

Episode 45 - Prominent Romanian Jewish Personalities and Families from Ploiești and Brașov

Hello listeners, this is Adrian Iosifescu your host of the History of Romanian Jews podcast. In this episode, we will be visiting the cities of Ploiești and Brașov (please see their location on the Romanian map presented in the notes).

You just listened to the beginning of the song “Brașov Dance”; a link to the full recording is provided in the episode notes.

Ploiești Jewish History

Ploiești occupies a unique place in Romanian Jewish history as it was the only major Romanian city whose kahal combined Ashkenazim and Sephardim in communal activities, although distinctions persisted in regard to separate synagogues and Hevra Kaddisha. In Ploiești Sephardim and Ashkenazim served alternately as heads of a united community.

Although the presence of Jews in Ploiești is noted from the 17th century, an established community can be documented only from 1700, when Sephardic Jews established a synagogue and cemetery.

In 1780, Ashkenazi Jews erected a modest synagogue alongside the existing Sephardic one. By the early 20th century, five synagogues were eventually established, including one for artisans and another for Sephardim.

As the Jewish community developed and its economic power increased due to the oil industry, a large modern Ashkenazi synagogue designed by Israel Goligher was constructed in 1911. The vast structure included an organ brought from Vienna. Sephardic Jews had also built a modern synagogue that opened formally in 1899.

In 1831 there were 280 tax-paying Jews in Ploiești, rising to 2,478 in 1899, 3,843 in 1930, and 10,000 in 1940.

Immediately after the outbreak of World War II, Ploiești became a center of German interest because of its oil resources. Units of the German army appeared in the city as early as the autumn of 1940.

Later, under the Antonescu regime, persecution of the Jews in Ploiești became brutal, in large part due to the town's strategic location near areas of oil extraction. On 13 July 1941, all Jewish men aged 18 to 60 were arrested and deported to the concentration camp of Teiș. They were released six months later, but were forbidden to return to Ploiești; some were sent instead to concentration camps in Transnistria.

An interesting element of the second world war was Operation Tidal War, a massive air attack by bombers of the United States Army Air Forces based in Libya, on nine oil refineries around Ploiești, on August 1, 1943. It was a strategic bombing mission and part of the "oil campaign" to deny petroleum-based fuel to the Axis powers. The mission resulted in "no curtailment of overall product output". Due to the number of aircraft available and the long distance, the mission was conceived as low level attack using Consolidated B-24 Liberator with the advantage of surprise against relatively undefended targets. However the aircraft were not designed for

low level use and the targets were well defended by many anti-aircraft guns and German and Rumanian fighter squadrons. As a result, the operation was one of the costliest for the United States Army Air Forces in the European Theater, with 53 aircraft - about a third of those committed - and 500 aircrewmen lost. It was the costliest major Allied air raid of the war, and it was later referred to as the "Black Sunday". One of the downed American planes crashed into a women's prison in Ploiești, resulting in about half of the civilian casualties from the total of 101 killed and 238 injured.

On Sep 29, 1943 the newspaper Jewish Herald from London mentioned that a large numbers of Jews were among the crews of the American Liberators that raided the Ploesti oil refineries in Romania.

After the war, In 1950, just 2,000 Jews lived in the town, and the census of 2000 counted only 124, two-thirds of whom were over the age of 65.

Ploiești Rabbinical Leaders

Let's discuss Ploiești rabbinical leaders.

Among noted rabbis who served Ploiești were those of the Brezis family: **Judah Aryeh Brezis** (1869–1908) and **Dr. Joseph Hayyim Brezis** (1911–1922).

The Brezis family represented a model of continuity in religious leadership across two generations, with Rabbi Judah Aryeh laying the institutional foundations and his successor carrying the community through the turbulent post-World War I period of emancipation and reorganization.

Rabbi Tzvi Yosef Chaim Brezis continued the family's communal engagement even after his rabbinate: he served in Ploiești from 1911 to 1922. During the years 1924–1925, he was the director of the office of the Zionist Organization of Romania. He also served as the director of Keren Kayemet LeYisrael (Jewish National Fund) from 1928 to 1930.

Rabbi Menahem Safran was a member of the illustrious Șafran rabbinical dynasty of Bacău, the son of Rabbi Bezalel Ze'ev Șafran, the supreme halakhic authority of Romania. After his rabbinate, Rabbi Dr. Menahem Safran served in Ploiești from 1939 to 1956, then made aliyah and settled in Ramat Gan.

Rabbi David Friedman, a Hasidic zaddik of the Ruzhin dynasty, lived in Ploiești until his murder by the Iron Guard in 1940. During that era, Rabbi Friedman of the Ruzhin dynasty came to the city and set up a prayer house in his home. On 27 November 1940, during the rule of the Iron Guard, 11 Jews were arrested and executed, including the Hasidic rebbe, David Friedman. His martyrdom, one of the first mass executions of Jews in Romania's fascist era, made him a symbol of the brutality that was to follow.

Ploiești Jewish Artists, Intellectuals and Civic Leaders

Let's move over to Ploiești Jewish artists, intellectuals and civic Leaders.

David Emmanuel (1854–1941) was Ploiești's most towering intellectual figure, and one of the greatest Jewish scientists in Romanian history. David Emmanuel was a Romanian Jewish mathematician and member of the Romanian Academy, considered to be the founder of the

modern mathematics school in Romania. Emmanuel received his primary schooling in Ploiești between 1861 and 1864, where his mathematical gifts first became apparent. In 1873 he went to Paris, where he received his PhD in mathematics from the University of Paris (Sorbonne) in 1879, becoming the second Romanian to have a PhD in mathematics from the Sorbonne. In 1966, his name was noted at the United Nations as one of the select personalities who promoted the advancement of various scientific areas.

Lazăr Șăineanu (1859–1934), born Eliezer Schein in Ploesti, was a philologist, linguist, folklorist, and cultural historian, a specialist in Oriental, Romance, and German studies, primarily known for his contribution to Yiddish and Romanian philology. He compiled a Romanian dictionary in four volumes (1895) which went through 84 editions, won prizes from the Romanian Academy, and was the most prominent Romanian philologist of his day. Despite this, he was continuously denied Romanian citizenship even after embracing Christianity. He finally left Romania in 1901 to settle in Paris, where he taught Romanian folklore at the École des Hautes Études at the Sorbonne. He is called "the father of Yiddish linguistics" for his groundbreaking 1889 study of the language.

Among Ploiești's Jewish civic leaders were the oil magnates, Jewish pioneers of Romania's Petroleum Industry. The rise of the oil industry in the Prahova Valley created a new Jewish merchant and industrial elite in Ploiești that had no equivalent elsewhere in Romania. At the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, this Jewish elite developed in town, consisting mainly of businessmen involved in extracting oil — notably Max I. Schapira, Mendel Predinger, and A. D. Rosen.

Max Schapira (1864-1921) was the most prominent of these figures. A local entrepreneur and banker, he expanded and reorganized oil processing enterprises in the region. Under Schapira's management, oil processing capacity doubled in a year. The vast majority of the products refined were exported, primarily to the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian empires.

Max Schapira was a representative figure for the modernization of Ploiești society. Born in Fălticeni, Moldavia, in a family of Sephardi Jews, he moved to Ploiești towards the end of the 19th century. He was granted Romanian citizenship in 1904. He bought the gas factory in 1901 and renamed it Astra Refinery. The purchase was followed by a series of investments in its modernization. Well connected to the international business environment, Schapira focused on key sectors: banking, oil, real estate, and textiles (as the owner of the textile factory Dorobanțul Schapira). His business excellence was acknowledged at the National Exhibition of 1906 when Astra-Schapira Max – Petroleum and Derivatives Refinery was awarded a silver medal.

Schapira's work, *The history of the community of the Israelite cult in Ploiești*, was also awarded a diploma. Unwilling to make further investments in technology, Schapira sold the refinery towards the end of 1906. This marked the transition from the romantic period of the industry to its international expansion. Yet Schapira did not completely leave the oil sector since he continued to lease the land he owned to the large refineries. He indirectly supported the development of the oil industry, particularly the companies with Romanian capital, through the loans given by his bank. He was a prominent member of PNL (the National Liberal Party) and a true Maecenas of the local community. He contributed to the development of education and

culture; he launched philanthropic initiatives in support of the churches and Orthodox parishes of the town, and he supported young musicians and painters. On his death, *Lumina*, the newspaper of PNL Prahova region, noted that 'with the death of Max Schapira, we lose a strong pillar of the excellent, bold and well-conceived commercial and industrial enterprises of Prahova and the entire country. For a long time, one of the streets in the town retained his name.

Lazăr Edeleanu (1861-1941), born in Bucharest in a Jewish family of humble origin, showed a studious inclination from his childhood. He completed grant sponsored studies at the Faculty of Sciences of the University of Bucharest. He obtained his doctorate at the University of Berlin with a thesis which looked at amphetamine and its role. From Berlin he moved to England where he worked at the Royal Artillery College. He returned to Romania as a lecturer at the University of Bucharest, the organic chemistry department. His reputation as a specialist in applied chemistry in the emergent oil sector, as well as his connection to the German world, led to his appointment, between 1906 and 1910, as the managing director of one of the large refineries of Ploiești, the Vega refinery, which had the German company Disconto Gesellschaft as majority shareholder. It was here, under challenging conditions and in the absence of a proper laboratory, that he developed in 1907 a groundbreaking method of refining oil that would be known as the *Edeleanu method*. It was subsequently tested in Rouen, France, and later applied widely in the oil industry. From 1910 onwards, Edeleanu continued his research in Germany at Allgemeine Gesellschaft für Chemische Industrie. With the help of the German company, he patented his invention, and the Edeleanu method started to be used in different production plants worldwide. After 1923, the Edeleanu method became very popular in the US following the author's publication of a study in a US journal, and numerous North American refineries started using it. The patent was valid until 1928, and after this date, the Edeleanu method was still widely employed in the countries where oil was extracted and refined. Edeleanu registered a series of other patents during his career: 40 in Romania and 17 abroad, mainly in Germany, US, France, Sweden, and Holland. His activity provides the best illustration of the transformations brought by globalization and modernization in Ploiești. Yet it also shows the limitations: the dissemination and implementation of his discovery on a global scale required communication with and scientific validation from a major European capital. In 1910, Edeleanu moved to Germany where he spent the greater part of his life, employed as the director of Allgemeine.

Born in 1856, **Mendel Predinger** was a Jewish philanthropist from Ploiești who amassed a vast fortune in the oil business. Not content with mere extraction, he built a refinery on Crețulescu Boulevard in 1906. Predinger's name is associated with the old children's hospital located at the corner of Calea Oilor and Transilvaniei Street, erected in the late 19th century at the expense of the Jewish philanthropist. Due to the war, the hospital was not inaugurated until 1919 and was subsequently expanded between 1939 and 1940. Over time, the building became too small, leading the hospital to relocate to other premises, while the old building became the headquarters of a state institution. Mendel Predinger had married Maria (née Nissim), but they had no children. Furthermore, Maria Predinger passed away on January 11, 1920, and was buried in the Jewish cemetery in the northern part of the city. Left a widower, Mendel

Predinger was a pillar of the Jewish community in Ploiești during the interwar period, serving as both its legal representative and one of its principal donors. When the Jewish community lacked a kindergarten, Mendel Predinger donated the funds needed to construct a modern building for it. The structure, known as the "Maria and Mendel Predinger Foundation", was built between 1929 and 1931 based on designs by architect Jean Monda; it is the only documented building by this representative of interwar modernism in Ploiești.

Luca Moise was the Ploiești's philanthropist who focused on Jewish education. The Jewish boys' school, built in 1875, was named after Luca Moise who granted funds for its building and maintenance. Luca Moise School for boys, established in 1873 according to the wishes expressed in Luca's will. Luca Moise's bequest was a visionary act that gave the community one of the first formal Jewish educational institutions in Wallachia. The "Luca Moise" Primary School was located on Basarabi Street, next to the synagogue. The Israelite school for girls was set up in 1890, and a secondary school was established in 1908 — among the first Jewish upper-level ones in Romania. The Luca Moise school was eventually destroyed by Iron Guard.

One of the most remarkable acts of Zionist philanthropy in Romanian Jewish history happened in 1913, when the merchant **Baruch Kahana** of Ploiești donated the first and largest donation to the Keren Kayemet LeYisrael (Jewish National Fund), a sum of 130,000 golden francs (6,000 pound sterling). The Keren Kayemet LeYisrael used these funds to establish two moshavim in the Land of Israel. One of them, Kfar Baruch, was named after him. Kfar Baruch is a moshav near the Kishon reservoir in the Jezreel Valley, Israel and it was founded in 1926 by settlers from Kurdistan, Iraq, Romania, Poland, Germany, and also Mountain Jews from the Caucasus. Today the village has a population of nearly 800, a living monument to Ploiești's Jewish generosity.

From David Emmanuel's revolutionary mathematics to Baruch Kahana's gift that lives on in the Jezreel Valley, from the Brezis rabbinical dynasty to the oil barons who built the city's most magnificent synagogue, the Jews of Ploiești made themselves indispensable to one of Romania's most strategically vital cities. Their story is inseparable from the story of Romanian oil, and through Kfar Baruch in Israel's Jezreel Valley, their memory endures in the very landscape of the Jewish homeland they helped to build.

Now, let's cross the Carpathian mountains from Wallachia to Transylvania to the town of Brașov (Kronstadt in German and Brassó in Hungarian).

Brașov Jewish History

The Jewish community of Brașov is a vital part of the history of Transylvania.

From 1492 onward Jews are mentioned living there temporarily or passing through Brașov in transit. For a long time the city was inhabited mostly by Romanians, Hungarians, and Germans (Saxons). The Jews took part in the trade between Hungary, Wallachia, and Turkey.

Jews have lived in Brașov since 1807, when Rabbi Aaron Ben Jehuda was given permission to live in the city, a privilege until then granted only to Saxons.

In 1826, 11 Jewish families (46 people), plague survivors from Bucharest, obtained permission to establish a community with its own statutes and an elected leadership. The Jewish Community of Braşov was officially founded 19 years later, in 1845, followed by the first Jewish school in 1864. The Jewish community in Braşov was led by Aron Löbl, who wrote a history of Braşov's Jews covering the period from 1807 to 1830.

In the decades that followed, town authorities and the societies of Saxon, Greek, and Romanian traders in town attempted to expel Jews, but the imperial court in Vienna rejected these proposals because Jewish trade enabled Austrian exports to flow to the Ottoman Empire. There were many other people who tried to enter Brasov, but were denied entry. A small Jewish cemetery for plague victims was located near Catherine Gate. Recently, peoples' remains were exhumed and transferred to the Jewish cemetery. Over the 75 years following the ruling in 1826, which allowed the initial 11 families into Brasov, the Jewish community grew as a result of marriages and slowly over time, as more Romanian Jews were allowed permission to move in from outside the city.

In 1868, the Braşov community became Reform (Neolog). A separate Orthodox community was established in 1877. The school continued to serve both communities.

A significant part of the Jews of Braşov were assimilated, mostly to Hungarian and German culture, but some also tried to assimilate to Romanian culture. This multi-directional cultural fluency — across German, Hungarian, and Romanian identities — gave Braşov's Jews a distinctly cosmopolitan character rare even by Transylvanian standards.

The Jewish population of Braşov expanded rapidly to 103 people in 1864, 1,280 people in 1910 and 4,000 in 1940.

By the late 1920s, the Jewish community of Braşov included entrepreneurs (4), merchants (2), salesmen (226), clerks (119), physicians (14), engineers (10), lawyers (8), independent professionals (4), teachers (2), and an artist. This snapshot of a thoroughly middle-class, professionally integrated Jewish community reflects the fruit of six decades of civic participation since emancipation and the degree to which Braşov's Jews had made themselves indispensable to the city's economic and professional life.

In 1901 a Synagogue was built for Neolog community, designed in a Moorish/Secession style by an Austrian Jew, Leopold Baumhorn, who designed many famous synagogues. The Synagogue, which began construction in 1898 and completed it in 1901, cost 1.2 million gold kronen. The pipe organ and stained glass windows were destroyed by the Nazis, and the whole building was turned into a warehouse. However, after 1944 the Synagogue was renovated, with the addition of a kosher kitchen and a home for the elderly. The congregants paid for and did the work themselves, under the direction of the leader of the community, Zitrom Aladar. After the 1977 earthquake, the Federation of Roman Jewish Communities helped to restore the Synagogue. In 1915 an Orthodox Temple was built.

During the interwar period, the journal *Brassói Lapok*, which was owned and edited by Jews, was published. This Hungarian-language newspaper became one of the most important periodicals in Transylvania. When *Brassói Lapok* first appeared in 1895, it was little more than a

local bulletin for the Hungarians of the Burzenland. However, after the border changes of 1918, *Brassói Lapok* became a crucial forum for minority politics, and by the interwar years it had risen to national prominence. Writers such as Sándor Márai, János Bartalis, and Elek Benedek appeared in its pages, while the paper also carried interviews with international figures such as Thomas Mann and Josephine Baker.

By the 1930s, under the editorial leadership of intellectuals of the era, the newspaper had taken a marked leftward turn, carving out space for anti-fascist voices, populist writers, and sympathizers of the Labour movement. Jewish ownership and editorship of this major cultural forum placed the community at the heart of Transylvania's intellectual life between the wars.

In 1939–1940, *Monitorul Comunității*, a publication of the Neolog community, was also produced, a sign of the community's sustained engagement with civic life even as the shadows of fascism gathered.

During World War II, under the Fascist Antonescu regime, the communal buildings and much Jewish property were confiscated. Jewish men, including many from throughout the region, were drafted into local labor battalions.

From 1940 to 1944, when Jewish students were excluded from public schools, a Jewish school was opened to cover elementary four grades. Unlike the communities of northern Transylvania which fell under Hungarian jurisdiction and faced deportation to Auschwitz, Brașov's Jews, remaining under Romanian authority in southern Transylvania, were subject to severe persecution but were not deported en masse, allowing most to survive.

After the Holocaust, the community was reorganized; in 1956 it had 1,759 members. As a result of postwar emigration, however, the community numbered just 270 members in 2003. The last Jewish wedding was performed 23 years ago. In the first decade of the 21st century there have only been a handful of bar mitzvahs and there is no rabbi in Brașov.

Brașov Rabbinical Leaders

We will mention again the **Rabbi Aaron Ben Jehuda** who was given permission in 1807 to live in the city, a privilege until then granted only to Saxons. His arrival opened a door that had been sealed for centuries, making him the founding figure of modern Jewish Brașov.

Brașov Jewish Artists, Intellectuals and Civic Leaders

Aron Löbl was a founding father and the first historian of the Brașov Jewish community. He wrote a history of Brașov's Jews covering the period from 1807 to 1830, making him not only the first communal leader but the first chronicler of Jewish Brașov, an act of self-documentation remarkable for its era.

Solomon Ehrenkranz was one of the first poets from Transylvania to write in Hebrew. In 1870 the Jewish community started a program for teaching Hebrew to its members, and for this purpose invited the Hebrew poet Solomon Ehrenkranz to serve as a teacher.

Ehrenkranz (also known as Velvel Zbarzher — Benjamin Wolf Ehrenkranz) was one of the most original Jewish literary figures of 19th-century Eastern Europe. Born in Zbarazh, Galicia, he had

a traditional Jewish education. He composed and sang folk songs, and as a singing bard traveled to various European cities, spending his last years in Istanbul. He performed his songs in Yiddish, shifting to Hebrew when appearing before a Maskilim audience. His songs spread quickly. The major themes of his poetry were nature and people, poverty and wealth, and the fight of light against darkness. Much of his work comprised satires and parodies. His time in Braşov placed him at the cultural crossroads of Transylvania, where he helped awaken Hebrew literacy in a community of German-speaking, highly assimilated Jews, an unusual and fruitful cultural encounter.

Vladimir Tismăneanu is Braşov's most internationally celebrated Jewish intellectual of the modern era. Vladimir Tismăneanu is a Romanian and American political scientist, political analyst, sociologist, and professor at the University of Maryland. Born in Braşov, he is the son of Leonte Tismăneanu, an activist of the Romanian Communist Party since the early 1930s, and Hermina Marcusohn, a physician and one-time Communist Party activist, both of whom were Jewish and Spanish Civil War veterans.

A specialist in political systems and comparative politics, he is director of the University of Maryland's Center for the Study of Post-Communist Societies. He has worked with international radio stations Radio Free Europe and Deutsche Welle, and authored programs for the Romanian Television Company.

The Fischer family is probably the best-documented Jewish family with Brasov roots:

Josef Fischer, a Hungarian Jew and descendant of the *Hatam Sofer*/Moses Sofer, the influential 19th-century Orthodox rabbinic authority, lived in Brasov and married Bertha Meldt, a Transylvanian Saxon Lutheran, itself notable as an intermarriage across the town's ethnic lines. Their son, **Rudolf Fischer** (1923–2016), born in Brasov, became a noted historian, linguist, and polymath, later based in Australia and consulted by travel writers on Transylvanian history. He's buried in the family grave in Brasov's Saxon Lutheran cemetery.

From Aron Löbl's founding chronicle to Shelomoh Ehrenkranz's Hebrew poetry, from the cosmopolitan pages of the *Brassói Lapok* to Vladimir Tismăneanu's scholarship on totalitarianism, the Jews of Braşov left a cultural and intellectual imprint entirely disproportionate to their modest numbers, shaped above all by their remarkable capacity to participate fully in the multiple languages and cultures of Transylvania's most multifaceted city.

This concludes the episode on Ploieşti and Braşov Jewish personalities.
Next, we will be visiting the Transylvanian cities of Cluj and Alba Iulia.
Until next episode, be well.