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Sephardim

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Sephardic Jews were a marginal element in Eastern Europe with the exception of Romanian lands, where because of their relatively larger numbers, they played a somewhat more significant role. Jews expelled from the Iberian Peninsula at the end of the fifteenth century, and *conversos* leaving those lands in later periods, did not

settle in Eastern Europe. Those who did move to the region did so after settling first in Ottoman or, much less often, Italian territories. Nevertheless, some Sephardim are established as having resided in various areas of Eastern Europe, arriving from the Balkans and other regions of the Ottoman Empire in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Along with Iberian Jews, there were Italian, Greek or Romaniot, and Arabic- and Persian-speaking Jews who were often identified as Sephardim in Eastern Europe. In addition, [Ashkenazic Jews](#) sometimes married and assimilated into the group. ("Ashkenazi" became a common Sephardic surname.)

For two centuries, Turkish and Spanish Jews were prominent in international [trade](#) in Eastern Europe along the routes linking the trade hubs in Salonika (Thessaloníki), Adrianople (Edirne), and Istanbul to [Gdańsk](#), Leipzig, and Frankfurt in the central and northern parts of Europe. Along with Armenian, Greek, and Turkish competitors, they traveled from the Aegean Sea through Belgrade and Buda ([Budapest](#)) to Pressburg ([Bratislava](#)) and [Kraków](#). To the east, the shorter but riskier "Tartar routes" linked Kaffa (Feodosiya), Cetatea Albă (Belgorod Dnestrovski), and Chilia (Kiliya) on the Black Sea, along the Dniester and Siret Rivers in [Moldavia](#), to the trade center in [Lwów](#) and eastward to [Kiev](#) and Novgorod in [Russia](#) or westward to [Kraków](#), Leipzig, and [Gdańsk](#).

Outstanding among these merchants was Joseph Nasi (1524–1579), duke of Naxos. Born a *converso* in Lisbon to an important mercantile family, he moved in 1537 to Antwerp and then to Italy. Having settled in 1554 in Istanbul, where he returned to Judaism, Nasi was a personal counselor and diplomat for Selim II, handling peace negotiations with [Poland](#) in 1562. In return, he was granted extensive trading concessions with Poland. His agents established themselves in Lwów, developing a wide network of branches along the way south; their traces can still be documented in cities and towns throughout southern Poland, western [Ukraine](#), and eastern [Romania](#).

Following [Hungary's](#) 1526 defeat at Mohács, [Transylvania](#) became autonomous under Turkish suzerainty, with southern and central Hungary incorporated into the Ottoman Empire. The status of the Jews changed dramatically: they were granted the same rights as in the rest of the empire. Many Sephardim then immigrated to the region, chiefly from Istanbul, Salonika, and Belgrade. Buda (Budon in Sephardic sources) was the most important Jewish center, with both Ashkenazic and Sephardic communities; in 1580, about one-third of the roughly 800 Jews there were Sephardic. In the second half of the seventeenth century, Buda became the main contact point between Oriental and Western Jewry, opening the way to Sephardic influence on Hungarian Jewry; Buda's rabbis turned to Salonika for rulings on halakhic issues. Efrayim ha-Kohen of Vilna, who settled in Buda in 1666, corresponded with Sephardic rabbis in the Ottoman Empire, among them Moses Galanté in Jerusalem.

Buda was also a conduit for [Sabbatianism](#) from the Balkans into the rest of Europe. And, generally, the city was a main stop for travelers to and from the [Land of Israel](#). Sephardim in Buda were mostly merchants who traded with the Ottoman Empire and with Habsburg lands. The Sephardic experience in Buda, however, was short-lived: the end of Turkish occupation in 1686 was marked by the violent pillage of the Jewish quarter by Austrian troops, whereupon Sephardim and Ashkenazim both fled to the Ottoman Empire.



Under Turkish rule in Hungary, a Sephardic presence was also documented in Eger, an important trade center that attracted Turkish Jews after 1569, and in Gyöngyös, Jászberény, and Vác in the North. Székesfehérvár, in the Northwest, had an important Jewish community between 1544 and 1688; many Sephardic Jews came from the Ottoman Empire as well as from Buda. In central and southern Hungary,



The Navons, a family of Sephardic Jews with ties to Bulgaria, on the occasion of the engagement of Ernestina (third from right), Constanța, Romania, 1919. (Centropa)

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Safed, Israel, 19th century. Hasidic Jews celebrating Purim with a Sephardic Jew (left). The inscription is part of a passage from the Talmud urging Jews to imbibe enough alcohol so that they will not know the difference between the phrases "cursed is Haman" and "blessed is Mordechai." Collection of Isaac Einhorn, Tel Aviv. (Erich Lessing/Art Resource NY)

Sephardic physicians were present at the prince's court, as were Sephardic translators from Turkish into Hungarian and Latin. Influenced by the Calvinist faith of the Transylvanian elites and possibly by his Sephardic court physician, Avraham Sasa of Istanbul, Bethlen permitted *conversos* to openly return to Judaism, and to wear clothes without distinctive Jewish signs. At the end of the seventeenth century there were 70 Sephardic families in Alba Iulia.

In Porumbacul de Sus near [Făgăraș](#), in southern Transylvania, Sephardic Jews are credited with introducing glass manufacture to the region. In [Târgu Mureș](#), Sephardim are mentioned from 1582; a permanent community was founded in 1601 in the nearby village of Názánfalva. The first known communal leader was Mosheh Aizik Frenkel, heir to a *converso* family.

Sephardim were an important portion if not a majority of the Jews in Hungary and Transylvania under Turkish rule, dealing in local and international trade and paying taxes in return for their rights; their religious and scholarly life flourished. But at the end of Turkish domination in 1686 and 1690, respectively, most preferred to return to the Ottoman Empire. The remaining few were gradually assimilated among waves of Ashkenazic immigration from [Bohemia](#), Austria, and [Galicia](#).

The [Timișoara](#) region received Sephardic immigration during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Turkish armies occupied Timișoara in 1552, after which Sephardic Jews coming from Belgrade and Istanbul settled throughout the area. In [Lugoj](#) to the North, Caransebeș to the East, and Făget to the South, Sephardic Jewish settlements were documented in 1733, 1746, and about 1750, respectively. At the time of the Habsburg occupation in 1716, Sephardim in the city of Timișoara were given the option of remaining and living on the city's outskirts; many chose to stay. Don Moses Pereira became a leading merchant and held the tobacco monopoly for the whole Habsburg Empire, while Diego Aguilar obtained the right in 1739 to found a community composed of both Sephardim and Ashkenazim. Two synagogues, one of them Sephardic, were built in 1762. During the nineteenth century, two Sephardic communities, one Orthodox and one modern, were founded (along with three Ashkenazic ones), led by rabbis Mosheh Alkalay between 1831 and 1863 and Yosef Levi between 1815 and 1856, respectively. At the beginning of the twentieth century, there were approximately 1,000 Sephardim in the city.

Sephardic Jews reached the southern regions of Poland (Galicia) via the main European trade routes, although few settled permanently. An exception was the town of Husiatyn (Gusyatin), where Jewish merchants from Salonika were mentioned even after 1772. Both Sephardic Jews and Italian Jews settled in Lwów in the second half of the sixteenth and the first half of the seventeenth centuries as merchants and physicians. Agents of Joseph Nasi, such as Avraham and Mosheh de Moza and Ḥayim Kohen, dominated trade, especially in wines and spices, with the Ottoman Empire. Enjoying special rights and diplomatic status granted by the Sultan and the Polish king, they incurred the envy of local merchants—Polish Jews included. After Nasi's death in 1579, many Sephardim abandoned the town; by 1600 the remainder had disappeared into the larger Ashkenazic community.

The Sephardic community in [Zamość](#) was unique. Midway between Lwów and [Lublin](#), Zamość was designed by the magnate Jan Zamoyski, who owned and founded the town, to become a Western-style academic and economic center. In 1587, Zamoyski, who had studied in Padua and appreciated the local Jews' erudition and skills, invited Sephardic Jews from Venice and the Ottoman Empire to settle and develop the town, granting them extensive privileges restricted specifically to Jews of Spanish and Portuguese origin. Several dozen Sephardic families (many coming from Lwów) settled there, and were allowed to buy property, to engage in trade and most [crafts](#), and to practice medicine and pharmacy. The Sephardic community declined after Zamoyski's death in 1605, when their privileges were curtailed and Polish aristocrats began defaulting on their debts. Many left the town, and by 1630 the community was being engulfed by newly arriving Ashkenazic Jews.

The large community of Kazimierz (which was later annexed to Kraków) had a Sephardic component in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Notable Sephardim were the financier Mosheh ben 'Uzi'el, Shelomoh Ashkenazi of Udine (Italy), diplomat and Polish court physician between 1561 and 1564, and the communal physician David Morpurgo, who was graduated from the medical faculty in Padua in 1623. The [Calahora family](#) of pharmacists and physicians, founded by the court physician, Shelomoh Calahora (d. 1597), purchased additional land for the Jewish city of Kazimierz in 1608 and was known in Kraków until the mid-nineteenth century. Following the Swedish invasion around 1655, almost all the Spanish and Italian Jews of Kazimierz abandoned the town. As if to seal this trend, Matityahu Calahora, a physician and pharmacist, was accused of blasphemy. A [blood libel](#) accusation led to student riots; on trial in [Piotrków](#), he was burned at the stake in 1663.

Farther to the East, Sephardim are documented, along with Italian Jews, in Black Sea ports such as La Tana (Azov), Soldaia (Sudak), and especially Kaffa in [Crimea](#), and later in Ochakiv and Olbia at the mouth of the Dnieper River in Ukraine. In 1672, the southeastern Polish province of Podolia

was annexed to the Ottoman Empire, some Ottoman Jews moved into the region, and the influence of Sabbatianism may have widened. To date, this has not been studied.

In Romanian lands the first mention of Spanish Jews appears in 1559, locating them in the Walachian towns of Silistra, [Bucharest](#), and [Craiova](#) in transit to Transylvania and Hungary. In [Brăila](#), a Jewish community with a Sephardic majority developed from the end of the fifteenth century until the mid-nineteenth century, when it was overwhelmed by Ashkenazim. Cetatea Albă (Genovese Moncastro) had an important community of Byzantine and later Sephardic Jews after 1591. Home to a [Karaite](#) settlement, Cetatea Albă also served as transit station for many Jews on their way to the Land of Israel. In the North, Hotin (Khotin) was the main link with the Jewish merchants of Lwów; Sephardic Jews settled there in the sixteenth century. They traded and sometimes settled in the towns of [Cernăuți](#), [Siret](#), and [Suceava](#). In [Iași](#), a Sephardic settlement developed after 1565 and dominated the wine and alcohol trade. The traveler Yosef Shelomoh Delmedigo (Yashar) of Crete reported a large Jewish community in Iași between 1619 and 1620. From the mid-seventeenth century, immigration from Galicia gradually led to an Ashkenazic majority.

Romania is the only country in the region where Sephardic communities such as Bucharest, Craiova, and Timișoara endured, reinforced by a wave of Sephardim, especially from Bulgaria, after the treaty of Adrianople (1829). Involved in the import-export trade, they established new communities in Danube ports such as Călărași, Giurgiu, Turnu Măgurele, and Calafat. The most important was in Turnu Severin; in 1833, numerous Jews from the Balkans, Bucharest, and Hungary, two-thirds of them Sephardim, resided there.

The old Sephardic settlement in Craiova was reinforced by immigration from Vidin in Bulgaria and by 1806 had a Spanish synagogue. In 1882, about 40 percent of the community were Sephardim (150 out of 370 families). In 1893, the Sephardic community obtained legal standing, a rare achievement at the time. In [Ploiești](#), Sephardic Jews began to arrive in 1806; they shared the community with the Ashkenazim, having separate synagogues and burial societies.

Bucharest was home to the largest Sephardic community in Romanian lands, though there was an Ashkenazic majority by the mid-seventeenth century. In 1730, the banker Mentès Bally and the physician Daniel de Fonseca succeeded in obtaining official recognition of Jewish residence. The number of Sephardim increased in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries; the [Kahal Grande](#) synagogue was built in 1811. The 1832 census registered 2,600 Jews, among them 80 Sephardic families. In 1842, a second Spanish synagogue Kahal Cicu (Judeo-Spanish, "Small Synagogue"), was built, resolving tensions between the conservative Orthodox and the modern liberal factions. In 1864, Sephardim separated from the Ashkenazim and built their own cemetery. Reinforced by immigration from Bulgaria and Anatolia, the community grew to 150 families by 1858 and to 330 by 1899. There were 665 families in 1917 and 1,500 (6,000 persons) in 1940.

Between 1719 and 1834, a Sephardi-dominated institution, the *hahambași* (Heb., *hakham bashi*; chief rabbi), with a residence in Iași and authorization from Istanbul, protected the traditions, privileges, and autonomy of all the Jewish communities in [Moldavia](#) and [Walachia](#). In the period of modern Romania, Sephardim grew more secularized and became active in Romanian national politics, supporting the revolutionaries of 1848 politically and financially and volunteering in Romania's war for independence of 1877–1878.

The Sephardic contribution to Romania's economy and culture was notable in both commerce and cultural life. Two significant innovations are credited to Sephardim: at the end of the nineteenth century, Michael El Nahmias edited *Mercurul Român*, the first financial periodical in Romania; and Samitca (later, Ralian and Ignat Samitca), the oldest Jewish printing house in the country, pioneered the technology of lithography (1878) and the use of the engine in the printing industry (1893). In 1868, Samitca opened a branch in Turnu Severin, publishing two periodicals in Judeo-Spanish (Ladino).

The decline of the Sephardim in [Romania](#) occurred in the late 1930s and early 1940s. [Assimilation](#) and secularization increased, mixed marriages proliferated, and Judeo-Spanish lost prestige. [Zionist](#) organizations such as [Hoveve Tsiyon](#) and Bene Tsiyon encouraged aliyah. And like all Romanian Jewry, Sephardim witnessed a surge of fascism and antisemitism. The final blow came with the loss of state subsidies (1939), followed by antisemitic legislation and Iron Guard persecution resulting in requisitions (confiscation of property and communal buildings) and destruction by fire of the "Spaniards' Synagogue" in Ploiești (1940) and the Kahal Grande synagogue in Bucharest (1941).

After the [Holocaust](#), under Communist rule in 1948 what was left became a "Sephardic section" of the Jewish community of Bucharest. Many left for Israel, and others assimilated; only a tiny group, centered around the Kahal Cicu synagogue in Bucharest, preserved the Sephardic tradition.

The Sephardic presence in Eastern Europe survives vestigially in a few synagogues that remain standing and, onomastically, in the surprising endurance of certain Sephardic surnames—such as Abarbanel, Algazi, Dylion, Elion, Frenk, and Szpanierman (i.e., Sephardi or Spaniard)—within an overwhelmingly Ashkenazic East European Jewry.

Suggested Reading

Nathan Michael Gelber, "Le-Toldot ha-sefaradim be-Polin," *Otsar yehude sefarad* 6 (1963): 88–99; Jacob Geller, *Ha-Yehudim ha-sefaradim be-Romanyah* (Tel Aviv, 1983); Theodor Lavi and Nathaniel Katzburg, eds., *Pinkas ha-kehilot: Hungaryah* (Jerusalem, 1975); *Pinkas ha-kehilot: Polin*, vol. 2, ed. Danuta Dombrowska, Abraham Wein, and Aharaon Vais, *Galitsyah ha-mizrahit* (Jerusalem, 1980); vol. 3, ed. Abraham Wein and Aharaon Vais, *Galitsyah ha-ma'arivit ve-Silezyah* (Jerusalem, 1984); Janina Morgensztern, "Notes on the Sephardim in Zamość," *Biuletyn Żydowskiego Instytutu Historycznego* 38 (1961): 69–82; *Pinkas ha-kehilot: Romanyah*, vol. 1, ed. Theodor Lavi, Aviva Ben-Azar, and Tsevi Sha'al; vol. 2, ed. Jean Ancel and Theodor Lavi (Jerusalem, 1969–1980); Cecil Roth, *The House of Nasi: The Duke of Naxos* (Philadelphia, 1992).

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