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Beno & Iulia

Beno and Iulia Azriel
Israel

Beno: I am sixty-four and I am a European with double citizenship. I was born in Romania, in Moldova, but I have been living many years in Israel. When I left for Israel in 1961, the authorities took away my Romanian citizenship. For a while I was only an Israeli citizen. After 1989, both my wife and I got back the Romanian citizenship. Therefore, I have double citizenship now. How do I vote? I vote in Israel and I also vote, as a Romanian citizen, at the headquarters of the Romanian Embassy in Tel Aviv. I am a person who thinks and feels „in two languages“.

I was born in 1938 in Podu Iloaiei and my family and I settled in Iasi in 1941. We lived there until the departure, in 1961. My mother's family was strongly influenced by Zionism and it was obsessed by the idea of getting to Israel. This was a known fact in our home ever since I can remember. My mother's brother had gone to Israel in 1932. He was in the British Army and he fought in Africa during the war. In 1946 he managed to get the necessary papers in order to bring his entire family to Israel. We're talking not only my parents and their children, but also all their relatives. We were to leave in 1947. Back then my father was into very promising businesses. He was passionate about the whole thing and it absorbed his entire energy. He was involved in the opening of two big factories in Iasi: a weaving factory and a modern oil factory.

He decided that we were to stay behind for a while and not live together with the rest of the clan. We postponed it for a few years. That was what my father was thinking. Because of the new Communist regime these few years extended to many, until 1961. Until then all our emigration requests had been denied.

I lived my childhood and my teenage years in Iași. I had many friends there. Some of them are still very good friends of mine. In 1955 I graduated high school and I was admitted to the Math College. I studied there for three years. Why only three? Because my father had been arrested on grounds of espionage for an enemy state. The accusation was based on a minor event. A relative of ours who lived in Israel was the secretary of the Israeli Legation in Bucharest. My father wanted to see him and invited him over to our house. However, the guy knew the attitude of the Communist authorities towards the contacts between Romanian citizens and foreign diplomats. He refused to come over and told my father *I am not coming to your house. Let's get together where everybody can see us. This way everything will be clear.* They got together and shortly after that my father was arrested. The accusations varied from espionage to money laundering. They prompted my father to turn in all the gold he had. Only that he had none. Anyway, the thing is that at a certain point he just vanished in the thin air and we didn't know

anything about him for one year and a half. After one year and a half we found out that he had been tried and convicted to thirty-one years in prison. What were the charges? Espionage in favor of a capitalist state. After that we were only getting rumors about his location. We were never certain about his whereabouts. In 1960 he was pardoned. My father was arrested in '57 and I was expelled from Math College in '59. In fact the big college purge started in '58. That was the year when many people left for Israel. The ones who had families who had filed an emigration request were expelled. After they kicked me out I was drafted and sent to the forced labor battalion. It was called J.B.L.S. – The Joint Board of Labor Services. This was an institution where only the children of property owners, priests and elements hostile to the Communist regime were sent. Soldiers didn't have guns here. They wore grey uniforms and they were doing forced labor. The J.B.S.L. was dissolved in 1960. The same year, following an amnesty, my father returned. Upon his return he was summoned to the chief of the secret police Iasi branch (Securitate). He was announced that he was going to Israel.

My father had been tortured a lot in prison. In the camp, because he was frequently being beaten and tortured he got very ill. He developed a serious kidney condition. Fortunately for him, in the same camp, there was a Jewish doctor who, without any medicines, managed to cure my father. He couldn't help himself though and he died in the camp.

I left for Israel in 1961. Meanwhile I had already met Iulia. We were trying to obtain the emigration papers for her and for family as well. Iulia's parents secretly filed the papers (that was the expression used back then), hoping that way Iulia wouldn't be kicked out of college. We also got married in secret. The wedding was in Podu Iloaiei. We were to get back together with Iulia and her parents after three months at the most. These three months turned into two years and three months. We were already thinking that it would go on like that forever. Now when you retell this story it doesn't seem like such a big deal. But the lack of certitude we were experi-

encing back then meant a lot in our lives.

Iulia: I was born in a labor camp in Transylvania. I personally don't have any recollection about the camp, but my family memories and my mother's pain and sufferance soon became mine as well.

I got to Iași in 1945. There I led a happy, quiet life, away from the political and economic reality, just like all the other children my age. I had a lot of friends. I was from a modern, open-minded family. School and college went smoothly for me. Iași was my entire universe. Israel was something I didn't know much about and I wasn't thinking of. I had Romanian friends and my life was similar to theirs. It was completely different from Beno's. From time to time I was hearing that some people filed their papers and that they were leaving the country. But life went on for me unchanged until 1958. That year, while I was still a high-school student I met my future husband. Due to him I learnt a lot about Israel. He told me that he had been waiting for ten years to live the country. We decided to get married in secret. We didn't want anybody from the college to find out. I was a student in Letters, at the French Department. We were afraid I would be kicked out. That was what happened to the ones who filed for emigration. In the end they did find out and I was expelled in the middle of my junior year. All of a sudden my life became much more complicated. My friends kept on being students while I was becoming more and more confused. I had all sorts of jobs. I had to do all kinds of things I hadn't been prepared for during my overprotected adolescence. I was a teacher in the countryside, I was a model, I taught private French lessons, I worked in a cooperative...All my Romanian friends stood by me the entire time. In 1963 I was finally allowed to leave to Israel.

Beno: I got to Israel in 1961. Israel was an extremely poor country. Life there meant a lot of work. Like all the newcomers we had nothing in the beginning. The state gave us a small apartment in a flat. We started working and we got to live in Jerusalem. I had the advantage of already knowing Hebrew. I had learnt it home, in

Romania. I also knew a lot of things about the history of my people. We were contended about living in Jerusalem. The climate was good and the city was beautiful. Back then, the only university in Israel was also in Jerusalem. I tried to get back to school. It was very difficult to get back to Med School and I was advised to go to Italy to finish my studies. However, I didn't have that kind of money and I stayed in Jerusalem. I studied biology for one year at the university. In '62 they told me I was allowed to take the admissions exam for Med School. That was when I decided that since I had to start all over again I ought to give up Med School and choose something more productive. This is how I chose Economics.

Slowly, our family started feeling at home in Jerusalem. We were not rich, but we had a decent, civilized life. We were working and we were settling. In 1963 Iulia came and we started

our life together. The state gave us an apartment and both of us enrolled back in college. I was working over the summer. That is how our life together started. I felt like everything was coming back to normal. I was in Israel, I had a family together with Iulia, I was working and hoping. I met many college students our age. Most of them were from Romania, from places like Transylvania, Bacău and Bucharest. Fewer of them were from Iași.

We were all young, with similar preoccupations; we were all going through this struggle to adjust and to forge our future. Then children came, we graduated colleges and we started working. We were getting more and more concerned about the country, about its future and about ours. Wars started, in 1967, 1970, 1973 and so on... I took part in them. Life became more and more predictable and comfortable.

Until 1971 we had almost no connection with



Romania and with our friends there. Only after 1971 the former Romanian citizens were allowed to go back and visit. Until then there were only the letters, as many as the authorities allowed.

Inside the house and with our friends we were speaking in Romanian. It was only natural. I met Iulia in Iași and our language was Romanian ever since childhood. We kept on speaking Romanian to each other. This explains the joy we both get from having and using Romanian dictionaries. Our eldest daughter learnt Romanian before she learnt Hebrew.

As soon as the opportunity of going back to Romania came up Iulia went to visit her friends in Bucharest. I was on a business trip in Frankfurt and I joined her in Bucharest after a while. We happily retied the old connections. I was very moved and amazed to discover that it was as if we had left just the day before. My mother was very worried about my returning to Bucharest. I didn't think there was a problem. And I was right. The first visit to Bucharest meant re-bonding with our friends.

We are friends with very many Romanians who are now settled abroad in Israel, Germany, Canada, South Africa. Most of them left Romania after 1971. In spite of the distance we remained very good friends. To this day we still speak Romanian, we visit, we talk on the phone...

After 1971 and until 1978 Romanian citizens were not allowed to get out of the country. That is why we were coming to Romania as often as we could. Starting with 1978 our Romanian friends started coming to visit us in Israel as well. They came almost every year. We stopped coming to Romania until after 1989. We couldn't stand seeing the pain and the torment of the people from Romania and not be able to do much about it. As long as we could see them in Jerusalem it was better for us. It was better especially for them. They could have a small timeout and experience a normal, civilized life. Things changed after 1989. We come to Romania and our friends come to Israel. Things are back to normal, the way they must be. The

important thing is that the ties among us remained strong in spite of hardships and troubles. Going back to normal after 1989 was a well-deserved price for all of us.

Iulia: I got to Israel in September 1963 and I could say it wasn't easy for me at all. The hardest thing was learning the language. It was extremely hard, because it was different from all the other modern languages. I couldn't talk to people. I could only communicate normally with the Romanians. When I got to college at the French Department other problems occurred. In Romania, we were learning almost nothing connected to the 20th century. What we were learning was not accurate either. The result was that I discovered I was far behind with my knowledge of modern French culture. I had to read a lot in order to get back on track. But my main problem was the different mentality of people around me. I was confronted with a new kind of society, completely different from the Communist society. People here respected other norms and had other priorities. I was astounded and shocked in the beginning. It took me a few years to understand and to adjust. Only in 1967 (i.e. the year of the first war with the Arabs) I lied that I was part of the Israeli people because, in time, I had learnt to love the people and the norms. In the university I saw that in Israel there are many people from all over the world, not only Israel-born people. People are different from one another. Each one brings from home customs, behavior, eating styles, clothing... I remember that in the beginning I wanted to meet colleagues of mine. None of us knew Hebrew. We were shrugging, smiling and giving up. Only as far as 1968 I started having relations with people who didn't speak Romanian. As I was starting to get better in Hebrew I could get closer to different people from different parts of the world. But I must say that, to this day, the group of Romanian friends remained as important as in the beginning.

Back in 1963, leaving Romania meant for us a definitive breaking off, the end of a part of our lives, a total heartbreak. In some way I finished it completely with the Romanian culture and

life. Our life was hard and full. We were struggling to adjust to the new mentalities and requirements. We were trying to get off of our heads the haunting image of the friends we had left behind and of the breaking off with them. That was very hard. As Beno was saying, we went to Romania as soon as the Romanian State gave us the permission. Beno told me *please be careful and don't expect too much! I don't want you to be disillusioned! Cherish what you will discover there.* I will never forget it. My friend Magda waited for me at the airport. We got on a cab and the entire ride we talked as if we were just continuing a conversation started day before. That is when I realized that I didn't have to worry anymore. I still have all the good friends from childhood, the friends I made between the ages of six and eighteen. I wonder if it's by chance or it is just the quality of people who are my friends.

Beno: It is probably the people. Experience taught us that people radically change as time goes by. Only those ones who were shaped around a set of genuine values didn't change. That was why we were able to re-bond with them as if there had been no hiatus.

We are Israeli of Romanian origin. We are connected with the state of Israel and we are proud to be Israeli. We cannot conceive living anywhere else but in Israel. At the same time, by culture, friends, affinities and language we are Romanian. At night I dream both in Romanian and in Hebrew. It depends on what I dream and on the persons I am with in my dream. I like to solve crosswords in Romanian. Every time I return to Romania I make huge provisions of crossword puzzles. The Explanatory Dictionary of the Romanian Language (DEX) is one of the most important books in our library. We equally enjoy reading in French, English, Hebrew and Romanian. We read Harry Potter in English, Romanian and French...When we are in Romania we go to the theater a lot. We try not to miss any important theater performance in Bucharest.

Iulia: After getting back in touch with our friends in Romania, we kept on looking all over the world for our friends from when we were

young. It was wonderful to find each other again and to spiritually remain together to this day. After 1989 the relations with Romania increased. Many Romanian political and cultural public figures started coming to Israel. The *Friends of Romania Association* in Jerusalem marks the presence of the Romanian cultural public figures that came to Israel for meetings, seminars and round-tables. We read Romanian books, we go to Romanian book fairs and we regularly return to Romanian and take part to its cultural life. A journalist interviewed me and asked me *What does Romania represent to you?* My answer was *To me Romania is my cultural homeland. Beyond any doubt.* My Romanian friends here and I— some of them are professors or well-known scholars — we always say that we owe a great deal to the Romanian educational system. We say this every time we get the chance and we underline the importance of our high-school years in Romania. Today we are aware of everything going on in Romania. We come back on and on. It is true that we are more into the cultural life than into politics. Politics is too crooked for us. That's about it!

Beno: from political point of view I think that, beyond any doubt, the strong connection with the States is a very good policy of Romania. This friendship will lead to Romania's development from all points of view. I would also like to say something very interesting. Our children speak Romanian. They read and write in Romanian. The eldest daughter more and better than her siblings. The Romanian language and culture shaped them and influenced their way of thinking. They would be happy to get the Romanian citizenship as well. When we got back our Romanian citizenship we didn't require it for them as well. We wanted them to become of age and make this decision on their own. Now they wish to get it as well.

Iulia: Our relation with Romania and with the people there is somewhat different from the relations other Israeli persons of Romanian origin have. There are a lot of them who after coming to Israel gave up the Romanian language and tried to extirpate any Romanian memories from

their souls. It was a protection mechanism. Some of them rediscover Romania now, after 1989. It is different in our case. Our ties with Romania were never completely broken. The connection was maintained, probably due to our friends.

Beno: the political change in 1989 was exhilarating for us. We have morally been part of everything that was going on. We knew that Romanians were finally free and managed to come to light. The fact that Iliescu was a former communist didn't even matter that much. What mattered was the extraordinary change happening. The transition period looked like a normal thing in the case of Romania. It takes a while until new politicians are formed and come into the public sphere. It takes some time to completely democratize and liberalize the country. I don't cease to be amazed by the continuous evolution of the Romanian young people. It is very fast. They internalize very fast everything new and good in the world science and technology. I think that Romanians should be more confident in their future. Of course now there is corrup-

tion, hardship and a lot of ugly things happening. It is just a phase. One cannot switch from Communism to Capitalism without an *intermezzo*, which, by the nature of things, is chaotic and ugly.

We are happy for us as well because we were able to physically get back in touch with Romania. We come back at least twice every year. We started traveling a lot around Romania. Now we know it better than when we left. We go to Iași and to the Moldavian monasteries all the time. We also like the sub-Carpathian Oltenia region. We think that Romania's nature is a priceless wealth. Romanians must make a continuous effort to bring Romania forth and forward in the international tourism.

Nevertheless we don't come to Romania as foreign tourists. We are Israeli but we never broke off with our Romanian roots. It can't be done!

Interview by Vlad Manoliu
Translated by Cora Moțoc

