

Episode 40 - Prominent Romanian Jewish Personalities and Families from Piatra Neamț and Roman

Hello, I am Adrian Iosifescu, your host of the History of Romanian Jews podcast, and this is episode 40, where we continue our exploration of Jewish life in the Romanian cities and towns which have had a large Jewish population, with visits to the Moldavian towns of Piatra Neamț and Roman. (see their location on the Romanian map presented in the notes).

You just listened to “Sârba de la Piatra Neamț” (Sârba =Traditional Romanian folk dance from Piatra Neamț); a link to the full recording is provided in the episode notes.

Piatra Neamț Jewish History

Piatra Neamț is a town in the Moldavian region of Romania, at the foot of the Carpathian Mountains and on the banks of the Bistrița River.

Jewish settlement in Piatra Neamț dates back as far as the 18th century: a wooden synagogue was built in 1766 which still exists; a burial society existed by 1771, and the cemetery includes tombstones from that period as well. At the end of the 18th century, Jewish professional guilds were established and continued to function until 1861.

In 1803, there were 120 Jews living in Piatra Neamț, working mainly in crafts and trade.

The Jewish population was 1,760 in 1838; and it rose to 3,482 in 1859; to 4,987 in 1872; to 8,361 in 1894; and to 8,489 in 1907, representing approximately half the town's population.

In 1872 a new cemetery was inaugurated, and enlarged in 1903. The old cemetery of the Jews of Piatra Neamț had been closed because the Christians resented the passage of Jewish funeral processions through the center of town. In the old cemetery stood the “Hekdesh”(shelter), containing a few rooms for poor and sick people. Until 1875 the Kehilla paid a doctor and a midwife to care for the sick and poor. In 1898 the Chevra Kadisha turned the Hekdesh into an Old Age Home. In 1901 a shelter for the indigent sick with seven beds was created in a private home. In 1905 a new hospital with 12 beds was built.

Between the wars, the community leadership was contested by Zionists, representatives of the Union of Romanian Jews party, and representatives of other Romanian political parties.

A branch of the Înfrațirea Zion (Zion Brotherhood) association was established in 1875, forming a B'nai B'rith lodge in 1881 and founding an elementary school for boys the next year. An elementary school for girls was opened in 1899 by the Cultura (Culture) association. All of the Jewish schools and the hospital were taken over by the community in 1932.

In 1941, there were 19 synagogues in Piatra Neamț, one of them a modernizing temple.

Piatra Neamț was a notable center of the Hebrew and Yiddish press. Between 1882 and 1939, several Jewish newspapers were published in Yiddish, Hebrew, and Romanian. The Hebrew weekly *Yizre'el* was published there from 1882, as well as a Yiddish journal *Di Hofnung*, published three times weekly. The Hebrew magazine *Ha-Mekiz*, edited by Braunstein-Mibashan and A.L. Zissu, was published beginning in 1909.

In 1821, during the Greek Revolution, a pogrom in Piatra Neamț was organized by the Greek insurgents. In 1841, 1860, and 1891 respectively, accusations of ritual murder were made; in the first case, Moses Montefiore successfully intervened with the Ottoman sultan on behalf

of 48 Jews who had been arrested. Several antisemitic demonstrations took place in the 1930s. From September 1940 to January 1941, members of the Iron Guard pillaged Jewish shops in the town. In 1941, approximately 600 Jews from neighboring villages and towns were forcibly moved to Piatra Neamț. Some 600 men aged 15 to 66 were forced to perform hard labor throughout the county; another 500 were sent off in labor detachments. In 1947, approximately 8,000 Jews remained in Piatra Neamț, but the numbers of Jewish inhabitants gradually decreased as a consequence of emigration to Israel. In 2003, just 153 Jews were living there, and one synagogue still functioned.

Piatra Neamț boasts one of the most legendary synagogues in Romania, the Wooden Synagogue, built of wood in 1766, on the site of an earlier masonry synagogue, and surrounded by the legend of the Baal Shem Tov. According to legend, the founder of Hasidism, the Baal Shem Tov, prayed here, which is why it is often called the "Besht Synagogue". The synagogue was built in the traditional Moldavian wooden style, blending in with the design of regional wooden churches. To bypass local restrictions on synagogue height, the interior floor was dug 1.5 meters below ground level. It features a raised octagonal wooden dome over the central bimah and a three-tiered wooden Torah ark carved in 1835. This synagogue is one of the oldest surviving wooden synagogues in Europe and the only remaining wooden synagogue in Romania. Currently it is a historical monument and functions as a museum.

Piatra Neamț Rabbinical Leaders

As usual, we start the review of Jewish personalities with the town's rabbis. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, **Rabbi Yehi'el Mikhl Yosef** a prominent Hasidic and religious leader who served as one of the most influential rabbis in Piatra Neamț, along with religious leaders from the **Steinberg** and **Tobias families**.

Another remarkable rabbi was **Rabbi Avraham Brandwein** founded a Hasidic court in Piatra Neamț.

Let's now look at

Piatra Neamț Artists, Intellectuals and Civic Leaders

Born in Piatra Neamț, the Surrealist painter **Victor Brauner** (1903–1966) came from a prominent Jewish family that profoundly shaped his life and artistic style. His father, a prosperous timber manufacturer, was also a deeply spiritual man who hosted spiritualist seances in the family home. These esoteric and mystical childhood experiences heavily influenced Victor's art. Victor was the third of six children.

One of his notable brothers was **Harry Brauner** (1908–1988), a highly respected Romanian folklorist and ethnomusicologist. Harry was later a political prisoner in Communist Romania. Following Victor Brauner's death, his wife Jacqueline preserved his artistic legacy and donated his archives and materials to the French State in 1984.

Like Victor Brauner, the painter **Jacques Hérold** was born in the same Moldavian town, Piatra-Neamț. He arrived in Paris in 1930, and entered the Surrealist group of André Breton in 1934,

but his artistic career developed independently. He also shared with Brauner the same preoccupation with magic and occultism, so that his creations seem to hide a dark secret which can be revealed only by esoteric practices. His first personal exhibition was in Paris, in 1947, and it was followed by other 30 all over the world, as his name became famous in the context of international Surrealism.

For more details on both Victor Brauner and Jacques Hérold please see Episode 13 - Jews and the Romanian Cultural Avantgarde.

The Abramovici and Herskovici families were among the most documented genealogical families of the region, with branches spread across Piatra Neamț and surviving descendants in Israel and abroad. These families represent the broader merchant and artisan classes that formed the backbone of Piatra Neamț Jewish community.

The Juster family was well-known in the Piatra Neamț region across generations, with **Abraham Lipa Juster** serving as one of the leaders of the Jewish community, erudite and active in public affairs, and his son **Moshe Juster** continued that tradition of scholarship and communal service. The family produced Jean Juster, one of the foremost legal historians of ancient Jewish life. **Jean Juster** (1881–1915) was born in 1881 in Piatra Neamț. Juster studied in Germany and at the Sorbonne in Paris, where he was admitted to the bar in 1913, becoming a lawyer at the Paris Court of Appeal. He died in military action during World War I. His major work, *“Les Juifs dans l'empire romain: leur condition juridique, économique et sociale”* (2 vols., 1914), remains an indispensable reference for scholars of Jewish history under Roman rule.

Meyer Abraham Halévy (1900–1972) was born in Piatra Neamț and studied at Sorbonne, receiving his doctorate and rabbinical diploma from the Séminaire Israélite de France in 1925. He served as rabbi of Iași, then at multiple Bucharest congregations, and from 1950 to 1963 was Research Professor of Oriental, Classical and Numismatic Studies at the Romanian Academy. During World War II he was continuously harassed by the authorities and arrested on a number of occasions for the sympathy and spiritual care he extended to persecuted Jews. In 1963, after the intervention of a number of important personalities, including the German Pastor Martin Niemöller, and the payment of a ransom, he was permitted to leave Romania and settled in Paris, where he acquired French citizenship. In Paris, he became professor of Jewish history at the Séminaire Israélite de France and Consistorial Grand Rabbi at the Tournelles Jewish Center.

The Zissu Family had a strong Hasidic background and is known as one of Romania's most important Zionist dynasties, with Abraham Leib Zissu becoming a national figure in Jewish politics, literature, and emigration activism.

Abraham Leib Zissu (1888–1956) was born in Piatra Neamț, descended from prominent Chabad Hasidim and was raised in a religious environment. He is considered the "traditional symbol of the Zionist movement in Romania", and according to Dr. W. Filderman, the "sole representative of the Jewish Agency in Romania". A complex personality in Romanian interwar cultural life, A. L. Zissu was a writer, journalist, owner and editor of the national Jewish daily "*Mântuirea*"

(Salvation), industrialist, owner of the "Omega" oil factories in the capital and the Sugar Factory in Ripiceni, administrator and financial advisor within the Romanian Petroleum Company. He started his journalistic career first in the Hebrew language, by founding the monthly review *Hamekitz* in Piatra Neamț, and later directed the *Hatikvah* review in Galati. Writing also in Yiddish, he collaborated with the review *Licht*, before collaborating on Romanian-language Jewish publications like *Adam*, *Puntea de fildes* (The ivory bridge) and *Hasmonaea*. From a political point of view, Zissu was, during the interwar period, the founder and honorary president of the Jewish Party of Romania, from 1941 president of the Palestinian Emigration Office, and from 1944 president of the Zionist Executive of Romania and of the Jewish Agency, Romania section. An opponent of assimilation, he found himself in a state of adversarial relations with other leaders of Romanian Jews who supported Zionism, such as M. Benvenisti, and with some representatives of Jewish organizations from outside the country. After the war, A. L. Zissu was arrested in 1951 by the Communist regime, and, after 3 years of detention was sentenced to life imprisonment for "the crime of high treason". He was pardoned in 1956 and was allowed to emigrate to Israel, where he died shortly after. For more details on Abraham Leib Zissu please see Episode 8 - Romanian Jews and Zionism.

M. Weissman-Amir (1893–1954) was a prominent Romanian-Israeli lawyer and diplomat. Born in Piatra Neamț, he served as president of the Zionist Organization of Romania and was a delegate to the Romanian Parliament before emigrating to Israel in the 1940s and later serving as Israel's ambassador to the Benelux countries.

Itzhak Ben-Efraim (Mano Moscovici), born in Piatra Neamț in 1914, was a Jewish resistance fighter and parachutist. He emigrated from Romania to Palestine in 1935 and, being affiliated with the HaShomer HaTza'ir youth movement, he volunteered for military operations for the British in Palestine during War World Two. He was one of a group of elite Jewish parachutists from Mandate Palestine who were dropped behind enemy lines in Axis-controlled Romania in 1944 to rescue Allied pilots and help local Jews escape. For more details on the Jews parachuted in Romania during the Second World War, please see Episode 22 - Romanian Jews parachuted back into Romania.

Roman Jewish History

Now let's leave Piatra Neamț and visit the town of Roman.

Oral tradition about the town of Roman supports the age of the Jewish community of over five centuries, going back even to the reign of the Moldavian prince Alexander the Good. An old document written in Hebrew, which mentions the existence of a synagogue in the Romanul town, appears to support the age of the community from at least 1572. The authors of the work do not, however, make any reference to the nature or provenance of the respective document, so that the truth of the claims cannot be verified. The first recorded leader of the Jewish community of Roman was Leiba, called the "Staroste" (headman) of the Jews in 1790, one of the debtors of Squire Constantin Balș. The community's roots stretch back even further: a tombstone discovered in 1928 during construction of the Roman Vodă high school bore the inscription of Rabbi David Ber, a renowned Tzadik who died in 1724.

The Jewish population of Roman grew from 288 in 1803 to 1,200 in 1831, reaching 3,290 by 1859 and 6,099 by 1899. By 1936 the Jewish community had a school for boys with 200 students, a school for girls with 160 students, a kindergarten, the only public bath in the city, a hospital, a home for seniors, and a cemetery. Roman's Jewish cultural life was equally vibrant: the great Yiddish writer Shalom Aleichem visited the city in the first decade of the 20th century, and local publishers produced books, periodicals, and pamphlets in Hebrew, Yiddish, and Romanian throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries.

The town's Zionists elected the writer and journalist Horia Carp as a delegate to the Fifth Zionist Congress, and Zionist activities, especially fund-raising for the Keren Kayemet (National Jewish Fund), continued after World War I.

During the interwar period, Jews were elected to the local council on the lists of various Romanian political parties. In 1930, Alexandru C. Cuza, the leader of an antisemitic nationalist movement, was elected to parliament as representative of Roman.

Jews were subjected to discrimination and persecution from the beginning of World War II. After Jewish teachers and students were expelled from public schools, the community established a mixed Jewish high school with 180 boys and girls. On the eve of the German–Romanian war against the Soviet Union, 800 Jews were driven out of neighboring villages and small towns and were transferred to Roman by force. On 1 July 1941, 160 notables and leaders of the community, including Rabbi Isacsohn, were imprisoned for three months in the main synagogue. On 2 July, after the Iași pogrom, the “death train” from Iași to Călărași stopped in Roman. Viorica Agarici, president of the local Red Cross, defied the interdictions; she had the cars opened and brought water and food to the survivors. The dead from the train were buried in the local Jewish cemetery. Agarici was subsequently awarded the title of Righteous Gentile by Yad Vashem for her bravery.

Almost 1,000 Jews from Roman were sent into forced labor in remote towns. In April 1944, as the Soviet army approached, 1,000 Jewish refugees from Pașcani and 1,400 from Târgu Frumos arrived in Roman. Jewish deportees from Transnistria who could not return to their towns also arrived. In 1947, there were 7,900 Jews living in Roman, but their numbers dropped as a result of emigration, mainly to Israel. The Jewish population was 4,500 in 1950, 750 in 1969, and just 62 in 2005.

Roman Rabbinical Leaders

Rabbi Isaia Avraham Ben-Israel authored the Hebrew work *Chehilas Israel* (Jewish community), one of the local religious publications that documented community life in Roman.

The Isacsohn family, particularly **Salomon Isacsohn**, was active in the Jewish community of Roman, Romania, during the early 1940s, serving as one of the two rabbis in the city. Rabbi Salomon Isacsohn: According to data detailing the "Activity of the Mosaic Cult" between 1918-1943 in Roman, Romania, Salomon Isacsohn is listed as one of the two functioning rabbis in 1942. In 1942, the community in Roman had 18 synagogues, two rabbis (Salomon Isacsohn and Mendel Frenkel), five Hahams, and served a Jewish population that grew to over 6,000 in

the early 1940s. The name Isacsohn appears in the context of the Jewish community in Roman, Romania, especially in historical and memorial documents related to the Holocaust and post-war period.

From the same family we should mention **Isacsohn Debora** and **Itic** are mentioned as teachers in Roman in 1948.

Rabbi Mendel Frenkel served the community during its most difficult wartime years. In 1941 he served on the community's wartime relief committee, and in 1942 he was among the officers of the Zionist organization permitted to resume activities. He also taught Judaism to students in the community's wartime seminary.

Moving over to

Roman Artists, Intellectuals and Civic Leaders

Ronetti Roman (Aron Blumenfeld, 1847–1908) was a playwright and polemical journalist who settled permanently in Romania in the mid-1870s. His chief literary contribution was the 1900 play “*Manasse*”, which explored the intergenerational conflict between tradition-bound and assimilated Jews, and which drew Romanian nationalist mobs to the streets to block its staging. One Jewish critic described the furor as “the Dreyfus Affair of Romanian spirituality.”

Filip Brunea-Fox (Filip Brauner, 1898–1977) was born into a Jewish family in Roman and became one of Romania's most celebrated investigative journalists of the interwar period, known for his work published in *Dimineața*, *Adevărul*, and *Jurnalul*. Alongside Geo Bogza, he is credited with laying the foundations of Romanian literary reportage and was part of the nascent Romanian Surrealist movement. He was nicknamed “the Prince of Reportage” by Bogza himself. His “*Jurnalul rebeliunii* (1944)”, describing the January 1941 Bucharest pogrom, is among the few Holocaust accounts published in immediate postwar Romania.

Richard Stein (1909–1992) was a composer born in Roman in 1909, who co-created the beloved Romanian song “*Sanie cu Zurgălăi*” (Sledge with Bells) together with poet Liviu Delianu (Lipa Kligman). The song became so popular it was widely mistaken for a folk melody, and Stein even sued the American guitarist Les Paul for plagiarism after the tune was adapted internationally. Stein first taught music at the Israelite-Romanian school and later at the local Jewish high school, and in 1942 he organized and conducted a concert of Jewish music.

Suchard Rivenzon A respected intellectual of the Roman Jewish community, Rivenzon authored “*The Jewish School in Roman*” (1933), collaborated in the Jewish press, served as secretary for the Union of Native Jews local section, and was a key figure in community arbitration and administration for decades.

The Grinberg (Grunberg) Family The Grinberg family was prominent in Roman over multiple generations: **Leon Grunberg** ran a publishing, printing, and illustrated postcard shop (“Viitorul”) from 1909 to 1916, while **Iehuda Leib ben Ithok Grinberg** served as president of the Jewish Community and patron of religious publications.

The Zingher family was deeply embedded in communal administration. **Iosub Zingher** served as treasurer of the community committee in 1907–1908, **Bercu Zingher** represented the "Sacra" Society in the 1926 arbitration, and **Marcel Zingher** served as one of the arbitrators in the same proceeding.

The Schiffer family was among the most prominent in Roman across generations. **Dr. Ioseph Taubes-Schiffer** served as honorary president of the ladies' society "Concordia" in 1882; **Isidor O. Schiffer** held leadership of the craftsmen's mutual aid society for decades; and **Charlotte Schiffer** served as president of the Cultural Association of Jewish Women in 1930, which maintained a kindergarten and library for the community.

The Beram family operated the community's most prominent bookshop and publishing press. **Ozias Beram** ran a bookshop, while the "Beram Sr. Press" printed the community statutes and Rivenzon's monograph on the Jewish school. The publishing house "The Schools' Bookshop, I. Beram" was another imprint of the family.

The Avramovici / Haimovici / Moscovici families These inter-related families of craftsmen, merchants, and community leaders appear across generations of Roman's communal records, from founding members of the Cneses Israel mutual aid society to cultural committee members and leaders of the Băcești sub-community.

Horia Carp (Jehoshua; 1869–1943), was a well-known journalist. He received a medical degree from the University of Jassy. He became a member of the Zionist movement as a youth and from 1901 to 1904 edited the Romanian-language weekly *Mevaseret-Zion*. He also contributed to the Romanian press, and in 1911 edited the magazine *Cultura*. Devoting much of his activity to the Union of Romanian Jews, he founded in 1906 the weekly *Curierul Israelit*, which became its semiofficial publication. His published books include "*Ganduri faramate*" (Tormented Thoughts, 1905), "*Suflete obosite*" (Tired Souls, 1918), and "*Din vremuri de urgie*" (From Wrathful Times, 1924), all on Jewish themes. Carp also translated Herzl's *Altneuland* (in 1918), Graetz's *History of the Jews* (in 2 vols., 1903), and Yiddish literature. He was a member of the Romanian Senate, but in 1941 was arrested and tortured by the legionnaires in the period of their rebellion. He eventually succeeded in making his way to Palestine.

Carp's son, **Matatias Carp** (1904–1952) was a lawyer and secretary of the Union of Jewish Communities of Romania. From 1946 to 1948 he published "*Cartea Neagra*" (The Black Book), three volumes of documents about the suffering of Romanian Jews in the Holocaust. He later emigrated to Israel, where he died.

Noel Bring (1874–after 1934), born in 1874 in Roman, was the dominant personality of the local Jewish world, celebrated for his philanthropic work and Zionist activism. He founded the "Crémieux" Zionist Society and served as its president, headed the local community, and was vice president of the Society Cneses Israel. He was an ardent supporter of Jewish emigration to Palestine. Bring personally delivered the Zionist message at nearly every major gathering: he eulogized Theodor Herzl at the Great Synagogue in 1904, represented Roman at Zionist congresses, and was the city's delegate to the Galați Zionist conferences.

Iancu Avram was described as a leader who "worked 30 years for Jewish wellbeing and gave the city a modern school." He headed the local section of the Union of Native Jews (U.E.P.) and chaired the school construction committee for the Hebrew-Romanian Primary School for Boys.

Isidor Schiffer served as vice president of the Union of Native Jews local section and was treasurer and later president of the craftsmen's mutual aid society Cneses Israel. He is noted among those who "watched for the Jewish interests and presided over the distribution of aid that came through the Joint Distribution Committee."

Attorney Maximilian Schor led in 1920, the Zionist organization in Roman. He also served as one of the arbitrators in the landmark 1926 settlement between the "Sacra" Society and the Jewish Community.

Attorney Arnold Cramer represented the Jewish Community in the 1926 arbitration with the "Sacra" Society and later served as community president, under whose leadership the Maccabi sports association received communal support in the 1930s.

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