

Episode 1 – Introduction

Hello, I am Adrian Iosifescu, your host of the History of the Romanian Jews podcast and this is the first episode of the podcast.

Qualifications:

You may wonder what are my qualifications to put together and present this podcast to you. Well, I'm a Jew who was born in Romania and immigrated to the United States after college. While growing up in Romania, at school, at college, in the army, with friends, I felt and especially I was made feel different than the majority of people around me. All my life I tried to make sense of this difference as I've always listened avidly to the stories of my parents, grandparents and other relatives, other Romanian Jews, about their life and tribulations in Romania and read every single book and article on the topic available to me. This podcast brings together my strong interest in Jewish topics, my knowledge of Romania and my love for history and art.

This podcast will be narrated by an American Jew born and raised in Romania whose English, after many years in the States, still has a Romanian accent.

By-the-way, for the listeners not familiar with the Romanian language, my last name, Iosifescu, would correspond to "Son of Joseph" in English, or Adrian ben Joseph in Hebrew or, to use my Hebrew name, Usher Leib ben Joseph.

Purpose:

This podcast will present historical information collected over the years and filtered through my own personal experiences, in the hope that it will help my children and grandchildren to better understand their ancestry and be proud of it.

I also want to contribute to filling a general void as still very little is known today about one of the oldest Jewish communities in diaspora, a community started in the first century our era, after the destruction of the second temple in Jerusalem by the Roman emperor Titus. This little-known Jewish community was at some point in history, before the 2nd World War, the 4th largest in the world, after the ones in USSR, Poland And US.

Dedication:

I dedicate this podcast to my family whose support and love I've felt all my life. My many thanks to my brother, Sorin Iosifescu, and to Susan Rosenbaum. Also, my thanks to Angela Iosifescu, Daniel Joseph, Melissa Joseph, Mark Iosifescu, Sophie Tintori, Ronnie Simhon, Lauren Simhon, Sarah Iosifescu, David Saltz, Rachel Iosifescu, Cara Fitzgerald and Elana Opher-Iosifescu and to all grandchildren, Maya, Judah, Rose, Caleb, Jack, Asher, Ari and the upcoming twins.

Many thanks for her assistance to my relative from an earlier immigration of a branch of my family to America in the early 1900's, Elissa Sloan.

Logistics:

I will attempt to produce a new episode every week and try to keep them to about 30 minutes long. Each episode will have notes, the full bibliography of books and documents used here, an email address for questions and comments I'll be more than happy to receive and answer.

Pronunciation:

Let's address pronunciation; I will call all cities, towns and villages in Romania by their English name so most people could understand the reference but when it comes to names of people, I will use the Romanian pronunciation and, where appropriate, I will provide an English translation.

Territorial Limits:

I will limit this podcast's focus on only the Romanian lands where, for most of the time, the Romanian language was official and Romanian culture was dominant. These are the territories lying inside the historical boundaries of the former Romanian Principalities of Moldova, bound by the Carpathian mountains to the West, Dniester river to the North, Black Sea to the East and Siret and Danube rivers to the South) and the principality of Walachia bound by the Carpathian mountains to the West and North, Black Sea to the East and Danube river to the South. Transylvania (Ardeal in Romanian), Maramures, and Banat lands where while Romanian was widely spoken, the Jewish population adopted at different times in history the language and culture of the ruling classes, Hungarian or German. (see map in the notes).

The musical intro:

I assume that some of you may have recognized the musical piece played at the beginning of the podcast; it is the Yiddish song "Rumania, Rumania", composed and sung by Aaron Lebedeff. Lebedeff wrote the words and the music and first recorded the song for the Vocalion record label in 1925. Born in Homel, White Russia in 1873 he had several years-experience touring with Yiddish theatre companies before being pressed into the Tsarist army in the First World War. By 1920 he had made his way to America where he became a star of the American Yiddish theatre, with many successful productions well into the 1930's. He passed away in 1960.

This song harks back to what was once considered to be the golden era of Romanian Jewry, the years between the first and second world wars. During this time the Yiddish theatre thrived, Jewish culture blossomed and despite continuing discrimination there was a degree of prosperity and progress for Romania's Jews.

The song describes the simple pleasures of a less sophisticated and more rural Jewish world. The lyrics describe Romania as a land where everyone is drinking wine, eating delicacies and dancing. Some of those delicacies are still offered in Romania, in Israel and some old-style Jewish restaurants today. These include mamaliga - a porridge of yellow corn flour, karnatzl - spicy beef sausage, kastroveti - pickled cucumbers and patlazhele - pickled green tomatoes and two cheeses, - kashkaval which refers to a specific cheese made from sheep milk, white brinza is a kind of feta cheese. As the joke goes "They tried to kill us, we survived, let's EAT!".

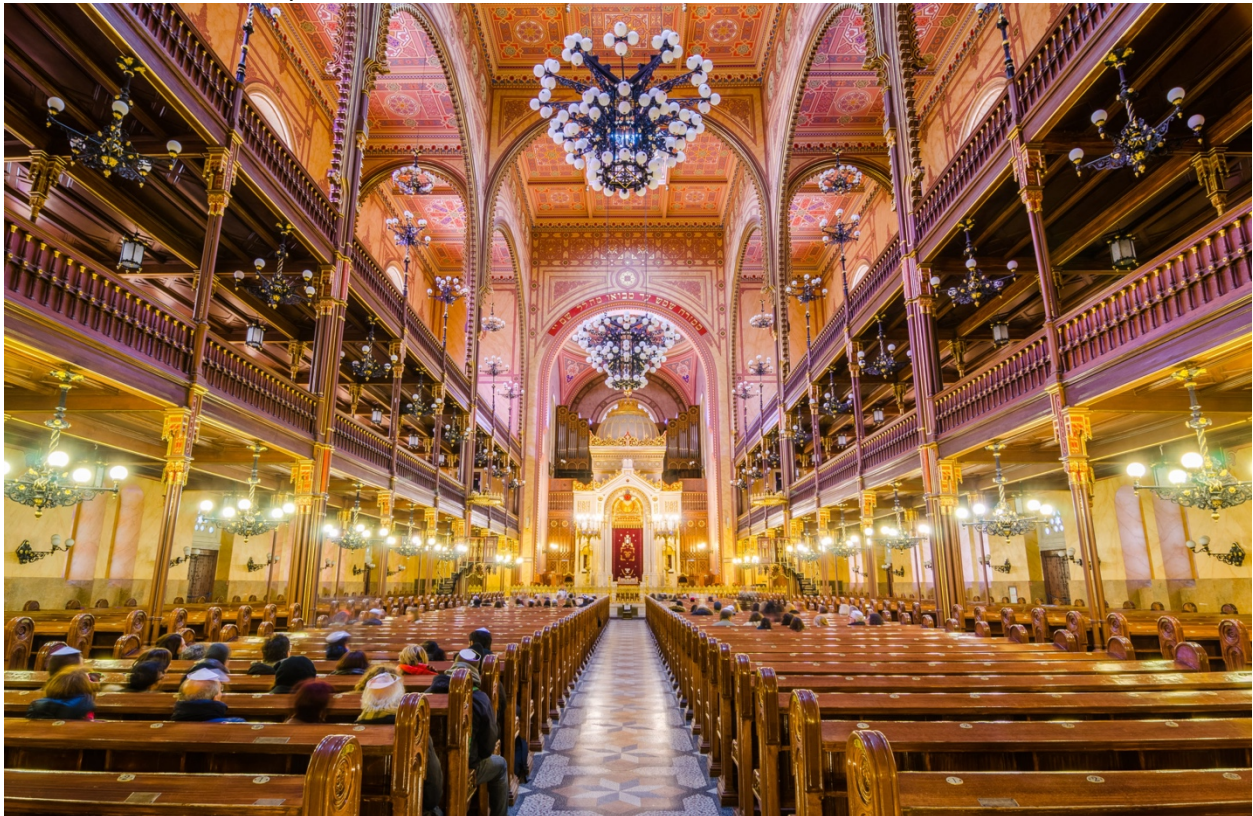
The episode's notes contain a full English translation of the song.

Hatikvah:

Talking about music, there is also a connection between, Israel's national anthem, Hatikvah, literally meaning "the hope", and Romania. Its lyrics were written in 1886 by Naphtali Herz Imber, a poet originally from Galicia. In 1888 Samuel Cohen composed a melody based on a nostalgic Romanian folk song called "Carul cu boi," (Cart with Oxen). By 1903, when the Sixth Zionist Congress convened in Basel, Switzerland and voted on the establishment of a Jewish homeland in Uganda, Zionist leaders closed the congress by spontaneously singing Hatikvah. It wasn't until 1933 that Hatikvah was ratified as the official anthem of the Zionist movement.

The podcast cover:

The podcast cover shows the biggest synagogue in Bucharest, The Choral Temple (Templul Coral). It was designed by the architects Enderle and Freiwald and built between 1864 and 1866 at the initiative of Iuliu Barash, as a close copy of Vienna's Leopoldstadt-Tempelgasse Great Synagogue. The Bucharest synagogue was devastated by the far-right Legionaries in January 1941, then restored in 1945. The main hall was recently refurbished, and re-opened in 2015 and it is shown in the picture.



Next week when we will discuss the first known Jewish presence on the historical land of Romania, the old Dacia.

Until then, be well!