

Episode 25 - Ana Pauker - the Romanian Jewish Woman Communist

Hello, I am Adrian Iosifescu, your host of the History of Romanian Jews podcast and this is episode 25, where we'll be discussing one of the most powerful women communist, the Romanian Jew Ana Pauker.

By-the-way, you just listened the Yiddish Anti-Fascist song "Nitsokhn Lid" or "Victory Song" A link to the full video is provided in the Notes.

Ana Pauker, born Hannah Rabinsohn, was a Romanian communist senior leader and served as the country's foreign minister in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Ana Pauker became the world's first female foreign minister when entering office in December 1947. She was also the unofficial leader of the Romanian Communist Party immediately after World War II. Pauker was born on February 13, 1893 into a poor, religious Orthodox Jewish family in Codăești, Vaslui County, in central Moldova, the daughter of Sarah and (Tsvi-)Hersh Kaufman Rabinsohn. Her father was a traditional slaughterer and synagogue functionary, her mother a small-time food seller.

As a young woman, Pauker became a teacher in a Jewish elementary school in Bucharest. While her younger brother was a Zionist and remained religious, she opted for Socialism, joining the Social Democratic Party of Romania in 1915 and then its successor, the Socialist Party of Romania, in 1918. She was active in the pro-Bolshevik faction of the group, the one that took control after the Party's Congress of May 1921 and joined the Comintern under the name of Socialist-Communist Party, future Communist Party of Romania.

She attended medical school in Switzerland for a period beginning in 1915 and married Marcel Pauker, a fellow Rumanian student in 1921, from whom she divorced in 1930. They had three children: Tanio (1921–1922), Vlad (1926–2016) and Tatiana (1928–2011). Though it was long alleged that she denounced the father of her three children as a Trotskyite, Comintern archival documents reveal, however, that she repeatedly refused to do so. Ana Pauker had a fourth child, Masha (1932–2020), fathered by the Czech-Jewish Communist Eugen Fried; Masha who was born in Moscow, was raised in France by her father. Pauker adopted a fifth child, Alexandru, in the late 1940s.

The Romanian Communist party had been declared an illegal organization and driven underground on April 1924. It was under firm Soviet control in the 1930s, a period in which it was also the target of effective police suppression. At the party's peak around 1936, it probably had only 5,000 members. In 1944, on the eve of its taking power, its membership may have numbered only 1,000.

Ana and her husband, Marcel Pauker, were arrested in 1923 and again in 1924 for their political activities and sent into exile in first to Berlin and Paris, and later to Vienna in 1927. In 1928, Pauker moved to Moscow to join the Comintern's International Lenin School, which trained senior Communist functionaries. In Moscow she became closely associated with Dmitry Manuilsky, the Kremlin's foremost representative at the Comintern in the 1930s.

From Moscow Ana Pauker went to France, where she became an instructor for the Comintern being also involved in the communist movement elsewhere in the Balkans. Upon returning to Romania in 1935, she was arrested and shot in both legs when she tried to flee. Ana Pauker was the chief defendant in a widely publicized trial with other leading communists and was sentenced to ten years in prison. In May 1941, the Romanian government sent her into exile to the Soviet Union in exchange for Ion Codreanu, a former member of Sfatul Țării, the parliament of Bessarabia, who voted for union with Romania on 27 March 1918, and who was detained by the Soviets after their occupation of Bessarabia in 1940. In the meantime, her husband had fallen victim to the Soviet Great Purge in 1938.

The next several years found her in Moscow where she played the role of propagandist to her native country. Her broadcasts in Rumanian over Radio Moscow were directed to her countrymen at home. She also helped to organize a Rumanian division to serve in the Soviet army, drawn from Rumanians serving with the Germans whom the Soviets had captured.

Despite later claims by Gheorghiu-Dej, Communists played no role in wartime Rumania. Thus, the party lacked the prestige of its counterpart in Yugoslavia. There, Joseph Tito could claim that Communism had become a legitimate and significant force due to its leadership of the anti-Nazi resistance movement. Some of the Romanian party's main figures like Gheorghiu-Dej had been imprisoned since the mid-1930s. Most Rumanian Communist leaders, including Ana Pauker, had been in exile in the Soviet Union.

When Vasile Luca, Constantin Pîrvulescu, Lucrețiu Pătrășcanu, Pauker, Teohari Georgescu, Florica Bagdasar, and Gheorghe Vasilichi attended the Romanian Communist Party meeting in Moscow, Ana Pauker became the leader of the Romanian communist exiles who later on became known as the "Muscovite faction". She returned to Romania in 1944 when the Red Army entered the country, becoming a member of the post-war government, which came to be dominated by the communists. In November 1947, the non-communist foreign minister Gheorghe Tătărescu was ousted and replaced by Pauker, making her the first woman in the modern world to hold such a post.

Although she declined to become the General Secretary of the Romanian Communist Party because she was a woman, Jewish and an intellectual, and had proposed the Romanian worker Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej for the job instead, Pauker formally held the number-two position in the Party leadership and was a member of the four-person Secretariat of the Central Committee. "Arguably the Jewish woman who achieved the most political power in the 20th century," Ana Pauker was widely believed to have been the actual leader of the Romanian communists in all but name during the immediate post-war period. In 1948 Time magazine featured her portrait on its cover and described her as "the most powerful woman alive" at that time. Infamous as the "Iron Lady" of Romanian Communist politics, she was universally seen as unreservedly Stalinist and as Moscow's agent in Romania —“her fanatical subservience to Moscow,” one observer noted, “was not only undisputed, it was legendary”.

Pauker played a key role in forcing King Michael, the hero of the coup in August 1944, into exile. The young monarch traveled to Britain for a royal wedding in late 1947, and he returned to

Romania after announcing his own forthcoming marriage to Princess Anne of Bourbon-Parma. The Romanian foreign minister took the lead in opposing the marriage. The excuse she gave was the financial strain it would place on Romania. It seems that the real objection was the fear it would rally popular enthusiasm behind the king. By early 1948, Michael had been forced to abdicate. In February 1948, Rumania signed a treaty tying its interests to those of the Soviet Union. In March, a new constitution turned the country into the Rumanian People's Republic.

Ana Pauker played a pivotal role in the imposition of communism on Romania. At the same time, she emerged as a force for moderation within the Romanian communist leadership during the early postwar period. Pauker was certainly complicit in the extensive purges and arrests in 1945 of tens of thousands of Romanians who were linked to the fascist Ion Antonescu regime. Yet, by August 1945 Pauker and interior minister Teohari Georgescu released all but two to three thousands of those arrested, offering amnesty to any member of the fascist Iron Guard who had not committed serious crimes and who would turn in his weapons. In late 1944 or early 1945, she pushed for creating a more broad-based coalition with the National Peasants' Party and the National Liberal Party, but was overruled by Joseph Stalin; hence, the Communist-led government created in March 1945 comprised a more restrictive coalition with a faction of the National Liberals led by Gheorghe Tătărescu.

During this same period, Pauker also pursued what she later described as "a type of Social Democratic policy" of mass recruitment of as many as 500,000 new Communist Party members without strict verification, including many former members of the Iron Guard. This policy would later be the subject of an attack on Pauker during her purge, and it was quickly reversed. Many of those who entered the party during Pauker's mass recruitment campaign would be purged between 1948 and 1950, and mass arrests would return with a vengeance in 1947, including members of the National Peasants' Party and the National Liberal Party, as well as the amnestied members of the Iron Guard. Although she acceded to Soviet orders to arrest the leaders of the non-communist opposition, Pauker reportedly opposed the arrests of prominent National Peasants' Party officials Corneliu Coposu and Ghiță Pop and appealed to the presiding judge of the trial of National Peasants' Party leader Iuliu Maniu for leniency in his sentencing.

Reviewing her record during the early postwar years, the historian Norman Naimark observed that Pauker's "policies in the period 1945–1948 are remarkably similar to those of the Polish leader Władysław Gomułka. She encouraged coalitions with the 'historical' parties, urged compromises with 'bourgeois' politicians, and sought to deflect the persecution of social democrats and liberals."

These contradictions would intensify as the regime became more Stalinist under Cold War pressures from 1947 on. Ana Pauker was a steeled and tested Stalinist who was "fanatically loyal to Stalin and the Soviet Union", who once admitted that "If a Soviet official told me something, it was the gospel for me... If they had told me that the USSR needed it, I would have done it... If they had told me to throw myself into the fire, I would have done it". Nevertheless, Pauker paradoxically promoted a number of policies counter to those of the

Kremlin during the Cominform period of "high Stalinism", when the Soviet Union imposed a single, hegemonic line on all its satellites. In 1948 she opposed the verification and purge of the large number of members who entered the Communist Party during the mass recruitment campaign, even though the Cominform had ordered such a verification in every Bloc country. In 1949 she opposed the construction of the Danube-Black Sea Canal, even though, according to her own testimony, Stalin had personally proposed the project. In 1949–52 she opposed the purging of the Romanian veterans of the Spanish Civil War and French Resistance as part of Moscow's bloc-wide campaign against Josip Broz Tito or - at the very least - took no part in their repression, as they were not purged en masse in Romania until a few months after Pauker's downfall. And she was reported by colleagues and associates to have resisted Stalin's plans to have Justice Minister Lucrețiu Pătrășcanu put on trial, and was accused by the Securitate's chief Soviet adviser of having "sabotaged and postponed investigations" in the Pătrășcanu case.

What was remarkable was that Pauker supported and helped facilitate, the emigration of roughly 100,000 Jews to Israel, among them her parents and her brother, between spring of 1950 and spring of 1952, when all other Soviet satellites had shut their gates to Jewish emigration, and as Stalin's policies regarding population control and strict restrictions on emigration and travel were increasingly tightened. Let's not forget that the actual aliyah of 100,000 Romanian Jews was conducted via the 'Shaike Dan channel'. If you recall from episode 22 of this podcast, a couple of the Jews parachuted in Romania during the Second World War stayed in Bucharest after the war to help with Jewish immigration; one of them was Shaike Dan.

Pauker was heavily involved in all discussions involving the Romanian policy towards Israel, fact also confirmed by recently found documents relating to Romanian-Israeli relations. The People's Republic of Romania cultivated close ties of friendship with the Israeli Communist Party. These two communist parties were led by the Kremlin as the Israeli Communist Party was formed at the initiative of Soviet leaders, who approved the emigration of certain Jewish communists sent to build a strong Communist party in Israel. But this party has shown since beginnings a lack of viability, so that the Soviet strategy changed to blaming Zionism, thus coming in contradiction with all Israeli parties and with the tradition of building the Israel national state with major contribution from Zionist organizations. Important leaders of the Israeli Communist Party were invited to specialization in Romania since 1949. Documents of the collection Romania-Israel describe different situations of the Romanian-Israeli relations. Pauker enjoyed a great prestige in Israel. The Israeli foreign minister, Moshe Sharett called her „an exceptional woman”. She was always informed of developments in the Romanian-Israeli relations during her stay as the Minister of Foreign Affairs. The ad- interim Israeli President Sprintzak acknowledged to the Romanian diplomats the role played by the Romanian Jews to building the State of Israel.

Eventually, the Romanian Communist government, following Soviet Union's model, started cracked on Zionism among the country's Jewish population. As Pauker's father and brother were in Israel at that time, the Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion attacked her in burning words. "Ana Pauker—the daughter of a rabbi," he said, "is preventing her own people from

returning to the Promised Land." Over the next several years, while she continued to serve as foreign minister, the Romanian authorities became more brutal in their treatment of the country's Jewish population and in their verbal assaults on the Israeli government. In 1952, Jewish emigration to Israel was forbidden.

Ana Pauker firmly opposed the forced peasants' collectivization that was carried out on Moscow's orders in the summer of 1950, while she was in a Kremlin hospital undergoing treatment for breast cancer. Angrily condemning such coercion as "absolutely opposed to the line of our party and absolutely opposed to any serious Communist thought", she allowed peasants forced into collective farms to return to private farming and effectively halted additional collectivization throughout 1951. This, as well as her support beginning in 1947 for higher prices for agricultural products in defiance of her Soviet "advisers", along with her favoring the integration of kulaks into the emerging socialist order, led Stalin to charge that Pauker had fatefully deviated into "peasantist, non-Marxist policies".

Pauker's "Moscow faction" was opposed by the "prison faction", most of whom had spent the Fascist period in Romanian prisons, particularly in the Doftana Prison. Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej, the de facto leader of the "prison faction", had supported intensified agricultural collectivization, pushed for Lucrețiu Pătrășcanu's trial and execution, and was a rigid Stalinist; however, he resented some strains of Soviet influence, which would become clear at the time of de-Stalinization when, as leader of Communist Romania, he was a determined opponent of Nikita Khrushchev. Gheorghiu-Dej profited from the anti-Semitism in Stalinist policy closely linked to Joseph Stalin's increasing paranoia, actively lobbying Stalin to take action against the Pauker faction. Gheorghiu-Dej travelled to Moscow in August 1951 to seek Stalin's approval for purging Pauker and her allies in the Secretariat, Vasile Luca and Teohari Georgescu. But archival evidence has led the historian Vladimir Tismăneanu to conclude that "Ana Pauker's downfall did not occur merely, or even primarily, because of Gheorghiu-Dej's skillful maneuvering—as some Romanian novels published in the 1980s would have us believe—but foremost because of Stalin's decision to initiate a major political purge in Romania." Pauker, Luca, and Georgescu were purged in May 1952, consolidating Gheorghiu-Dej's own grip over country and Party. The charges against Ana Pauker increasingly focused on her positions on Zionism and Israel. She was accused of supporting "the subversive and espionage activities of the Israeli Legation and of the Zionists in the country", of making secret commitments to Israeli diplomats, of displaying a "nationalist attitude on the emigration of Jews to Israel", and of divulging secrets to "the enemy", the United States, through its principal agent, "international Zionism."

Pauker was arrested on February 18, 1953 and subjected to tightened interrogations and a soft form of torture in preparation for a show trial, as had occurred with Rudolf Slánský and others in the Prague Trials. After Stalin's death in March 1953, she was freed from jail and put under house arrest instead—the result of the direct intervention of Vyacheslav Molotov, who reportedly acted on the insistence of his wife Polina Zhemchuzhina, a friend of Pauker's and herself freed from prison soon after Stalin's death. When another Party leader informed Pauker of Stalin's death, she burst into tears—prompting her colleague to quip: "Don't cry. If

Stalin were still alive, you'd be dead."

Following the twentieth Party Congress in Moscow there were fears that Khrushchev might force the Romanian Party to rehabilitate Pauker and possibly install her as Romania's new leader. Gheorghiu-Dej went on to accuse her, Vasile Luca, and Teohari Georgescu for their alleged Stalinist excesses in the late 1940s and early 1950. The period when all four were in power was marked by political persecution and the murder of opponents, such as the infamous brainwashing experiments conducted at Pitești prison in 1949–1952. Gheorghiu-Dej, who had as much to account for, used moments like these to ensure the survival of his policies in a post-Stalinist age.

In 1956, Pauker was summoned for questioning by a high-level party commission, which insisted that she acknowledge her guilt. Again, she claimed she was innocent and demanded that she be reinstated as a party member, without success. During her forced retirement, Pauker was allowed to work as a translator from French and German for the Editura Politică publishing house.

In the spring of 1959, Pauker was diagnosed with a terminal recurrence of cancer. She died on June 3, 1960 of cardiac arrest, after the cancer had spread to her heart and lungs.

Ana Pauker was recast by Romania's leaders in the official Communist party history as having been a staunch ultra-orthodox Stalinist, even though she had opposed or had attempted to moderate a number of Stalinist policies while she was in a leadership position. As the historian Robert Levy concluded: "No other communist leader save Tito has been shown to have resisted the Soviet-imposed line during the Cominform period of "high Stalinism" as Pauker did—whether on collectivization, the fight against the kulaks and the urban bourgeoisie, the prosecution of Lucrețiu Pătrășcanu, the purge of the Spanish Civil War and French Resistance veterans, the dimensions of the Five-Year Plan, the staging of a show trial of Romanian Zionists, or the facilitation of mass Jewish emigration".

Pauker's career retained its significance long after her fall from power. Romania became one of the most independently minded of the Soviet satellite states in Eastern Europe by the early 1960s. Its leaders found it increasingly useful to resurrect Pauker as a symbol of the Soviet domination they now challenged. Thus, she was the target of intense criticism by the victorious Gheorghiu-Dej at the party's gathering in late November and early December 1961. He resurrected the issue of Pauker's alleged errors in the summer of 1944. The successful Romanian leader claimed that Pauker played no role in the coup that overthrew Antonescu's dictatorship whereas he, Gheorghiu-Dej, and other Communists in Rumania had stood at the center of this important event. Meanwhile, Pauker and other Communists located in the Soviet Union had allegedly looked to the Soviet army to bring Communism to power. After Gheorghiu-Dej's death in 1965, his successor Nicolae Ceausescu continued the campaign. Thus, Pauker was identified with Soviet interests at a time when later Rumanian leaders wanted to claim a closer link with non-Communist elements and to downplay the Russian role in bringing Communism to power in Rumania.

Ana Pauker's legacy in Romania today is still tainted by the attempt of ruling party propagandists in the 1950s and 1960s to scapegoat her as the leader responsible for the crimes of the early Communist period. For instance, she is often referred to in Romania as "Stalin with a skirt" (Stalin cu fustă). The Romanian film director Radu Gabrea, who completed a feature-length documentary on Pauker in 2016, suggests that this demonizing of Pauker is only possible because Pauker was a woman and of Jewish origin, and that it reflects the widespread antisemitism in Romania.

As historian Robert Levy put it: "Long the party's propagandists' scapegoat as the source of all the horrors of the Stalinist period, Ana Pauker continues to be vilified in post-communist Romania as the party leader most culpable for the post-war years' repression. But the truth is that this perpetually contradictory figure, though a Stalinist herself, and one who played a key role in imposing Communism on Romania, paradoxically presented an alternative to the rigid, harsh Stalinism that soon emblemized Romanian party life and left a hidden legacy as a persistent patron of Romania's peasantry within the communist hierarchy. The fall of Ana Pauker was a significant step in a process that precluded any reformist leadership from prevailing in Romania and fated its citizens to endure the extreme hardship that would culminate in the Ceaușescu regime."

I always liked the Romanian sense of humor. Numerous jokes and anecdotes circulated in the 1950s about Ana Pauker, the most powerful woman in Romania during the early years of communism. Let me share with you a sample:

1. Ana Pauker fell into a river, and three people jumped to her aid and saved her from drowning. Grateful, she told them that she would grant each of them a wish. The first asked her to arrange things between him and the party, so that the communists would no longer have suspicions about him. The second asked for a raise. And the third begged her not to tell anyone that he had saved her life.
2. Ana Pauker heard that postage stamps with her portrait were not selling well at all, so she went to a post office in person to see how things were going. The clerk told her that people were complaining that the stamps with Pauker on them wouldn't stick. Ana Pauker spat on the back of one of the stamps and then placed it on an envelope. "Look, it sticks perfectly!", "Yes," the clerk replied, "but people always spit on the front of the stamp."
3. Ana Pauker was seen walking through Bucharest on a sunny day, carrying an open umbrella over her head. A passerby approached her and said, "Comrade, it's not raining here." "I know," she replied, "but it's raining in Moscow."
4. A Romanian Jew sacrificed a million lei and managed to obtain a passport to leave for Israel. At the border, he was searched. "What is this?" he was asked by the customs officer, pointing to a small box of medicine. "They are pills for headaches," came the

timid reply. "And this?" the officer asked, pointing to another box. "It is an anti-nausea medicine." The officer continued to check the man's luggage and discovered a portrait of Ana Pauker. "What is this?" he asked suspiciously. "Oh, it's just a remedy for homesickness."

5. A foreign guest was received in audience at the Foreign Ministry headed by Ana Pauker and was told to wait for her for a while. He noticed a completely unusual telephone on the desk. It only had the receiver through which he could hear the speaker on the other end of the telephone line, but the microphone was missing. He then asked Ana Pauker's secretary what the device was. "Oh, it's our only direct line to the Kremlin," he was told.

This concludes our episode on Ana Pauker.

Until next podcast episode, be well.