

Episode 33 – Jewish Timișoara (Temesvár in Hungarian, Temeschburg in German, Temeshvar in Yiddish)

Hello, I am Adrian Iosifescu, your host of the History of Romanian Jews podcast and this is episode 33, where we continue the exploration of the Jewish history of Romanian cities with the city of Timișoara.

You just listened to the folk song “Doină from Banat”- Song from Banat, Banat being the Romanian region where the city is located. A link to the full record is provided in the episode notes.

Timișoara

Timișoara, Temesvár in Hungarian, Temeschburg in German, טעמעשוואַר Temeshvar in Yiddish, is the main economic, social and cultural center in Western Romania. Located on the Bega River, Timișoara is considered the informal capital city of the historical Banat region.

With over 251,000 inhabitants, Timișoara is the country's fifth most populous city and home to around 400,000 inhabitants in its metropolitan area. Timișoara is a multicultural city, home to 21 ethnic groups and 18 religious denominations. Historically, the most numerous population were the Swabian Germans, Jews and Hungarians, who still make up 6% of the population of current Timișoara. Timișoara is one of the most important educational centers in Romania, with about 40,000 students enrolled in the city's six universities. Several breakthroughs in Romanian medicine have been achieved in Timișoara, including the first in vitro fertilization (IVF), the first laser heart surgery and the first stem cell transplant. As a technology hub, the city has one of the most powerful IT sectors in Romania alongside Bucuresti, Cluj, Iași, and Brașov. In 2013, Timișoara had the fastest internet download speed in the world. Nicknamed the "Little Vienna" or the "City of Roses", Timișoara is noted for its large number of historical monuments and its 36 parks and green spaces.

The name of the city comes from the river which passes the city, Timișul Mic, Little Timiș. The Hungarian name of the city, Temesvár, was first recorded in 1315. It refers to a castle, vár, on the Timiș River. The Romanian and German names, (Timișoara and Temeschburg, respectively) derived from the Hungarian word.

The southeastern part of the Pannonian Plain is bounded by the Mureș, the Tisza and the Danube; the region was very fertile and already offered favorable conditions for food and human livelihood, back 4,000 years ago. Archeological remains attested the presence of a population of farmers, hunters and artisans, whose existence was favored by mild climate, fertile soil and abundant water and forests. The first identifiable civilization in Banat were the Dacians who left traces of their past.

It is assumed that in the 9th century, Knyaz Glad ruled over these lands, accepting Hungarian sovereignty, though no contemporary accounts exist. Timișoara was first officially mentioned in 1212 as the Roman castrum Temesiensis or castrum regium Themes. This year is disputed by historians of the opinion that the city's first documentary mention

comes from 1266, when heir apparent Stephen V of Hungary donates part of the Tymes fortress, built by his father, Béla IV, to Count Parabuch.

The city was destroyed by the Tatars in the 13th century, but quickly rebuilt and grew considerably during the reign of Charles I of Hungary. Timișoara's importance also grew due to its strategic location, which facilitated control over the Banat plain. By the middle of the 14th century, Timișoara was at the forefront of Western Christendom's battle against the Muslim Ottoman Turks. The fall of Belgrade in 1521 and the Hungarian defeat at Mohács in 1526 caused the division of the Hungarian Kingdom in three parts, and Banat became the object of contention between the Habsburg Kingdom of Hungary and Ottomans. In 1552 a 160,000-strong army led by Kara Ahmed Pasha conquered the city and transformed it into a capital city in the region (Eyalet of Temeşvar). Timișoara remained under the Ottoman rule for 164 years, controlled directly by the Sultan and enjoying a special status, similar to other cities in the

region, such as Budapest and Belgrade. During this period, Timișoara was home to a large Islamic community and was predominantly populated by Muslims. The Ottoman period of Timișoara produced famous historical figures, such as Osman Ağa of Temeşvar and Ali of Temeşvar, the first, an army officer, historian and traveler writer, the second, a well-known military commander.

After the Treaty of Passarowitz in 1718, Banat became a province of the Habsburg monarchy. After the conquest of Banat, the imperial authorities in Vienna began an extensive process of colonization, inviting especially German Catholics from Württemberg, Swabia, Nassau, etc. who would become known as Banat Swabians. In Timișoara, the Swabians settled mainly in the Fabric neighborhood, where they strongly developed craftsmanship. Under the political pressure of the Hungarian Diet, the Hungarian parlement, the Viennese Imperial Court accepted that the three counties of Banat to be reincorporated into the Hungarian Kingdom, in 1779. As part of Austria-Hungary, the city experienced a fast economic and demographic growth. Credit institutions invested large sums in the development of local industry; at the turn of the 20th century there were many enterprises here: two breweries, an iron foundry, a match factory, a brick factory, a gas factory, a chain factory, a hat factory, a chocolate factory, etc. In the empire, Timișoara was technologically innovative, as the first city in the Habsburg Empire to install street lighting in 1760, and then again in 1884 when Temeswar became the first city in Europe to have electrical street lighting. It also opened the first public lending library in the Habsburg Empire and opened a hospital long before Vienna.

In the aftermath of World War I, the Banat region was divided between the Kingdom of Romania and the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, and Timișoara came under Romanian administration after a short Serbian occupation between 1918 and 1919. The city was ceded by Hungary to Romania by the 1920 Treaty of Trianon.

During World War II, Timișoara suffered damage from both Allied and Axis bombing raids, especially during the second half of 1944. After the war, the People's Republic of Romania was proclaimed, and Timișoara underwent Sovietization and, later, Systematization. The city's population tripled between 1948 and 1992. Timișoara became highly industrialized both through new investments and by increasing the capacities of the old enterprises in various industries: machine building, textile and footwear, electrical, food, plastics, optical, building materials, furniture, etc.

In December 1989, Timișoara witnessed a series of mass street protests in what was to become the Romanian Revolution. On 20 December, three days after bloodshed began there, Timișoara was declared the first city free of Communism in Romania.

Timișoara Jewish History

Jewish presence in Banat date back to 2nd-3rd centuries, the time of Dacia's occupation by the Roman armies. Jews have been present in Timișoara since 1515, when some settled there following the expulsion from Spain.

The community grew during the Ottoman occupation of Banat, as Sephardic Jews from the Ottoman Empire, particularly from Constantinople and Thessaloniki, migrated to the area. Documents confirm the presence of Sephardic Jewish merchants and money lenders in Banat, and the settlement of Jews in Timișoara is also attested by the funeral stones located in the Jewish cemetery of the city; the oldest surviving funeral stone dates from 1693, of the Jewish doctor Azriel Assael, originally from Thessaloniki.

After Prince Eugene of Savoy's Zenta victory over the Turks in 1698, the Austrian administration recorded the presence of 144 Jews in Timișoara. As in Bohemia and Moravia, the Jews of Timișoara were oppressed by the restrictions formulated by Maria Theresa in 1776. Only forty-nine were permitted to reside in the city. They were restricted to a single community, headed by a dayyan and a rabbi; nor might they contract marriages or leave the city without the permission of the authorities. Only eight were allowed to engage in commerce; and the distinction between Ashkenazim and Sephardim was abolished, the whole Jewry being comprised under the term "protected Jews of the cities and counties of the Banat." Jews from other places were forbidden to enter the city except for commercial purposes, when they were required to pay a daily tax of five groschen for protection, and were obliged to leave the city at night. Jews were forbidden either to have Christian servants or to live in the houses of Christians, and were compelled to reside in a ghetto in the citadel, their quarter being bounded by the streets now called Varoshaz, Szerb, Erzsibet, and Jenö. Marriages could be performed only by the rabbi of Timișoara, and all Jews who died in the province were to be buried in the cemetery of the city. It was not until the reign of Joseph II. (1780-90) that the condition of the Jews of Timișoara began to improve.

After 1870, the year of the split in the Jewish community throughout the empire, the status quo Jewish community establishes itself in the Fabric neighborhood of Timișoara while the Orthodox community congregated in the Iosefin neighborhood.

The first rabbi of Timișoara lived in the first half of the 19th century and was the European-famous rabbi Oppenheim or Oppenheimer Tvi Hirsch ben David (1821 - 1859), also known as "Gaon Rabbi Herschele Temeswarer". His grave, in the cemetery in Calea Lipovei, has become a place of pilgrimage for Jews and non-Jews alike.

The most prominent personality of Banat Jewry was baron Ignăț S. Eisenstädter, from Buziaș, president of the Jewish Community in 1866 and of the Chevra Kadiša, who made the greatest contribution to the construction of the synagogue in Cetate, among other things donating the organ. 10,000 people from Timișoara and Banat took part in his burial.

The peak of the flourishing of the Jewish communities was reached only after 1867 (the year of the Austro-Hungarian reconciliation), with the construction of six synagogues. First, the big Neolog one, in the central Cetate district, built between 1863 and 1864, an imposing construction executed in Moorish style. This was followed in 1899 by the construction of the synagogue in the Fabric district, also Neolog, which appears as a true architectural pearl, and the Orthodox one in the Iosefin district, between 1906 and 1910.

Multicultural Timișoara was also an important Jewish center at the beginning of the 20th century. The Jewish community in the city numbered around 12,000 souls in the interwar period, being a true economic engine of Timișoara. The Jews were book and newspaper publishers, had their own printing houses, laid the foundations of the Timișoara textile industry, cotton, wool and silk, and established hat, paint, soap, oil, leather and footwear factories. They created banking institutions, giving rise to a flourishing trade, through textile and food stores, through the export of cereals and furs. The small Jewish craftsmen contributed greatly, through their conscientiousness and professionalism, to the provision of household goods. Jewish artists laid the foundations of the city's philharmonic orchestra, and the concerts and musical life enjoyed a large attendance from the Jewish population.

During World War II, both Timișoara and Banat Jews suffered because of the Iron Guard, they were sent to forced labor camps, deported to Transnistria, the Jewish communities in the county were dissolved, and the Jews from there were moved to Timișoara, their property being confiscated. The Jews were evicted from their homes, the practice of trade and professions was prohibited, Jewish civil servants and teachers were excluded from public services, Jewish doctors and pharmacists were removed from colleges, Jewish lawyers from bars, Jewish pupils and students from state education.

Later, the communist period, in which some Jews believed that they would be rehabilitated, brought them great disappointment, as nationalism, which had invaded communism, revived anti-Semitism.

In 1947, there were still more than 13,600 Jews in Timișoara. By 1956, emigration had reduced this number to 6,700, still the highest for all Transylvanian cities; but by 1971 the population had fallen to 3,000. Today, the small Jewish community numbers only about 60 registered people. The Jews of Timișoara are fighting hard to preserve their identity and keep the flame of their ancestral faith alive.

Among the Jews of Banat, scientists, theologians, entrepreneurs, teachers, artists, and athletes have become known to the world, and a few names are relevant in this regard: physicist Peter Freund, musician Ioan Holender, journalist Peter Gross, and footballer Rudolf Wetzer.

Timișoara Jewish Cemeteries

An important element of Jewish presence in Timișoara is the existence of Jewish cemeteries. The **Timișoara Jewish Cemetery**, one of the oldest cemeteries in Romania, is situated in the Lipovei district, with its main entrance on Calea Sever Bocu, formerly known as Calea Lipovei. As I mentioned before, the oldest grave in the cemetery, dating back to 1636, belongs to Assael Azriel, a Sephardic Jew from Thessaloniki. The inscriptions on the older tombstones

are in Hebrew, gradually becoming bilingual in the 19th century as the city administration changed. Initially, they were in Hebrew and German, later shifting to Hebrew and Hungarian, and eventually to Hebrew and Romanian. The cemetery is divided into two sections: the older one, situated to the right upon entering, and the newer section. There are approximately 14,000 graves, 81 crypts, and a chapel. The chapel, designed in the Moorish style typical of late 19th-century Jewish buildings, consists of three rooms: a spacious hall for funeral ceremonies, a wake room, and a mortuary room for washing the deceased. Adjacent to the chapel is the residence of the guard and caretaker. On the frontispiece of the chapel is inscribed a Hebrew text which refers to verse 4 of chapter 32 of Deuteronomy:

Hebrew

לכבוד צור תמים בכל פועלו נבנה הבית
הזה בשם ברוך דיין אמת

English

This place was erected for the glory of His deeds, in
the blessed name of the true judge.

On the chapel wall, there is a plaque listing the names of 28 Jews from Timișoara who perished during the Holocaust. Across from it stands a commemorative stele dedicated to the Jews who were killed in World War II. The tomb of Rabbi Zvi ben David Oppenheim is a site of pilgrimage for people of all faiths, because it is believed to perform miracles. The legend stems from a story told by Rabbi Jakob Singer, in which a Christian cemetery guard, who survived World War I unharmed, credited his survival to the rabbi's powers, despite the rabbi having died more than 50 years earlier.

Timișoara Synagogues

Let us review now that symbol of Jewish life, the Timișoara Synagogues.

Fabric Synagogue, also called the **New Synagogue**, is a former Neolog Jewish congregation and synagogue, located on Ion Luca Caragiale Street, in the Fabric district of Timișoara.

Fabric Synagogue is one of the most beautiful buildings in Timișoara, notable for its very rich decorative ensemble. It features neo-Moorish elements combined with Gothic and neo-Renaissance elements.

The synagogue was built on foundation of a previous synagogue. The year of the foundation of the original synagogue on this site is disputed. Some opinions date it to 1838, others to 1841.

The temple was first opened for a Jewish community that, after 1870, joined the so-called status quo ante trend of Hungarian and Transylvanian Judaism. A dozen years later, this community became Neolog. The original synagogue was located on Kunz Embankment, on the banks of the Bega Canal, next to the Archduke's House and the Josef Kunz Palace.

The Fabric Synagogue was built according to a project by the Hungarian architect Lipót Baumhorn, who designed, among other things, the Neolog synagogues in Brașov and Szeged. The new building was designed according to the tradition of the great contemporary Neolog synagogues of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, being similar in shape to the synagogues in Rijeka, Szolnok and Zrenjanin.

Delighted by the plan, the Jews of Fabric formed a temple construction committee, chaired by David Blau, a spirit maker. The religious building cost 162,000 crowns. After a first presentation of the project, the newspaper Temesvarer Zeitung headlined on November 28, 1896: "The project is fabulous ! (...) the building will be imposing and will be one of the most special

architectural ornaments of the city of Timișoara”. The success of the presentation mobilized the Jewish community in Fabric and, in a short time, most of the funds were secured through collections and donations. The local authorities contributed 6,000 crowns, obtained following a lottery organized by the City Hall.

In addition to Amalia Freund, who donated half the value of the land needed for construction, Alexander Kohn, the sales representative and lawyer of the Kunz brick company, also played an important role in the Synagogue's construction committee. He also served as chairman of the committee. The work was entrusted to the Timișoara entrepreneur Josef Kremer. The synagogue was inaugurated on 3 September 1899, with a sermon by Rabbi Jakab Singer, in the presence of the head of the community, Bernát Deutsch, and the mayor of Timișoara, Carol Telbisz. The organ was built by the famous Timișoara craftsman Carl Leopold Wegenstein. The synagogue fell into decay at the end of the communist period, closing in 1985 as most of the Jews left the city after World War II and emigrated to Israel. It was closed for 24 years, during which time it was vandalized several times and several valuables, such as sculptures or pieces of furniture, were stolen. In 2023 it was taken over again by Timișoara City Hall for maintenance, rehabilitation and restoration in order to transform it into a tourist and cultural objective.

The **Cetate Synagogue**, built in the central Cetate neighborhood, from where its name comes, is located on Marășești Street. Many responded to the call of Chief Rabbi Mór Hirschfeld to replace the two small synagogues with a new one with donations and active participation in the organization and supervision of the work. The organizing committee, under the leadership of Marcus Grünbaum and Ignátz S. Eisenstädter, the treasurer, and later, between the 1870s and 1890s, the president of the community, played a key role. Ignátz Eisenstädter as an industrialist, businessman, and as the founder and first executive of the Lloyd Society, enjoyed formidable prestige. The Jewish community commissioned the Austrian architect Carl Schumann to design a synagogue similar to the much-admired one in Budapest, the Dohány Street Synagogue, the work of the architect Ludwig Förster, Schumann's former patron. The building was designed in an eclectic style, with features of the Moorish style. The synagogue was built between 1863 and 1865 and was inaugurated on September 19, 1865, and was re-inaugurated 7 years later, in 1872, by Emperor Franz Joseph I of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. It served the Neolog Jewish community for almost 100 years. The synagogue fell into disrepair at the end of the communist period. In 2001, the Jewish Community of Timișoara ceded the Cetate Synagogue for a period of 50 years to the Philharmonic Society. It was reopened for the first time in 20 years, in September 2005, when it hosted a concert organized by the Timișoara Philharmonic Society. Currently, the synagogue is back under the administration of the Federation of Jewish Communities in Romania. The Cetate Synagogue is one of the most distinctive and original buildings in the city. It has a rectangular plan with a dome and arches, with a vestibule and two towers on the west side. Its characteristic element is the facade with two massive towers, which integrate into the street front. The facade is built of brick alternating with glazed ceramics. The two tall towers are topped with domes, and the main facade has a rosette with stained glass windows in the middle. Inside the synagogue, inscriptions on marble slabs draw attention to important events. On one, the architect, Carl Schumann, and the community leaders are named. On the wall to the right of the entrance, a text in Hungarian, written in gold letters, records another memorable event: the reopening of the synagogue on May 7, 1872, on

the occasion of the visit of Emperor Franz Joseph I. It was a supreme gesture of recognizing Jews as citizens with full rights belonging to an important community in the city.

The **Iosefin Synagogue** is an Orthodox Jewish synagogue, located on Iuliu Maniu Boulevard, in the Iosefin district of Timișoara. The community of Orthodox Jews in Iosefin, formed in 1871, met until 1894 in rented premises. The synagogue was inaugurated on 18 September 1895, on the eve of Rosh Hashanah. Rabbi Bernát Schück, as the leader of the community, made an effective contribution to its construction. Carol Telbisz, the mayor of Timișoara, was also present at its inauguration. Built according to the plans of the architect Karl Hart in an eclectic style with neo-Moorish, neo-Romanesque and neo-Gothic ornaments, the synagogue is modest in size compared to the other two large synagogues in the city. In 1910, the synagogue was enlarged, but photographs from 1914 and 1915 show that the synagogue had only one central dome. Later it acquired its current appearance, with two central domes and two smaller, lateral ones. In the courtyard of the synagogue there were a cheder (kindergarten), a mikveh (ritual bath) and a shechita (slaughterhouse). The Orthodox primary school, established in 1918, moved ten years later to a new building at the end of the courtyard. The marble plaque inside the synagogue commemorates the construction of the school in 1928, honoring the names of those who contributed: First Rabbi Bernát Schück, Community President Jakab Rothbart, architects Arnold Merbl and Jakab Klein and others. Currently the Iosefin Synagogue is used on Friday evenings, Saturday mornings and High Holidays.

This concludes this episode on Jewish Timișoara.

Until next episode, be well.