

Encyclopedia of the Jewish Communities
From their Foundation until after the WWII Holocaust

ROMANIA

Volume I – Moldavia
(Pages 246 - 253)

Roman

Map Coordinates: 46° 55' North – 26° 55' East

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N.B. Kehillah will be used where reference is to the organized Jewish community. Kehillah is the name given to Jewish communal organizations in Eastern Europe. The role and authority of the Kehillah varied greatly, depending on location and historical period. At times a Kehillah would have quasi-governmental authority over both the Jewish community and its relationship with the Gentile community.

Roman: A district town in the Moldavia region nearby the main railway from Bucharest to Cernauti (Chernowitz).

Jewish Population

Year	Number	% of Jews in the General Population
1803	?	
1820	416	
1831	1,200	
1838	1,936	
1893	3,290	

1899	6,432	39.0
1910	4,728	
1930	5,563	28.0
1941	5,540	21.0
1942	6,485	
1947	1,900	

Until the End of WWI

The Beginning and Evolvment of the Jewish Settlement

Roman was founded in the end of the 14th century on the ruins of a Roman fort built by Claudius Caesar. From a scroll written in Hebrew, the Jews wanted to prove that they were already living there in 1491, but the scroll was a fake. Still, according to the tradition, a Jewish cemetery was there from the middle of the 15th century. Legends tell that the Moldavian Prince, Alexandru Cel Bun (The Good Alexander, 1400-1432), visited the first synagogue, which was made of wood. Another legend tells that Prince Bogdan III, (The Blind, 1504-1517), visited the synagogue and even donated money to buy a Torah Book and ritual articles. The town's historian, Bishop Malkitzedek, also thought that a Jewish settlement was there in the 16th century but the Jews were deported from Roman in 1579, as commanded by the Moldavian Prince Peter the Lame. In the Hebrew document from 1752 a synagogue was mentioned, but the oldest tombstone in the Jewish cemetery was from 1746.

The first Roman documents where Jews are mentioned are from the beginning of the 18th century. A document from the time of Prince Mihai Racovita from 1709 stated the sums that the Christian, the Armenian and the Jewish merchants had to pay and ratified the church's right to collect taxes from the Jews.

In 1714 and in 1842, a blood libel was cast on the Roman Jews.

In 1825, representatives of the local church came to Prince Ioenita Sandu Struza with a demand to close the Jewish cemetery since it was located in the center of the town. The prince declined but, they started to sue the Jewish congregation and incited the citizens against the Jews. In 1846, the congregation had to buy another lot for the cemetery; in 1849, the old cemetery was abandoned, and in 1866, the municipality no longer recognized the congregation's ownership of it. In 1867, according to a municipal decree, soldiers and firefighters destroyed the cemetery; they threw the bones out of the graves and on the Rabbis tombstones they painted crosses. This desecration stirred worldwide protests and brought about the dissolution of the town's municipality. The bones were collected and together with the old tombstones transferred to the new cemetery.

At the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, the number of Jews in Roman decreased, after many of them immigrated because of the economical persecution that all Romanian suffered.

The Congregation

The first body with an authority of a congregation was the “guild,” but some of the internal functions were given to other institutions, such as the “Hevra Kadisha” (for the ritual burial) and a notebook from 1773 remained. The congregation had 16 prayer houses, the main one was the “big synagogue” that was also called “The Tailor’s Synagogue,” which according to tradition was built in the 15th century. The church also plotted against this institution and demanded that it be destroyed on the pretext that it is too close to the Christian institutions. The council refused, since it was built with a permit from the prince, but did not allow fencing it until 1852. Other important synagogues in Roman were: “The Study House of the Kosov Hassidim” (built in 1825); the merchants synagogue (built anew in 1835); the prayer house “Berl Golbeners” (1852); the study house “Zalman” (1859); the study house “Moshke Weisman” (1865) that was built in the ruins of an old synagogue by the name “The Magid Study House”; the shoemakers synagogue (1870); and the study house “Yashan Noshan” (very old - 1876).

The congregation had an ancient ritual bath, which was used also as the only bathhouse for the town’s citizens, “Hekdesh” (home for the needy) that in 1875 became a new hospital, and an old people home. Among the institutions for helping the needy were the society, “The Light Lamp,” and from a notebook (1781) we can learn that it also gave scholarships to pupils; the society “Poaley Tzedek” (justice makers) of the craftsmen (from 1794), and the societies “Bikur Cholim” (visiting the sick) and “Gmilot Hasadim” (giving charity - from 1796). The congregation had its own coins named “Pruta” for giving charity to the poor.

Rabbis

The first Rabbi we know about is Rabbi Itzhak ben-Yehuda Leib, born in Roman and was the Rabbi from 1792; Rabbi Yaakov Berish, called “the Romaner Rov”, served in the years 1825-1840 and then immigrated to Israel and settled in Sefad. Rabbi David Isakson served for 68 years (1839-1907) was the nephew of Rabbi Meir from Framishlian. After him, his grandson became the Rabbi of Roman, Rabbi Shlomo Isakson (1910-1947). He passed away at the age of 75 in Roman.

Education

The oldest educational institute in Roman was the “Talmud Torah” with a report book from 1817, although the institute itself is older. In 1865 and also in 1882, there were in Roman 20 “Heders” but, in 1929 only 4 of them remained. In 1880, a new building was purchased for the “Talmud Torah” with a restaurant for the pupils. In 1858, the congregation had to open a modern school like the other schools in Moldavia, but only in 1865 the congregation purchased a special building for it and in 1866 this school was opened. In 1867, the school was closed by the police, opened and closed again after one year, because the municipality ordered the cancellation of the tuition fee, which was the basis for its existence. In 1872, the Christian who sold the building to the congregation, succeeded in a court to cancel the sale, but he did not return most of the money he had received and not even the sums that were invested by the Jews for repairs. In 1893, when the Jewish children were expelled from the public schools, a Hebrew modern elementary school was opened, but the authorities nominated for it a Christian headmaster. It had 8 classes in two buildings. In 1899, a girl’s school was established with 179 girls. That same year 226 pupil studies in the boy’s school. In 1909, a special building was built for that school, with a soup kitchen for 100 poor children, who also were given clothes and books. The soup kitchens in the schools were maintained by donations.

The Economic and Social Situation

Towards the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century changes took place in the social structure of the Jewish population of Roman. In the middle of the 19th century Jews were mainly professional workers, while in 1899 there were already 322 merchants and in 1910 – 322 merchants, 52 tailors, 55 shoemakers, 18 blacksmiths, 20 carpenters, and 305 of different professionals.

In 1907, during the farmer’s riots, 98 Jewish homes were destroyed in Roman. In 1908, the court required one of the Jews to take a “Jewish Oath,” but the congregation refused to open the synagogue for a trial.

The Zionist Movement

The Zionist movement was rooted in Roman from its first years. The “Karmit” Society and a union of Zionist women were active there since 1899. In 1906, the Zionist Unification on the name of Rosenbaum was founded.

Between Two World Wars

In 1917, there was in Roman a large concentration of Russian soldiers and in the days of the first Russian revolution, in March 1917, it influenced those soldiers. In May first of that year, the soldiers organized a demonstration for

the international workers day. Among the slogans that had an influence was also a protest against the murder of the Jewish socialist leader from Iasi, Max Wechsler, who was killed by the Romanian police. Many Jews joined the demonstrations and one of them gave a speech, demanding equal rights for the Romanian Jews. As a result, an atmosphere of anti-Semitism prevailed and things deteriorated almost to a pogrom. The Zionist leader, lawyer Misu Weisman, who stayed in Roman as a recruit with the rank of a sergeant major, approached the revolution committee of the Russian soldiers to alert it on the danger facing the Jews. The committee turned to the Supreme Soviet in Petrograd and warned that if the Romanian continued persecuting the Jews, there might be clashes between the two armies, the Romanian and the Soviet ones. (Misu Weisman was for a short time the head of the Zionist organization in Romania and later Israel's ambassador to Belgium).

The Congregation

The Jewish congregation got organized anew after the war, with a committee of 23 members, who were elected for three years. In 1926, its articles of regulation were established and in 1932, the congregation was ratified formally as a legal body by the religions ministry.

During that time there were 3,500 Jews, who paid taxes. The congregation's committee published a bulletin with reports of its activities. In 1934, the congregation collected a special donation in order to give monthly support to the needy.

As in other towns in Romania, the Romanian political parties were involved in the social life of the Jewish congregation. From 1926 and on, the congregation's leadership was nominated by the government and included members belonging to the ruling party of General Averescu.

Organizations and Institutions

Just before the outbreak of WWII, Roman's congregation held the following institutions: 18 synagogues; 2 elementary schools – one for boys and one for girls; a kindergarten; a ritual bathhouse that was the only public bath in the town, also for the non-Jewish citizens; a hospital with an infirmary (a new wing was added in 1983); an old people home; a soup kitchen helping the school kids; and a cemetery. All in all, the congregation owned 37 buildings, among them several given to the congregation by philanthropists.

There were also institutions that did not belong to the congregation. Between 1918 and 1920, a traditional "Yeshiva" was active, headed by Rabbi Berl Isacsohn; also several Jewish libraries: the Roneti Roman" library (1918-1922); the "Or Zion" library (1918-1922); the "Mackabi" library of the same

organization (1918-1935); the “VIZO” library (founded in 1920) with books in Hebrew, which was also active during the war in the Jewish high school building.

The Zionist Movement

The Zionist movement was very active between the wars. The local Zionist Organization branch also published a bi-weekly newspaper.

Jews took part in the general political life by belonging to Romanian parties and sometimes there were Jews in the town’s council. They were not representatives of Jewish organizations, but served as activists in the Romanian parties. In 1930, there were 6 Jews among the ten members of the commercial and industrial council. In 1934, a Jewish deputy mayor was elected.

Persecution of Jews

Immediately after WWI, Jews in Roman began to be persecuted. In 1920, the dean of the lawyers union refused to accept Jewish members with the pretext that the emancipation law of the Jews was opposed to the law of the land. The Jewish delegate to the parliament, Doctor Beno Straucher, served a parliamentary question to the government about this issue and at the same month the appeal court in Iasi ruled that the emancipation was legal, which forced the dean to accept the Jewish members.

In 1922, following the first pogroms in the universities under the slogan of “Numerus Clausos” (see below), the students, who returned from the universities for vacation, influenced the high school children who later formed the local “Iron Guard.”

The local Bishop Lucian Triteanu was one of the most famous anti-Semitists in the country and supported openly the anti-Semitic movement. In 1928, in a discussion held in the Romanian Senate in Bucharest on the religious law and the status of the Jewish congregations, the Bishop attacked the Jews, arguing that they have a negative influence on the country with their particular ways and by their shutting themselves up. The Jewish Senator Horia Carp answered back sharply.

The anti-Semitic atmosphere is evident from the fact that in 1930 the Romanian professor, A. K. Cuza, the leader of the Christian-National anti-Semitic party, was elected there to the parliament. In 1933, Cuza prevented the erecting of a memorial to a Jewish physician, who sacrificed his life while saving a Christian worker who fell into an oil well.

In 1937, the lawyer's bureau of Roman decided not to accept new Jewish members and not to give tenure to the previous ones.

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During the Holocaust

During Antonescu's and the "Iron Guard" rule (September 1940-January 1941), things in Roman were quiet because of special circumstances. The local "Iron Guard" commander was appointed to be a commissar for the Romanization of Bertold Rorlich and his brother Leon's plants. Rorlich was the congregation's chairman. The two brothers supported him with money and achieved their influence. That influence played a crucial role when the "Iron Guard" riots broke out in Bucharest in January 1941, which led to a pogrom in Bucharest but not in Roman. Here the commander ordered the head of the district to keep the peace and in that way the Jews of Roman did not suffer during those stormy days.

Still, several things happened. The congregation's head was attacked by a legionnaire and a Jewish boy was killed by his schoolmates. The decrees against the Jews were executed with care, but were not too brutal. The Jewish merchants kept dealing with their trade, but from time to time had to put a sign on their stores (since November 1940), "Jewish Store." Some of the bartenders were expelled from the town and Macedonian refugees from the Dobrovia region took their place. Eleven Jewish lawyers were removed, some Jews were fired from their posts in government ministries, and some Jewish teachers were removed from public schools. Many Jews were dismissed from private plants, and for those who remained, their salary was reduced and to each a Christian "substitute" was at hand. Of 1,259 craftsmen and workers, 241 ended up unemployed; of 244 clerks 158 lost their posts and of 281 store and plant owners, 250 were kept away.

On August 11 1941, the police forbade the Jews from accepting Christians to give them certain services. From July, Roman Jews had to wear the mark of shame, even before the police published the decree about that. Buying in the market was allowed only from 10 to 12 and eventually a separate market only for Jews was established in the outskirts. Movement in the town was first forbidden from 6 pm until 7 am and then from 8 am to 6 pm. In September 1941, the Jews of Roman, like all the Romanian Jews, were obliged to bring the first half of the garment's tax, and in February 1, 1942 – the other half. In the autumn of 1941, the Jews were forced to sign on a "completion loan" the sum of 51 million lei instead of the 10 million that was previously decreed. The mayor squeezed out a million lei from 12 Jews after jailing them for 12 days. Antonescu praised the police commander for this act in a special broadsheet that was distributed all over the country.

The Jews had to donate hundred of thousands lei to the patronage council, 650,000 lei to the foundation of the invalid palace, also hundreds of beds, pillows, sheets etc. to military hospitals in the town or in Trnasnistria. 800 Jews were sentenced because they were unable to bring those things. The congregation succeeded to cancel those trials for the sum of 100,000 lei.

In September 16, 1942, the authorities stopped giving bread coupons to Jews. In November 30, 1942, they were not allowed to be in the streets but for two hours a day, before noon. The congregation's leaders succeeded to cancel the decree after one month.

The Congregation's Activities

The congregations did a lot in the welfare area. Two soup kitchens were established, one for the poor and one for school children; 400 studied in two elementary schools. There was also a high school with 8 classes and several parallel classes for those expelled from the public schools, with 180 boys and girls. Beside the professional teachers, scholars who were fired from their posts also taught there. Several lawyers, who were expelled from the court, started working for the congregation. In January 9, 1941, the Jewish hospital was confiscated and the sick removed. The congregation immediately opened a clinic and Jewish physicians worked there.

With the outbreak of war between Romania and the Soviet Union (June 21, 1941), about 800 refugees, who were deported from the vicinity, joined the Roman Jewish congregation.

The first convoys of the deported arrived at Roman with great poverty after all they had was robbed. The following convoys were organized by the congregation in order to be guarded by the police, so that the deported could bring their belongings. They were sheltered in the synagogues and private homes. A special soup kitchen for the refugees was immediately opened with meals for 600 people. In July 1, 1941, after the pogrom in Iasi, 160 of the congregation's leaders were taken hostages with Rabbis Isakson and Dr. Fenkel. They were jailed in the central synagogue. They were freed after 3 months, but they were told that they would be held accountable for any sabotage acts executed by Jews.

On July 2, 1941, at dusk, the "death train" from Iasi to Calarasi stopped in Roman with those who were expelled from Iasi and survived the bloodshed in the train. The Mayor's deputy, N. K. Pipa, forbade helping any passengers, who were dying inside from suffocation and thirst. However, Mrs. Victoria Agarici, the local "Red Cross" chairwoman, with the help of the garrison's commander, Colonel Graur, after overcoming the opposition of the journey's commander, Judje Triandaf and others, succeeded to break loose the iron locks of the train cars doors and provide water to the people.

The congregation's people brought food and clothes. Mrs. Agarici instructed to let the people get off the train for the night – 53 were already dead – and sent them to the bathhouse. Meanwhile, the inner walls of the train cars were painted. The next morning the passengers boarded the train and continued their way to Calarasi, but thanks to the help they got fewer of them died on the way. Several hours afterwards, Mrs. Agarici was suspended under the pressure from the other members of the Red Cross and the Mayor's deputy.

During that time, 100 Jews from all levels of their society were jailed in the synagogue and held for twenty days under a military guard. From August to September, thirty-eight of them from 8-9 families were expelled to Transnistria on the pretext that they had evaded the forced labor. Another 80 were expelled because they were communists and were sent to Vapniarca camp.

During the time of the expulsions, the congregation kept in touch with the deported by letters and messengers who brought them food, clothes, and money. The congregation collected special donations with the slogan “a meal for a deported to Transnistria” and collected a large sum. One of the Jews from the first group died in Transnistria; the others came back in 1943. The other group in the camp returned in March-April 1944.

Forced Labor

Soon after the breakout of the war between Romania and the Soviet Union, Roman Jews were apprehended together with the refugees and sent to forced labor. First they worked in the town and the vicinity; in May 15, 1942, 250 Jews were sent to Floresti in Bessarabia. After that, 200 were sent to Sihna in the Botosani region and 93 were annexed to the 5th regiment in Macin. Thirty-five shoemakers were sent to Tiraspol, Transnistria; 75 to Baldovinesti, in the Braila region; 45 to Barlad; 50 to Herja-Saventi; and more than 100 to Predeal. Many craftsmen and technicians were sent to different military units in the country. The number of people that were sent to different units outside of Roman reached 1,000. Jewish physicians were also sent to several camps in Transnistria. The work regime was very tough. The congregation and the local office of the “Jewish Center” took steps in order to bring back workers after serving 6 months or at most one year. However that was not always the case. Still, the congregation always took care of their families and provided them with food, clothes and from time to time some money. Also, those families were exempt from paying municipal taxes. Other work groups also received clothes and food. The congregation's messengers traveled to the work camps to give food and clothes to the workers. Those, who worked inside the town or the district eight hours a day, received very little compensation as salaries. The congregation managed to get 650 cards of exemption from work in return for sums that sometimes reached 200,000 lei per card.

In April 1944, when the Russian military advanced, Jewish refugees began to arrive in Roman from Targu-Frumos and Pascani. The congregation rented German trucks and in return for 3,000 lei per person, transferred during the nights the Jews from Targu Frumos. Altogether 1400 Jews were brought from Targu Frumos and about 1,000 from Pascani. The police instructed to jail those refugees in the synagogue and to court martial them for deserting a war zone without permission. This time also the congregation managed to free the refugees and they received a special permit to stay in town. With the help of "JOINT" special soup kitchens were organized for those refugees. That same period (May 1944), the military commander tried to establish a ghetto in Roman and instructed to Jews living on main and commercial streets of the town to move away within 48 hours to the outskirts near to the gypsy's quarter. After bribing the officials, the decree was cancelled.

On May 10, 1944, the regional office of the "Jewish Center" received an order from the army to allocate 600 people, 300 men and 300 women, for digging projects. The same day, the head of the police transferred General Racovita's decree to the congregation's leaders. According to the decree, all Jews, men and women alike, age 15-55, must go to work. The congregation had to provide their food and tools. On May 22, 1944, a third decree was issued from the General Staff with details of the different works Jews must perform: for the men – paving roads, digging, building bridges and more; for the women – washing linen, kitchen work, sewing and more. Each unit was to be comprised of 500 people, be under the rule of the army's headquarters, and the headquarters would be in constant touch with the congregation. The work that was forced upon Roman's Jews in that last stage was the hardest and continued until after August 23rd.

Inner Life

During the holocaust, the congregation's leadership remained the same, also after the regional office of the "Jewish Center" began its activities (April 1942). The old leaders were not forced out and due to that the situation of Roman's Jews was less severe than the circumstances of other towns in Romania.

The Jewish school had a good influence on the mood of the Jewish population in Roman. With the initiative of Rabbi Dr. Frenkel, the high school conducted public prayers every Saturday and holidays. The choir and the cantors were students. During the holidays and on other occasions, the teachers and the students organized parties and all the town's Jews participated.

When the orphans returned from Transnistria in the spring of 1944, 2 of the congregation's representatives traveled to Tiraspol and brought back 132 orphans. They were placed in Jewish homes. In 1944, many deported Jews arrived to Roman from Transnistria and since they were originally from Bukovina, then under Russian rule, they could not return to their homes. Many of them settled in Roman. Also, some of the deportees from the region remained in Roman and never returned to their homes.

There is still a small Jewish community in Roman today.

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The General Archive of the History of the Jewish People - RM 77
Yad Vashem Archive - PKR
W. Filderman Archive I.
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Captions of Photographs:

Page 247:

- A letter from 1867, from the mayor to the congregation's council about elimination of the cemetery (The General Archive of the History of the Jewish People).
- Rabbi Shlomo Isakson (The Collection of Chaim Rabinson).
- Approval of a contract for a butcher shop on the basis of a tender put by the mayor in 1866

Page 248:

- The congregation's budget from 1866.

Page 249:

- A temporary approval from the regional council allowing the congregation's leadership to open a Jewish school (The General Archive of the History of the Jewish People).

- The congregation's building.

Page 250:

A call of "The Christian National Defense League" for elections in 1930.

The first on the list was A. K. Cuza.

Page 251:

A mayor's decree, autumn 1942, forbidding the Jews from buying bread.

Page 252:

The "Dead Train" from Iasi in the train station of Roman