

The Sephardic Community of Bucharest

In early 20th century, Spanish senator Angel Pulido Fernandez published two volumes on the history of Sephardic Jews of Eastern Europe



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[Christine Leșcu](#), 11.11.2017, 14:01

The books were based on the senator's intense correspondence with members of the Sephardic community around the lower Danube. Some of his most prominent correspondents were in Bucharest, which at that time had a sizable Jewish community. Within that community, Sephardic Jews were less numerous, but formed an elite of bankers, traders, scholars and artists. Historian Anca Tudorancea offered us a glimpse into the history of this community in Bucharest:

"This is one of the Jewish communities with a strong western orientation. There are certain stereotypes regarding Jews and banking. One important banking family is the Halfon family, which is important in regard to the beginnings of bank loaning in Romania. The central figure is Haim Enrique Bejerano. His family was from Bulgaria. During the Russian-Turkish War of 1877, his mother was killed, and he came to Romania with the rest of his family. This Jewish community of Spanish origin was always small, but was the first to settle in Bucharest. It was officially recognized as a distinctive community as early as 1730. Berejano was erudite, he spoke 8 languages and translated many religious texts. He was a confidant of Queen Elisabeth, wife to King Carol I. Berejano was in charge of identifying old texts. He was very open to other communities, and very much in touch with modernity."

Rabbi Haim Berejano was the person that Fernandez corresponded with the most in Bucharest. After he headed the Sephardic community in Bucharest for 32 years, he moved to Edirne in 1910, formerly known as Adrianople. Towards the end of his life, he became the right hand of the chief rabbi of Turkey. Even though he spoke many languages and had lived in several countries, he kept strong ties with Spain, with the Spanish language, as well as with the Ladino language, the language of Jews in Spain. His nostalgia for Spain is obvious in all the letters sent by Jews to Fernandez. They are full of details on how Sephardic Jews in exile held on to their Spanish traditions, keeping Spanish sounding names, and naming their synagogues accordingly. One example is the superb and imposing temple in Bucharest, Cahal Grande, which was set fire to during the Legionnaire rebellion of 1941. Anca Tudorancea told us about these letters, which impressed so much Senator Angel Pulido Fernandez:

“Another personality writing to Fernandez is Lazar Ascher. He had ties with Sephardic schools for boys and girls, financed by the community, fully free of charge. It shows once again that his correspondents were some of the most prominent members of the community. Lazar Ascher was the head of the school committee, which was made up of the most important representatives of the community. He was a banker, like Solomon Halfon, another great banker, who was for a long time head of the Sephardic community, being among the people financing the community.”

This community dwindled fast after 1948, when the communists started their nationalization campaign. Many Sephardic Jews moved to Israel, but the ones who remained in Romania continued to stand out, especially in the arts.