

Episode 36 - Prominent Romanian Jewish Personalities and Families from Dorohoi and Suceava

Hello, I am Adrian Iosifescu, your host of the History of Romanian Jews podcast, and this is episode 36, with which we start the third season of this podcast.

In this third season we will discuss various Romanian cities and towns which historically had a large Jewish population, their specific Jewish history and their significant Jewish personalities. I hope you'll find it interesting.

This episode, episode 36, starts our virtual travel in the northeastern part of Romania, with the Moldavia towns of Dorohoi and Suceava. These towns share the distinction of belonging to the Bukovina province which was once ruled by Austria, as the Duchy of Bukovina, for 143 years, from its annexation in 1775, until the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1918.

Before we delve in, let me just mention that you just listened to the folk song "Din Suceava-n Radauti", "From Suceava to Radauti" and that a link to the full recording is provided in this episode notes.

Dorohoi Jewish History

The first town we are visiting is the town of Dorohoi, which has been located on important trade routes between Poland, Bukovina, and Moldavia. An important commercial center, Dorohoi has been an attraction for Jews since the 15th century. According to tradition, the city's old cemetery had headstones dating back to the 15th century, the oldest one is from 1656. Names of Jews appear for the first time in land ownership documents as well as in court sentences from the 17th century. A document from 1768 speaks about Jewish merchants dealing in crude oil & spirits, in Dorohoi. In the following period, some of the Jews who came to Moldavia settled in Dorohoi, at that time an urban center in commercial relations with Poland. As I mentioned before, Jews began to settle here in the 17th century. They were granted charters of privilege in 1799, 1808, and 1823. The Dorohoi community was organized, like other communities in Moldavia, as a *Breasla Jidovilor* ("Jewish guild"), first mentioned there in 1799 and existing until 1834.

The number of Jews increased in the following centuries, reaching from 600 Jewish families in Dorohoi in 1803, to 3,031 persons in 1859, 50% of the total population, to 6,804 in 1899, 54%, and 5,820, 37% in 1930. For much of the 19th century, Jews were the outright majority of Dorohoi's population, a defining feature of the town's character.

The Jews in Dorohoi were mainly occupied as artisans, manual workers, and petty shopkeepers. The town was also a major market for timber and farm produce from the northern Moldavian highlands, with merchants from neighboring states attending its fairs.

The effervescent Jewish religious life led to the opening of a synagogue as early as 1824. Before the Holocaust, 25 synagogues functioned in Dorohoi. The Great Synagogue, the only synagogue still standing today, was built in the 19th century on the site of the town's first synagogue from 1792. The town was also a Hasidic center, where *admorim*, Hasidic masters, sometimes lived. The community had a *Talmud torah* and a secular Jewish school by 1895. In 1920 the community established its first hospital.

Towards the end of the 19th century, the first Zionist organizations appeared in the city, and organizations were opened to help poor or elderly Jews. However Zion groups became active in

the last decades of the 19th century. Later, various Zionist and other Jewish organizations also became active.

The Jewish community suffered severely during the Romanian peasant revolt of 1907 because of "The Arendași System" existing in rural Moldavia at that time. Arendași were lease-holders who rented estates from the Romanian boyars and managed them commercially. Jewish arendași effectively ran vast agricultural estates, collecting rents, operating mills, and running taverns (cârciumi). That generated a tremendous amount of ill-will towards the Jews and many were killed during the peasant revolt.

The Jews were persecuted by the military authorities during World War I and suffered from economic restrictions and increased antisemitism between the two world wars which culminated with the Dorohoi pogrom of July 1, 1940. The spark that ignited the massacre was a military funeral. In an incident between Romanian and Soviet military men in Herța, neighboring Dorohoi, the Soviets killed a Romanian officer, and a Jewish-Romanian soldier, Iancu Solomon, who was trying to defend the officer. The two were laid to rest in separate funerals. A firing squad was sent to Solomon's funeral, made up of ten Jewish soldiers from the battalions stationed nearby. Right after the coffin was lowered into the grave, shots were heard and the local Jews ran and hid in the local cleansing room. The Jewish soldiers, turning to the cemetery gates, were surrounded by soldiers from the 3rd Border Patrol battalion. They were put up against the cemetery's back wall and shot by the Romanian soldiers. Then, the Romanian soldiers attacked the Jewish quarter, murdered about 200 Jewish inhabitants, and looted houses. The following day local peasants stripped the Jewish corpses that were still lying in the streets. The victims' families were forced to sign statements to the effect that their relatives had been murdered by "unknown wayfarers"; the public prosecutor, however, came to the conclusion that the soldiers had acted on instructions. According to an official Romanian report, 53 Jews were murdered, and dozens injured. According to the town's Jews, the number of fatalities was between 165 and 200. These acts were committed before Romania entered World War II, before it became Germany's ally, and before the German military entered the country.

In 1941 there were 5,384 Jews living in Dorohoi, comprising about one third of the population. After the war with the Soviet Union broke out, 2,000 Jewish men from the towns and villages in the district were brought to the city and deported to Transnistria on November 7, 1941. Dorohoi's Jews were deported on November 12, and by November 14 two transports totaling 3,000 persons were dispatched. Many died in the sealed railroad cars before they reached their destination, Ataki on the Dniester. Deportations resumed on June 14, 1942, when 450 men were sent to Transnistria. They were later joined by their families in Mogilev and were sent from there to German camps on the banks of the Bug, where most of them met their deaths. In Dorohoi itself, only 2,000 Jews were left and they were forbidden to engage in any economic activity.

After World War II the Jewish population of Dorohoi increased because of the refugees who settled there. In 1947, 7,600 Jews lived there. In 1956 there were 2,753 Jews in Dorohoi; in 1966, 1,013. In 2000, only 49 Jews remained in Dorohoi, with one functioning synagogue. Most Jews from Dorohoi emigrated to Israel. An organization of Israeli Jews originating in Dorohoi is

based in Kiryat Bialik, Israel. Dorohoi stands as one of the most striking examples of a once-thriving Jewish majority town in Romania, at its peak over half the population was Jewish, reduced to near-extinction through a combination of Romanian state-sponsored violence, deportation, and decades of emigration to Israel.

Dorohoi Rabbinical Leaders

The spiritual pillars of the Dorohoi Jewish community were its rabbis. **Rabbi Mattitياهو Kalman**, who died in 1824, represents the earliest formal rabbinical leadership of the community during its most formative decades. Another well-known Dorohoi rabbi was **rabbi Hayyim Taubes** (1847–1909), who, after serving in Sassov, Galicia, became one of Dorohoi's most distinguished rabbis. He was the author of Torah commentaries and responsa. A figure bridging the great Galician yeshiva world with the Moldavian frontier, he brought high scholarly standards to the Dorohoi pulpit and left behind an important body of halakhic literature. **Rabbi Dov Ber Drimer** (1889–1929) was a scholar rabbi of Dorohoi who represented the continuity of serious Talmudic scholarship in the community into the early 20th century. **Rabbi Pinhas Eliyahu Wasserman** (1917–1996) served as the last rabbi of the Dorohoi community. In order to maintain the illusion that Dorohoi was a model of the Jewish shtetl in Romania — with delegations of foreign Jewish organizations brought there to visit — he was forced to remain in Dorohoi for some 20 years by the Communist authorities, even though the Jewish population had greatly diminished through emigration, mainly to Israel. He ultimately made his way to Jerusalem, where he died in 1996. Dorohoi was also the hometown of **Moses Rosen**, Chief Rabbi of Romanian Jewry between 1948 and 1994, and president of the Federation of Jewish Communities of Romania between 1964 and 1994. He led the community through the entire Communist era in Romania and continued in that role after the Romanian Revolution of 1989

Dorohoi Artists, Intellectuals and Civic Leaders

Among the intellectuals born in Dorohoi were Romanian-language writers such as Ion Călugăru (1902–1956), Sașa Pană (1902–1979), and Ștefan Antim (1879–1944).

Ion Călugăru was born Ștrul Leiba Croitoru on February 14, 1902, in Dorohoi. A Romanian novelist, dramatist, journalist, literary critic, and poet, he was active across the literary movements of Sburătorul, Contimporanul, Expressionism, Surrealism, Social Realism, and Socialist Realism. As a figure on Romania's modernist scene throughout the early interwar period, he was noted for combining a picturesque perspective on the rural Jewish-Romanian community, to which he belonged, with traditionalist and avant-garde elements. His early works, including the novel *Copilăria unui netrebnic* ("The Childhood of a Ne'er-do-well"), bring together elements of Social Realism, Surrealism, and Expressionism over a conventional narrative line based on oral tradition and the classics of Romanian literature. The great Romanian critic G. Călinescu described *Copilăria unui netrebnic* as a vast mural painting of Jewish life, in the shadowed tones of Rembrandt and Grigorescu, with perfect stylistic maturity — objectively depicting a world that contains within it all the attributes of humanity: birth, betrothal, wedding, death, and customs rendered by a sure brush.

One of the most remarkable and little-known facts about Dorohoi is that it served as the birthplace of Romania's most important avant-garde literary magazine *unu* (Romanian for "one"), an avant-garde art and literary magazine published in Romania from April 1928 to

December 1932, edited by writers Sașa Pană and Moldov, dedicated to Dada and Surrealism. The first ten issues were printed in Dorohoi, and the rest in Bucharest. The driving force behind *unu* was **Sașa Pană** (Alexandru Binder, 1902–1981), who had strong ties to the Dorohoi Jewish community. Generally considered the most passionate propagator of avant-garde literary trends, he was the guiding spirit of the literary review *unu* (1928–32), Romania's most important avant-garde magazine. Pană's blunt manifesto begins with the words: "Reader, disinfect your brains." He is also known as the main archivist of the Romanian avant-garde; even today, avant-garde researchers rely on his archive and collection, now owned by his son, Vladimir Pană.

Another intellectual born in Dorohoi was **Ștefan Antim** (1879–1944), a Romanian-language writer on general and Jewish themes. His life dates, spanning from the peak of the Jewish community's growth to the Holocaust, encapsulate the entire tragic arc of Dorohoi's Jewish experience.

Abraham Goldfaden, the father of Yiddish theater, was very popular among the Dorohoi Jews, and lived in Dorohoi in 1851-1852, where he wrote his play: "The Sacrifice of Issac". Its premiere took place in the city, in 1892 with the participation of all of the Jews from outlying areas.

Suceava Jewish History

Suceava, known in German as *Suczawa* and in Yiddish as *Shotz*, was historically one of the most significant Jewish communities in Bukovina.

At the beginning of the 15th century, the Moldavian prince Alexandru cel Bun (1400–1432) invited Jews from Galicia and Hungary to contribute to the development of economy and trade. Another Moldavia ruler, Ștefan cel Mare (1457–1504) was under the care of a Jewish physician named Shmil, and sympathized with the Jews. Ștefan Răzvan, who ruled in Suceava (1595), also invited Jewish merchants to help develop trade and the economy.

The oldest tombstone found in the Jewish cemetery was dated 1510, making Suceava one of the earliest sites of Jewish settlement in the region, already home to an established community at the beginning of the 16th century.

At the beginning of the 17th century, Jews fled from Russia after the tyrant Chmielnicki and his bandits destroyed hundreds of communities and killed tens of thousands of Jews, swelling the Suceava community further.

When Bukovina was conquered by Austria in 1774, there were 50 Jewish families in Suceava. In 1771 the synagogue burned down and only in 1781 permission was granted to build a new synagogue. In 1782, the Austrian general Enzenberg ordered the expulsion from Bukovina of all those who could not prove they could support themselves. As a result, in 1782, 92 Jews were expelled from Suceava, the authorities claiming that they were unable to pay the taxes. There were 160 Jewish families in Suceava in 1791, and 272 according to data of 1817.

The Jewish population of Suceava continued to grow after 1841 and by the end of 1880, out of 10,104 residents, 3,750, 37%, were Jews. The Jewish communal institutions included a Jewish school, opened in 1790 and a large synagogue rected at the beginning of the 19th century.

The Jewish populace was very active and played a significant role in public life. In 1901 there were 6,787 Jews in Suceava. By the outbreak of World War I, the population had reached 8,000.

Jews engaged in the trade of liquor, wine, and beer. The cultural orientation was German. Jews played important roles in both municipal and national political life.

Zionism was particularly strong in Suceava. The Zionist movement in Suceava was founded at the end of the 19th century. It was very influential in the lives of the Jews in the city. It sent Max Ellenbogen and Yishayahu Langer as delegates to the First Zionist Congress in Basel in 1897. In 1902, the first congress of Zionist organizations in Bukovina was convened in Suceava. In 1906, Po'alei Zion was founded, with Dr. Meir Teich as one of its leaders.

After World War I, Bukovina was reintegrated into Romania. In 1930, the town had 3,496 Jewish inhabitants (34.2% of its population).

The interwar period brought increasing antisemitism. In Suceava, Jewish shops and houses were vandalized and destroyed by Romanian peasants, and their owners were assaulted. From December 1st, 1938, Jews were the target of restrictive regulations.

Antisemitic persecution began in Suceava in 1940, when the Romanian Army retreated from Bessarabia and northern Bukovina, which were annexed by the USSR. Government institutions moved from Czernowitz to Suceava. The Jews were blamed for the Romanian downfall, and many Jews were murdered. Terror against the Jews of Suceava continued during the period of "Iron Guard" rule. Many Jews were imprisoned on the grounds that they were Communists. In July 1941, thousands of Jews from the surrounding villages and towns were evicted from their homes and concentrated in Suceava. After that, the Jews were removed from the army, education, and public institutions, and the business licenses of Jewish entrepreneurs were revoked. At the same time, their properties were confiscated.

The deportations came in October 1941. The Jews were informed that deportation would take place according to the street on which they lived. At the same time, they were warned that those who were not present at the time set at the point of departure, or those who would commit acts of violence, attempt to flee, or destroy their property, would be shot on the spot. On October 9th, 10th, and 11th, 1941, three deportee trains left Suceava. With the first train, Jews were deported from Suceava, Ițcani, and Burdujeni. In the second there were only Jews from the city, and with the last train the sick of Jewish origin were deported from Suceava Hospital — a measure equivalent to sending them to certain death. 3,253 Jews from Suceava were deported between October 9th and 11th, 1941. They arrived in Moghilev, Șargorod, Djurin, Murafa, or other ghettos in Transnistria. In total, 5,874 people were deported from the city, a figure that includes Jews from Ițcani and Burdujeni. Among those deported to Transnistria were the city's doctors, many of whom perished from typhus contracted while treating patients.

After the end of the Second World War, both the survivors of the deportees from Suceava and the Jews from Northern Bukovina returned to the city. In the first post-war years, about 4,000 Jews lived in Suceava.

The number of Jews ultimately decreased as a result of emigration. In 1971 the town had approximately 500 Jewish inhabitants. In 2003, there were only 94 left and just one synagogue was still functioning.

The story of Suceava's Jews is one of a once-thriving community — at times over a third of the city's population — that was methodically destroyed during the Holocaust and then slowly dispersed through emigration to Israel, leaving behind one synagogue and a series of deeply important cemeteries as testament to centuries of Jewish life in Bukovina.

Let's talk about the Jewish personalities of Suceava.

Suceava Rabbinical Leaders

One of the most outstanding Jewish personalities born in Suceava was **Rabbi Meir Shapira** (1887–1933), who became the leader of the Agudas Yisroel Party in Poland. He belonged to the **Shapira / Shapiro Family** distinguished rabbinic dynasty deeply rooted in Suceava. The family produced Rabbi Jacob Shimshon Shapira and his son Rabbi Meir Shapira, and several members were active in Zionist and communal affairs across generations. Rabbi Meir Shapira was known as the *Lubliner Rav* and he is celebrated for promoting the *Daf Yomi* study program in 1923 — daily study of one page of the Talmud — and for establishing the Chachmei Lublin Yeshiva in 1930. His father, **Rabbi Jacob Shimshon Shapira**, was already renowned in his youth as the "Shotz Genius" (the brilliant mind of Suceava). His family came from the SWM communities (Speyer, Worms, Mainz), which is why the family name was Shapira.

Rabbi Yehuda Meir was a genius in Halakhah, an artist in casuistry, exposition, song, and poetry. He died at a young age, in his 47th year, in 1934. The "Zikhron Meir" neighborhood in Bnei Brak in Israel is named after him.

A Hasidic court was founded in Suceava by **Rabbi Yo'el Moskowicz**, who was the son-in-law of the famous Rabbi Me'ir of Premishlan. Meir of Preimslan's daughter, Miriam Haya, was married to rabbi Yoel. She was known as a wonder worker, using a cane she inherited from her father. She asked that it be placed in her grave to protect the city. Indeed, during World War I, all the surrounding towns were destroyed, but Suceava remained intact. A shelter erected over her grave in Suceava's old cemetery still exists today.

Another Hasidic court in Suceava was founded by **Rabbi Moshe Hager**, known as the "Humorer Rebbe." Rabbi Moshe was the grandson of the late Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Vizhnitz, known as *Zemach Zadik*, after his book on the Torah and holidays.

Rabbi Haim Hager was the son of Rabbi Moshe Hager. During the holidays and High Holidays, Rabbi Haim, led the prayers with his pleasant voice in the original Vizhnitz version, enraptured his Hassidim. Rabbi Haim returned from the deportation to Schotz, remarried to Rachel Fruchter, and continued to run the Schotz-Vizhnitz Hassidim. The Hassidim gathered daily for prayers and Torah study in the synagogue in the "Courtyard." The courtyard also contained a famous orchard for the enjoyment of the town's young people. In 1950, the Rabbi emigrated to Israel with his family, settled in Haifa and gathered his Schotz followers around him in the synagogue on Omer al-Mukhtar Street. Later, the Rabbi left Haifa and moved to Bnei Brak, where he died in 1977, at a ripe old age.

Rabbi Moshe Haim Lau was a strong supporter of the Zionist idea in Suceava, playing an important role in early Zionist organizing in the city. He served as rabbi of Schotz during 1920-1928. He came from a lineage of rabbis that went back generations. His great-grandfather, Rabbi Isaiah Halevy Segal, the TAZ (named after his book, *toarei zahav*), was a rabbi of Probusna. His maternal grandfather was Gaon Rabbi Shmuel Yitzhak Schor, rabbi of Monasterzyska, after whom his book was named, *Responsa minḥat shai*, and was one of the

greatest respondents of his generation. Rabbi Moshe Haim Lau was the son-in-law of Rabbi Israel Hager of Vizhnitz, the author of *ahavat yisrael*. He was ordained a rabbi at 27 and his first position was in Schotz. Here he founded a Talmud Torah and gave daily and evening classes. He was involved with bringing the youth closer to Torah and Judaism, and developed a friendly relationship beyond the relationship between a rabbi and his flock. From Schotz he continued to serve as rabbi in Preszów and Piotrków, one of the leaders of Polish Jewry and one of the foremost rabbis of Poland. Rabbi Moshe Haim Lau perished in the Holocaust.

Suceava Artists, Intellectuals and Civic Leaders

The lawyer **Baruch Schaffer**, leader of the Social Democrat Party, served as vice mayor of Suceava from 1907 to 1908. He was one of the first Jews to hold such a position in the city. A native of Suceava and a prominent figure in the Mizrahi Zionist movement, **Israel Shapira** emigrated to Eretz Israel in 1925 and became one of the founders and first Local Council chairman of Kiryat Motzkin.

Artist **Arnold Daghani** (Arnold Korn) was born into a Jewish family in Suceava, Romania 1909 and studied fine art informally in Munich and Paris during the 1920s. A collection of around 6,000 of his works — drawings, paintings, collages, sketchbooks, and albums — were given to the University of Sussex, entering the archives of the Centre for German-Jewish Studies in 1997. His many drawings and writings document his experiences in the Mikhailowka forced labor camp in 1942–43, from where he and his wife escaped only a few months before the camp was liquidated by the Nazis. He is considered one of the great documentary artists of the 20th century.

The Schwarz Family ("di poileshe") One of the most extended Jewish families in Suceava was the Schwarz family, nicknamed *di poileshe* to indicate their Polish origin. The widowed matriarch, Deborah Schwarz, emigrated from Poland with her five children. Four members — Meir, Yitzchak, Yoel David Schwarz, and Esther Karniol — established families in the city. They were devoutly religious, raised their children in a religious Jewish and Zionist spirit, and some of the family's descendants emigrated to Eretz Israel as early as the 1930s. Some members of the family established their own households and shops in the city. For example, Meir Schwarz ran a wire factory that made fences, gates, and sugar factory filters, while his wife ran a store selling pottery and glassware.

The Dalfen Family The Dalfen family, originally from Galicia, was a scholarly and commercially prominent household in Suceava. Grandfather Natanel (Snell) Dalfen was a Zionist intellectual personally acquainted with Ahad Ha'am, and the family ran a bookstore, a stationery, and yeast business under the brand *Le Dalfen*.

The Alter / Kostiner Family Among notable Suceava Jewish households were the Alter and Kostiner families, who in their business activities supported a communal *Gemach* (interest-free loan fund) for small merchants, and whose members were also among the founders of the local Mizrahi Zionist organization.

The Schapira Family was a prominent and extended family in the city, with members owning prominent local businesses (haberdasheries and taverns) on Regina Maria Street and contributing heavily to community leadership.

The Liquornik Family were leading civic figures in Suceava; Berl and Rachel Liquornik were notable residents, deeply involved in the local Mizrahi Zionist movement.

The Bessler Family was a prominent merchant clan dealing in large-scale cattle exports and the meat trade.

The Tennenbaum Family (Bobby and Munio) were notable for their daring Zionist activities; they were involved with the Beitar movement and famously bicycled from Suceava to the Middle East.

The Klackstein Family were esteemed educators in the city. Rabbi Klackstein ran a well-known heder (elementary school for boys) on which generations of local youth relied for their bar mitzvah preparation.

The Fallenbaum Family was known in the city for operating a candle and soap factory and store, contributing to the local commercial economy.

This concludes this episode.

In the next episode we will be visiting the town of Botoșani.

Until then, be well.