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A Real Story about Dwarfs, Giants and the Holocaust

Larry Stern

The stifling heat of the Panonian plain had gradually faded giving way to the cool summer of Transylvania's high plateau. Washington to Cluj via Budapest, luggage in Amsterdam outlined our travel ambitions. Our base camp in Cluj was to be the stately former hotel New York of "Balkan Ghosts"¹ fame. Now known as the Hotel Continental it had endured from Royal times through communism, through hard times at the end of the cold war, to eventually close its doors at the end of the first decade of the 21st Century.

This was to be our base camp for a week long exploration of the northern and most remote part of Transylvania. The year was 2004, the hotel was still open and I had promised my daughter a trip² to the ends of the earth since it was flat. Forests still dominate the Transylvanian countryside. Towns are small, have dusty streets and rarely see foreign visitors. Where the road ends, Romania ends. Our goal was to see the Romanian language sign at the end of that road proclaiming: "Do not pass. Mortal danger crossing beyond this point", proof the earth was flat, if you went ahead you'd fall off the edge.

We left Hotel Continental headed for Poieni De Sub Munte, literally "the pasture at the foothills", at the Ukrainian border of the Maramures region. A part of this mountain had once been part of our family estates. The land had never been officially confiscated as title had been vested in the older members of the family who died in the German concentration camps. It would have been the height of folly to have claimed it back under communism. Not only would the land have been confiscated immediately by the state, but we, the descendant would have been forever labeled "antisocial elements" subject to prison and reeducation. That would have included the as yet unborn children and descendants in perpetuity. Such was the magic new curse of the land. The curse did not however attach to those who simply took the benefits of the land without ownership by means of their newly acquired might – the denizens of the Communist party. It was this "flatness of the earth" I was looking to share with my American family. In addition to the mountain, we were also fleeced of two orchards and a house that had once included a tavern run by my maternal grandmother³.

Our route was passing the site of the 1711 battle of Strimtura, somewhere along the valley of the river Iza. At the wheel of the rented Ford was the founder and head of Linea Blu travel agency, Ed Foris⁴. The living embodiment of customer service, he became our historian, guide, translator and friend for the duration of the trip. Incidentally this was

also the village of my grandparents before disease and the flames of Auschwitz claimed their lives.

Two of us were fluent in the local languages, but rather removed from the place and culture. In contrast Ed was steeped in both, with a Rolodex to die for and familiar with all the roads. Weather and the road conditions dictated we find a place for the night. A few short calls later he stopped at a hole-in-the-wall bar to pick up keys. We then found a lone man waiting for us in pitch black darkness in pouring rain on a deserted highway. After a sharp turn and a few hundred yards of bouncing on sizable boulders, our headlights lit the angry creek running across the road, behind it a closed gate. Ed stopped, hesitated, then drove left into and along the bed of the creek. Pandemonium broke out in the car. "- Eddie, are you crazy? You are going to drown us?!! " Fifty feet or so later, he broke right, out of the creek, onto a street. Before we could collect our wits the car turned right, into an open gate and a magic story book scene. A loong(sic) driveway covered in cloverleaf, topped by a two car garage, door open, empty but for a child's playpen in the middle.

Dinner was a on the table in the form of mamaliga (polenta) with a carafe of milk and what looked like a pitcher of water. The water turned out to be fire water, 90 proof double distilled Ţuica (or slivovitz).

This was the village of Rozavlea. We walked into a story book house. A solid granite kitchen counter attached to the wall, no cabinets, was highlighted by gleaming copper-ware hung on the walls. Off the living room a solid black marble jacuzzi and bathroom. A flying V shaped stairway rose unsupported from the middle of the living room to the three bedrooms with sunken beds and a bath on the second story.

Behind the living room was a small but functional family room, highlighted with a boombox, a sizable color TV and a videotape player. Next to it, in a small basket, were VHS tapes. A recent tape, by the date, labeled simply "Wedding" looked home made. After some hesitation at invading our hosts privacy, we decided it was left deliberately for curious guests.

It was indeed a wedding. Looked like the entire village was attending, and it was clearly our host's marriage. Amidst the celebration, one thing stood out, at least for people familiar with the ethnocentric Romanian demography. Uniquely for a Transylvanian village, the bride was African black.

Things now started to make sense. We knew the owner to be running a construction crew in Marseille, France. The storybook house we were staying in for the night was a house he had built for himself on land he stood to inherit from his mother. Mom was the one who provided the mamaliga⁵ dinner. He and his family had simply retired next door to her house to host us overnight. We surmised the house was his "nest" built to welcome a

sophisticated French wife to the simple village of his ancestors. That explained the exorbitant black marble bathroom with its large collection of imported cosmetics, the unusual storybook architecture and that fabulous kitchen. In a village built up with outhouses, that had only seen electricity within the last decade, it was the one house with running water and indoor toilets with its own water pump and septic field. The playpen belonged to their newborn.

We watched the wedding procession led by a bearded Orthodox priest go through the Christian rites with what was most likely a North African Berber Muslim bride. I turned to ask Ed how that was possible, given the religious sensitivities of the locals. “-You’d be surprised what \$100 buys in Rozavlea.” “- Ok, but who gets bribed, God, the Church or the local priest? What do the villagers think?” Ed merely laughed at the question. The tape was the answer. Neither modern racism nor dogma had yet arrived to soil the simplicity of the locals. We were soon to learn their prejudices lay elsewhere.

The easy sloppiness of Romanian history places the "battle of Strimtura" within a 15 mile radius, anywhere between the villages of Strimtura and Rozavlea⁶.

According to legend, the name Rozavlea originates from immemorial times when the place was inhabited by a dying race of giants. Rozalia, the last of the young giant maidens was despondent at not finding a suitable mate. While bathing in the river she spied a handsome, perfectly formed but ever so tiny gnome. She started to talk to him and soon fell in love, but the size difference was unmanageable. With the assistance of the fairies the tiny groom was grown while Rozalia was shrunk. They married and had many children. Their normal sized progeny eventually founded Rozavlea, or at least so were we told by our thirty five year old hostess who joined us for breakfast. She was the sister of the owner, temporarily home from her job in France.

We asked if she had met any Americans before. Imagine our surprise to hear that a Disney film crew had been in the village making a historical movie about world famous residents of the village. She explained that seven Jewish dwarfs⁷, part of a Badchen⁸ troupe, had been running the village at the dawn of World War 2. After the war they moved to New York where they became famous musical stars and the American film crew was in Rozavlea to shoot the definitive movie about the dwarfs.

The story, with its mixture of little people and bigger people seemed to tie well with the founding legend we had just heard. Yet, our guide was a little perplexed. The village consisted of a couple of thousand orthodox Christians, the seven dwarfs to run it were Jewish, and exactly seven, really?! It all seemed contrived.

-”Did seven Jewish dwarfs really RUN your village??!” The question was phrased with the polite “evreu”, derived from the same Latin root as “Hebrew”.

-” Well you know how Jews are!” The reply used the pejorative slavonic form, ”Jid” (Kike, if you will).

Our guide, sensitive to the nuance, aware of our Romanian fluency tried to improve on the conversation:

-”What were the Jewish dwarfs known for?” he hinted, emphasizing the polite root “evreu”.

-”Some kind of Jewish theater”. She did not take the hint, her reply lead with “Jidan” again.

We did not see any point in informing her that she had hosted Jews for the night. We could not help inquiring if, in addition to Americans, she had ever met the seven dwarfs or any other Jews.

-”All Jews left Rozavlea before I was born.” Delivered with another “Jidan”.

Twenty minutes later, having finished exploring the legends of the place, we left.

As the car got underway I asked our guide:

-”Why do you think she resents people she never met?”

-” It is endemic, they suck it at their mother's breast” was the laconic reply of the last Hungarian in his family. His grandmother had taught him that ethnic Hungarians could never amount to anything in the land of Romania. Practical and to the point, he had married a Romanian ethnic, his baby was being raised Romanian and he confided he was the last Hungarian in his family. Old hatreds endure.

Months later, speaking with an Italian friend in New York I reminisced about the legend, marveling at the inventiveness of a community that was by now Judenrein⁹. I was of the opinion that the entire story, including the American film crew had been made up of whole cloth:

-”I never heard of seven Jewish dwarfs from Romania. Have you ever heard of the seven Jewish dwarfs? You are native New Yorker, do you think seven dwarfs famous enough for a movie would escape your notice? Do you think they would escape my notice? ”

To my surprise he thought he knew the movie.

”- Really, so where do you think it was shot”

”- About 30 kilometers out of Bucharest.”

After a short laugh I corrected him, ”- Only for a New Yorker does Rozavlea seem so close to Bucharest. Try 500 kilometers, you'll be closer to the mark.”

Still, the conversation bothered me. He had allowed for the possibility that some grain of truth existed behind the entire conversation. I had dismissed it out of hand. What if he was right? Was I taking offense to ignorance and prejudice and dismissing the story? I had not even tried.

Half hour later, on Google, using Rozavlea as a key word, the real story stunned me. I found references to not one, but two movies and a book about the seven Jewish dwarfs of Rozavlea¹⁰.

They never ran Rozavlea. Their fame was acquired at the gate of the Auschwitz crematoria, not New York. Their story is a miracle of survival, their protector in Hell, for that is the real name of Auschwitz, none other than the Angel of Death, Dr. Mengele, the man my mother¹¹ had confronted each day for a year for his gas chamber selection process.

I devoured the book¹². I pinched myself and thought, how could any of this be true? To say I was clueless was to understate the case by a mile.

A couple of weeks later, I was speaking to my mother in law¹³, an immigrant to New York. She was a graduate of Auschwitz herself, from the Romanian village of Halmeu, not that far from Rozavlea. I laughed at the impossibility of the story and the amazing coincidence of finding it. She would have none of it:

"- I've seen these dwarfs. I attended their performances in the early 1930s. I remember them. Their sister played the violin well." Her own daughter, my wife, is a known American violinist¹⁴. Mom knew her violin music.

I mentioned it to my many friends from Romania. No one had heard of it, but they were my age, born after the war. They all marveled at the little gem of a story that had practically run me over. This was to be the trip that kept on giving.

The seven dwarfs had been born to a family which also had average to tall sized members. Their mother had seen to it they were trained as a troupe of entertainers. They sang, danced and acted. They played multiple musical instruments. One of them played the violin. They had a show they took to to the surrounding villages and became a regional performing troupe focused primarily on weddings - Badchen. They also did not fit the genetic dwarf profile. Their mother had urged them to never separate as each one of them would be insignificant in the big bad world, but all together they were unique and could support each other.

It was thus, that in 1944 the whole Ovitz family was transported to the gas chamber at Auschwitz. Dwarfs, unfit for hard labor, were gassed on sight. It was also that mother's advice that extracted them from the gas chamber, after the door had already closed and the Zyklon B¹⁵ poison gas was being prepared to murder them.

A Nazi officer had wanted to curry favor with his boss, Dr. Mengele. The murderous doctor had been performing research on dwarfs, and while individual dwarfs were expendable and killed immediately, a family that included tall people as well as dwarfs

was unheard of and offered unique research material. Alive, Mengele thought, surgery could unravel their mysteries - they would make great vivisection material. Mengele raised heaven and earth to extract his subjects from the gas chamber for his unique chance to experiment on live human beings, perhaps even understand the mechanism for race differentiation. He was going to prove the inferiority of the mongrels...

The dwarfs acquired more "family". Tall people trying to avoid the gas chamber became uncles and cousins. They carried the dwarfs to the vivisection sessions. The dwarfs suffered in silence, they never gave anyone away. After a year, the war was over, Mengele had disappeared and they were free to return to their home in Rozavlea.

Except it was not over. The plain folks who had profited from stealing and robbing that which the Nazis failed to take, were not willing to forgo their loot. Worse, returnees from concentration camps were a gnawing issue of conscience they did not want to face. So they chased the conscience out of their presence and reality. The Badchen could not stay.

History sometimes has a sense of humor. Left standing in the Romanian countryside, was the old jalopy they had used on their itinerant performing circuit. No one wanted it, not the German army, not the Romanian army, not thieves, not the villagers in Rozavlea, not one of their tormentors. On the back of the jalopy, in plain sight was the spare wheel. No one had wanted that either. Inside the spare tire were their lives savings in gold - in the days after the war a small fortune. The Nazi's had confiscated even people's hair and gold teeth from their mouths. Since they were going to be murdered anyway they clearly did not need them. Cases requesting restitution for robberies of art from Jewish homes remain in the courts into the year 2020. In 1945 the Badchens had their lucky moment and spirited their savings and the contents of that spare tire to Israel.

So it came to pass that the story of the seven dwarves became real and amazing, especially since it was from my parents neighborhood and a story of survival against all odds. I shared it with more and more friends, nonetheless the story had, in my mind, come to an amazing and beautiful end. Then...

One evening we had guests for dinner, a couple. The wife was a Juilliard¹⁶ educated violinist, a friend of my wife, and well known in the Washington DMV (DC-Maryland-Virginia) violin teaching circles. The husband was a doctor. They were both American born. As we relaxed after dinner and chatted away, the violinists had gone off to share some teaching stories and I decided to tell the good doctor my amazing story with a dwarf violinist. I was stunned when my guest boldly told me I was a liar - "there had never been such dwarfs". Somewhat offended, but trying to stay the gracious host, I reassured the doctor that I was merely telling him what I learned in Rozavlea and a book. He could read the book for himself. The exchange kind of placed a damper on the remainder of the evening. When they left I complained to my wife, but eventually got over it and forgot the whole thing.

A month or so later we had a repeat visit from the couple. An apologetic doctor explained this was the only set of dwarfs in the world he had never heard of, then profusely thanked me for bringing them to his attention. Candidly, I was just as stunned as the first time. Why would a doctor expect to know about all the dwarfs in the world, even those of a prior generation, from Transylvania no less?

It turns out ignorance is curable. I learned a lot that evening. Those dwarfs were not true dwarfs. They were victims of a genetic illness called pseudoachondroplasia¹⁷ - a disease which affect the growth zones of the bones, but does not express itself in all the family members carrying the defective gene¹⁸. That is why some of the family were not affected and tall, while some were dwarfs. Our doctor friend¹⁹ was at the head of the Kennedy Krieger Institute at John Hopkins, and the director of their Osteogenesis Imperfecta program, a similar disease. He in fact knew about all the famous dwarfs of the world, except these seven. His apology accepted, my ignorance was ameliorated, but as it turns out not cured.

I had thought my story had ended, but here I was writing another chapter. My daughter, with a Masters degree in Economics from the University of California Santa Barbara, eventually went to work at Kennedy Krieger, drafted her first scientific paper on bone related diseases and applied to medical school²⁰. I can't remember whether this was before or after she spent nearly a year at the Maryland Medical Examiners handling dead bodies. When her mom asked her if that work was not scary, her reply was "But mom, those people are dead, I can't hurt them anymore."

Surely this was the last chapter of the seven dwarfs from Rozavlea. Or was it?

Eventually I also found two movies²¹ about the seven Jewish dwarfs. One, Israeli made rented for \$1800. The owner recommended I lease a movie theater to defray the costs of watching it. That was a non-starter. The other, available from the History Channel was about \$20. We watched it with great interest. It matched the content of the book, but seemed somewhat abbreviated.

There remained one part to the puzzle that never clarified itself²², what was the story of that Disney movie crew that had preceded us to Rozavlea. Why were they there? The story of the dwarves was interesting, but giants and gnomes notwithstanding, it was no rival to Snow White. The Nazi, Dr. Mengele was not Disney material. Then one day as I was reviewing some Disney stock I had received as a bonus for one of my projects, my eyes fell on the name of the Chairman of the Disney Corporation - Ovitz. The same surname as the family of dwarfs.

The rest came from Wikipedia:

“Michael Steven Ovitz (born December 14, 1946) is an American businessman, investor, and philanthropist. He was a talent agent who co-founded Creative Artists Agency (CAA) in 1975 and served as its chairman until 1995. Ovitz later served as president of The Walt Disney Company for only 16 months, from October 1995 to January 1997.”

“ Ovitz was born to a Romanian Jewish family in Chicago, Illinois, the son of a liquor wholesaler. Raised in Encino, California, he was student body president at Birmingham High School in Van Nuys, a classmate of Sally Field and Michael Milken.”

Is it just my conjecture, or is it a tie to that film crew we followed into Rozavlea? Does this story have another chapter yet to be written? Bets anyone?

END

END NOTES

¹ Balkan Ghosts: A Journey Through History by Robert D. Kaplan

² The author was born in Romania and had visited ancestral Maramures as a child

³ These were in the village of Ruscova, a Rusyn village, (aka Carpatho-Rusyn or Rusnak in slavonic with the latin designation of Ruthenian). An East Slavic ethnic group from the Eastern Carpathians in Central Europe speaking a language treated as a distinct language or a dialect of Ukrainian.

⁴ Ed Foris(h) owner and founder of <http://www.lineabltravel.ro/> .

⁵ Corn meal mush, similar to Italian polenta or American grits

⁶ Comuna Rozavlea web - “The Commune of Rozavlea is one of the old villages in Historic Maramureş, inhabited by the “Free Dacians” during the very old ages. At the beginning of the second millennium after Christ, in the time of Romanian medieval voivodeships and principalities, Rozavlea was part of the Lowlands principality of the Bogdan family, owned by Iuga, the brother of Bogdan before 1353, when the property is transferred to the sons of Iuga, Stefan and Ioan. In 1424 the village is the centre of Iuga heritage properties “Possessio Rozalyia”. As well from the tradition, Rozavlea, being a voivodeship possession having a monastery, even today in the lower part of the village there are locations called “ the monastery’s lowland” or the “monk’s hill”. The oldest human habitation signs are from the Neolithic period, well represented thorough multiple archaeological findings.”

⁷ The author uses "dwarfs" when referring to the historical reality, and "dwarves" when the story begs the imagination even as it remain literally true.

⁸ A badchen (Yiddish: בַּדְּחֵן) is a type of Ashkenazic Jewish professional wedding entertainer, poet, sacred clown, and master of ceremonies originating in Eastern Europe, with a history dating back to at least the sixteenth or seventeenth century. The badchen was an indispensable part of the traditional Jewish wedding in Europe who guided the bride and groom through the stages of the ceremony, act as master of ceremonies, and sing to the bride, groom and in-laws with the accompaniment of klezmer musicians. They also had a traditional role on holidays such as Hanukkah or Purim. Today they are primarily found in Chassidic communities.

⁹ Judenrein - Nazi speak for Jew free

10 Standing Tall at Auschwitz A&E special about the seven Ovitz siblings, a family of little people who worked as traveling entertainers in the 1930s until the Nazis sent them to Auschwitz, where Josef Mengele protected them to test his eugenics theories on them. <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0795477/>

11 My mother's Auschwitz uniform is at the US Holocaust museum in Washington.

12 Giants: the Dwarfs of Auschwitz: The Extraordinary Story of the Lilliput Troupe, Yehuda Negev, Eilat Koren ISBN-10 : 1849544646

13 Irene Weiss, Life At the End Of The Tunnel, A survivor's Story, Lyandy Press, 2000, ISBN-10 : 0970595700

14 Wikipedia, Lya W. Stern is a violinist, recording artist and violin teacher. Born Lya Weiss to a Jewish family in Cluj, Romania, Stern moved to the United States as a teenager. She is married to Larry Stern and has two children.

15 <https://www.thoughtco.com/zyklon-b-gas-chamber-poison-1779688>

16 <https://www.juilliard.edu/>

17 Pseudoachondroplasia and the seven Ovitz siblings who survived Auschwitz, Oliver J. Muensterer & Walter E. Berdon & Ralph S. Lachman & Stephen L. Done, HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE, *Pediatr Radiol* (2012) 42:475–480 DOI 10.1007/s00247-012-2364-8

18 It was not until 1995 that the underlying genetic defect in the COMP gene was identified on chromosome 19.

19 Jay R. Shapiro, Bone and Osteogenesis Imperfecta Department, Kennedy Krieger Institute, Baltimore, Maryland, Department of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation, Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, Baltimore, Maryland

20 *Pediatr Res.* 2016 Mar;79(3):489-95. doi: 10.1038/pr.2015.230. Epub 2015 Nov 5., Cross-sectional and longitudinal growth patterns in osteogenesis imperfecta: implications for clinical care. Emily L. Germain-Lee, Feng-Shu Brennen, Diana Stern, Aditi Kantipuly, Pamela Melvin, Mia S. Berkowitz & Jay R. Shapiro.

21 <https://datebook.sfchronicle.com/movies-tv/musical-in-the-making-will-show-how-7-dwarf-troupe-survived-the-holocaust>;

22 Menemsha Films *The Matchmaker* (2010 film) Sylvia (Bat-el Papura) is inspired by a real person, a dwarf in the Ovitz family of seven small siblings who were popular performers in Romania, and saved in Auschwitz for experimentation by Dr. Mengele. <https://film-forward.com/foreign/israeli/the-matchmaker>