

## Episode 8 – Romanian Jews and Zionism

Hello again, I am your host, Adrian Iosifescu, and this is episode eight of the History of Romanian Jews podcast. Today we will discuss the Romanian Jews and their approach to Zionism.

The disappointment which followed the 1866 Romanian Constitution and its revision in 1879 generated a strong "Zionist" movement and here we speak of "Zionism" before Zionism itself appeared as a national political movement.

It was the Jewish journalist Armand Levy who popularized in the pages of the newspapers *Esperance* (Hope) and *L'Israelite roumain* (the Romanian Jew) the idea of the agricultural development of Eretz Israel. A letter from a Jewish physician from Giurgiu was sent to the president of the Jewish Alliance in Paris on May 29, 1867, which shows that as early as 1867 there were many Jews who cherished the Zionist ideal. Learning from *Esperance* newspaper of the plan to establish a Jewish colony in Palestine, Dr. Wertheimer from Giurgiu asked: "Is it the purpose of this colonization to prepare the way for our nation and the restoration of Israel, or is it simply to make farmers of the Jews and thus make their daily life easier?" The answer provided was that "the idea of the Alliance was not at all to encourage emigration to Jerusalem, but to help the Jews of Palestine by encouraging agriculture". This answer indicated the attitude of the Alliance, at least at that time, that "the only purpose of the Jewish Alliance was emancipation by assimilation".

Rabbi Jakob Taubes, a leading figure of Romanian Judaism, and Armand Levy, the journalist, had a meeting in 1868 with the Romanian Prime Minister Bratianu on the subject of the Jews in Romania. The prime minister explained to them that his policy towards the Jews was conditioned by their large number and declared that at least ten thousand families should leave the country at once. He even promised them to obtain money from the Romanian parliament to encourage emigration. The two Jewish leaders supported the project which they hoped would take the form of Eretz Israel, but in spite of their efforts, it did not come to pass.

The thought of colonizing Eretz Israel by the Jews of Romania came up again during discussion of the proposal of the American consul Peixotto concerning emigration from the country in 1872, but was rejected in favor of continuing the struggle for political emancipation.

Zvi Kalischer (1795-1874) a German rabbi of Polish origin, who witnessed as a youth the emancipation of the Jews in France and the German countries at the time of Napoleon, occupies an important place in the Jewish national movement prior to Herzl. He reached the conclusion that the political emancipation already obtained by the Western Jews was only a stage necessary towards assembling at least part of the Jewish people in Palestine. He wrote that the situation of the Jews in Romania was "an evil from which good would come." In a letter to the editor of the newspaper *Ha-Zofe be-Eretz ha-hadasha*, he stated that even if "a small number of Romanian Jews formed colonies in Palestine, that would have favorable repercussions on the situation of their brothers, for the Romanians would be convinced that the Jews were useful and necessary for them."

The idea of agricultural colonization in Eretz Israel spread quickly among the Romanian Jews and in 1875 a society called Jashub Eretz Israel (The Colonization of Eretz Israel) was founded at Moinesti. Similar societies were created in other cities under the leadership of the dynamic Eleazar Rokeach and a turning point was reached in the new movement of Jewish national renaissance at the Focsani conference of 30 December 1881 and 1 January 1882. 56 delegates representing 29 localities took part in the conference which was held symbolically in the city where the union of the two principalities had been previously proclaimed. It was decided to encourage and coordinate all efforts towards organized emigration and successful colonization in Palestine. The conference had great impact on the Jews and one immediate result was the departure of the ship Thetis from Galatz in August, 1882, bearing 228 immigrants and the creation of the first farming colonies, Samarin-Zichron and Roch Pina. A new era began in the modern history of the Jews. Other organizations followed Jashub Eretz Israel, of which the largest was Hoveve Zion (The Lovers of Zion) in 1892.

The great figures in the beginnings of Zionism in Romania were Dr. Karpel Lippe (1830-1915) and Samuel Pineles (1843-1928). They took up the cause of Theodore Herzl and at the Zionist congress at Basel in 1897, the former opened the debate as senior in age and the latter was appointed co-vice president. A contemporary publication noted that "The Romanian Zionists have done everything in their power to ensure the success of the Congress by sending 25 kilos of petitions signed by nearly 50,000 Jews who requested transfer to the Holy Land" (Der Baseler Kongress, Vienna, 1897).

As early as 1898, at the fourth congress of Hoveve Zion, which was held at Galatz in April, it was unanimously decided to join in Herzl's cause, accepting the Basel platform. That brought new expansion to the Zionist movement and by 1899 there were 136 Zionist associations in Romania. Intellectuals soon joined the small businessmen and the working classes which formed the initial basis of the Zionist movement. But Herzl's death and internal dissensions weakened the movement. In 1905, the dynamic Heinrich Rosenbaum, who had played an important part together with Herzl in the creation of the Colonial Bank and the publication of the unofficial weekly Die Welt, became president of the Zionist Federation of Romania. He threw himself fully into the Zionist struggle, intensifying its propaganda and increasing its sections, but by 1907 he suddenly withdrew from Jewish political life.

The Zionists of Romania took part in the 8th Zionist congress at Hague. As reported by Rabbi Dr. I. Nacht, the principal activity of the Romanian Zionist associations included, besides encouragement of emigration to Israel, two other main points: Jewish education and fund raising.

By 1907, there were many independent Zionist societies in Romania and Zionist groups existed in nearly all the Jewish communities. While supporting the idea of a return to Eretz Israel, the Romanian Zionists fought steadily for political emancipation.

The Zionist movement experienced tremendous growth, but because of opposition by Turkish authorities, the number of Jews who established themselves in Palestine was small, although it still amounted to several thousand. The Balfour Declaration on November 2, 1917, found a resounding echo in Romania and represented there, as elsewhere, a turning-point in the Zionist movement.

As we have seen Zionist activity started relatively early on in Romania. The first attempts at organizing aliyah – Hebrew word for “ascent” is the immigration of Jews from the diaspora to Palestine, traditionally described as “the act of going up” towards the Jewish holy city of Jerusalem; one of the most basic tenets of Zionism were made in 1880. A congress for settlement of the land of Israel was held in Focsani in 1882, about 16 years before the First International Zionist Congress (Basel, 1897) and 15 years before the appearance of Theodor Herzl's book *Der Judenstaat* [The Jewish State] (Vienna, 1896; immediately translated and published in Botoșani). It was from Moinești and from other shtetls in Moldova that the first Zionist pioneers broke off to the Holy Land and created the first “agricultural colonies” (moshavs) in Palestine: in particular Zikhron Yaakov and Rosh Pina, but also Rishon le Zion, Petah Tikvah, Gedera.

The first two papers in Romanian supporting *aliyah* were *Aparatorul* (The Defender), which was published in Bucharest from 1881 to 1884, with E. S. Gold as editor, and the weekly *Stindardul*, which was published in Focsani from 1882 to 1883. The Yiddish paper *Ha-Yo'ez*, which appeared in Bucharest from 1874 to 1896, also supported *aliyah*. Eleazar Rokeah, an emissary from Erez Israel, published as special organs of the pre-Zionist movement the Hebrew paper *Emek Yizre'el* in Jassy (1882), the Yiddish *Di Hofnung* (Hope) in Piatra-Neamt (1882), and *Der Emigrant* (The Emigrant) in Galati (1882). Of the Jewish press in Romania, the weekly *Egalitatea*, edited by M. Schwarzfeld, survived for half a century. The weekly *Curierul Israelit* (The Israeli Courier), edited by M. Schweig, began to appear in 1906 and continued up to 1948, becoming the mouthpiece of *Uniunea Evreilor Romani* (“Union of Romanian Jews”) after World War I.

From 1897 to 1905 the Zionist program was propagated in Jewish publications and press in Yiddish, Hebrew, and Romanian, including the conclusion of the first congress which proposed the establishment of a Jewish state. The first Zionist newspaper appears in Braila in 1897 under the name of *Zion*. In 1898 *Ahawath Zion* (Love of Zion) starts publication in Galati. In 1899 *Rasaritul* (Sunrise) starts publication in Iasi while, at the same time, *Viitorul* (The Future) starts in Bucharest. *Sionistul* (The Zionist) became the official organ of the Zionist Federation in Romania which, following the death of Theodore Herzl in 1904, continued his efforts according to the decisions of the various Zionist conventions.

In 1913, the monthly *Hatikva* in Romanian was issued in Galati under the editorship of L. Gold, who gathered around him outstanding Jewish authors in Romanian. Apart from original articles they also published translations of a high literary standard from modern Hebrew poetry and classical Yiddish literature. After World War I, from 1919 to 1923, there was published in Bucharest a daily newspaper in Romanian with a Zionist national tendency, *Mantuirea* (Salvation) edited by A. L. Zissu with Abraham Feller as chief editor. This paper stood for the idea of a Jewish political party and sharply attacked the tendencies of assimilationist circles. The weekly *Renasterea Noastra* (Our Rebirth) (1923–42, 1944–48), edited by Samuel I. Stern, continued in this direction. The Zionist Federation published the weekly *Citiri din Lumea Evreasca* (Reading from the Jewish World), edited first by I. Ludo and later by Theoder Loewenstein.

Between the two world wars, the *Zionist* students' association published the monthly *Hasmonaea*. The number of Jewish journalists grew between the two wars, some of

them even becoming chief editors of the great democratic papers. They included Constantin Graur, B. Branisteanu, Em. Fagure, G. Milian ( Bucharest); A. Hefter (Jassy), and S. Schaferman-Pastoresu ( Braila).

I am boring you with all these Newspaper names just to give you a sense for the strong interest in Zionist topics among the Romanian Jewry.

The Jews of annexed Transylvania used the Hungarian language in the Zionist press, even under Romanian rule, those of Bukovina German, while in Bessarabia the language of the Jewish press was Yiddish. Each province kept its traditions, autonomous structure, and cultural life, within the framework of the all-Romanian Federation of Jewish Communities. Culturally, the deeply rooted Jewish life of Bessarabia, with its Hebrew teachers, writers, and journalists, had a great influence across the whole Romanian land.

Next week when we will discuss another major topic, Romanian Jewish emigration.

Until then be well.