

The luminous sanctuary of the Grain Merchants' Synagogue in Romania



# Where My Ancestors Prayed

What can we learn about ourselves by piecing together the lives of those who came before us? As **Alex Schechter** finds out, more than we think



**It's a golden afternoon** in mid-September and I'm wading through thick bramble in a cluttered cemetery on the outskirts of Bacău, Romania. There are more than 6,000 graves crammed into an area the size of a soccer field, and navigating them is tricky—the land is hopelessly overgrown. My guide, a toothless, sun-baked gravedigger named Ben, smiles as he pulls back some weeds to reveal yet another stone that bears my last name: Schechter.

Bacău is a small industrial city on the Bistrița River, four hours north of Bucharest. It's unremarkable in every way, except to me: This is the birthplace of my Jewish grandfather's parents, and I have come looking for evidence of their past. Earlier in the day, I had contacted Izu Butnaru, the nonagenarian president of Comunității Evreilor din Bacău, the local Jewish community center. After directing me to the city's old Jewish cemetery, he'd agreed to meet me at the Grain Merchants' Synagogue, one of two prewar temples still standing in Bacău.

No longer an active center of worship, the building now sits behind tall padlocked gates. Butnaru, hunched over and partially deaf, leads me through a yard littered with broken bottles. But as we enter the main prayer hall, a dream world unfolds before me. The walls and columns are painted with robin's-egg blue and touches of coral pink, like cake frosting. Looking up, I see murals inspired by scenes from the Bible and the zodiac, which depict tigers leaping and crocodiles waiting in marshes. The colors are vibrant, cartoonish, almost psychedelic. Despite this temple's crumbling exterior, its heart is stunningly alive.

But for how long? With the help of a translator, Butnaru explains that he has tried in vain to get the place listed on the national historic register. Bacău's Jewish population has sharply declined over the years. A 1930 census counted almost 10,000 Jews, roughly 30 percent of the town's population then. But after World War II, most moved to Israel. Today, just over 150 Jews remain. The community—much like the temple itself, which must be protected from vandals and squatters—is in danger of disappearing.

When my great-grandparents sailed to New York in 1918, they never looked back. As far as they were concerned, Romania was a distant memory. A century later, it's up to me to revisit the home they left behind, to stand in the waist-high grass and reassemble these identities, one weed-choked headstone at a time. Because if not me, then who?