Episode 4 – Jews in the 19th century Romania

Hello, I am your host, Adrian Iosifescu, and this is forth episode of the History of the Romanian Jews podcast. Today we will get closer to modern times and discuss Jewish life in the 19th century Romania.

The beginning of the 19th century brings about political changes, influencing Jewish settlements in the Romanian Principalities, most of all in Moldova. The annexation of Bessarabia (1812) to Tsarist Russia and the strong Russian legislation against Jews, the dissolution of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (1817) and the Treaty of Adrianople (1829), leading to a strong Russian political influence over the Romanian Principalities, resulted in the establishment of a series of written legislation codes dealing with regulations concerning foreign and Jewish settlers in the Romanian Principalities. In Moldova, the Callimachi Code (1817) gave Jews the right to buy houses and shops inside the cities, however forbade the purchase of any property in the countryside. At this point, the Jewish population could have been divided into three groups: the native Jews (*pământeni*), living in the territory before the XVIII-th century, the Jews settled by royal charter (*hrisov domnesc*) and the foreign Jews (*sudiți*), subject to foreign protection.

Russian influence and tendencies of Jewish discrimination can be noticed in the Organic Regulations (*Regulamentele Organice*), semi-constitutional codes of law enforced in Wallachia in 1831 and in Moldavia in 1832. It contained a series of restrictive and discriminatory dispositions against Jews, such as: non-Christians could not benefit from civil and political rights, vagabond Jews were expelled and the Hahambasha institution and the Jewish guild were abolished, moving the economic and political organization of the Jewish community directly under Principality supervision. These changes catalyzed the apparition of multiple Jewish religious communities, organized in each city, spiritually guided by the local rabbi.

Despite restrictive measures taken against Jews, their number increased throughout the XIX-th century, especially after the Treaty of Adrianople, when Western capital would penetrate the Romanian Principalities and Ottoman commercial monopoly would cease. Prince Mihail Sturdza leads a policy of attracting Jews from the neighboring states, thereby greatly expanding their number in Moldova. In 1803, at the time of the first census in Moldova, there were 12,000 Jews compared with 604,000 inhabitants. Due to immigration, the census of 1820 shows 19,000 Jews in Moldova, the 1827 census shows 24,000 Jews while the 1859 census shows 130,000 Jews. The number of Jews in Wallachia has always been smaller than in Moldova. The 1821 census showed 3,300 Jews versus 1,650,000 inhabitants. The census of 1838 showed 6,000 Jews. After the union of Moldova and Wallachia in 1862 over 50,000 Jews emigrated from the Moldova to Wallachia.

Jewish communities played an important role in the (re)settlement of Moldavian cities and establishing *târguri* and *târgușoare*. These *târguri* were in a sense the equivalent of a shtetl. A great deal of settlements with Jewish inhabitants displays toponymic terms like *târg* (Târgul Cucului, Târgul Neamț, Târgul Frumos, etc.). Some others use the toponymic term of *pod*

(meaning bridge, such as, Podul Iloaiei, Podul Turcului, etc.), since many Jewish settlements occupied areas in the vicinity of water streams crossings or road intersections.

The capital of Moldova, Iași, a city dating from the mid-XIV-th century, displayed the biggest Jewish community throughout the Romanian Principalities. The city's geographical position on the slopes of seven hills influenced its entire urban structure. Being the permanent or temporary residence of Moldovan ruling princes, with its Princely Court (*curtea domnească*), the city of Iași went through a long urbanization process since the mid-XIV-th century; in the XV-th century, the city became a major artisanal, commercial and economic center. Between the XVI-th and XVII-th centuries, once it became the Moldavian capital, Iași increased its urban territory and became the largest city in Moldavia.

Beginning with the XVI-th century, the Jewish community had already built a synagogue and a cemetery in an Iasi area known as *Târgul Cucului*. Different ethnic groups settled in Iași, defining their own neighborhoods, as in other medieval cities of Eastern and South-eastern Europe, with urban dimensions depending on the community's scale and wealth. *Mahala* or *uliță* were the terms used to designate such neighborhoods: *mahalaua armenească* (Armenian quarter), *mahalaua jidovească* (Jewish quarter), etc. Throughout the XIX-th century, with Iași's further urban development and population growth, Jewish urban presence becomes more diffuse and extends into the territory of the entire city by building synagogues, schools and even an Israeli hospital (1827). An interesting information about the city's Jewish customs is captured by two Scottish travelers in 1839. During their visit in Iași, around the festivities of Yom Kippur, they learn that the city had around 200 synagogues, contained in a compact Jewish neighborhood.

Bucharest was the capital of the principality of Walachia. Up to the XIX-th century almost the entire Jewish population of Walachia was concentrated in Bucharest, where the great majority continued to live subsequently. The history of the Jewish community in Bucharest is essentially the history of Wallachian Jewry. The community, consisting of merchants and moneylenders from Turkey and the Balkan countries, is first mentioned in the middle of the XVI-th century in the responsa of several Balkan rabbis. Toward the middle of the XVII-th century, a new community, now predominantly Ashkenazi, was established. In the XVIII-th century the Jews were concentrated in the suburb of Mahalaua Popescului, but as the community grew, a number began to move to other parts of the city, where they even established synagogues. The populace, afraid of Jewish economic competition, was intensely hostile toward the Jews. The Bucharest community grew rapidly in the XIX-th century through immigration. From 127 families registered in Bucharest in 1820 and 594 in 1831, the community grew to 5,934 persons in 1860 and 40,533 (14.7% of the total population) in 1899.

Continued quarrels within the Bucharest Jewish community and repeated complaints to the authorities by each of the competing factions (progressives, orthodox) brought about in 1862 the government's decision (which applied to the whole country) not to interfere any more with

the internal affairs of the Jewish communities and to withdraw from them their official status. The decision, reiterated in 1866, led to the gradual disorganization and dissolution of the Ashkenazi community in Bucharest, which in 1874 had ceased to exist as an organized entity. Several attempts were later made to reconstitute the community, the most serious in 1908. However, it was only in 1919 that an organized Jewish community was again established in Bucharest. Until then various benevolent societies and organizations undertook educational and social welfare activities. Chief among them were the Choir Temple Congregation, formally established in 1876 as a separate and independent organization levying its own tax on kosher meat, and the Brotherhood Zion of the B'nai B'rith, founded in Bucharest in 1872 by the American consul B.F. Peixotto. These succeeded in setting up and maintaining a network of educational and charitable institutions, including, in 1907–08, 15 schools, filling the void created by the lack of an organized community. Cultural bodies were also established, and a number of Jewish journals and other publications made their appearance. Bucharest also became the center of Romanian Jewry's political activity and the struggle for emancipation. National Jewish bodies, among them the Union of Native Jews, established their headquarters there. Among the most prominent spiritual and religious leaders of the community before World War I were Antoine Levy and Moritz (Meir) Beck , rabbis of the Choir Temple Congregation from 1867 to 1869 and 1873 to 1923, respectively, and Yitzhak Eisik Taubes , rabbi of the Orthodox congregation from 1894 to 1921. The most prominent lay leader was Adolf Stern . In the 19th century, a high proportion of the Jews in Bucharest were occupied in crafts. There were 2,712 Jewish artisans in the city in 1899. Others engaged in commerce and several, notably Sephardi Jews, were prominent in banking.

The national revolutions of 1848 brought new hopes of integration for the Jews in Europe. Romanian revolutionaries had mixed feelings about the Jews, ranging from pity to disgust, yet it was admitted that these ‘wandering foreigners’ were necessary to society in the role of victims of the people’s intolerance and prejudices. The revolutionary proclamation in Moldova promised civil rights to all, irrespective of religion. The one Wallachia, dated November 6, 1848, in article 21 decreed the emancipation of the Jews and political rights for all compatriots of other religions. This article began to take effect when a Jewish banker, Hillel Manoach, was appointed member of the Bucharest City Council.

How did the Jews react to these events? The Jews only took part in the Revolution of 1848 on an individual basis, which was perhaps due to the fact that there was no forum in the principalities which represented all of the Jewish population. Many Jews participated in the revolutionary events, Lazarica Zaraful, Daniel Rosenthal, the painter, whose attachment to the revolution later cost him his life, Barbu Iscovescu painter and, most important, Davicion Bally, the Sephardic banker who financed the revolution in Wallachia. Davicion Bally was the maternal great grandfather of the writer Mihail Sebastian (Iosef Hechter) we will talking later on about. The Jews contributed to the cause in different ways, some giving up their fortunes to help the proscribed revolutionists. C.A. Rossetti, as Minister of the Interior, spoke thus of the part played by the Jews: "As far as payment is concerned, the Jews have paid me by taking my hand in a brotherly way when I was in exile on foreign soil; they even paid me with their blood, for, six years ago, one of them gave his life for my country: David Rosenthal."

Anti-Semitism in Romania in the second half of the XIX-th century can only be considered in close relationship with similar performances in other countries. But there is an important difference between the manifestations of this phenomenon in the second part of the nineteenth century, in the countries where Jews were living legally (Central and Western Europe) and those where they had not yet been emancipated (Eastern Europe). Even in the former, political equality of the Jews did not take place simultaneously and it met with strong resistance. In fact, although the Constituent Assembly in France proclaimed the emancipation of the Jews on September 27, 1701, it was not finally accepted in England until 1860, in Germany until 1864 (it existed earlier in certain states), in Italy until 1866 and in Austria-Hungary until 1867. Different from Western European, where anti-Semitism had more political than economic cause, the contexts in which it developed in Romania and Russia (including Poland) were not all the same. In those countries, anti-Semitism was openly practiced by the governments and unleashed expressions of extreme violence. Russian anti-Semitism began with the introduction of the system of pogroms, that of Romania with xenophobic legislation which struck at the Jews without even naming them explicitly. In both countries, the Jews were placed under laws of exception and justice was inseparable from the Orthodox Christian religion. Freedom did not exist in Russia while in Romania it was proclaimed by the constitution; it was through a trick, as we shall see, that in reality the Jews were excluded from enjoying civil and political rights. It was economic, social and demographic factors which characterized and shaped the explosions of hatred against the Jews. While the anti-Semitic phenomenon in Russia may be explained by the specific conditions of that country, in Romania the facts of what became the real Jewish problem in the second part of the nineteenth century are different.

The congress of Paris in 1856 initiated a long series of political pressures by the foreign powers on the Romanians to extend equal rights also to the Jews but to no avail. Instead, there were attempts by the ministry of interior to expel the Jews from villages.

The union of Moldova and Wallachia principalities happened in 1862 under prince Alexandru Ioan Cuza so from now on we will be talking about the Romanian kingdom instead of the two principalities. In the struggle for the union of the two principalities, which agitated the country after the Crimean war, many Jews of Wallachia and Moldova ranged themselves on the side of union.

After the 1864 union, prince Alexandru Ioan Cuza succeeds in his new civil code in granting Jews the right to vote in local elections but this did not involve political rights. It is an open question whether the reign of Alexander Ioan Cuza was as favorable to the Jews as has been pretended. The history of the time has not yet been written, and the documents are for the most part unknown. Both anti-Jewish excesses and accusations of ritual murder took place under Cuza as before; and decrees and circulars bearing the earmark of persecution were drawn up in his reign. Later these served as models for the governments of Prince and King Charles; and certain laws made by Cuza contain the germs of future restrictions.

The fundamental event that marked the difference between the Jews of Romania and the Jews of Central and Western Europe was the adoption of the 1866 Romanian Constitution; specifically the Article 7 of the Basic Law, which made Romanian citizenship conditional on membership of the Christian religion: "Only foreigners of Christian rite may acquire the status of Romanian ". It was a political decision with economic roots. In order to pressure the Constituent Assembly, the city dwellers attacked and partially destroyed the Bucharest Choral Temple, then under construction. A new set of persecutions started: repeated expulsions of Jews from villages as 'vagrants' (1867-68, 1869-72) and limitation of liquor-selling permits (1873). The booming small and big Romanian bourgeoisie wanted to have an advantage in the competition with the small and big Jewish bourgeoisie.

The 1877 Romanian war of independence from the Ottoman Empire

In spite of their isolation, the Jews showed their attachment to Romania during the War for Independence from Turkish suzerainty. During the war of 1877-1878 there were 883 Jewish soldiers out of a total of 35,000 in the Romanian Army. The Jews fought brilliantly and many Jewish soldiers were decorated and their names appeared after the war in lists published officially. The contribution of the Jews to the war for Independence was not limited to the battlefield. Across the country, a series of committees were formed to collect gifts of money and in kind (clothing, underwear, horses, cattle). The organization 'Call to the Jewish Women' in Bucharest asked the women to "give the maximum to help the soldiers who have been wounded in this great battle for the future of our country." There was no delay in answering these appeals and Romanian newspapers were quickly filled with lists of subscriptions by Jews from all parts of the country. The Zion Fraternity contributed four ambulances and placed them under the patronage of the reigning princess. The Jewish community of Jassy opened two hospitals, one in Bucharest and the other near the field of battle at Turnu-Magurele. Many welfare associations, within the Jewish communities contributed a great deal to the war effort. The heads of the Jewish banks of Michel Daniel et fils in Jassy and Hillel Manoach of Bucharest were decorated with the Star of Romania for their exceptional work for the Romanian war front.

When the war was over, the Romanian Jews rightfully hoped for a change in their situation, a cessation in persecutions and the granting of political rights. Such a change would be announced at the Congress of Berlin where it was proposed by the French delegates.

The Russo-Turkish War of 1877 was a sequel to the failure of the Conference of Constantinople in 1876 to regulate the situation in the Balkans. That war, declared by Russia on April 24, 1877, had as its stated aim the emancipation of Christians in the Ottoman Empire. Romania, still a vassal state to the Ottoman Empire, seized the opportunity to attain its independence. On April 4, 1877, Mihail Kogalniceanu, Minister of Foreign Affairs, signed with Baron Demetri Stuart, Russian councilor and Consul General at Bucharest, an agreement which allowed the Russian army to cross Romanian territory. The independence of the country was proclaimed on May 10, 1877, the anniversary of the accession of Prince Carol. He took command of the army himself and crossed the Danube to help the Russian army, which suffered many defeats after a few victories. One by one, the Turkish forts fell before the victorious advance of the Romanian Army. On November 29

Osman Pasha turned the city of Plevna over to Prince Carol and on February 12, 1878, the Romanian Army entered Vidin in northwest Bulgaria, on the Romanian frontier.

But Romania was not even invited to attend the peace talks as her reward. The Romanian government learned of the Peace Treaty of San Stefano on March 3, 1878, from the newspapers of Moscow. Articles 5 and 19 of that treaty related to Romania. In the first, Turkey recognized Romanian independence; in the second, Romania was to cede southern Bessarabia to Russia and receive in exchange part of Dobrogea. Discontent over this arose at once in Romania. Nor were the Great Powers satisfied with an arrangement which was taken without their consultation. The idea of a European congress to create the basis for a durable peace in the Balkans quickly arose.

The Berlin Congress began on June 13, 1878, with the participation of Germany, Austria-Hungary, England, France, Italy, Russia and Turkey. Romania expected two things from the Congress: recognition of its independence by the Great Powers which had protected it since 1856 and prevention of the seizure of southern Bessarabia. The Jewish question was raised and the prime minister Bratianu replied that he was preparing a draft law aiming at the emancipation of native Jews and that foreign Jews might obtain naturalization on an individual basis. But this was only a way to avoid the problem. In July, 1877, Kogalniceanu, the foreign affairs minister had promised emancipation of the Jews to representatives of the Jewish Alliance of Vienna. From February, 1878, the end of the Turkish War, and up to the beginning of the Congress in June, 1878, the Romanian government did nothing in that direction.

The 1879 revision of the Romanian Constitution did not solve the problem of Jewish emancipation, despite pressures from the Great Powers. At the Congress of Berlin, Bismarck, Disraeli & Co. put it very clearly: the recognition of the independence of Romania from the Ottoman Empire, after the war of 1877-1878, will be given in exchange for political emancipation of the Jews in the Romanian space. Eventually, in October 1879, the Romanian Parliament approved a formal amendment of the famous Article 7. Jews will "be able to obtain naturalization" however not automatically, but rather under certain conditions: not immediately, but after a period of at least 10 years; and not in block or by categories, but on an individual basis, with each case being voted in both Houses and then approved by the Parliament through a special law. Applicants had to submit a file with old documents (which some of them did not have anymore) along with and an application for naturalization to the Parliament. Under the circumstances, the new constitutional provision of the political emancipation of the Romanian Jews, proved to be a dead letter.

From 1879 to 1900, only 85 persons were naturalized, 27 of whom died during the same period. In 1913, besides the veterans of 1877, the total number of naturalizations after the Berlin Congress was 529. This increase was due to the Jews of Dobrogea. In fact, the government decided in 1909 to grant political rights to the residents of that area who had formerly been Turkish subjects. The applications always caused passionate debates in the parliament on the Jewish question. One of the first and most famous occurred in 1880 concerning Daniel, a native Jew who founded the oldest bank in Moldavia has been decorated for his contributions to the independence war. The naturalization of Adolphe Stern, one of the leaders of the Romanian Jews, also met with strong opposition in parliament and it was only through his literary works that he

was just able to obtain the necessary majority in the Chamber of Deputies. Among those who were naturalized, some had to pay large sums of money to the senators and deputies in order to enter the "Romanian nation." The system of individual naturalization, which gave the members of parliament absolute power, encouraged corruption. In early 1911, a group of twelve deputies was created which proposed naturalizing 3,000 Jews in exchange for large sums of money. Their agents went through the Jewish communities to "register applications" and, of course, to extort money.

The case of Professor Lazar Saineanu, originally Schein, who revolutionized Romanian philology through his widely recognized studies, and who was refused naturalization after twelve years of struggle and hope, is typical of the way in which the government envisaged solving emancipation. Eventually, disgusted and humiliated in 1901 Şăineanu exiled himself to Paris.

My maternal grandfather, born in Romania 1894, at least three generations of Jews in Moldova, got his citizenship only in 1938 and only because he fought in the Romanian army in the first world war.

The brother of my paternal grandmother, born in Romania in 1875, at least two generations of Jews in Bucharest, got his citizenship in 1906 when his individual petition to the Romanian parliament was approved.

The episode notes reflect documents related to my family's struggle to obtain Romanian citizenship although they lived for generation in the country.

A painting by famous Romanian artist Nicolae Grigorescu is enlightening. In 1880, the artist exhibited at the official Paris Exhibition a painting known as The Jew With A Goose. The fresh breath of the work and its crude realism impressed the art critics of the time. The work was noticed and enjoyed success. This was not the first work by the painter with a Jewish subject. Grigorescu made several paintings and drawings of Moldavian or Galician Jews. The Jew With A Goose represents a typical Eastern European Jew. He wears a traditional black caftan and hat with fur (streimel), has a beard and ritual sideburns etc. He is a poor Jew from a shtetl in Moldova. In his left hand he holds a piece of paper and in his right hand he carries (sturdily, so that it cannot escape) a live goose. Jews in Moldova were big geese breeders. Goose meat and fat were part of the local traditional Jewish diet. The image of a poor Jew holding a live goose wasn't anything unusual. The strange element of the painting is the piece of paper which the character holds in his left hand. It carries a judicial stamp and appears to be an official document. One can decipher to whom the petition is addressed: "Mr. President and Gentlemen Members. Coming from a shtetl in Moldova, the Jew in Grigorescu's painting is going to Bucharest to submit to the Parliament a naturalization application, bringing with him – as a bribe - a goose. The huge amusement of the situation represented in the painting is that the poor Jew imagined that such a minor bribe - a goose (and a living one!) - could be "handed" to the Parliament to solve such an important issue. Grigorescu's painting should be understood as the irony of a simple man trying to survive in a corrupt society.

The result: the Jews of Romania were the last in Europe to receive citizenship (1919-1923).

This produced a huge disappointment among Romanian Jews and a change of strategy. Instead of a rapid process of integration of Jews into Romanian society, there was a process of relative isolation. We witness - despite a Central- European Zeitgeist - an increase in the degree of establishment of Jewish institutions, including the cultural institutions. The founding, in 1876 in Iasi of the first Yiddish theater in the world is a symptom of this phenomenon.

At the time, the life of the Jewish community in the Romania was substantially different from both Jewish life in the West and in the East. In 1866 Romania missed a crucial moment to synchronize with Central Europe. In 1867 the Jews of Austria-Hungary became politically emancipated, after or simultaneously with those in France (1790), The Netherlands (1796), Belgium (1830), Germany (1811 to 1871), Italy (1848-1870) etc. The residents of Hungary become citizens of the "Hungarian nation" a political-civic rather than an ethnic nation. They become all Hungarians – of Catholic, Protestant or Mosaic confession. Jews speak the Hungarian language and they integrate (or even assimilate) in the "host society". To this day, the census of Romania, yields more Mosaic than Jewish citizens, because the Jews of Transylvania register as ethnically Hungarians of Mosaic religion. Obviously, however, anti-Semitism in Austria-Hungary persists. The emergence in the late nineteenth century of Karl Lueger the anti-Semitic mayor of Vienna and, in response, of the Zionist Theodor Herzl are quite telling. It is in this part of the continent, in Central Europe, and namely in this era, that the term anti-Semitism is forged for the first time, by the German publicist Wilhelm Marr, 1881. However, the Central European Jewish intellectuals did not deploy any isolationist efforts by establishing of institutions which preserve a cultural identity, but, according to the principles of the Enlightenment, they integrated in the dominant culture.

In the Romanian space the attempt of Jewish emancipation fails with the approval of the 1866 Constitution which allows Romanian citizenship to Christians only and is not resolved by its later amending. Deeply disappointed, the Jews have every reason to strengthen their community and cultural institutions and to preserve their cultural and linguistic identity. Unlike the Jews of Russia, the Romanian Jews have not only the motivation, but also the opportunity to do so. Social and religious tolerance allows Jews in the Romanian space to establish Yiddish language newspapers, schools and theater. In a nutshell, the Jews of Central Europe can, but will not; those in Russia will, but cannot; and those in Romania will and can to found a Yiddish theater and other community cultural institutions.

The upsurge of antisemitism in Romania in the last third of the XIX-th century has been explained in socioeconomic terms: although politically independent, Romania was characterized by semifeudal conditions and a grave agrarian problem. Instead of striving for modernity together with the Jewish urban strata, the emerging Romanian bourgeoisie, once in power, preferred to achieve social status by acquiring vineyards and farmland. This resulted in creating a new agrarian class that replaced the decadent boyars but they had no incentive to develop the industrial sector that would deprive them of cheap fame labor force. This bind the peasants

to the farmland and the economic crisis caused by draught in Romania in 1900, generated the peasants' revolt of 1907 in which many Jews were killed.
All evils in Romania were the fault of the "Jewish invasion" and the "Jewish proliferation".

The most immediate reaction of the Jewish population to this situation was massive Jewish emigration, to be discussed in a separate episode.

Next week when we will review Jewish life in in the sec XX-th century Romania.

Until then be well.