

Earlier this year as I was on the Internet site of the 92nd Street YMHA (a predominately Jewish Y in New York City) where Joe and I attend a concert series each year with another couple, I noticed a category entitled Tours, Domestic and International. I went into that site and saw a tour entitled, "Romania and Bulgaria, The Road Less Taken." I checked out that tour and decided that was a great opportunity to visit my mother's home village and combine that visit with a tour of two countries which were definitely off the beaten path and ones Joe and I wouldn't try to visit on our own. I began my plans for the trip.

By sheer luck as I was surfing the Internet sites for Romania, I came across one called "Romanian Travel Companion." It was the site of Gigi Sitaru, a young Romanian fellow who conducts custom tours of his country. I e-mailed him and told him what I wanted, i.e., someone to be our guide for the first week of our stay in Romania and someone who would also do some preliminary research into Peregu Mare. Gigi indicated he would be able to do what I ask, and so we agreed to work together via e-mail. I outlined what I wanted regarding my genealogical research, and he set to work. He's very resourceful and did a really good job in every way. His home is about a day's drive from Peregu Mare, but Gigi called the mayor of the village on the phone and with the mayor's help located a woman (named Hermine Hampel) who lives in the village and is a combination caretaker of the church, curator of the church's records (such records that are left after the communists did their dirty work on the country's records), director of the church's choir, vocalist and caretaker of the cemetery, etc. (There is no resident priest in the town; a priest serves several villages in the area and comes to Peregu Mare about once a week for Mass.) As it turned out, Hermine is a relative of mine on my grandmother's side and was very helpful in our research project.

Our trip did not start off too well, unfortunately. We left Kennedy Airport in New York on Thursday night, August 2nd and didn't

arrive at our hotel in Timisoara, Romania until noon on Sunday, August 5th. Because our travel agent only allowed one hour for us to make the connection in Frankfurt from our Lufthansa flight to our Tarom Romanian Airlines flight into Timisoara, Romania, and we had to circle for about ½ hour before landing in Frankfurt, we missed that connection. Lufthansa put us up in a hotel Friday night, and their agent said we could get a flight on Saturday to Bucharest and then a connecting flight that same day back to Timisoara. We booked the flight into Bucharest and when we arrived there on Saturday, we discovered that the agent had made a mistake, and the connecting flight was not going to Timisoara, but rather coming from Timisoara. So, we had to find another hotel for Saturday night in Bucharest and finally were able to get a flight from Bucharest to Timisoara on Sunday morning. Gigi met us at the hotel on Sunday afternoon and he had a room there during the time he was our guide (at our expense). Our cousin, Laurent Leese (grandson of Frank Leisz), was with us also, so with all of this changing flights, none of the luggage we checked through in NYC was in Timisoara when we arrived. In fact, my bag and Laurent's didn't arrive at the Timisoara airport until Tuesday, and Joe's didn't arrive until Wednesday evening. Gigi had to take us to a large Metro (a Wal-Mart type store) so Joe could buy some pajamas, underwear and socks to tide him over. As I said, it wasn't a good start to our trip.

We spent Monday, August 6th touring Timisoara, an old-world and quite attractive city. It was hot (in the 90's), so we didn't stay out in the late afternoon, but returned to our air-conditioned hotel to rest. The next day was our day to visit Peregu Mare. This town is very isolated. It is only a few miles from the Hungarian border and the road to the town starts out paved, but about 7 miles or so from the town turns into a dirt road which makes the Apian Way in Rome look like I-95. We bounced along going from one side to the other, sometimes in the ditch area trying to find the least bumpy surface. Gigi needed some work on the front end of his car

after our trip there. But finally we reached the town. It was very thrilling for Laurent and me to see the road sign for Peregu Mare. I believe Laurent and I were the first Leisz family members to return to the village since our ancestors left.

Unknown to us, Gigi had been in contact with Hermine and arranged with her to spend the day with us when we came to the village. She got what records she found out of the church's archives, showed us the interior of the church (St. Theresa of Avila), put a special rosary that had been blessed in the Holy Land around the crucifix in honor of our visit and sang a lovely hymn in Romanian and German for us. She had a book which was recently published in Germany telling the history of this town (she has a couple of sons in Germany, and she agreed to have them get a copy of the book for Laurent and me—we gave her the money for the book plus mailing charges). The book told about the fire in which our great-grandfather and 16 others died. The story is that the townspeople were celebrating a Mardi Gras-like festival at the local tavern just before Lent started in February, 1893. During the evening of February 13, 1893, one of the waiters in the tavern dropped some money and lit a match to find it. He discarded the match before it was fully out and the match ignited a large container of kerosene used to fuel the stove in the tavern. The kerosene exploded and the place became an inferno. People were trying to get out through a rather small doorway, others were trying to get in to help and in the chaos, seventeen people lost their lives including our great-grandfather (who had the money on his person from the sale of the family properties prior to their immigration), as well as the tavern keeper and the tavern keeper's small son who was sleeping in his crib. It must have been a ghastly experience for such a small town. Hermine took us to the place where the fire occurred (now a building is on the site), then to the cemetery and showed us where the victims are buried. Even though the other graves in the cemetery are really beautiful with nice stones and lots of flowers, the site where the 17 victims of the fire are buried is

just a large open area overgrown with long grass and just a hint of the grave humps. When I saw that, I decided I would give a final gift to our great-grandfather and the other victims of this tragedy. With the help of Gigi and Hermine I'm now in the process of arranging for a tombstone to be placed on this gravesite with the story of the fire and, if possible, the names of the victims. I also want the site to be neatened up and its edges outlined with low plantings, a low fence or some other edging. I will pay for this work myself.

After we left the cemetery, Hermine invited us to her home for lunch. We didn't want to impose, but we did agree to stop for a cool drink. As it turned out she brought out some home-made meatballs, bread and cool drinks. So, we did eat and visited with her and her husband. She took us into her house and showed us some pictures she painted (mostly religious subjects). She is a very talented lady and very, very sweet and honest. Laurent plans to go back next year (not in mid-summer) and spend some time in the village. Hermine told him he could stay in the priest's house which is quite nice and empty at present. I had to use the bathroom, so I used the outhouse behind the priest's house (there were actually two outhouse side by side; I suppose originally built for the priest to use one and his housekeeper to use the other). It was actually not too bad since it is not really being used by anyone (reminded me of my days on the farm in Turtle Lake). I doubt that there are any indoor bathrooms in the entire village.

After the nice lunch and visit with Hermine and her husband, we started bumping on the terrible road back to our hotel in Timisoara. Even though I grumble a little about this "vacation," I consider it to have been a success since I was able to accomplish my objective in visiting Peregu Mare. I guess our ancestors did us the biggest favor by immigrating to the United States. If they hadn't, we wouldn't be on this planet and certainly not in the good, old U.S.A.

On Wednesday, August 8th, we toured Arad, a large city nearer to Peregu Mare. The weather was getting hotter each day. We also had arranged with Hermine to meet her in Arad. She was going to photocopy the records she had taken from St. Theresa's archives regarding the Leisz family and give us copies. She had other business in Arad related to an elderly woman who she was caring for who recently died. There is a bus that runs from Peregu Mare to Arad once a day, and that is how she got to Arad. We did meet her and after she finished her business, we took her to a nice hotel dining room nearby for lunch. Laurent took an immediate liking to her and spoke a little German with her. She had never been to a restaurant in her life before, so she ordered exactly what Laurent ordered to eat. When we finished our lunch, we said our goodbys and went back to Timisoara to our hotel.

Our original plans called for Gigi to drive us to Bucharest where we would join the Y tour. We had planned to do the trip as a leisurely two-day trip. But with the heat and all, Joe and I decided to fly to Bucharest from Timisoara, a 30 minute flight. Laurent accepted Gigi's invitation to see *more of Romania*, and he accompanied Gigi to his home in Campulung. Laurent spent three nights at Gigi's home while Gigi showed him around that area. Then Laurent took a train to Budapest, Hungary which he visited for a couple of days before flying back to New York.

We joined our tour group in Bucharest, staying for three nights at the new Bucharest Marriott Hotel, a beautiful hotel that could hold its own even in New York City. Our tour group numbered only 15 members, and we had a nice, big air-conditioned bus with a toilet in the back. We spent three days touring interesting areas of Romania, including Dracula's Castle. It was quite hot, and everything was crowded. All of Europe is on vacation in August, it seems. We vowed never to travel to Europe in July and August again.

On August 14th we set off to cross the border into Bulgaria. It took 1½ hours for the border crossing personnel to get the paperwork done so we would be allowed to come into Bulgaria. It was hot and people had to use the toilet facilities which were not available at the border area. Finally we transferred to our Bulgarian bus (smaller than the one we had in Romania and with air-conditioning that didn't work too well). The biggest problem in Bulgaria was the language. Romanian is very close to Italian; Joe could understand quite a lot of it. I think the area was under the Roman empire at one time; notice the word "Roman" in the country's name. Bulgarian on the other hand is a language based on the Cyrillic alphabet (like Russian) and uses an alphabet with symbols such as д, ж, з and ф—impossible to figure out the meaning of a word. English is not widely spoken or understood, so we felt a bit lost in that country as far as the language is concerned.

We had a good guide, a young fellow named Joseph. He is studying in the United States (at Penn State University) for his Ph.D. He has been doing the tour guide job for some time, and is very knowledgeable about his country and its history. He is also very patient, a necessary attribute for dealing with this group which included some real prima donnas. Joe and I were constantly amazed at the petty requests some of these people gave to waiters, etc. who generally just looked blankly at them and understood nothing that was being said to them.

Joseph wanted to give us our money's worth and showed us Bulgaria from one end to the other. We started in the north central, traveled east to the Black Sea resort town of Varna, (an interesting city with a "Coney Island" atmosphere near the beach where our hotel was located). I did actually buy a dress there, although the dress was made in Hungary. After leaving Varna, we traveled up the coast a distance, and then back down before we headed west again toward our final destination of Sofia, Bulgaria's capital city. We saw a lot of interesting things along the way, but I think the

Sofia is an interesting old-world city, and I would have liked to be able to see some of it. Joe went with the group, and I stayed in the hotel most of the day just going out for a walk in the afternoon. As I said before we have decided that we will not go to Europe in July and August (too hot and too crowded), and will look for private guides when we do tour. That strategy works best for us.

We flew Lufthansa all the way home from Sofia. The plane we were to take from Sofia to Frankfort was over 1 hour late coming in from Munich (heavy fog there), so, of course, we again missed the connection in Frankfurt for our New York flight. We were afraid we'd have to be put up again overnight, so Joe pleaded with one of our flight attendants to see if she could radio ahead and get us on a later connecting flight. Thankfully, she was able to do this, and we only had about 1½ hours to wait in Frankfort for our New York plane. Joe took a sleeping pill and managed to sleep the entire flight back, but I just dozed a little without really sleeping. I was so happy when we finally landed at Kennedy Airport and got a taxi to our apartment. It took me about ten more days before I began to feel normal again. In fact, I had to call in sick the first day I was supposed to be back at work. I did go in the rest of the week, but it was really hard working, and I was so tired when the day was over.

Joe got sick, too, after we got home and then came down with a cold on top of the other infection. He seemed to get over that and then came down with another cold. Those Bulgarian "bugs" just wouldn't give up. I guess we're getting too old to be traveling in these "transition" (i.e., just coming back from many years under communist rule) countries. I know we Americans are spoiled and need our comfort, but Joe and I are pretty experienced travelers.