Episode 30 – Jewish București (Bucharest in English, Bukharest in Yiddish)

Hello, I am Adrian Iosifescu, your host of the History of Romanian Jews podcast and this is episode 30, where we'll be discussing , the Jewish history of the Romanian capital Bucharest**.** I thought important for us to explore the Jewish history of some major Romanian cities so we start here with the capital, Bucharest. I hope you will find it meaningful.

At the begging of the episode, you listened to the Yiddish song "Mekhuteneste Mayne" – "My dear in-law", performed by the Bucharest Jewish Theatre orchestra. A link to the full song is provided in the episode notes.

București

București, in English Bucharest, in Yiddish בוכאַריסט - Bukharest, is the capital and the largest city of Romania. Throughout this episode we will be using the Romanian word București for Bucharest. The metropolis stands on the river Dâmbovița in the south-eastern part of Romania. Several lakes, the most important of which are Lake Herăstrău, Lake Floreasca, Lake Tei, and Lake Colentina, stretch across the northern parts of the city. In addition, in the center of the capital there is a small artificial lake, Lake Cișmigiu, surrounded by the Cișmigiu Gardens. București is a major cultural, political and economic hub, the country's seat of government, and previously, the capital of the Wallachia principality. București population is estimated at 1.76 million residents while the greater metropolitan area has 2.3 million residents, which makes București the 8th most- populous city in the European Union. București in the 19th century was the largest city in terms of population (58,000 inhabitants) in South-Eastern Europe after Constantinople but ahead of Belgrade (19,000), Sofia (12,000) and Athens (10,000).

Tradition connects the founding of București with the name of *Bucur*, who was either a prince, or an outlaw or a shepherd according to different legends. In Romanian, the word Bucur stems from *bucurie* which means 'joy' hence the city București could mean 'city of joy'. Growing up there I'm not sure it's true. First mention of the city was as the 'Citadel of București' in documents from 1459, when it became the residence of the ruler of Wallachia, the prince Vlad the Impaler. In 1862, after the principalities of Wallachia and Moldavia were united to form the Principality of Romania, București became the new nation's capital. In 1881, it became the political center of the newly proclaimed Kingdom of Romania under king Carol I.

The city architecture is a mix of historical Neoclassical and Art Nouveau, interbellum Bauhaus and Art Deco, mixed with Romanian Revival architecture and socialist era style; quite an eclectic combination. In the period between the two World Wars, the city's elegant architecture and the sophistication of its elite earned București the nicknames of "Little Paris" or "Paris of the East". Although buildings and districts in the historic city center were heavily damaged or destroyed by war, earthquakes, and even by Nicolae Ceaușescu's program of systematization, many survived and have been now renovated.

București Jewish History

Let's quickly review the history of Jews in Wallachia and specifically in București; more details were presented in previous episodes dedicated to the history of Jewry in Romania.

The first documentary mention of the presence of Jews in București dates back to the time of prince Mircea Ciobanul, when, around 1550, 8 Sephardic Jews who fled from the Alhambra are mentioned by name, two of whom, Isac Rufus and Habib Amato, had a shop, David ibn Usa is shown as the "eminent one", therefore the leader of the community, and the others, Iacob ibn Habib, Abraham ibn Eliezer, Iuda ibn Rufus. Another known Jew in București was Isaiah ben Joseph, who was secretary to prince Alexander Mircea in 1573. Under Constantin Brancoveanu (1689–1714), a Jew surnamed Salitrariul (maker of saltpeter) furnished that prince with the gunpowder needed for the army.

Up to the 19th century almost the entire Jewish population of Walachia was concentrated in București, where the great majority continued to live, thus the history of the Jewish community in București is essentially the history of Walachian Jewry. The initial community, consisting of merchants and moneylenders from Turkey and the Balkan countries, were called Sephardim or Spaniards because they came from Spain, fleeing due to religious persecution there. They were first mentioned in the middle of the 16th century in the responsa of several Balkan rabbis.

In București, they settled in the **Mahalaua (slum) Jignitei**, south of Sf. Gheorghe Vechi, not far from the Royal Court, around Sf. Ioan-Nou and Negru Voda streets.

Toward the middle of the 17th century, a new community, now predominantly Ashkenazi, was established. They mostly came from Galicia and Moldova and they were also called Galicians (Lehi) because they came from parts of Poland. The newcomers settled mostly around the area inhabited by Spanish rite co-nationals on Sf. Vineri, Vacaresti, Udricani, Mircea Voda, Anton Pann Streets, and the beginning of Dudesti Road.

In the 18th century the Jews were concentrated in the suburb of **Mahalaua (slum) Popescului** but as the community grew, a number began to move to other parts of the city, where they even established synagogues; however, some these were later closed by the Wallachian princes. The local populace, afraid of Jewish economic competition, was intensely hostile toward the Jews; starting in the 17th century there were repeated anti-Jewish riots and blood libel charges, and, as a result, many Jews were killed or wounded. Nevertheless, the importance and the influence of the Jews increased; their provost was named grand provost of the gild of tinmen; and their artisans and merchants were sought and honored by the Romanian boyars. Some among them were appointed to remunerative and honorable positions. The cashier of the București prefecture of police from 1839 to 1848 was a Jew. The Jewish banker Hillel Manoaḥ was knighted, and made a member of the commission appointed by the prince in 1847 to aid the suffering Jews, and in the following year he was elected to the municipal council. The physician Iuliu Barasch was appointed a professor at the Medical College in 1852.

The few Sephardi Jews, whose numbers began to increase only at the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th century, did not then constitute a separate community, although they had their own synagogue in a rented house in Mahalaua Popescului and in 1811 established their own burial society. In 1818 they were granted permission to build a synagogue. The București community grew rapidly in the 19th century through immigration. From 127 families registered in București in 1820 and 594 in 1831, the community grew to 5,934 persons in 1860 and 40,533 in 1899, 15% of the total population of the city. The Sephardi Jews, numbering

about 150 families in 1854, had founded their own community. Within București Jewish community, Sephardic Jews were less numerous, but formed an elite of bankers, traders, scholars and artists. One important banking family is the Halfon family, like the banker Solomon Halfon who was important in regards to the beginning of bank loaning in Romania. Another important figure was the Sephardi 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. He headed the Sephardic community in București for 32 years. Bejerano was erudite, spoke 8 languages and translated many religious texts. He was a confidant of Queen Elisabeth, wife of King Carol I. Other famous Sephardic Jews from București were Manoah Hillel, who left his entire fortune made from banking operations to the University of București and Jaques M. Elias who donated his entire fortune to the Romanian Academy.

The first Jewish merchants of București were tinsmiths, shoemakers, tailors, glassmakers, hatmakers, goldsmiths, silversmiths, mamulari (small goods merchants in Turkish), mamelegii or telali (moneylenders in Turkish). Because they could not afford a brick-and-mortar store, many of them carry their merchandise or tools on their back while roaming the streets of București in search of work. They were called boccegii. That's how the late 1800s merchant Moise Cilibi started**,** eventually opening a shop on Franceză Street. He became famous not for his business but for his educational books, as a popular philosopher and the first Jewish author to write in Romanian. He was mentioned by renown literary critic George Călinescu in his "History of Literature". George Potra, in his volume "From Bucharest of the Past" tells us that "Moise Ovreiul (the Jew) received the nickname Cilibi from the Bucharesters, meaning "the joker wise man".

Various Jewish benevolent societies and organizations were started to undertake educational and social welfare activities. Chief among them were the Choir Temple Congregation, formally constituted in 1876 and the Brotherhood Zion of the B'nai B'rith, founded in București in 1872. These succeeded in setting up and maintaining a network of educational and charitable institutions, including, in 1907–08, 15 schools. Cultural bodies were also established, and a number of Jewish journals and other publications made their appearance. București also became the center of Romanian Jewry's political activity and their struggle for emancipation. National Jewish bodies, among them the party of Union of Native Jews, established their headquarters there.
During the second half of the 19th century a number of anti-Jewish outbreaks occurred in București.
In the period between the two world wars the București Jewish community grew in both numbers and importance. The Jewish population of the city, now the capital of greater Romania and attracting settlers from all parts of the country, increased from 44,000 in 1912 to 74,480 (12% of the total population) in 1930, and to 95,072 in 1940. About two thirds of those gainfully employed were occupied as artisans, workers, clerks, and shop assistants; others were active in the liberal professions, especially medicine and law.
In 1941, 102,018 Jews lived in București, although possibly there were more, due to the influx of refugees from other parts of Romania.

It would be difficult to guess this today that Jews once formed the largest minority community in București**,** almost 11% of the city's population in the interwar period, when less than 3,000 Jews currently live in București.

București Jewish Neighborhoods

The Jewish presence played an important role in the life of București in the 19th and early 20th centuries. They represented the necessary contribution of urban and bourgeois spirit in a city with a traditional rural civilization.

The Jewish quarter formed a compact residential area on the left bank of the Dâmbovița River, with Calea Vacaresti and the beginning of Calea Dudesti as its central axis.

The starting point of Calea Vacaresti was not far from the current Union Square, in the oldest neighborhood of the city, known as Popescului slum (Mahalaua Popescului). From the Union Square, Calea Vacaresti follows a south-eastern trajectory, along Dâmbovița river, towards Berceni neighborhood. Its name is connected to the Vacaresti Monastery, demolished in 1987, which was located in the south of București. Gradually the Israelite population became predominant in this area, especially after the great fire of 1847. Jews settled on streets like Bradului, Vulturi, Nerva Traian, Colonel Orero, Pitagora, Udricani, Mămulari, Sfântul Ioan Nou, Jigniţa, Olteni, Mircea Vodă, Haiducul Bujor, Labirint, and a significant part of Calea Călăraşilor. As a result of this, there are also streets with specific Jewish names: Israelite Street, Halfon Street, Synagogue Street, Spanish Street, Dr. Rabin Street, Dr. Beck Street, Goldfaden Street, Jacques Elias Street, Dr. Iacob Felix Street, Palestine Street.

The Jews gradually also entered the commercial areas of București like Gabroveni and Lipscani, then other streets in the commercial center: Carol, Selari, Smardan, taking the place of Bulgarian, Greek or Romanian merchants, at first renting and then managing to become owners of many of the commercial spaces. The poorest Jews were employed as carpenters and craftsmen, mainly tailors, tinsmiths, and painters. Others were shoemakers, belt makers, upholsterers, glaziers, and barbers.

The **Dudeşti-Văcăreşti neighborhood** was one of the poorest, known especially for its second-hand merchants and the Antiques and Second-Hand Furniture Hall (Flea Market), which was of dubious fame at the time. The famous Flea Market was demolished in 1930 (see the photo in the Notes). For sale of old clothes there was Taica Lazar on Lazar Street (today Baia de Fier Street) located between Văcăreşti and Sf. Vineri street. At Taica Lazar Jews formed the majority of both sellers and buyers.

Characteristic to this neighborhood were the teahouses which were full after six o'clock in the evening regardless of the weather outside and where Jewish religious songs were played on the gramophone. There were also many traditional dairies and butchers, where kosher meat was sold.

The streets inhabited by poor Jews had houses close together, all with small shops, with a large population crammed into cheap apartments. In the evening, an intense life reigned on these streets. The Dudeşti-Văcăreşti area remains in the collective mind through the memory of the old shops and houses but also due to the evocations of the writer of the book “Calea Văcăreşti”, Isaac Peltz, in 1933. Eugen Lovinescu, a well-known Romanian literary critic, calls Peltz "the

greatest weaver of sorrows" and, analyzing his work, did not hesitate to evoke the name of Balzac. Through the intertwining of the fate of the family and other members of the community, a broad social fresco emerges, with characters that are more or less picturesque. The emphasis is on authenticity, on real conflicts, on everything that made up the tumult of life in a neighborhood over which suffering descends. And the autobiographical touch is obvious. The Dudeşti-Văcăreşti neighborhood was a lively part of the city, with a with a strong Jewish character, but far from the idea of a ghetto. Here is how Frédéric Damé described this area in his 2007 book "Bucharest in 1906":
"*Cramped into narrow houses, they live without space and air, working around a smoky lamp, working with perseverance and eagerness to earn a little well-being. In the evening, after the closing of the offices and shops where the vast majority of them are busy, their neighborhood becomes very lively, this entire population spreads out on the streets, women, children and old people living with each other, sharing the same fate, knowing each other which gives them a special character of intimacy."*
Other streets of the neighborhood, like Sf. Ioan-Nou, Str. Israelita, Str. Spaniola, Negru Voda were inhabited by Sephardic Jews, and formed a different neighborhood; houses with gardens and courtyards, without shops, formed "the neighborhood of the Spanish Jewish aristocracy" and "some of their buildings are famous for their grand style" as dr. Iuliu Barasch noted in his memoirs. Through their wealth and superior culture, Spanish Jews "have always represented elements of culture and refinement among their fellow nationals".

The second Jewish center was created in the area of the Palace of Justice, Sfinţii Apostoli Street, from where it gradually conquered **Calea Rahovei**. On Sfinţii Apostoli Street were located the houses of P. Bratman, built in 1887 by architect Const. Russe and, on Emigrantului Street, the properties of M. Mircuş built in 1886 by architect Richard Kraft.

Even before 1860, a third Jewish area was established in **Calea Moşilor**. Calea Moşilor started from Sf. Gheorghe Square and ended at Obor open market, bordering on one side with streets like Paleologu, Herescu-Năsturel, boulevard Pake, boulevard Ferdinand, Foişorul de Foc street, Traian, Zece Mese, Căluşei, Vaselor, Maşina de Pâine, Mihai Bravu and Obor and on the other side with boulevard Domniţei, Vasile Lascăr, Italiană street, boulevard Carol, Popa Petre street, Venerei, Silvestru, Teilor, Viilor, Popa Şapcă, Romană, Palade, Argeş, Birjarilor, Făinari, Episcop Radu and Câmpului. Jews from the suburban communes of Colentina and Pantelimon were also connected to this neighborhood, and frequented the synagogues and Jewish organizations here. Calea Moşilor is the commercial district par excellence and the place where most of the Jewish shops and factories were located. Here are the main leather goods shops (wholesale leather goods – D. Haberman, Laura and Mendel Blum, Iscovici Brothers, Ozias Kremer, Rubinstein, etc.) and shoe factories (factory with mechanized production process – Samuel Askenazi; Iosef Kaiserman). There were also bag factories ("Idealul" - founded by the Calmanovici brothers), knitwear factories ("Viitorul" - owned by Frankel), brick factories (Sinigalia, Ferdinand Feldman), paint and oil factories (Carol Zimmer) but also bakeries and bread factories (Geisler). There were also construction material warehouses (F. Feldman, Oscar Brothers, Filip Witzling, Filip Berman) and oil warehouses (Moise Blum).

Jews also played an important role in the Obor market, which had three parts: the cattle pen, the manufacturing pen and the annual fair. They did not deal with the cattle trade in general, but in the manufacturing pen (with shops and stands selling cloth, fabrics, looms, sheepskin coats, fur coats, household items, kitchenware and blacksmith shops) they represented the majority of merchants (for example: Aronovici and his son, Israilovici and his sons, David Herscovici, Bereiteanu and his sons, Leon Zilberman, etc.). Those who did business in the Obor lived mostly in Calea Moşilor.

București Jewish Cemeteries

Another important element of the București Jewry was their cemeteries. The first **Jewish Cemetery** was initially founded on Filipescu Street, which was later was renamed to Sevastopol Street after the Crimean War and served both the Ashkenazi and the Sephardic communities of București. In 1864 the cemetery closed as it had reached full capacity. By the time of its closure, 1,920 Jews had been buried there, with the oldest tombstone dating back to 1716. It was later destroyed by order of Ion Antonescu between 1942 and 1944. At the moment of its demolition, it was the oldest Jewish cemetery in București. One of the last people buried here was Dr. Iuliu Barasch in 1863. After its closure in 1864, the Sephardic and Ashkenazi communities each acquired separate burial grounds, which are today known as the Bucharest Sephardic Jewish Cemetery and the Filantropia Israelite Cemetery in Bucharest, respectively.

The **Sephardic Jewish Cemetery** is one of three active Jewish cemeteries that still exist in București. The cemetery is located on Olteniței Street and was opened in 1865. It has an area between 12 and 15 acres large, and contains about 10,300 graves. The cemetery is home to many tombstones, among which are some transferred from the former Jewish cemetery on Sevastopol Street. There is also an obelisk present, dedicated to the memory of Sephardi Jewish soldiers who died in World War I.

The **Filantropia Israelite Cemetery** is an Ashkenazi cemetery located on Ion Mihalache Boulevard and established in 1865. It has an area of about 170 acres and contains over 29,000 graves. The Filantropia Cemetery features a diverse array of civil tombstones, from traditional stelae to more elaborate monuments commemorating the affluent of the early twentieth century. Many bear the signatures of renowned stonemasons like S. Goldeanu, whose nearby workshop produced about 30 headstones, ranging from grand mausoleums to simpler plaques. Other noted craftsmen include J. Heidenreich, known for his black marble obelisks, and L. Martinis. Additionally, some families imported tombstones from Vienna, enriching the cemetery's collection with works by makers such as Nfg. Schulz and Wulkan & Neubrunn.

Being a product of this culture, I have a set of grandparents in each of the two Jewish cemeteries. My parental grandma although born in Romania, came from a Sephardic family from Vienna while my maternal grandparents, born in Romania, came from Galician families.

București Synagogues
The evolution of Jewish life in București can also be traced by the number of synagogues and temples: in 1832 – 10 houses of prayer, in 1861 – 30 synagogues, the beginning of the 20th century – 70 temples and synagogues, in 1930s about 130 synagogues and temples.
After the 2nd World War, in 1975 – 15 synagogues, 1981 – 11 synagogues. Today there are only 7 synagogues of which only three are still operating: Templul Coral on Sf. Vineri Street, Yeshua Tova Synagogue on Take Ionescu Street and Credinta Synagogue on Vasile Toneanu Street.

In the second half of the 19th century, many synagogues were built, reaching several dozen, mostly around Calea Văcăreşti. Only on Mămulari Street, apart from the Unirea Sfanta Temple that still exists today, there was the Fraterna Temple and several small synagogues located in the houses of rabbis. Also, on Mămulari Street was the Mikva ritual bath.
Set on fire during the legionary rebellion in 1941, destroyed in the 1977 earthquake or demolished in the 1980s under the communist regime, the synagogues almost completely disappeared.

Templul Coral (Choral Temple) on Sf. Vineri Street is the main orthodox synagogue in București still functioning. It was designed by the architects Enderle and Freiwald and built between 1864 and 1866 at the initiative of Iuliu Barash, as a close copy of Vienna's Leopoldstadt-Tempelgasse Great Synagogue. The synagogue was devastated by the legionaries in January 1941, then restored in 1945. The main hall was recently refurbished, and re-opened in 2015.

Yeshua Tova Synagogue on Take Ionescu Street near Piaţa Amzei, is also known as the Podul Mogoşoaiei Synagogue, is a Hasidic synagogue. It was designed in the Moorish Revival style and completed in 1827 making it the city's oldest synagogue still functioning. It was renovated in 2007. Bas-reliefs decorate the tympanums above the frontal doors and the upper part of the façade.

The **Credinţa (Faith) Synagogue** is a synagogue located on Vasile Toneanu Street. The synagogue is a modernist building situated among dwelling houses in a former suburban Dudești area. It was built in the modernist International style in 1926-1928. While the synagogue was once an active place of worship, its congregation had dwindled, and the building's condition has deteriorated. The building belongs to the Jewish community, but is locked and abandoned. The synagogue features an International architectural style with influences of Victorian and Moorish styles, including decorative pilasters, stars of David, and a triple profile cornice.

The **Great Synagogue** is located on Vasile Adamachi Street, It is called so because it was for a long time the largest synagogue in București. It was repaired in 1865, redesigned in 1903 and 1909, repainted in Rococo style in 1936 by Ghershon Horowitz, devastated by the Legionnaires in 1941 and restored again in 1945. In 1987 an eight-story block of flats was built in front of it. The synagogue was restored in recent years and houses the Holocaust Museum.

Templul Unirea Sfântă (**Holy Union Temple**) on Mămulari Street, was either built in 1836 or in 1850 as a synagogue of the tailors' guild and is therefore also named the Great Synagogue of Tailors. After a remodeling in 1910 the synagogue now has a mix of styles including Moorish, Romanesque, and Byzantine. In 1978, the Museum of the History of Jewish Communities in Romania was established in the synagogue at the initiative of the chief rabbi Dr. Moses Rosen.

The **Sephardic synagogue Cahal Grande (**Templul Mare Spaniol), built in 1818 on Negru Voda street in Văcăreşti was the most beautiful temple in Romania and even in Eastern Europe, a true monument of Sephardic art (see Notes photos) It was burned down in 1941, during the legionary rebellion.

The **Beth Hamidraș Temple**, located on Calea Moşilor was founded in 1781, first as a wooden synagogue completed in 1812, in a building given by a Jewish woman; initially, it was named after her and her husband's, Bet Hamidraș – Naftale and Taube Synagogue. A replacement of the wooden synagogue was completed in 1896. The synagogue was burned down by legionnaires in 1941 when 23 faithful caught inside during the religious service were killed. The synagogue was restored in 1947, however, the building has since been abandoned and repurposed as a warehouse.

The **Malbim Synagogue** was a true spiritual center of the Jews in Romania and the largest Orthodox synagogue in București, was located on Bravilor Street, near the former Căuzași Square. The synagogue was built in 1864 upon the initiative of head rabbi Meir Leibush Wisser and reconstructed in 1912. The building was named after Rabbi Meir Leibish Malbim (1809-1879) who was Chief Rabbi of București and Romania between 1858 and1864. The building was devastated by the Legionnaires in 1941 and rebuilt after World War II. However, in 1987, the Malbim Synagogue along with the **Spanish Small Temple** were demolished in 1984 to make room for the Union Boulevard in București.

The **Carpenters' Temple**, built in 1842 and reconstructed in 1895, also devastated by the Iron Guard, was demolished in 1984.

The **Adath Ieshurim Synagogue**, close to the Carpenters' Temple, an Orthodox temple built in 1915, was also demolished in 1984.

The **Fraterna Temple** on Mamulari Street, built in 1863 by the ladies' tailors' guild, was affected by the great earthquake of 1977 and eventually taken down in 1986.

The **Ad Kiduş Haşem Synagogue** built in 1863 as the cobblers' synagogue on Labirint Street was demolished in 1985.

Păstrarea Credinţei (Preserving the Faith) Synagogue on Vasile Cârlova street was the tinsmith workers' synagogue and was demolished in 1986.

The **Gaster Temple** on Sticlari Street, was one of the most modern buildings of its time, a place of worship for the Jewish elite of București. It was built in 1858 by the Gaster family, reconstructed in 1903, damaged by the earthquake of 1940 and then by the one of 1977, and was razed that very year.

The places are unrecognizable to a former resident, entire streets have disappeared and others are left with changed names. Sf. Ioan Nou, Banu Maracine, Sf. Nicolae Jitnita, Adam Goldfaden streets no longer exist; the former Macin street is now called Negru Voda - and the former Negru Voda street, which was further south, no longer exists; the current Macin street is a portion of the former Labirint, and the old Căuzași no longer exists.

The dramas of war, communism, expropriations, emigration to Israel destroyed the specificity of the Jewish areas of București. After 1985 Dudeşti-Văcăreşti was almost entirely demolished because of the architectural ambitions of the communist regime related to the wide perspective towards the House People when it was decided to extend the artery by another two kilometers in a straight line to the vicinity of Vitan Post Office and a connecting boulevard to the Labor Square. Houses on the streets disappeared like Căuzaşi, Văcăreşti, Pitagora, Nerva Traian, Theodor Speranţia, Calea Dudeşti, Calea Vitan, part of Calea Călăraşilor and Popa Nan streets.

The Jewish Quarter of București is much more than a simple area. It represents an essential part of the history, culture and architecture of the city, being a symbol of Jewish identity in the Romanian capital. From here, Jewish vibrant and dynamic contributions made a mark on the capital's urban environment, on the social, cultural and the political life of Romania.

This concludes this episode on Jewish București. Next, we will be discussing the city of Iași. Until then, be well.