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Back To Bucharest

Chovevei Torah grad to head back home as Romania's chief rabbi.



Steve Lipman - Staff Writer

Like most members of his generation, who grew up in communist Eastern Europe during the last years of communism, Sorin Rosen had no Jewish education or upbringing. "Nothing at all," he says.

Like many Jews from former Iron Curtain countries who belatedly discovered their Jewish roots, Rosen became interested as a teen in learning what he had not as a child. After visiting some distant relatives in Israel, he became active in several Jewish organizations in Bucharest, his Romanian hometown.

Like some, he drifted toward religious observance.

And unlike the rest, he will return to Bucharest this summer, after nearly three years of studying here, as his community's chief rabbi.

Rosen, 28, will be ordained in June by Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the Modern Orthodox rabbinical school founded in 1999 by Rabbi Avi Weiss of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale.

In August he and his wife Livia, whom he met at a summer camp — the couple have one child and another on the way — will become leaders of the Romanian community in which they were activists after communism fell and open observance of religion became permitted. Though Rosen's exact title and duties are yet to be determined, he will serve as the successor to Rabbi Menachem Hacoheh, the Israeli spiritual leader and onetime Knesset member, who has been Romania's chief rabbi for nearly a decade.

Rabbi Hacoheh, who originally went there on a one-year contract, chose Rosen to succeed him. The rabbi calls his selection of Rosen "my greatest achievement" in Romania.

Rosen, who grew up in an intermarried family and attended Jewish summer camps, taught at the Ronald Lauder Foundation's day school in Bucharest and studied Judaism with Rabbi Hacoheh. He decided to "become fully Jewish" and went to Jerusalem at 21 for his conversion by a rabbinical court.

Then Rabbi Hacoheh suggested that Rosen — no relation to the late Rabbi Moses

Rosen, Romania's chief rabbi from 1948 to 1994 – study for the rabbinate.

“I was scared” of the responsibility, Rosen says. “Eventually I said yes. I felt I had to give back to the community.”

Rabbi Hacoheh suggested Chovevei Torah. In past years, other rabbinical students from Eastern Bloc countries and the former Soviet Union have gone to yeshivot in Israel, Yeshiva University in Washington Heights or Ohr Somayach Yeshiva in upstate Rockland County.

Rosen's studies here are subsidized by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee. At Chovevei Torah, based at Columbia University's Kraft Center for Jewish Life, he supplements a semicha student's normal long days of halachic and talmudic studies with individualized preparation for his unique, national position.

“There's no chief-rabbi track,” he says.

Rosen will join a small but growing number of natives of Eastern European Jewish communities who are becoming religious leaders in their homelands. A lifelong knowledge of the language and the culture gives people like him an advantage over dedicated but non-native rabbis from the United States and Israel who assumed those rabbinic positions in the first years after the fall of communism.

“I have an insider's view,” he says.

Is he excited about going back to Bucharest? “Yes.” Nervous? “Yes.”

Romania's Jewish community has, like those in the other onetime communist lands, an orientation more cultural than religious.

His goal: to make Romanian Jewry “more religiously aware and to motivate them to learn.

“I feel I'm the right person to do it. I'm willing to do it,” Rosen says. “The community has a very viable future. I would not go back if I did not believe in its future.”