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THE ROUMANIAN JEWS IN AMERICA

BY D. M. HERMALIN

I

Previous to the Russo-Turkish war (1877), in which Roumania took an active part, gaining her independence from the Sultan's suzerainty, the Roumanian Jew was not often heard of as an emigrant. Sporadic migration, however, brought Roumanian Jews to every part of the globe, with the exception of America, which, for no particular reason, did not attract their attention. India and Egypt seem to have been more favored than other countries, and Palestine was holy ground, to which rich and pious Roumanian Jews resorted in their old age to die and to be buried in its sacred soil. America was spoken of as a country almost beyond reach, and of its material advantages the average Roumanian Jew knew nothing.

As early as 1840, according to the testimony of a few Roumanian Jewish residents of New York, some Roumanians at Bombay, hearing of fortunes amassed in North America and not finding India to their liking, sailed for New York. Arriving at their destination, they thought themselves the pioneers of Roumanian Jewry on the American Continent, but they were told that others of the same type had been their forerunners.

Diligent inquiry fails to ascertain the exact names, occupations, and dates of the earliest comers. However, it remains an undisputed fact that even the sporadic emigration

of Roumanian Jews to the United States did not commence much earlier than 1850.

II

As late as 1870, a Roumanian Jewish immigrant might wander about the country for months without meeting one of his countrymen. But after 1877, the emigration to America began to increase, and almost at once the peculiarities of the immigrants obtruded themselves in American life. These peculiarities were not religious and not national in character, they were chiefly gastronomic—the first impression made by the Roumanian Jew upon the American Jewish community was in the culinary department.

The religious cohesion that manifests itself in the formation of separate congregations was very late in coming. This strange behavior, so unlike the course pursued by other Jewish immigrants, is susceptible of explanation. The early arrivals from Roumania were nearly all unmarried men and rather lax in the matter of religious conformity. Either they were indifferent to religious practices, or if they intermarried with the Jews from other countries, they permitted themselves to be absorbed by the congregations with which the families of their wives had affiliated.

After 1878, when the Jews of Roumania were hard pressed by her government, and were compelled to seek a permanent home elsewhere, they began to take great interest in the letters of their scattered countrymen. Comparing the different reports with one another, they came to the conclusion that America, distant though it was, was best suited for their purpose.

The records show, however, that their migration to America

continued to be spasmodic. From 1878 until 1882, the immigration gradually increased from 261 to 1052, forty per cent of the whole number being women and children. In the next year, 1883, there was a decrease of a hundred, and since that time, though on the whole there has been a constant increase, the percentage of increase has varied most irregularly. In fact, if it is desired to know when the Roumanian Jews are more than ordinarily persecuted by their government, it is not necessary to look up the Roumanian edicts against the Jews; we have but to study the annual variation in the number of arrivals in this country. In 1888, for instance, there was an increase of nearly two thousand as compared with the immigration of the previous year, but the next year showed an increase of only four hundred over 1887. This irregular course continued until 1900, when the Roumanian Jewish immigration reached amazing proportions.

III

During all these years, although Roumanian Jews went to nearly every part of the Union and the Dominion of Canada, the city of New York was, as it still remains, the goal of their wanderings. Almost all the Roumanian Jews in America either were residents of New York, or had passed through the metropolis in seeking their fortunes elsewhere. This rule has been broken only since 1900, when well-known European benevolent associations transported a considerable number of the Roumanian wanderers to Canadian shores.

After all, however, the bulk of Roumanian Jewish immigrants still remain in New York, and whatever peculiarities of theirs survived expatriation can be studied nowhere as in the metropolis, in which they have established congregations and societies, and developed individual traits.

As has been said, the earliest Roumanian Jewish immigrants did not attempt to separate themselves from other Jews in religious affairs. But as soon as the more orthodox class began to arrive, and some of them became prosperous in worldly affairs, they thought of indulging in the luxury of a synagogue of their own, and they devoted themselves to the formation of societies somewhat on the model of those they had had in their Roumanian home.

But the creature comforts were provided for earlier than the satisfaction of spiritual cravings. As early as 1884, two Roumanians occupied a basement on Hester Street, where they manufactured grape wine, and served it in Roumanian fashion. Then they installed a complete Roumanian kitchen, whence issued all a Roumanian palate could desire. Others were encouraged to follow suit, and the Roumanian *carciuma* (wine house) and *brutaria* (restaurant) became a lucrative business in New York. The first patrons naturally were Roumanians, but soon other Jews flocked to them and paid homage to Roumanian culinary art.

In the same year, 1884, a few youths established the *Roumanisch-Amerikanischer Brüderbund*, for the purpose, as set forth in their constitution, of devoting themselves to the study of social science. This society can hardly be called an original manifestation of Roumanian needs and character; it rather mimicked similar societies in the neighborhood, organized for pleasure and entertainment.

IV

At the end of 1885, a score of Roumanian Jews assembled in meeting decided to hire a hall on the Bowery for the purpose of holding religious service in the manner they were

accustomed to in the old country. They called themselves simply "The First Roumanian American Congregation," without the usual addition of a Hebrew name.

Even at that late date the motives that led them to form a congregation of their own were not of a compelling nature. The Roumanian Jew in America who clings to his religion differs from almost all other immigrants of his calibre. They are eager to have their own rabbis or expounders of the Law, but he is satisfied with the religious authorities existing, so long as they are orthodox. The foundation of the first Roumanian congregation rests on other than purely religious reasons. The Roumanian Jew is wont to pronounce the Hebrew language in a manner peculiar to himself. He differs even from the Galician Jew in this regard, nor does his pronunciation agree with the Hebrew of the South Russian, who is careful at least in the matter of accentuation. A loose and careless way of pronouncing the Hebrew language became somewhat of a fad with the Roumanian Jew, and when he hears prayers recited with precision, he feels repelled. Besides, the Roumanian Jew conducts divine service according to the Sephardic ritual, and as most of the East Side congregations consist of Ashkenazim, it was natural that he should provide for his own religious needs as soon as he could. Again, the Jew in Roumania is accustomed to resort to the synagogue on Saturdays at his leisure, as a place at which to meet and converse with the friends and acquaintances whom he could not see during the week. Once established in America, he longed for the old time synagogue which was his club as well.

V

The first Roumanian congregation, which met on the Bowery, consisted of about fifteen members, who were not sufficiently blessed with worldly goods to purchase a scroll of the Law; they had to hire one of a Hebrew book-dealer on Canal Street. The congregation rarely met during the week. If one of the members had to recite *Kaddish*, he either had to gather a *Minyan* himself, or visit the synagogue of another congregation. But on the Sabbath day the little hall was well filled. If a Roumanian Jew wanted to see any one of his countrymen, he was sure to find him there, or at least meet some one who knew his whereabouts. And in the synagogue foreign and domestic politics were discussed, and above all the fate of those left behind in the "country of Amalek," as the Roumanian Jew in America is fond of calling his native land.

Contrary to expectation, this first Roumanian congregation did not thrive, and had it not been for the great masses pouring in from Roumania, and for the benevolent purpose which it added to its religious objects, it would have decayed entirely. It continued to meet on the Bowery until 1893, when it took a ten years' lease on the building at 70 Hester Street, and established a synagogue at which the full quota of religious services was held. At this moment its membership does not exceed two hundred. On a similar basis, the congregation *Kehal Adath Yeshurun*, or the *Yassier Sheehl*, was established in 1897. It also leased a building, 79 Hester Street, for a period of ten years, and its membership runs up to about the same number as the membership of the other.

Recently a third Roumanian Jewish congregation was established in the section of Brooklyn called Williamsburg, but

it is not of more consequence than its predecessors in New York City.

In short, the Roumanian Jew has not been very successful in forming congregations in America. They have not, in fact, even exerted the attraction of a club house upon him; it has been demonstrated lately that he has given up seeking his friends at the synagogue. He now looks them up at the Roumanian coffee-houses, wine-cellars, and restaurants. Such Roumanian Jews as desire to affiliate with a religious body prefer the congregations formed by the South Russians or Bessarabians. They have even learned to overlook "short-comings" in pronunciation and liturgy. And the conditions that prevail in New York characterize Roumanian Jewish communities wherever they exist in the United States; no matter in what numbers Jews from Roumania may have gathered, they are not inclined to form congregations.

VI

As early as the beginning of 1889, there were a number of Roumanian Jews in New York who were very proud of their American citizenship. When they visited their newly-arrived compatriots, they would display the document that entitled them to participation in the political affairs of the United States. The dream of the Roumanian Jew, to be a naturalized citizen, was at last realized. When he was able to grasp the novel situation, he not only prided himself on his citizenship, but looked back with horror and contempt upon his native land, which had robbed him of his rights. Besides the oath sworn before the American Judge, he took another, never to desert the country of his adoption.

It is a fact that in devotion to country, the naturalized

Roumanian Jew in America excels almost every other foreign Jew. The reason probably is that the Roumanian Jew has suffered more through being considered an alien in the country of his birth than any other persecuted Jew of the present day.

The first Roumanian Jewish citizens of New York called a meeting at 104 Orchard Street, and after a short debate concluded to form a political organization. A discussion arose as to the party to which the club was to belong. Not one of the persons present was sufficiently conversant with the principles of the different political organizations to be in a position to advise to which to give their support. Yet they had been told that unless they took sides with the one or the other party, their organization would amount to a mere farce.

At this juncture a youth asked permission to speak. He was a student from a Roumanian University, and had but lately arrived in America to join his parents, who had left him behind to finish his studies. The young speaker delivered a clever address on Abraham Lincoln, dwelling principally upon the efforts made by this President of the United States to establish equality among men, to level the barriers of race, religion, and color. The speaker concluded thus: "And now, my dear countrymen, this noble American, this friend of the enslaved and oppressed, was a member of the Republican party."

He was warmly applauded for his speech, which was delivered in the Roumanian language, and many voices exclaimed in the same tongue: "*Traiasca memoria lui Lincoln!*" ("Long live the memory of Lincoln!"). Without further deliberation, the association concluded to give its political support to the party that had produced a Lincoln, and so

“The Roumanian American Republican Club” was formed. But next year, after the members had had some political experience, the name was changed into “The Roumanian American Independent Citizens Association.” Later the association took active part in the political reform movement in New York City. At the end of 1891, contact with professional politicians bred quarrels and disharmony, and the association disbanded. Subsequently it was reorganized as a Democratic club, but the original enthusiasm had evaporated, and it degenerated into an office seekers’ society, lying dormant all year, and awakening only when candidates are in the field, and promise rewards in return for votes. In short, the Roumanian club sank to the low degree occupied by the typical political organizations that infest the entire East Side of New York.

VII

A prominent figure in Roumanian-American Jewry worthy of honorable mention is the late Michael Rosenthal, who arrived here early in the “eighties.” Though a cobbler by trade, he plunged into business, first as a peddler; then he opened a saloon, and in a few years he had accumulated a little fortune. He was himself almost illiterate, but he loved men of education, and he sought their society and advice. With the aid of such, he established, in 1885, a benevolent and endowment association, called “The American Star.” The earliest members of the order were Roumanian Jews exclusively, but later others joined it. It is still flourishing, and it bears the reputation of being one of the best managed benevolent associations in New York City.

In the same year, lodges composed entirely of Roumanian

Jews were formed in connection with the older Orders, and a number of societies sprang up with the double purpose of entertainment and charity. Most of the latter were of short duration. One of the exceptions is the "Carmen Sylva Dramatic Association," which, however, is now about to share the fate of the majority. This association was formed in honor of the Roumanian queen, whose *nom de plume* is Carmen Sylva, and who bears, among Roumanian Jews, the reputation of being a liberal woman. It was composed of young men and women, and one of its purposes was the cultivation of Roumanian language and dramatic literature. Several dramatic performances were given during the winter season, which were well patronized by the countrymen of the young actors. But as the persecutions of the Jews increased in Roumania, hatred of Roumanian language and literature grew with them in America, and the performances lost their patrons and the society its prestige.

VIII

It is proper to devote some space to the Roumanian Jewish actors, who began to arrive in New York as early as 1881. They played in a concert hall, on the Bowery, at that time known as the "Oriental Theatre." At the end of 1886, the best Jewish company of actors and actresses came to New York, and took up their headquarters at another concert hall, renamed in their honor, "The Roumania Opera House." The company soon attracted the attention of the entire Jewish population of New York; nevertheless the income was not sufficient to support the members of the troupe, and they suffered many hardships.

This company of actors was fully equipped with plays,

wardrobe, scenery, and even playwrights from Roumania. The authors composed all manner of plays, but the undertaking languished until 1894-95, when skill began to command its due price. At present, the three greatest theatres on the Bowery, the People's, the Thalia, and the Windsor, are Jewish, and some actors have actually become rich; all others are making a decent living. One manager, as poor as a church mouse on his arrival in America, and at first dependent upon what his wife could earn as a soubrette, has amassed a fortune of two hundred thousand dollars. His wife only recently retired from the stage.

In fact, it may be said that the Yiddish press and literature, though not founded by Roumanian Jews, owe their present material and literary success greatly to Roumanian Jewish influence.

IX

A movement which attracted great attention throughout the country was started in 1890 by a Roumanian Jew named Jacob Ochs. His movement purposed to introduce a new Masonic Rite in this country designed to oppose the old York Rite in vogue in England and in the United States. This Jacob Ochs had been initiated into the mysteries of freemasonry while yet in Roumania, a circumstance which goes to show that he was possessed of exceptional intelligence and attainments, for in Roumania Jews are rarely accepted into the Masonic fraternity. When he arrived in New York, he was recognized as a lawful Mason in good standing by the York Rite lodges. But according to his notions, the American Masons did not perform their duties as such, and he protested against their course. He was drawn into an altercation with the grand officers, and he reported their actions to

several European grand lodges, at the same time asking permission to organize new lodges under a European Rite, in order to show Americans what real Masonry is.

Strangely enough, of all the European grand lodges only the Spanish Rite of Madrid seized the opportunity, and invested Mr. Ochs with full authority as its representative in the United States. The first Masonic lodge formed under Spanish jurisdiction consisted only of Roumanian Jewish immigrants, but later Mr. Ochs invaded American territory and organized Masonic lodges among native Americans. His influence spread rapidly, and lodges were organized in New York by Jews, Italians, Spaniards, Frenchmen, Germans, and Americans. After the field had been so well covered in New York, he went to Brooklyn, and then to Philadelphia, Boston, Chicago, and other large towns, everywhere meeting with great success.

After four years of unceasing labor, he was arrested on the charge of fraud; he was accused of having collected initiation fees for a society, without authorization. The American press of New York and its vicinity, influenced by York Rite Masons, was very bitter against him. But the trial never came off; his credentials showed that he had acted honorably and lawfully, and the case was dismissed on motion of the District Attorney. In the meantime the lodges he had formed fell into a state of neglect and disorganization. However, some of them, consisting of Roumanian Jews, who knew the integrity of Mr. Ochs, weathered the storm, were reorganized, and became most efficient agents of charity and benevolence. Recently, they set themselves free from Spanish sovereignty, and with much difficulty they established "The Grand Orient of North America of Free and Accepted Masons," and the order is recognized by almost all European grand lodges.

X

The occupations of the Roumanian Jews in the United States do not differ materially from the occupations of others, with the exception of their wine-cellars, coffee-houses, and restaurants. On the whole, it should be said, the Roumanian Jewish spirit is inclined towards commerce, although thirty-five per cent. of the immigrants are artisans, chiefly tailors and carpenters. When they arrive in America, they speedily find work at their trades; they work hard, and accumulate as much as possible, and after a few years of industrious labor they nearly all start some business. If they succeed, they continue to strive; if they fail, they return to their original calling. Among the others, who have been engaged in commerce all their life, there is rarely one to be found who applies himself to the learning of a trade on his arrival in this country, a practice so common with other immigrant Jews. As a rule, they become peddlers, dealing in all kinds of merchandise, chiefly notions, dry goods, and jewelry. In this capacity they journey, not only through the State of New York, but almost all over the country, and then settle down to a permanent occupation, either in New York City or at some other favorable spot. Among them are successful merchants, with establishments, not only on Grand and Canal Streets in New York, but also on Maiden Lane and Broadway. They are engaged in the wholesale diamond and woolen trades, and some in the banking business on Wall Street.

Roumanian Jews follow similar occupations in the larger towns of Pennsylvania and Massachusetts. In other localities they have not yet succeeded to such a degree as to attract attention, unless an exception be made in favor of some noteworthy business establishments in a few Southern towns.

After the recent war with Spain, a considerable number of Roumanian Jews went to Cuba and Puerto Rico, and report has it that their business is thriving on both islands. Some five months ago a party of six young Roumanians left New York for the Hawaiian Islands. Nothing definite is yet known about them.

Roumanian Jewish young men who came here with their parents; after having striven in vain while in Roumania to attain to one of the learned professions, take up special studies immediately upon their arrival, and qualify themselves as physicians, lawyers, dentists, and engineers. Above ten per cent. of East Side lawyers and physicians in New York are Roumanians. It is said that the Philadelphia Dental College is always attended by a fair percentage of Roumanian students. Dentistry seems to be a favorite profession with them, and the famous Philadelphia institution attracts them. Not a few of the dentists have returned to European countries after graduation, and are practicing their profession there with considerable success.

XI

The Roumanian *café* as well as the Roumanian wine-cellar and restaurant is being conducted in New York more or less in the same way as in Roumania. The Roumanian Jews gather at these public houses for many purposes besides eating and drinking. They serve as meeting places for friends, where they discuss business and social matters, and where, above all, in Oriental fashion, over a cup of black coffee and through the blue smoke curling up from their cigarettes, they indulge in a game of cards or chess. The *café* is a perfectly innocent resort, and it is the only place at which the Roumanian Jew finds enjoyment. Latterly the custom has grown

up of having Roumanian music in the public houses, and another touch is thus added to the homelike surroundings, arousing sweet memories in the frequenters.

The owners of the *cafés* and similar places are doing a thriving business in the East Side of New York, some have even accumulated fortunes. By a moderate estimate there are in New York one hundred and fifty restaurants, two hundred wine-cellar, with lunch rooms attached, and about thirty coffee-houses kept by Roumanian Jews. During the last three years the Roumanian resorts have been frequented by all classes of Jews and lately by not a few non-Jews.

XII

With the growth of the Roumanian Jewish population, the wealth of the earlier immigrants has increased. The situation of their brethren in Roumania appealed to their generosity, and two years ago, under the leadership of the active and talented Dr. P. A. Sigelstein, one of the prominent physicians of New York, the admirable "Roumanian Hebrew Aid Association" was formed. The association was called into existence in 1898 by a few Roumanian Jews, for the express purpose of ameliorating the condition of the poor immigrants arriving from Roumania. It has quickly grown into a powerful charitable institution, and when the great influx of Roumanian refugees came in 1899 and 1900, it was able to extend a helping hand to the unfortunates. It has attracted the attention of many charitably inclined Jews, and large sums have been entrusted to it for distribution among its wards. According to the last report of the association, \$1201.76 was expended from dues collected from members. But the whole sum disbursed was approximately \$30,000.

In 1900, the association sent 1362 persons to almost all the States of the Union; 402 of them were married, and twenty-two persons, who had become invalided through their hard journey and exposure, were furnished with means of transportation to return to their native cities in Roumania. During the same year, 269 applications for relief from Roumanian Jewish residents in New York were received; twenty-four were denied, and the remainder cost the association \$330. Of the new arrivals, nearly two thousand were started as peddlers, and for about the same number of artisans work was procured. The association has already made a good record for itself, and it is continually preparing for the new emergencies to be expected.¹

By a moderate estimate, there are nearly forty thousand Roumanian Jews on American soil, twenty-four thousand of whom are living in Greater New York. On the whole, they are an industrious class of people, and grasp at every opportunity to Americanize themselves. They have a proper appreciation of American institutions, and learn to speak and read the English language in a shorter time than other foreigners. They regard the United States as their permanent home, and do everything within the bounds of possibility to qualify themselves to be worthy citizens of the great Republic that has offered them a secure haven of rest.

March 20, 1901.

¹ In a letter to the Editor of the YEAR BOOK, Mr. Leo N. Levi, president of the Order B'nai B'rith, which has put its machinery at the disposal of the relief agencies dealing with the problem of the increased Roumanian immigration, estimates that during the twelvemonth ending July 1, 1901, the Order distributed 2400 Jews, principally Roumanians, to about 220 different towns in the United States. Most of the immigrants were adult males, but since their establishment many who have become self-sustaining and even prosperous have sent for their families [Ed.].