed an admission exam in architecture at the Ecole des Beaux Arts. Foreigners were subject to 'numerus clausus': there was a limited number of positions for people who were not French. My nephew did well at one of the most difficult entrance exams for higher education in France and got admitted to the Faculty of Architecture in 1968. He graduated

in Paris, and then he went to Israel. He passed some exams there too, and he ended up holding a second architect's degree - an Israeli one. I don't know exactly the periods when he was a student and the times when he graduated from both faculties. He met his wife, Ester, in Israel. She was an Israeli woman whose parents were Romanian Jews. The couple went to Paris, where Ester graduated in psychology. However, she mostly taught Ivrit to the Jewish community there and to the French who wanted to learn the language. They have two daughters: Miriam and Sara [Rubinger]. Miriam is 22 and goes to two colleges: Judaic studies and Psychology. Sara, who's in high school, is about to turn 16. They are very religious. They observe the ritual on Friday evening, rest on Saturday, don't answer the phone on Friday and Saturday, stay home, pray, go to the temple. They kept in touch with me - they love me and I love them. I went to visit them two years ago. Every time we go to see our children, we pass by Paris and Dusseldorf to see our good relatives - sister and brother, nephew and nieces. We keep in touch with all of them and we love them very much. Adrian is a nephew who behaves as if he were our son.

Sebastian Sebastien, my brother, was born in 1915, in Bucharest. [He changed his name from Wechsler to Sebastien after World War I.] He first went to the Faculty of Law and Philosophy, and then he attended the Faculty of Architecture, which he graduated in 1945. He chose architecture despite his having already graduated in Law and Philosophy because the Jews were disbarred in 1940, so it was obvious that Law wouldn't make a good career. He was kicked out from the Faculty of Architecture [because of the Jewish Statutum] 3, but he continued his studies after the war and became an architect ahead of me. His fiancée, Lola Gotfried, came from a well-off family - her grandfather had a shoe store on Victoriei Ave. Back then, the shoes sold by the luxury stores on Victoriei Ave. had the name of the store imprinted on them. It was a famous store in Bucharest and her grandfather was very rich. He had a block of flats built at 36 C. A. Rosetti St. which is still there today. At the time, it was a very modern building, heated with terracotta stoves. He had three children and, when he died, they inherited these apartments. My sister-in-law is still the owner of those apartments (her ownership has been officially recognized), but there's no use, for there is someone living there and nothing can be done about it. My brother and my sister-in-law emigrated to France around 1960 and settled in Paris. My brother was employed as an architect - he didn't have his own workshop. Thanks to his wife's entrepreneurial skills, they later opened a decorations and clocks store on a central street in Paris. For many years, this small business brought them more revenues than architecture.

I, Aristide Streja [Ed. note: He changed his name from Wechsler to Streja after World War II.], was born in Bucharest on 19th December 1922, in a house on the River Dambovita's banks, on the Unirii Embankment [Ed. note: The area was relatively close to the center of the city and had a rather large Jewish population.]. I was well looked after and educated by my parents. I had a brother who was 7 years older than me and a sister who was 6 years older. When I was in the first year of my life, both of them were in primary school. They would play together - they were still children when I was very young. My mother took care of the three of us. I used to play with the circle; it was one of my favorite games before I went to school. At the age of 4 or 5, I caught the scarlet fever and my mother had to take special care of me. She had to isolate me, so that the other children wouldn't get sick. It was a very serious matter. I didn't go to kindergarten - we didn't have kindergartens back then. My school was on the Independentei Embankment, opposite from a tanning factory, the Mociornita factory. It was a public school and I went there for 4 years. I don't have any friends from that period, and I can't remember if I made friends with anyone in that

school - I was too young. I was a relatively good student. While in primary school, I didn't enjoy any subject in particular, except maybe Math. When there was no school, I would play in the neighboring streets, like Aurora St., with some friends who lived nearby. My sister and brother looked after me to a certain extent, but they didn't take me play with them - they just helped me with my homework. They made my parents look after me; they didn't really like to do it themselves because they thought they wasted their time on me. But they loved me and I didn't have any conflicts with them.

Afterwards I went to the Matei Basarab High School, because my brother had gone there too. [Ed. note: The Matei Basarab High School is one of the oldest and most prestigious secondary schools in Bucharest. It was located in the vicinity of the Great Synagogue and of the Jewish quarter. The children of many outstanding Jewish families went to this high school.] I studied there from the 1st year until the 6th year, when I was kicked out because I was a Jew - this happened in 1939-1940. I had very good teachers. There was the principal, Stoenescu, who taught Math. There was the History teacher, Ion Tatoiu, an author of textbooks. He was a great teacher who came to class, sat down and taught us history as if he were narrating a novel or telling us a story. When we grew older, we had a teacher of Romanian, Perpessicius, who was a literary critic. [Ed. note: Perpessicius (1891-1971), literary critic, literary historian and poet. He managed the 'Universul literar' - 'Literary Universe' - magazine between 1925 and 1927. He was a literary reviewer for Radio Bucharest between 1934 and 1938. Between 1929 and 1951 he served uninterruptedly as a teacher of Romanian at the Matei Basarab High School in Bucharest.] Our Latin teacher was Chiriac, an author of textbooks too. I was a relatively good student in Latin. I remember he once caught me with my lesson not learnt and he gave me a 1. But I generally got good grades. I didn't take private lessons. I studied French and Italian in high school. Our Italian teacher was a young woman named Constanta, and learning from her was a pleasure.

The Matei Basarab High School was recognized as a very good high school. It was a public school, but there was some tuition to pay. Back then, elementary schools were free of charge and it was compulsory to attend them; but you had to pay in order to go to high school. Private high schools had higher tuitions than public schools. There was, for instance, this [Jewish] private high school called Libros, where tuition was higher than in the public high schools. The Jewish high schools were called Cultura 4. I think they used to charge tuition too, but they stopped during World War II, when the Jewish students were expelled from the public schools.

When I was in high school, the strajeria 5 was founded. The movement was established by Carol II 6, who was the chief strajer. We would gather in a square in the schoolyard; it was a sort of paramilitary organization. In 1930's the anti-Semitic manifestations began in Romania. We felt it in our high school too, as we began to be seen as outcasts. All students were scouts, but the Jewish scouts were somewhat ostracized by their schoolmates. Our teachers didn't have anti-Semitic attitudes. Although the Latin teacher (Chiriac) and the History teacher (Ion Tatoiu) shared nationalistic views that were expressed in the textbooks they had authored, the diligent Jewish students - like myself - got high grades at their subjects.

We didn't have enough money for the tuition; my mother kept postponing the payment from one day to the next and I would get kicked out from classes when I didn't pay. My mother would go to the secretary's office and plead: 'I beg of you, look, my boy is a pretty good student, please, give me some more time because I can't pay right now.' It wasn't easy to get a postponement, because

our situation was pretty poor. I would wear my school outfit for 2-3 years in a row, until it didn't fit me anymore. But I didn't miss school and I was never expelled because of the tuition. I always paid; it's true that I usually was behind schedule, but I would get postponements. I didn't owe the school one penny. And when I got kicked out, it was because all the other Jews had been kicked out from high schools. For my final years of high school, I went to the Jewish school [Cultura B], where I had some extremely good teachers. I studied Romanian Language and Literature with [Mihail] Sebastian [Ed. note: Mihail Sebastian (1907-1945), novelist, literary critic, playwright, essayist. PhD in economic sciences and public law from Paris. Editor for the 'Revista Fundatiilor Regale' - 'The Magazine of the Royal Foundations' - from 1936 until 1940, when he was fired because he was a Jew. In 1941, he started teaching at the Jewish high school Cultura B.]. I also had Sanielevici as a teacher.

In my childhood, my mother, who was a rabbi's daughter, kept all the holidays, of course. She would often go to the synagogue. My father was also a very religious man. Jewish tradition was observed with every holiday. We ate matzah on Passover and we fasted for Yom Kippur. My grandfather from Ploiesti came to visit us. He kept the kashrut. We did our best to eat kosher too. My mother would buy live poultry and would have it slaughtered [by the hakham] on Mamulari St. I couldn't tell how strictly we kept the kashrut, but I'm sure we did. There is no hakham nowadays; animals are slaughtered at the slaughter house and the rabbi checks on the process.

So my father was a religious man. He went to the synagogue on Friday, on Saturday and in other days. He would go to the Great Synagogue, where he had a seat reserved for him, which he paid for. He would take me with him too, but only on holidays. I spent a lot of time there, playing with other children in the courtyard, which was pretty large. The synagogue is and has always been at the very heart of the community - this is what I think and what I say to the children who come here now. Take Passover or Yom Kippur, for instance. The prayers last 3-4 hours in the morning and are continued for 3 more hours in the afternoon, which takes a lot of time. Back then, they lasted even longer. During the breaks, people would get out in the courtyard and talk. All sorts of things were discussed in the courtyard. Even marriages were arranged out there; young men and women would get introduced to one another and people would talk. They would also talk inside the synagogue, not on Yom Kippur or Passover, of course. But there were days when they would discuss things that weren't necessarily related to religion. Like nowadays, people talked about the issues that concerned the Jewish community of the time: social, philanthropic and Zionist issues, donations for Keren Kayenet 7. The Jewish communities were organized around the synagogues, which had their own committees, presidents, rabbis etc.

Hamisha Asar was the most popular holiday, because we got to eat exotic fruit, just like in Palestine. We would have sweet dates, manna, dried squeezed apricots called pistil, and all sorts of fruits except oranges and the likes. They were expensive, but could be found on the market, because we lived in a capitalist society back then. Tradition would have us eat a bit of those and we cared about the tradition.

I had my bar mitzvah at the Great Synagogue. The only time in my life when I studied Hebrew was when I was preparing for my bar mitzvah. I do know a few Hebrew letters and three or four words, but, even today, I'm not able to follow the service, especially when they read really fast. I go to the synagogue on Friday evening and I can only follow some fragments. I'm interested in the commentary of the weekly pericope.

Here are some of the friends I can remember. Schwartzman was the son of the man who conducted the choir of the temple in Bucharest. He was a renowned musician in our city and his boy was my schoolmate. Bercu Grimberg, nicknamed Boris, was also my fellow-student at the University. We became friends in high school and even went to forced labor together. I also had Romanian friends. One of them was Vasilescu. We parted when I had to leave the high school and he stayed for two more years. We never met again. Then there was this other friend, Aurel Zlota, one year younger than I was. He went to the Matei Basarab High School too. We became friends in the 1st year of high school - or maybe even earlier, in elementary school. We stayed friends until a couple of years ago, when he passed away. For 60-70 years, he was my best friend. He was besides me when I was courting my future wife. And I was the one who introduced him to his future wife, in my turn. I wasn't really a matchmaker, but I did advise him to get married. We were like brothers. When I was in high school, my family moved on Udricani St. Aurel lived opposite from us. I also made friends with two brothers on Udricani St., where we lived. In 1939-1940, they lived in a typical building for that time: the business was at the ground floor (a pub) and the dwelling space upstairs. I sometimes played backgammon with them. But my friendship with Aurel Zlota was the real thing. We went to dance with the girls together.

We enjoyed going to the cinema. We did it on Sunday. There were two films. I went through an adventure when in high school. Back then, students weren't allowed to go to the theater, to the cinema, or to any performance that wasn't approved by the high school. We had to wear our uniforms, and they had numbers on them, so we could get reported at any time. The cinema was safe, because it was dark and no one could see us. But we once went to the Tanase Theater. I had a friend who knew someone there, an actor. That guy got us in through the actors' entrance. We weren't allowed to go there because they staged variety shows which featured women who weren't far from being naked. From the actors' entrance, we had to get to the stage, pull the curtain a little, and climb down some stairs into the orchestra. When we entered the stage, we saw a naked woman (I mean, she only had her panties on). We couldn't believe our eyes at first, and then we got scared: if someone spotted us, we would be expelled from school. We sat in the first row. I looked behind me and I noticed that anyone in the orchestra and the circle could see us. So I stood up and went in the last row, under the circle, to avoid being seen. And I watched the rest of the performance in fear.

One of the few things I was allowed to do was ride the bicycle. I learnt to swim and I went to swimming pools when I grew older. I usually went to the Bucharest Hippodrome with my sister-in-law. Quality people came to the horse races. Those were people with a very good material situation, since they owned race horses. But there were also people who came to bet and who belonged to the lower and middle classes. There was an entrance fee. Betting was pretty complicated, because one had to carefully consider the chances of winning of a certain horse. One had to buy the program and study what was happening there in order to place a good bet. It wasn't like a lottery ticket that you just buy. The game was only for people who knew what it was about.

During the War

My parents had a lot to suffer during the Holocaust [because of the anti- Jewish laws in Romania] 8. My father owned a store, a small business on Selari St. When the 'Romanianization' came, he was kicked out and an administrator was appointed. He wasn't allowed to do trade anymore and was left with no means of earning his existence. I can say that I owe a lot to him. He proved to be very

resourceful, despite his not being skilled for any other occupation. He had been a tradesman all his life, and they took that away from him. I couldn't say how we survived during that period. Everybody was unemployed. During the [legionary] rebellion 9, in 1941, a friend of mine was arrested. We lived in a place that had a courtyard surrounded by apartments. We were on very good terms with our neighbors. When the rebellion came, they didn't go to report us for being Jews. I don't know how many of them are still alive. We soon had new neighbors. We were evicted [by the military] from the house on Legislator St. and we rented an attic on Labirint St. We lived in an attic for a while. We had two rooms and a kitchen below. Jews were being persecuted. Jewish physicians were banned from hospitals and all the institutions. They were only allowed to attend to Jewish patients and so on and so forth.

[Ed. note: Mr. Streja's father was too old to be drafted, and his brother was sent to forced labor in other places.] I did forced labor in three or four locations: the Cotroceni shooting range, the Central Statistics Institute, the North Railway Station (clearing the snow off the tracks), and Grivitei Ave. At Cotroceni they were building a shooting range for the army. They dug ditches and piled up all the dirt so as to form a hill. We had to dig the ditches, carry the dirt in a wheelbarrow, unload it on the hill and tread on it. They were going to shoot from ditches about 200 meters long and bullets were supposed to stop against that hill. We did nothing but digging and pushing the wheelbarrow all day long, from morning till evening. I remember it rained sometimes and we were all covered in mud. We did that for months and months. I actually think I spent one year by those ditches. All day long, I was half-buried in ditches and mud. Going back home in the evening was bliss. It was a pleasure to walk the city streets, away from the mud, and to see houses instead of ditches.

There was a decent lieutenant in those forced labor detachments. He stood on higher ground and supervised the lines of people who went up the hill. His job was to watch over all the ditches and make sure people were working properly. He was a sort of general supervisor of the entire site. A warrant officer was in charge of each ditch. They called the men on their list every morning. We had to be there at 7 a.m. We worked 12 hours, till 7 p.m. In the evening, the list was read once again, and we were free to go home. The lieutenant stood up there and looked at everything - how the wheelbarrows ran, how the digging went. He paid attention to all those ditches and made sure we were not wasting working time. We had a quota to complete. One time, the colonel who was in charge of the entire detachment gathered us, had us sit down, told us that those who would fail to complete their quota would be shot, and urged us to make sure we did our duty. So it was the wheelbarrow and the shovel for us.

My friend, Boris Grimberg, was there too. We were to become fellow- students. He was with the Communist youth - I wasn't yet. He listened to the Russian or English radio, although we weren't allowed to listen to the radio, and he gave me the news. I knew from him what the situation on the front was. We were very interested in the development of the war because we knew that, if Germany won, we would have been in great trouble. The Russian victory on the Eastern front, at Stalingrad, made us happy.

Then I did forced labor at the Central Statistics Institute, for the drawing and typing department. I wasn't paid, so my father supported me - I don't know how he got the money. In the winter of 1943-1944, I was assigned to the North Station to clear the snow off the railway tracks. I spent the winter working there, muffling myself up. I had to work in the open air all day, in bitter cold, snow and dampness. Afterwards, in 1944, when Bucharest was bombed - especially the tracks of the

North Station and Grivitei Ave. -, we were sent to remove the debris. Some houses were hit and we were assigned to dig out the possessions of those whose houses had crumbled. Everyone wanted to save some piece of furniture or some eiderdown or something. It was a disaster. We would dig out things and load the bricks and debris into trucks in order to free the streets. Before the bombings, the air raid alarms would be sounded. We would flee Grivitei Ave. and go towards the center of the city, to seek shelter in some basement. When the alarm was off, we went back. This is what we did until the Soviet troops entered the city.

The day before 23rd August 10, not knowing what would happen, we reported for work. Those who had to go to Grivitei Ave. had to gather under the command of a lieutenant. We came where we were supposed to, but the lieutenant didn't show up. We left home. The next day, there was the radio announcement. After 23rd August, the Soviet troops entered Bucharest. I was very glad we had got rid of that misery. For us, the Soviet troops were our liberators. We were enthusiastic about Communism. This is why I applied to become a member of the Party. However, I didn't join in 1944, but in 1947 or 1948. Meanwhile, I graduated from high school, at the Jewish school. I got my graduation exam, and then I went to the College for Jewish students, the Architecture department. [Ed. note: The College for Jewish students operated between 1941 and 1943, with official permission. It gathered the Jewish students and professors who had been banned from their faculties.] Our project professor in architecture was architect Hary Stern, to whom I owe a great deal. He taught me a lot of things.

After the War

After the war we went back to our place on Legislator St. It hadn't been inhabited by anybody else - it had served as a military headquarters. We didn't find major changes, but we had to repaint. Our family began to feel revived. Thanks to his skills, my father began to run some businesses at the old place, on Selari St. In 1945, when I was still a student, my brother got his architect's degree. Together with our father, he managed to build a house in the center of the city, on Gabroveni St. Our father had owned a piece of land there since 1937, but, during the Legionary regime, his ownership was not recognized, so he could do nothing with the property. He claimed back the land in 1945, and registered it on his name. It was a very small plot, so he thought of building a house. After the war, Lipscani St. and Gabroveni St. were places where the black market began to develop. Those who dealt on the black market only needed a small office, because they didn't have their merchandise there. They first made the transaction, and only brought the goods afterwards. So my father designed some offices that were 2 meters wide by 3 meters long; they were no larger than 5-6 square meters - they were like cages. He put a sign that read 'Offices to sell in this building'. But there was no building - there was only the sign, the construction site, and a cartload of gravel. In 1945, he got the authorization to build. Based on that authorization and on the plan designed by my brother, he managed to sell three offices. He bought iron and bricks and he began to build. My brother was supervising the works. I was called in to supervise too. When people saw the construction had begun, there were others who came to buy offices. The building went on and the house was completed. But a nationalization decree 11 caused him to lose the house [in 1948]. My father was left with nothing at all, and no income. My brother and I began to support our parents.

A friend of mine - he was the cousin of my future wife - once said: 'There aren't too many girls in our circle. Let's go meet some!' His lady cousin had some girl-friends and they all lived in the

Dudesti area. We went to meet them, and I wanted to see his cousin again. This is how I met my future wife, in 1944, during the war. After the war, I went with her and some friends of mine on some trips to the Bucegi Mountains. After she went there, she wanted to leave for Israel. Meanwhile, I kept in touch with her. I became an architect and was hired in 1947. Her father, who wanted to leave for Israel and had a passport, happened to get arrested for a few days because of a relative who was a stamp forger. She tore his passport because she was afraid. This is why her parents were no longer able to leave, and they wouldn't let her go on her own. So she was delayed. We fell in love and got married in 1949. My wife and I moved at 20 Nicolae Golescu St.

Chely Streja [nee Weisbuch], my wife, was born in 1927, in Braila, in a Jewish family. She was still very young when her family moved to Bucharest - she must have been 2-3 years old. Her mother was born in Tysmenitsa, Poland, currently in Ukraine. I believe her father was born in Roman. Both her parents were religious people who went to the temple and observed the holidays. They spoke Romanian at home. The mother also spoke Polish. They also used Yiddish - my wife learnt a bit because she heard it at home. She first went to a Romanian school. After being kicked out, she went to a Jewish high school, and then she attended a commerce school. She was a qualified accountant. I wanted her to go to the Commerce Academy, but she didn't get the chance to; she began her professional life. After the war, as she was a high school graduate, she was hired by the State Commission for Planning.

She had some very interesting assignments. At a certain point, the kindergarten's manager resigned or retired - I can't remember which. My wife became the new manager and the children were very fond of her. She worked in accountancy for about 15 years, but she was fired because she had relatives abroad and she wasn't a Party member. The Great National Assembly had decided that the ratios of minority employees to majority employees should not exceed the actual ratios of the populations. My wife wasn't a Party member, she wasn't Romanian, and she had relatives abroad, in America and Israel, so they saked her. [Ed. note: The people who had relatives abroad could have problems at work at any time.] She was hired again - she had several offers. She chose the Central Organization of the Textile Industry, which administered several factories. She worked in accountancy. The organization was dissolved and the factories were put under the direct jurisdiction of the ministry. She was reassigned to a factory on Dudesti Ave. We lived in the center of the city and this factory was rather far away from our place. Back then, it took my wife a lot of time to get there by tram. She worked in accountancy too. That was my wife's career.

Our son was born in Bucharest. We didn't raise him in a religious spirit. There were no special religious manifestations in our family. Besides, we lived in the so-called Communist period, when propaganda against all religious beliefs was very strong. My son went to a public school and he got an anti-religious education. His teachers were very good and he belonged to an extremely gifted generation. Some of his schoolmates emigrated and built exceptional professional careers. My son had a very good education at home, at school, at University, and on the sports field. He was a high-performance swimmer and had a German coach, who educated him in a sporting spirit. He belonged to the Romanian junior team at international competitions in Czechoslovakia.

After he graduated from college, he got married, in 1977. He had a religious ceremony at a small synagogue, Credinta, in Bucharest. He did his military service in Ploiesti. Five years after he and his wife had applied for emigration, the Communist authorities finally gave them the permission. Thus they emigrated legally. They had to work very hard abroad because they were fresh immigrants

with no money and no support. For 22 years, they have been living a decent life abroad. They have two daughters, to whom they give a fine general and Jewish education.

If I showed no interest in religion during all the 50 years of the Communist period, it was because of my inner structure, because I received a part of my education in this period, and despite the mystical religious influence of my parents. I didn't give my son a religious, mystical education, although my wife is rather religious. I am not a believer, I'm only religious. We celebrated Passover and Yom Kippur, we fasted and we kept all the other major holidays at home. My wife always knew more about these things than I did. In all these 50 years, we kept the important holidays, but we didn't observe the kashrut and almost stopped going to the temple.

I held conferences on religion at the Community [Ed. note: Various conferences are organized periodically in the conference hall of the Jewish Community in Bucharest, on Popa Soare St.], and I wrote about it. There are many controversies nowadays. The notion of Jew itself is very controversial. Some think that being a Jew means sharing the Mosaic or Judaic faith; others believe that one has to have a Jewish mother in order to be a Jew, like the Israeli law states; others, like some rabbis in the US, believe that being a Jew is something else: it means sympathizing with the Judaic tradition, the Judaic common history, and the position of being Jewish. They believe people are not born Jews - they become Jews. They do it by assuming the position of being a Jew, that is the tradition. There is a Judaic tradition, a historical sense of belonging, a Judaic culture. Assuming these Judaic values means being a Jew and being acknowledged as such. This is what really matters. For instance, [Nicolae] Cajal 12 said that Chanukkah is a holiday that also celebrates the heroism of those Jews who resisted the attack of the Syrian troops, so it's a national holiday, a holiday of the liberation. Of course, we celebrate God's miracle which kept a candle burning for a week. It is a religious holiday, but it is also a national, heroic holiday. It has a range of meanings that have nothing to do with the mystical, purely religious holiday. This is true for all the Judaic holidays; they don't have a mystical meaning exclusively, they also have a lay meaning.

My friends and I would talk a bit about the Communist policy and about what went on abroad, in the so-called Capitalist countries where we had relatives.

I became an architect in 1947. First I got hired by the Union of the Democratic Women in Romania. I fixed a children's hostel. I don't remember on what street it was located, but I remember it was an old house. Then I got hired by the Construction Projects Institute, the first State project institute in the country. I got the job in 1948 or 1949. My brother was already working there. The institute changed its name a lot of times, and we got moved from one place to another. But the place stayed the same. So, for 40 years, I worked for the same project institute. Only it kept getting new names.

My very first project there was the cement factory in Turda. This was an easy job. Then I made cement factories in Medgidia and Bucharest. Later, with some former professors of mine from the Architecture Faculty, I drew the urban improvement plans for the town of Medias. Afterwards, I made hundreds of stores for the CENTROCOOP. I designed some standard projects which were used as a basis to replicate hundreds of rural stores. In Savinesti, I designed the first self-service restaurant; the equipment was provided by the Ministry of Chemistry. [The Synthetic Thread and Fiber Industrial Complex in Savinesti was under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Chemistry.] I designed a series of projects for workers' hostels and boarding schools. In Bucharest, I made the

block no.10 in Palatului Sq., on Ion Campineanu St. The building had dwelling apartments with a post office and a bank at the ground floor. I have very nice memories of that project. The building has a passage underneath. There was a street that joined Ion Campineanu St. I couldn't block it, so I made it go under the building. I had some very good engineers. One of them was a Jew who performed wonders of bravery as an engineer, because the building had to be erected over a street and there was a huge sewage pipe and a pole that came right over the pipe. He made a triangle into the pole and passed the pipe through this triangle. This was my most important project that I saw put into practice. I also did some experimental projects for stores: a roof made of insulated metal beams covered with wavy plates of asbestos-cement. At that time, between 1960 and 1965, this was an innovation. I was involved in a study with another project institute. I designed a house heated by solar power in Campina - a place where there were more sunny days per year than the average in Romania. The ground floor was heated from an adjoining greenhouse. Solar panels were placed on the roof. They heated water that was pumped through the heaters and to the taps.

Around 1975, I designed some other projects that I enjoyed very much. Unfortunately, they were rather expensive, so they were never accomplished. They were conceived as standard projects and came from the need for certain towns to have a local identity. A project was made for a certain town, but the town's or the county's Party secretary, who had more than a word to say, could prefer to give the project to the local specialized organization. So this was it - I enjoyed designing those buildings, even though they were not important ones. I began my career at the institute as a simple designer, and I ended up as a project manager for major assignments. It goes without saying that I went through many adventures as a project manager - I always had all sorts of adventures.

I made a business trip to Pitesti with a female colleague [in the 1950's]. When we came back to Bucharest, we found a baby in the train. In one of the stations, a peasant woman got in. She was nicely dressed and was carrying a baby and a small piece of baggage. I made her room next to me and she put the baby on the free seat. Then she disappeared. I thought she had gone to bring the rest of her baggage. After the train left the station, I said to my companion 'She's probably on the corridor with the baggage and will soon be here.' My colleague said 'You know, I think she left us the baby and ran away.' 'How could she have left it? Can you imagine a mother abandoning her baby? By now, she must be devastated because she missed the train. Let's pull the alarm and stop the train.' After some investigation, we alerted everybody. The train conductor came and said 'I can't stop the train because of this. I will get off at the nearest station, phone the other station and, if we find the mother there, we get the baby off the train. We go on, but the baby stays at the station and his mother will get him back.' The nearest station came, and the conductor went to make the call while we all waited. No one moved a muscle. The man came back and said 'Well, she's not to be found; and we have to leave. I announced the North Station in Bucharest that you are to arrive with the baby. You must take care of it and deliver it to the station's Gendarmerie.' My colleague said 'I'll have no part in this; just leave me alone!' Meanwhile, the train was moving. We rocked the baby a bit. The poor soul, it was a very nice boy. People on the train found out the baby's story and offers began to pour. Some tried to persuade me to give it to them claiming they needed a baby, and this and that. 'How could I give it to you? The Gendarmerie are waiting for me at the North Station. I have to deliver the baby to them, so I can't give it to you, for it's not mine.' 'We'll go with you and settle things at the station.' My companion was very alarmed. When the train stopped at the platform, there were three armed gendarmes waiting for us by the car's door.

Two of them placed themselves ahead of us, and one passed behind us. We formed quite a column. They took us to the station's Gendarmerie. A nurse from the 'Mama si copilul' ['Mother and child' - an organization protecting mothers and children] showed up and a report was written: 'We hereby declare that in this station, this person got in, and did this, and that...' We both had to confirm the facts. I called my wife on the phone: 'Can we have another baby? If I choose to, these guys are giving me the baby. What do you think about it?' She didn't agree. If she had, I would now have a second son.

There are many stories to tell about the office. I was a Party member and I was put in charge of the institute's news billboard [Ed. note: a billboard which displayed various propaganda materials, the top ranking employees, critiques of negative individuals etc.]. We once criticized the Party secretary, whose brother was a member of the Party's Central Committee. He reprimanded me: 'Citizen, what did the Party put you there for?' Another time I criticized our manager. He spent a lot of time abroad, and he seldom came to the workshops to guide the designers. There was an article with a caricature of his which read 'Ni vu, ni connu' [French for 'Seen nothing, knew nothing']. I was responsible for it. And things went on and on. I did so many silly things that I was amazed they didn't expel me from the Party.

I went to Paris in 1968. That was the year when the Soviet troops invaded Czechoslovakia. [Ed. note: Mr. Streja refers to the period after the Prague Spring.] 13 My brother said 'There's going to be a war.' Ceausescu 14 immediately held a meeting and stated he was against the entrance of the Soviet troops on the Romanian territory. My brother told me to stay in Paris. He offered to help me get a legal status, as a refugee from the Communist Romania. I could have done that. 'And leave my wife and child in Romania? Well, I can't abandon my family, I have to go back.' I came back, as my visa was for a limited period. I traveled in a sleeping-car and I remember it was totally empty. I was the only one in it. In fact, the whole train was rather empty - no one dared return to Romania for fear of the war. I came back and didn't feel sorry about it. When we left Romania, the baggage check was very thorough and very unpleasant. They would unpack everything we carried - they wanted to prevent us from taking paintings, art objects, jewels or money across the border. We were only allowed to have $10 on us. The exchange rate was 6 lei for $1. What could anyone do with that money?

At the 1977 earthquake, the Free Europe 15 had a broadcast in which they said that Mrs. Letzler from the US wanted to know if her relatives in Romania were all right. I was working in a Communist State institution, and was a Party member, while the Americans were imperialists and enemies of the people. When I met my co-workers, they told me 'The Free Europe is looking for you'. This put me in a dangerous position. Those from the Party organization asked me 'What is the meaning of this? Why is the Free Europe looking for you?' However, I didn't get any sanctions. The next day, we received a phone call from the Free Europe: 'This is the editorial office of the Free Europe. Are you aware of the announcement that was broadcast? Have you heard it?' It was my wife who had answered the phone. She said 'No, I'm not aware.' 'Then we'll play it for you, because we recorded it.' 'There's no need for that', my wife said. The radio station probably told Mrs. Letzler about this conversation, so she asked them not to send any more messages, for they might cause us harm. The Free Europe announced that 'Mrs. Letzler asked us not to send any more messages, for they might cause harm to her family'. And the story repeated itself. We would secretly listen to the Free Europe and discussed the things that went on in the Western world. We also discussed

books and the intellectual issues of the time. We were subscribers to Romanian culture magazines and we purchased books.

During the Communist regime, the Romanian intellectual life was not bad. There were valuable writers, good theater plays and great actors, and we had access to all the cultural manifestations. Outside my professional activity, which had forced me to study Soviet architecture at the beginning, I had subscriptions to some Russian-speaking magazines, like Arhitectura CCCP; I couldn't understand a word. I had architecture books in my library, including the history of architecture written by the Soviets and translated into Romanian. I sold it because it wasn't worth a dime anymore. We had Romanian literature and foreign literature: French, English. My wife had studied German, English and French in high school. I learnt English very late, in my sixties. I had a lot of French literature in particular. There were many translations from the foreign literature during the Communist period. The publishing house was Russian, but the translation was Romanian. I kept in touch with my brother and sister, and they would send us books.

The street we lived on, Legislator St., no longer exists. It was located in the area where the Victoria Socialismului Ave. was built. [Ed. note: Currently known as Unirii Ave. On Ceausescu's order, a portion of 4.5 kilometers from the historical center of the city was destroyed in order to obtain a monumental perspective on the House of People, the second largest building in the world, after the Pentagon. Ironically, this avenue now shelters the headquarters of many capitalist banks and companies.] It was where Dudesti Ave. crossed Vacaresti Ave. There is nothing left of it now. It was bulldozed and something else was built in its place. The [systematic] demolition 16 took place in 1985-1986, long after my father had died (in the 1970's). My mother lived there until the 1977 earthquake, and then she moved with me. The place where we lived [20 Nicolae Golescu St.] was partially damaged by the earthquake. Ceausescu was on the site and weaved his hand. No one knew what exactly he had meant, so they only demolished the three floors that were above us, leaving us, at the first floor, with no roof. The rain couldn't be stopped, so we had to move to a student hostel. Then they gave us an apartment in Drumul Taberei - we could see the field and the grazing sheep from our window. Finally, they added a roof to the old place, and we were free to move back on Nicolae Golescu St. This is what we did. Eventually, we managed to exchange the place for the one we live in now, in the center of the city. This happened during the Communist period.

When the State of Israel 17 was born, I was very enthusiastic about it. I thought it was a miracle back then and I still think that today. It was a real miracle and I admired the Jewish people for it. When Palestine was divided between Jews and Palestinians, the division was poorly made and left room for future conflicts. Jews, however, would accept anything at that time, because it meant the revival of the Jewish State, a political milestone. I thought of emigrating to Israel, but I had my parents here, and they were already old. I felt obliged to support them and I couldn't just take them to a newly formed state. We couldn't leave our parents here. My mother's sister worked for the Political Publishing House and she would have been kicked out immediately. The wars of 1967 and 1973 caused us a lot of anxiety, but their outcome was rather good. We have relatives in Israel. All my wife's cousins live there. We kept in touch with them. We couldn't phone them in those days, but we received and sent letters all the time. We kept up with all the events and listened to the Free Europe. In 1980, I went with my wife to Jerusalem, Tel Aviv and Haifa, where we had friends and relatives. We went to see our relatives, but we ended up visiting most of

country.

My mother died in 1982. My parents are buried at the Giurgiului [Jewish] cemetery. We had a cantor at the funeral, not a rabbi. I recite the Kaddish at every commemoration. I cherish the memory of my parents, who looked after me. We go to the cemetery from time to time.

Around 1980, I went to Moscow and Leningrad [Sankt Petersburg]. I went to Moscow several times - with the Architects' Union and on the 'Friendship Train'. The 'Friendship Train' was set up by the Association of Friendship Romania-the Soviet Union. It was a sort of trip. We stayed in Moscow and Chisinau, and we passed through Transnistria. The region was up in arms and it was in war with Moldova - a pure war. We feared our train would be attacked. We passed through Hungary and Czechoslovakia. I also went to Paris, to Dusseldorf (Germany), and to Italy. My wife saw more of Italy than I did - I only visited Venice, Milan and Florence. I went to the Cote d'Azur. I went from Paris to Belgium with a friend of mine who was from there. I went to the US, but not too often. I didn't see many cities there. My wife stayed there for nine months to look after the first girl. Then we stayed together for three months, when the second girl was born. I wasn't allowed to stay nine months. 'First let's see your wife return, and then you can go.' I went to Canada a couple of times. So, you see, I traveled quite a lot with my wife.

I never imagined Romania could get rid of Ceausescu. I just looked at those impressive rallies [organized on 1st May, 23rd August, when foreign leaders would visit the country etc.]. The rallies had turned into masquerades: people only attended them because they were forced to - they even had to sign evidence sheets. I was a head of workshop back then and I was supposed to send my people to the rallies. I made up lists of those who were present. People weren't allowed to carry bags or sacks at the rallies, because Ceausescu was afraid of a bomb. Economically speaking, industry was in a deep crisis. The set targets could not be reached because we lacked the necessary resources. And people didn't get paid because the set targets weren't reached. It was a wretched situation from all points of view. But I never imagined things would come to this. It came as a great surprise for me. I was in Bucharest when Ceausescu held that speech in Palatului Sq. [currently known as Revolutiei Sq.]. I went there to hear him from a close distance. When people became agitated, I left and walked the streets. Shots were heard and people fled. I was out all the time that followed. There were shootings all the time. They even fired at out block [Mr. Streja lives very close to Palatului Sq.]. I saw everything that went on. There were troops outside, guarding our door, and I had to ask for permission to get through. 'Come on, Mister; let him go buy some bread.' [At the 1989 Romanian revolution] 18 they came to offer me weapons to stand guard, but my wife wouldn't let me: 'Are you crazy? You're wandering around while they are shooting.' I went out all the time. I wasn't afraid, and my wife feared my lack of fear. When the miners came [this event was later called 'mineriade'] 19, they got to our terrace. So I was at the very heart of all these events.

I saw that the Unic store began to distribute food to the people at low prices, so that they could eat something. The store was on Balcescu Ave., where it is still today, but, back then, it was a large store. Then the Informatia was printed, the first newspaper of the revolution. I bought it and kept it. Later on, the Romania libera and the Liberalul were printed too. The Liberal Party expressed itself through the latter. I didn't really agree with them, because they published a poem by Nichifor Crainic. This man was a right wing extremist and a contributor for some Legionary magazines. A party with a liberal tradition cannot publish in its first issue a poem by Nichifor Crainic. [Ed. note:

Nichifor Crainic (1889-1972), essayist and poet. He graduated in philosophy and theology from Vienna. He was the main ideologist of an anti-Semitic and xenophobic Christian- Orthodox trend.]

I enjoyed that extraordinary freedom which suddenly allowed people to leave the country whenever they wanted. Our relatives from abroad started to call us on the phone. After 1989, I became a retiree and many things changed for me from the point of view of my liberty. I saw my intellectual and moral horizon widening and I thought it to be a great blessing. This is what I appreciated about this revolution, not the material benefits. I can travel abroad, listen to the radio and watch TV. Naturally, this degree of freedom has its negative side. When other people make the decisions for you, you have no responsibilities. But when you're free, some responsibilities ensue.

Because of my retirement, I had more time for myself and I became more of a Jew than I ever was. I am more Jewish than some who go to the synagogue day and night. I have strong ties with the community now, because I am very interested in its situation from all points of view. I am directly affected by all the positive events promoted by the community: social assistance, keeping alive the religious activity in temples and synagogues, reflecting the Jewish culture in the museum. This community supports the kosher restaurant, provides medical assistance, helps its members get hospitalized, and offers those eye operations that are also available to the non-Jews. It has ties with the State through the department of the minority ethnic groups and through the Parliament, and keeps in touch with the world community. In other words, the Community is doing unbelievable things for a group that counts at most 8,000 Jews. This is an optimistic number, because statistics speak of 5-6,000. So I am bewildered by all these positive things, like the museum, the Memorial of the [Jewish] Martyrs ['Moses Rosen'] 20.

I am also affected by all the negative things. One of the most recent of them is that Rabbi Glanz left. The fact that he abandoned us is nothing compared to the fact that we have no rabbi anymore. For a man like me, who gladly frequents the Choral Temple on Friday night, but can't speak Ivrit, and reads the translations of the prayers, the most interesting thing were the commentaries for the weekly pericope. I thought very highly of Rabbi Hacohen, who has the gift of story-telling. He narrates as if he were there; he tells about how the Jews felt and about how they spoke with Aaron when they asked him what they were to do since Moses had been missing for 40 days. I am affected by the absence of these people. I went two or three times on Friday evening and heard some commentaries that didn't please me at all. A tzaddik once came. He was into Torah and the study of Judaism. I don't know what stage he had attained, whether he had been studying for a year, for two or for seven, but he wore a caftan and a black hat and said a few words about the weekly pericope that didn't satisfy me at all.

I am involved here too [at the Great Synagogue, as guide of the 'Moses Rosen' Memorial of the Jewish Martyrs], and I understand every Jew who, although a survivor [of the Holocaust], remains marked by these things for life. I suffered nothing compared to what they went through. I did forced labor, but I wasn't deported. I suffer for each and every Jew who was deported and died in that period. I don't think the Holocaust means burning people alive or complete combustion. It is a historical period that stretched from 1930 to 1945, not from 1940 to 1944. This is what I think. It is true that the Holocaust killed 6 million Jews. But it is equally true that it also killed people who weren't Jewish. Jews should pray for the millions of Gypsies and Poles and other members of the 'inferior nations' who perished then.

Glossary:

1 Legionary

Member of the Legion of the Archangel Michael, also known as the Legionary Movement, founded in 1927 by C. Z. Codreanu. This extremist, nationalist, anti-Semitic and xenophobic movement aimed at excluding those whose views on political and racial matters were different from theirs. The Legion was organized in so-called nests, and it practiced mystical rituals, which were regarded as the way to a national spiritual regeneration by the members of the movement. These rituals were based on Romanian folklore and historical traditions. The Legionaries founded the Iron Guard as a terror organization, which carried out terrorist activities and political murders. The political twin of the Legionary Movement was the Totul pentru Tara (Everything for the Fatherland) that represented the movement in parliamentary elections. The followers of the Legionary Movement were recruited from young intellectuals, students, Orthodox clericals, peasants. The movement was banned by King Carol II in 1938.

2 The Jewish State Theater (new)

It was founded in 1948 as a consequence of the nationalization of all the performing institutions, including the Jewish theater. It staged classic plays from the Yiddish repertoire, but also shows with traditional Jewish dances. Nowadays, because of the emigrations, and the increased diminishment of an aging Jewish population, the audience for the Yiddish culture is very scarce and most of the actors are non-Jews. Great personalities of the theater: Israil Bercovici (poet, playwright and literary secretary), Iso Schapira (stage director and prose writer with a vast Yiddish and universal culture), Mauriciu Sekler (actor from the German school), Haim Schwartzmann (composer and conductor of the theater's orchestra). Famous actors: Sevilla Pastor, Dina Konig, Isac Havis, Sara Ettinger, Lya Konig, Tricy Abramovici, Bebe Bercovici, Rudy Rosenfeld, Maia Morgenstern.

3 Jewish Statutum in Romania

In 1934 a law was passed, according to which 80 % of the employees in any firm had to be Romanians by ethnic origin. This established a numerus clausus in private firms, although it did not only concerned Jews but also Hungarians and other Romanian citizens of non-Romanian ethnic origin. In 1935 the Christian Lawyers' Association was founded with the aim of revoking the licenses of Jewish lawyers who were already members of the bar and did not accept new registrations. The creation of this association gave an impetus to anti-Semitic professional associations all over Romania. At universities the academic authorities supported the numerus clausus program, introducing entrance examinations, and by 1935/36 this led to a considerable decrease in the number of Jewish students. The leading Romanian banks began to reject requests for credits from Jewish banks and industrial and commercial firms, and Jewish enterprises were burdened with heavy taxes. Many Jewish merchants and industrialists had to sell their firms at a loss when they became unprofitable under these oppressive measures.

4 Cultura Jewish High School in Bucharest (new)

The Cultura School was founded in Bucharest, in 1898, with the support of philanthropist Max Aziel.

It operated until 1948, when the reform of education dissolved all Jewish schools and forced the Jewish students to go to the public schools. It was originally an elementary school that taught the national curriculum plus some classes of Hebrew and German. Around 1910, the Cultura Commerce High School and Intermediate School were founded almost at the same time. They were ranked as the best education institutions in Bucharest. Apart from the Jewish children from the quarters Dudesti, Vacaresti, Mosilor or Grivita, these schools were also attended by non-Jewish students, thanks to their good reputation.

5 Strajeria (Watchmen Guard)

Proto-fascist mass-organization founded by King Carol II with the aim of bringing up the youth in the spirit of serving and obedience, and of nationalist ideas of grandeur.

6 King Carol II (1893-1953)

King of Romania from 1930 to 1940. During his reign he tried to influence the course of Romanian political life, first through the manipulation of the rival Peasants' Party, the National Liberal Party and anti-Semitic factions. In 1938 King Carol established a royal dictatorship. He suspended the Constitution of 1923 and introduced a new constitution that concentrated all legislative and executive powers in his hands, gave him total control over the judicial system and the press, and introduced a one-party system. A contest between the king and the fascist Iron Guard ensued, with assassinations and massacres on both sides. Under Soviet and Hungarian pressure, Carol had to surrender parts of Romania to foreign rule in 1940 (Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina to the USSR, the Cadrilater to Bulgaria and Northern Transylvania to Hungary). He was abdicated in favor of his son, Michael, and he fled abroad. He died in Portugal.

7 Keren Kayemet Leisrael (K

K.L.): Jewish National Fund (JNF) founded in 1901 at the Fifth Zionist Congress in Basel. From its inception, the JNF was charged with the task of fundraising in Jewish communities for the purpose of purchasing land in the Land of Israel to create a homeland for the Jewish people. After 1948 the fund was used to improve and afforest the territories gained. Every Jewish family that wished to help the cause had a JNF money box, called the 'blue box'. They threw in at least one lei each day, while on Sabbath and high holidays they threw in as many lei as candles they lit for that holiday. This is how they partly used to collect the necessary funds. Now these boxes are known worldwide as a symbol of Zionism.

8 Anti-Jewish laws in Romania

The first anti-Jewish laws were introduced in 1938 by the Goga-Cuza government. Further anti-Jewish laws followed in 1940 and 1941, and the situation was getting gradually worse between 1941-1944 under the Antonescu regime. According to these laws all Jews aged 18-40 living in villages were to be evacuated and concentrated in the capital town of each county. Jews from the region between the Siret and Prut Rivers were transported by wagons to the camps of Targu Jiu, Slobozia, Craiova etc. where they lived and died in misery. More than 40,000 Jews were moved. All rural Jewish property, as well as houses owned by Jews in the city, were confiscated by the state, as part of the 'Romanisation campaign'. Marriages between Jews and Romanians were forbidden from

August 1940, Jews were not allowed to have Romanian names, own rural properties, be public employees, lawyers, editors or janitors in public institutions, have a career in the army, own liquor stores, etc. Jewish employees of commercial and industrial enterprises were fired, Jewish doctors could no longer practice and Jews were not allowed to own chemist shops. Jewish students were forbidden to study in Romanian schools.

9 Legionary rebellion
failed coup d'etat intended by the legionaries in January 20-27 1941, which culminated with the pogrom of the Jews in Bucharest; after its defeat, Ion Antonescu established military dictatorship.

10 23 August 1944
On that day the Romanian Army switched sides and changed its World War II alliances, which resulted in the state of war against the German Third Reich. The Royal head of the Romanian state, King Michael I, arrested the head of government, Marshal Ion Antonescu, who was unwilling to accept an unconditional surrender to the Allies.

11 Nationalization in Romania
The nationalization of industry and natural resources in Romania was laid down by the law of 11th June 1948. It was correlated with the forced collectivization of agriculture and the introduction of planned economy.

12 Cajal, Nicolae (1919-2004) (new)
President of the Federation of the Jewish Communities in Romania between 1994 and 2004. PhD in medical sciences, microbiologist and virologist, he wrote over 400 scientific papers in virology, with important original contributions. He was the head of the Virology Department of the Faculty of Medicine and Pharmacology in Bucharest, member of the Romanian Academy, member of numerous prestigious international societies, and an independent senator in the Romanian Parliament between 1990 and 1992.

13 Prague Spring
The term Prague Spring designates the liberalization period in communist-ruled Czechoslovakia between 1967-1969. In 1967 Alexander Dubcek became the head of the Czech Communist Party and promoted ideas of 'socialism with a human face', i.e. with more personal freedom and freedom of the press, and the rehabilitation of victims of Stalinism. In August 1968 Soviet troops, along with contingents from Poland, East Germany, Hungary and Bulgaria, occupied Prague and put an end to the reforms.

14 Ceausescu, Nicolae (1918-1989)
Communist head of Romania between 1965 and 1989. He followed a policy of nationalism and non-intervention into the internal affairs of other countries. The internal political, economic and social situation was marked by the cult of his personality, as well as by terror, institutionalized by the Securitate, the Romanian political police. The Ceausescu regime was marked by disastrous

economic schemes and became increasingly repressive and corrupt. There were frequent food shortages, lack of electricity and heating, which made everyday life unbearable. In December 1989 a popular uprising, joined by the army, led to the arrest and execution of both Ceausescu and his wife, Elena, who had been deputy Prime Minister since 1980.

15 Radio Free Europe

The radio station was set up by the National Committee for a Free Europe, an American organization, funded by Congress through the CIA, in 1950 with headquarters in West Germany. The radio broadcast uncensored news and features from Munich to countries behind the Iron Curtain. The programs were produced by Central and Eastern European émigré editors, journalists and moderators. The radio station was jammed behind the Iron Curtain, team members were constantly harassed and several people were killed in terrorist attacks by the KGB. Radio Free Europe played a role in supporting dissident groups, inner resistance and will of freedom in communist countries behind the Iron Curtain and thus it contributed to the downfall of the totalitarian regimes of Central and Eastern Europe.

16 The systematic demolitions (new)

The passing of the Law for the Systematization of Towns and Villages in 1974 opened the way to the large scale demolition of the Romanian towns and villages. The great earthquake of 4th March 1977 damaged many buildings and was seen as a justification for the demolition of many monuments. By the end of 1989, when the Ceausescu regime fell, at least 29 towns had been completely restructured, 37 were in the process of being restructured, and the rural systematization had claimed its first toll: some villages demolished north of Bucharest. Between 1977 and 1989, Bucharest was at the mercy of the dictator, whose mere gestures were interpreted as direct orders and could lead to the immediate disappearance of certain houses or certain areas. Old houses and quarters, the so-called imperialist-capitalist architecture, had to vanish in order to make room for the great urban achievements of Socialism, which competed with those in the USSR and North Korea.

17 State of Israel

From 1917 Palestine was a British mandate. Also in 1917 the Balfour Declaration was published, which supported the idea of the creation of a Jewish homeland in Palestine. Throughout the interwar period, Jews were migrating to Palestine, which caused the conflict with the local Arabs to escalate. On the other hand, British restrictions on immigration sparked increasing opposition to the mandate powers. Immediately after World War II there were increasing numbers of terrorist attacks designed to force Britain to recognize the right of the Jews to their own state. These aspirations provoked the hostile reaction of the Palestinian Arabs and the Arab states. In February 1947 the British foreign minister Ernest Bevin ceded the Palestinian mandate to the UN, which took the decision to divide Palestine into a Jewish section and an Arab section and to create an independent Jewish state. On 14th May 1948 David Ben Gurion proclaimed the creation of the State of Israel. It was recognized immediately by the US and the USSR. On the following day the armies of Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon attacked Israel, starting a war that continued, with intermissions, until the beginning of 1949 and ended in a truce.

18 Romanian Revolution of 1989

In December 1989, a revolt in Romania deposed the communist dictator Ceausescu. Anti-government violence started in Timisoara and spread to other cities. When army units joined the uprising, Ceausescu fled, but he was captured and executed on 25th December along with his wife. A provisional government was established, with Ion Iliescu, a former Communist Party official, as president. In the elections of May 1990 Iliescu won the presidency and his party, the Democratic National Salvation Front, obtained an overwhelming majority in the legislature.

19 Mineriade

in 1990 and 1991, waves of miners from the Jiu Valley came to Bucharest to 'restore order'; the acts of street violence directed at those who protested peacefully in the Revolution Sq. against the newly- installed power destabilized the internal political life and were even considered a coup attempt. They affected the positive perception that the Romanian revolution of 1989 had created abroad, of fight for freedom.

20 Moses Rosen (1912-1994)

Chief Rabbi of Romania and president of the Association of Jewish Religious Communities during communism. A controversial figure of the postwar Romanian Jewish public life. On the one hand he was criticized because of his connections with several leaders of the Romanian communist regime, on the other hand even his critics recognized his great efforts in the interest of Romanian Jews. He was elected chief rabbi of Romania in 1948 and fulfilled this function till his death in 1994. During this period he organized the religious and cultural education of Jewish youth and facilitated the emigration to Israel by using his influence. His efforts made possible the launch of the only Romanian Jewish newspaper, Revista Cultului Mozaic (Realitatea Evreiasc? after 1990) in 1956. As the leader of Romanian Israelites he was a permanent member of the Romanian Parliament from 1957-1989. He was member of the Executive Board of the Jewish World Congress. His works on Judaist issues were published in Romanian, Hebrew and English.