

THE JEWS OF CLUJ IN THE INTER-WAR PERIOD

Abstract

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The main topic of my dissertation is the history of the Jewish community in Cluj in the inter-war period. It is a tentative for a monograph, with interdisciplinary approaches using the classical research methods of history, but also elements from sociology and anthropology.

I set myself an aim to present this topic from the point of view of identity and

social integration. The history of the Transylvanian Jewry, and of Cluj as well, went through a metamorphosis after the I WW. Their social stratification, cultural life, the institutional system, political attitude, economic role have changed. Thus, the process of integration and assimilation to the Hungarian community had slowed down or in some cases even stopped, due to the geopolitical changes and internal political and social events.

The very few self-depending sources concerning the history of the Transylvanian Jewry are found in the archive of the Federation of Jewish Communities of Romania in Bucharest and at a few congregations. Since the archives of the Northern Transylvanian Jewish communities had been destroyed during the Holocaust or moved to yet unknown locations, the scholars can rely mostly on the non-Jewish source material. The records of the Jewish institutions, advocacy organizations haven't been discovered yet, albeit those would have been of major importance for the research. Thus, as far as the inter-war Jewish social construct is concerned, I could rely only on the scarce and dispersed documents in the Romanian and Hungarian National Archives, and in the Jewish Federation's archive in Bucharest.

The 1st and 2nd chapter presents The frames of the research, and The historiography of the Romanian and Hungarian Jewish communities; the sources of the research.

The 3rd chapter is a summary of the history of The Jews of Cluj till the WWI. The Jewry appeared in the history of Cluj at the beginning of the 16th century, nevertheless for a few centuries the community had no direct interference with the life of the town, due to restrictive regulations.

The settlement of Jews in towns was allowed by law in 1840, and thereafter a Jewish community started to develop in Cluj. The city council report from 1835 mentioned 61 Jewish men and 48 women, while at a census in 1846 the number of Jewish families was 58. Soon after the tabernacle in Kül-Magyar Street(nowadays a part of the 22 December Street) proved to be too small for the community, thus a synagogue

in classical style was built in today's Paris Street, in 1851. This synagogue, and the annex buildings (the rabbi's and the teacher's house, the ritual bath) later became the religious and cultural center of the orthodox Jewish congregation.

The 1867 emancipation opened the possibility for social mobility and the Jews in Cluj assumed increasingly substantial roles in the development of culture and economy. The majority found employment in commerce, industry or became freelancers.

The 4th chapter is about The demographical structure and the topography of the Jewish population of Cluj. Both in number and significance, the Jews in Cluj became one of the important Israelite communities in Transylvania. Beside Cluj, Oradea-Nagyvárad, Sighetul Marmăției-Máramarossziget and Satu-Mare-Szatmárnémeti were in 1930 the settlements with Jewish communities over ten thousand members.

The 1910 census reported 7,046, the 1930 one 13,504, the 1941 census 16,763 persons of Israelite religion in Cluj. The Jewish community represented around 13–15% of the town population between the World Wars. Most of them spoke Hungarian as mother tongue.

The 5th chapter analyses The occupational structure and the role in the economy of the Jews. In the second half of the nineteen thirties, there were around 4000 Jewish families of which around 150 belonged to the upper middle class, around 800 to the middle class, and the rest made part of the lower middle class or poor. In 1938, 800 Jewish families in Cluj were poor to that extent that they were unable to procure, by themselves, the necessary documents for proving their rights for Romanian citizenship.

The social structure of the Jewish society in Cluj reveals a middle-class community actively engaged in the economic and cultural life of the town. In 1930, a 33% of Jews in Cluj made their incomes from industry, while 31% made a living on commerce and crediting. From the 435 companies registered in 1937 at the Trade Registry, 246 were owned by Jews (57%), while 665 of the small entrepreneurs registered at the Cluj Labor Chamber were Israelites (24%).

Young Jewish people often chose to become physicians or lawyers, and due to their excellent professional reputation they attracted a great number of clients. There

were 472 registered physicians in Cluj in 1937, and among them 158 were Jews.

The role played by the Jewish population in commerce and industry had a significant impact on the atmosphere of the town. The central stores were almost with no exception owned by Jews and Hungarians.

The 6th chapter being entitled *Interdictions, Segregation and Anti-Semitism in Cluj*, presents the anti-Jewish legislations and the effect of the anti-Semitism on the Jewish national identity.

After the instauration of the Romanian administration in 1918-1919 the Transylvanian Jewry and like so the Jews in Cluj, too, lost the stability of the former legal system of Austro-Hungary, and experienced a legal insecurity and defenselessness. The Mârzescu law on citizenship in 1924, and the supervision of citizenship in 1938 deprived hundreds of Jewish families of their citizenship.

The 7th chapter offers an analysis of *The Jewish institutional system*. Beside the congregational framework that traditionally provided the organization of Jewish communities, after 1918 appeared the Zionism, that focused more on lay institutionalization. In only a few years, an institutional network encompassing the entire Jewish society was established in Cluj, which in meantime became the center of the national Jewish movement in Transylvania. This institutional network was meant to foster the safeguard of interests and develop social care but also to form the identity.

In November 1918 the *Transylvanian Jewish National Union* was founded and thereafter the Union's group managed the local Zionist movement in Cluj. Under the umbrella of the Union, several organizations developed representing various social groups and interests. Such groups were, for example, the lay counterparts of the congregational women's associations, the international *WIZO* (Women's International Zionist Organization) movement, which started to function in Cluj in 1927. The *Transylvanian Jewish Student Aid Group* came into existence in 1932, while the *Transylvanian Jewish Orphan Support Group* played an important role in teaching industrial professions. The sick were cured in the *Jewish Hospital*.

The vectors of cultural life were on one hand the Zionist Jewish political daily

paper *Új Kelet* (New East) published in Cluj, the publishing houses which were editing books on Jewry and on the other hand the *Goldmark Philharmonic Association*.

Important professional organizations were the *Poale Cedek Trade Union* and the *Paul Ehrlich Association of Physicians*. Poorer Jewish families and small entrepreneurs were aided by the *Small Credit Bank*.

Beside the Zionist camp constantly growing in number, there were still many families who felt to belong to the Hungarian community and chose the way of assimilation. Many industrials of Jewish origin, as Farkas Mózes, for instance, chose to support Hungarian cultural and social organizations while others made sacrifices to buttress the Zionist national structures.

The Jewish educational institutions are presented in the *8th chapter*. The orthodox community established first a school. They started an elementary school for boys in 1875, and included classes for girls in 1908. The number of pupils increased continuously, thus while at the beginning the school had two teachers and forty pupils, by the time of the first World War the number of pupils exceeded three hundred. The congressional community founded its own elementary school in 1904.

In the inter-war period the Jewish education was provided through nursery-, elementary- and the high-schools for boys and for girls that functioned with the support of various Jewish congregations between 1920–1927.

The *9th chapter* analyses the *Jewish Self-Organization and Awareness of Identity*. Up to the second decade of the twentieth century the majority of the Transylvanian Jewry assimilated into the Hungarian nation: around 80 % of the Transylvanian Jews spoke Hungarian as mother tongue. On the East-Hungarian territories enclosed to Romania lived 182 489 Israelites in 1910, while their number increased to 192 833 in 1930, that made 3,4% of the Transylvanian populace. The main Jewish centres were Máramarossziget (Sighetul Marmăției), Szatmárnémeti (Satu Mare), Nagyvárad (Oradea), Temesvár (Timișoara), Arad, Gyulafehérvár (Alba Iulia), Dés (Dej), Kolozsvár (Cluj) and Marosvásárhely (Târgu Mureș).

The matter of fact, the enclosure of Transylvania to Romania was the real turn in

the life of the Transylvanian Jewry, since they became a minority together with the Hungarians, and consequently, segregations started within the Jewish community. The Transylvanian Jewry, as other communities that lived in Hungary before 1918, had to decide whether they throw in their lot with the Hungarians, or detach themselves from the Hungarians ceding to the Romanian dissimilation policy.

The contemporaneous Transylvanian Jewish communities were far from being unitary, and were split along different organizations, such as the Hungarian National Party, Transylvanian Jewish National Union, the Transylvanian branch of the Romanian Jewish Union, Social Democratic Party, Communist Party (in illegitimacy from 1924) as well as other Romanian political factions.

The *10th chapter* contains the conclusions of the thesis and a short presentation of the fate of the Jews after 1940. The main research question of my survey refers to the identity of the Jews of Cluj. I outlined the strategies adopted by the Jewry in defining their identity after the First World War and change of power, taking into consideration the confessional and social differentiations of a mainly Hungarian speaking Jewish population. At the same time I presented their answers to the new political and cultural challenges.

To conclude, I would assert that by the end of the inter-war period at least a quarter of the Transylvanian Jews became adherents of Zionism, and around fifty percent assumed the Jewish identity. The majority of the Jews, however, kept the Hungarian language and culture throughout this period.