

Episode 31 – Jewish Iași (Jassy in English and Yiddish)

Hello, I am Adrian Iosifescu, your host of the History of Romanian Jews podcast and this is episode 31. As mentioned in the previous episode, I thought important for us to explore the Jewish history of some major Romanian cities so we continue here with the city of Iași.

You just listened to the song “Moldoveanca de la Iași (Moldovan woman from Iași)” performed by Andreea Romila. A link to the full song is provided in the episode notes.

Iași

Iași, Jassy in English and Yiddish 'יִסאַזש', is the largest city in eastern Romania, the third largest city in Romania. Iași was the capital of Moldavia for almost 300 years, from 1564 until 1859. When Moldavia merged with Wallachia in 1859 Iași and București were de facto capitals for three years. In 1862 the two principalities were recognized as Romania with the national capital in București. Iași served again as capital of Romania during World War I from 1916–1918 when București was occupied by Germany and its Allies. Still referred to as "The Moldavian Capital", Iași is the main economic and business center of Romania's Moldavian region.

At the 2021 census, the city-proper had a population of over 272,000 while its metropolitan area had a population of about 423,000.

Iași is home to the oldest Romanian university and to the first engineering school, accommodating over 60,000 students in five public universities.

The social and cultural life of the city revolves around the Vasile Alecsandri National Theatre, the oldest in Romania, the Moldova State Philharmonic, the Opera House, the Iași Athenaeum, the Botanical Garden, the oldest and largest in Romania and the Central University Library, again the oldest in Romania.

Scholars have different theories on the origin of the name "Iași". Some argue that the name originates with the Sarmatian tribe Yazyges of Iranian origin, mentioned by Ovid in his writings. Another explanation indicates that the name originated from the Iranian Alanic tribe of Jassi, having the same origin with the Yazyges tribes.

Iași History

Archaeological investigations attest to the presence of human communities on the present territory of the city and around it as far back as the prehistoric age. Later settlements included those of the Cucuteni culture, a late Neolithic archaeological culture.

There is archaeological evidence of human settlements in the area of Iași dating from the 6th to 7th centuries (Curtea Domnească). In 1396, Iași is mentioned by the German crusader Johann Schiltberger, a participant in the Battle of Nicopolis. The name of the city is first found in an official document in 1408. This is a grant of certain commercial privileges by the Moldavian Prince Alexander to the Polish merchants of Lvov. However, as buildings older than 1408 still exist, e.g. the Armenian Church believed to be originally built in 1395, it is certain that the city existed before its first surviving written mention.

Around 1564, prince Alexandru Lăpușeanu moved the Moldavian capital from Suceava to Iași. In 1640, prince Vasile Lupu established the first school in which the Romanian replaced Greek, and set up a printing press in the Byzantine Monastery Trei Ierarhi built in 1639. The city was often burned down and looted by the Tatars (in 1513, 1574, 1577, 1593), by the Ottomans in 1538, the Cossacks and Tartars (1650), or the Poles (1620, 1686). It is surprising that after some many disasters anything survived until today. In 1734, it was hit by the plague. The city was also affected by famine (1575, 1724, 1739–1740), or large local fires (1725, 1735, 1753, 1766, 1785), propagated by many buildings that were built on wooden structures.

Iași Jewish History

Now, that we have some idea of Iași's history, let us quickly review the history of Jews in Moldavia and specifically in Iași; more details were presented in previous episodes dedicated to the history of Jewry in Romania.

Iași figures prominently in Romanian Jewish history, with the first documented presence of Sephardi Jews from the late 16th century. The oldest tomb inscription in the local cemetery probably dates from 1610. The first Jewish settlers arrived in Iași around the 15th century. Isaac ben Benjamin Shor, a Jew from Iași, was steward and chancellor to Prince Stephen the Great who ruled Moldavia from 1457 to 1504. Isaac also served under Bogdan (1504-1517), the son and successor of Stephen. In 1551, the Jew "Emanuel" was nominated by the Turkish sultan to be the ruler of Moldavia, however it is not clear whether he actually ruled.

At the end of the 16th century, the Jewish settlement in Iași became a stopover place for Polish merchants on their way to Bessarabia and the port of Galati. Several Moldavian princes used Jewish doctors, who also served in political roles. The trade in wine and hard spirits at that time was almost solely in Jewish hands. In the 17th century, Iași served as a stopover for immigrants from central and eastern European countries and Jews slowly began to settle in the area.

A statistic from 1851 records 1,169 Jewish merchants and 1,430 craftsmen, to which are added about 606 Jewish journeymen. Jews were organized in professional guilds, separate from those of Christians. For example, in 1885 23 Jewish guilds operated in Iași: brass makers, bakers, grocers, butchers, innkeepers, tailors, scullers, carpenters, musicians, shoemakers, hatters, barbers, saddlers, upholsterers, weavers and painters.

Jews mainly worked in the fields of clothing and footwear manufacturing, construction and transportation of goods, food trade, itinerant trade, but we also find them working as moneylenders or bankers, jewelers, silversmiths, brass workers, watchmakers, bookbinders. Despite laws that seriously affected their economic interests, such as those against itinerant trade from the end of the 19th century, the importance of Jewish entrepreneurs in the economic structure of the city of Iași constantly increased, so that in the first decade of the 20th century Jews represented about 77% of the craftsmen and traders in Iași. 77%!

In the 19th century the Jewish population throughout Romania grew rapidly and the fastest growth was in the Moldavian towns. By the mid-19th century, owing to widespread Russian and Galician Jewish immigration into Moldavia, Iași was at least one-third Jewish, growing to represent almost half of the city's population by 1899.

According to the 1930 census, with a population of 34,662 (some 34% of the city's population), Jews were the second largest ethnic group in Iași. There were over 127 synagogues. The Jews also settled in most of the neighborhoods of the city and especially, on streets with commercial traffic. Târgul Cucului, the primary Jewish quarter, became the commercial center of Iași.

During WWII Romanian government forces under Marshall Ion Antonescu launched the Iași pogrom against the city's Jewish community, which lasted from 28 June to 30 June 1941. According to Romanian authorities, over 13,266 people, or one third of the Jewish population, were massacred and many were deported. A third of Iași's Jews were killed! After World War II Iași played a prominent part in the revival of Yiddish culture but politics and renewed antisemitism in the 1960s and 70s led to a declining Jewish population. In 1947 there were about 38,000 Jews living in Iași. Because of massive emigration to Israel, in 1975 there were only about 3,000 Jews left in Iași with four synagogues which were active. Currently, Iași has a dwindling Jewish population to maybe 500 members and two working synagogues, one of which is the 1671 Great Synagogue, the oldest surviving synagogue in Romania and among the oldest synagogues still active in Europe.

Iași Jewish Culture

As mentioned before, the Jews from Iași played a major role in the Moldavian and overall Romanian culture. In 1855 Iași was the home of the first-ever Yiddish language newspaper, *Korot Haitim*. In 1876 Avraham Goldfaden founded the world's first professional Yiddish Theater in Romania, with the first performances being held in the Pomul Verde summer garden, on Ulita Mare. They enjoyed a favorable review even in the Romanian press, one of the reviewers being the famous Romanian poet Mihai Eminescu. In the following years, the initial repertoire of popular inspiration, was modernized under the influence of American revue shows and Viennese opera and was enriched by the staging of works of universal literature and dramaturgy.

Iași's prominence as a major center of Jewish culture is also noted in the area of music. Words of Hatikvah, the Israeli national anthem, were written by Naphtali Herz Imber in Iași. Jewish musicians in Iași played an important role in preserving the Yiddish folklore, as performers and composers.

The first Zionist Hebrew-language newspaper in Romania, *Emek Israel*, was published in Iași in 1882. Zionist sports clubs, student associations and discussion groups were established in the city, most of which later merged into the Organizația Sionistă (Zionist Organization). The Hachshara Farms in Iași were a type of training farms to prepare young people for resettlement in the Palestine region.

One particularly noteworthy Iași academic family was headed by Benjamin Schwarzfeld who lived from 1822 to 1896. He was an educator, writer and father of Elias Schwarzfeld (1855-1905) novelist and historian, Wilhelm Schwarzfeld (1856-1894) writer, publisher, historian, Moses Schwarzfeld (1857-1943) writer, publisher, Zionist leader.

In 1878, a group of maskilim in Iași (in the context of the Haskalah movement, maskilim refers to the followers of the Jewish Enlightenment, a movement that sought to modernize and integrate Jewish life into European society) established the cultural association Ohale Shem,

whose purpose was to develop the Hebrew language and spread Jewish culture. Hebrew writers involved in the association included Benjamin Schwarzfeld, Naḥman Fraenkel, Menahem Mendel Braunstein (known as Mibashan), and the physician Karpel Lippe. In 1906, a group of maskilim, including rabbi Niemirower, Iacob Nacht, Abraham Leib Zissu, Iacob Groper, Iacob Botoșanski and others, founded the Toynbee Hall Association, which was a sort of Jewish popular athenaeum, and organized public lectures on Jewish and general topics in Romanian and Yiddish. Among the lecturers who appeared in Iași were Sholem Aleichem, Bernard Lazare, Franz Oppenheimer, and Nahum Sokolow.

In Iași Jewish writers and journalists writing in Romanian before World War I included Adolf-Avram Steuerman-Rodion, Horia Carp, Enric Furtună, A. Axelrod, the brothers Joseph and Marcel Brociner (the former an essayist and historian, the latter a novelist in Romanian and German), the epigrammatist Bernard Goldner, the poet Adrian Vereea, the journalists Jean Hefter, Alfred Hefter, Carol Schoenfeld, Clement Blumenfeld-Scrutator, and A. Glicksman. There were Yiddish poets in Iași, among them Itzik Manger, Leib Drucker and Srul Braunstein; Hebrew poets, including Eliyahu Meitus and Hayim Rabinsohn; and Romanian writers, Geri Spina, Moses Duff (translator of the Psalms, together with the Romanian writer Mihail Sadoveanu), Jacques Pineles, Carol Drimer and Isac Ludo. The poet and philosopher Benjamin Fundoianu, later known as Benjamin Fondane, also began his literary work in Iași.

Iași Jewish Cemeteries

An important element of Jewish presence in Iași is the existence of Jewish cemeteries. The **Ciurchi Old Cemetery** was the old cemetery of Iași and the first Jewish cemetery in the Romania. It contained graves from the 15th century, the oldest dating from 1457, probably belonging to a Jewish doctor who came to Iași from Poland during the reign of Stephen the Great. The cemetery covered over 12,000 acres and contained over 10,000 graves around the tomb of the Ștefănești rebbe and was surrounded by a 3-meter stone wall. This old cemetery was destroyed in 1943–44 by order of the legionary mayor Constantin Ifrim, with the approval of Marshal Ion Antonescu. On August 7, 1943, the mayor approved the demolition of the surrounding wall with the help of 200 pre-military personnel, and the Jews were invited to exhume their dead. In order to rescind this decision mayor Constantin Ifrim demanded a huge sum of money from the community. The rabbis of Iași organized a hunger strike. In the end, it was decided that the little money the community had would be used for education and social assistance. One hundred poor Jews were made to dig up the bones of over 100,000 people. A small part of the remains were transported to the other end of the city in carts and thrown into mass graves. According to some sources, the tombstones were broken during the decommissioning, and were used to pave paths and roads.

After the 2nd World War, the former cemetery land was partially transformed into a park, Tătărași Park, in agreement with members of the Jewish community. On another part of the land, apartment buildings were built, and many bones were found during construction. In 2016 a plaque was erected by Iași City Hall to commemorate this former cemetery as the oldest Jewish cemetery in Romania.

The current land on which the **Păcurari New Cemetery** is located in the Păcurari Neighborhood was purchased by the Jewish community around 1880. The cemetery currently houses approximately 150,000 graves and covers an area of over 40 acres. The site has been cared for more than 30 years by Olga Chimir, a 59-year-old woman who in her youth was a mezzo-soprano in the choir of the National Opera of Iași. Olga Chimir lives right in the administrative building of the cemetery, although she has a home in the Păcurari neighborhood.

Iași Synagogues

Most rabbis in Iași from 1859 to 1919 were Hasidim. They included Shemu'el Shmelke Taubes, his son Uri Shraga Feivel Taubes, Yeshayahu (Isaia) Shor, an adept of strict Orthodoxy, Dov Ber Rabinovici, also called the Folticener Rebbe, Hayim Landau another adept of strict orthodoxy Yisra'el Gutman and his son Shalom Gutman.

From 1897 the position Iași chief rabbi was filled by Iacob Isac Niemirower, who subsequently became the chief rabbi of Romania. Another modern rabbi in Iași was Meyer Thenen.

Bonar and Robert Mc Cheyne, two foreign travelers who visited Iași in 1839 estimated the total number of synagogues at 200, of which 30 were large ones. "In a neighborhood there are 20 synagogues on just one street" the two missionaries noted, probably referring to Târgu Cucului, an area with a high density of Jewish population and numerous synagogues and houses of prayer. They visited about 12 synagogues, including the largest in the city, and found them overcrowded during major holidays.

The synagogues in Iași were founded and patronized or administered, in general, by wealthy Jews, professional guilds and the community. Several synagogues were founded by the families of some leaders of the community, wealthy bankers and merchants, among whom we should mention some well-known ones, such as Michel Daniel and his descendants, Naftule Zisu Kaufman, Pascal (Hascal) Botoșăneanul, Șimon Diamant, Iancu and Solomon Feighilis.

There were also numerous synagogues patronized by professional guilds. In the list from 1843 it was mentioned the synagogues of the cobblers and tailors in Târgu Cucului, the synagogue of the bakers from Podul de Piatră, the one of the guild of the carpenters near the Rufeni church and another on Podul Lung. In 1939, about 30 synagogues belonging to different guilds are mentioned: tailors, furriers, woodworkers, shoemakers, woodcutters, butchers, musicians, stonemasons, weavers, painters and others.

The **Great Synagogue** of Iași, the oldest surviving synagogue in Romania and among the oldest synagogues still active in Europe, reflects, through its history and architecture, both the effects of medieval prohibitions and the benefits of periods of confessional tolerance.

It was founded in 1670, reportedly at the initiative of Rabbi Nathan (Nata) ben Moses Hannover author of *Yeven Mezulah* book which describes the course of the Khmelnytsky uprising in the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth, from a Jewish perspective. He was the rabbi of the Jewish community of Iași in the 1660's. A charter granted to the Jewish community of Iași in 1666 by Ilias Alexandru, the Prince of Moldavia, confirmed the right of the local Jews to open a school and have a synagogue in their neighborhood. The synagogue is mentioned in another official document of 1686.

In 1822, after a fire that destroyed it, the synagogue was rebuilt in its current form, with further renovations taking place in 1865–1866, 1914, 1924–1925, after 1944 and after the 1977 earthquake. These renovations did not significantly alter its original appearance, with thick walls but a reduced height, the most important modern additions being the dome and the floor above the women's gallery. The reason why the synagogue is so low is probably due to the discriminatory laws of medieval Europe, according to which synagogues could not exceed the height of surrounding churches. Consequently, in order to gain maximum interior height, many synagogues were built with the floor below street level. However, we do not know whether, in the case of the Great Synagogue, such a condition was imposed by the authorities or was applied voluntarily, as a precautionary measure, by Jews accustomed to the arbitrary decisions of the central power. Initially, the position of the Great Synagogue was peripheral within the city, far from the royal court. Until the 19th century, the Jewish quarter around this place developed continuously, becoming the place with the highest density of Jewish population in Iași. It is no coincidence that around the Great Synagogue there appeared in the 18th century and in the first half of the following century many synagogues and prayer houses.

The **Merarilor (apple growers) Synagogue** was built in 1865 in the Jewish neighborhood of the city and was re-inaugurated in 2015. It has an imposing shape, and the exterior has some stylized Doric pillars. During the communist period it escaped demolition, but it was used as a storehouse, being masked by a row of white cedar trees, in order not to be seen from the street. Currently it is not functioning.

Another well-known synagogue in Iași was **Cismarilor (shoemakers) Synagogue** built in the 19th century but currently in a very dilapidated condition.

The **Podu Roș Synagogue** was the second major synagogue to be built in Iași following the building of the Great Synagogue in Iași in 1671. In 1808, the Apter Rav, Rabbi Avraham Yehoshua Heschel moved to Iași to found a Hassidic community there. In 1810 the Apter Rebbe built the synagogue from his own funds, though the completion of surrounding luxurious homes, which had been part of his contract with the leaders of a Jewish community of Iași, was not realized. The text of the contracts is to be found in the Apter Rebbe's published correspondence. Despite the synagogue no longer standing, it is still recalled today as one of the major synagogues in Iași.

This concludes this episode on Jewish Iași. Next, will be talking about the city of Cluj. Until then, be well.