

Episode 3 – Jews in Romania in the 17th and 18th centuries

Hello, I am your host, Adrian Iosifescu, and this is the third episode of the History of the Romanian Jews podcast. Today we will discuss the life of Jews in the 17th and 18th centuries in the Romanian principalities of Moldova and Wallachia.

Romania, and therefore Jewish community in Romania, was always at the junction of great empires and civilizations, in a multi-cultural and multi-religious area. It was at the boundary of Catholic, Orthodox and Islamic space, at the crossroads of Habsburg, Tsarist and Ottoman empires, under the influence of the three cultural poles: Vienna, Petersburg and Istanbul, somewhere between the Central, Eastern and Southeastern Europe. It is said that by 1843 an Englishman from the Royal Geographical Society did some math and concluded that the "center" of Europe was geographically in a shtetl on the Prut, in Bukovina, called Noua Suliță, in English, The New Javelin. The three great empires borders met in the same place (triplex confinium). Wanting to spend a day in three different empires, he would have gone to the only place on earth where this performance was then possible. The English traveler could have been drinking tea in Russia, coffee in Turkey and wine in Austria, sitting on a stool with three legs, each stuck in another empire.

The Romanian Jewish community also has a specific character because of the cohabitation of Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jews. *Sephardi* is a Hebrew word for Spanish and *Ashkenazi* is a Hebrew word for German. Sephardic Jews spoke Ladino language while the Ashkenazi Jews spoke Yiddish. Typically, in south of Romania the Sephardic communities prevailed, while to the north Ashkenazi Jews were a majority. The Sephardic Jews, were coming from Constantinople, Thessaloniki, Damascus or Cairo, while the Ashkenazi Jews were coming mainly from Galitia, Poland, and they coexisted in the same geographical space, with separate community associations (*kehillah*), synagogues, ritual baths and cemeteries. Bucharest, even today has two major Jewish cemeteries, a Sephardic one and an Ashkenazi one. Being a product of this culture, I have a set of grandparents in each of the two cemeteries.

After the expulsion of the Jews from Spain (1492) and Portugal (1497), they were welcomed with open arms in the Ottoman Empire. Not understanding the decision by the kings of Spain and Portugal to let the Jews to leave, the Turkish sultan Bayezid II openly expressed reservations about their intelligence. Sephardic Jews filled South-Eastern Europe (Athens, Thessaloniki, Sarajevo, Belgrade, Sofia), reaching the Southern Romanian space: Timisoara, Bucharest, Constanta. Actually, the first documentary attestation of the Jewish communities in these towns date back to the XVI-th century and refers specifically to the Sephardic Jews.

According to historical commercial acts, we find Jewish communities trading products between Byzantium (Constantinople), Russia and Poland, and crossing the Romanian Principalities since the Middle Ages. Jewish historian M.E. Halevy places the beginning of important Jewish trade in the area in the middle of the XVI-th century. During the XVIII-th century, the area was already well connected to Europe's trading network. There were two main commercial roads; one linking Wallachia to Constantinople passing through Bosnia and Bulgaria, and another one

linking Moldova to Galicia, Silesia, Moravia and Brandenburg. Nicolae Iorga, a well-known Romanian historian, points to a late XVIII-th century massive migration of Galician Jews into the Romanian Principalities, a geographical space with few anti-Jewish laws at that time, due to pogroms and worsening living conditions in Poland. They settled especially in Moldova, having an important role in the commercial transit on the Moldovan road, between the Ottoman Empire and Poland, exporting cattle, raw skins, wax, wine, and importing foreign currency and textiles. During the XVIII-th and XIX-th centuries, Moldovan nobility followed the same pattern as the Polish aristocracy and invited by royal charter, in Romanian *hrisov domnesc*, Jewish communities to settle in the Moldovan Principality. Privileges granted by landlords favored the multiplication of Jewish settlements in existing Moldovan cities, and also the establishment of new trading towns, the so-called *târguri*.

The accession to the Moldovan throne of Stefan Tomşa (1611-1615) was propitious to the Jews of Moldova. His treaty with Poland assured them entire commercial liberty; and in 1614 he invited the Jews of Lemberg and probably of other places to settle in Moldova.

In Wallachia, under the successors of Michael the Brave, the Jews returned to the principality, and led a tranquil existence there; but they were far from attaining to the number and importance of the Jews of Moldova. With difficulty, traces of them are found at long intervals during the XVII century. The Greeks and the Armenians, more numerous, monopolized commerce as well as the trades, and the legislation of Matei Basarab bears witness to the inferior condition of the Jews.

In Moldova the reign of Vasile Lupu (Basil the Wolf) (1634-1653) was favorable to the Jews. Early in his career Basil the Wolf connected with a **Dr. Cohen** who in 1656 was sent by the Turkish sultan to Moldova in order to facilitate peace negotiations with the king of Sweden. In 1660 Dr. Cohen became personal physician to Basil the Wolf in Constantinople, where the prince lived after his fall from power. The code decreed by Basil the Wolf shows that a considerable degree of protection was accorded the Jews. He granted facilities to converts, but his high opinion of Jewish physicians made him attach great importance to their testimony. Traders enjoyed perfect security, and the law protected all others equally with the Christians.

The insurrection of the Cossacks, however, was as disastrous to the Moldovan as to the Polish Jews. Their incursion into Moldova took place in 1650. They pillaged, and sacked, and sowed terror among the Jewish population. The Jews of Jassy were treated with such cruelty that all must have perished but for the intervention of the Patriarch of Antioch, who was passing through the city. The Cossacks shut them up in the towers, and tortured them night and day in order to make them reveal the place where their treasures were hidden. Even when the Cossacks entered Jassy as friends, in the train of Timush, son of Chmelnitzky, who came to marry the daughter of Basil the Wolf (1652), the Jews were forced to hide themselves; for if the Cossacks caught a Jew, he had to ransom himself.

In Wallachia Matei Basarab (1633-1654) encouraged the baptism of the Jews, and conferred high dignities on converts. One of these was appointed **Porter of the Court** who was

responsible for the main castle entrance and for the guardrooms. The codes which Matei Basarab decreed in 1640 and 1652 were not favorable to the Jews. The Jew was treated like a leper so no one might approach him, or come in contact with him, or sit with him at the same table, or touch the objects which he touched. The Christian was forbidden to consult a Jewish physician; the testimony of a Jew, except that of a physician, was refused; and his conversion was encouraged.

Little is known concerning the situation of the Jews under the successors of Matei Basarab in Wallachia. They engaged in commerce, in the making and selling of brandy, and some practiced medicine. Under Constantine Brancoveanu (1689-1714) **a Jew, surnamed " the saltpeter maker,"** furnished the prince with powder for the army. In Bucharest and probably in other cities, the Jews were confined to certain quarters, and paid more taxes than any other body of people in the city. They were not compelled to wear a special garb, but the color of their clothes and shoes had to be black, similar to the Hassidim clothing today.

Although the condition of the Jews in Moldova was better, their religion was not officially recognized. For the erection or rebuilding of a synagogue they had to obtain special authorization from the princes; the synagogues had to be made of wood, and be built on side streets at a certain distance from churches; and the Jews paid higher taxes than any other corporation. Nevertheless, they enjoyed commercial and industrial liberty. The Russian and the Polish Jews continually traversed the routes leading across the principalities to Turkey. They traded in cattle, horses, honey, and wine, imported manufactured articles from Germany, and also farmed large estates. They left the practice of money lending to the Turks and the Greeks.

With the beginning of the XVIII-th century the condition of the principalities underwent a great change. From the end of the XVII-th century the princes became fragile instruments in the hands of the pashas, who appointed and recalled them at will in order to extort as much money as possible from them upon obtaining the throne. To satisfy the increasing desires of the pashas in Constantinople, the princes pressed the people; but when their exactions became unbearable, they were deposed. Often, they were transferred from one principality to the other, or, after an interval, they were restored to the same throne. Some princes were appointed and deposed six times within a short period. It is difficult to follow their actions amid all these changes and to obtain a distinct idea of the situation of the Jews.

In April 5, 1710, the Jews of Neamt, in Moldova, were accused of ritual-murder. This is the first recorded ritual-murder in a long list of these unfortunate events. What happened was that some Christians killed a Christian child on Passover eve, and threw the body into the courtyard of the old synagogue. The next day the people believing this was the result of a Jewish Passover murder ritual, attacked the Jews, killed five of them, and pillaged without restraint. Twenty-two Jews were imprisoned by order of the prefect. A Jewish deputation waited on the prince at Jassy; an investigation was made, the charge was found to be false, the Jews were set free, and the guilty punished.

In 1714 the same false charge was made at Roman, Moldova. Some Poles abducted a Christian girl, a servant in a Jewish house, and the master was arrested. The mob plundered Jewish houses, two Jews were hanged, and the others would not have escaped massacre, if a Pole had not given information about the rape which led to the finding of the girl.

In Wallachia it was the prince himself who arraigned the Jews. Stefan Cantacuzino (Stephen Cantacuzene) (1714-1716), in order to obtain the people's pardon for his exactions, donned the religious mask, and in 1715 caused the synagogue at Bucharest, situated in a retired corner of the city, to be torn down. The Jewish provost was killed in the riot that broke out on the occasion. It was only through great sacrifices that the Jews obtained permission to rebuild the synagogue and resume their religious practices.

The successor of Stephen Cantacuzene in Wallachia, Nicholas Mavrocordatos (1716-1730), a cultivated and enlightened man, healed the wounds that Cantacuzene had caused the Jews. He invited to Bucharest a **Jewish banker, Celebi Mentesh Bally**, whom he overwhelmed with favors, and exempted from taxation. Nicholas Mavrocordatos was most closely connected with the physician and diplomat, **Dr. Daniel Fonseca**, a Portuguese Sephardic Jew. Dr. Fonseca had been the physician of the Sultan, and the intimate friend of the French ambassador at Constantinople and in 1719 he went to Bucharest as personal physician to Mavrocordatos. He aided the prince with his counsel, and his influence was so great that it aroused the rancor of the Austrian ambassador at Constantinople.

During his reign in Moldova (1714) Nicholas Mavrocordatos, the same who two years later will be prince in Wallachia, succeeded in keeping the people in check, and he punished the guilty persons who had reopened the question of ritual murder. Mihai Racoviza, succeeded to the throne in 1716, occupying it for the third time from 1716 to 1726. Racovitza was the type of a cruel and oppressive ruler, and history stigmatizes him as a repugnant personality. In order to extort money from the Jews he took advantage of the murder of a child by some rascals at Onitzkani to accuse the Jews of ritual murder. The Jew charged with being the author of the crime protested in vain. He was led to Jassy, and maltreated and tortured in the presence of the prince, the synagogue was destroyed, and the scrolls of the Law were burned. Finally, after having extorted enormous sums from the Jews, Racovitza set his victims free.

Under Constantine Mavrocordatos, who occupied the throne of Wallachia four times and that of Moldova (1730- 1763) six times, the Jews led a peaceful existence. He decreed reforms which show his desire to promote the welfare of the lowly and the humble. The charter promulgated by him in Moldova, in 1741, granted the Jews the same protection as the rest of the people. Their homes were to be inviolable and they might settle in all the cities and villages, and follow whatever craft or trade they chose; they could also appeal directly to the prince against any injustice. At the same time, they, just like the Turks, could not employ Christian servants under thirty years of age, and Jewish women as well as Christian women might not sell spirituous drinks. Although the terms of the charter were never literally executed, its good effects made themselves felt. The Jews lived in all the cities, villages, and market-towns of Moldova, and their activity was perceptible everywhere. Many went to Hotin at the border of Moldova and

Poland, with leather belts, embroideries, textile fabrics, and carpets, and brought back furs from Russia. Others exported cattle, saffron, cotton, carpets, dates, and other fruits as far as Breslau and Frankfurt, and imported silver and merchandise. The Jews were engaged in all the crafts; the cultivation of the land was in their hands; the wayside inns on the main routes of travel belonged to them, and, according to the travelers, these were the only places which offered comfortable quarters. The best houses in the cities were those of the Jews, and they were chosen for lodging distinguished guests.

The Russo-Turkish war (1769-1774) brought dangerous times to the Jews of the principalities. After massacring the Jews of Uman in Ukraine, the Cossacks advanced as far as Balta castle, and demanded all the Polish Jews who had taken refuge there. When the Turkish garrison refused to give them up, the Cossacks murdered the garrison along with the Jewish population.

When the Russian troops entered Moldova, the Russian and Turkish soldiers vied with each other in pillaging. Jews and Christians fled the country, those who remained enduring the maltreatment of the Turkish janissaries, an elite military corps of the Ottoman Empire army from the late XIV-th century to 1826. At Botoshani, the rabbi fell a victim to their brutality. At Bucharest, people taking advantage of the disorder induced by the Turkish army, fell upon the Jews in 1770.

It was during the Russian occupation that the first anti-Jewish pamphlet appeared at Jassy in 1771. It is a Romanian translation of **the Opus Aureum of Samuel Maroccanus**, one of the most influential anti-Jewish treatise of the Middle Ages. Allegedly translated from the Arabic by the Spanish Dominican Orientalist, Alfonsus Bonihominis, the epistle was supposedly composed by a Moroccan Jew ("Samuel Maroccanus") at the beginning of the XI-th century in which he shares with his colleague, Rabbi Isaac, the head master of a rabbinical school and of the Jewish synagogue in Subjulmeta , Morocco, the thinking which led him to be baptized and convert to Christianity. You can see a picture of the book in the notes.

Tranquility was not restored in the principalities nearly the end of 1774, when peace was concluded.

On the renewal of the Russo-Turkish war, in which the Austrians took part, the Russians took the Ismail town by storm in November 1790 and massacred a great number of Jews, sending others as prisoners into the interior of Russia. The Austrian occupation of Wallachia was disastrous for the Jews. In consequence of the frequent requisitions made for agricultural products, the distilleries, which were almost exclusively in the hands of the Jews, could no longer be run, and many Jews were ruined. Commerce stopped, and the traders were heavily burdened with taxes. A special and severe order was given by the authorities of the districts to take a census of the Jews, including even the purveyors to the imperial army, and to impose large taxes upon them.

Under Alexander Moruzi (1793-1796) the Jews of Wallachia experienced all the severities of an oppressive ruler. Moruzi renewed the privileges of the converted Jews, destroyed the

synagogue, which had been constructed on one of the principal streets of Bucharest. He forbade the settlement of Jews in Bucharest and the people, influenced by his acts, became so inflamed against the Jews that he was compelled to adopt protective measures. At the same time Moruzi recognized the services rendered by the Jews engaged in industries. He granted privileges to a Jew by the name of **Moses, who was a manufacturer of glassware**; he exempted certain artisans from taxation; and he even **appointed a Jew to the post of Giuvaergiu-Basha** (head of jewelry guild) .

In Moldova the Jews were subjected to fewer vexatious. Nevertheless, Alexander Kallimachos in 1796 drove from their shops the Jews that lived close to the main church in Jassy, under the pretext that they denied the sacred precincts. At Galatz the never-dying accusation of ritual murder was made in 1797. The Greeks attacked the Jews, beat them, pillaged their houses, killed four, threw others into the Danube, and burned the synagogue with the scrolls of the Law. The Jews escaped entire destruction only through an old priest, who gathered them together, and sheltered them in his church.

On February 8, 1803 a leaflet attacking Jews and Judaism, **Infruntarea jidovilor (Confronting the Jews)**, was published in Jassy; its author was the converted Jew Noah Belfer, who had become a monk under the name Neofit. The leaflet was published with the approval of the metropolitan of Moldova and probably with the consent of the prince. It contains the old absurd accusations and slanders, and gives silly interpretations of the customs of the Jews. The pamphlet was spread among the people and at Jassy it provoked mob violence against the Jews which threatened to become a massacre. You can see a picture of the leaflet in the notes.

In December 1806 war again broke out again between Russia and Turkey and the Russian troops occupied again the principalities. As soon as they approached Bucharest, Ypsilante left the city, the wealthier of the residents following his example. Taking advantage of the disorder resulting from this departure, the people fell upon the Jews, penned them up, and gave them the choice between baptism and death. They were saved from their terrible plight by the entrance of the Russians.

The Russian occupation, ill-fated for the Romanians, was still worse for the Jews of the two principalities. They had many vexations to undergo at the hands of the authorities and the army. Commerce was paralyzed; the traders were burdened with taxes; and the Jewish artisans were prevented from working on Christian holidays even at their own homes.

After peace was concluded, the simultaneous reigns of John Caradja in Wallachia (1812-1818) and Charles Kallimachos in Moldova (1812-1819) were marked by the ravages of the plague in both principalities. In Wallachia, Caradja, needy and avaricious, profited by the calamity to drain money from the Jews, while accusing them of filthiness. He forbade them to employ Christian minors as servants, or to rent or buy shops in the vicinity of churches. In Moldova, Kallimachos, kinder and more disinterested, treated them well; but the ritual murder calumny was repeated at Piatra in 1816. The authorities maltreated the Jews, and extorted money from them, using plague as a pretext.

in 1821 a tremendous storm broke out bringing mortal terror to the Romanian Jews. It was the epoch of the Heteria (the Greek revolution), when the Greeks sought to free themselves from the Turkish yoke. The heterists were undisciplined bands of plunderers who stole, sowed destruction, and pillaged the houses of Jews. They killed and massacred those whom they met on their march to Piatra, Neamtz, Folticheni, Hertza, Fokshani, etc., and their route through Moldova and Wallachia was flooded with Jewish blood. These wretches found assistants in the Greek monks of the Moldovan monasteries. The entrance of the Turks put a stop to the carnage; but then the Turks and the janissaries took their turn at pillaging. The Jews lived in a constant state of dread; terror reigned in the two countries, especially in Moldova. The well-to-do crossed the frontier; but the poor wandered about in the forests and the mountains. The city of Jassy, at first partially destroyed by conflagrations, was converted into a furnace of living coals before the departure of the janissaries in August, 1822. All the Jewish houses and synagogues were reduced to ashes.

The "Organic Law" a charter drawn up in Moldova under the Russian influence, introduced additional restrictions for the Jewish population: Jews were forbidden to inhabit certain streets or districts in the cities; restrictive measures were passed against merchants, peddlers, brokers, and artisans; they were forbidden to rent certain shops or build their synagogues in certain places. The accusation of ritual murder was brought in several places, and riots against the Jews were frequent.

In spite of the numerous wars, Cossack and Tartar incursions, pest, floods and periodic famine, the number of Jews in Wallachia and Moldova, especially in Moldova, increased. In Wallachia, during the XVIII-th century, the number of Jews increased through immigrants from Hungary, Russia, and Turkey. They were traders or they engaged in all kinds of crafts—tailoring, shoemaking, tinning, lacemaking, working silver, making jewelry, bookbinding, engraving, making pipes, and manufacturing potash and glassware. They joined the guilds of artisans and craftsmen, on an equal footing with Christians. They were also the best distillers, as such enjoying certain privileges. They rarely engaged in money changing.

The people at large despised and insulted them; yet they were well received by the boyars, the high dignitaries of the principalities and even by the princes and the court, at which the artisans through their skill succeeded in obtaining exceptional positions, in acquiring privileges, favors, and influence, and exemption from taxation. In Bucharest, a Jew was appointed **Cuiungi-Basha**, or grand provost of the silversmiths. In 1792 a Jew named **Eleazar was made Giuvaergiu-Basha**, grand provost of the jewelers. These were high positions, which conferred upon the holders a certain authority and certain judicial powers over all the members of the guild, of which they were the natural defenders.

The Jews of Moldova exerted a still stronger influence on the social and economic condition of the country than the Jews of Wallachia. Many villages and towns, like Folticheni and Mihaileni, were founded or re-peopled by them or their agents in the XVIII-th century.

After obtaining the authorization of the prince, the boyars, that is, the proprietors of estates, generally made an agreement with certain foreign Jewish families, by which these families bound themselves to people of a town for a limited time. Privileges were granted the founders and their descendants, and the land and the material for the construction of synagogues and the management of cemeteries were given them at no cost. They were assured the independent administration of their internal affairs, and they took an active share in the communal affairs with rights equal to those of the other citizens.

Jews followed all professions and crafts. There were Jewish physicians, surgeons, barbers, midwives, whole-sale and retail merchants, bankers, brokers, traders in cattle, grain, tobacco, wines, fruits, skins, and fish, inn-keepers, and middlemen. Among the artisans there were Jewish clock-makers, coppersmiths, workers in hides and furs, cap and hat makers, keepers of coffee houses, shoemakers, tailors, tanners, silversmiths, jewelers, glaziers, engravers, bookbinders, butchers, housepainters, masons, drivers, lacemakers, bakers, etc. Among the manufacturers, there were distillers on a large and small scale, manufacturers of liquors, butter, glass-ware, potash, paper, and textile fabrics.

In Wallachia the artisans were absorbed by the Christian guilds, but in Moldova Jewish artisans formed independent organizations, each with a provost and councilors, and they were absorbed only by the great guild called the Jewish corporation.

The organization of the Jews in Romania merits special attention. The internal administration of their affairs did not differ greatly from that in the Jewish communities of Poland; but the same is not true of their representatives before the authorities of the country. These bore titles borrowed from Poland and Turkey, but they had different functions from those of the Polish and Turkish officials of the same name.

The community was known to outsiders as the *Breasla* (guild); and its most ancient representative was called the *Staroste* (provost), who, by the end of the XVI-th century, acquired the right to represent the community officially before the authorities of the city. The *Staroste* title has been preserved in Wallachia while in Moldova, since the beginning of the XVIII-th century the highest position is that of the *Hahambasha*. After 1750 this position was occupied chiefly by rabbis, though its character and functions were essentially secular. The Jews conferred upon the holder of this office the title of *Bosh Medina*, regent of the country and as his authority and influence increased, he was recognized as chief also by the Jews of Wallachia. Thus, a kind of Jewish union was established between the two countries before their actual political union in 1862.

The *Hahambasha* was appointed by a princely decree, which had to be renewed with the accession of each prince. He represented the Jews before the prince and the central authorities, and was freely admitted to their presence, enjoying many privileges and immunities. Each head of a family owed him an annual sum, and a certain sum was due him at betrothals, marriages, and divorces, and from Jewish butchers for "each head of cattle slaughtered". He himself and his near kindred were exempt from taxation on the beehives,

wine, cattle, and drinks belonging to them, and he owed no tax, even to the prince. The decree by which he was appointed invariably contained a reference to important services previously rendered by him to the prince.

The *Hahambasha* had absolute authority in religious questions and very great authority to decide questions in litigation, both civil and criminal.

The rabbis were nominated by the *Fruntași* (notables) of the Jewish community and all its members, they had to be recognized and appointed by the *Hahambasha*, who had the absolute right to revoke their appointment.

Though the office of *Hahambasha* was not hereditary, it remained with some slight interruption in the hands of one family. About 1740 **Bezalel ha-Cohen, a distinguished rabbi**, brother or nephew of Naphtali ha-Cohen of Prague, known for his disputes with Chajon, became *Hahambasha*; and after 1750 or 1752 the office was handed on to his descendants, and with some exceptions did not leave them until 1832. In this year the office was abolished in consequence of the incapacity of the last incumbent, Isaiah ha-Cohen.

Next week when we will discuss the Jewish life in in Romanian Principalities in the XIX-th century.

Until then be well.