

Episode 43 - Prominent Romanian Jewish Personalities and Families from Constanța and Craiova

Hello, I am Adrian Iosifescu, your host of the History of Romanian Jews podcast, and this is episode 43, where we will be moving to the South of Romania to visit the cities of Constanța to the East and Craiova to the West. Please see their location on the Romanian map presented in the notes).

You just listened to the song 'O seară la Constanța' (An evening in Constanța); a link to the full recording is provided in the episode notes.

Constanța Jewish History

Constanța is the oldest continuously inhabited city in Romania, founded in 600 BE. The Greeks and Romans called Constanța Tomis. The Genoese established here a small local port in the 12th century they called Constanța. The Turks called Constanța Küstenje. The region of Dobrogea, where Constanța is located, was annexed by Romania in 1878 after the independence war.

Before 1878 Constanța was a small town; the construction of the Cernavodă–Constanța railway, completed in 1860 and expanded later, and the development of the modern port in the 1890s, transformed Constanța, Romania's main Black Sea outlet, into Romania's window to the world.

Archaeological evidence indicates the presence of a small Jewish settlement in the third century CE. Ashkenazi Jewish traders who accompanied the Russian army as suppliers during the Russo-Turkish war re-established a Jewish settlement in Constanța in 1828. There is no historical or archeologic record of a continuous Jewish presence in this area through medieval, Byzantine and early Ottoman periods.

A Jewish cemetery was opened in 1854 by the Ashkenazi Jewish traders established here.

In 1911 the Ashkenazi Synagogue in Constanta was built in a Moorish style, according to the plans of the architect Adolf Linz. It was done at the initiative of Pincus Șapira, supplier to the Royal House of Romania and an important merchant of watches and jewelry in Constanța.

In the 1830s, Sephardic Jews from Anatolia settled in the area and set up a community of their own, created their first cemetery in 1895 on an obtained plot of land, and on a leased land they built a synagogue in 1867, a monumental building of Gothic influence, which was demolished in 1980s, without any protest or regret.

Constanța's Jews enjoyed a legal standing available to almost no other Jews in Romania before 1919, a fact of enormous historical importance. In 1878, after northern Dobruja passed to Romania from Turkey, Romanian nationality was automatically granted to the Jews in the region, including Constanța. As former Turkish subjects, they found themselves in a more favorable situation than the other Jews of Romania, the overwhelming majority of whom were deprived of rights. While Jews across Moldavia and Wallachia were stateless subjects and denied citizenship for decades, Constanța's Jewish community, by virtue of their Ottoman citizenship, were already Romanian nationals. This unique status shaped the character of the community as more integrated, more civic-minded, and more commercially embedded in the city's institutional life than their counterparts elsewhere.

Jewish merchants in Constanța specialized in freight forwarding, a complex logistical role involving customs, insurance, warehousing, and ship booking. As the port modernized in the 1890s, some Jewish firms became agents for major European shipping lines (Lloyd, Messageries Maritimes, etc.). The customs brokerage sector was also largely in Jewish hands.

There was significant commercial rivalry between the Danube ports of Brăila and Galați and Constanța; the Danube route was cheaper for bulk grain but slow and dependent on water levels while Constanța offered faster, more reliable sea access and became increasingly dominant after the modern port was built. Jewish merchant families sometimes had offices in both locations, hedging between the two routes. Family networks were key; brothers or cousins in different ports allowed real-time information sharing about prices, ship availability, and credit conditions.

The telegraph, arriving in Romania in the 1850s–60s, transformed this network, and Jewish merchants were among the earliest and heaviest users.

This vibrant commercial world was devastated in stages; first during WWI which disrupted trade routes and destroyed capital and then in the interwar period, when rising Romanian nationalism and antisemitic legislation squeezed Jewish merchants out of many sectors.

The Jews of Constanta were never very numerous or influential because Romania's most important port, Constanta, had, even before 1877, important communities of Greeks and Armenians, who set the guidelines in Pontic trade, crafts and finance.

In 1850, Ion Ionescu de la Brad counted 119 Jewish families throughout the province, with improvised prayer houses. Four decades later, in 1890, the city of Constanta had around 600 Jewish inhabitants. The 1939 census recorded an increase in the community to more than 2,000 souls.

In 1939, the Ashkenazic community had two schools — one for boys and one for girls — while the Sephardic community had one. Modern Jewish education developed under the influence of the Alliance Israélite Universelle.

The Jewish community association funded a children's camp and hospital in the neighboring spa town of Techirghiol, helping Jewish children and needy Jewish patients from throughout Romania. There were several Zionist organizations of various orientations in Constanța, as well as a committee supporting emigration to Palestine.

In the autumn of 1940, a German military mission was established in the port, and the Jews' access to it was forbidden. On 13 December 1940, Legionary groups took over Jewish shops. When Romania joined Germany's side on 22 June 1941, all Jews were arrested and confined in the camp of Cobadin. Five weeks later they were transferred to three other smaller camps, Osmancea, Ciobănița, and Mereni. Both men and women were sent in hard labor detachments to stone quarries and to repair roads in Dobrogea and Bessarabia.

In November 1941 the Jews returned to Constanța, but to a special district. In 1942 there were 1,532 Jews in Constanța.

After the communist takeover, the number of Jews in Constanța decreased gradually as a result of emigration. In 1956, there were 586; in 1969 there were approximately 300, and at the end of 2003 there were only 104 Jewish inhabitants; with one synagogue still functional.

No aspect of Constanța's Jewish story is more historically momentous than its role as the principal departure port for Jewish emigration to Palestine and Israel. The port was a point of departure for ships carrying Jewish emigrants to Palestine before, during, and after the Holocaust, until 1951. From Constanța's docks, across the Black Sea and through the Bosphorus, tens of thousands of Romanian Jews set sail for the Land of Israel in legal immigration during the early Zionist era, in desperate Aliyah Bet (illegal immigration) during the Holocaust years, and in mass emigration, early in the Communist period.

The Tiger Hill, a ship built in 1887, sailed from Constanța on August 3, 1939, with about 750 immigrants on board. On September 1, the first day of World War II, the Tiger Hill was intercepted and fired on by Royal Navy gunboats off Tel Aviv, and was beached. Its passengers, scrambling ashore under fire, to become part of Israel's founding generation.

Among the most tragic voyages was that of the Mefkure: a list of 301 persons who were aboard the motor schooner Mefkure, which left the port of Constanța sailing under the Turkish and Red Cross flags carrying Jewish refugees to Palestine on August 5, 1944. The ship was torpedoed in the Black Sea by a Soviet submarine. The Mefkure tragedy joined that of the Struma, which had also departed from Romanian waters, as a symbol of the desperate and mortal risk faced by Jews seeking refuge from the Holocaust.

For more details please see Episode 9 - Romanian Jewish Emigration.

Constanța Rabbinical Leaders

Let's start the review of Jewish personalities from Constanța with its rabbinical leaders.

Rabbi Iosef Haim Schechter was the town's rabbi and author of Torah commentary. Rabbi Schechter led the community through the most dangerous years of its modern history, the period of fascist persecution before and during World War II, by providing religious continuity and communal leadership when both were under severe threat.

Rabbi Sabetai (Shabtai) Djaen (1883–1940) was appointed Chief Sephardic Rabbi of Romania between 1921 and 1931. He was a remarkable polymath: rabbi, playwright, Ladino language scholar, and collector of Sephardic folklore and theater. He wrote extensively on the Ladino language as spoken in Romania and the Balkans, and was decorated by Spanish President Alcalá-Zamora for his promotion of Hispanic culture and Judeo-Spanish heritage in the Balkans. He was one of the most important figures of Romanian Sephardic Jewry in the interwar period.

Constanța Artists, Intellectuals and Civic Leaders

Now let's move over to Constanța artists, intellectuals and civic leaders.

Solomon Abraham Rosanes (1862–1938), a famous chronicler of Ottoman Jewry, was among the most distinguished scholars to have lived in Constanța. He was a historian, archivist, and librarian of Sephardic Jewry and a researcher of the history of Jews in the Ottoman Empire. Rosanes was born in Rousse, Bulgaria, in the Ottoman Empire, to an Orthodox Jewish family of Sephardic origin. His father, Avraham, was the head of the city's Jewish community and a rabbi,

teacher, and educator. Solomon Abraham Rosanes' commercial life brought him to Constanța, where, as with all his travels, he combined business with scholarship. During his many business trips, he managed to pursue research in libraries and archives in Constanța and other various localities. Rosanes contributed to Hebrew, Ladino, Romanian, and Bulgarian publications, writing chiefly on the history of the Jews in the Balkans. His major work was *Korot ha-Yehudim be-Turkyah ve-Arẓot ha-Kedem* ("A History of the Jews in Turkey and in the Orient," 6 vols., 1930–45), of great importance because of the wealth of source material it contains. These six-volume work is considered the standard general history of Jews in the Ottoman Empire. It has been described as "a monument to Turkish Jewish learning" because of its emphasis on Ottoman rabbinic sources. Rosanes stands as one of the greatest Jewish historians of the Sephardic world, and his time in Constanța connected the city's Dobrujan Jewish community to this remarkable scholarly legacy.

Among the Constanța's Jewish personalities we should mention the archaeologist **Carol Blum**, who contributed to the excavation and documentation of the ancient city of Tomis and its surrounding region. Working in a landscape where Jewish history itself lay buried in the soil, the third-century Jewish settlement of Tomis being one of the earliest in Southeast Europe, Blum represented the intersection of Jewish identity and scholarly devotion to uncovering the deep past of the Black Sea coast.

Carol Friedmann was a distinguished local psychiatrist, who served as the leader and prominent voice for the remaining Jewish community in the 21st century.

The Alleon Family was one of the most prominent families in Constanța. **Jean Gérard Amédée Alleon**, a French banker of Jewish descent, was a major figure in the local economy. The family brought over the renowned Greek architect Pelopidas D. Couppa from Constantinople to build in 1883-4 the iconic Casa Alleon, also known as the "Stone House" (because it was constructed almost entirely from massive cut stone) or "English House" (The moniker stems from the property's previous history. A building originally erected by the English-owned Danube and Black Sea Railway (DBSR) Company stood on the exact site, which temporarily housed a British Vice Consul). Its asymmetrical features include a distinctive Venetian-style corner balcony, a suspended tower, and a unique fronton making the house a protected architectural monument today.

The Șapira and Cohan Families represented by **Itic Șapira** and **Iano Cohan**, were the backbone of interwar civic and commercial life, heavily involved in the region's trade.

Pincus Șapira was a highly respected leader in the city, who served as the President of the Ashkenazi Jewish community during the early 20th century, notably guiding the community through the end of World War I. Pincus Șapira was the watchmaker and jeweler of the Royal Court. He was also a member and later headed the Commodity and Grain Exchange until 1933. He owned important shops, located on the north side of Independence Square (Ovidiu today).

The Bally / Bali family were Sephardic merchants involved in import-export through the Black Sea, particularly in wool, hides, and manufactured goods.

The Moscu / Moscou family was active in grain forwarding, taking grain arriving by rail from the interior and arranging its loading onto ocean-going ships.

The Behar family was another typical Sephardic merchant family of Constanța, involved in both wholesale trade and money exchange.

The Shorr and Schwarzfeld Families were notable within the broader Romanian Jewish intelligentsia, members of these families contributed significantly to the region's historical and literary landscape.

Craiova Jewish History

Now let's move over to the other corner of Romania South and visit the town of Craiova. Craiova was the capital of Oltenia (the western part of Wallachia) and one of Romania's most important inland cities. Its commercial character was shaped by its role as a regional market hub for agricultural Oltenia and by its proximity to the Danube crossing points toward Serbia and the Ottoman Empire.

As shown in the archaeological discoveries, a Geto-Dacian site existed in Craiova area between 400 and 350 B.C., identified under the name of Pelendava. Here, at the beginning of the 2nd century A.C., the Romans built a Roman castra, which constituted the hub of its later expansion. The site is mentioned in Tabula Peutingeriana, a map of the Roman Empire, drawn upon the initiative of Roman Emperor Caracalla and completed during Severus Alexander's reign. The year of 225, when this map was finished, is considered to be the date of the first documentary evidence of the oldest site in the present city area. At the end of the 15th century, Craiova was a trade city, on the property of the influential boyars Craiovești.

The first documents about Jews in Craiova are dated from the middle of the 17th century. Archbishop Paul de Alep, in his work *Călătoriiile patriarhului Macarie* (The trips of Patriarch Macarie) mentions the presence of some Turkish Jews in Craiova since the beginning of the 17th century. The presence of Jews here will fully contribute to the process of diversification in the local market, strengthening of the social division of labor and the economic development of the city, which was known as a large 'trade city'. Salesmen, owners of small shops or great merchants, Jews left their definite mark on the social and economic dynamics of the city. They also played a great part in the cultural development of Craiova.

In terms of Jewish participation into the economic life of Craiova, it is worthwhile to mention that, during interwar times, **Lazar Dunkelblum** had a store known as *Englezul* (The Englishman). In Craiova, there was *Moara lui Mendel* (Mendel Mill), where tens of workers were employed. The equipment had been brought from Switzerland, and the mill was located in a seven-story building. **The Mendel brothers**, great business people, have a large store, which operated until after 1948. Three out of the four big mills in Craiova were owned by Jews: **Moise A. Mendel, Marcu Weiss, Adolf Weiss**. In the vicinity of the mill, there was the **Mendelbaum** bakery store, located in the Gipsy neighborhood, next to the Jewish one.

Craiova's Jewish merchants tended to dominate the textile & clothing trade. Craiova main commercial streets, particularly around Piața Centrală, had numerous Jewish-owned textile shops and tailoring businesses. They imported cloth from Vienna and Budapest and sold both wholesale and retail.

They also controlled the grain and agricultural produce brokerage. Oltenia was rich in wheat, corn, and sunflower and the Jewish merchants acted as intermediaries between Oltenian landowners and larger exporters in Brăila or Galați. They provided pre-harvest credit to smaller landowners, the same zarafi function seen in the port cities.

Spirits and inn-keeping were controlled by the Craiova Jews, as elsewhere in Romania. Jewish merchants were heavily involved in the alcohol trade, operating taverns, distilleries, and wine merchants. Several families held leases on boyar estates in the Craiova hinterland, running the commercial operations of those estates.

Finally, Jewish merchants has a heavy presence in hardware and general goods. Hardware, tools, building materials, and manufactured goods were importing from Austria and Hungary for the growing city.

In Craiova, around 1790, a Jewish institution of social assistance was operational; several personalities were involved, such as **Isac Benvenisti**, **Elias Sabetay** and **Iacob Benevenisti**. Another charitable institution is the one called Erza Bezarothe, which was granting scholarships to Sephardic children and students.

In 1790 Sephardi Jews founded a Chevra Kaddisha, as a Romanian landowner granted them land for a cemetery. Craiova was a center of Judeo-Spanish culture in Romania.

Ashkenazi Jews settled in Craiova in the mid-19th century, though their community was not officially founded until 1913. They owned two synagogues, the first built in 1842 and the other in 1880. Craiova was a center of Judeo-Spanish culture. In 1865 the Ashkenazi community established a boys' school which functioned until 1948. The Sephardic community maintained a separate school until 1887, when both schools were joined.

The "Lumina" (light) School was attested in 1865, firstly as a primary school, then it became a distinguished high school. In 1877, the commercial Israelite school had 75 Romanian and 8 Jewish students enrolled. The school closed in 1897 due to financial reasons. Between 1899 and 1901 the Sephardic community led by President **Ignat Samitca**, opened a canteen for poor children. In 1919, there were 114 students enrolled at the Jewish school. During the 1921-1922 school years, there were 113 students, under the supervision of principal A. Weismann. The school had both Romanian and Jewish teachers.

In Craiova, at the beginning of the 20th century, there were three Jewish religious buildings: The Sephardic Synagogue and two Ashkenazi Synagogues. Two of them are no longer there. A charter in 1792, provided by Wallachian prince Constantin Șutu refers to a place purchased that year by the Sephardic Israelite community at Horezu monastery. The Jewish Havra was erected on that piece of land. In another document, by C.A. Ipsilante, prince of Wallachia, a Jewish man is mentioned, by his name Leib, owner in the Horezu Monastery Street, by the Jewish Havra, which suggests that the area was populated by the Jewish community at that time. The first synagogue of a Sephardic rite was built here. The financial aid for its erection

came from **Mosi A. Mendel**. In the aftermath of the earthquake on March 4, 1977, the Sephardic Temple went through an irreversible deterioration. Later on, the building was abandoned and demolished. Its altar was rescued and installed in the current Synagogue. In 1832, the Ashkenazi community purchased a piece of land, also on Horezu Street, to build a religious site. Erected in 1832, the Coral Temple was initially meant for the Ashkenazi Jews, but later, the Sephardic were accepted to join. In 1887 architect Birkental reconstructed the building. After being damaged during the earthquake on March 4, 1977, the Coral Temple underwent serious repairs in 1982. On the Synagogue façade on Horezu street, there is a built-in plaque to commemorate the 53 Jews who had served during the 1913, 1916-1919 wars; six of them were medical doctors.

The Jewish community in Craiova grew over time:

- in 1786, 40 Jews were registered in Craiova;
- in 1831, there were already 328;
- in 1838, there were 114 documented Jews, out of whom 27 foreign subjects;
- in 1860, the community had reached 495 people;
- in 1899, the number of Jews was 2,891;
- in 1920, there were 2,867 Jews, with 2,728 permanent residents and 139 transients;
- in 1930, during the General Census of Romanian Population on December 29, 1930, a number of 2,176 Jews were registered in Craiova
- in 1938, 2,274 Jews were in Craiova.

After the war, the Jewish population was augmented by the influx of refugees from northern Bukovina, who chose not to return to their former homes under Soviet rule. At the end of the 50's, a large number of the Craiova Jews left for good, and most of them settled in Israel. Their exodus ended in the year of 1964. Ever since, their number is gradually decreasing and the age average in the Jewish community is growing. In 2004, only 89 Jews lived there.

Craiova Artists, Intellectuals and Civic Leaders

Felix Aderca was born Froim-Zelig Aderca on March 13, 1891 in Craiova. He was to become a Romanian novelist, playwright, poet, journalist and critic, noted as a representative of rebellious modernism in the context of Romanian literature. As a member of the Sburătorul circle and close friend of its founder Eugen Lovinescu, Aderca promoted the ideas of literary innovation, cosmopolitanism and art for art's sake, reacting against the growth of traditionalist currents. His diverse works of fiction, noted as adaptations of Expressionist techniques over conventional narratives, range from psychological and biographical novels to pioneering fantasy and science fiction writings, also include a sizable contribution to erotic literature.

Aderca's open rejection of tradition, his socialism and pacifism, and his exploration of controversial subjects resulted in several scandals, making him a main target of attacks from the far-right press of the interwar period. As a vocal critic of antisemitism, the writer was persecuted by successive fascist regimes before and during World War II. Afterward he resumed his activities as author and cultural promoter, but, having failed at fully adapting his style to the requirements set by the communist regime, he lived his final years in obscurity.

Velvel Zbarzher born Benjamin Wolf Ehrenkrantz (1824–1884), was a great Galician-born Yiddish bard and Brody singer spending extended periods in Romanian cities including Craiova, performing his satirical and lyrical songs in the homes of wealthy Jews and in workers' cafés. His "mini-melodramas in song" were precursors to Yiddish theater. He was described by Isidore Singer in the *Jewish Encyclopedia* (1901) as "a real folk-poet" whose songs were still sung by Jewish masses two decades after his death.

Filip Lazăr (1894–1936) was born in Craiova, and became an internationally celebrated pianist and composer. He helped found the Romanian Composers' Society in 1920 and later relocated to Paris, where he established the "Triton" modern music society.

Constantin Marius Șăineanu (1859–1944) was also born in Craiova; he was a distinguished philologist, linguist, and folklorist known for his widely used dictionaries.

Iancu Zimel was an influential attorney who served as the president of the Craiova Jewish Community for over 45 years.

The Samitca family was recognized for their significant role in the Romanian publishing and printing, centered primarily in Craiova, but influential within the wider Romanian cultural landscape, including Bucharest, during the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

In the first half of the 19th century, **Iosif Samitca** was a book "transporter" in Craiova. He went from door to door to sell books. With the money won, penny by penny, in 1847, he bought the printing house of Constantin Lecca, painter and 1848 revolutionary, becoming himself a typographer, then editor and librarian. Iosif Samitca and later his sons, **Ralian** (1846-1911) and **Ignat** (1857-1925), developed the publishing and the printing house over the decades, built new edifices, brought modern machines from abroad and gained international acclaim. The modern printing press they established in Craiova operated for nearly 100 years, producing Hebrew books, textbooks, and other literature. They pioneered the technology of lithography (1878) and the use of the engine in the printing industry (1893). The family's printing house was highly regarded, receiving two silver medals in 1900 for their work. The family was connected to prominent intellectuals of the era, notably being the in-laws of the scholar Lazăr Șăineanu (son-in-law of Ralian Samitca). When the king Carol I visited Craiova, in 1884, he bought some books from them that he donated to the lyceum library, the only lyceum existing in the city in that time.

The Benvenisti family belonged to the Sephardic community in Craiova. **Sandu** and **David Benvenisti** founded the Frații Benvenisti printing press in 1876, a major publication hub for Jewish books. A notable descendant, **Mișu Benvenisti**, was born in Craiova in 1902 and later became a prominent Zionist leader and lawyer who fought for Jewish rights during the Holocaust. He was one of the few Sephardic Jews to reach national prominence in Romanian Jewish political life. He became a leader of the Zionist Youth movement in the early 1920s and later general secretary of the Jewish Party. During WWII he engaged in rescue operations for Jewish refugees; he negotiated with the Romanian General Leoveanu to allow Jewish refugees

fleeing the Holocaust in Hungary, Slovakia, and Poland to sail from Constanța Harbor, saving hundreds of lives. He eventually emigrated to Israel.

The Mendel, Weiss, and Dunkelblum families were prominent families who drove much of the city's economic life. Three of the four major grain mills in Craiova were owned by Jewish families, including **Moise A. Mendel**, **Marcu Weiss**, and **Adolf Weiss**. Additionally, **Lazar Dunkelblum** ran a renowned interwar department store known as "Englezul".

The Dorosteanu family became synonymous with organized communal life in Craiova. **Mauriciu Dorosteanu (1862–1935)** was the first president of the Sephardic Community of Craiova and the leading civic figure of the organized Sephardic Kehilla in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. He is buried in the Craiova Jewish cemetery.

The Eskenazy family was one of the preeminent Jewish families in Craiova, that produced many intellectuals during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, including doctors, lawyers, and prominent figures in the banking sector. The Eskenazy House takes its name from the Eskenazy family. The son of **Leon Eschenazy**, a great personality in the community, became a Senior MD in the Israeli marine forces.

The Zwilling family was a prominent Jewish household based in Craiova, known for leaving behind a recognized architectural footprint.

This concludes this episode on Constanța and Craiova.
In the next episode we will be visiting the city of București.
Until next time, be well.