

## Episode 2 – Jewish presence on the historical land of Romania

Hello, I am your host, Adrian Iosifescu, and this is episode two of the History of the Romanian Jews podcast. Today we will discuss the early presence of Jews in Dacia, the name of the Romanian territory in antiquity.

A complete history of the Jews in Romania has not yet been written because there are no chronicles or accounts of any kind to have been handed down by earlier generations; and it was only with some difficulty that a few Hebrew documents of secondary importance and of comparatively recent date were brought to light. This strange condition is without doubt due to the numberless scourges which afflicted this land—unceasing wars between neighboring powers, internal feuds, periodic invasions of Turks, Tartars and Cossacks, recurring conflagrations which destroyed whole cities one after the other, famine, and plague, and the intolerable exactions of the princes and the boyars, who forced the population to seek refuge in the forests and the mountains, and sometimes in the neighboring countries.

The Romanian chroniclers, occupying themselves mostly with the wars and the internal conflicts, paid no attention to the Jews, and made only the barest mention of them in certain passages. Moreover, the official documents were for the most part destroyed in the conflagrations; and those which escaped destruction are still hidden away in some archives. Some few documents have appeared in rare collections, or in literary and political magazines; and it is to these sources, the collections and the magazines, as well as to the accounts of travelers, that one must resort to compile a sketch, however brief, of the history of the Jews in the Romanian principalities.

Some historians believe that Jews lived on Romanian territory, known in antiquity as Dacia, as early as at the time of the Dacians. They say that after the destruction of the second temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE and the dispersion of the Jews by the Roman emperor Titus, Decebal, the Dacian king, received Jews into his country, and assigned to them the city of Talmus or Talmaci on the border of Transylvania, generally more known under the name of the Rothethurm (in Romanian Turnu Rosu), a commune located in the Sibiu county, near the Carpathian mountains.

It is agreed that Jews inhabited Dacia after its conquest by the Romans in 106 CE; it is an established fact that many Jews followed the Roman legions in their triumphal marches across the continent, as purveyors to the army, and that they settled in the countries favorable to their trade. An example would be the Roman legion of XIII Gemina, with soldiers from Judea, which arrived in the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE in Apulum (Alba Iulia), Potaissa (Turda) and Porolissum (Zalau) accompanied by Jewish purveyors. Jews lived in Sarmisegetuza, Decebal's capital, Apulum (Alba Iulia), Tibiscum (near Caransebes), Ampellum (Zlatna). We find Jews in administrative and military positions; during the reign of the Roman emperor Septimius Severus, a Jew named Herrenius Gemelinus was procurator of equestrian rank at Dacia Apulensis, with residence in Sarmisegetuza.

Coins have been discovered in the area of Hotin, Bessarabia, bearing the effigy of Judas Maccabeus, the Jewish priest who led the Maccabean Revolt against the Seleucid Empire in 167-160 BCE. Also, a bronze coin issued by Simon Bar-Kochba, the Jewish military leader who led the revolt against the Roman occupation of Judea in 132 CE, was found on the Romanian territory.

Moreover, Jews had lived in places scattered along the shore of the Black Sea a long time before BCE, and after the dispersion their number increased, especially in Dobrogea, Romanian territory by the Black Sea. Gradually, the Jews penetrated into the interior of the countries. For example, under the Byzantine emperor Theodosius the 1<sup>st</sup>, the prefects were ordered to calm the anti-Jewish movements in 379 CE and to see that the synagogues and Jewish homes were respected (the region of Dobrogea was at that time part of the Byzantine empire).

After the Roman administration of Dacia withdrew in 270 CE, there is lack of evidence concerning the long and troubled period of mass migrations (Goths, Gepids, Huns, Slavs, Avars, Hungarians, etc.) that affected the Romanian territory from the V-th until the X-th century.

In the VIII-th century the Khazars, a people partly Finn and partly Tartar, who had converted to Judaism, made their appearance in southern Russia. Soon they extended their conquests in the east of Europe as far as Pannonia, Hungary. In the XI-XII centuries masses of converted Khazars to Judaism came over the Romanian territory upon the destruction of their kingdom. Traces of them still exist in the Romanian principalities and in Transylvania, a number of places bearing the names Jidova, Jidovchitza, etc. The Khazars left a strong impression on Romanian tradition, in which "Jew" is synonym with "Giant" or "Jidov", an epithet which dates from the time of the Khazars and didn't have yet the demeaning connotation acquired in the XIX-th century.

At an early period, Bulgaria, Hungary, Poland, and the principality of Kiew, all adjacent to and enclosing Moldova and Wallachia, were inhabited by Jews. The shortest and most frequented route for those countries in their traffic with one another lay through Moldova and Wallachia, and at least part of this traffic was in the hands of the Jews. There is no doubt that Jews inhabited, since its foundation, the county of Berlad, which, in the XII-th century, included the commercial cities of Little Halicz (Galatz) and Tecuci, under the dominion of a Galician (Polish) prince. In addition, it is certain that they inhabited places in the northern part of Moldova and in Bessarabia as early as the XII-th and the beginning of the XIII-th century. The Jews also lived in the *lanat* (domain) of Severin, which was under Hungarian suzerainty at that time.

There is no doubt that Tugomir Basarab, known as Radu Negru (Rudolf the Black), was followed by the Jews when he left Transylvania, crossing the Carpathians in search of a new country, and founded Wallachia in 1290. This is an explanation given in the statements of the chroniclers, who said that Radu Negru, duke of Amlash and Fogarash, left the country with a large following of Romanians, Catholics, Saxons, and all sorts of individuals, in order to establish the new Wallachian state. Another immigration of Jews into Wallachia took place at the beginning of the reign of Vladislav Basarab, between 1365 and 1367, when they were driven from Hungary by the king Louis the Great. Many of them came to Wallachia, and were well received by Vladislav,

who assigned to them the town of Turnu. According to some historians, Turnu was built by the Jews. They made it a commercial center from which they reached all the Danubian countries.

When the principality of Moldova was founded (1348 or 1349), Jews were already living there, at least in certain localities. At the moment of its appearance on the scene of history, Moldova came under the suzerainty of Poland; and immediately thereafter it accorded facilities and privileges to the Polish traders, a great number of whom were Jews. Privileges were granted to all invited to settle in Moldova. When prince Roman 1st (1391-1394) founded the city bearing his name in Moldova, Jews took up their abode in it, doubtless the first to do so. Roman 1st and his son Alexander the Good (1401-1433) issued decrees permitting the Jews of Roman and the rest of the country to establish themselves wherever they chose and to pursue any kind of trade or industry. They were exempted from military service, and all that was asked of them was the payment of three Lowenthaler (3 silver coins) a person. These decrees were confirmed by the successors of Roman and Alexander in Moldova.

Information concerning the Jews of Wallachia during the XV-th century is very scanty, especially as the history of the principality itself is wrapped in obscurity. The Jews were for the most part traders, and the commerce of the country was principally conducted through their agency. They shared the lot of the whole population, who were subjected to the caprice and the despotism of the princes succeeding each other on a slippery throne.

The reign of Vlad Tzepesh (the Impaler), 1456-1462, in Wallachia was particularly gruesome. He was a monster of cruelty, who took pleasure in the cries and tears of his victims—gypsies, Turks, pagans, and Jews. He hacked them into bits, or crammed them into great pots with a hole in the lid, through which he poured boiling water, or he impaled them on their sides—all, as he said, out of zeal for the Christian faith. Everyone suffered at his hands, boys, girls, men, women, old and young. During his second reign (1476), he seized Turkish Jews who came to the country on business, imprisoned them, and demanded their whole fortune as a ransom; and if any would not or could not pay a ransom, he put out their eyes or cut off their ears or hands.

The Moldovan princes displayed more wisdom, and treated the Jews with favor. Under Stefan cel Mare (Stephen the Great) (1457-1504) they traded freely, even at Suchava, the capital of the principality, where they made large profits in their cattle business. They also negotiated the ransom of captive Christians. They willingly paid the war taxes in money and in produce, and rendered many services to the prince, whose reign was one of constant warfare against the neighboring peoples. We should mention here the Jew who made it by name to our history of Romanian Jews; that is **Isaac Benjamin Shor**, a Jew from Jassy, who was **steward to the prince**. He was even raised to the rank of Logothete (chancellor), and held the same position under Bogdan (1504-1517), the son and successor of Stephen. Before his death Stephen was cared for by a **Jew, the physician of the khan of Tartars**, and Bogdan acknowledged the Jew's services by sending him back to his master after Stephen's death, while detaining against his will an Italian physician who had also attended Stephen.

It is probable that many Jews settled in Moldova in 1498, when Stephen, after his incursion into Poland, carried away with him one hundred thousand prisoners in order to establish them in his own country. The treaty of commerce concluded with the king of Poland in April, 1499, expressly stipulated that the traders be allowed to carry on commerce in the two countries freely.

In the XVI-th century new immigrations came to Moldova, composed of mostly Polish and Turkish Jews. Many immigrants came from Turkey. Wallachia had fallen under Turkish suzerainty at the end of the XIV-th century, and in 1513 Moldova shared the same fate. This was exactly at the time when the Jews of Turkey began to play an important role in the Turkish state and to gain diplomatic influence at the court, in the harems, and with the pashas and the grand viziers. The princes of Moldova and Wallachia turned to these influential Jews to obtain the throne or to strengthen themselves in its possession. Commerce with Turkey was extended, and the Jews of Constantinople and other places frequently visited the principalities. Many established themselves there permanently. But the situation of the Jews varied with the prince, and depended upon the favor which he obtained from an influential Jew or Jewess at Constantinople.

In Moldova Bogdan (1504-1517), following in the foot-steps of his father, Stephen the Great treated the Jews kindly; but his successor, Stephen the Young, accorded privileges to Christian merchants of Lemberg in 1522 to the detriment of the Jews, whose influence he wished to weaken. When Peter Raresch was driven from his throne, he was helped back to it again, in 1541, by a **Jewess, the confidante of the mother of the Sultan**, who even advanced him a sum of money. This did not prevent Petru Raresch from seizing the horses of Jewish traders; and his successors did not fail to imitate him in this respect whenever they were short of money. He also imprisoned many of the Polish merchants in order to extort money from them. The exactions of Alexander Lapushneanu (1552- 1561), a cruel tyrant, were so severe that the Jews uttered shouts of joy when he was dethroned by Jacob Heraldides, despot of islands in the Aegean, whose reign was favorable to the Jews.

The Moldovan orthodox clergy usually more favorable to the Jews, assumed a hostile attitude during the reign of Ion Cumplitu (John the Terrible). They oppressed them, extorted money from them, and placed them under the ban. The bishop of Roman ordered them to be expelled from the city and burned the Jewish cemetery on Purim 1574. Many Jews were saved by the intervention of another Jew, **Isaiah ben Joseph, secretary of the prince** who interceded with John the Terrible and the prince granted them the right to have an official to represent them before the provincial authorities of the country.

In Moldova, Petru Schiopu (Peter the Lame) (1574-1579) pitilessly exploited all the inhabitants, and did not spare the Jews. He put a heavy tax upon the wines transported through Moldova (1578), the trade in which was in greater part in the hands of the Jews; and in order to rid himself of the Jewish cattle dealers from Poland, he decreed their expulsion from the country. He was dethroned shortly after, in 1579; but assumed the throne again in 1582, through the help of the physician **Benvenisti**, from a well know Sephardic Jewish family from France.

Benvenisti's help as well as the increasing influence of a **Solomon Ashkenazi** seems to have made Peter the Lame fairer in his conduct toward the Jews.

There is little information concerning the Jews of Wallachia during this time. The secretary of Alexander Mircea (1567-1577) was a Jew, **Isaiah ben Joseph**, who later served also Ion Cumplitu (John the Terrible) in Moldova.

While the Duke of Naxos was intriguing without success to obtain the throne of Wallachia, Solomon Ashkenazi succeeded in placing on the throne of Moldova a **prince of Jewish extraction, Emanuel Aaron**, a natural son of a Moldovan prince. Although Aaron was a good Christian, he was branded by the chroniclers as the cruelest of tyrants.

The end of the XVI-th century was marked by massacres of the Jews in the two principalities. The princes of Moldova, Wallachia, and Transylvania allied themselves under Austrian influence. In 1594 Mihai Viteazu (Michael the Brave) of Wallachia assembled his creditors, Turks, Greeks, and Jews, and had them all massacred. This was the signal for a general slaughter of Turks and Jews. The entire Jewish community of Bucharest perished. At the same time Emanuel Aaron had nineteen Turkish Jews put to death in Jassy, Moldova. On the strength of their victories at the beginning of their campaign, both the princes, Michael and Emanuel Aaron, massacred the Jews wherever their armies passed—the Wallachian, at Giurgewo, Rustchuk, Braila, and Plevna; and the Moldovan, at Kilia, Bender, and Ismail. The Jews left Wallachia with most of the inhabitants; but in Moldova they were soon relieved through the fall of Aaron and the accession of Jeremiah Movila, a puppet of the king of Poland. The Jews could once more breathe freely; in fact, a new immigration took place. The Polish army which established itself in Moldova in order to protect its master's protege, was accompanied by Jewish purveyors. Nevertheless, the Jews of Soroca were massacred by the Cossacks, who made a raid on the town, and led men, women, and children into captivity and slavery. Soon many Jews were soon forced to leave the Moldova for a time as a consequence of Tartar incursions and plague, which broke out at Roman, Bacau, Piatra Neamt, and Suceava.

Next week we will review the Jewish life in in Romanian Principalities in the XVII and XVIII centuries.

Until then be well.