

Dear Friends of Partnership:

I just returned from a visit to the US Consulate in Bucharest, where a parishioner of mine and I applied for the United States visa. I am writing to share our experiences, both positive and negative, and through our stories, to offer information for future reference in this regard.

First, I want to speak up about the obvious changes into good, as far as the entire application process is concerned. There is enough information available on the US embassy website (<http://romania.usembassy.gov>), from where it is easy to start learning about the application details. If you still have questions or concerns, there are consulate phone numbers provided where to call for more information, but one can only get predefined information, actually talking to a voice machine, and not a real person.

Documents that are mandatory to be presented at the interview:

- a valid passport
- a predefined photograph
- the original receipt from the payment of the visa fee
- the printed cover page of the online application form that one has to fill and send in at least 48 hours prior to interview time
- expired passports that prove previously given US visas.

Documents that are essential to be presented, even if not required:

- an invitation letter from the US in original (from a congregation or a person)
- a letter of support from the US in original (from a congregation or a person)
- a letter of recommendation from the Unitarian Church Headquarters, in original.

Further documents that are very helpful in the process:

- a proof detailing the person's employment status and salary
- a copy of the person's employment register (carte de munca)
- copies of the person's marriage certificate and the children birth certificate (if applicable)
- bank account statements, in original, issued over the last 24 hours prior to the interview
- any other documents that can prove the person's interest to return to Romania at the end of the visit, like: vehicle registration certificate, proof of real estate ownership, business association certificates, etc.

Once all our documents were in hand, we went to the US consulate in Bucharest, at a time given in advance during the registration process.

At the gate, there was a queue of 5-10 people, quite alright compared to the queues of 150-250 people in the 1990s. We stood in line for 10-15 minutes. There were 3 security points where they checked our names on the list of the day, then a proper security officer helped us go through an electronic security check where we had to empty our pockets, and took off our belts. All our personal objects were returned at the other side of the gate.

Then, we went to the first counter for a first (preliminary) document checking, where they checked our passport, our receipt for the \$131+\$10 visa and interview fee, the printed page of our electronic application form, the expired passports and the photography. (My photo was rejected immediately, because my left ear was only visible in 90%. The officer asked me to leave the building and provide a new photo, which I eventually did in about 15 minutes, enjoying the able services of a photo business 2 minutes walk from the consulate. When I took back the new picture with a 100% visibility of my left ear, she let me continue my visa path).

So finally, we went to a large waiting room, joining about 50-60 people there, nervously waiting for their turn. We waited about 25-30 minutes, observing an officer come out with a list every 15 minutes, calling for 10 names at once. In the meantime, while sitting in the waiting room, we could observe the leaving of those applicants who were interviewed ahead of us. Some left cheerfully with a registration number in hand with which to come back on the next day for their passport and visa. Others left disappointed and sad, holding their entire documentation and passport which was returned to them without a visa. The percentage of those succeeding vs. those failing was about 50%.

My friend and I were called in as part of the same group. The first thing we did was to share our fingerprints using an electronic mechanism. Then we stood in the line again, waiting for another 15-20 minutes, until a US consul called for us from behind a security glass window counter. I stepped to the counter first. The consul was polite to almost kind. She asked if I have visited the US before, and to provide more information on those visits. She asked about the church I was representing, and a few figures about my denomination. She wanted to know what I would do in the States, and who would pay for my expenses.

She did not seem to look into the documentation that I provided. Finally, she asked about my marital status and children, and checked if they were coming with me or staying home. After a 4-5 minutes conversation she told me that the visa was to be issued, and that I was to come back on the next day to pick it up.

THINGS THAT I FELT WERE IMPORTANT TO MY CASE: that I was a minister and I was a delegate of a church, that I have visited the US before and returned to Romania after each visit, that I had a family and they did not come with me to the US, but stayed home.

The other consuls were busy with other applicants, so my friend got to go to the same officer that I did. Theoretically, this could have been a positive thing, meaning that the officer knew the whole story on the Unitarian partnerships already, and that my friend would not have to start all over again. Unfortunately, this was not the case. The officer did not want to hear about the religious implications of my friends' story. All she wanted to know was the information related to her person (she has been refused a visa 5 years ago): the questions were about her being divorced, her one child, and her job. She tried to connect her story to mine, pointing out that she was the delegate of the same church, and that she was to travel with me, her minister. She tried to hand over the official invitation and support letters from our partner church, but the officer didn't take look at them. After 2-3 minutes, my friend was told that she did not meet the conditions, and her visa would not be issued. All her documents were returned to her, including her passport, and she was told goodbye.

THINGS THAT SHE FELT WERE ESSENTIAL IN HER BEING TURNED DOWN: that she was already refused a visa once, and that she was a divorced mother raising her child by herself.

Finally, let me conclude by pointing out a few remarks that I consider especially important:

- in spite of the obvious changes into good, the application is not a formality at all, but a demanding process with clear content
- in order to complete the online application, one needs a high speed internet connection and the ability to upload / download pictures
- one has to prepare the application as completely as possible, taking every condition very seriously
- conditions are equally important, for instance the poor quality of the picture can ruin the best application
- time is an essential factor, and one has to start preparing the application at least two months prior to departure (but rather three)
- it is risky to purchase the plane tickets before one has the visa in hand, the consulate is not asking for the proof of tickets

One of my eyes is laughing, and the other is crying, as our Transylvanian folk tales put it. I am convinced that the visa application system has become a lot better and easier over the years, but also, that it still has some components in the process that stop us from benefiting from a transparent treatment. Even by doing the most careful preparation, the success is not assured, but is being left with a decision that does not speak about how well the application is completed, nor about the value of the person, nor about the ability of the applicant to introduce his or her case. It also speaks about things that we cannot fully understand, but which we will have to accept, and with which we will have to live.

Wishing good experiences with the US visa application:
David

The Rev. Gyero David
Minister, the Unitarian Congregation in Kolozsvar
Councilor, Headquarters of the Unitarian Church in Transylvania