Episode 9 – Romanian Jews Emigration

Hello again, I am your host Adrian Iosifescu, and this is episode nine of the History of Romanian Jews podcast. Today we will discuss Jewish emigration from Romania.

The Jewish emigration out of Romania consists of three major waves:
1. The massive economic emigration of early 1900s
2. The antisemitism and holocaust related emigration
3. The emigration from Communist Romania

The massive economic emigration of early 1900s

The upsurge of antisemitism in Romania in the last third of the XIX-th coupled with the economic crisis caused by draught in Romania in 1900 forced the Jewish population in Romania into a massive Jewish emigration.

Between 1880 and 1924, approximately 2.5 million Jews from Eastern Europe left the region and settled in the United States, becoming known as the great wave of Jewish immigration to the United States. Interestingly, in the first decade of the twentieth century, Jewish emigration from Romania increased more rapidly than that of any other country of Jewish mass migration, leading to the designation of "Rumanian exodus" since nearly 30% of Romania's Jewish population immigrated to America between 1881 and 1914. The specific character of the great wave of Romanian Jewish emigration in the early twentieth century, in comparison to neighboring Eastern European countries, was imposed on the whole movement by one group of migrating masses that marked the beginning of the exodus. This involved bands of fusgeyers or wayfarers who began to migrate after the economic depression of 1899, especially until 1907; by-the-way, fusgeyers means "emigrants on foot" in Yiddish. As also indicated in the memoirs of the best-known leader of Romanian Jews, Wilhelm Filderman, thousands of Jews organized themselves in groups, and, because they lacked money to pay for a train ride, they started on foot primarily toward the port of Hamburg in order to get a passage across the ocean, especially to the United States or Canada. The period of the maximum emigration was 1900-1907 when 50,000 Jews emigrated, peaking at almost 17,000 in 1900. The emigration of the Romanian Jews on foot was the most unusual and most dramatic aspect of the great Jewish emigrations in Eastern Europe at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. As they walked, certain groups sang in Romanian or in Yiddish. They were poor and suffered from hunger and in many towns free kitchens were created to feed them, subsidized by the Universal Jewish Alliance, a Paris-based international Jewish organization founded in 1860 with the purpose of safeguarding human rights for Jews around the world. Between May 1900, and January 1901, Universal Jewish Alliance spent about 500,000 francs to aid the impoverished. In the beginning, the various Western Jewish organizations opposed the very idea of emigration, but they ended accepting it as a necessity. Bands of miserable Jews appeared at the railway stations and ports of some European countries on their way to America. The Fusgeyers' reception in Central Europe, however, was generally less enthusiastic. For one thing, they were not permitted to continue on foot once they reached the border of

the Austro-Hungarian Empire. In Romania, everyone was proud of them, but by the time they reached Budapest, everyone looked down on them as poor refugees but the assimilated Jews of Vienna and Budapest and Germany were especially embarrassed by the Jews from the East. They were afraid they would once again awaken anti-Semitism in the non-Jewish communities.

In view of the expansion of emigration, the Austro-Hungarian authorities informed the Romanians that they would not allow any emigrants to cross their borders unless they possessed railway tickets for a country other than theirs. Then the Romanian government changed its attitude and attempted to slow down emigration by not issuing passports except to groups of Jews bound for the United States, Canada or Argentina with sufficient resources to reach at least Hamburg, London and Paris.

Following the publication in Romania of the law concerning the different trades, Jewish emigration increased in 1902. The Association of Jewish Artisans published a manifesto calling for mass emigration. According to statistics from the Jewish Alliance based on the number of passports issued, 41,754 Jewish, men, women, and children left Romania between 1899 and 1904. Among them were 9,288 artisans. According to a report by the British Consul General at Galatz, Colonel Trotter, dated in January 1903, between 1900 and 1902, most of the emigrants went to New York, and somewhat fewer to Philadelphia, London, Paris and the smallest number to Egypt and Argentina.

Drawing on the pamphlets, poems, and texts produced by these emigrating groups that appeared in the Romanian and international press at the time, several scholars have offered a good overview of the fusgeyer movement. This phenomenon of "walking groups" was one of the most salient characteristics of the Jewish "emigration fever" from Romania, given the high number of impoverished, desperate Jews on the brink of starvation, resulting in a "dramatic note" that "impressed and aroused excitement among all the Jews in the country". Yet the fusgeyers were not poor peddlers, as the previous migrants were, but young and healthy individuals that were artisans, workers, and, to a lesser extent, clerks. This mass exodus of Jews from Romania also drew inspiration from Theodor Herzl's idealistic Zionism by borrowing its notions of self-determination, Jewish dignity and activism against unfair treatment. It was the first peaceful Jewish revolt against inequities. The most pressing reasons for the formation of the fusgeyer phenomenon was the bad harvest of 1899 and the May 1899 Iaşi pogrom. Jewish people started to organize themselves as "military-like groups" and flee on foot in early spring 1900. They primarily left from Moldova, the region with the largest Jewish population in Romania. We know that the first fusgeyer group was formed in Bârlad in May 1899 by a young man named Ginsburg. He drew 94 people, who adopted the name of "Drumeţii din Bârlad" (The Wayfarers of Bârlad) and soon gained fame and inspiration for others throughout Romania. The fusgeyers group usually ranged from 40 to 300 people, although the number would sometimes reach 500 or even over 1,000 people if several groups united on the way. The first press mention of fusgeyers appeared on February 1900, in Bucharest.

Roughly a century after tens of thousands of impoverished and persecuted Jews walked across Romania in hopes of reaching more hospitable locales abroad, a Canadian writer-photographer

has chronicled their story. Jill Culiner's book follows the footsteps of the largely forgotten fusgeyers. As many as 70,000 Jews took part in the pedestrian exodus that began in 1900. As Culiner notes, the American Jewish Yearbook of 1903 reported that some 200 to 300 Jews were streaming out of Romania each week, mostly on foot. In 1914, the outbreak of war reduced the flow to a trickle.

By far the richest documentary source was Jacob Finkelstein's "Memoir of a Fusgeyer from Romania to America," a Yiddish manuscript held by the New York-based YIVO Institute for Jewish Research. A New Yorker who had trekked out of Romania with a pioneering group called the Bârlad Fusgeyers, Finkelstein had submitted the work to YIVO in 1942 in response to a contest meant to attract immigrant stories. His first-person narrative took the prize. The Bârlad Fusgeyers left the town of Bârlad in April 1900 and journeyed some 200 miles in a large semicircle around the base of the Carpathian Mountains. They supported themselves by staging theatrical performances and selling brochures in Jewish towns on their route. It was the director of a Jewish social club, whose members sometimes staged amateur theatrics, who first came up with "a plan about how we can get to America without money," Finkelstein recorded. "We all grasped the idea. We were a young, strong team with no fear of hardship. The plan had been so simple to work out that we wondered why we hadn't thought of it before." Consisting of 75 single men and three women, the Bârlad Fusgeyers generated much publicity and public support, and received gifts of food and clothing from both Jews and Romanian peasants along their route. In many places they were welcomed as heroes.

Between 1881 and 1914 over 100,000 Jews left Romania, including 62,000 for United States, 30,000 to United Kingdom and 3,000 to Palestine. That is almost a quarter of the Romanian Jewish population of the period, 22.5%.

Large numbers of fusgeyers settled in New York, London, Paris and the towns of Rosh Pina and Zichron Ya'acov in what was then British-mandate Palestine.

Among the Romanian Jews immigrating to United Stated in the early 1900's were two brothers of my maternal great-grandfather.

The antisemitism and the holocaust emigration

Between 1939 and August 1944, when Romania withdrew from the war, 13 boats left Romania, carrying 13,000 Jewish refugees. As a result of German pressure exerted through diplomatic missions in Romania, Bulgaria, and Turkey, the emigration of refugees was discontinued.

Each refugee was allowed to take 20 kilograms (44 lb) of luggage. Romanian customs officers took many of the refugees' valuables and other possessions, along with food that they had brought with them. The passengers were not permitted to see the vessel before the day of the voyage.

On 3 August 1939 the **Tiger Hill** had sailed from Constanţa with about 750 immigrants on board and had taken on board the passengers from the **Frossoula**, another illegal immigrant ship that was marooned in Lebanon.

On 19 September 1939, the **Noemi Julia**, sailing from Sulina in Romania with 1,130 Jewish refugees from Europe on board was intercepted in the Mediterranean by a British warship and forced to Haifa port; fearing that they would be sent back, the illegal immigrants engaged in passive resistance; the British authorities brought them ashore and held them in a detention camp only to be released a month later.

In October 1940, 1,763 Jewish refugees sailed from Tulcea to Haifa in two ships.
The **Pacific** arrived off Haifa on 1 November, followed a few days later by the *Milos*. The Royal Navy intercepted each ship and escorted it into Haifa, where British authorities detained the refugees before transferring them to a requisitioned French ocean liner, the **Patria**, for deportation to Mauritius. They were followed from Tulcea by another 1,829 refugees aboard the **Atlantic,** which arrived on 24 November off Haifa, where the Royal Navy escorted her into harbor. On November 25 the British had just started transferring Atlantic's refugees to **Patria** when Haganah agents planted a bomb aboard the French liner with the intention of disabling her to prevent her from sailing. However, the bomb quickly sank Patria, killing 260 people and wounding 172. The survivors were allowed to stay in Palestine on humanitarian grounds.

On 19 February 1941 **Darien II** left Constanta and stopped in Istanbul to pick up 70 of the survivors from **Salvador** bringing the total number of refugees to 793. Darien II was intercepted by a British patrol boat and escorted to Haifa.

On 12 December 1941 **Struma** sailed from Constanţa carrying between 760 and 790 refugees. Three days later she barely reached Istanbul because of engine issues. Turkey detained the ship for 10 weeks, until 23 February 1942, when Turkish authorities towed her back into the Black Sea and cast her adrift. Early the next day the Soviet Navy Shchuka-class submarine torpedoed and sank her. 768 people were killed, and there was only one survivor, the 19-year-old David Stoliar. The Struma disaster was the Black Sea's largest exclusively civilian naval disaster of World War II.

On 20 September 1942, the **Europa** sailed from Romania with 21 passengers. She was wrecked in the Bosphorus.

On 21 April 1944, the **Belasitza** sailed from Romania with 273 passengers including 120 children, who went from Istanbul to Palestine by sealed train.

On 5 August 1944, **Bulbul, Mefküre and Morino** sailed from Constanţa under the Turkish and Red Cross flags carrying about 1,000 refugees between them. In the night the Soviet submarine *Shch-215* sank Mefkür*e* by torpedo and shellfire, and then machine-gunned survivors in the water. Between 289 and 394 refugees plus seven crew were aboard Mefküre; only the crew and five refugees survived. Bulbul rescued the few survivors and took them to

Turkey. Morina also reached Turkey, and refugees from both ships continued overland to Palestine.

Among the Jewish refugees from Romania boarding ships for Palestine was also my maternal uncle; his ship was stopped by the British Royal navy, forced into Cyprus and my uncle was interned in a camp them together with many other Jews and their families trying to reach Palestine. During almost 2 years in Cyprus, my uncle, together with other young Jews, got military training from Haganah operatives. Once they were all released, my uncle fought along the others in Israel's War of Independence of 1948.

The Communism emigration
As one of Easter Europe most obedient satellite, Romania closely imitated the 'Soviet model' in its policy towards its Jewish population and the new state of Israel. Because the Soviets hoped that the new state would join the antiimperialist camp, Soviet satellites were first encouraged to allow Jews to emigrate to Israel. The Romanian Communist Party even encouraged the emigration of communist Jews hoping to reinforce the Israeli Communist Party. Between December 1948 and January 1949 3,600 'politically instructed' Jews left Romania for Israel in order to "support the fight against the domination of American imperialism in Israel".
Zionists in Romania actively promoted and help organize the move to Palestine/Israel.
In January 1949 the Soviet Union change direction and the Soviet press began a vigorous "ani-cosmopolitan", anti-Jewish campaign, with preeminent Jewish intellectuals arrested, Yiddish journals closed, Zionists treated as western spies.
The Romanian Communist Party follow suit and started its own anti-Jewish campaign.

While emigration was still possible, hundreds of thousands have fled communism to Israel. The vast majority of Jews in Romania was composed of small traders, independent craftsmen, workshop and shop owners, people with liberal professions (lawyers, doctors, etc.). The communist nationalization and new regulations, hit first these social and professional groups. They were the first who were robed and impoverished, the first who were destroyed. This is the explanation for the successive waves of immigration to Israel in the late '40s and early '50s, not by the "export of socialist revolution" which Ana Pauker would have envisaged. A reminder, Ana Pauker, a Jew herself, was one of the most prominent leaders of the Soviet lead Romanian Communist movement . Some 120,000 Romanian Jews formed one of the largest single contingents of olim (Jewish immigrants) to Israel, until exit visas were blocked in 1952.

However, emigration was not completely banned; Romanian Foreign Minister Ana Pauker, negotiated an agreement with Israeli ambassador Reuven Rubin, himself a Romanian immigrant to Israel, under which the Romanian government would allow 4,000 Jews a month to emigrate to Israel; this decision was at least partially influenced by a large Jewish Agency bribe to the Romanian government. This agreement applied mainly to ruined businessmen and other economically "redundant" Jews. Around this time, Israel also secured another agreement with the Romanian government, under which Romania issued 100,000 exit visas for Jews and Israel supplied Romania with oil drills and pipes to aid the struggling Romanian oil industry. By December 1951, about 115,000 Romanian Jews had emigrated to Israel.

Throughout the period of Communist rule, Romania allowed limited numbers of Jews to emigrate to Israel, in exchange for much-needed Israeli economic aid. By 1965, Israel was funding agricultural and industrial projects throughout Romania, and in exchange, Romania allowed emigration of limited numbers of Jews to Israel.

When Nicolae Ceaușescu came to power in 1965, he initially ended the trade in deference to the Eastern bloc's Arab allies. However, by 1969, he decided to exchange Jews for cash from Israel. Ceaușescu wanted economic independence from the Soviet Union, which was content to keep Romania a backwater and as nothing more than a supplier of raw materials, but to fund economic projects, Ceausescu needed hard cash. From 1969 until the Ceaușescu regime fell in 1989, about 1,500 Jews a year were granted exit visas to Israel in exchange for a payment of cash for every Jew allowed to leave, in addition to other Israeli aid. The exact payments were determined by the age, education, profession, employment, and family status of the emigrant. Israel paid a minimum of $2,000 per head for every emigrant, and paid prices in the range of $25,000 for doctors or scientists. In addition to these payments, Israel also secured loans for Romania and paid off the interest itself, and supplied the Romanian Army with military equipment.

Today, there are very few Jews remaining in Romania: couple of thousands, of which about half in Bucharest. This means that there are less than 1% of Jews living in Romania then in 1940.

But there is still in Romania a huge Jewish heritage, cultural, material (synagogues, cemeteries, hospitals, community schools) and spiritual (the legacy of intellectuals, writers, philologists, scholars, visual artists, actors, architects, musicians, etc.).

Next week when we will discuss Romanian Jews in America.

Until then be well.