Reflections from WCJCC Study Visits to the JCCs in Bucharest, Romania, Sofia, Bulgaria and Nis, Belgrade, Novi Sad, Serbia

December 12-21, 2008

It was the middle of December; the temperatures were low and sometimes quite freezing. We did not see the sun very often and most cities were grey and not very attractive, but once we stepped into the Jewish Community Centers in Romania, Bulgaria and Serbia, we were wrapped with warmth, caring and a rich Jewish life.

Our journey began in Bucharest, Romania, celebrating one year since the opening of the new Jewish Community Center and also participating in the Third Conference of European JCCs.

Jews in Romania date back to the 14th century. They soon became involved in the economical and cultural life of the country. In the 19th century they were part of the fight for Romanian independence and were prominent in every field. The first Jewish theater started in Yash, Romania, some 130 years ago and many writers, painters and intellectuals were part of a thriving Jewish community. There were 800,000 Jews in Bucharest prior to the Second World War. Only half of the Jews survived the war and later the majority of the remaining Jews immigrated to Israel. Today, there are only 9,000 Jews with about 4,000 living in Bucharest (out of a general population of some 21 million people.)

The Jewish Community Center in Bucharest is a new member in the network of more than 1,100 JCCs worldwide. It was not easy to recreate Jewish life after the effects of the Second World War, immigration and long years of Communism. Our own Linda and Jerry Spitzer and their family have been instrumental in establishing this new JCC and have been closely involved with every aspect of it. Dorit Rom of IACC was helpful in the initial stages, when she conducted several ‘needs’ studies and helped train some of the young local leaders. This endeavor has been a partnership of FEDROM (the Federation of Romanian Jews) and JDC. It established a JCC that provides Jewish, cultural and recreational programs that have helped rekindle this small community.

It was therefore decided that the site of the Third European Conference of JCCs will be Bucharest as a show of recognition and support. It was sponsored by the European Association of Jewish Community Centers, The Fonds Social Juif Unifie of France, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee and the World Confederation of Jewish Community Centers. The purpose of the conference was to provide a framework for networking and peer learning, while also striving to strengthen the newly formed European Association of Jewish Community Centers under the presidency of Dr. Jo
Zrihen from FSJU, France. Europe is a very heterogeneous continent, with very different Jewish communities who vary in size, language, culture and political realities. Still, they all feel that they do share a lot in common and possess some specific European traits. The 140 participants from 28 countries were looking for common ground and found it in programming, in sharing best practices and dilemmas and in voicing a European Jewish voice.

Sofia, Bulgaria

The sun shone during our first day in Sofia and indeed the meeting at Shalom, the umbrella organization of the Jews in Bulgaria, was very gratifying. We were greeted by a young and charismatic lay leader, Dr. Alex Oscar who first gave us an historical overview.

Jews in Bulgaria date back even to Byzantine times, though the main influx came after the Spanish Inquisition. Before the Second World War, there were 55,000 Jews who enjoyed good relations with the non-Jewish community. Bulgaria joined the German Axis in 1941 and soon after, restrictions on Jewish life were imposed. In return for their support of the Germans, the areas of Macedonia and Terakya were annexed to Bulgaria. Thus, an additional 12,000 Jews were now under Bulgarian rule. 11,000 of them were sent to the death camps in March, 1943. It was during that month, that plans to deport Bulgarian Jews by the Bulgarian authorities were underway. However, on March 9th, the Bulgarian Jewish “Purim story” took place. The Jewish community heard about the plans for deportation and contacted Dimitry Peshev, the vice chair of the parliament, who managed to stop the decree. A strong wave of public support for the Jewish community mobilized public figures and Bulgarian church officials joined the fight to keep the Jews alive. The role of the King of Bulgaria, Boris, is still debated among historians, but the end result was clear; Bulgarian Jews were not harmed. Since then, every year the Jews of Bulgaria celebrate this dramatic turn of events.

After the end of the war, 90% of the Jews immigrated to Israel and the 5,000 remaining Jews were not allowed to practice Judaism. It was only in November 1989, when the Iron Curtain fell, that Jews slowly began to rebuild Jewish life. JDC was the main organization that helped this revival, from the initial distribution of food packages to establishing formal and informal Jewish programs.

Today there are 5,000 Jews, (about 3,000 Jews immigrated to Israel). The general Bulgarian population is 8 million. Alex made the very interesting observation that throughout the years, the Bulgarian Jewish community was always very open to the general society and had good relations with the Bulgarian people, yet the level of assimilation was low. Therefore, his vision is a JCC that strengthens Jewish life but is also open to the non-Jewish society.
The model of the Jewish community is positively unique. It has a strong umbrella organization that supervises all aspects of the community. The community was able to rehabilitate some of the buildings, which generate income that help fund 70% of the budget. We learned that Jerry Spitzer was instrumental with these restitution efforts and taught local professionals how to manage them. We also learned that about 75% of the budget is directed to welfare and only a fourth to renewal.

There is one JCC in Sofia which operates in two locations. There is a Jewish school with 350 children, 150 of whom are Jewish. There is also a Jewish old age home. While the majority of Jews live in Sofia (85%), there are Jews in 19 different locations around Bulgaria and Shalom serves them as well. We listened carefully to presentations from the various group directors regarding their programs and activities. We also had a chance to taste traditional Bulgarian food and listen to a local singer in Ladino, the Jewish dialect of Sephardic Jews.

Julia Dandolova, JDC representative and the one, who graciously arranged and staffed our visit, spoke to us candidly about some of the challenges facing the community. As the community develops, there is a need for a more engaging Rabbi, who will open doors to young Jews and serve not only as a religious figure but also as an educator. There is also a need to address the issue of mixed marriages, a wide phenomenon around the Jewish world. The religious establishment is still Orthodox and does not accept mixed marriages. This poses a problem especially when children of mixed married couples attend programs and activities. The third challenge is the development of executive positions for young leaders. There was a lost generation which is slowly being replaced, but there is an evident gap which the community must overcome. Another request was to help send summer camp shlichim who specialize in music and culture.

**Nis. Serbia**

Crossing the border from Bulgaria to Serbia in the pouring rain, we stopped at the city of Nis. There was a special reason to stop at this city that day. We joined the mayor of Nis and the Israeli Ambassador to dedicate the mezuzah at a new small JCC that is going to serve the 50 remaining Jews in the city.

The Jews in Serbia have been living there for many years. There were good relations with the non Jews and a rather high percentage of intermarriage. More than 90% of Serbian Jews were persecuted during the Second World War and the Serbian population also paid a very high price. During the years of Tito, the ruler of the Former Yugoslavia, there were no relations with the State of Israel, though the Former Yugoslavia did serve as an unofficial bridge between east and west, as Tito was more open to the west. In recent years,
relations with the State of Israel were established and there are possibilities for trade and business.

An official cocktail reception at city hall was followed with much attention from the media and the local press. The Israeli Ambassador, **Mr. Arthur Kroll**, invited us to join his meeting with the mayor and it was interesting to hear how he connected business possibilities for the city, with the need to take care of the Jewish cemetery, one of the oldest in Europe. Receiving the new Jewish space was also seen as a sign that can help strengthen relations with Israel. **Jane Gellman**, WCJCC President-Elect, summarized the meeting by saying how privileged she was to be there on this special day and see how a small Jewish Community Center can transform the life of the community.

**Belgrade, Serbia**

We were off to visit another gem of Jewish life in Eastern Europe, the Jewish community of Belgrade. While most Jews perished in the Holocaust and later left for Israel, there are today 2,000 members in the local Jewish community. We were greeted by **Prof. Yovan Elazar**, the Vice President of the community and **Ela Rojnik**, the director of social activities. Prof. Elazar gave us an interesting overview of general and Jewish politics during the last 100 years. Of the 80,000 Jews in the Former Yugoslavia who lived there before the Second World War, 60,000 died in the Holocaust. Serbia is infamous for being the first country where the gas chambers were tested and the first one to be free of Jews. However, Serbians were known to always be anti-fascist and the resistance movement was quite strong. From the few remaining Jews, 4,500 moved to Israel in 1952. Despite the Communist rule, Jews could practice their Judaism and until 1967 there were official relations with the State of Israel. Despite the criticism about Tito, who was a dictator, he did manage to unite Yugoslavia and in 1948 split from Stalin. In fact, the first JDC representatives to enter the former Soviet Union did so via Yugoslavia. The Jewish community has been known to be very intellectual with many members who hold high academic degrees. On top of these traumatic experiences, came the recent war-time event of the 90’s, threatening once again the Jewish community. Many Jews were evacuated. We were able to see some signs of the bombings as we travelled across the city.

Moving from history to reality, we visited the youth club, the children's club, joined the senior adults for lunch, met with the young counselors and heard about a wide variety of activities and programs. From a very successful family camp, to Limmud and to celebrating the day of the children, bringing together a whole host of ethnic and religious groups.

We celebrated Friday night at the beautifully renovated synagogue and met with **Rabbi Yitzhak Asiel** and his family. The synagogue and the community
center are actually one, and the Rabbi is very engaged in every aspect of Jewish life. In addition, Rabbi Asiel has been able to translate some 30 major Jewish books to Serbian and provides services all across Serbia.

**Novi Sad, Serbia**

A day trip to the city of Novi Sad enabled us to see one of the most beautiful synagogues left in Europe. It is more than a 100 years old and was not harmed during the war. We then met with Hana Frankel who runs the Jewish community. She told us about their current programs and activities. This very small 650 member Jewish community was still able to provide some cultural and social activities. We could see the pre-Chanukah preparations and heard that youngsters from Belgrade volunteered to come and celebrate with them.

Our visit concluded with a meeting with the board of directors of the Jewish community of Serbia. A very open and interesting discussion vented their accomplishments and challenges. They were eager to learn more about Jewish community centers worldwide and establish more formal relations with JCCs and their leaders. Another crucial problem was the issue of restitution which hasn't been resolved.

In our entire visit to Bulgaria and Serbia, there was a name that came up at almost every meeting. It was that of Robert Djerassi. We knew Robert was instrumental in the renewal of Jewish life, but we could not imagine to what extent. At first we did not understand what was going on. Everywhere we went in Bulgaria and Serbia, people said: “Oh, this was Robert’s idea”, “Robert helped us develop this project”, “Robert believed it can happen” and the list went on and on. We soon began unraveling a secret: in a very low key, modest and an unassuming way, Robert is the pillar of Jewish life in these countries.

It was gratifying to see a thriving and unified Jewish community in Sofia, an emerging and enthusiastic Jewish community in Belgrade, attempts to form a new JCC in Nis, Serbia and serving small communities in Serbia, like the one in Novi Sad.

**Ishie Gitlin,** WCJCC Chair-Elect, summarized the visits by expressing how moved he was to see first hand, a strong and meaningful expression of Jewish life even in the smaller communities. He offered an open invitation to connect not only with the Jewish community of Mexico, where he resides, but through WCJCC, with JCCs around the world.

Submitted by Smadar Bar-Akiva