

## Episode 7 – Jews in Communist Romania

Hello, I am your host, Adrian Iosifescu, and this is episode seven of the History of Romanian Jews podcast. Today we will discuss the life of Jews in Communist Romania.

In 1933 the Romanian Communist party claimed 1,459 members of which 364 were Jews or 22.6%. In 1946 the Jews were only 5.3%. In keeping with the long tradition of antisemitism, Romanians eventually blamed the Jews for the casualties and excesses of the Communist rule.

By the time Romania broke with Nazi Germany and entered the war on the side of the Allies in August 23, 1944, Romanian Jewry had considerably decreased due to the life losses caused by the Holocaust. Massive emigration from the country would decrease the population even further. The struggle for Jewish independence in Palestine influenced Romanian Jews, and the goal of *aliyah*, which had been deep-seated in the community in the past, became a powerful force. For those of you unfamiliar with the term 'aliyah', it is the Hebrew word for "ascent" traditionally described as "the act of going up" towards the Jewish holy city of Jerusalem.

After World War II, the political regime in Romania exercised its authority over the community life of Romanian Jewry. The government was able to place restrictions on Jewish activities. Government control was prevalent during the first period, from August 23, 1944 until the abolition of the monarchy in December 30, 1947, and even more so in the succeeding periods, through all the internal changes that altered the regime in Romania. For a few years after the abolition of the monarchy, Romania closely followed the line dictated by Moscow. This situation continued until late in the 1950s when the first signs of an independent Romanian policy began to appear. Until 1965, the pattern of this policy gradually solidified and Romania was able to have an independent policy. All the changes in government and policy also left their mark on Jewish community life.

On August 23, 1944 when Romania joined the Allies, the Zionist movement came up from its underground operation. The same was true of the Jewish Party, which was reorganized as the representative body of Romanian Jewry and headed by the Zionist leader A. L. Zissu. In 1945, an extension of the Communist Party was established among the Jewish population under the name the Jewish Democratic Committee (*Comitetul Democrat Evreesc*). For about four years the Zionist movement maintained regular activities in the fields of organization, education, training farms, and Zionist funds. In 1948 there were 100,000 members in the Zionist movement and 4,000 in *He-Halutz*, with 95 branches and 12 training farms. He-Halutz was the Jewish youth movement to train people for agricultural settlement in Israel. The Zionist Organization in Romania participated in the World Zionist Congress in Basel in 1946. A general representation of Romanian Jewry, including delegates from the Jewish Democratic Committee, the Communist branch, was present at the Montreux conference in 1948 of the World Jewish Congress. These were the last regular contacts of the Romanian Jewry with Jewish organizations abroad; afterward the ties were severed for an extended period of time.

The more the Communist Party strengthened its power, the more Zionist activity in Romania turned from "permitted" to "tolerated," until it was finally outlawed completely. The instrument

of this process was the Jewish Democratic Committee, which never succeeded in striking roots among the Jewish population, in spite of the support it received from the authorities. The cue to abolish Zionist activities was given in the decision of the central committee of the Communist Party on June 10 1948, in the midst of Israel's War of Independence. The decision stated that "the party must take a stand on every question concerning the Jews of Romania and fight vigorously against reactionary nationalist Jewish currents."

As early as the summer of 1948, the liquidation of Zionist training farms begun, and the process was completed in the spring of 1949. In November 1948 the financial activities of the Zionist funds were forbidden. On November 29, 1948, a violent attack on the branch of the Zionist Organization in Bucharest was organized by the Jewish Communists. On December 12 1948, the party decision was again publicized, including a clear denunciation of Zionism, "which, in all its manifestations, is a reactionary nationalist movement of the Jewish bourgeoisie, supported by American imperialism, that attempts to isolate the masses of Jewish workers from the people among whom they live." This statement was published in the wake of a bitter press campaign against Zionism during November and December 1948.

The persecution of the Zionist movement was also expressed by the imprisonment of *shelihim*, Hebrew word for emissaries, young people representing Israel abroad. On December 23 1948, a general consultation of Zionists was held and resulted in the decision to dissolve "voluntarily" the Zionist organizations. Following this decision, the Zionist parties halted their activities, with the exception of the youth movements, and the *He-Halutz*. The World Jewish Congress also ceased to operate in Romania. Those organizations that did not close down at the time continued to operate formally until the spring of the following year. On March 3, 1949 however, the Ministry of Interior issued an order to liquidate all remnants of the Zionist movement, including youth movements and training farms. With this order, the Jewish community in Romania was given over completely to the dominance of the government alone—at first by means of the Jewish Democratic Committee until it too was gradually dissolved. In April 1949 the youth movement of the Jewish Democratic Committee was disbanded just as the Communist Party Youth (UTM) was organized, and the committee itself was disbanded in March 1953, together with all other national minority organizations in Romania. In 1950 the activity of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee in Romania was discontinued by order of the government. The hostile attitude toward the Zionist movement was also expressed in Romania's attitude toward Israel, which gradually hardened and led to frequent imprisonment of previously active Zionists.

Israel's efforts to ease the emigration of Romanian Jews did not prove fruitless. In November 1949 the Romanian ministry relaxed its emigration criteria so the aliyah jumped from 600 a month to 2,500 at the beginning of 1950. The numbers exceeded all expectations as 53,480 requests for emigration were submitted from January to May 1950. Eventually an exodus started; in 1951 almost 60,000 Jews received exit visas. Much of this is due to the support shown for the emigration by Ana Pauker, one of the most senior leaders of the Romanian Communist Party. Although Ana Pauker was from a poor Orthodox Jewish family, she became a committed Communist during her student years as an answer to the antisemitism she experienced growing up in Romania. Her parents and brother emigrated to Israel during her

position of power in the early 1950s. When she fell from power in June 1952, emigration to Israel came to a standstill. During her tenure, no fewer than 100,000 Jews had left Romania.

The Romanian Communist party saw emigration as an important source of income. Ben Gurion noted in his diary about Romania that 'one can't do anything without money'. Israel started paying \$100 for each passenger on the Romanian ships bound for Israel. From 1950 forward, the Israeli government provided Romania with oil-drilling equipment, to replace the one seized by the Soviets, in exchange for Jews. In the 1960s, Jewish emigration from Romania was handled not in cash but in agricultural products. The money obtained from these agricultural exports, between \$8 to \$10 millions were kept in a secret account for Gheorge Gheorgiu Dej, the Communist Party First Secretary. Israel also fattened Ceausescu's accounts, having paid no less than \$60 million in cash in return for Jewish exit visas in the 1970s and 1980s.

The situation of Romanian Jewry always had a special character. Even in the days of complete dependence on Moscow, when the tools and institutions of national Jewish identity were destroyed and expression of Jewish aspirations was repressed, Romanian Jewry was not compelled to be as alienated from its national and religious identity as were the Jews of the Soviet Union. At the end of the 1960s, the Jewish community in Romania found itself in an intermediate position. Its activities displayed indications of free community life within the limitations imposed by the government. Variations in the government's policy also reflected the confusion between the status of Romanian Jewry and Israel. Most questionable was the central issue of the right to leave the country and settle in Israel.

After a short period of democratization, from August 1944 to December 1947, and the establishment of the true Communist regime in 1947, all Jewish national, cultural, and welfare institutions in Bucharest were gradually closed down. The welfare institutions were nationalized and the schools absorbed in the general educational network. A state Yiddish school was opened in 1949, but closed a few years later. Communal activity was organized by the Federation of Jewish Communities in Romania. Jewish cultural activities centered on the Yiddish theater taken over by the state in 1948. Two Jewish newspapers, the Romanian Unirea (The Union), followed later by Viața Noua (The New Life) and the Yiddish Ikuf Bleter were published, but all were discontinued in 1952–53. From October 1956 a periodical, sometimes biweekly, sometimes monthly, in Romanian, Yiddish, and Hebrew, Revista Cultului Mozaic ("The Review of Jewish Religion") was published on behalf of the Federation of Jewish Religious Communities. It continued until 1994, when it was superseded by Realitatea Evreiască (The Jewish Reality), a cultural biweekly in Romanian, Hebrew, and English. The Federation also cared for the religious needs of its members, supplying them with matzoth, prayer shawls, prayer books, etc. In the late 1960s, there were 14 regular synagogues in Bucharest, including the main one, the Choir Temple. Of the 44,202 Jews or 3.6% of the total population registered in Bucharest in the 1956 census, 4,425 declared Yiddish to be their mother tongue. In 1969 it was estimated that 50,000 Jews lived in Bucharest.

The Romanian Jewish community was characterized by its decreasing size during this period.

At the end of World War II is a registration that was carried out on the initiative of the World Jewish Congress in 1947, the only source on the size of the Romanian Jewish community.

According to the registration, there were 428,312 Jews in Romania in 1947. This number was the balance after the losses caused by the Holocaust, the annexation of Bessarabia and North Bukovina by the U.S.S.R., and the migration to Palestine during and shortly after the war. Ten years later the Jewish population had been reduced to about a third. According to the census taken on February 21, 1956, there were 144,236 Jews in Romania, of whom 34,263 spoke Yiddish. At the end of the 1960s, the Romanian Jewish community numbered no more than 100,000. According to the statistics given by the Federation of Jewish Communities, which based itself on a registry of those in need of the community's services, the number was approximately 45,000, and its files did not include those Jews who have no connection with the communities. If these Jews were included, it would bring the total Jewish population to approximately 70,000. The Jewish community of Romania was an aging one; 25.51% of all Jews in Romania belong to the age category 41–60 and 46.2% to the age category 60–80. The majority of the Jews of Romania were professionals. By 1988 there were no more than 23,000 Jews in Romania, most of them 60 years or older.

One of the most difficult issues is the number of Jews remaining in Romania. In 1995, it became known in Israel that the Jewish Agency had been asked—and refused—to bring 3,000 elderly Romanian Jews, those living in Jewish old age homes, to Israel.

A census taken after the fall of Ceausescu in 1990, indicated that 9,000 remained, while the Federation and Joint speak of 14,000. **14,000 Jews in Romania where at the beginning of the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War had almost 800,000 Jews!**

During 1977- 1989 Ceausescu ordered the destruction in Bucharest of over 60 synagogues (besides tens of Christian churches). Currently, the only existing synagogues in Bucharest are the Great Synagogue, currently the Holocaust museum, the Coral Temple, Unirea Sfanta Temple, all on the Vacaresti street and Yeshua Tova synagogue on Take Ionescu street.

After the 1989 revolution and the fall of Communism, Jewish communal property nationalized by the Communist regime was returned to the Federation of Jewish Communities. Jewish life was reborn. A Jewish publishing house, Hasefer, was founded and many books on Jewish subjects were published. The Center of Jewish History in Romania, founded in 1976 but lacking legal status, obtained legal standing. A department of Jewish studies was founded at Bucharest University. In 2004, 5,313 Jews lived in Bucharest, where three synagogues, a community center, a youth club, an old-age home, a kosher restaurant, three cemeteries, and other institutions operated.

Despite the declining number of Jews, the communities run smoothly and without assistance from the Federation, whose central place has been taken under the prevailing circumstances by the Joint. In addition to the Bucharest community, there are organized communities in the Transylvania region in Cluj, Oradea, Arad, Timisoara and in eastern Romania in Piatra-Neamt, Botosani, Jassy, Braila, Galati, Constanta, Ploiesti, Brasov, Sighet, Satu-Mare, and a number of small communities. Ten kosher canteens are still operated by the communities and kosher meat is provided by three ritual slaughterers.

In the latter part of December 1977, the Museum for the History of the Jews in Romania was opened in Bucharest. In 1977 the centennial of the founding of the Jewish theater in Romania was celebrated by a gala performance at which Tevye the Dairyman by Shalom Aleichem, The Dybbuk by An-ski, and Lessing's Nathan the Wise were presented.

Jewish education is almost non-existent. The majority of the community consists of elderly people whose children and grandchildren live in Israel or elsewhere. *Talmudei Torah* (Study of Torah) outside of Bucharest is dwindling along with the Jewish population. Bucharest has been able to maintain its successful choir and a Talmud Torah, which dozens of children attending on Sundays.

Romania lost its special status regarding relations with Israel since it is no longer the only Eastern bloc country to have diplomatic relations with the Jewish state. Relations continued to be normal and friendly, with efforts to increase bilateral trade. Israeli tourism to Romania dropped off.

Let us quickly discuss negative stereotypes that continue to survive tenaciously in the Romanian collective psyche. Just as the Jewish-Romanian culture is part of Romanian culture, so is, unfortunately, the anti-Semitic culture in Romania.

The small number of Jews did not make the anti-Semitic manifestations disappear from the public space in Romania. One speaks of "anti-Semitism without Jews". We are not in the same situation as Hungary (with a smaller population and a much larger Jewish community) where very acute anti-Semitic political events do take place. Somewhat similar is the situation in Poland, where there are only a few thousand Jews left. A Polish intellectual, Adam Michnick, described the situation very aptly: "In Poland there are more Buddhists living today than Jews, but there is no Buddhist problem, but Jews are a big problem." It is not the size of the minority that matters, but rather the history of the relationship between the minority and the majority. Paradoxically, the anti-Semitism without Jews manifests itself in simpler way and is more effective. It is not the "real Jew" around the corner that one detests, but rather the "imaginary Jew" generic Jew, a ghostly construct, a puppet on which one can heap all the conceivable vices. The "real Jew" will no longer be around to refute all these aberrations. There is only one further step to be made to the theory of "Judeo-Masonic conspiracy" of "world government" to the "occult Finance" which triggers wars, changes governments, pushes up the price of oil, etc. In recent years anti-Semitism in Romania has been on a back burner and there were no violent acts. The most prominent antisemitic spokesman is Vadim Tudor, editor of the daily newspaper *Romania Mare* (the Great Romania). The newspaper and the political party of the same name incited against the Jews, against Israel, and also against the democratic forces in post-Ceausescu Romania. Iliescu tries to block any rising anti-Semitism, especially when considering America's decision regarding the granting of economic concessions as a most favored nation. The current Jewish community's attitude differs from that held in the past by Rabbi Rosen. There is not a general, vocal war on anti-Semitism, but it focuses more on providing information to convince the Romanians of the great contribution the Jews made to the Romanian culture and country. It may be that by the time the efficacy of this approach is proven, there will be no Jews left in Romania.

On October 12, 2004, Romania celebrated its first Holocaust Remembrance Day. President Ion Iliescu told a joint session of Parliament, "We must never forget or minimize the darkest chapter of Romania's recent history when Jews were the victims of the Holocaust." Romania established Memorial Day after a government statement denying that the Holocaust took place on Romanian territory provoked an uproar.

Romanian President Klaus Iohannis signed legislation into law on July 22, 2015, that punishes Holocaust denial with up to three years in prison. The law also bans the promotion of fascist movements and symbols.

In 2021, Romania made the Holocaust and Jewish history part of the school curriculum.

It is probably a good time to tell a little bit about myself, a Jew, born in Romania under the Communist regime. From very early on in my life I felt acutely the separation between me and all my Christian friends although we all looked alike, spoke the same language, went to the same schools, did the same things. Their cultural background was molded by their family attitude towards the Jews, anywhere from suspicion to actual antisemitism and the political environment did nothing to change that. The more they push me away the more I got immersed into my grandparents stories of all things Jewish and of our family going back generations, our tribulations, our pains, our successes. This is where I got my upmost Jewish education and the immersion in the Jewish/Yiddish culture. I grew up a proud Jew who dismissed or overcame all challenges and there were a few.

Following my father's example I never considered becoming a Communist party member in order to facilitate my professional and economic advancement so I ended up having two strikes against me: a Jew and a non-parti member. As a result, most of my life options were very limited but, the most important reason for leaving the country was the lack of freedom to think, speak and decide how my life would be. I then left Romania in 1980 for United States.

Next week when we will discuss Romanian Jews and Zionism.

Until then be well.