

## Episode 11 - Romanian Jews in Israel

Hello, I am your host, Adrian Iosifescu, and this is episode eleven of the History of Romanian Jews podcast. Today we will discuss Romanian Jews emigration to Israel.

Romanian Jews in Israel refers to the community of Romanian Jews who migrated to Palestine beginning in the later 19th century, continued migrating to Israel after the formation of the modern state in 1948, and live within the state of Israel. The descendants of those who made aliyah in the 1930s, the wave of emigrants after World War II or after the fall of communism, with their children and grandchildren born in Israel, represent about 10% of the population. According to the Association of Romanian Journalists Abroad, about 400,000 Romanian Jews live in Israel.

The immigration of Jews from Romania has been recorded since the 18th century, when the Chief Rabbi of Bukovina emigrated to the city of Safed where his tomb is today a place for pilgrimage. Later on, in the 19th century, representatives of several Jewish organizations that had been established earlier in Romania held in the city of Focșani a Zionist conference in December 1881. After the conference, many Jews emigrated in caravans to Palestine, establishing various settlements such as Rosh Pinna and Zikhron Ya'akov once there. Romanian Jews from Bârlad and Moinești constituted an important part of the so-called First Aliyah in 1882.

In a previous podcast episode, we discussed two major waves of Romanian Jewish immigration to Palestine/Israel, one triggered by the antisemitism and Holocaust the other one during the Communist regime in Romania. As a result of aliyah, The Romanian Jewish population which was almost 800,000 souls before the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War was reduced to only about 10,000 Jews left in Romania today, most of them of old age.

Here are some of the Romanian Jews who made remarkable contributions to the land of Israel:

### **In Science:**

**Aaron Aaronsohn** was an agronomist, born in Bacau in 1876. At the age of six he was taken by his parents to Palestine. His father was one of the founders of Zichron Ya'akov. Aaronsohn studied in France and on his return was employed as an agronomist by Baron Edmond de Rothschild at Metullah in 1895. He made extensive explorations in Eretz Israel and neighboring countries and in 1906 discovered specimens of wild hybrid wheat (*triticum dicocoides*) at Rosh Pinah, a discovery that made him famous among botanists throughout the world. *Triticum dicocoides* is thought by many to be related to *triticum dicoccum*, the hybrid Emer wheat that was cultivated first in the Middle East and is the basis of agriculture.

His discovery and his articles in European journals gained scientific recognition and fame for Aaronsohn. In 1909, he went to the USA at the invitation of the American Ministry of Agriculture. With the support of American Jews, Aaronsohn founded an agricultural research station in Atlit, where he built a rich library, collected geological and botanical samples and inspected crops. He employed Arab workers and promoted their employment on Jewish farms.

**Chaim Sheba** was an Israeli physician. Chaim Scheiber (later Sheba) was born in Frasin, near Gura Humorului in 1908 to a well-known Scheiber Hasidic family, descendant from the Hasidic court of Ruzhin. Chaim began medical studies in Cernăuți and completed such studies in Vienna in December 1932. In the beginning of 1933, Sheba immigrated to Palestine. Until 1936, Sheba served as rural doctor and later in Beilinson Hospital. In 1942, he joined the Jewish Brigade as a doctor, joining the Haganah in 1947. From 1948 to 1950, he commanded the Medical Corps of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), and became Director General of the Ministry of Health after leaving the IDF. In 1953 became director of the Tel HaShomer Hospital named Chaim Sheba Medical Center, in his honor. In addition, from 1949 Sheba served as Professor of Medicine at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. He was one of the founders of the Tel Aviv University Medical School and served as a Vice-President of that University. He also helped to establish medical schools in Jerusalem and in Haifa. In 1968, Sheba was awarded the Israel Prize, in medicine.

**Harden Askenasy** (1908 - 1975) was a scientist and professor of neurosurgery, notable for pioneering neurosurgery in Israel and much of the Middle East. Professor Askenasy was born in 1908 in Bucharest and departed Romania by boat, the Pan York, one of the largest ships in the history of illegal immigration to Palestine, After departing from Bulgaria, the English Royal Navy diverted the ship to a refugee camp in Famagusta, Cyprus on January 2, 1948. However, the Haganah organization granted him and his wife English immigration certificates under the false names of Mr. Jacob and Mrs. Rivka Schwartz so that they could leave the camp and arrive in Haifa, Palestine aboard the Kedma Haganah ship on February 19, 1948. He was responsible for making the Israel Neurosurgical Society a member of both the European Neurosurgical Association and the World Federation of Neurosurgical Societies. His scientific contributions laid the foundation for old and new generations of neurosurgical students who achieved high honors at the top of their profession, both in Israel and abroad.

**Zvi Laron** is an Israeli pediatric endocrinologist. Born in Cernăuți, Romania, Laron is a professor emeritus at Tel Aviv University. In 1966, he described the type of dwarfism later called Laron syndrome. His research opened the way to the treatment of many cases of growth hormone disorders.

#### **In Business:**

**Bruno Landesberg** was born in 1920 in Cernăuți. When he was 14, his family moved to Bucharest. In 1940 the family fled the Nazis to the USSR, where Bruno married. He returned to Bucharest in 1944, where he completed his studies and joined the anti-Fascist underground. With his cousin, he started a small textile plant that the Communists later nationalized. On March 3, 1952, Bruno immigrated to Israel where, eventually, started Sano, one of the largest consumer products company.

#### **In Arts:**

**Aharon Appelfeld** well-known novelist was born in Jadova in Bukovina. In 1941, when he was nine years old, the Romanian Army retook his hometown after a year of Soviet occupation and his mother was murdered. Appelfeld was deported with his father to a forced labor camp in

Transnistria. He escaped and hid for three years before joining the Soviet army as a cook. After World War II, Appelfeld spent several months in a displaced persons camp in Italy before immigrating to Palestine in 1946. Appelfeld resided in Israel but wrote little about life there. Most of his work focuses on Jewish life in Europe before, during and after World War II. He received many awards for his extensive literary work: 1975 Brenner Prize for literature; 1979 Bialik Prize for literature; 1983 Israel Prize for literature; 1989 National Jewish Book Award for Fiction for *Badenheim 1939*; 1989 National Jewish Book Award for Fiction for *The Immortal Bartfuss*; 1998 National Jewish Book Award for Fiction for *The Iron Tracks*; 2004 Prix Médicis (foreign works category) for his autobiography, *The Story of a Life: A Memoir*

**Marcel Janco** (Marcel Hermann Iancu) born on 24 May 1895 in Bucharest, was a Romanian and Israeli visual artist, architect and art theorist. He was the co-inventor of Dadaism and a leading exponent of Constructivism in Eastern Europe. He emigrated to Palestine in 1941. He won the Dizengoff Prize and Israel Prize, and was a founder of Ein Hod, a utopian art colony. We will talk some more about Marcel Janco in the podcast episode 13.

**Jean David** was born in Bucharest Romania in 1908. He was a painter and designer, known for his contributions to the Romanian avant-garde and to the early modernist art of Israel. In 1942, He left Romania in a boat with 12 other Jews, including Theodor Brauner, the brother of Victor Brauner. After being captured by British authorities in Cyprus, he managed to reach Palestine in 1944. Among his many awards we should mention 1954 Gold medal at the Triennial for Applied Art in Milan and the 1960 Dizengoff Prize for Painting and Sculpture.

**Lia van Leer** (née **Greenberg**) was a pioneer in the field of art film programming and film archiving in Israel. She was the founder of the Haifa Cinematheque, the Jerusalem Cinematheque, the Israel Film Archive and the Jerusalem Film Festival. Lia Greenberg was born on August 8, 1924, in Bălți in Romania, In 1940, her parents sent her to Palestine to visit her sister Bruria, a dentist, who had immigrated in 1936 and was living in Tel Aviv. She never saw her parents again. In July 1941, the Germans murdered her father and other Jewish community leaders. Her mother and grandmother were deported to Transnistria and died in a concentration camp. Lia moved to Jerusalem in 1943 to attend the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

During the latter half of the twentieth century the Israeli stage, like numerous other cultural spheres, was enriched by the infusion of newcomers from Romania. Noteworthy among these were many women actors, some of them with rich acting backgrounds and repertoires from the world of Romanian theater, and others who arrived at an early age and achieved great success in the world of Israeli theater.

**Miriam Zohar** is one such Israeli actress. Zohar was born and lived in Cernăuți with her family until 1941. During that year, Germans invaded the city and Zohar, her brother and her parents,

were deported to Transnistria where she and her family were forced into hard labor in Nazi work camps. In 1944 the Soviet military liberated them from labor camp and Zohar and her family moved back to Czernowitz. In 1946, her father was arrested and taken to the Soviet Union. Shortly after his imprisonment and death, the rest of her family moved to Timișoara. In 1948, the family attempted to illegally immigrate to Palestine on the *Pan York*. However, British ships captured the *Pan York* and the passengers were placed in detention camps in Cyprus. In 1949, she and her family finally made it to Israel.

**Andrei Călărășu** (Bernard Grupper) was born in 1922 in Botosani and grew up in Jassy. In 1941 Bernard, his father and his brother were survivors of the Iasi pogrom and the 'death train'. Călărășu was returned to Jassy with some of the few survivors of the massacre, and sent to hard labor. He was liberated with the arrival of the Red Army in the summer of 1944. Bernard studied at the Academy for Theater Arts in Jassy and in Bucharest. He directed many classical theater plays, and in the 1950s began to work in the film industry. He directed a number of full-length features, winning several prizes, and later became a lecturer on film and television. In 1965, Andrei immigrated to Israel. He began to work in the Haohel Theater and the Beit Zvi School for the Performing Arts, where he established the Film and Television track. He also directed skits on Israel Army Radio, and was a member of the founding team of Israel Television. He worked at the Israel Broadcasting Authority (IBA), in television and in radio, for some 30 years, directing hundreds of programs.

**Mendi Rodan** (Rosenblum) was born in Iasi. Mendi began playing the violin at the age of five. His parents made sure that all the children got extra tuition in languages, mathematics, physical education and music. In 1941 Mendi's father and many of his relatives were murdered in the pogrom carried out against the Jews of Iasi. Mendi, his mother and his brothers survived the war. Rodan began studying engineering, but eventually he abandoned these studies. One of his musical mentors and teachers was Mircea Bersan, as well as the Armenian violinist Garabet Avakian. He studied conducting with the noted Romanian conductor Constantin Silvestri at the Romanian National Academy of Music in Bucharest. In the field of chamber music, Rodan was the pupil of the Jewish composer Michai Andryko. At the age of 16, Rodan became first violinist of the National Symphony of Romania. At the age of 24, he became its conductor. In 1958, he applied for a permit to immigrate to Israel. As a result of the request, he was fired from all his positions with the orchestra in Bucharest and forced to move to Bacau until his departure. In 1960, Rodan made aliyah to Israel with his family. In 1961-1963 he was the conductor of the Chamber Orchestra of Ramat Gan. From 1963 to 1972, Rodan was the principal conductor and musical director of the Israel Radio Orchestra in Jerusalem. From 1964, he was a guest conductor with the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra at the Israel Festival and at the Artur Rubinstein competition.

**Nancy Brandes (Silviu Brandes)** born in 1946 in Bucuresti, is an Israeli conductor, composer, arranger and founding member of the well-known Romanian band Roșu și Negru (Red & Black). He emigrated to Israel in 1975 where he collaborated with artists such as Ofra Haza, Zohar Argov, Avi Toledano, Yair Nitzani, Mirel Reznik.

### **In Sports:**

**Angelica Rozeanu** won no less than 17 world titles in table tennis. Angelica Rozeanu was also the first Romanian sportswoman to become a world champion. She reached the peak of her career at the World Table Tennis Championships held in Bucharest in 1953, where she won championships in all four competitions in which she participated. She also reached the position of President of the Romanian Table Tennis Commission. She did aliyah in 1960.

### **In Politics:**

**Yigal Allon** Yigal Allon was an Israeli military leader and politician. He was a commander of the Palmach and a general in the Israeli Defense Forces. He was also a leader of the Ahdut HaAvoda and Labor parties.

**Moshe Arad** Moshe Arad was a former ambassador from Israel to Mexico and an ambassador from Israel to the United States. He emigrated to Israel in 1950.

**Benny Gantz** Benjamin "Benny" Gantz is an Israeli politician and retired army general. He served as a minister without portfolio from 2023 to 2024, as the Minister of Defense between 2020 and 2022, and as deputy prime minister between 2021 and 2022.

**Yair Lapid** Yair Lapid is an Israeli politician of the centrist Yesh Atid party, and a former journalist. He has been the Leader of the Opposition since January 2023, having previously served in that role from 2020 to 2021. He served as the 14th Prime Minister of Israel from 1 July to 29 December 2022.

These are only some names from over 400,000 Romanian Jews who made contributions to the Israeli society.

Next week when we will discuss Jews in the Romanian Culture.

Until then be well.