

A JOURNEY HOME

BY MERRI (SALPETER) UKRAINCİK, 1992 RALPH GOLDMAN FELLOW
Former Assistant Executive Vice-President of JDC, New York

My Goldman Fellowship experience was never about exploring the Jewish world; It was about getting to know one corner of it well. There was also Ralph Goldman, the only constant in that evolving journey, whose supportive presence both encouraged my work and urged me to savor the adventure of the time overseas.

Unlike traveling, living abroad required me to step entirely out of one place and blend seamlessly into another. After a starting jolt, life stood still during those first weeks of adjustment. Then it suddenly lurched forward at a rapid pace, blurring the line between where I had come from and where I was heading.

The Fellowship year transported me across the Balkans as war raged throughout a newly dismantled Yugoslavia; it ended at the heart of the former Austro-Hungarian Empire. First based in Zagreb, Croatia's capital, I learned to navigate the city, speak the language, and decode local customs while gradually becoming part of the everyday bustle.

Inside the Jewish community itself, I was immersed simultaneously in Croatian Jewish life and the community of Jews exiled from nearby Bosnia who had been displaced to Zagreb by the siege of Sarajevo. Despite our diverse circumstances, the Bosnians saw me as one of their own: We were all Jews transplanted temporarily to a city not our own.

From our work together, I learned to bless the mundane and to appreciate even the smallest act of *hesed* (loving kindness), because most days brought news of loss or transition. Only rarely did we have the com-

fort of the status quo. We, too, would never be the same, though my personal transformation was initially drowned out by the screech of Central Europe's ubiquitous tramcars.

When I left Zagreb for Budapest, it was an auspicious time to be a Fellow. The community had just cast off the Communist yoke and was in the throes of a Jewish renaissance, so I found myself experiencing the Hungarian Jewish past, present, and future—seemingly all at once.

By coincidence and even greater luck, Ralph was in town the day I arrived. Though the cobblestone streets of the central Jewish district knew his footprints well, he urged me to find my own way. His example of humility in moments of achievement and grace in times of disappointment guided my decisions all along.

The months passed quickly in the intense way that time does only while living abroad. My educational project came to a meaningful close, and I prepared to return home, eager to share the lessons of what had been a singular experience. It occurred to me then that we really are what we preach: one people, separated only by geography and the quirks of our own *shtetlach* (towns), but united by a greater purpose.

Lech Lecha, the Torah teaches, "Go forth from your land." Go forth to fully understand where your life's journey began and in which direction to steer toward the future. The Fellowship enabled me to do just that, strengthening the connection to my roots, my heritage, and myself.