



Jewish Life in Northern Transylvania in a Historical Perspective

ETERNAL ECHOES

Teach and Learn About the Holocaust



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Jewish Life in Northern Transylvania

Jews have lived in Northern Transylvania, (in today's Romania) for hundreds of years. At the beginning of the 20th century about 180,000 Jews lived in the province of Transylvania. Most lived in larger cities such as Satu Mare, Cluj, Oradea, and different counties like Salaj and Maramures. In many towns, Jews made up a significant part of the population. In Sighet, where Livia lived, some 40% of the total urban population was Jewish. The most common occupation for Romanian Jews was trade. Many were also involved in industrial production and especially during the interwar period agricultural work became significant. As elsewhere in Central and Eastern Europe, Jews made up a significant portion of the free professions, such as lawyers, physicians, engineers, etc.



Jewish blacksmith shoeing a horse, Ruscova, Romania, ca. 1920s.

The Jews contributed to the economic and social life of the country. But differing somewhat from elsewhere in Central and Eastern Europe, in Romania, Jews also participated in the country's political life, not least in the inter-war period (1918-1939).

In the wake of the First World War, Romania was granted the province of Transylvania in the Treaty of Trianon 1920. The Romanian central government in Bucharest sought to impose Romanian law on the previously Hungarian province. One important law stipulated that all residents of the annexed provinces could become Romanian citizens without having to fulfill any formal requirements or bureaucratic procedures.

The Jews contributed to strengthening Romanian national unity and the development of democracy and political pluralism. Joining forces with the democratic political parties, they contributed to the struggle against the extreme right-wing *Legionnaires* that pursued an aggressive antisemitic policy against the Jews of Romania.

The Jewish community life in Transylvania was based tradition and religious practices, characterized by such institutions as burial societies, schools for younger children, hospitals and charities. Secondary schools and other institutions of higher learning were found only in the larger Jewish communities. Some communities maintained close ties with Hungarian Jewish organizations, while others favored closer cooperation with Romanian communities.

In, for instance, Timisoara, Oradea and Cluj, Jewish secondary schools were established in the inter-war period, with Jewish religious institutions playing an important role. Indeed, in spite of many difficulties, an extensive network of Jewish schools was created throughout the province, and educated almost the entire school-age population.



The synagogue in Targu-Mures, Transylvania. Postcard mailed in 1917.

Nonetheless, the situation for Jewish schools in Transylvania was uncertain. Despite having permits to operate, schools were not allowed to issue graduation diplomas. Instead, Jewish students were compelled to take their final exams in front of a special board appointed by the Ministry of Public Instruction.

In 1925, Minister of Education Constantin Angelescu decreed that all minorities had the right to education in their mother-tongue. This privilege, however, was not granted to Jews. He said: "For Jewish students, the mother-tongue is the language of the country." These restrictions meant that the teaching of Hebrew and Yiddish was halted, and Hebrew permitted to be used only in religious studies.

Nationalism and Antisemitism

Even though the Jews were guaranteed political equality by the Constitution of 1923, the interwar period was characterized by ever-growing antisemitism and political aggressiveness against Romania's Jewish population. Various Romanian popular movements and political parties expressed antisemitic attitudes and held demonstrations. One example is the "National Christian Defense", founded by A. C. Cuza, professor of political economy at the Iasi University.

Antisemitism was particularly strong amongst Romanian university students, like elsewhere in Central and Eastern Europe. At both the University of Cluj and after the Oradea Student Congress in 1927, many Jewish students were beaten and even tortured by gangs of Romanian university students.

Despite the growing hostile and antisemitic political climate the Jews were active in Romanian politics. At the parliamentary elections 1926, 1928, 1931 and 1932 4-5 deputies were chosen in the Parliament as representatives of Jewish organizations. Jacob Niemirower who was Chief Rabbi of the Jewish Community from the Old Kingdom of Romania was senator until 1939. When he died, Chief Rabbi Dr. Alexandru Safran took his place.

1940 Northern Transylvania was "awarded" to Hungary by Hitler's Germany in what is known as the Second Vienna Award. Somewhat ironically in light of the large presence of antisemitism in Hungarian society, the new situation gave Jewish communities a chance to re-open or establish new educational institutions in Cluj, Mapoca, and other cities.

Throughout Eastern Europe, including Romania, the end of the inter-war period saw the end of Jewish involvement in the political life of the country. The "spirit" of antisemitism had become dominant. And with the start of the German war against Poland in September 1939, and even more so with the German invasion of the Soviet Union in late June 1941, the fate of the Jews in Eastern Europe was sealed. In Romania the fascist regime of Ion Antonescu saw the "opportunity" offered by Nazi Germany to rid itself of its Jews. Tragically, this opportunity was seized, and in only some few years, Jewish life in Northern Transylvania, including Sighet, was exterminated.



Chief Rabbi Jacob Niemirower.



Adolf Hitler shakes hands with Prime Minister of Romania Ion Antonescu in Munich, June 1941.

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Text: Daniel Stejeran, director of the Northern Transylvanian Holocaust Memorial, Simleu Silvaniei/Paul A. Levine, Ph.D., History

Fact checking: Paul A. Levine, Ph.D., History

Graphic design: Cecilia Undemark Péterfy