

Episode 10 - Romanian Jews in America

Hello again, I am your host, Adrian Iosifescu, and this is episode ten of the History of Romanian Jews podcast. Today we will discuss Romanian Jewish immigration to America.

Previous to the Russo-Turkish war of 1877 in which Romania took an active part, gaining her independence from the Ottoman Empire, the Romanian Jews did not often hear of a Jew as an emigrant to US. Sporadic migration, however, brought Romanian Jews to every part of the globe, with the exception of America, which, for no particular reason, did not attract their attention. India and Egypt seem to have been more favored than other countries, and Palestine was holy ground, to which rich and pious Romanian Jews resorted in their old age to die and to be buried in its sacred soil. America was spoken of as a country almost beyond reach.

As early as 1810 some Romanians in Bombay, India, hearing of fortunes made in North America and not finding India to their liking, sailed to New York. Arriving at their destination, they thought themselves as the pioneers of Romanian Jewry on the American Continent, but they were told that others of the same type had been their forerunners. Diligent inquiry fails to ascertain the exact names, occupations, and dates of the earliest comers. However, it remains an undisputed fact that even the sporadic emigration of Romanian Jews in the United States did not start much earlier than 1850.

As late as 1870, a Romanian Jewish immigrant might wander about the American country for months without meeting one of his countrymen. But after 1877, the emigration to America began to increase, and almost at once the peculiarities of the immigrants obtruded themselves in American life. These peculiarities were not religious and not national in character, they were chiefly gastronomic - the first impression made by the Romanian Jew upon the American Jewish community was in the culinary department.

From 1878 until 1882, the immigration gradually increased from 261 to 1052, 40% of them being women and children. In fact, if it is desired to know when the Romanian Jews were more than persecuted by their government it is not necessary to look up the Romanian edicts against the Jews; we have only to study the annual variation in the number of arrivals in US. In 1888, for instance, there was an increase of nearly two thousand as compared with the immigration of the previous year, but the next year showed an increase of only four hundred over 1887. This irregular course continued until 1900, when the Romanian Jewish immigration reached amazing proportions.

During all these years, although Romanian Jews went to nearly every part of the United States and Canada, the city of New York was the goal of their wanderings. Almost all the Romanian Jews in America either were residents of New York, or had passed through the metropolis in seeking their fortunes elsewhere. This rule has been broken after 1900s when well-known European benevolent associations transported a considerable number of Romanian wanderers to the Canadian shores.

In 1901 it was estimated that nearly 40,000 Romanian Jews were on American soil, 24,000 of whom were living in Greater New York.

75,000 Romanian Jews emigrated in the period 1881–1914 to the United States. Among them were two brothers of my maternal great-grandfather from Botoshani.

Many of these Jewish immigrants from Eastern European countries, including Romania, affiliated themselves with fraternal organizations called *landsmanshaftn* in Yiddish, and organized in order to buy burial plots, give each other interest-free loans and other forms of mutual aid, for their “landsmen” or countrymen. Usually, these communal organizations were even more locally based, not just for Jewish immigrants sharing a background in an entire country like Romania, but for specific cities, towns, and villages in Romania and other places.

The bulk of Romanian Jewish immigrants remained in New York, in which they have established congregations and societies, and developed individual businesses.

The earliest Romanian Jewish immigrants did not attempt to separate themselves from other Jews in terms of religious affairs. But as soon as the more orthodox class began to arrive, and some of them became prosperous in worldly affairs, they thought of indulging in the luxury of a synagogue of their own, and they devoted themselves to the formation of societies somewhat on the model of those they had had in their Romanian home.

As early as 1884, two Romanians occupied a basement on Hester Street, where they manufactured grape wine, and served it in Romanian fashion. Then they installed a complete Romanian kitchen with all a Romanian palate could desire. Others were encouraged to follow suit, and the Romanian *carciuma*, (wine house/restaurant) became a lucrative business in New York. The first patrons naturally were Romanians, but soon other Jews flocked to them and paid homage to Romanian culinary art.

At the end of 1885, a score of Romanian Jews assembled in a meeting and decided to hire a hall on the Bowery in New York for holding religious services in the manner they were accustomed to in the old country. They called themselves simply "The First Romanian American Congregation", without the usual addition of a Hebrew name.

The first Romanian Jews in US conducted divine service according to the Sephardic ritual, and as most of the East Side congregations consisted of Ashkenazim, it was natural to provide for their own religious need as. The Jew in Romania was accustomed to go to synagogue on Saturdays at his leisure, as a place at which to meet and converse with the friends and acquaintances whom he could not see during the week. Once established in America, he longed for the old-time synagogue which was his club as well. The first Romanian congregation, which met on the Bowery, consisted of about fifteen members, who were not sufficiently blessed with worldly goods to purchase a scroll of the Law; they had to hire one from a Hebrew book dealer on Canal Street. The congregation rarely met during the week. If one of the members had to recite Kaddish, he either had to gather a Minyan himself, or visit the synagogue of another

congregation. But on the Sabbath day the little hall was packed. If a Romanian Jew wanted to see any one of his countrymen, he was sure to find him there, or at least meet someone he would probably know.

Contrary to expectations this first Romanian congregation did not thrive, and had it not been for the great masses pouring in from Romania, and for the benevolent purpose which it added to its religious objects, it would have decayed entirely. It continued to meet on the Bowery until 1893, when it took a ten years lease on a building at 70 Hester Street and established a synagogue at which the full quota of religious services was held. At this moment its membership did not exceed 200. On a similar basis, another congregation, Kehal Adath Yeshurun, was established in 1897. It also leased a building at 79 Hester Street for a period of ten years, and its membership run up to about the same number as the membership of the other, about 200.

Romanian Jews founded the The First Romanian-American Congregation, also known as Congregation Shaarey Shomayim, 'Gates of Heaven' in Hebrew, or Roumanishe Shul 'Romanian synagogue' in Yiddish, as an Orthodox Jewish congregation at 89–93 Rivington Street on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. The congregation was organized in 1885 by Romanian Jewish immigrants to serve the Lower East Side's large Romanian Jewish community. The Rivington Street building, erected around 1860, switched between being a church and a synagogue and was extensively remodeled in 1889. The First Romanian-American congregation purchased it in 1902 and again remodeled it. The synagogue became famous as the 'Cantor's Carnegie Hall' because of its high ceiling, good acoustics and seating for up to 1,800 people. George Burns was a member here, and Edward G. Robinson had his Bar Mitzvah there. The congregation's membership was in the thousands in the 1940s, but by the early 2000s had declined to around 40, as Jews moved out of the Lower East Side. Though its building was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1998, the congregation was reluctant to accept outside assistance in maintaining it. In January 2006 the synagogue's roof collapsed and the building was demolished two months later. Please see the episode notes for photos of this synagogue.

The Romanian Jews who first became citizens of United States, called a meeting at 101 Orchard Street and after a short debate concluded to form a political organization. A discussion arose as to the party to which the club was to belong. None of the persons present was sufficiently conversant with the principles of the different political organizations to be in a position to advise to which the new organization should give its support.

A prominent figure in Romanian-American Jewry worth of a mention was the late Michael Rosenthal, who arrived here early in the 1800s. Though a cobbler by trade he plunged into business, first as a peddler; then he opened a saloon, and in a few years, he had accumulated a little fortune. He was himself almost illiterate, but he loved men of education, and he sought their society and advice. With the aid of such persons he established, in 1885 a benevolent and endowment association, called 'The American Star' The early members of the society were Romanian Jews exclusively, but later others Jews joined it.

It is worth to discuss the first Romanian Jewish actors, who began to arrive in New York as early as 1881. They played in a concert hall, on the Bowery, at that time known as the "Oriental Theatre" At the end of 1886, the best Jewish company of actors and actresses came to New York and took up their headquarters at another concert hall, renamed in their honor, 'The Romanian Opera House. The company soon attracted the attention of the entire Jewish population of New York; nevertheless, the income was not sufficient to support the members of the troupe, and they suffered hardships. This company of actors was fully equipped with wardrobe, scenery, and even Yiddish plays from Romania. The authors composed all manner of new plays, but the undertaking languished until 1895, when skills began to command its due price. In the early 1900s three greatest theatres were active on the Bowery, the People's theater, the Thalia, and the Windsor, all Jewish. It may be said that the Yiddish-press and literature, though not founded by Romanian Jews, owed their literary success greatly to Romanian Jewish influence.

The occupations of the Romanian Jews in the United States did not differ materially from the occupations of other Jews, with the exception of their wine-cellars, coffee-houses, and restaurants. When they arrived in America, they speedily found work at their trades; they worked hard, and accumulated as much as possible and after a few years of industrious labor they nearly all started some business. If they succeeded, they continued to strive; if they failed, they returned to their original calling. Among them there was rarely one to be found who applied himself to the learning of a trade on his arrival in US, a practice so common with other immigrant Jews. In general, arriving Romanian Jews without a trade would become peddlers, dealing in all kinds of merchandise, chiefly dry goods and jewelry. In this capacity they would journey, not only through the state of New York, but all over the country and then settle down to a permanent location either in New York City or in some other favorable spot. Among them were successful merchants, with establishments not only on Grand and Canal Streets in New York, but also on Maiden Lane and Broadway. They were engaged in the wholesale diamond and woolen trades, and some in the banking business on Wall Street.

Romanian Jews followed similar occupations in the larger towns in Pennsylvania and Massachusetts. After the war with Spain, a considerable number of Romanian Jews went to Cuba and Puerto Rico and their business thrived on both islands.

Romanian Jewish young men who came to US with their parents took up special studies immediately upon their arrival, and qualified themselves as physicians, lawyers, dentists, and engineers. In the early 1900s more than 10% of East Side lawyers and physicians in New York were Romanian Jews. It is said that Philadelphia Dental College was always attended by a fair percentage of Romanian students.

The Romanian cafe as well as the Romanian wine-cellar and restaurant was conducted in New York more or less the same way as in Romania. The Romanian Jews gathered at these public houses for many purposes besides eating and drinking. They served as meeting places with friends where they discuss business and social matters, and where above all in Oriental fashion, over a cup of black coffee and through the blue smoke curling up from their cigarettes, they

indulged in a game of cards or chess. The cafe was a perfectly innocent resort, and it was one of the places where Romanian Jews found enjoyment.

The owners of the cafes and similar places have done a thriving business on the East Side of New York, some even accumulated fortunes. In the early 1900s it was estimated that there were in New York 150 restaurants, 200 wine-cellars with lunch rooms attached, and about 30 coffee-houses kept by Romanian Jews.

The situation of their brethren in Romania appealed to their generosity and under the leadership of Dr. P.A. Sigelstein, one of the prominent physicians of New York, the "Romanian Hebrew Aid Association" was formed in 1898. The association was called into existence by a few Romanian Jews, for the express purpose of ameliorating the condition of the poor immigrants arriving from Romania. It had quickly grown into a powerful charitable institution, and when the great influx of Romanian refugees came in 1899 and 1900, it was able to extend a helping hand to the unfortunates. It has attracted the attention of many charitably inclined Jews, and large sums have been entrusted to it for distribution among its wards.

I quote from a 1901 newspaper article "The Romanian Jews are viewed as an industrious class of people with a proper appreciation of American institutions, learning to speak and read in English in a shorter time than other immigrants. They regard the United States as their permanent home and do everything within the bounds of possibility to qualify themselves to be worthy citizens of the great Republic that had offered them a secure haven of rest."

Among the well know Americans of Romanian Jewish ancestry are famous actors like George Burns, Bela Lugosi, Edward G. Robinson, Johnny Weissmuller, John Houseman, Lauren Bacall, Harvey Keitel, Dustin Hoffman and many others. The episode notes provide a long list of well-known Jewish Americans of Romanian ancestry.

Next week when we will discuss Romanian Jews in Israel.

Until then be well.