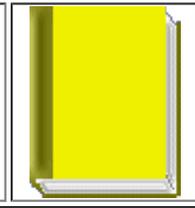




History of the Sudits of Romania



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History of the Sudits of Romania

by Robert S. Sherins, M.D.

As a result of economic decline during the 18 th century, princes of the autonomous Romanian provinces of Moldavia and Wallachia instituted a unique socio-economic plan. Foreign professionals, merchants, artisans, and craftsmen were encouraged to immigrate to Romania given incentive by special tax-free privileges and the legal protection of the foreign governments of their origin. Neither citizenship nor property rights were granted, but the exceptional tax-free privileges conferred a status that provided enormous economic advantages over the indigenous population. Eventually, even the princes and nobility sought sudit privileges in order to remain commercially competitive with the new immigrant merchants and bankers.

The Romanian word, *sudit*, which meant privileged immigrant, was created from the original Latin, *subbo subter*, to put together, and the Italian word, *suddito*, subject of a foreign power. Sudits were foreign guest workers, who were invited to Romania by the Ottomans, the Romanian nobility, the gentry (boyars), and the Orthodox Church, in order to promote import-export business with Europe, to create a skilled professional and artisan/craftsman community, and to populate the underdeveloped and remote agricultural lands. Sudits became the most successful, prestigious, and influential inhabitants of Romania in the 19 th century. In the first half of the 19 th century alone, there were sixty new communities established by sudits.

Sudits were not the first Jews in Romania. Inscriptions on 2 nd century coins discovered in Bessarabia affirmed the first Jewish presence in Romania. Khazarians, who adopted Judaism in the 9 th century, migrated there. In the 14 th century, Hungarian Jews migrated to Transylvania. By the 15 th century, princes in Galati proclaimed the great benefits to the region that were derived from Jewish merchants, who established trade with Western Europe. A thriving 16 th Jewish community in Iasi already had extensive trade with merchants in Brody, Galicia. However, Jews were not permitted to own property or businesses; they became lessees of the landlords and their businesses.

The Capitulation Treaties were signed by the Ottoman overlords of Romania, which provided for the privileged immigrants in the late 18 th century. Tens of thousands of individuals from Western, Central, and Eastern Europe migrated to Romania to seek better opportunities. An estimated 30% of the new arrivals were Jewish immigrants, who came predominantly from Poland and Russia. At first, Jewish sūdits mixed easily with the indigenous Jewish communities.

The majority of sūdits arrived from Austria-Hungary, Russia, Prussia, France, and England. Poland was no longer a political power after dismemberment by Austria-Hungary, Prussia, and Russia in the three Partitions of Poland (1772, 1792, and 1795). Polish immigrants were provided legal protection by Russia, when the Poles of Eastern Poland suddenly found themselves to be relocated in Russian Occupied Poland. As an example, Moldavian and Wallachian catagrafia (census) and metrical records of the 19 th and 20 th centuries stated that individuals from Poland were “under the protection of Russia.” Poles from Western Galicia were under the protection of Austria-Hungary, since Austria occupied Galicia after the First Partition of Poland in 1772.

There were no official records of the population prior to 1778, when the Russian occupation administration ordered the census of Moldavia after an uprising in Iasi during the Russian-Turkish war. This did not include a separate category for Jewish communities. New foreign consulates were quickly established: Russia in 1782, Austria in 1783, France in 1784, and England 1802.

The Ottomans ordered several catagrafia in 1803, 1808, 1820, and 1824 for Moldavia. Catagrafia meant economic census, but they were used as a political census, not an economic instrument and were directed towards specific groups. The 1820 census in Moldavia had a separate catagrafia for Jews after an uprising of the Greek Orthodox in Iasi against the Muslim Ottoman overlords. Sultan Mahmood II suspected that the rioters had obtained false papers to enter Moldavia. Patronymic names were handwritten in Cyrillic, but were very well indexed by Latin letters. In some instances the names were simple, Bercu Jidovul (Bercu the Jew). Only by comparison with catagrafia from later periods where patronymic names were complete, i.e. Bercu sin Zeilic (Bercu son of Zeilic) was it possible to link fathers and sons. Females were not initially recorded. A few individuals were listed with legal surnames, adopted in the country of origin.

Agricultural development of the backward, outlying rural communities was one of the

primary problems of Romania. Immigrants were invited to develop the lands. Small villages were created, which were called Targuri. The small towns functioned as centers for exchange of merchandise in a society that was agriculturally based. Romania was primarily inhabited by farmers, who depended entirely upon the few powerful landlords and boieri (boyars).

Under the new immigration laws, there was a huge demographic movement of foreigners from Western, Central, and Eastern Europe, 30% of whom were Jews. Half of the Jews were from Austria-Galicia and Russia. During the early years, Romanian princes and boyars encouraged the immigration of this large skilled work force. However, economic advantages for the newly arrived immigrants eventually created severe animosity among the indigenous Romanians. Consequently, restrictive and exclusionary laws were written that took away the civil rights of the same immigrants, who had been previously courted. It was the era of exclusion of the Jews from Romanian society that followed their previous emancipation.

Economic stratification developed between the wealthy landowners with their enormous privileges, and the poor agricultural peasants. Moldavian Jews filled an intermediate role. In Wallachia, Greeks and Bulgarians served this new middle class role. Economic growth of the Jewish and non-Jewish sudits coincided with the last phases of the Romanian struggle to achieve unification as a nation.

In the 19th century, an explosion of anti-Semitism and xenophobic policies accompanied the awakening of Russian Nationalism. The Organic Laws, imposed by the Russian Czar in 1830, confirmed this. As the economic climate deteriorated, the official policies of exclusion of the Jews turned into policies of legal anti-Semitism.

The Treaty of Adrianople (1829) ended the Russo-Turkish War. It provided little direct benefit to Romania. At the end of the Crimean War (1856), Russia turned its attention again toward the affairs of Romania. An unusual settlement granted the Ottomans suzerainty over Romania, while the Russian Czar managed the internal affairs of Bukovina, Bessarabia, Moldavia, and Wallachia.

The Russian governor, General Pavel Kisselev, who reported to the Czar, imposed the Organic Laws over Romania. They were established first in Wallachia (1830) and soon followed in Moldavia (1831). The laws were inspired by the Russian regime and deliberately gave political power to the wealthy landowners. Boyars became directly responsible for their peasants, who were stripped of all authority and had no power of their own.

Russia exported their restrictive laws against Jews to Moldavia and created a new category of “vagrant Jew.” Romanians were told that Jews were vagrants, who lived at the expense of the native population and exploited their resources to the detriment of industrial progress and public prosperity. The government declared Jews as vagrants, deported at will, and prevented them from returning to Romania.

Serious economic conflicts arose among the Jews themselves, which divided the Jewish communities. Sudits were given enormous tax-free incentives in business that held great advantages over the indigenous Jews, whose families had resided in Moldavia and Wallachia for centuries.

Taxation for sudits was restricted to 3% of the export/import goods, whereas other merchants paid 5 %. They were not required to pay personal or community taxes. Their transactions were restricted to wholesale goods and they were forbidden to enter the retail markets, although they often ignored the restrictions. Indigenous Jews and non-Jewish merchants angrily contested the unfairness of the privileged status of the sudits.

Antagonism grew steadily within the Jewish communities. Conflicts over sudit affairs often ended in litigation. Cases were tried in special courts that also demanded the presence of translators to ensure the precision of the discussions. In 1838, the Moldavian Jewish population was 79,164, 14.7% of the total. Jewish population increased remarkably and by 1845, 1,437 sudit families represented 31% of the total. This resulted in placing increased tax burdens upon the indigenous Jews.

After years of conflict and complaints to the governmental agencies by the indigenous Jews, other new taxes were levied in the attempt to equalize some of the unfair practices. Taxes were applied to the koshering of meat and poultry, head taxes upon Jewish individuals, Jewish communal taxes derived from the Jewish communities own authorities (Hahambashi), taxes levied upon artisans and merchants (patentei), who engaged in retail sales (amanuntul), and school taxes. The new tax code of 1839 set the tax of 60 lei on each head of household in Iasi, and 45 lei for heads of household in other towns of Moldavia. Sudits were eventually required to settle their disputes in local courts and abide by local laws.

After the Romanian Revolution to become independent of foreign rulers, a Congress of Berlin was convened in 1848, supported by the western powers of Europe. Its decrees had specific requirements aimed at providing political and religious equality to

all Romanians, including the Jews. It was not successful and Jews were only briefly emancipated.

Jewish communities petitioned Prince Sturdza in 1847 to release them from their required special dress, which consisted of wearing the traditional Polish clothing of the long caftan (coat) and large shtreiml (hat). Such deviation from wearing traditional clothes caused great conflict within the Jewish community between the Orthodox and liberal Jews.

After the restrictive Organic Laws were ended, Jews had a respite from the imposed effects. By 1848, Jews could own vineyards and only recently arrived immigrants could be expelled. Jews were able to serve in the army, but only up to the rank of non-commissioned officers; the latter was reserved for Christians. Synagogues could be built with the provision of maintaining a distance of at least 150 feet from the nearest Christian church. Jews were allowed to enter institutions of higher learning and obtain a doctorate from foreign universities.

The core of anti-Semitism developed among the teachers in public schools and universities. Similar problems arose in political and professional organizations. Anti-Semitism involved all social classes and became an integral part of literary clubs and the media. It became a national movement.

Politicians, who were determined to maintain their offices, used rising anti-Semitism for their own means by inciting the masses against the Jews. There were massive persecutions of Jews from the 1860s to 1880s. The Romanian Parliament blamed Jews for being a "village within a village." Persecutions of Jews were achieved by every possible legal, and often, non-legal means. A systematic exclusion of all Jews in Romania evolved. In the Romanian countryside, where almost no Jews resided any longer, anti-Semitism remained very strong.

The growth rate among the Jews between the 1850s and 1890s exceeded the Christian families. Of 5.95 million Romanians, 269,000 (4.5 %) were Jews. In Moldavia, Jews represented 10% of the population.

By the last half of the 19th century after Prince Carol Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen was crowned King Carol I (1881), legal anti-Semitism was enacted by the government. Jews were excluded from naturalization, denied civil rights by being declared foreigners, their children were expelled from public schools, and their properties and businesses were confiscated. Jews were prohibited from having professions, business

licenses, or even peddling. Jews were denied previously held rights of propination (sales of alcohol) and lost their leases to the inns and pubs. Eventually, the experiment of having Jews reside in Romania as privileged guests failed. Jews were murdered or injured in the ensuing riots. Mobs looted businesses and residences, while police either looked aside or were directly involved. Some older Jews remained, but 30 % of the families were forced to emigrate by the end of World War I. A unique group of very poor, but highly motivated, young Jews (Fusgeyers) walked from Moldavia across Europe to Antwerp and sailed to America.

Enormous religious, political, and socio-economic pressures were imposed upon loyal Jewish communities of Moldavia and Wallachia. Increasingly, the Jews turned to Socialism and organizations that offered hope of emancipation from the political nightmare in Romania. About a third of the Jews emigrated to the U.S. and Canada, Western Europe, and Central Africa, especially to Southern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) and Belgian Congo. Many families became fervent Zionists in the hope that by immigrating to Palestine they could become productive citizens and freely express their religious beliefs.

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