

The Ottoman Sephardim in the Romanian Principalities

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The Ottoman Sephardim

- Although Spanish Jewish merchants crossed the Romanian Principalities even before the 1492 expulsion (according to historian Nicolae Iorga they were the first who used, long prior to 1480, the alternative route Constantinople – Silistra – Galați to reach Western Europe), it was only after their settlement in the Ottoman Empire that the Sephardim started crossing the border into Wallachia and Moldova regularly, and established local communities in Bucharest, Iași, Craiova, Turnu Severin, Corabia, Calafat, Turnu Măgurele, Ploiești, Giurgiu, Constanța, Brăila, etc.
- Later on, Sephardim also came from Vienna, or from various Italian towns
- Some wise rulers of Wallachia and Moldova who saw the economic potential of these merchants and travelers encouraged their settlement here giving them various facilities.
- According to historian M.A. Halevy, considering that the first Sephardim were documented in Wallachia as early as 1496, i.e. less than 5 years after the expulsion, the history of the Sephardim in the Romanian Principalities can be divided into two distinct periods: 1496-1711 (when rulers started being appointed by the Sublime Porte from among the rich Greek merchants of the Fanar neighborhood of Constantinople who were able to buy the throne) and 1711-1821 (the year of the Greek revolt against Turkish rule, “zavera”, which had profound bearings on the Romanian Principalities

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- In Bucharest, the first proof of a Sephardic presence dates back to 1550, when documents issued by Prince Mircea Ciobanul speak about Jews who owned stores.
- There is also a responsa of the rabbi of Salonica, Samuel de Medina, concerning the killing of an Ottoman Jew in the town's vicinity.
- This is confirmed by a second responsa, issued by Rabbi Iosef Caro of Nicopole in 1559, concerning a similar case, in which one can find two of the names mentioned in the first responsa, which proves the stability of the respective Sephardim in the city.

- In Moldova, Sephardim emigrated especially during the reign of Stephan IV (1517-1527), i.e. again in the immediate aftermath of the expulsion
- Their number increased with the arrival of fellow Jews from neighboring Ottoman Bulgaria, for economic but also political reasons
- The Russian traveler of Dutch descent Leon Peres Balthasar von Campenhausen (1746-1808) relates that during the Russo-Turkish war (1781-1791), when he crossed Moldova, the Ottoman Sephardim settled there during the reign of Stephan IV “still spoke and wrote in Spanish but with Hebrew letters”
- In a travel account of 1619 the great scholar Joseph Solomon Delmedigo, former disciple of Galileo Galilei, says that in 1580 the Jewish community of Iasi was led by the rabbi, doctor and kabbalist Solomon ben Aroyo, a Sephardi of Italian origin, probably a descendent of the Arbib family from Salonica, with whom Delmedigo studied for 11 years.
- The information is confirmed by another traveler, Paolo Bennicio of Malta, who crossed the Moldovan capital in 1632.
- M.A. Halevy mentions that the rights and duties of the Jewish “guild” were established under royal decrees at least starting from 1622 (one such document being in his possession) and reiterated 44 years later, in 1666, under another royal decree, issued by Prince Alexander.

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- Sephardic trade between the Ottoman Empire and the Romanian Principalities increased in the second half of the 16th century, when we find more and more Spanish Jewish merchants crossing Wallachia and Moldova and Spanish Jewish creditors giving loans to the local rulers, which indicate their involvement not only in the economy but also in political life. This is also when stable communities start being mentioned, such as the one in Bucharest in 1550, and later on in Craiova, in 1650, or Focșani, in 1700.
- Some princes, like Aron the Tyrant, imposed high taxes to be able to repay their debts to the Ottoman Sephardic creditors (which often did not help),
- Others, like Michael the Brave, solved the issue by killing them.

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- Although princes like Radu Leon, Alexander Iliaş or Constantin Brancoveanu continued to employ Sephardic physicians at their courts (and take loans from the Jewish creditors in Constantinople), in the 17th century religious tolerance towards the Jews began to decrease, a trend also reflected in the economic restrictions that started being imposed on them.
- The climax came in 1714, when Prince Stephan Cantacuzino demolished the Sephardic synagogue in Bucharest and forbade the Jews to gather for prayer.
- Nevertheless, due to the development of the commercial relations, during the 18th century Sephardic Jews continued to come from the Ottoman Empire to the Romanian Principalities

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- If the 16th century was marked by the personality of Joseph Nassi, of the Mendes family, the Portuguese Marano who had so much influence at the Sublime Porte during 1566-1579 that he was granted the title of Duke of Naxos and the Cyclades, and in 1571 Sultan Selim II even offered him the Moldovan throne (which however he was clever enough to refuse), the beginning of 18th century was undoubtedly marked by Daniel de Fonseca.
- Equally appreciated in the West and in the Ottoman Empire, de Fonseca, whom Prince Nicholas Mavrocordat literally “kidnapped” from the French Embassy in Constantinople, where he had served for 17 years, as mentioned in the French Ambassador’s letter allowing de Fonseca to enter the service of the Wallachian Prince, while continuing to grant him French protection.

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- From de Fonseca we have information about the famous library of Mavrocordat, from which the Marano deciphered and copied several Greek manuscripts which he then made available to scholars in France and Italy, popularizing in a vast correspondence the Prince's collections, which included, just like in Constantin Brancoveanu's case, a series of Hebrew manuscripts. As de Fonseca himself puts it in a letter of 14 September 1731, sent to the director of the Royal Library in Paris, "*in the entire Levant you will not find manuscripts more valuable than those in the library of the Prince of Wallachia, who promised to let me copy those we shall deem necessary [...]*".
- It was in fact de Fonseca and Mentès Bally, another important Ottoman Sephardic merchant and creditor who enjoyed Mavrocordat's appreciation, that convinced the Prince to recognize, in 1730, the Sephardic community of Bucharest as a separate and independent structure.

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- In 1819 the Spanish community built its biggest and most impressive synagogue, Cahal Grande (the Great Spanish Temple),
- Although organized separately, the Sephardic communities generally cooperated with the Ashkenazi ones, willingly or forcibly, as was the famous case of Ploiești in 1830, when Grand Rabbi Haim Focschaner from Bucharest intervened in the dispute between the two local communities, ruling that they would have equal rights within a joint structure but would not be allowed to set up separate ones.
- On the other hand, we have a document from 1823 issued by the Austrian Agency in Wallachia whereby the Agency expressed its satisfaction at seeing that both the Ashkenazi and Sephardic communities agreed to repay the services brought to them by Anshel Brayer, who had been appointed by the Agency.

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- In 1838, the two communities sent a joint letter of gratitude to Prince Alexander Ghica, praising his friendly attitude to the Jews, whom he saw as a “significant source of communal welfare”
- The good relations with the authorities are further confirmed by a letter from 1846 in which the leader of the Spanish Jewish Community in Bucharest, Iancu Cohen, informed Barbu Știrbei, Minister of the Interior, that the community was building a new synagogue in the Popescu Neighborhood, inviting him to be the patron of the new prayer house, called the Peace Synagogue (Cahal Cicu, the Small Spanish Temple).
- Moreover, sometimes a member of one community was hired to serve as a rabbi for the other: Iacob Isaac Niemirower and Moses Gaster, both Ashkenazi, served as rabbis of Sephardic communities.

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- The most important Sephardic century remained however the 19th century, when a series of important personalities coming from the Ottoman Empire managed to impose themselves as leading figures in the most diverse areas.
- Some of them were repaid for their contribution by being granted certain facilities (the first generation of bankers) and even individual citizenship (the second generation).

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- Iuliu Barasch about the Sephardim in 19th century Wallachia:
“The other part of the Israelite population here is composed of the so called French or Spanish Jews; they wear the typical dress of the country, i.e. Wallachian, and speak among themselves a Spanish-Castilian dialect, which is now of course more or less corrupt in their mouth. They can only communicate with the Christians and the Polish Jews in Romanian. The Jews of the entire Orient, like for instance those of Constantinople, Smyrna, Salonica etc. are all of the same origin. Among them there are many rich and considerate families”.
- But not only rich Sephardim arrived in Wallachia: many came as refugees from Bulgaria and Dobrogea during the Russo-Turkish war of 1828-1829.
- In October 1831, in Giurgiu there were 20 Sephardic merchants who had fled Silistra, and who applied for a 3 year tax waiver, as war refugees, just like the Serbs, based on the 1830 law; their petition was indeed approved.
- Another 3 Sephardic merchants from Silistra who had taken refuge in Călărași în 1836, when the fortress had surrendered, asked for approval to settle in Bucharest

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- After the Organic Regulations of 1831 (Wallachia) and respectively 1832 (Moldova) launched the first legal antisemitic measures, for which reason many Jews chose to file for the protection of the recently opened consulates of Russia (1782), Austria (1783), France (1796) and Great Britain (1803), as was the case with several of the important Sephardic bankers coming from the Ottoman Empire, who thus came to be registered in the census of 1838 as Austrian subjects (the Ottoman Empire did not have consulates in the Romanian Principalities because it had sovereignty over them), and after the enthusiasm of the 1848 Revolution, which included among its claims the emancipation of the Jews, not only because a series of Jewish bankers and merchants supported the movement, but from a genuine awareness of the need to modernize the Romanian Principalities, and after Alexander John Cuza included it among his reforms, came the year 1866, when, in the first constitution of Romania, Jews, who had previously been considered “native” and enjoyed certain rights, were labeled as “foreigners” and literally removed from the life of the Romanian society.

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- Thus, the Romanian Principalities and later on Romania refused to emancipate the Jews, giving preference to individual (and selective) naturalization, at least until the Constitution of 1923, which provided for the overall naturalization of the Jews for the first time in history; unfortunately the wonder was to last only 15 years, as the 1938 law for the revision of citizenship striped many of them of it.

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- What is extremely interesting to note in regard to the 19th century migration is the directions in which the Ottoman Sephardim circulated.
- The case of Isaac Nassi: born in 1855 at Constantinople, he moved, as an Ottoman subject, to Constanța, where in 1894 he married Neama (herself an Ottoman subject), had 4 children and worked as a commercial clerk at the local branch of the Marmorosch Blank Bank.
- In 1916, Isaac applied for naturalization and was granted Romanian citizenship.
- A little later Neama died and in 1920 Isaac decided to return with the children to Constantinople, where he was registered as... commercial clerk at the local branch of the same Marmorosch Blank Bank, but this time as a... Romanian citizen!

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- The story of Solomon Avram Rozanes, born in 1862 at Ruse.
- He was a student of Haim Bejarano and had an extraordinary talent for foreign languages. Rozanes learnt Turkish and French at the school opened by the Alliance Israelite Universelle in his hometown, Arabic and Hebrew in the Holy Land, where he traveled at the age of 12, German at Zemlin, near Belgrade, where his family moved following the break out of the Bulgarian independence war, Romanian at Bucharest, where he came to get medical treatment for a wound and Greek and Italian at Galați, where he stayed for a short while.
- He lived for some time in Constanța as well, from where he contributed articles about Joseph Caro and the Jewish origins of Bulgarian Queen Theodora to the Jewish magazines *Amagid* and *Israel*, but he remained famous particularly for his initiative to write a book on the History of the Jews in the Ottoman Empire in Hebrew.

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- Romanian Sephardim also became famous in the USA:
- Jacob Levy Moreno (born Iacob Levy in Bucharest on 18 May 1889 who died in New York on 14 May 1974), son of Moreno Nissim Levy, a Sephardic merchant born in 1856 at Plevna, where his family had settled coming from Constantinople, and of Paulina Iancu (Wolf), also a Sephardi, born at Călărași, who had moved to Romania during the Russo-Turkish war of 1877-1878, following Haim Bejarano, psychiatrist and psychosociologist of international repute, philosopher and educator, especially known as the founder of psychodrama and as a pioneer in the field of group therapy.

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- Information about the origin of the Romanian Sephardim, especially of those in Bucharest, can be found in the cemetery. Opened in 1865, the Sephardic Cemetery of Giurgiului Street hosts Jews who came from Turkey (born in Constantinople/Istanbul, but also in Smyrna/Izmir, Adrianople/Edirne, etc.), Greece (born in Salonica, but also in Ianina), Italy (born in Caspoli or other towns), Austria (born in Vienna), Serbia (born in Belgrade), Macedonia (born in Skopje), France (born in Paris), and an impressive number from Bulgaria (half of which were born in Rusciuk/Ruse, and the rest in Silistra, Nicopole, Vidin, Varna, Bazargic, Stara Zagora, Sofia, Burgas, etc.)

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- In most cases the Ottoman Sephardim coming to the Romanian Principalities and later on in Romania in the 19th century remained here, and brought important contributions to the country's development, in the most diverse fields.
- From bankers like Menachem and Jacques Elias, Mauriciu Blank, Solomon Halfon, Hillel Manoach, publicity agents like David Adania, mathematicians like David Emmanuel and Ernest Abason to literates and journalists like Alexandru Vona (born Alberto Henrique Samuel Bejar y Mayor), Raoul Siniol, Ezra Alhasid, musicians like Clara Haskil, Filip Lazăr, Leon Algazy, Mauriciu Cohen Lânaru, Alexandru Mandi, Avraham Cohen Bucureşteanu, Benedetto Franchetti, Abraham Levi Ivela, Alberto della Pergola, editors like Leon Alcalay (1847-1920), the Samitca and Benvenisti families, theatre actors like Maria Ventura, Alexandru Finți, Moscu Alcalay or Rosina Campos, these were all Sephardic personalities born in Romania.

Sabetay Djaen (*Plevna, 1883 – Tucuman, 1947*)

- ***Rabbi, writer, playwright, editor.*** Originating from a family expelled from Jaen, as his very name shows, he was first chief rabbi of the Sephardic community of Monastir. He then emigrated to Buenos Aires where he worked as rabbi of Argentina and Uruguay between 1928 and 1931. During 1931-1944 he was chief rabbi of the Sephardic Community of Romania. A convinced Zionist, he was at the same time a fervent adept of the Jews' return to Spain, which he visited in the 1930's. He was also a prolific author, who wrote songs, scholarly articles (related particularly to the preservation of Ladino) and over 20 successful theatre plays, in Judeo-Spanish, many of which were later translated into various other languages. In 1935 President Niceto Alcalá Zamora granted him the Order of Commander of the Spanish Republic, for his important work. In the years of the Second World War he fought together with the Chief Rabbi of the Ashkenazi Community Alexander Safran for the salvation of the Romanian Jews. He left Romania for health reasons.