Episode 14 – Transylvania Jews

Hello again, I am Adrian Iosifescu, your host of the History of the Romanian Jews podcast and in this 14th episode we will be discussing the Jewish communities in Transylvania.

In the previous episodes of this podcast, I focused mostly on the Romanian Principalities of Wallachia and Moldova where, for most of the time, the Romanian language was official and Romanian culture was dominant. Bur Romanian language has been widely spoken in Transylvania, Maramures and Banat which were incorporated into Greater Romania after the 1st World War. The term Greater Romania (in Romanian *România Mare*) usually refers to the borders of the Kingdom of Romania between the two World Wars, which besides Wallachia and Moldova, incorporated Transylvania, Bukovina, Bessarabia and parts of Banat, Crișana, and Maramureș. In this episode will do justice and cover the lands of Transylvania, Banat, Crișana, and Maramureș under the generic name of Transylvania. Bukovina and Bessarabia were previously covered under the generic of Moldova. Transylvania (Ardeal in Romanian) is a historical and cultural region in Central Europe, encompassing central Romania, bounded east and south by the Carpathian Mountains, to the west by the Apuseni Mountains, and bordering Ukraine to the North and Hungary to the West (see map in the episode notes).

Ancient History

Historically, Transylvania was part of the Dacian Kingdom (168 BC–106 AD) and then Roman Dacia (106–271 AD). After the Roman army retreat in 217 the land was overrun by migratory tribes of Goths, Huns, Gepids, Avars Slavs, until the late 9th century when Transylvania was conquered by the Magyar tribes.

Transylvania became part of the Hungarian Kingdom until after the battle of Mohacs in 1526, when the Turks defeated the Hungarian army, after which it became the Principality of Transylvania, a vassal state of the Ottoman Empire In 1690 the Habsburg monarchy gained possession of Transylvania. After the failure of the 1848 revolution, the March Constitution of Austria decreed that the Principality of Transylvania would be a separate crown land entirely independent of Hungary. The separate status of Transylvania ended with the Austro-Hungarian Compromise of 1867 and Transylvania was reincorporated into the Kingdom of Hungary as part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. After World War I, the National Assembly of Romanians from Transylvania proclaimed the Union of Transylvania with Romania on 1 December 1918 and Transylvania became part of the Kingdom of Romania by the Treaty of Trianon in 1920. In 1940 the Northern part of Transylvania reverted to Hungary as a result of the Second Vienna Award by Hitler, but it was returned to Romania at the end of World War II.

Now that we have a better understand of how many times this territory changed hands during its history, let's look at the Jewish presence in this land.

Our exploration begins in antiquity, when the first Jewish individuals arrived in Transylvania with the Roman legions in the 2nd century BC. Through archaeological finds such as altars, inscriptions and coins, we gain insight into the early presence of Jews in the region. These artefacts bear significant symbols, such as the Star of David, the Shofar and the seven-armed

menorah, the lulav and the etrog, which were drawings of objects of worship used in the Temple of Jerusalem, as well as the word Theos (Greek for God), an indication of monotheism, or YHWH (Latin for Adonai) which attest to the historical references of the Jewish people in Transylvania.
The Roman emperor Trajan brought Roman legions from Palestine for his campaign against Decebal, the Dacian leader, and the legions, later, participated in the defeat of Simon Bar Kochba's rebellion in 132-137 in Palestine. With these legions may have come soldiers from the auxiliary troops and Jewish merchants.
Coins from the time of Bar Kochba, which have emerged from archaeological excavations in Transylvania and Banat, may have been brought by Roman soldiers or the Jews who accompanied them. Coins issued during Bar Kochba's revolt have also been discovered at Ulpia Traiana Sarmizegetusa, Decebal's capital.

An interesting fact is that a Hungarian historian, Iosif Kemény of Mănăstireni, outside the city of Cluj, received a letter written in Hungarian by a group of Israelites from Transylvania, on January 26, 1846 which he published in a German magazine from Brașov. The letter stated that:
"In Transylvania, where history does not mention us at all, we are always seen as foreigners, although in the year 90, according to the Christian era, we committed epoch-making deeds, being called by King Decebal of the Goths for the defeat of the Romans. Our ancestors came to his aide, it is said, in great numbers, about 50,000 souls, crossing the Dardanelles, the Black Sea, Moldova, and the Romanian Country, fighting and bleeding against Trajan's troops in Transylvania at Turda."
In conclusion, Count Iosif Kemény is asked not to forget them and their history in the course of his historical studies. Kemény had intended to fulfil the request of the "Israelites of the Ardeal". These "Transylvanian Israelites", claimed in 1846 their presence on the Transylvanian territory since the time of Roman Emperor Trajan, in the first century.

The Khazar Jews in Transylvania
Let me remind we discussed Khazar influence in the Romanian Principalities in the first episode of the podcast. Here is a quick refresh:
The Khazars were a nomadic Turkic people that, in the late 6th-century, established a major commercial empire covering the southeastern section of modern European Russia, southern Ukraine, Crimea, and Kazakhstan. Khazaria long served as a buffer state between the Byzantine Empire and the nomads of the northern steppes. Sometime around the year 740, the king and the ruling class, followed by members of the general population, decided to convert to Judaism. Between 965 and 969, the Kievan Rus' ruler, Sviatoslav I of Kiev, and his allies, conquered the Khazaria capital, Atil, and ended Khazaria's independence. Many of the Khazars tribes left the area after the Rus conquest of their land.
The penetration of small Khazarian communities into Transylvania through the vast process of transmigration through South-Eastern Europe of the population from the former empire of Khazaria, is mentioned in a series of works. An invasion of a Jewish army in the early Middle Ages, undoubtedly the army of the Khazarian Jews, could have been anchored in the western area of Transylvania where, sometime in the 10th century, the Khazarian tribe of Kabars penetrated. Many historians are of the opinion that in 896, the Hungarians were driven into

Pannonia by a Khazar tribe known as the Kabars who joined the Hungarians in their new heartland. The three tribes of Kabars under the leadership of Almutzes led the Hungarians to Pannonia. The Khazar-Kabars were well known as skilled goldsmiths and silversmiths. The Hungarians, initially more primitive, learned these skill from the Khazars. The fact that the Hungarians were ruled in Pannonia by a Khazarian tribe is due to the fact that the Khazars knew the area as they had traveled before, on the occasion of their first entry into Pannonia next to the Huns.

Arpad, the first leader of the Hungarians and the son of Kabars king Almutzes, was invested in office according to the customs of the Khazars, by standing on the shields of the fighters.

From this close Kabaro-Hungarian communion, in the young Hungarian state, both Hungarian and Khazarian were spoken, at least until 950. The Hungarian historian Erik Molnar, in his work devoted to the ethnogenesis of the Hungarians, attributed a great importance to the Khazar influence that would have lasted 200 years.

The Hungarian-Khabar settlement corresponds to a wide area, the core of which would have been the middle Tisza and extended to the Apuseni Mountains to the west, the Danube in the south, the Somes river to the north and the foot of the Carpathians in the east. The historian Victor Neumann describes a peculiarity of the modern Jewish diaspora in Maramures: the Jewish shepherd. It is possible that one of the main features of the Kabars civilization, animal husbandry, became predominant with the passage of time, to the detriment of the military character. Another occupation of the Khazarian Jews was related to the transport of salt on Mures; the only areas with salt deposits were in the Carpathian mountains.

At Sânnicolaul Mare, a locality in the Banat region, a treasure dating from the 10th century was discovered in 1799. On one of the main vessels of the treasury, there appears the figure of a victorious Khazar price dragging a prisoner by the hair.

The dual leadership system lasted until the end of the 10th century, when Stephen I, also known as King Saint Stephen, the first King of Hungary from 1000 or 1001, took on the Roman Catholic faith and defeated a rebellious Transylvanian ruler probably a Khazar, proud of his non-Catholic faith. This episode put an end to the Hungarian-Khazar dualism in leadership.

Towards the end of the 10th century, the Hungarian ruler Taksony invited a second wave of Khazarian emigrants to settle on his domains. Two centuries later, Ioan Cinnamus, the Byzantine chronicler, talks about troops who kept the Mosaic law, but fought as part of the Hungarian army in Dalmatia in 1154.

Medieval Transylvania

The earliest written records of Jews in the Transylvania land date from the time of Hungarian king Ladislaus I and then Coloman, in the 11th and 12th centuries. Ladislaus I's decrees of 1092 was hostile to the Jews: intermarriage between Jews and Christians was forbidden; Christians could not be servants of Jews; on Sundays and Christian holidays Jews were not allowed to work.

Article XXIV of the Golden Bull issued by king Andrew II in 1222 forbids the employment of Saracens and Jews in Hungary as "commissioners of salt and fiscal directors", a provision that also applied in Transylvania. In 1231, the same Andrew II ordered again that "Jews and Ismailies may not become monetary and salt rulers, nor may they hold other public offices". Jews were

forbidden to engage in coin minting, mining, or collecting taxes, and they were also forbidden to wear Christian clothing.
In 1239, king Bela IV asked Pope Gregory IX to allow him to employ Jews in the administration of public revenues. The pope acquiesced on the condition that the Jews were doubled by trustworthy Christians, on whose behalf Jewish rulers administer the public revenues.
The publication of Bela IV's privilege certainly stimulated the Jews to settle in Hungary and Transylvania. The 30 points of Bela IV's privilege granted protection in many respects to Jews: the right to free movement, the possibility to buy houses, to benefit in their trials from Jewish judges judging on the basis of Jewish laws, All these provisions may have contributed to the immigration of Jews. The Jewish presence in Transylvania in the 13th century is confirmed by a series of documents mentioning Jewish entrepreneurs involved in the salt trade along the Mureş River. In the 13th century the first Jewish communities were formed and the Jewish population was consolidated.

In the 14th century, Ashkenazi Jews came from Central Europe and during the Ottoman rule, Sephardic Jews settled in Transylvania. There is documentary evidence from 1357 when the city authorities of Sibiu record the presence of Petrus Iudaeus as a witness in the trial between the inhabitants of two communes in the seat of Sibiu.

Jewish settlement in Transylvania continued in the 14th – 15th centuries. Documents mentioning Jews date from this period. The Jews appear little by little in all corners of Transylvania (Alba-Iulia, Sibiu, Brasov, Oradea, Lipova, Arad, Cluj, Carei, Sighet) and Banat, excluding the surroundings of the mining towns.

Several documents mentioning Jews date from the late 15th and 16th centuries, mainly concerning commercial affairs, court cases, and anti-Jewish persecutions. Jews acquired the right of settlement primarily from landowners and military commanders. Their right to resettle or bring in new families depended on them. For example, we have the provision of Baron Stefan Cosa, commander of the fortress of Arad, according to which two Jewish families affect themselves in 1717 under his protection; they can move around and trade unhindered, but the condition of approval is not to bring in others. Another example would be the military commander of Oradea, Baron Subetich, disturbing the Hungarian court chancellor, who asked the court war council in Vienna to order the military commander of Oradea to take a "proper" attitude towards the Jews.

In the 16th century, a wave of Yiddish speaking Ashkenazi Jews arrived. The anti-Jewish manifestations of the Middle ages were nourished mostly by religious preconceptions and the Jews were considered "foreign bodies" in the feudal Christian societies, and thus the ecclesiastical and the lay legislature acted against them. Often, the segregated Jewish population pursued occupations that were not practiced or were banned for the Christians. Thus, many Jews were driven towards mercantile activities or finances. In documents from the beginning of this century we read of financial loans. Wealthy and influential Hungarian Jews living in Buda (pest), like Emeric Szerencsés (Fortunatus) and Mendel Fekete, provided loans to some Jewish inhabitants of Cluj.

In 1543 the trusted man and supplier of the Ottoman Porte, Aloisio Gritti, became governor of Hungary. He surrounded himself with Greek and Jewish merchants.
After ascending the Walachian throne, the price Michael the Brave entered Cluj in 1601 and killed the Jews and Anabaptists found there, setting fire to the city. The Jews also suffered at the hands of Sigismund Báthory, the Transylvanian price, who believed that they had helped Michael the Brave.
Many Sephardic Jews came to Banat from Turkey and Turkish-occupied territories in the early 17th century. They earned their living by making brandy, trading in grain, hides, and skins, or trading on the road.

Principality of Transylvania
During the Principality of Transylvania (1571–1691), the Jewish presence increased significantly, as evidenced by the existence of a rabbinical court (Beth din), a Jewish religious "court of justice" dealing with internal community affairs, in Alba Iulia in 1591. Conrad Jacob Hiltebrandt, a Swedish traveler in the midst of the 17th century mentions a synagogue in the seat of the Prince (Alba Iulia), while a 1657 document alludes to a 'Jewish street'.

In the 17th century, Jews were primarily documented as visiting physicians attending to the princes of Transylvania or as mediators of trade relations with the Ottoman Empire. The Transylvanian princes encouraged the settlement of the Jewish population to stimulate economic activity and facilitate the principality's entry into the prominent trade circles of the time through the mediation of Jewish merchants.
The official attitude towards Jews in Transylvania was extremely varied, ranging from the granting of privileges to discrimination and expulsions. A radical change occurred in the 17th century with the reign of prince Gábriel Bethlen who issued an edict in 1623 allowing Jews to settle in certain limited areas and granting them freedom of worship and trade. Most of the newcomers settled in Alba-Iulia, the capital of Transylvania, but small communities also formed in other settlements, including Cluj. The Bethlen edict was issued in Cluj and was the result of the initiative of the Jew Abraham Sarsa who was the court physician to prince Gabriel Bethlen. The edict was a key turning point in the settlement of the Transylvanian Jews. In the following years, Jews from Poland, Moravia, Germany, Hungary, and Moldova came to the principality, in addition to Sephardic Jews from the Ottoman Empire.
The Approbatae Constitutiones, the codes of law of the Principality of Transylvania published in 1653 during the rule of prince George II Rákóczi, established that the Jews' right to settle was limited to the city of Alba-Iulia and they were forbidden to acquire property.
During the 17th century, due to the protection offered by the princes, the Jewish presence became increasingly significant in the economic life of Transylvania. Historical records mention a synagogue belonging to the Sephardic community in Alba-Iulia in 1656.

Between 1691–1867, Transylvania was part of the Habsburg Empire, and between 1867–1918, it belonged to the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Under Habsburg rule, prohibitions on Jewish settlement were maintained. Therefore, new arrivals were only allowed to settle in Alba-Iulia. Between 1754–1879, the Jewish community of Transylvania was placed under the jurisdiction of a chief rabbi based in Alba-Iulia.

During Empress Maria Theresa's reign, anti-Jewish political measures such as deportation or expulsion were discussed. During this period, many towns in the region banned Jews from settling on their land. Jews were not allowed to buy land, build factories, or practice crafts until the 1840s.
In 1780, Maria Theresa accepted Governor Brukenthal's proposals, prohibiting the settlement of Jews outside Alba Iulia and concentrating the Jews in other parts of Transylvania. This was impossible, and Brukenthal asked Empress Maria Theresa to postpone it for at least a year. The result was an imperial order sent to the Transylvanian authorities, instructing them to take care that no Jews should in the future enter the principality illegally.
From the second half of the 18th century and especially in the first part of the 19th century, due to the hardening situation of the Jews in Galicia, a new wave of Jews took refuge in Moldova and Transylvania, where the authorities were more tolerant.

Transylvania part of the Austro-Hungarian kingdom
After the region was incorporated into the Austrian Empire in the 18th century, the Jewish population in Transylvania grew even more as a result of immigration. Because of the large Jewish population in the empire, a so- called toleration tax was imposed, which lasted for about a century and a half. With the territorial expansion of the empire, an increasing number of Jews from Galicia, Bukovina, and Hungary emigrated to Transylvania. Until the early 19th century, most Jews lived in rural areas and worked in commerce, the spirits distilling industry, renting, and other occupations such as tailoring and butchery.

The emancipation of the Jews began in 1867, under Emperor Francis Joseph I, when Transylvania was once again annexed to Hungary, ending Austro-Hungarian dualism. Jews were granted civil and political rights equal to those of the Christian population at the time, and Judaism was legally recognized as a religion in 1895, after centuries of being merely tolerated.

A turning point in the history of the Jewish communities in Hungary and Transylvania took place after the 1867 emancipation, when they were divided into a series of diverging branches, either traditional or reformed. During the Jewish Congress (December 1868-January 1869) of Pest, an autonomous Jewish organization was attempted which sought to represent all Jews. Because general consensus could not be reached, a number of congregations emerged:
the Orthodox (including Hasidic Jews), the Neolog and the Status Quo.

Orthodox Judaism remained the predominant orientation among Northern Transylvania Jews, and was characterized by the strict observance of religious precepts and very rigorous ritual laws. After its break from Orthodox Judaism, Hasidism renounced excessive ritual formalism and focused instead on an unmediated religious experience and on man's closeness to God. Hasidic Judaism experienced significant growth in Northern Transylvania, where the rabbis did not aggressively oppose it. By the turn of the 19/20th century, in addition to Sighetu Marmaţiei, the town of Satu Mare turned into a major center of Transylvanian Hasidism, and thus it became famous all over the world after world war ii when rabbi Joel Teitelbaum who survived the Holocaust established a dynasty (Satmar) in Brooklyn, New York.

The term “neolog”, borrowed from German Protestantism, was employed to designate Jewish Reform Judaism. Unlike Orthodox Judaism, the Neologs represented a direction that promoted the social integration of Jews in their host countries, as well as a ritual relaxation by the introduction of music and organ accompaniment to the religious service. The “Status Quo” was the term attributed to the Jewish communities which did not adhere to either of the two orientations: Orthodox or Neolog. This community did not have an organizational structure of its own, nor did it develop its own ideology.

By the turn of the century, the Jewish communities of Transylvania stood out through a specific architectural style for their synagogues. During this period, the synagogues of the following communities were built: the synagogue in Turda (1868); the Neolog (1878) and Orthodox (1910) ones in Oradea; the Neolog synagogue in Cluj (1886); the Orthodox synagogue in Baia Mare (1885); the ones in Borșa and Carei (1890); the Orthodox (1892) and Status Quo Ante (1905) synagogues in Satu Mare.
In the early 1900s, the predominantly rural Jewish community migrated in an ever-increasing proportion into the towns forbidden before. By 1910, 44 percent of the Jewry in Transylvania was living in towns, and the proportion of the urban population continued to grow even more.

By means of the mobility careers provided by emancipation, native Jewry took better and better part in the development of economy and culture. The significant majority of Jews got a situation in trade, industry and liberal professions. In Transylvania they played a major role in food, alcohol, wood, textile, metal and garment trade. in these areas important factories were established with Jewish capital in Arad, Oradea, Cluj, Câmpia Turzii, Satu Mare and Reşiţa. In 1912 38 out of the 51 factories in Oradea were owned by Jews.
The cultural and linguistic Magyarization of Jewry were promoted by the public schools open for the youth, yet most educational institutions operated by the parishes themselves also contributed to the process of assimilation which can be observed by the bare census data. By the eve of World War, I Hungarian became the mother tongue of 70–73 percent of Transylvanian Jewry and the Yiddish gradually lost ground. in addition to that many Jews changed their names into Hungarian.

Transylvania part of Romania
Following the 1st World War peace treaty of Trianon in 1920, Hungary lost a part of the Banat, and the whole of historical Transylvania which were integrated into Romania. The legal security that Jews had enjoyed in the Hungarian Kingdom was replaced by legal insecurity and defenselessness. The Romanian Citizenship Law adopted in 1924 (respectively the revision of citizenships in 1938) deprived 23,000 Transylvanian Jewish families and single persons of their citizenship. Despite the Jewish difficult situation in the Greater Romania, a gradual dissimilation of a significant part of Transylvanian Jewry from Hungarians occurred between the two world wars. One of the most important reasons was anti-Semitism, yet the gradual alienation from Hungarians was also inflamed by the events taking place in Hungary, including the white terror, *numerus clausus*, the progressive shift to the right of the Hungarian political leadership, and later by the anti-Jewish legislation. The pressure from the Romanian state was not favoring the survival of the Hungarian Jewish identity either.

It is very difficult to find exact figures about the number of the Jewish population in Transylvania and Banat in from 16th to early 19th century. During the first half of the 19th century, the Jewish population in Transylvania grew significantly. According to several successive censuses, the Jewish population in Transylvania consisted of approximately 2,000 Jews (in the 1766 census), roughly 5,175 Jews (in the 1825 census), and around 15,600 Jews (in the 1850 census). After 1867, when Transylvania came under Hungarian administration following the establishment of the Austria-Hungary dual monarchy, the number of Jews increased to 23,536, representing 1.2% of the total population. The 1910 census recorded 64,074 Jews, comprising 2.4% of the total
population. This demographic growth within the Jewish population was primarily due to an influx of Jewish immigrants from Galicia, Bukovina, and other regions of Poland and Ukraine. According to the Romanian census of 1930, the number of the Jewish population in Transylvania was 178,699, while the Hungarians recorded 193,000. Most Jews lived in larger cities such as Satu Mare, Cluj, Oradea, and different counties like Salaj and Maramures. In many towns, Jews made up a significant part of the population. In Sighet some 40% of the total urban population was Jewish. The most common occupation for the Transylvanian Jews was trade. Many were also involved in industrial production and especially during the interwar period agricultural work became significant. As elsewhere in Central and Eastern Europe, Jews made up a significant portion of the free professions, such as lawyers, physicians, engineers, etc.

In 1940, when Northern Transylvania was annexed to Hungary, 170,694 Jews again came under Hungarian authority, which sealed their fate. The Horthy regime deported 166,061 Jews during the war and another 151,180 in June 1944, days before the war ended. Only 35,769 deported Jews survived.

During the Communist regime in Romania, the Transylvanian Jews suffered the same indignities as the whole Romanian Jewish community, many of them leaving Romania for Israel or Western Europe during the large emigration of the 1950s.

Another reminder that the 4th largest Jewish community in the world in 1940, the Romanian Jewish community has been reduced currently to barely over 6,000 people from close to 800,000 in 1940.

Btw, at the begging of this episode you listen to the Romanian folk song Carul cu Boi, or The Cart with Oxen, the musical basis for the Israeli Hatikvah. For those interested, the episode notes contain links to the whole song.

In the next episode we will discuss Hassidic Judaism in Romania.

Until then be well.