

Episode 37 - Prominent Romanian Jewish Personalities and Families from Botoșani

Hello, I am Adrian Iosifescu, your host of the History of Romanian Jews podcast, and this is episode 37, where we continue our virtual visit of the various Romanian cities and towns which historically had a large Jewish population. We will stay in the northeastern part of Romania and visit the Moldavian town of Botoșani (see its location on the Romanian map presented in the notes).

Let me mention that you just listened to the folk song “Fetele din Botoșani”, “The girls from Botoșani”, and that a link to the full recording is provided in this episode notes.

Botoșani Jewish History

Botoșani occupies a uniquely significant place in Romanian Jewish history, as one of the most heavily Jewish cities in all of Romania — at peak, Jews may have represented 40–50% of the population. By 1900 the Jewish population was probably 15,000–20,000 out of a total of around 30,000–35,000 inhabitants. The Jewish community was overwhelmingly Ashkenazi with strong Galician and Polish roots. Botoșani was a center of Hasidic influence, as several prominent Hasidic dynasties had followers here.

Botoșani is located in northern Moldavia, a short distance from the Bukovina border, about 30 km east of Suceava and 120 km west of the Prut river, which marks the border with Bessarabia. This close-to-the-border position made it a natural commercial crossroads. It sat on historical trade routes connecting Poland, Galicia, Russia. Unlike the port cities which were export-oriented, Botoșani was primarily an import distribution hub, channeling Austrian and Galician manufactured goods into Moldavia.

Tombstones from 1540 were found in the old Jewish cemetery of Botoșani. The Romanian historians, who studied the town's history, A. Gorovei and Tiberiu Crudu, pointed out that in the 17th century the Jewish settlement in Botoșani was in dire straits. In Hebrew literature Botoșani's Jewish Kehillah is mentioned in the Responsa of the “MaHaram (Meir b. Gedaliah) written in Lublin, in 1615, and afterward in the later Responsa of the Bach. (Yoel Sirkes, 1561-1640). From a document signed by Moldavian Prince Nicolai Mavrocordat in 1745, one can surmise that the Jews were considered to be “city-folk,” i.e. the town's citizens, a status that Jews did not gain in any other European realm at that time. Thus they were equal in privileges and in obligations to all the town's residents and even took part in administering the town. These privileges were also approved in a document signed by Moldavian Prince Matei Ghica in March 1754. During the Turkish-Russian war (1768-1774), the Jewish settlement in Botoșani suffered from the Ottoman military activities and the town Rabbi was murdered.

A document from 1769 notes that in Botoșani resident-merchants were active, trading in honey, bulls for slaughter and sale, etc. Towards the end of the 18th century, large weekly fairs for cattle trade took place here.

Despite the high-ranking status of the Jews of Botoșani, clashes did occur every now and then between them and the local population. In 1783, they were libeled with a blood libel; in 1817 they were in a conflict about enlarging the cemetery; Prince Calimachi ordered an inquiry and finally announced in May 1817 that the cemetery was 200 years old and that the “Jewish Guild” is allowed to bury its dead there. The prince also denied the Christian residents' request to

prohibit the Jews from drawing water from the well, arguing that the “Jews had always been considered equal to all the other residents.”

During the days of the Greek rebellion of 1821, Botoșani Jews were spared from the calamity that the rebels inflicted on Jews everywhere else in Romania. They fought shoulder to shoulder with the Romanian army and succeeded in driving the attackers away.

Count Fida Von Karaczay, who passed through Botoșani in 1818, tells that Jews were allowed to grow beards, a privilege given only to Romanian boyars and priests; that they are dressed like the Turks and that their trading reached to Leipzig and Brody, trade which included foodstuffs, crafts of Saxon origin, Russian furs, beeswax and tobacco.

From the 1832 census, we learn that 40% of the craftsmen in the town were Jews. Only Jews were hatters, makers of donkey sacks for farmers or water carriers. In 1900, the number of Jewish craftsmen in Botoșani reached 90%. Among the Botoșani Jews were also those with liberal professions, mostly physicians and lawyers. However, there were also many poor Jews, who inhabited in the so-called “poor quarter.”

In 1908, a cooperative Jewish bank was founded in Botoșani with 231 members called ‘Botoșani’. In 1911, a saving and loan bank was founded with 87 members. There was also a Hebrew printing house owned by Azriel Grinberg, which was known throughout Romania for its prayer books and calendars. Beside their trades the Jews participated in all city affairs and influenced every aspect of the city’s public life.

Botoșani had only two synagogues, but over 70 houses of prayer with libraries.

In 1861, the Aron Hakodesh (the sacred cabinet where the Torah scrolls are kept) was installed at the Templul Synagogue in Targu Vechi. The Temple in Targu Nou was renovated after the fire of 1887 and inaugurated in 1889. Avram Iosef Schnitzer, a master from Odessa, worked on the execution of the Aron Hakodesh and on the engravings inspired by the Bible.

The first public body that coordinated part of the Kehillah's functions was the “Chevrah Kadishah” (the ritual burial society) and a notebook from 1740 was preserved. According to the Kehillah's notebook from 1777, there was one Rabbi, one cantor, 2 slaughterers and one beadle (a synagogue caretaker).

The Jewish hospital in Botoșani i was at first a “Hekdesch” (shelter), founded in 1817 for those sick, mentally ill, crippled, beggars and the elderly. In 1863, the hospital moved to a separate building rented for the purpose, in 1877 a new building was built for the hospital, and in 1906 another new building. It had a very good reputation and the Romanian peasants preferred that hospital to the governmental one, saying that the Jewish physicians were more dedicated and humane.

In 1865, in Botoșani a new Jewish school for boys was founded, one of the first in the country, whose headmaster was the famous intellectual Hillel Kahana. In 1866, the school had 14 teachers and 438 pupils. A school for girls was founded in 1896.

Religious education was also very developed. In 1889, there were in Botoșani 32 heders with 2,000 pupils. Before the outbreak of World War I there were also a kindergarten and a vocational school for girls. A “Talmud Torah” was founded in 1908, and in 1910, 500 boys and girls studied there. In the same year, 511 students attended the school for boys and 464 the school for girls.

Towards the end of the 19th century, the number of Jews in Botoșani grew due to the constant deportation of Jews from the villages and the hamlets of the region, which were conducted according to the orders of the Interior Ministry in the years 1882, 1884 and 1892. In 1892 alone, the number of deported Jews reached 600. The Jews were allowed to lease manors and be occupied in farming, but not to live in those villages.

Persecution of the Jews in Botoșani continued and became a permanent feature of life. In 1887, when a fire broke out in the Jewish neighborhood and 800 houses were ruined, including the big synagogue, 5 batei midrash (traditional Jewish study halls) and the building housing the "Talmud Torah," the fire fighters refused to help the Jews in putting out the fire.

In 1900, several groups of emigrants left Botoșani by foot part of the fusgeyers movement ("fusgeyers" - "emigrants on foot" in Yiddish). They published newspapers in Romanian, "Pedestrii" and "Infrajirea."

The emigration of Romanian Jews on foot was the most unusual and most dramatic aspect of the great Jewish emigration in Eastern Europe to North America at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th. As they walked, these groups sang in Romanian or in Yiddish. They were poor and suffered from hunger and in many towns free kitchens were created to feed them. Bands of miserable Jews appeared at the railway stations and ports of some European countries on their way to America. This phenomenon of "walking groups" was one of the most salient characteristics of the Jewish "emigration fever" from Romania, given the high number of impoverished, desperate Jews on the brink of starvation, resulting in a "dramatic note" that "impressed and aroused excitement among all the Jews in the country". Yet the fusgeyers from the second wave were not all poor peddlers, many were young and healthy individuals that were artisans, workers, and, to a lesser extent, clerks. The most pressing reasons for the formation of the fusgeyer phenomenon was the bad harvest of 1899 and the May 1899 Iași pogrom. Jewish people started to organize themselves as "military-like groups" and flee on foot in early spring 1900. They primarily left from Moldova, the region with the largest Jewish population in Romania. The fusgeyers group usually ranged from 40 to 300 people, although the number would sometimes reach 500 or even over 1,000 people if several groups united on the way. For more details on fusgeyers, please see episode 9 – 'Romanian Jewish Emigration'.

During the farmer's rebellion of 1907, the Jews of Botoșani suffered terrible losses. The rebellion started in Botosani district, where Jews leased many manors. On March 4th and 5th 1907, 1500 farmers from the surrounding villages attacked the city. From the inns, where they became drunk, they came out to loot and rob Jewish stores and their dwellings. Christian dwellings were marked with white crosses on the walls and windows to prevent their being attacked. Twenty synagogues and 2 schools were also looted. The main street where the stores of the Jewish merchants were located looked after they were finished as one witness said, "like after a bomb."

The Zionist movement was extremely active in Botoșani. Already in 1882, the Hebrew monthly "Haor" (The Light) was published there, dedicated to the idea of the national revival in Eretz

Yisrael. The editors were Zvi Elazar Teler and D. Zilberbusch. A newspaper reporter, Avraham Feler, was a delegate from Botoșani to the eleventh Zionist Congress in Vienna in 1913.

When the Soviet army entered Moldavia, Botoșani local authorities and a large part of the Romanian population took refuge from the Soviet army advances. The only ones who would have remained would have been some of the members of the Jewish community. When the Russian army entered Botoșani on April 4, 1944, the city was surrendered officially by the head of the local office of the “Center of the Jews in Romania.” Without anything being recorded, but still known by almost all Botoșani residents old enough to remember, the Jews assumed the leadership of the city and declared the Jewish Republic to which the Russians would have added the Soviet label. Even the mayor of the city would have been a member of the Jewish community, Emil Ardeleanu. The Jewish intellectuals and merchants, in the absence of the Romanian administration, led the city for two weeks.

After the 2nd World War, many of the Jews deported from the surrounding villages settled in Botoșani, as well as refugees from Transnistria and those from regions that later became part of the Soviet Union, especially northern Bukovina and Bessarabia.

After several years under Communism, most of them eventually emigrated to Israel.

Botoșani Rabbinical Leaders

As we did for other cities, we will start the presentation of Botoșani personalities with its remarkable rabbis.

A famous rabbi from the Botoșani area was **Rabbi Avrohom Mattisyohu Friedman**, also known as the Shtefanesht (Ștefănești) Tzadik. He is considered one of the most important figures of the Hasidic movement. His tomb became the most important place of pilgrimage in Europe for Hasidic Jews. They come annually to pray at the tomb of the so-called "Angel". For more details on Rabbi Avrohom Mattisyohu Friedman, please see episode 29 – ‘Remarkable Romanian Rabbis and Tzadikim’.

Rabbi Dov Burstein, was one of the leaders of the “Mizrachi” (Orthodox Jewish Zionists) in Romania. He published several books, including “The Book of Wisdom and Ethics”. Another book on “Ritual Slaughter in the Light of Science” from 1938 was a response to a book by Dr. G. Radulescu-Calafat against ritual slaughter. He served in his role until 1950 and then immigrated to Israel where he served as chief of the rabbinical court of Tel Aviv-Yafo.

Botoșani Artists, Intellectuals and Civic Leaders

The **Blumenfeld family** was very active in grain brokerage and agricultural finance.

Saia Blumenfeld, born in Botoșani in 1896 was a major business owner.

Zev Blumenfeld, also born in Botoșani, attended yeshiva in Sighetu Marmației. In 1905 he came to Czernowitz and there took up his general (secular) education, studying at the university. In 1909 he left for Paris where he studied in the Sorbonne and became a resident of Paris. He published his first piece in 1913 in *Fraye Arbeter Shtime* (Free Voice of Labor), an article concerning the Provençal writer Frédéric Mistral. He wrote for Yiddish-language newspapers and periodicals in Europe and the United States: literary-critical articles, correspondence pieces concerning Jewish life in France, and translations from Dutch, German, and mainly French.

Roza Blumenfeld was a typical representative of the Botoșani merchant women, and played an active role in the family business.

The **Averbuch / Averbach family** was among the most prominent merchant families in Botoșani, involved in the textile and import trade with strong Galician connections.

The **Kaufman family** was involved in the Austrian import trade, typical of the Botoșani commercial elite.

Abramovici family was another prominent Botoșani Jewish family.

The **Șapira family** was connected to both commerce and religious leadership, illustrating how the two spheres intertwined in the Hasidic community.

The **Sommer family** was a very rich Botoșani merchant family. The Jewish merchant **Hirsch Sommer** built in 1860 a beautiful house using French craftsmen. After his death it housed a theater, where famous troupes of the time gave performances, the brothers Vladicescu and Matei Millo, Costache Nottara, as well as the troupe of actors led by Mihail Pascaly, which included the famous poet Mihai Eminescu as a prompter. The same Hirsch Sommer, as the leader of the local Jewish community, welcomed in 1859 the Prince Al. I. Cuza upon his arrival in Botoșani.

Another remarkable family was the **Wenstein family** who owned most of the town's breweries. One of the favorites of the wealthy people was Bucă's brewery. It actually belonged to the wealthy Jew called "**Bucă**" **Wenstein**. "This brewery was luxurious. Only people with money came here. They served luxurious snacks and drank the best beer. Even the place was positioned to satisfy all needs. It was cool in the summer and warm in the winter. It was one of the favorite places of the rich, especially in the hot season," said the town historian Median. Another famous brewery was the "Calul Bălan" (The Pale House), where the famous Cișmea (Pump) beer was served. It was produced in Botoșani, but it was luxurious, according to German and Austrian recipes and with water, which was said to have magical properties and

flowed a few kilometers outside the town. Of course, much of the Cişmea beer production was exported, being preferred in Hungary and Austria.

The Teler Family: The brothers **Zvi Elazar and Israel Teler** were Galician educators and writers who were immensely influential in shaping the intellectual and academic environment for local Jewish youth.

Beriş Moscovici was a well-known banker of Jewish origin who was friends with King Ferdinand I, welcoming the king twice in 1917 in Botoşani.

Reuven Feuerstein (1921–2014) was born in Botoşani into a large, poor Orthodox Jewish family; a prodigious child who read Yiddish, Hebrew, and Romanian by age three. Emigrated to British Mandate Palestine in 1944 where he became one of the world's leading educational psychologists, renowned for developing the theory of Structural Cognitive Modifiability (SCM) and the concept of Mediated Learning Experience — the idea that human intelligence is dynamic and can be substantially developed at any age. His methods transformed special education internationally.

Isidore Isou (1925–2007) was born Isidor Goldstein in Botoşani. Emigrated to Paris in 1945 and founded Lettrism, a radical avant-garde art and literary movement that influenced later movements including Situationism. A poet, filmmaker, economist, and visual artist, he was one of the most provocative figures in postwar French culture. For more details please see Episode 13 - Jews and the Romanian Cultural Avantgarde.

Max Blecher (8 September 1909 – 31 May 1938) was a well-known writer. Max Blecher's father was a successful Jewish merchant and the owner of a porcelain shop. After graduating from high school, Blecher left for Paris to study medicine. Shortly thereafter, in 1928, he was diagnosed with spinal tuberculosis (Pott's disease) and forced to abandon his studies. For the remaining ten years of his life, he was confined to his bed and practically immobilized by the disease. Despite his illness, he wrote and published his first piece in 1930, a short story called "*Herrant*" in Tudor Arghezi's literary magazine *Bilete de papagal*. He contributed to André Breton's literary review 'Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution' and carried on an intense correspondence with the foremost writers and philosophers of his day such as André Breton, André Gide, Martin Heidegger, Ilarie Voronca, Geo Bogza, Mihail Sebastian, and Saşa Pană. He continued to write until his death in 1938 at the age of 28. During his lifetime he published two other major works, "*Întâmplări în irealitate imediată*" (Adventures in Immediate Irreality) and "*Inimi cicatrizate*" (Scarred Hearts), as well as a number of short prose pieces, articles and translations.

Surica Bravermann (Sara Spachner), the only Romanian woman among the Jewish volunteers in Palestine to be parachuted back in Romania, was born in Botoşani in 1919, was active in the local organization of Hasomer Hazair, immigrated to Palestine in 1938 and received her education at the agricultural school for girls in Ayanot. She enlisted in Palmah where she learned that candidates for parachutists were being sought behind the Romanian front. Surica

was sent for training in Egypt and then parachuted into Yugoslav territory, among the partisans, from where she was to enter Romania. When Romania turned its weapons against the Axis she recalled back to base. In 1945 she took over the responsibility of military training for women in the Hagana. In 1948 she was among those who laid the foundation for the Israeli Women's Army. For more details on this parachuting event, please see episode 22 – 'Romanian Jews parachuted back into Romania'.

Andrei Călărașu (Bernard Grupper) was born in 1922 in Botoșani and grew up in Jassy. In 1941 Bernard, his father and his brother were survivors of the Iasi pogrom and the 'death train'. Călărașu was returned to Jassy with some of the few survivors of the massacre, and sent to hard labor. He was liberated with the arrival of the Red Army in the summer of 1944. Bernard studied at the Academy for Theater Arts in Jassy and in Bucharest. He directed many classical theater plays, and in the 1950s began to work in the film industry. He directed a number of full-length features, winning several prizes, and later became a lecturer on film and television. In 1965, Andrei immigrated to Israel. He began to work in the Haohel Theater and the Beit Zvi School for the Performing Arts, where he established the Film and Television track. He also directed skits on Israel Army Radio, and was a member of the founding team of Israel Television. He worked at the Israel Broadcasting Authority (IBA), in television and in radio, for some 30 years, directing hundreds of programs.

Iacob Psantir (1820, in Botosani - 1900) was "the first chronicler of the Jews in Romania". Among his books in Yiddish and Hebrew are *Cronica Tarilor Romanianesti*, *Intemplari si pozistiri din Romania*, and *Cartea amintirilor* (volume of memoirs).

Alexandru Graur (July 9, 1900 – July 9, 1988) was a well-known Romanian linguist. Born into a Jewish family in Botoșani, Graur graduated from the Faculty of Letters of the University of Bucharest and the École Pratique des Hautes Études in Paris (1924–1929). He obtained a Doctor of Philosophy degree from the Sorbonne. After returning to Bucharest, he became involved in academic life and published studies in different periodicals. Graur founded and was the principal (1941–1944) of the "Liceul particular evreiesc" (Jewish Private High School). In 1946 he started teaching at the university level. In 1955 he became member of the Romanian Academy. Between 1954 and 1956 he was the Dean of the Faculty of Letters at the University of Bucharest. He wrote many papers and articles on classical philology and etymology. He had many contributions in the field of linguistics, phonetics, and grammar of the Latin and Romanian languages.

Constantin Graur was one of the leaders of daily journalism: "...a thinker, a writer, a fighter..." as B. Branisteanu said. He was born in Botosani, in 1880 (d. 1940). He devoted his entire life to journalism. Publicist "in the Western sense of the word" of articles with political and social themes on topics such as Manasse, critical notes, Freedom of the press, From the history of Romanian socialism, portraits, etc. "Const. Graur is the definition of the true intellectual" said the poet Tudor Arghezi.

Henric Sanielevici (1875–1951) was a literary critic and biologist. Born in Botoșani, Sanielevici pursued two entirely separate careers, one scientific and the other literary. His polemical gifts

revealed themselves in the articles which he contributed – some under the pseudonym Hassan – to leading Romanian periodicals and newspapers. He held that literary works contained two types of phenomena: the sociological and the psychological. The former was to be clarified and coordinated on the basis of materialistic principles of history, the latter on what Sanielevici himself termed "differential psychology" and "the psycho-physiology of race." Sanielevici particularly opposed ultra-nationalistic tendencies in Romanian literary circles and from 1903 published critical essays and studies written in a vigorous and uncompromising spirit. The most important were collected in *Incercări critice* (1903), *Cercetări critice și filosofice* (1916), *Studii critice* (1920), and *Alte cercetări critice și filosofice* (1925).

Solomon Sanielevici was a painter, portraitist, landscape painter, woodcutter, born in Botosani, in 1878. He studied fine arts in Germany and France and in 1916 he exhibited, under the auspices of the "Libertatea" circle, his engravings and drawings; landscapes bathed in the sun, portraits. He died in 1917, in the war of reunification, a fact also mentioned by the historian N. Iorga, in 'Our War in Daily Notes'.

Simon Sanielevici was a mathematician born in Botosani, in 1870. He did his primary and high school studies (1881-1889) in Botosani, then at the Faculty of Sciences of the University of Bucharest where he was colleague, in the early years, with N. Iorga. Simon Sanielevici had a long and prodigious career in higher education.

It is worth mentioning that in 1876 **Goldfaden** was with his troupe in Botoșani; but at the outbreak of the Russian-Romanian-Turkish war, the actors were forced to hide in the attic of a house because of the Romanian army recruitments, where they would grab young people of the street, like being caught with the lasso. This inspired Goldfaden with the idea for a vaudeville in three acts, DIE REKRUTEN, the first original play presented by the Jewish theater, brought before the Botoșani public, as soon as the recruitment activity calmed down.

Let me close the Botoșani visit with a quick note: Botosani is important to me because my maternal grandfather family came from there.

This concludes this episode.

In the next episode we will be visiting the city of Iași. Until then, be well.