

Episode 5 – Jews in 20th century Romania

Hello, I am your host, Adrian Iosifescu, and this is the fifth episode of the History of Romanian Jews podcast. Today we will discuss the life of Romanian Jews in the 20th century.

Demographic changes

The Jewish population of Romania before the First World War was for the most part an urban one. According to the 1899 census, 79.73% of the Jews lived in cities, forming 32.10% of the whole urban population of the country. Only 20.27% lived in villages, forming 1.1% of the whole rural population. This phenomenon was a result of the ban on Jews dwelling in rural areas.

In Moldova, where the Jews were most heavily concentrated, they formed a majority in several towns. In Falticeni they were 57% of the total population; in Dorohoi, 53.6%; in Panciu, 52.4%; in Botosani, 51.8%; in Jassy, 50.8%. In several smaller towns of that region, their proportion was greater: in Gertsa, 66.2%; in Mihaileni, 65.6%; in Harlau, 59.6%.

The Romanian population was 84.06% farmers while the Jews constituted the middle class. According to 1904 statistics, 21.1% of the total number of merchants were Jews, but in some cities of Moldova they were a definite majority, such as in Jassy, 75.3%; Botosani, 75.2%; Dorohoi, 72.9%; Tecuci, 65.9%. Jews represented 20.07% of all artisans, and in several branches, they were a majority: 81.3% of engravers, 76% of tinsmiths; 75.9% of watchmakers; 74.6% of bookbinders; 64.9% of hatmakers and 64.3% of upholsterers.

Industry was not advanced in Romania before World War I. There were only 625 industrial firms, 19.5% of them owned by Jews. Jewish factory owners were strongly represented in several industries: 52.8% of the glass industry; 32.4% of the wood and furniture industry; 32.4% of the clothing industry; and 26.5% of the textile industry. Of the liberal professions, only medicine was permitted to Jews. They constituted 38% of the total number of doctors. The overall occupational distribution of the Jews seems to have been as follows: in agriculture, 2.5%; in industry and crafts, 42.5%; in trade and banking, 37.9%; in liberal professions, 3.2%; in various other occupations, 13.7%.

According to the industrial study by the Ministry of Public Land in 1901-1902, of a total of 107,332 licensed merchants, there were 22,590 Jews (21.1%); the number of craftsmen was 97,755 with 19,181 Jews (19.6%); of 625 industries 122 were Jewish (19.5%); and finally, of 39,121 workers and employees, 2,092 were Jews (5.3%).

These percentages were much higher in Moldavia alone, where 75% of the Romanian Jewish population lived and where the merchants and workers constituted a majority in some of the large cities. On the basis of these data, it has been concluded that about 90% of the Jewish population, or about 200,000, were living from trade and crafts in an almost equal proportion.

It may be noted that at the beginning of the twentieth century many of the craftsmen were recruited among foreigners. According to statistics from the Bucharest Chamber of Commerce in 1904, there were 18,644 craftsmen registered in Bucharest of whom 9,608 were Romanian citizens, 3,190 were Jews, and the rest were Austro-Hungarians, Bulgars, Serbs, Greeks, Turks, Russians, Italians, Germans, Frenchmen and other nationalities.

In 1908 there were 127,840 craftsmen in Romania, with 83.1% in the cities and 16.69% in rural communes. From 1906 to 1910, according to the Ministry of the Treasury, the number of Romanian businessmen increased by 3,287 and the number of Jewish businessmen decreased by 1,665. The reduction in the number of Jewish businessmen was partly due to the beginning of emigration from Romania.

After the First World War the provinces of Bessarabia, Transylvania, and Bukovina were annexed to Old Romania, increasing the Jewish population threefold. In 1924, there were 796,056 Jews in the enlarged Romania (5% of the total population): 230,000 in the Old Kingdom, 238,000 in Bessarabia, 128,056 in Bukovina, and 200,000 in Transylvania. In each of the provinces, the Jewish occupational structure was different as a result of historical development. In the two annexed provinces of Transylvania and Bukovina, the Jews had enjoyed civil rights from the days of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and were also represented in the liberal professions. On the other hand, their situation in Bessarabia in czarist times was worse than in Old Romania, a fact which also influenced their occupational structure. The only census taken in Bessarabia was in 1930 and, according to those figures, the occupational distribution of the Jewish population was as follows: industry and crafts, 24.8%; trade and banking, 51.5%; liberal professions, 2.9%; miscellaneous, 8.2%. It should be noted that Jewish bankers (such as the bank of "Marmorosh-Blank") invested money in the developing industry of Greater Romania. Some industrial enterprises, comprising several factories such as the sugar, metal, and textile works were owned by Jews. In the late 1930s, under the influence of the spread of the Nazi movement to Romania, the whole occupational structure of the Jews collapsed because of persecution on the economic level, which preceded political persecution and murder.

In spite of their large number, most of the craftsmen and merchants were of modest means; in case of economic crisis, generally caused by a bad harvest, they reached the limits of poverty. This was also due to the professional concentration of the Jews in light industries.

At the beginning of the 2nd World War almost 800,000 Jews were living in Romania, one of the largest in the diaspora, the third largest Jewish population in Europe and the fourth largest in the world after USSR, Poland and USA.

First World War

From the beginning of hostilities of the 1st World War, about 25,000 Jews went serving in the Romanian army. Just as in the War for Independence in 1877 the Jews again were solidly behind the fight for their country. Many Jewish girls and women left their families to devote themselves to the sick and wounded. Even the poorest Jewish communities made large sacrifices and large sums of money were given to the Red Cross. All Jewish institutions gave their space and liquid money for public service.

Despite these manifestations of active patriotism, the Jews still had to suffer many exactions during the war coming from civil and military authorities. A few months before the start of the war, hundreds of Jewish families were expelled from towns on the frontier and the application of the law against espionage as applied to innocent Jewish residents often had the character of a systematic campaign. There are many reports which strongly attest to the active Anti-Semitism existing in the army and especially among the officers.

Still, the Jews fought valiantly and after the war many statistics pointed to their active participation. At war's end, the Jews had the right to expect a radical change in their condition and recognition of their full citizenship.

Of the 25,000 Jews serving in the Romanian army, 882 were killed, 740 were maimed , 449 were taken prisoners and 3,043 were not accounted for.

My maternal grandfather was one of those who fought in the Romanian army and was taken prisoner although he did not have Romanian citizenship. He received his citizenship only in 1923 and only as a result of his participation in the Romanian army during the war.

At the end of the 19th century the organization of Jewish communities began, together with the creation of a Jewish school system prompted by the expulsion of Jews from public schools in 1893. The certificates of Jewish schools were not recognized, and their pupils had to pass state examinations, paying a fee until 1925, when the certificates of Jewish schools were finally recognized if the language of tuition was Romanian. All Jewish schools were maintained by the communities; in Bessarabia, **Tarbut**, which means "Culture" in Hebrew, maintained Hebrew schools. The Tarbut movement was a network of secular, Hebrew-language schools in parts of Poland, Romania and Lithuania. It operated primarily between the world wars. The impoverishment of the Jewish population also created a need for social assistance that could not be provided by the various existing associations. To achieve the legalization of the communities, several congresses of their representatives were organized in April 1896 in Galati, in 1902 in Jassy, and in 1905 in Focsani, but they could not agree on the proper nature of a community. Some claimed that it should have an exclusively religious character; others wanted a lay organization dealing only with social welfare, hospitals, and schools. The different Jewish institutions (synagogues, religious associations, hospitals) endeavored to preserve their autonomy.

Romanian Citizenship

Lets' discuss now the topic of Romanian citizenship for the Jews living in Romania. As mentioned before, following World War I, Romania enlarged its territory with the provinces of Bukovina, Bessarabia, and Transylvania. In each of these, the Jews were already citizens, either of long standing like those who had lived in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, or more recent such as those from Bessarabia who achieved equality only in 1917. The naturalization of the Jews of Romania was under way in accordance with the separate peace treaty concluded with Germany in the spring of 1918. After the defeat of Germany, Prime Minister Ionel Bratianu realized that the topic of naturalization of the Romanian Jews would be brought up again at the peace conference, so he tried to resolve the problem by issuing a decree of naturalization on December 28, 1918, proclaiming individual naturalization on the lines adopted after the Congress of Berlin. This time the decision had to be made by the law courts instead of parliament, on the basis of certain certificates that were very difficult to obtain. The Jewish leaders immediately rejected the law and Jews refrained from applying to the court. The Jews demanded that citizenship be granted *en bloc* after a declaration by every candidate at his municipality that he was born in the country and held no foreign citizenship. Although the Romanian government continued to assert that the Jewish problem was an internal one and

one of national sovereignty, when the delegation led by Ionel Brătianu appeared at the peace conference in (May 1919), Georges Clemenceau reminded him that after the Congress of Berlin, Romania had not implemented the provisions concerning the political rights of the Jews. This time the great powers decided to include guarantees in the peace treaty. A Jewish delegation from Romania, composed of U.E.P. - Uniunea Evreilor Români, or, in English, The Union of Romanian Jews, and Zionist representatives, arrived in. They joined the Jewish delegations participating in the peace conference and lobbied to have the peace treaty specify the laws Romania should adopt concerning naturalization. To prevent the conference's imposition of naturalization of Jews, Ionel Brătianu wired to Bucharest the text of a law promulgated as a decree on May 22, 1919, according to which citizenship could now be obtained by a declaration of intent in writing to the law court, the latter being obliged to make out a certificate of confirmation that conferred the exercise of political rights. Those who did not possess foreign citizenship, those who satisfied the requirements of the enlistment law, and those who had served in the war were declared citizens, together with their families.

The peace conference did obligate Romania to legislate the political emancipation of the Jews. Brătianu resigned in protest and, only after an ultimatum sent by the peace conference, did the new Romanian government led by Alexandru Vaida-Voevod sign the peace treaty. In 1923, the struggle for the enactment of naturalization in the new constitution was led by Adolphe Stern, the president of the U.E.P., elected as a deputy to parliament. After hard bargaining, not without renewed threats on the part of the government, the **naturalization of the Jews was introduced into the constitution on March 29, 1923**, also confirming the naturalization of those from the newly annexed territories who would otherwise have been threatened with expulsion.

A word about the first Jewish political party, Uniunea Evreilor Paminteni, in English, The Union of Earthlings Jews, started in 1909 and converted to Uniunea Evreilor Români, in English, The Union of Romanian Jews, in 1923. The party's objectives were the naturalization of all Jews on the Romanian territory and the active fighting against all antisemitic activities. A second Jewish political party active in representing Jewish population needs was Partidul Evreiesc, in English, the Jewish Party. In the 1931 elections, Partidul Evreiesc got 64,193 votes which gave them 3 parliamentary seats.

Anti-Semitism

Growing social and political tensions in Romania in the 1920s and '30s led to a constant increase in anti-Semitism and in the violence that accompanied it. Anti-Semitic excesses and demonstrations expressed both popular and student anti-Semitism and cruelty; they also served to divert social unrest to the Jews and show Western public opinion that intervention on their behalf was bound to miscarry.

In December 1922, Christian students at four universities proclaimed *numerus clausus* as their program; riots followed at the universities and against the Jewish population. Numerus Clausus in translation "the number is closed" limited the number of Jews accepted at the universities., As was later revealed in parliament, the student movements were organized and financed by

the Ministry of the Interior. The leader of the student movements was Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, the secretary of the League of National Christian Defense which was headed by A. C. Cuza. Codreanu will become infamous during the Romanian Holocaust. The students formed terrorist groups on the Fascist and Nazi models and committed several murders. In 1926, the Jewish student Falic was murdered in Cernăuți, the capital of Bukovina and the assassin was acquitted. In 1927 Codreanu broke away from A. C. Cuza's party and founded the Archangel Michael League which, in 1929, became the Iron Guard, a paramilitary organization with an extreme anti-Semitic program.

On December 9, 1927, the students of Codreanu's League carried out a pogrom in Oradea, in Transylvania, where they were holding a congress, for which they received a subsidy from the ministry of the interior: they were conveyed there in special trains put at their disposal free of charge by the government. Five synagogues were wrecked and the Torah scrolls burned in the public squares. After that the riots spread all over the country: in Cluj eight prayer houses were plundered, and on their way home, the participants in the congress continued their excesses against the Jews in the cities of Huedin, Targu-Ocna, and Jassy.

At the end of 1933, the liberal prime minister Duca, one of the opponents of King Carol's dictatorial tendencies, dissolved the Iron Guard and, after three weeks, he was assassinated by the Iron Guard. Codreanu, the Iron Guard leader, had close ties with the Nazis in Germany. King Carol the 2nd aided other political bodies with an anti-Semitic program in an attempt to curb the Iron Guard. From 1935 Vaida-Voevod led the Romanian Front, another antisemitic party which accused the Jews in his speeches of the blood libel, parasitism, defrauding the country, and the Judaization of the press and national literature.

After Hitler came to power in Germany (1933), all large Romanian parties adopted antisemitic programs. In 1935, the National Peasants' Party, which united with Cuza's party to form the National Christian Party, announced that its program included "the Romanization of the staff of firms and the protection of national labor through preference for our ethnic element", that is, the removal of Jews from private firms.

Gheorghe Bratianu, leading the opposition Liberal party, demanded "nationalization of the cities, proportional representation in public and private posts, in schools and universities, and revocation of Jewish citizenship."

In July 1934, the "Law for Employment of Romanian Workers in Private Firms" was enacted, and established a *numerus clausus* for Jews to be employed by private firms. The Ministry of Industry and Trade sent all firms special questionnaires which included a clause on "ethnic origin." In 1935, the board of the Christian Lawyers' Association, founded that year by members of the bar from Bucharest, gave an impetus to anti-Semitic professional associations. The movement spread all over the country. Its program was the *numerus nullus*, i.e. revoking the licenses of all Jewish lawyers who were already members of the bar and not accepting new Jewish lawyers registrations.

At the universities, students of the Iron Guard forcibly prevented their Jewish colleagues from attending lectures. Jewish students were harassed and beaten up. My father, who was studying medicine in Jassy in 1929, together with other Jewish students, was severely beaten by these hooligans and he was forced to give up studying medicine and go back to his family in Bucharest. Please see the actual photo attached to the notes.

The academic authorities supported the numerus clausus program, introducing entrance examinations in 1935–36, which led to a decline in the number of Jewish students. In other professional corporations, no Jews were elected to the board; they were prevented by force from participating in the elections. The great Romanian banks began to reject requests for credit from Jewish banks as well as from Jewish industrial and commercial firms, and the Jewish enterprises were burdened by heavy taxes, imposed with the aim of ruining them. Jewish firms were not granted import quotas for raw materials and goods. Meanwhile, Germany financed a series of publications and newspapers aimed at fastening an alliance between the two countries and removing Jews from all branches of the professions and the economy. Many of the Jewish merchants and industrialists were forced to sell their firm at a severe loss.

Next week when we will continue the discussion of Romanian antisemitism in the XX-th century by discussing the Romanian participation in the Holocaust.

Until then be well.