

Episode 39 - Prominent Romanian Jewish Personalities and Families from Bacău and Vaslui

Hello, I am Adrian Iosifescu, your host of the History of Romanian Jews podcast, and this is episode 39, where we continue our exploration of Jewish life in the Romanian cities and towns which have had a large Jewish population. Today we are visiting the Moldavian towns of Bacău and Vaslui (see their location on the Romanian map presented in the notes).

You just listened to Teodora Panainte singing “Zi-i asa ca la Vaslui” (Tell it like in Vaslui); a link to the full recording is provided in this episode notes.

Bacău Jewish History

Bacău is situated in northern Moldavia, at the confluence of the Bistrița and Siret Rivers. Oral tradition claims that the first synagogue was erected in the late 15th century, but the oldest documentary reference to the existence of a Jewish community is a tombstone from 1703. In 1742, the Moldavian prince Constantin Mavrocordat granted two Jewish merchants from Hotin, in Bessarabia, the right to settle in the town and exempted them from taxes. Prince Ioniță Sandu Sturza, who encouraged the settlement of Jewish merchants, adopted a similar policy in 1823.

The number of Jews continued to grow until World War I: 1,740 (55% of the total population) in 1838; 3,819 (42.5%) in 1859; 6,122 (48%) in 1880; 7,902 (48.3%) in 1899; 8,209 in 1910; and 11,500 (60%) in 1915. According to the 1930 census, there were 9,593 Jews (30.8%) living in Bacău, of whom the majority declared Yiddish to be their mother tongue.

According to community statistics of 1896, the Jews of Bacău were categorized according to their profession as follows: 1,529 craftsmen, 550 merchants, 402 employees in the trading houses, 114 carters, 94 workers, 55 middlemen, 7 building contractors, 7 doctors, and a lawyer. In 1903 there were 654 Jewish licensed craftsmen (66% of the total number). Most Jews in Bacău were merchants, craftsmen, or workers in the textile, oil, and forestry industries.

The traditional institutions had been established for a long time: the Pinkas of the burial society dates to 1771, the Talmud Torah was founded in 1828, the Gemilut Hesed (mutual aid society) in 1836, a Jewish hospital in 1862. The first modern Jewish primary school that taught in Romanian was opened between 1863 and 1865, managed by the teacher Iosef Haim Grimberg; other schools for boys and girls were established in the late nineteenth century.

The wooden synagogue that had been built in 1794 burned down in 1853; the number of synagogues increased from 14 in 1864 to 21 in 1890; and the first modern temple was established in 1899. During the interwar years, the community also had a kindergarten, two primary schools (for boys and girls), a hospital, a home for the elderly, an orphanage, mutual aid associations (Marpe le-Nefesh, Fraterna, Înfrățirea, and Providența), 30 synagogues, and a mikveh.

Pre-Herzlian Zionism existed here from 1881 when several families from Bacău were among the first pioneers to settle in Rosh Pinah and Zikhron Ya'akov in 1882. During the interwar period, young people were grouped in several Zionist associations. Branches of the Union of Romanian Jews, the Jewish party, B'nai B'rith, and other cultural and sports organizations were also active in Bacău.

Relations between Jews and Christians were relatively satisfactory, although there were moments of tension: an accusation of ritual murder in 1824, persecutions in 1864 when 500 Jewish families were forced out of neighboring rural communities, and acts of violence in 1884 perpetrated by a gang instigated by Radu Porumbaru, manager of the Letea paper mill. In 1940, all Jews, approximately 1,000 families, were expelled from the adjacent villages and most crowded into Bacău, where the community offered its support. The number of Jews increased to 10,333 in 1941 and to 13,038 in 1942. Jews were victims of discrimination and men were sent to Bessarabia and southern Transylvania to provide forced labor.

After the war, Jews from northern Bucovina, which had been occupied by the Soviet Union, settled in Bacău. In 1947 there were 18,000 Jews, but, with emigration to Israel, just 600 families remained in 1969 and 173 persons in 2005.

Bacău Rabbinical Leaders

We will start the review of The first known rabbi, who retained his position for 55 years, was **Yitshak (Iṭḥac) Botoșaner** (1803–1858); he was followed by his student, **Alter Ioines**, author of *Divre Mosheh* who held the position until 1873.

Two Hasidic rabbis were also of note: **Rakhmune Derbaremdiker** (1825–1846) and **Yisra'el**, from the dynasty of Yisra'el of Ruzhin and Sadagora, employed in 1895, and who had his own synagogue on Leca Street.

The single greatest contribution of Bacău to Jewish history is without question the **Şafran rabbinical dynasty**, a family that shaped the religious and spiritual life of Romania for over a century.

Rabbi Bezalel Ze'ev Şafran (1866–1930)

Bezalel Ze'ev Şafran was a Romanian rabbi who studied under his grandfather Hanoch Henikh Şafran of Pomeran, Galicia, and under Isaac Aaron Ittinga of Lemberg and Jacob Wiedefeld of Grimailov. From 1905 until his death he was rabbi of Bacău. He was regarded as the most important halakhic authority in Romania and virtually every Romanian rabbi addressed problems to him. In his responsa he discusses topical problems, such as mixed dancing at weddings, and the heating of food in an electric oven activated on the Sabbath by a time switch. In his responsa he makes wide use of the Jerusalem Talmud, which was generally ignored as a source by other authors of responsa.

Şafran left a ramified family, many of whom served in the Romanian rabbinate and were later dispersed throughout the world. They included **Hanoch Henikh Şafran**, rabbi of Bucharest and publisher of his books; **Dr. Alexander Şafran**, chief rabbi of Romania and then rabbi of Geneva; **Dr. Joseph Şafran**, chief rabbi of Jassy; and **Dr. Menahem Şafran**, rabbi of Ploieşti.

Rabbi Alexandre Şafran (1910–2006) is the most historically consequential figure, a man who stood between the Jewish people and annihilation during the Holocaust.

Born in Bacău, he was elected chief rabbi of Romania in 1940, thereby becoming the only representative of the Jewish community in the Romanian Senate. He repeatedly intervened with Romanian government officials, the Church, diplomatic representatives of neutral

countries, and other international bodies to alleviate anti-Jewish measures, and in 1942, was able to bring pressure on the government to resist the Nazi demand that the Romanian Jews be deported. With bravery he succeeded in persuading and extracting promises from people close to the government that were kept for the most part. In 1941, Șafran and Romania's Union of the Jewish Communities, through intervention with Nicodim Munteanu, the patriarch of the Romanian Orthodox Church, convinced Antonescu to revoke an order forcing Jews to wear the yellow badge. Supporting him was Queen Mother Elena as well as a number of Romanian public figures.

Not cooperating with the Communist authorities after the war, he was expelled from the country in December 1947, and in 1948 became chief rabbi of Geneva, where he remained until his death.

Despite his tumultuous life, Șafran remained pre-eminently a scholar, working right up till his death. Asked once if he was preparing another book, he responded with a smile: "I'm always working on a new book." He wrote several books including a memoir. His best-known writings are on the Kabbalah. He was elected an honorary member of the Romanian Academy in 1997. He is buried in Israel beside his wife, Sarah.

Bacău Artists, Intellectuals and Civic Leaders

The first library in Bacău was founded in 1860 by **Herman Margulies**. In 1882, **Marcel Margulies** introduced a printing press that was also equipped with Hebrew characters, while the photography shops of **Max Agatstein and Segal** were making color pictures as early as of 1877. In the 1890s, **Eliahu and Yehezkel Margulies** operated prominent publishing and printing houses, printing local Jewish newspapers, Yiddish songs, and philanthropic statutes.

A. I. Löbl published *Prezentul* (The Present) in Bacău, the first Jewish newspaper edited in Romania with any real continuity (1876–1878) and focused to a large extent on the Jews' struggle for emancipation and on their patriotism during the war for independence in 1877.

Solomon Marcus (1925–2016) — Mathematician & Member of the Romanian Academy
Bacău's greatest scientist and one of Romania's most celebrated 20th-century intellectuals. Solomon Marcus was born in Bacău, in a Jewish family of tailors.

His main research was in the fields of mathematical analysis, mathematical and computational linguistics, and computer science. He also published numerous papers on various cultural topics: poetics, linguistics, semiotics, philosophy, and history of science and education.

Marcus published about 50 books in Romanian, English, French, German, Italian, Spanish, Russian, Greek, Hungarian, Czech, Serbo-Croatian, and about 400 research articles in specialized journals in almost all European countries, in the United States, Canada, South America, Japan, India, and New Zealand. He is cited by more than a thousand authors, including mathematicians, computer scientists, linguists, literary researchers, semioticians, anthropologists, and philosophers. He is recognized as one of the founders of the disciplines of mathematical linguistics and mathematical poetics.

Solomon's brother, **Marius Mircu** (1909–2008), was a Romanian journalist who graduated from the law faculty of the University of Bucharest in 1935. Mircu is also the author of *Pogromurile*

din Bucovina și Dorohoi (1945), one of the first documentary accounts of Romanian-perpetrated Holocaust crimes.

Solomon's other brother was the writer **Marcel Marcian** who wrote lively stories depicting Jewish market towns in Moldavia.

Bacău was a major center of Zionism in Romania; movements belonging to Zionist political parties operated there. In 1926 Ze'ev Jabotinsky, head of the Revisionist Zionist movement, was invited to Bacău to lecture.

The **Adelshtein family** had deep Zionist roots; the Adelshtein family had a strong connection not only with *Kol Yisrael Haverim*, but also with the Land of Israel; the parents of the father, N. Adelshtein, lived in the moshav Zichron Yaakov, in which most of its settlers come from the Jewish community of Bacău.

Prof. Moshe Gil (1921–2014) — Israel Prize Laureate & Historian of Medieval Jewry
Professor Moshe Gil from the University of Tel Aviv considers himself a native of Bacău, although he only arrived there with his parents at the age of five from Bialystok, Poland, where he was born in 1921. His father was invited to Bacău as an expert on the textile industry. The Gitler family was well-known in the city. Their house on the 15th of August Street was a center for Jewish and Zionist activities, and Moshe knew Hebrew from his childhood. From the age of 14, the young Moshe was an active member of HaShomer HaTzair, and at 19 he served as the secretary of the national movement.

He was sentenced to 25 years in prison in Romania in 1942 for his underground activity as a leader of the Hashomer HaTzair Zionist underground. He was released when the war ended and immigrated to Palestine in 1945, becoming a founding member of Kibbutz Reshafim in the Bet Shean Valley.

In 1998, Gil was awarded the Israel Prize for Land of Israel studies, primarily for his work analyzing some 846 document fragments from the Cairo Genizah and for his work in documenting the role of Jewish merchants in the development of medieval society.

A Bacău central communal figure for decades was **Meir Eybeshitz**, a spiritual leader and great Zionist among Bacău Jewry who fought on behalf of Jewish education and tradition and for *aliyah* to the Land of Israel.

Another pillar of the community was **Jean Zingher**, one of the prominent leaders of the community, owner of a textile factory, who during the war years helped impoverished Jewish families — making warm coats for displaced Jewish children while simultaneously giving identical coats to Romanian workers' children to avoid antisemitic objections.

Aaron Aaronsohn, an agronomist, was born in Bacău in 1876. At the age of six he was taken by his parents to Palestine. His father was one of the founders of Zichron Ya'akov. Aaronsohn studied in France and on his return was employed as an agronomist by Baron Edmond de Rothschild at Metullah in 1895. He made extensive explorations in Eretz Israel and neighboring countries and in 1906 discovered specimens of wild hybrid wheat (*triticum dicocoides*) at Rosh Pinah, a discovery that made him famous among botanists throughout the world. *Triticum*

dicocoides is thought by many to be related to *triticum dicoccum*, the hybrid Emer wheat that was cultivated first in the Middle East and is the basis of agriculture.

His discovery and his articles in European journals gained scientific recognition and fame for Aaronsohn. In 1909, he went to the USA at the invitation of the American Ministry of Agriculture. With the support of American Jews, Aaronsohn founded an agricultural research station in Atlit, where he built a rich library, collected geological and botanical samples and inspected crops. He employed Arab workers and promoted their employment on Jewish farms. For more on Aaron Aaronsohn please see Episode 26 - Lawrence of Arabia and Aaronsohn of Palestine.

In order to portray a more comprehensive image of the Jewish influence in the commercial life, let's mention the names of some of the most important Jewish business people of Bacău.

The Brills were some of the most prominent names in the grains trade. Among the leaders of this trade were owners of large silos such as Shae Cofler, Pinhas Edelstein, Berl Malai, Mordehai Ber, and later the brothers Iacobsohn, Isac Avram, Dikman, Avram Gutman, Weissbuch, as well as many others. Not by chance, the greatest and most important Synagogue in Bacău was and continued to be the grain merchants' synagogue. Some grain merchants even had printed official postcards with their name and qualifications (for example Iacob Berkovici).

A remarkable figure in this area was **Moise Klein**, originally from Poland, who in a very short time, became the most important grain merchant of Bacău. His son, **Buium Klein**, was the owner of the largest silos on the bank of the canal where all the windmills and watermills existed, later called the Filderman Watermill.

Another important grain merchant was **Aron Schuler**, known for his philanthropic activities – among other things the hospital he founded named “Mina and Aron Schuler Hospital”. In 1914 he founded the agricultural society named “The First Seed”.

One of the trades that had strongly influenced the economic development of Bacău and all of Moldavia was the iron trade. The largest iron merchant in Moldavia was **Faivis Klein**, whose business was one of the oldest in Bacău and who provided the rails for the railroad. There were other Jews who participated in the iron commerce such as David Haran, Kahane, and others.

Many Jews had grocery stores in Bacău and in the surrounding areas. Let us mention the **brothers Hirschenbein**, who provided groceries to many towns throughout Moldavia and the surrounding villages of Bacău.

The Jewish people were also involved in manufacturing leather goods, for which the brothers **Leibu and Iosef Brill** were renowned for having founded the first factory of this kind.

In 1876, **Samuel Filderman**, initially a show salesman, also founded a tannery in north part of the city. The production process was rudimentary, his former employees saying that in the beginning, the owner himself would gather bird residues and oak barks using them as tannin. However, this primitive factory evolved in the decades to come into the glorious complex “S.

Filderman Enterprises". Aside from the tannery, S. Filderman bought from Paul Kisten a leather-manufacturing factory, already in existence since 1892. In 1908, dr. H. Perlbergher founded in Bacău a leather-manufacturing factory, where he produced for the first time black and colored leather by using a chromium leather tanning process. Filderman's factory, which at the time could only offer regular leather, had also been modernized with machinery and leather specialists brought over from abroad. In 1908, the two businessmen merged founding the "First Chromium Processed Fine Leather Factory in Romania as well as Systematic Tannery in Bacău". During the first world war, Filderman Enterprises were the only factories in the country supplying the army with leather manufactured goods and soles, producing for the first time boots, harness and furred goods.

There were other industrial enterprises initiated by the Jews. In 1870, **Moscovici's** brick factory was founded. Then, in 1892 and 1919, **Bercu Gros** and **Ellenberger** set up soap factories and candle factories respectively.

Vaslui Jewish History

Let's now switch gears and visit the town of Vaslui.

Vaslui is a district capital in Moldavia, eastern Romania. Several of the tombstones in the Jewish cemetery date from the first half of the 18th century. According to a certificate from 1769, there were many Jews in Vaslui who traded in oil and alcoholic beverages. Most of Vaslui's Jews were initially from Galicia and Bukovina. In the second half of the 19th century, many of the cantonists escaping from Russia settled in Vaslui.

Let me explain: Cantonists were Jewish underage conscripts in the Russian Empire who were educated in special military camps (cantons) for future service. Instituted in 1721, the system is most notoriously known for its devastating impact on Jewish communities between 1827 and the late 1850s under Tsar Nicholas I. During this era, an estimated 70,000 to 75,000 Jewish boys, some as young as six years old, were forcibly kidnapped or drafted by the state to fill Jewish community recruitment quotas.

In 1867 many Jews were expelled from the villages and the farms around Vaslui. During that year many were arrested on the pretext that they were vagabonds. In 1886 a plague broke out infecting the Jewish population and as a result, a parcel of land was allocated for a new cemetery. In 1889 the Jews were expelled again from the villages and the farms of the district and the same thing happened again and again in 1901 and 1908.

During the farmer's rebellion, in 1907, 87 Jewish families were robbed and many of their houses were destroyed.

The Jewish population numbered 892 in 1839, grew to 1,202 (25.3% of the total) in 1859, and reached 2,823 (41%) in 1889. Their arrival from Galicia during the second half of the 19th century gave new impetus to the city's economic development. By 1899 Jews formed 37% of the population.

There were eight synagogues in Vaslui in 1940.

In a remarkable testament to Jewish civic standing, in 1851 two Jewish inhabitants of Vaslui were raised to the nobility (boyarhood) for service to Vaslui — an extraordinary and exceptionally rare honor for Jews in 19th-century Romania, where legal discrimination against

the Jewish population was widespread. Their names have not been preserved in the major historical records, but their elevation speaks to the deep integration and contribution of the Jewish mercantile elite to the town's development.

Difficulties were encountered in the organization of the community because the merchants and the artisans each had their own institutions, and even their own rabbis. In 1877 a primary school was founded, but the craftsmen had their own Talmud Torah.

Zionist activity began in Vaslui in the 1880s.

On the eve of World War II there were in Vaslui eight prayer rooms, a hospital and clinic, an old-age home, a mikveh, a primary school, and a kindergarten. After the naturalization laws were passed in 1919, two to six Jews were active in the local council. This institutional richness — with parallel structures for merchants and artisans, separate charitable and educational organizations — reflects the vitality and social complexity of the Vaslui Jewish community across its classes.

In 1947 the Jewish population numbered 3,200, decreasing to 2,400 in 1950. By 1960 there were about 70 Jewish families with one synagogue. Emigration to Israel during the Communist era, the losses of the war years, and natural attrition gradually brought to a close one of Moldavia's most dynamic Jewish communities.

Vaslui Rabbinical Leaders

The most spiritually significant Jewish dynasty to emerge from Vaslui was the **Vasloi** dynasty, a branch of the illustrious Ruzhin lineage.

Rabbi Shalom Halpern (1857–1939) was born on 1857, to Rabbi Dovid Halpern of Berdychiv and Leah, a daughter of Rabbi Yisroel Friedman of Ruzhin. In 1873, aged 17, he married his cousin Chana Sarah, daughter of Rabbi Yitzchok Friedman of Buhuși. He settled in the village of Răducani in Vaslui County, where he was well received and stayed for more than 13 years. When the Haskalah movement opened a school in the area in 1909, Rabbi Shalom threatened to leave unless it was closed. After his demands were not heeded, he settled in Vaslui, where a large court and synagogue were built for him.

The Vasloi dynasty is related to the Ruzhiner Rebbe through his daughters, connecting it to one of the most prestigious Hasidic lineages in Eastern Europe. The Vasloi Hasidic dynasty, now transplanted to Bnei Brak and Tel Aviv, carries on the spiritual flame kindled on the banks of the Bârlad River, a living link between Moldavian Jewish life and the State of Israel.

Rabbi Chaim Dov Halpern, the only son of Reb Shalom Halpern, assumed his father's position after 1939 and left Romania in 1950 for Israel, where he died in 1957. He was succeeded by his son **Reb Yaakov Shlomo**, who was in turn succeeded by his own son, the present Rebbe of Vasloi, **Reb Avraham Shimshon Shalom**, who lives in Bnei Brak. The current Rebbe of Vasloi has his synagogue and Beit Midrash in Tel Aviv, where an eclectic group of congregants gather to pray and study.

Rabbi Alexander Taubes (1841–1913) served the Vaslui community for decades as its leading rabbinic voice, representing the more formally Orthodox strand of Jewish religious life alongside the flourishing Hasidic court.

Vaslui Artists, Intellectuals and Civic Leaders

Menahem Mendel Braunstein (pen name Mibashan; 1858–1944) — a major Hebrew writer and Zionist organizer with deep ties to Vaslui. He received his early education in Iași, mastered multiple European languages, and became one of the most active Zionist voices in Romania. As a young man he was part of a group of *maskilim*, an informal set of people with headquarters at a coffee shop in Iași. In 1887 he was a co-founder in Iași of Doresh le-Zion, one of the country's earliest Zionist organizations. He also edited the periodical *Jüdischer Volksfreund* and taught Hebrew subjects for 23 years in Jewish schools across Romania, including in Vaslui. Braunstein was a founding, active member of the Iuliu Barasch Historical Society. As the first researcher to focus on Jewish oral history, Braunstein recorded a considerable number of oral testimonies that he eventually published. Braunstein dedicated much of his time to developing textbooks for Jewish schools in Romania, especially for studying Hebrew.

He emigrated to Palestine in 1914 and continued writing stories and poetry, especially for young readers. He was considered one of the last modern Hebrew authors to employ a purely biblical style. His translations include de Amicis's *Cuore* and Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* into Hebrew.

Ana Pauker (1893–1960), was a prominent official of the Communist International (Comintern), Romanian Communist leader, and foreign minister of Romania. She was born Ana Rabinsohn to impoverished Orthodox Jewish parents, Ana Pauker grew up in Bucharest and began teaching Hebrew and Judaica at a Jewish community school when she was 17 or 18. In 1915 she joined the fledgling Romanian Workers Social Democratic Party and supported its pro-Bolshevik wing after the 1917 Russian Revolution; four years later, she and her husband, the Romanian Jewish socialist Marcel Pauker, emerged within the leading ranks of the newly formed Romanian Communist Party. In November 1947 she was appointed Romania's foreign minister, the first Jew to serve as a government minister in that country, and the first woman in the modern world ever to hold to such a post. In that capacity, she supported the mass emigration of Romanian Jewry to Israel in the period between 1948 and 1952, enabling the departure of roughly 100,000 Jews, and opposed the Kremlin-ordered show-trial of Romanian Zionists in 1950–1952. Arguing in the Politburo in 1948 that all Jews, regardless of class, were oppressed by antisemitism, thus contradicting the official Marxist-Leninist doctrine on the issue, Pauker unsuccessfully tried to contravene the openly antisemitic campaign of Stalin's final years. For more details about Ana Pauker please see Episode 25 - Ana Pauker - the Romanian Jewish Woman Communist.

Leo Wolson was born in Vaslui and he became a key figure in the pedestrian emigration movement—known as *fusgeyers*—of poor Jews who walked across Europe to reach the United States. He later became a prominent leader in New York as the president of the Federation of Romanian Jews of America.

Moritz Marcovici was a well-known Jewish merchant and entrepreneur who owned and operated the movie theater Roxi in Vaslui during the 1930s.

This concludes this episode on Bacău and Vaslui.
In the next episode we will be visiting the towns of Piatra Neamț and Roman.
Until then, be well.