



NCSEJ Leadership Mission to Romania and Bulgaria

October 24-31, 2019

Mission Report



Central Synagogue in Sofia, Bulgaria

Introduction

NCSEJ's Fall Leadership Mission travelled to Romania and Bulgaria from October 24 to October 31. In both countries the delegation held high-level meetings with national government representatives and American and Israeli diplomats and local Jewish community leaders, and visited Jewish communal and heritage sights.

The delegates discussed the safety and security of the Jewish communities, the rise of anti-Semitism and ultra-nationalism in the region, the bilateral relationship with the United States and the relationship with the State of Israel.

They had an opportunity to visit cities outside of the capitals. In Romania they traveled to Iasi and learned about the history of the city's Jewish community. In Bulgaria the delegates visited Plovdiv, the nation's second largest city.

The delegation was led by NCSEJ Chairman Daniel Rubin, CEO Mark Levin, and Deputy Director Lesley Weiss. Members of the delegation were Executive Committee members Harry Blumenthal and Dr. Gerald Platt and board members Dr. Vikki Deutsch, Joshua and Amelia Katzen, Alicia Levin, Eileen Prusek, and Robert and Karen Spitalnick.

Romania

Since the 1989 Revolution, Romania has been improving its democratic institutions and capitalist market economy. However, corruption and government instability continue to hinder development. Romania joined NATO in 2004 and the EU in 2007.

Today the nation is undergoing political turmoil after its government fell in early October 2019, just prior to NCSEJ's visit. Despite the turmoil, NCSEJ was able to arrange meetings with a number of Romanian government officials.



Rabbi Rafael Schaffer at the Choral Synagogue in Bucharest

The Romanian Jewish Community

Romania's Jewish community suffered brutally in the Holocaust. Before World War II there were an estimated 800,000 Jews in Romania. More than 40% were murdered during WWII, many by the Romanian army and the fascist Iron Guard. Under the communist dictatorship of Nicolae Ceausescu, life was oppressive, but organized Jewish life persisted. The Federation of Jewish Communities was officially recognized by the government. From 1948 to 1988

about 300,000 Jews left the country, almost all going to Israel. Today Romania's Jewish population is 10,000-14,000.



NCSEJ Deputy Director Lesley Weiss receives Medal of Honor

The delegation had dinner with **Dr. Aurel Vainer, President of the Federation of Jewish Communities of Romania**, and members of the community. Dr. Vainer welcomed the delegation and presented Medals of Honor to NCSEJ Chair Daniel Rubin and CEO Mark Levin for their work on behalf of the Jewish community in Romania, and to Lesley Weiss, for her past work as Chair of the US Commission on the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad, for the support of heritage projects in Romania. At the dinner, the delegation heard from Jewish organizational leaders about their activities in Bucharest.



Dr. Vainer presents Medal of Honor to NCSEJ CEO Mark Levin

The delegation spent Shabbat at the Choral Synagogue, joining the congregation for services, meals, and discussion.

On Saturday night, the Jewish State Theater presented a performance of "Mazel Tov... and Justice for All" in a special showing for the delegation and the community.



NCSEJ Chairman Daniel Rubin presents Floran Iordache with a tzedakah box

Government

The delegation met with **Mr. Floran Iordache, Vice President of the Chamber of Deputies**, who has been a Member of Parliament for 20 years. Mr. Iordache spoke about the historic suffering of the Jewish community in Romania, his commitment to "openly discuss what happened in World War II," and the need of joint efforts to show the damage that was done. He expressed his openness and willingness "to recognize the Jewish community and its rightful place in the country." He stressed that the positive relations between

Romania and Israel and with the United States will continue and noted the possibility that the Romanian Cultural Center could be moved to Jerusalem.



Delegation with Floran Iordache at the Parliament of Romania

Monica Gheorghita, State Secretary, Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, stated that the relationship between Romania and the United States is paramount and relations with the State of Israel close and personal. Her view is that anti-Semitism is more the result of economic uncertainty than rooted in the European mentality. She stressed the importance of early education and welcomed NCSEJ's help to reinforce Romania's commitment to fight anti-Semitism. In 2016 Romania held the



Delegation meets with State Secretary Monica Gheorghita at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs



Executive Committee member Harry Blumenthal presents State Secretary Monica Gheorghita with a tzedakah box

chairmanship of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA). It was under their leadership that the definition of anti-Semitism was adopted by IHRA.

Senator Titus Corlaten, former Foreign Minister, spoke about the essential strategic partnership with the United States and the positive relations with Israel. He also spoke about the strong partnership with the European Union and the importance of trans-Atlantic ties. He is grateful for the American and NATO forces stationed in Romania. Legislation has been introduced to build a Holocaust museum, and he emphasized the need to remain vigilant.



From the left: Mihaela Butariu, Titus Corlaten, Adela Burcea, Marcel Pitigoi at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs

The senator asked for our assistance with the visa waiver program, describing it as a practical and symbolic issue.



Delegation members Vika Deutch, Gerald Platt, and Joshua Katzen speak with Ambassador David Saranga

U.S. and Israeli Government Briefings

Israel Ambassador David Saranga described bilateral relations with Romania as being among the closest in the EU. He expects that good relations will continue when the new government is formed. He said that the Jewish community is small but active and the government is effective in combating anti-Semitism. Last year 100,000 Romanians visited Israel, and Israelis are the second largest group visiting Romania.

U.S. Deputy Chief of Mission Abigail Rupp gave an overview of U.S.-Romanian relations, listing American priorities as security, increasing prospects, and protecting democracy. She explained that the U.S. is a priority relationship for Romania and that there is U.S.-Romanian cooperation in a number of areas including energy, cyber security, and law enforcement.



Iasi

U.S. Deputy Chief of Mission Abigail Rupp (in the middle)

The delegation traveled to the historic city of Iasi for the day. The first settlement of Jews there was in 1400. At the beginning of the 20th century 50,000 out of the 80,000 inhabitants of the city were Jewish. In 1941, 13,000 Jews were killed by the Romanian fascist Iron Guard in one of the worst pogroms in Jewish history. Before World War II there were 112 places of Jewish worship in Iasi. Today there are only two: the Great Synagogue and the Synagogue of Merari. There are around 300 Jews.

The **Mayor of Iasi, Mihai Chirica**, spoke about his excellent relationship with the Iasi Jewish community and the many commemorative event his office holds together with the community to remember the dark spots in Romanian history, including the 1941 pogrom. The close relationship with Israel is evidenced by three flights a week from Iasi to Israel and a sister-city relationship with Haifa and Ashdod, and the city is close to an agreement with Netanya. Sister-city programs also exist with Houston, Texas, and with the Jewish community of Switzerland.



Delegation at the Memorial at the Mass Grave in Iasi from 1941



Mayor of Iasi Mihai Chirica (in the middle)



Great Synagogue, Iasi

The delegation visited the Great Synagogue of Iasi with a Jewish community guide, Odette Blumenfeld. Architect Lucia Apostol and the Federation of Jewish Communities of Romania, who designed the Aron Kodesh, joined the delegates.

Bulgaria

Bulgaria has undergone a transition to democracy and a market economy while combatting inflation and corruption. It joined NATO in 2004 and the EU in 2007.

There is no state discrimination against the Jewish community, and Bulgaria and Israel have a close relationship. Bulgaria and the U.S. also have a close bilateral relationship.

The history of the Jews during the Holocaust is complex. During the Holocaust, 40,000 Jews were saved from deportation to the Nazi death camps. However, over 11,000 Jews from areas administered by Bulgaria but occupied by the Nazis were murdered in Treblinka.

Bulgaria recently gained membership in the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) and has adopted the IHRA definition of anti-Semitism.

Jewish Community in Bulgaria

The small but active Jewish community in Sofia has an impressive number of young leaders. The Jewish population of primarily Sephardic Jews is 2,000-6,000.

“Shalom,” the Organization of Jews in Bulgaria, represents the community. The delegation met with Alexander Oscar, president, and Julia Dandolo, executive director.



Julia Dandolo, Executive Director of “Shalom”

The Sofia synagogue is one of the largest in Southeastern Europe and one of the two functioning synagogues in Bulgaria. Located in the center of the city, it can accommodate 1,300 worshipers.



Central Synagogue, Sofia

The delegation toured the **Lauder School**. Sponsored by the president of the World Jewish Congress, Ronald Lauder, it is the first Jewish school in Bulgaria in over 20 years. The school has 88 students, all under age 12. The delegation met with teachers and children.



The children in the Lauder school in Sofia

During a visit to **Plovdiv** the delegation toured the synagogue and the city. Plovdiv is considered to be one of the oldest cities in the world.



Plovdiv synagogue

Government

NCSEJ presented the Torch of Liberty Award to **Prime Minister Boyko Borisov** in recognition of his leadership in foreign affairs and the promotion of human rights.

In thanking NCSEJ the Prime Minister said that the award was for all of the Bulgarian people.



NCSEJ presents Prime Minister Boyko Borisov the Torch of Liberty Award

Joining us at the meeting were **U.S. Ambassador Hero Mustafa, Israeli Ambassador Yoram Elron, and Julia Dandolo, Director of Shalom.**

The Prime Minister spoke about how Bulgaria was the first country to pronounce Hezbollah a terrorist organization. He is proud of the twin monuments in Tel Aviv and Sofia dedicated to the salvation of Bulgarian Jews from death camps on 1943.

He said that anti-Semitism has no breeding ground in Bulgaria and likes the idea of building a Holocaust Museum in Sofia.

Deputy Speaker Emil Hristov at the National Assembly stated his concern about extremist ideologies on the rise and expressed his gratitude to **Deputy Foreign Minister Georg Georgiev**, who participated in the meeting, for coordinating with different ministries to combat anti-Semitism. Mr. Georgiev is also the Bulgarian Special Envoy on Combating Anti-Semitism. Mr. Hristov said he is preparing a draft bill in the National Assembly to increase the penalty for the dissemination of unacceptable ideologies from an administrative sentence to criminal charges. It is his feeling that Europe is facing concerns about anti-Semitism and intolerance, and “these challenges found many of us unprepared.” He stressed the importance of working with young people and responding to every act of anti-Semitism. Regarding the relationship with Israel, he is

a member of the National Assembly friendship group with Israel and has participated in a number of exchanges with Israelis.



NCSEJ delegation member Amelia Katzen presents Emil Hristov with a tzedakah box



Emil Hristov presents an award from the nation of Bulgaria to NCSEJ Chairman Daniel Rubin

Ekaterina Zaharieva, Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister, condemned all forms of racism and spoke about her participation in the March of Tolerance held in the spring. She reiterated that education is key to fighting intolerance and said her ministry reacts immediately to incidents of anti-Semitism. She said the development of a Holocaust museum is an excellent idea and that they should start to organize it. She thanked the Bulgarian Jewish community for supporting the government's educational initiatives. Deputy Foreign Minister Georgiev and Ambassador Plamen Bonchev also participated the meeting.



Delegation meets with Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Ekaterina Zaharieva

Patriarch Neophyte of Bulgaria welcomed the delegation to the Holy Synod. Joining the delegation was **Sofia Cohen, President of the Central Israelite Religious Council of Bulgaria.**

The Patriarch talked about the role of the Church during the Holocaust and how the Church did not differentiate between Jewish and non- Jewish citizens. He spoke fondly about his close ties to a Jewish family that emigrated to Israel and their letters to him about their warm memories of Bulgaria. He said “Bulgarian Jews are our brothers” and talked about some of the joint projects with the Jewish community. “Jews are an integral part of society, equal and free,” he said. He likes the idea of a Holocaust museum and thinks the idea will be fulfilled. The delegation thanked him for the role of the Church during the Holocaust in saving Jews in Bulgaria, and the good relationship that exists today with the Jewish community.



Delegation meets with Patriarch Neophyte of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church at the Holy Synod in Sofia



Stefan Balabanov and NCSEJ Chairman Daniel Rubin

Deputy Minister of Interior Stefan Balabanov met with the delegation and members of his team, including the police inspector and officials responsible for crime prevention, analysis and policy, and cybercrime. He spoke about the positive impression he had when he visited Israel to deepen a partnership on science and technology. His main focus is on fighting, radicalism, and terrorism. He gave an overview of the structure of the Ministry of Interior and its fight against hate crimes. A discussion followed about the recent acts of hatred during a football match in Sofia. He spoke about the arrests made and the importance of education. The minister also said that a strict law on football hooliganism has been introduced in Parliament.

U.S. and Israeli Government Briefings

In a meeting at the US Embassy, **Deputy Chief of Mission Justin Friedman** presented an overview of U.S.-Bulgarian relations and how the embassy interacts with the Bulgarian Jewish community.



Delegation meets with Deputy Chief of Mission Justin Friedman

In a meeting with **Israeli Ambassador Yoram Elron**, the ambassador spoke about the excellent relations Bulgaria has with Israel. There are around 5,000 Jews in Bulgaria. Recently Yad Vashem and the Ministry of Education signed a memorandum of understanding on how to teach the Holocaust in all its complexities and on commemoration.



NCSEJ delegation member Karen Spitalnick presents Ambassador Yoram Elron with a tzedakah box

The trip concluded with a dinner hosted by **Ambassador Plamen Bonchev**, Directorate General for Global Affairs, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs; **Georg Georgiev**, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs and National Coordinator on Combating Anti-Semitism, and **Maria Spassova**, Director of the Human Rights Directorate at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. We were joined by Shalom's president, **Alexander Oscar**, and executive director, **Julia Dandolo**, and by **Sofia Cohen**, President of the Central Israelite Religious Council, and Israel's Ambassador **Yoram Elron**.

Farewell dinner hosted by Plamen Bonchev and Georg Georgiev (second and third from the left), joined by Maria Spassova and Alexander Oscar



This report was prepared by NCSEJ Deputy Director Lesley Weiss and NCSEJ Atlas Corps Fellow Bella Goldshtein

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