

# Dancing Jews

A folk-dance teacher from Teaneck leads a tour that includes klezmer and abandoned shuls

By [JOANNE PALMER](#) | November 21, 2019, 2:01 pm



Romanians and visitors danced together in a restaurant.

Oy Romania...

It was a paradise, at least the way the early 20th century Yiddish singer Aaron Lebedeff remembered it; his song got faster and faster and more and more riotous as he detailed some of the food and the pleasures until he nearly exploded with joy.

Of course it did not end well. (It being life in Romania, not the song, which did, spectacularly.) The relatively few who survived the Holocaust were driven out in the postwar era; now almost none out of what had been many are left.

That complicated history — wholesale murder, but also the music and dance and well-lived lives that came before and also are lodged in descendants' memories — was part of the lure of a trip that Jim Gold of Teaneck led to Romania last month.

Mr. Gold is a folk dancer and teacher; he often leads tours to Europe, but this one was different.



Jim Gold

The genesis of his trips was his own desire to learn more about the dances he teaches. “I started teaching local classes in folk dance, and then people would tell me that I was doing the wrong steps,” he said. “I would wonder how they knew.” There are many versions of similar dances, just as there are many similar-but-different words to folk songs, and some are more authentic than others. “Slowly, I realized that I wanted to see the sources of these dances. I wanted to learn the real steps.” So he started visiting eastern European dancers, and soon he began taking other dancers with him.

“So we went to Hungary, and then we just kept adding countries. We would meet local groups, go to villages, have unique experiences in each one. Then I had a dream of organizing folk dance tours to all the countries in Europe and the Middle East. I kept adding one country a year, until finally I ran out of countries.

“So now I am doing it in more depth, and adding specialists.”

That was half of the genesis of this last tour. The other part was KlezKamp, the klezmer music extravaganza that klezmer superstar Henry Supoznik used to run in the Catskills every year for some three decades. Mr. Gold often had folk dance weekends in the hotels where KlezKamp met, and the two men became friends. So when Mr. Supoznik decided to run a KlezKamp in Romania, combining his tour with Mr. Supoznik’s program was a no-brainer.

So a group of eastern European folk dance enthusiasts, joined by three serious musicians who staffed the program and added immensely to it, went to Romania. But there was another side to the trip.

Many of the participants were descendants of Romanian Jews, and most of them were drawn not only by the music and dance but also by the history, by the chance to see the ruins of the places that their grandparents had known as they flourished.

Romania is home to few Jews but many synagogues; most are maintained well enough to remain standing, cared for by the local non-Jews who feel compelled to memorialize, with clear love, Mr. Gold said, the Jews who once had lived there. Some house museums, others just memories.



This is the group of folk dancers that Jim Gold took to Romania; the map shows their route.

Mr. Gold led a group of 30 people; most but not all were Jewish. They came from the United States, Canada, Israel, and New Zealand. The tour was packed; the first night they went to a Romanian folk dance club, and then the next day they toured Bucharest. The pace didn't let up. They listened to lectures and music, they saw many dances and danced many of them, they were surprised by history.

They also learned a great deal about the dances they perform. "The hora comes from Romania," Mr. Gold said. "The Romanians who settled in Palestine in the 19th century brought it with them, and it became the Israeli national dance."

Similar dances might be disguised with different names. "A name like the bulgar, which means Bulgarian," Mr. Gold said. "It's the national dance of Bulgaria. And it turns out that it's a hora step. The hora is done everywhere in eastern Europe, under different names.

"In Serbia, it's the kolo. That's because h sound turns to a k sound in Slavic languages, from the back of the throat, and the r becomes an l, from the front of the mouth." These sounds shift gradually, he said, but in the end, the hora became the kolo in Serbia, and similarly became the horo instead of the hora in Bulgarian.

They learned about klezmer. (Keep in mind that "learned," in this context, generally means "learned even more than they'd known already, which was a great deal.") "Klezmer musicians in the 19th century, from Romania and all over eastern Europe, played mostly at weddings and special events," Mr. Gold said. "They were hired by both Jews and non-Jews, and they played pretty much the same repertoire for both. There was no such thing as klezmer dancing, but when there was a revival of the music in the 1970s and 80s, people loved the music and asked 'How do we dance to it?' So they started inventing dances in the Romanian style, and that became klezmer dancing."

They also learned about the history of Jews in Romania. "We visited local synagogues, which mainly are monuments because there are so few Jews left," Mr. Gold said. "Some cities have maybe 20, 30 Jews. It is very sad but also very illuminating."



This memorial in Bistrita lists the names of the Jews from that town murdered during the Holocaust.

There were about 800,000 Jews in Romania before the war, according to the European Jewish Congress. Between them, the Nazis, the Romanian army, and the Iron Guard murdered about 40 percent of them; after the war about 400,000 of them remained in Romania. Between 1948 and 1988, about 300,000 of those Jews left, mostly for Israel. Romanians form one of the largest ethnic groups in Israel, the EJW says. Since then, the population continued to dwindle; “some 12,000 Jews live in Romania today, but the country’s census in 2002 showed a total of 6,200 persons wishing to identify as Jewish,” according to the EJW.

That was the backdrop to the trip.

Mr. Gold talked about a city called Bistrita, “a town with a great synagogue, and maybe 20 Jews left. The town used to be about half Jewish; there were about 400,000 people, about 200,000 of them Jews. Bistrita is a Slavic word that means ‘fast-flowing stream.’ The synagogue is very big, and it is now a concert hall.”

Despite — or perhaps because of — the melancholy parts of the trip, and those parts of the trip that tipped over into horror, which tempered the joy of the music and the dance, Mr. Gold found it transformative. “You are so moved by it that you completely forget about the world, and meanwhile your subconscious is busy at work solving all your problems at home so that once you get back home, everything that had been hard becomes so simple,” he said.



This is a shul in Iasi that's kept in good condition for tourists; more than 3,000 Jews were massacred in Iasi in 1941.

Sally Seymour of Leonia also found the trip transforming. Part of it was simple fun, she said. She's a devoted amateur dancer; her weekly routine includes the folk dance morning at the senior center in Tenafly. "It's wonderful," she said. "It's usually about 30 or 40 people; we do Balkan dances, and occasionally Israeli dances, but mainly it's Greek, Bulgarian, and Romanian." So it was logical for her to go on the trip to learn more about Romanian dances, but there was something else pulling at her.

"My grandparents were from what was Romania when they came, in about 1910," she said. "Its borders have shifted, and it's now in Ukraine." That of course is another feature of Romania; like so many other eastern European countries, it shape-shifts. "As it turns out, there were several other people on the trip who had something similar in mind. Wouldn't it be awesome to step into a synagogue where my grandparents had been?"

She tells a story about "one of the most beautiful moments on the trip.



This shul in Medias has not been kept up, but volunteers are trying to keep it from crumbling.

“We were in a town that one of the women on the trip said that her grandparents had been from,” Ms. Seymour said. “She asked, ‘Can’t we please go to see the synagogue?’ So we went.

“It was the evening. It was dark. We got off the bus. In Romania, the synagogues are largely defunct, but they are not being knocked down.” (There seems to be some disagreement about who maintains them, and there is no clear answer to that question. But it is clear that they are maintained by someone.)

“The synagogues are kept painted.” She said. “They’re not in good enough condition to worship in, but they are safe to walk into. And there often are memorials out front.

“This shul was very pretty on the outside. Everybody got off the bus and looked at it. And then somebody from the town approached us, and asked ‘Are you Jewish?’ Many of us were, and we said so. And then this man, who was in his 70s, said that when he was a child, his best friend was Jewish, and her family went to Israel when she was 8.

“He asked us if we knew her.” Of course they didn’t, but “it was very sweet.”

It wasn’t surprising that many Romanian Jews went to Israel. Romania suffered for years under the rule of Nicolae Ceaușescu, who was a communist and more to the point — and unsurprisingly — also was a dictator. “Israel paid Romania to get the Jews out,” Ms. Seymour said. “Thousands and thousands of Jews left under those circumstances, because the Israeli government paid money to get them out. Other people were envious.” No one wanted to be in Ceaușescu’s Romania.

In many of the towns they visited, “there was maybe one Jew, or two Jews. We went into a synagogue in the town of Sibiu, and there was a Jewish man who met us there. He said that there is one 12-year-old Jewish child in Sibiu, and they are not sure if he will have a bar mitzvah.

“It’s like going to Cuba,” she added. “You visit defunct synagogues. There is a key, and someone shows you around. Maybe they can get a minyan, but usually they can’t.”

She was touched by how many young Christians worked to help maintain the synagogues. “They are historians, and they work with Jews who are in other places,” she said. But there’s just so much they can do. She remembers a shul the group visited.

“It was kind of musty,” she said. “We went upstairs, and there is just dust, and a box of books. They were siddurim. Prayer books.

“The box wasn’t neat. The books were just thrown in. It looks like that must have happened in 1941, and no one had touched them since.



These abandoned siddurim are falling out of a cardboard box in a shul in Medias.

“People said that these books should be buried, and the person working there said ‘We don’t have time for that. There is so much to do just to keep the building from falling down. We don’t have any time for the boxes.’”

The shuls, for the most part, looked like late 19th and early 20th century synagogues in Brooklyn and the Bronx, she added.

Getting back to music, Ms. Seymour said that she was fascinated by the historical changes the hora had undergone on its way to Israel. “The hora that the Romanians do is a sort of stompy thing,” she said. “It’s almost like you could imagine them wearing Dutch clogs. It’s very clompy. It doesn’t have the speed and the kicking that ours does.”

Janet Glass of North Bergen spends a lot of time dancing; she goes to St. Paul’s Church in Englewood on Monday nights, to the Teaneck Senior Center on Wednesday nights, and to the Tenafly Senior Center on Thursdays. “I have the time to do it because I am retired now,” she said; she taught Spanish at Rutgers, where she was an adjunct professor, and at the Dwight-Englewood School. She retired from that private secondary school after 28 years there.



Transylvania is the home of Dracula; here, Janet Glass is at one of his castles.

She found herself moved by the trip. “There were a number of people who had family from that area,” she said. “One of them got to a town where her ancestors had come from, and she was so moved by it. She was in tears,” and so, it seems, were some of her new friends from the tour.

Ms. Glass came away with two highlights from the trip. One was about the music alone, and the other about the combination of the sounds in the place.

She loved KlezKamp, Ms. Glass said. Like Jim Gold, she was particularly impressed by the clarinetist Merlin Shepherd, who is both Jewish and from Wales; he also has a long and impressive resume. Mr. Shepherd’s wife, Polina, was on the trip as well; she “is Russian, and sings Yiddish songs in the Russian style,” Mr. Gold said.

“His music was so beautiful it was transporting,” Ms. Glass said. “He is an amazing klezmer clarinetist. It was just beautiful.”

The other highlight was something that happened in what was going to be down time. Like many tours, this one involved some hurry-up-and-wait. “But we were traveling with people who had their instruments with them,” she said. “Aside from the hired musicians, several of the folk dancers also had instruments. So sometimes, while we were waiting for something to happen, we would get out of the bus, onto a sidewalk or into a parking lot, and the musicians would play, and we would dance.

“That was such a joyous part of the trip, the part I will remember years from now — piling out of the bus, having the accordionist pull her accordion out from its case, and all of us holding hands in a circle and dancing. It was lovely.

“We also did that in restaurants,” she added.

They also did it in a far grander venue, Ms. Glass said. “We went to the Palace of the Parliament, which is said to be the second largest building in the world.” (According to Wikipedia, it is also the world’s heaviest, weighing in at about 4,098,500,000 kilograms — but who’s counting?) It was built by Ceaușescu, “and it is very luxurious, with lots of marble. It is quite beautiful.” It also was massively self-indulgent, but “by the end, he was doing whatever he wanted



to. But he died” — in fact he was executed, in 1989, along with his equally loathed wife, Elena — “before it was finished.”

She was even more fascinated by the building’s status as the world’s second-to-biggest because she’d been in the biggest the year before. As it turns out, the Pentagon is the world’s largest building — who knew? — and she’d been there because a former Dwight-Englewood student, Elizabeth Casely, with whom she’d maintained ties, had gone to West Point. Last year, when the young woman was promoted to colonel, she’d invited Ms. Glass to watch it. Ms. Casely’s success is impressive; Ms. Glass’s having been first in the Pentagon and then in the palace was an odd coincidence.

But there she was, there the group was, in this massive marble palace built by a dead 20th-century dictator just decades after the Holocaust. A tour guide was leading them around. “And then all of a sudden, one of the folk dancers said ‘Let’s dance!’” Ms. Glass reported. “So we grabbed hands. We didn’t have an instrument, but we sang. Some of the people there knew the words to the Romanian folk song Alunelul” — the word means hazelnut, she said — “and we sang. The people like me, who didn’t know the words, sang the chorus.

“Our tour guide’s jaw dropped. He was a little nervous.” But the group finished the dance before anyone official showed up. They were safe, and they were exhilarated. “That was definitely the high point of the trip,” Ms. Glass said. Jews, in Ceaușescu’s palace, in a country ravaged by the Shoah and all the other disasters of the mid-20th century, dancing in the echoing marble. Singing with sadness, but also, overwhelmingly, with joy.

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