

## **Episode 34 -- Jewish Cernăuți (Czernowitz in German, Chernivtsi in Ukrainian)**

Hello, I am Adrian Iosifescu, your host of the History of Romanian Jews podcast, and this is episode 34, where we continue exploring the Jewish history of Romanian cities. This episode focuses on a major Jewish center, Cernăuți (Czernowitz in German, Chernivtsi in Ukrainian).

You just listened to the Yiddish song "Bukovina Mayn!" or in English, "My Bukovina!" A link to the full recording is provided in the episode notes.

### **Cernăuți**

Cernăuți, currently Chernivtsi, is a city in southwestern Ukraine on the upper course of the Prut River. It was formerly the capital of the historic region of Bukovina, which is now divided between Romania and Ukraine.

A fortified settlement on the northeastern shore of the Prut River, in what is now modern-day Chernivtsi, dates back to the 13th century and is thought to have been built by Slav Prince Yaroslav Osmomysl. Historical accounts refer to this fortress-city as Chern', or Black City. The name reportedly comes from the black color of the city walls, built from dark oak layered with local black-colored soil.

The name Cernăuți first appeared in a document by the Moldavian prince Alexander the Good (Alexandru cel Bun) from October 1408. At that time, Cernăuți was a town in the region of Moldavia, serving as a defensive fortification that eventually became the center of Bukovina in 1488. By 1538, Cernăuți was fully under the control of the Principality of Moldavia, which lasted for two centuries until 1774, when Austria took control of Bukovina in the aftermath of the Russo-Turkish War. Known then as Czernowitz, the city became the center of Galicia's Bukovina District until 1848, when it became the Duchy of Bukovina, lasting until 1918. In the aftermath of World War I, Romania united with Bukovina in 1918, leading to the city regaining its Romanian name of Cernăuți. This lasted until the Soviets occupied Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina. Chernivtsi was under Soviet control from 1940 to 1941, after which Romania recovered the city, and then again from 1944 until the dissolution of the Soviet Union, after which it became part of independent Ukraine.

Cernăuți has been inhabited by Ukrainians, Romanians, Poles, Ruthenians, Jews, Roma, and Germans. During its affiliation with the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, Chernivtsi enjoyed prosperity and culture as the capital of the Bukovina crown land. Until 1918, the main language of the city was German, which, in addition to native Germans, was also spoken by Jews (together they made up half the population) and even partly by Ukrainians, Romanians, and Poles. Cernăuți's demographic diversity shifted with political changes. Initially, Romanians and Ukrainians formed the majority of the population. However, after 1870, Yiddish-speaking or German-speaking Jews surpassed Romanians as the largest population group. After 1940, Ukrainians surpassed Romanians as the second-largest population group.

## Cernăuți Jewish History

The Jewish presence in Cernăuți was first mentioned in 1408. In the 16th and 17th centuries, the number of Jewish inhabitants increased significantly. During this period, Jews mainly spoke Yiddish and were active as traders. The kahal, led by an elected judge and a rabbi, enjoyed limited autonomy and the right to its own jurisdiction.

In 1774, Austrian authorities who had occupied the town recorded the highest concentration of Jews—468—in the entire district. Seeking to limit immigration from neighboring areas, the authorities resorted to various repressive measures, ranging from compulsory fees to forbidding marriages and even endorsing banishment. Nevertheless, in the following decades the Jewish population continued to grow. Economic progress and rapid urbanization of the Jewish community clearly affected its interaction with the surrounding environment. As promoters of incipient capitalism, and given the absence of a local bourgeoisie, Jews—who were craftsmen, merchants, moneylenders, builders, and real estate owners—identified with modernization trends and promoted German language and culture as a means of attaining social progress and acceptance. Although traditional schools, Talmud Torahs and heders, continued to predominate, Jewish students attended German Jewish public schools that operated from 1789 to 1806, in addition to other educational institutions, including the city's German high school, which was founded in 1808. An attempt in 1843 to establish a bilingual school offering German and Hebrew finally succeeded in 1855.

After being designated the capital of the new Habsburg crown province of Bukovina in 1849, Cernăuți, now Czernowitz, enjoyed several decades of development, a process stimulated by the economic and political emancipation of Jews, which was completed after 1867. The Jewish population also increased significantly: from 4,678 out of a total 20,467 in 1850 to 14,440 out of 45,600 in 1880, and 28,610 out of 87,235 in 1910. The proportion of entrepreneurs who were Jewish reached approximately 90% after 1900. It was therefore not by chance that parliamentary representatives of the Chamber of Industry and Commerce, founded in 1850, were mainly Jews.

Many Jews were also civil servants. They constituted the majority in the freelance professions and on newspaper editorial boards. This was a direct consequence of the increase in the number of Jewish pupils, from 3% in 1845 to 60% in 1905 of the total number of students enrolled in Czernowitz's German high school, and Jewish university students, who comprised 42% in 1903 of the total number of students enrolled in the German university founded in 1875. A network of institutions—hospitals, asylums, orphanages, schools, and foundations—were gradually added to the prayer houses and synagogues. Among these, the majestic temple established in 1877 reflected the social prestige of the Jewish community of Bukovina.

Jewish people left the villages—the shtetls—to settle in Czernowitz, leaving behind the Yiddish language as well and experiencing their entrance to the German world as a sort of social advancement.

The particular urban civilization of Czernowitz resulted from an apparent cultural "symbiosis" between Germans and Jews, and represented a bourgeois enclave within a patriarchal and conservative environment. In 1905–1908 and 1913–1914, the city was led by Jewish mayors Eduard Reiss and Salo Weisselberger, respectively. After 1890, the response to the first antisemitic manifestations of Romanian, Ukrainian, and German nationalists consisted of both the spread of Zionism and the electoral success of the Jewish National Party, led by Benno Straucher, who had been the community's president since 1903. Diverse cultural initiatives served as alternatives to assimilation, the most prominent being the world's first conference dedicated to Yiddish language and culture, held in Czernowitz in 1908.

In 1930, the majority of Cernăuți's Jewish population declared Yiddish as their mother tongue. The disputes within the community between Yiddishists and Hebraists—as well as among Zionists, social democrats, and supporters of the Union of Romanian Jews—weakened the community's ability to react to increasingly virulent antisemitic manifestations, events that occasionally had the passive or even active support of Romanian authorities.

For the Jewish population, the occupation of Cernăuți by the Soviet army in June 1940 replaced racial persecution with the terrible experience of Communist social egalitarianism and Stalinist terror. The bourgeois elite of the community, numbering approximately 3,000 people, was deported to Siberia. Romanian and German forces reoccupied the city on July 5, 1941, with precise orders from the Antonescu government to punish Jews for their apparent attachment to the Soviet Union. Following a wave of assassinations, culminating in the murder of Chief Rabbi Abraham Mark and the torching of the temple, a series of repressive measures were taken, depriving Jews of civil and economic rights. On October 11, 1941, a ghetto was established that concentrated approximately 5,000 people in the former Jewish district of the city, serving as a transit point before their deportation across the Dniester River to Transnistria. From October 1941 to May–June 1942, more than 32,000 people were deported to various camps and ghettos. To prevent complete paralysis of local affairs, several Romanian notables—Romanian lawyer and reserve officer Theodor Criveanu, as well as the then city mayor Traian Popovici, supported by General Vasile Ionescu—saved 19,689 Jewish people. Initially, The Romanian governor of Bukovina, Corneliu Calotescu, allowed only 190 Jewish people to stay, but Traian Popovici, the mayor, after an incredible effort, obtained from the then dictator of Romania, Marshal Ion Antonescu, an allowance of 20,000 to perform compulsory labor. It is estimated that after the city was reoccupied by the Soviet army in 1944, approximately 30 percent of the Jewish population had survived. Cernăuți once had a Jewish community of over 50,000; less than a third survived World War II.

After World War II, the city was a key node in the Berihah network, which helped Jews emigrate to the then Mandate Palestine from the difficult conditions after the war. Berihah was an organized, post-World War II operation that smuggled around 250,000 Jewish survivors out of Eastern and Central Europe and helped them emigrate to Palestine. The name means "flight" or "escape," and the network, which operated from 1944 to 1948, used a system of routes and transit hubs to move survivors to Displaced Persons camps in Allied-occupied zones of

Germany, Austria, and Italy. From there, the goal was to reach the Mediterranean coast and be smuggled into Palestine.

Czernowitz's Golden Age—the period when this tolerant multicultural town developed—spans from the annexation of Bukovina to the Austrian Empire in 1775 to 1918, when the duchy became part of Greater Romania. Czernowitz was the Far East of the Austrian Empire, a bastion of western civilization and culture. For German-speaking Jewish writers like Karl Emil Franzos, it was a sort of oasis in the barbarian East, and for travelers, a more European place well linked to Vienna. As in other regions of the Empire, there was a strong contradiction between the élites ruling the urban areas and the countryside: in a duchy that was mostly Ukrainian and Romanian, the capital was a mirror of German culture and language, because of the Austrian state officers related to the imperial administration, the German community, and the increased assimilation of the Jewish community as a German-speaking society. The model was Vienna: the Herrengasse, the street with the most elegant cafés and the most important shops in Czernowitz, was reminiscent of Vienna's Graben. Buildings in the Eclecticist and Secession styles made the urban fabric totally Central European. The city developed a particular look also because it was really young and, as such, lacked any Gothic, Renaissance, or Baroque historical core. Cernăuți was once dubbed "Little Vienna" and "Jerusalem upon the Prut."

### **Cernăuți Jewish Cultural Personalities**

Among the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries Central and Eastern European Jewish cultural personalities, many were born and raised in Czernowitz. We will mention only a few:

- Paul Celan, a major 20th-century German-language poet, born in Czernowitz as Paul Antschel.
- Rose Ausländer, a German-speaking Jewish poet who was born and grew up in Czernowitz.
- Aharon Appelfeld (1932–2018), famous Jewish writer who emigrated to Palestine.
- Alfred Margul-Sperber, Jewish writer.
- Itzik Manger (1901–1969), well-known Yiddish writer.
- Şlomo Bickel (1896–1969), considered the greatest Yiddish writer of Bukovina.

Other, non-Jewish cultural personalities associated with Czernowitz include:

- Hermann Bahr (1863–1934), Austrian writer, playwright, director, and critic.
- Mihai Eminescu (1850–1889), the most famous and influential Romanian poet.
- Gregor von Rezzori, whose childhood landscape was the romanticized Czernowitz, described as Czernopol in "An Ermine in Czernopol."
- Gala Galaction, originally Grigore Păculescu (1879–1961), Romanian writer.
- Miron Nicolescu (1903–1975), Romanian mathematician.
- Ciprian Porumbescu (1853–1883), Romanian composer.
- Aron Pumnul (1818–1866), Romanian philologist and teacher, national and revolutionary activist in Transylvania and Bukovina.

## **Cernăuți Jewish Cemeteries**

An important element of Jewish presence in Cernăuți is the existence of Jewish cemeteries.

The primary Jewish cemetery in Chernivtsi, Ukraine, is the New Jewish Cemetery, established in 1866 and located on Zelena Street. It is one of the largest preserved historical Jewish cemeteries in Central and Eastern Europe. The New Jewish Cemetery is a vast site, featuring approximately 50,000 graves and a Ceremonial Hall. There is an ongoing restoration effort to transform the hall into a Holocaust Museum. While some of the tombstones and monuments are in traditional style, others vary greatly, indicating the wealth and high level of education of the population, as well as the social, cultural, artistic, religious, and political tastes and ideals of Cernăuți's Jewish community.

There is also an Old Jewish Cemetery on the same Zelena Street, just across from a Christian cemetery.

## **Cernăuți Synagogues**

Let us now review that symbol of Jewish life: the Cernăuți Synagogues.

The most well-known and imposing synagogue in Cernăuți was the **Great Temple**, initiated by Rabbi Elieser Eliahu Iegel (1825–1892), a Jewish leader from the capital city of Bukovina. On May 8, 1873, the Chief Rabbi and the Christian Orthodox Patriarch founded the future choral temple, built after the plans of the famous Armenian-Polish architect Julian Zacharewicz. This Reform Jewish synagogue featured a striking Moorish Revival architectural style and was once the most prominent building in Czernowitz. Tragically, it was burned down by German and Romanian soldiers on July 5, 1941, following the reoccupation of the city by Nazi-allied Romania. Despite the destruction, the building's outer walls survived, and in 1959 they were used to partially reconstruct the structure into a movie theater. The building lost its dome and much of its original appearance during this conversion. After the fall of the Soviet Union, the theater was renamed "Chernivtsi."

The **Great Synagogue** is located in the Jewish quarter near a Jewish hospital and a Jewish school. It was built between the 1820s and 1853 and exhibits Neo-Classical and Baroque Survival architecture. Construction of the synagogue probably began in the 1820s but continued for about 30 years and was completed only in 1853. It was closed by Soviet authorities in 1959, and the building was converted into a furniture factory in the 1960s.

The **Grossshil Synagogue**, built in 1853, was partially destroyed and currently is not functioning as a synagogue (it is in private hands).

The **Beit Tefilla Binyamin Synagogue**, built in 1923, is still operating.

The **Korn Synagogue (Korn Shil)**, built in the late 19th century, was restored between 2008 and 2011 and is now a functioning synagogue, the Israel and Zelda Mayberg Synagogue. It also serves as the Chabad Jewish cultural and religious center.

I hope I was able to offer you in this episode a glimpse of old Cernăuți, a focal point of Jewish life and culture in Eastern Europe.

This concludes this episode on Jewish Cernăuți.

Until next episode, be well.