

Episode 42 - Prominent Romanian Jewish Personalities and Families from Brăila and Galați

Hello again, I am Adrian Iosifescu, your host of the History of Romanian Jews podcast, and this is episode 42, where we transit from the Principality of Moldavia to Wallachia and start looking at the Jewish life in the cities of Brăila and Galați (please see their location on the Romanian map presented in the notes).

You just listened to Nikos Dragulina's song 'Pentru Brăila' (For Brăila); a link to the full recording is provided in the episode notes.

Brăila Jewish History

Brăila is a port for the grain export and a commercial center on the Danube, close to where the river flows into the sea. It was subservient to the Turkish Pasha from 1550, and its former name was Ibrailov. In Jewish sources it is known as "Brilov that is called Ibraila, a city located on the Tuna River and on the waters of springs." During the middle ages, its commerce spread afar, and its ships conducted trade as far as Genoa, in Italy.

The first Jews settled in Brăila during the 15th century. The majority of them were of Sephardic origin. They lived on the "Jewish Street," where there was a synagogue and a cemetery under their control, both destroyed in 1819 by Russian bombardment.

In a letter from July 20, 1783, the Austrian explorer, Lieutenant Mihanolovitz stated that in Brăila, alongside Romanians and Turks, there were also a few Jews, probably merchants. In November 1795, a firman issued by the Sultan requested the Qadi and Nazar of Brăila to refund the customs duties abusively collected from Jewish merchants.

The first statistical and demographic information regarding the ethnic composition of Brăila appears in Grigore Tăut's 1828 map. According to it, 120 families lived in Ulița Tărgului with stores, of which 21 were Jewish families. It seems that some of them had settled in the city of Brăila around or earlier than 1821-1822. In Brăila, Jews belonging to both Sephardim and Ashkenazi. If the former are characteristic of Wallachia, the Ashkenazi arrived in the city of Brăila via internal immigration from north to south, entering the Wallachia city from Moldavia. The movement of Jewish families to the Danube cities was voluntary and was based on economic and commercial opportunities.

The professions practiced by Jews in the city of Brăila are not difficult to identify, because in order to allow them to settle in the town, Jews had to demonstrate their social usefulness from the beginning, linked to the financial capital they held or to their occupation. Those who could not prove their usefulness were immediately expelled. In the 1828 census of Grigore Tăut, the occupations of these Jews were also mentioned: merchants, tailors, tavern keepers, and servants. 9 years later, in 1837, the Jews are listed as having the professions of merchants, tavern keepers, watchmakers, shoemakers, commission agents, tailors, carters or carriers, glaziers, glassmakers, hatmakers, carpenters, tinsmiths, painters and money changers. When Brăila became part of Wallachia through the Adrianople Agreement in 1829, and the port was declared a free port, Jews began to flock to it. They arrived primarily from northern Moldavia, from the districts of Botoșani, Dorohoi and Iași.

The Jewish settlement in Brăila was not regarded kindly by the local police. They would steal their property and expel them. Intervention and bribes were necessary to allow them to return.

For example, in 1837, there were 72 Jewish families in the city, of which only 14 had rights of residency. The rest were expelled by the order of the Interior Ministry on the pretext that they were not homeowners. In 1841, the city council objected to the restrictions that were imposed upon the Jews by the Interior Ministry with regard to rights of residency, on the basis that the city requires trustworthy people of wealth, even if they are of a different religion. The Jews increased in number through the support of the city council despite the fact that the Interior Ministry renewed its restrictions several times.

Until the middle of the 19th century, the Jews lived in peace with their neighbors: Greeks, Bulgarians, and Romanians. During the years 1863-1865, Romanian merchants from Transylvania began to settle in Brăila, and anti-Semitism began to increase. During the latter half of the 19th century, a wave of Jewish persecution afflicted Romania, including Brăila. The law against peddling that was passed in 1855 and stubbornly enforced affected about 300 Jewish families.

The restrictive laws against Jews forced the Jews of Brăila to emigrate at the beginning of the 20th century, and they formed a large part of the immigration of Romanian Jews to the United States. In 1903, 439 Jews from Brăila immigrated to the United States.

In 1906 there were 785 Jewish tradesmen in Brăila (as opposed to 3,030 Romanians and 1,598 others). The Jewish merchants were occupied in wholesale commerce, and trade in wool, textiles and clothing. According to communal census of 1915, approximately 50% of the Jewish population were tradesmen, approximately 25% were merchants and practitioners of the free professions, and rest of 25% were temporary workers.

Brăila's unique character was defined by the famous cosmopolitan waterfront — the "Faleza" — where Greek, Jewish, Armenian, and Italian merchants all had offices and coffee houses.

Another unique element was the city's famous covered market (Piața Halelor), largely run by Jewish small traders and artisans alongside the larger export merchants.

One of Brăila's interesting features was the competition and cooperation between Jewish and Greek merchants. Greeks dominated certain shipping routes, especially to Ottoman ports, while Jews dominated inland financing and brokerage. Mixed partnerships were common, especially for larger export deals requiring both river logistics and sea connections.

The first Jewish organization in the city was the Jewish Guild. During the time of the Walachian ruler Stirbei, a Jewish leader was chosen by the members of the guild. The head of the guild, Yisrael Bohor, would report on transgressors and Sabbath violators to the authorities. After the guild was abolished, the Jewish community reorganized. The authorities recognized it and even gave it the rights of trusteeship for inheritances.

A new style communal council was organized in 1905, through elections.

There were two Jewish cemeteries in Brăila, one from 1830 and the second from 1840. The oldest synagogue was the synagogue of the Sephardim, which was built in 1830. The mikva (ritual bath) was also built in its courtyard. The Heichal synagogue was built in the same place in 1862. A large synagogue was built in 1832, which housed a Torah scroll that, according to tradition, had been brought to Iași by the exiles of Spain. It also housed a Hebrew library.

There were eight synagogues and six Beit Midrashes (study halls) in the city prior to the First World War. These included the Synagogue of the Tailors, in the courtyard of the Great Synagogue, the Synagogue of the Carpenters, and the Synagogue of the other Tradesmen. An old age home was built in 1888, containing 30 beds for the elderly, without differentiating by religion or nationality. The community set up an infirmary in the middle of the 19th century. In 1875, the Zion office opened up a four-grade school with 125 students. In 1879 they were on the verge of purchasing a lot for the building of the school but the court refused to authorize the purchase. Only two years later was a building built and then dedicated in 1882. In 1883, 200 students studied in the school, and in 1890, 300. A second elementary school was opened in 1893, called "Chovevei Sfat Kodesh" (Lovers of the Hebrew Language), with 80 students, mostly from poor families. In 1896, the community decided to merge these two institutions. In 1895, Agudat Am founded a night school for adults in the public school building. It taught foreign languages, as well as science and Jewish history. In 1897, the Zion office opened a school for girls called Baroness de Hirsch, in which 87 students studied in two grades. In 1903 a building was built for this school. A kindergarten with Hebrew as instruction language was built in 1908. In 1907, 700 students studied in the community schools, half of them without paying tuition. That year, a Talmud Torah with 70 students was founded. In 1910, 563 students studied in the boys school, and 410 in the girls' school. That year, 160 boys and 140 girls studied in the public schools. In 1912, the Al-Yesodi School was founded, with four classes and 130 students.

Brăila Rabbinical Leaders

Let's now look at some remarkable rabbinical leaders in Brăila.

Several renowned rabbis served in the rabbinate of Brăila. **Rabbi Yaakov Margulies**, who had arrived from Hotin, Bukovina, served from 1849 to 1871. Several of his halachic responsa are included in the book "Shoel Umeishiv" of Rabbi Yosef Shaul Halevi Natansohn of Lvov. After his death, his two children **Zalman Godel** and **Aharon Margulies** served in the rabbinate. They were followed by his grandson **Yisrael Margulies**.

During the years 1862-1873, **Rabbi Avner Casvan**, born in 1831, served in the rabbinate. He subsequently moved to Râmnicu-Sarat, where he died in 1898. He was active in the "Movement for the Settlement of the Land of Israel".

From 1874, **Rabbi Shlomo Mendel Meer**, the son of Rabbi Menachem Mendel Meer, born in 1850, served in Brăila. He was known as a great scholar, and was the author of the book "Divrei Shlomo", published in Sighet in 1906.

Another important figure was **Rabbi Mayer Thenen**. He was a highly esteemed Rabbi, prominent spiritual leader and scholar, who served the Jewish community of Brăila until 1940 and is recognized for compiling his own prayer books and authoring the first Romanian translation of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur prayers.

Brăila Artists, Intellectuals and Civic Leaders

There are important Jewish artists, intellectuals and civic leaders born in Brăila to be mentioned here.

The painter **Max Herman Maxy** is one of them. Unlike most other important figures of the Romanian Avant-garde, Jewish painter Max Herman Maxy never left Romania. He was born in 1895 in Braila and his family moved to Bucharest in 1901 where he attended school. His first exhibit of his paintings and drawings in Iasi followed by two one-man shows in Bucharest. In 1923 he started collaborating at the literary avant-garde magazine *Contimporanul* and is the organizer of the first *Contimporanul* international exhibit which drew renown foreign artists like Paul Klee, Hans Arp, Kurt Schwitters, Hans Richter as well as Romanians like Marcel Ianco, Constantin Brancusi, Arthur Segal and Victor Brauner. In 1925 he started another publication, *Integral* with Ilarie Voronca, Ion Calugaru, Brunea Fox and Benjamin Fondane. He illustrated books by Saşa Pana, Ilarie Voronca, Ion Calugaru and Tudor Arghezi, designed stage sets for the Jewish Barasheum theater and taught at Jewish Art school. In 1949 he was appointed director of the Bucharest Museum of Art.

Another important Jewish personality from Brăila is **Mihail Sebastian**, born Iosif Mendel Hechter, son of Mendel and Clara Hechter (née Weintraub). After completing his secondary education, Sebastian studied law in Bucharest, but was soon attracted to the literary life and the exciting ideas of the new generation of Romanian intellectuals, as epitomized by the literary group *Criterion* which included Emil Cioran, Mircea Eliade and Eugène Ionesco. Sebastian published several novels, including *Accidentul* ("The Accident") and *Oraşul cu salcâmi* ("The Town with Acacia Trees"), heavily influenced by French novelists such as Marcel Proust and Jules Renard. He legally changed his name from Iosif Mendel Hechter to "Iosif Mihail Sebastian" in April 1935. Although initially an apolitical movement, *Criterion* came under the increasing influence of Nae Ionescu's brand of philosophy, called *Trăirism*, which mixed jingoistic nationalism, existentialism and Christian mysticism, as well as that of the fascist and antisemitic paramilitary organization known as the Iron Guard. As a Jew, Sebastian came to be regarded as an outsider within the group, even by his friends. In 1934 he published another novel, *De două mii de ani* (For Two Thousand Years), about what it meant to be a Jew in Romania, and asked Nae Ionescu, who at the time was still friendly with Sebastian, to write the preface. Ionescu agreed, generating uproar by inserting paragraphs both antisemitic and against the very nature of the book to introduce. Sebastian decided to take the only intelligent revenge and publish the preface by Nae Ionescu, which only heightened the controversy. Sebastian's decision to include the preface prompted criticism from the Jewish community as well as the far-right circles patronized by Ionescu and the Iron Guard. The antisemitic daily newspaper *Sfarmă Piatră* (literally "Breaking Rocks") denounced Sebastian as a "Zionist agent and traitor", despite Sebastian's vocal declaration he was a proud Romanian with no interest in emigrating from his homeland. In response to the criticism, Sebastian wrote *Cum am devenit huligan* (How I Became a Hooligan), an anthology of essays and articles depicting the manner in which *For Two Thousand Years* was received by the Romanian public and the country's cultural establishment. In the book, he answered his critics by holding up a mirror to their prejudice, detailing and assailing the claims of both his right-wing and left-wing detractors. He addresses the rabid antisemitism of the former in a clear and unaffected manner, underlining its absurdity: "I was born in Romania, and I am Jewish. That makes me a Jew, and a Romanian. For me to go around

and join conferences demanding that my identity as a Jewish Romanian be taken seriously would be as crazy as the Lime Trees on the island where I was born to form a conference demanding their rights to be Lime Trees. As for anyone who tells me that I'm not a Romanian, the answer is the same: go talk to the trees, and tell them they're not trees."

Sebastian became known in Romanian literature mainly for his plays, such as *Steaua fără nume* ("The Star Without a Name"), *Jocul de-a vacanța* ("Holiday Games"), and *Ultima oră* ("Breaking News").

Ilarie Voronca born Eduard Marcus in Brăila in 1903, was a central figure in the Romanian and French literary avant-garde in the early 20th century.

In his early years, he was connected with Eugen Lovinescu's Sburătorul group, making his debut in 1922 in the Sburătorul literar with some symbolist pieces inspired by the works of George Bacovia and Camil Baltazar. A year later, Voronca adopted a change in style, adhering to the modernist manifesto published in *Contimporanul* and contributing to literary magazines such as *Punct* and *Integral*. He and Stephan Roll issued a Constructivism-inspired magazine entitled *75 HP*, of which only one number was ever printed. In 1925, he collaborated with Victor Brauner on "picto-poésie" for a portrait of himself.

He settled in France in 1933 and began writing in French. Several of his works were illustrated with drawings by Constantin Brâncuși, Marc Chagall, and Victor Brauner. A French citizen in 1938, Voronca took part in the French Resistance during World War II.

He visited Romania in January 1946, and was acclaimed for his writings and anti-fascist activities. He committed suicide later in the same year.

The last Jewish personality I will mention is myself, **Adrian Iosifescu**. Although I was born in Brăila, I always considered myself an Bucurestian (from Bucharest) because I spent most of my young years in Bucharest. My family left Brăila when I was 1 year old, when my father, a judge, was assigned to Galați, where my brother was born and shortly after, to Bucuresti.

In Brăila operated important business families.

The **Davidovici / Davidowitz family** operated grain warehouses and were involved in river transport, owning or chartering barges on the Danube.

Doru Davidovici (1945–1989), was a highly celebrated Romanian military pilot and science fiction writer, often compared to Antoine de Saint-Exupéry due to his dual mastery of aviation and evocative literature. On April 20, 1989, his MiG-21 fighter jet crashed during a routine training flight over Bărgănul, Brăila, marking a poignant end to his career and cementing his name in the region's contemporary history.

The **Fränkel family** represented Viennese banking interests in Brăila, providing credit to grain merchants and landowners ahead of the harvest season. This kind of pre-harvest financing, known as *zarafi* activity, was crucial to the entire agricultural export economy.

They also run "Moderna", a major printing and lithography house based in Brăila, which played a significant role in documenting and distributing the cultural history of the region.

The **Moscovici family** was involved in the timber trade coming down the Siret and Prut rivers into the Danube. Logs floated downriver and were then sold to shipbuilders and construction merchants in Brăila.

Serge Moscovici was born on June 14, 1925, in Brăila to this Jewish family of grain merchants. In France, he became one of the most influential figures in modern psychology, recognized globally as the founder of European social psychology and a pioneer in political ecology. His uncle, **Ilie Moscovici** was a highly prominent militant journalist and leader of the Romanian Social Democratic Party.

The **Löbel/Lobel family** was a prominent and influential Ashkenazi Jewish family in Brăila, deeply woven into the city's commercial, financial, and cultural evolution starting in the 19th century. As Brăila transformed into a wealthy, free-port boomtown on the Danube River after 1829, members of the Löbel family emerged as pioneer merchant-bankers, property owners, and publishers.

Historical census data and trade records from the 1830s identify **L. Löbel** as one of the few initial heads of families who spearheaded the early trade boom. They established Brăila as Wallachia's primary commercial gateway to the Black Sea. **Samoil Löbel** was a prominent 19th-century real estate owner whose legacy stands in the heart of the city. His historic residential property, known as the Samoil Lobel Building, is located at the intersection of Galați Street and Traian Square. Beautifully restored in 2011, it functions as the Brăila County Center for the Preservation and Promotion of Traditional Culture. **Jacob Löbel** acted as a vital advisor and partner to his brother-in-law, Jacob Marmorosch in the banking business. Löbel's financial acumen ultimately led him to become the Bucharest branch manager of the prestigious Ottoman Imperial Bank in 1865. His early ventures laid the groundwork for what became the Marmorosch, Blank & Co. Bank, the largest financial institution in modern Romanian history. Active in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, **Louis Löbel** was a known local publisher and postcard editor. Many vintage, collectible postcards illustrating early Brăila's famous Lacul Sărat (Salt Lake) resort and architectural streets bear his imprint.

Galați Jewish History

Let's move over to the city of Galați.

Galați is a port city by the Danube, near the estuary of the rivers Siret and Prut, both running through the Carpathian woods. The city was famous in exporting grains and was a center for import for the wood, iron and fishery industries. Galați was arguably the most important Jewish commercial hub on the lower Danube. Galați's geographic position — at the confluence of the Danube, Prut, and Siret rivers, facing the Russian Empire and the Ottoman world — made it one of the most dynamic commercial cities in Romania, and its Jewish community, one of the largest and most strategically placed in the country.

The name Galați was first mentioned in Romanian documents from the 15th century. The first Jews settled there towards the end of the 16th century. Tombstones from the years 1590-1595 were found in the old cemetery. A second cemetery was established in 1629. Interestingly, however, other historical sources mention, without, however, clear evidence, that the first Jews settled on the banks of the Danube since the time of the Khazars, a population of Turkish origin who converted to Judaism, in the 8th century AD.

In the middle of the 17th century there was already a large Jewish settlement in Galati. The Jews were living in a quarter named 'The City Valley', but had to abandon it in 1770. They settled in a new quarter and developed it. The traders among them lived on 'Jewish Road' and the craftsmen lived in separate roads according to their crafts: 'The Furriers Road', 'The Shoemakers Road', etc. In 1744, a new cemetery was established instead of the previous one that was ruined. In the 18th century Galati was the most important port in Moldavia. It inhabited many Greeks and Bulgarians who were also traders and the competition between them and the Jews became anti-Semitic in nature.

In the beginning of the 18th century, during the Turkish reign, Galati came down in the world but regained its grandeur again right after the signing of the Adrianople Pact (1829) and following its declaration as a "free port" (1834).

Romania's 19th-century economy ran on grain exports — wheat, corn, and barley grown in Wallachia and Moldavia. These goods needed to reach Western European and Ottoman markets, and the route was: from the Estate → River barge → Galați or Brăila → Black Sea → Constanța or directly through the Sulina Channel → World markets. Jewish merchants inserted themselves at every link in this chain — as brokers, warehouse operators, shippers, financiers, and insurers. The free port status attracted foreign merchant communities including Jews, Greeks, and Armenians. Jewish merchants benefited enormously from this city status, importing manufactured goods from Austria and Britain in exchange for grain — essentially running a two-way trade. Jewish merchant families dominated the Danube grain export trade. The Galați Stock Exchange (Bursa), established in the mid-19th century, functioned largely through Jewish brokers.

The Jewish population numbered around 7,000 in 1841, 14,500 in 1894, 12,000 in 1910 (22% of the total), 19,912 in 1930 (20%), and 13,000 in 1942. By the 1860s–1880s, Jews made up roughly 30–40% of Galați's population. The community was a mix of Sephardic Jews, older families, some with Ottoman connections, and Ashkenazi Jews, newer arrivals from Galicia and Russia.

The organization of Jewish businesses had begun as early as the first half of the 19th century, through professional organizations, in response to the refusal of local guilds to accept Jewish craftsmen. Thus, in 1826 the Guild of Jewish Tailors was established, in 1874, the Society of Jewish Craftsmen, in 1893, the Society of Port Officials, in 1895, the Association of Jewish Tanners and Dyers, as well as the Society of Jewish Butchers.

In banking and insurance activities, the presence of Jews was equally consistent. Banca Marmorosch Blank had three branches in Galați, only in Bucharest were there more, Banca Moldova, director Goldring, Banca de Credit Română, director Roesler, Banca Comerciala Română, director Orenstein, Banca de Credit Marunt, director Iancu I. and Banca Rubinstein.

In the history of Galați, the Jewish community was, as in industry and commerce, the driving force of social activities. In 1874, the Society for the Aid and Welfare of the Israeli Craftsmen of Galați was established, which provided assistance to the sick and the families of the deceased. The society also provided donations to the Association of Jewish Students in Bucharest and

Cernăuți, as well as to the local Children's Orphanage, the Elderly Home and the Jewish Canteen. The Jewish community of Galați established the first Health House as early as 1834 which also served as an improvised hospital during the cholera epidemic of 1847. When the issue of transforming this health house into a hospital arose, in order to obtain the necessary funds, Prince Mihail Grigore Sturdza was asked to approve a special tax on goods exported and imported by Jewish merchants. This request was approved by the Charter of February 23, 1846. This Charter also constitutes an implicit recognition of the Jewish Community of Galati as a legal entity. In 1903, the new premises of the Jewish hospital, the current "Buna Vestire" hospital, were inaugurated, which was visited in 1906 by the princely couple Maria and Ferdinand of Hohenzollern, who appreciated the good functioning and modernity of the institution, which provided medical assistance for all ethnic groups. During the First World War, it was transformed into a military hospital, and currently functions as a maternity hospital.

Before World War II, twenty-two synagogues, a kindergarten, two elementary schools for boys and one for girls, a secondary school, a trade school, a hospital, an orphanage, an old-age home, and two mikvahs served the Jewish community.

One aspect that reveals the rapid growth of the Jewish population in Galați is the construction of numerous synagogues by different categories of parishioners who frequented them. Thus, in 1780 the Great Synagogue was founded, in the courtyard of which a mikva (ritual bath) with steam was also installed. The Great Synagogue also functioned as the first headquarters for the Jewish Community of Galați. In 1805 the Chevra Kadisha was established, which took over the burial duties. Other synagogues we should mention are the Croitorilor Synagogue (Tailors' Synagogue 1826), the Chabad Synagogue (1846), the Blinzer Synagogue (1847), the Blecher Synagogue (1847), the Oel Synagogue (1848), the Dolingher Synagogue (1854), the Fierarilor Synagogue (Blacksmiths' Synagogue 1856), the Merari Synagogue (Apple Growers' Synagogue 1858), the Birjarii Synagogue (Cabmen's Synagogue 1860), and the Caritas Synagogue (1871). The Meseriașilor Synagogue (Craftsmen's Synagogue), inaugurated in 1896, remains the sole surviving synagogue from this era; the impressive synagogue itself was completely renovated in 2014 through the efforts of the community. A special mention deserves the construction of a Coral Temple in Galati, which was inaugurated in 1885, but was demolished in 1942, as the building was seriously damaged following the earthquake of November 1940. The request for approval of the demolition addressed to the Ministry of Interior by the City Hall is also a demographic document, as it mentions that in Galati the Jews had 24 houses of prayer for 13,511 souls, while there were 21 churches for 75,233 Christian Orthodox believers.

Despite its economic and social importance, the Jewish community of Galați went through many dramatic moments, the result of ethnic persecution. The violence of 1796 against the massive migration of poor Jews from the Austro-Hungarian Empire is recorded in Romanian documents. In 1821, during the days of the Greek uprising, 3,000 Greeks broke into the city and with the local Greeks put it on fire. The synagogues were also burnt. The Jews took shelter in the Austrian consulate yard for a few days and then boarded a ship and transferred across the river Prut to Reni in Bessarabia. The Austrian consulate also rescued the Torah books saved

from the synagogues. One Jew was killed during the riots and all Jewish stores and flats were looted. Every year, during the winter and in the beginning of the spring, many sailors from Greek ships stayed in the city, waiting for the Danube to thaw. Those sailors used to get wild and harass the Jews. They were parading a doll dressed with traditional Jewish clothes in the streets and mock it and at the same time harassing the Jews. This happened again and again every year at Easter's eve. The Scottish missionaries A. Bonar and Robert McCheyn, who visited Galati in 1839, wrote about this "tradition." Anti-Semitic excesses were recorded in Galati in March and April 1847, and reported in the newspaper "Der Orient". Hundreds of Jews were beaten and robbed and the synagogues of Dolingher, Oel, Gotesman, and the Great Synagogue were devastated. The same thing happened in 1859. Also in 1859 a blood libel was staged. Several Jews were arrested one night with the accusation that they drew blood from a Greek child's arm for Passover. Several Jews were murdered, many beaten and their homes looted. The riots continued for 3 days and ceased only after delegates from foreign countries intervened, especially the French one and Baron Rothschild. In 1867, the "Galați drowning" episode took place, which caused international protests; several Jews were killed by drowning in the Danube, under the pretext of enforcing a law against vagrants.

As a result of the Holocaust during World War II, but also of the persecutions under communism, the Jewish population of Galati decreased dramatically. While about a hundred years ago the community in Galati had 22,000 members, representing approximately 22% of the city's nearly 100,000 inhabitants, today fewer than 200 Jews, most of them elderly, live in Galati.

No aspect of Galați's Jewish history is more consequential than its role as the birthplace and headquarters of organized Zionism in Romania — and, many scholars argue, of the entire modern Zionist movement. From 1881 until 1919, Galați was the center of the Zionist movement in Romania. The first Romanian Revisionist Zionist organization was set up in Galati in 1926. The Pinkas Hakehillot records that at the beginning of 1883, a conference of the united Zionist youth in Romania was held in Galați. In September of the same year, the third conference for the settlement in Eretz Israel was convened, and it was decided to hand over to Rothschild the management of the two settlements founded already in Eretz Israel by the Romanian Zionists: Zichron Yaakov and Rosh Pinna. The central committee remained active in Galați for another whole year, and in the summer of 1884, 25 ploughs and 60 wagons were sent to the two settlements. In 1893, the Galați Jewish leaders founded the movement called Chovevei Zion (the lovers of Zion). Galați was also a center of Hachshara — practical training for life in Palestine. First troops started here by the pioneers from Ukraine on their way to Eretz Israel and the house in 9 Romana Street was known for years as the center of the pioneers.

Let's mention

Galați Rabbinical Leaders

In the middle of the fifties of the 19th century, the **Rabbi Zvi Menachem Pineles** arrived in Galati; he was born in Galicia in 1806 and passed away in Galati in 1870. He is the author of, "The Torah Way" published in Vienna in 1861.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel Friedman brought the splendor of the great Ruzhin Hasidic dynasty to Galați's spiritual life: hasidic courts such as that of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel Friedman also functioned in Galați. This court attracted followers from across the Moldavian region, infusing the city's religious life with the warmth and mysticism of the Ruzhiner tradition.

Among

Galați Artists, Intellectuals and Civic Leaders

Samuel Pineles (1843–1928) is the single most important Jewish figure produced by Galați and one of the most consequential Zionists in world Jewish history. Born in Brody, Galicia, he moved with his family to Galați, in 1863. Early in his youth he began his activity in the Hībbat Zion movement, and submitted to the central board of the Alliance Israélite Universelle in Paris periodical information and documents concerning Romanian Jewry. In 1881 he was elected to the board of the Romanian Association for the Settlement of Erez Israel. He took part in the conference of the settlement societies held in Focșani in January 1882 and was elected chairman of the central board, situated in Galați. As the dominant personality of the movement, Pineles chose the official name for the Central Committee for Facilitating the Emigration of Israelites from Romania and organized a delegation to Palestine in March 1882 to purchase land for agricultural colonization, and prepared for the departure of the ship Thetis to transport emigrants from Galați in August of that year. In 1897, Samuel Pineles served as the Vice President of the First International Zionist Congress in Basel, Switzerland, where he worked closely with Theodor Herzl. Several streets and towns in Israel are named after him. He lived his entire adult life in Galați, dying there in 1928. He was one of the unsung founders of the Jewish state, eventually buried at Har HaMenuchot in Jerusalem.

Baruch Zosmer was a lawyer, Zionist & Deputy Mayor. The first Galați Jews who took part in the city's political life were Jews from Dobruja, who were naturalized there already in 1878. Among them was the Jewish lawyer Baruch Zosmer, who was active in the Galați court of law since 1912. The Zionist Baruch Zosmer was elected deputy mayor in 1928. His election to the city's highest civic office — the only such achievement for a Jew in Galați's history — represented the culmination of the community's post-emancipation civic integration.

Heinrich Shein was another Zionist leader and public figure. Heinrich Shein was one of the central figures of Galați's organized Zionist community through the interwar period, embodying the city's role as a hub of national Jewish activism.

Radu Lupu (1945–2022) born in Galați, was a globally acclaimed pianist celebrated for his interpretations of the Romantic repertoire.

Reuven Rubin (1893–1974) born in Galați, was an Israeli painter and the first diplomatic envoy to Romania from Israel.

Barbu Nemțeanu (1887–1919) was a prominent Romanian-Jewish symbolist poet and translator. Born Benjamin Deutsch, he was a key figure in the Romanian literary scene and authored poetry reflecting the culture of Galați.

Florin Abelès (1922–2005) was born in Galați, and became an internationally renowned French physicist who made fundamental discoveries in optics, specifically in thin films and ellipsometry.

Maia Morgenstern (born 1962): is one of Romania's most celebrated stage and screen actresses, widely known internationally for her roles; her family origins trace directly back to Galați.

Nina Cassian (1924–2014) was a well-known poet, translator, and composer who spent her early years in the city.

Abba Bardicev (1920–1944) was a Galați -born Jewish paratrooper from the British Mandate for Palestine who was dropped into Europe during WWII. For more details please see the Episode 22 – “Romanian Jews parachuted back into Romania”.

The Löbel family, related to the family of same name from Brăila, was one of the most prominent grain trading dynasties in Galați. They operated large warehouses along the Danube quays and had correspondent relationships with brokers in Odessa, Vienna, and Marseille. They also financed smaller Romanian landowners in advance of harvests, effectively functioning as rural creditors.

The Cohn / Cohen family's multiple branches operated in Galați. Some focused on grain brokerage, others on ship chandlery (supplying ships with food, rope, coal, and provisions). The latter was extremely lucrative as Galați became a major stop for steamships.

The Rosenthal family was involved in both grain exports and insurance brokerage, representing foreign underwriters for Danubian cargo. This was a niche but highly profitable sector.

The Brociner family we discussed in during our visit to Iasi, was active in Galați as well.

Marco Brociner was a Galați-born Jewish intellectual and journalist, while his family had deep roots in Danubian commerce. They are a good example of how merchant wealth funded the next generation's entry into professions.

Joseph Brociner (1846–1919) was a university-educated historian, writer, and activist. He lived in Galați and published fundamental works regarding the history of Jews in Romania to advocate for emancipation.

Max Auschnitt (1888–1957), known as the "Iron King," was one of the most important industrialists of interwar Romania. Max Auschnitt was born in Galati in 1887, the son of Osias Auschnitt, who had emigrated from the surroundings of Lvov (then Lemberg), part of the Austro- Hungarian Empire. As a young man, Max Auschnitt was sent by his parents to Vienna to study at the Austrian University of Commerce. He then volunteered and served in the Romanian Army during World War I.

In the early 1920's, Max Auschnitt took over a wire and nail manufacturing factory in

Galati, founded by his father, and built it into a steel mill complex called Uzinele Metalurgice Titan Nadrag Calan (TNC). It included a new steel mill at Ferdinand, now known as the Oțelu Roșu, which, along with numerous other subsidiaries such as Magazinele Unite, Socomet, etc., employed about 10,000 people.

In the late 1920's, having purchased a large number of shares in the Austrian company Steg, Auschnitt, along with Vickers, one of Steg's shareholders that he represented in Romania, assumed control of the company. Steg, in turn, owned a Romanian company, Uzinele si Domenile de Reșița (UDR), a large steel and steel product manufacturing complex with about 17,000 employees, that was nearly bankrupt. Max Auschnitt took over its helm and returned it to profitability. As a result of these acquisitions, he became known in Romania as "Regele de Fier" (King of Steel). Through Steg, Max Auschnitt also assumed control of the steel mill Sartid in the then Yugoslavia and a locomotive factory in Poland.

He was also a founding member of the Romanian Chamber of Commerce, the Rotary Club, the Jockey Club, and the National Grand Lodge of Romania. In December 1934, he converted to Roman Catholicism in order to marry a Romanian woman, Livia Pordea. His friendship with King Carol II enabled him to secure a monopoly on state contracts in the construction and metallurgy sectors. In 1939, having fallen out of the King's favor, which shifted to his rival, the major industrialist Nicolae Malaxa, he was arrested, tried, and sentenced to six years in prison. He was released in 1942 after his sentence was commuted to community service, which he performed at his own former enterprises.

After Germany surrendered, at the request of the Four Power Commission then governing Romania, Max Auschnitt returned to assist in the reconstruction of the country.

At that time, he was completely exonerated of all the false charges that had been previously leveled against him. When, in 1947, it became evident that Romania would fall under the Russian sphere of influence and the country would be run by a Communist regime that would also try to destroy him, Auschnitt decided to leave the country for good. In the summer of 1946 the tycoon left Romania for the United States of America, as president of the Chamber of Deputies. A year later, the Romanian Communist Government confiscated all his properties and later also condemned him to death in absence. He was thus condemned to death by both of the king and then the communists.

An interesting note from researcher Emilian Tilibașa who discovered in the British SSI archives, a document indicating that the industrialist Max Auschnitt may have been an informant for the British Intelligence Services.

This concludes this episode on Brăila and Galați.

In the next episode, we will be visiting the cities of Constanța and Craiova.

Until next time, be well.