

**THE REORGANISATION OF THE JEWISH COMMUNITY  
AFTER WORLD WAR II (1945-1950).  
CASE STUDY: SIGHETU MARMAȚIEI**

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World War II brought major changes in the life of the Jewish communities all over Europe. Romania and Northern Transylvania were no exception in this respect. After the Second Vienna Dictate of August 30, 1940, the territories of Northern Transylvania – the counties of Sălaj, Bistrița-Năsăud, Ciuc, Solnoc-Dăbâca, Trei Scaune, Mureș and some parts of the Cluj county were annexed to Hungary. Consequently, the counties of Maramureș, Satu Mare and Ugocea reverted to the boundaries they had before World War I. Following the annexation of these territories, a population of approximately 200000 Jews were brought under Hungarian rule. They became the victims of the Nazi regime, of the anti-Jewish laws and of the Final Solution. A part of them, the men aged between 16 and 60 years old, were taken to labour camps, but the majority of the Jews were deported according to the provisions of Decree 6163/1944 to the Nazi extermination camps. The deportation of the Jews in Northern Transylvania started on May 16, 1944 and lasted until June 8, 1944, when the last transport left

Northern Transylvania; by this time, the number of deportees had reached 131639.<sup>1</sup>

The German and Hungarian troops were expelled from Northern Transylvania in the fall of 1944 and soon afterwards, this region was annexed to Romania. From this point forward, the return of the Jewish population to their native towns began. The first to come back were those who had been sent to the labour camps, their troops being stationed in eastern Hungary. They came following the Soviet and Romanian troops and returned to their native towns and villages, starting to reorganise the community life. First, while waiting for those in the concentration camps to return, the Jews established synagogues and community canteens and organised ritual burials for those who had been brutally murdered by the Nazi regime. The Jews who had survived the concentration camps returned only in the summer of 1945, after the camps were freed. Those who came back were unable to move back into the houses they owned before the war, as these had been occupied by Gentiles. As they had no means to support themselves, they were placed in the so-called "Houses for the Returned" which were organised in the larger Transylvanian cities. After things went back to "normal", those who returned from the concentration and labour camps attempted to reorganise the religious communities, the community institutions and to reprise their everyday life. The surviving Jews tried to regain possession of their homes and the wealth they had before the war. The first two years after the war were spent struggling to reorganise the institutional and community life, the situation changing dramatically after the establishment of the communist regime in Romania. The Soviet-supported regime introduced a number of laws and economic measures that made it impossible for the Jews to continue their community life according to the rules and traditions existing before the war.

The Romanian section of the World Jewish Congress started its activity in November 1944, its first purpose being that of recording the Jewish survivors. According to the first Northern Transylvanian censuses, approximately 7200 Jews were conscripted<sup>2</sup> (1500 in Cluj county, 2000 in Bihor county, 500 in Mures county, etc.; in January 1947, the number of the

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1 „Halálvonatok”, Menóra, Toronto, pp. 4-12.

2 Stark Tamás, „Zsidóság a vézskorszakban és a felszabadulás után (1939-1955)”, MTA Történettudományi Intézete, Budapest, 1995, pp. 65-68.

Jews who returned from the Nazi extermination camps was estimated to be 44706 people. Besides this institution, branches of the *Jewish Agency*, *The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee* (abbreviated *Joint*) and of the International Red Cross were also active in Romania with the purpose of supporting the Jews who had returned from the labour and concentration camps. For instance, *Joint*, during the first post-war years, brought dozens of millions of dollars to Romania in order to financially support the Jewish community.<sup>3</sup> After 1949, when the activity of *Joint* was banned by the Communist Party, the Romanian communist state, following outside pressures, accepted the presence of the *Joint* members who supported the activity of the Jewish Communities Federation in Romania.

There were innumerable problems confronting the community that survived the Holocaust, problems that required immediate solutions if life was to resume its natural course again. It was important for the members to find the relatives who were still alive, to deal with the physical and psychological traumas caused by the Holocaust, to regain their personal and community assets, to punish the war criminals and rebuild the community life. In addition to these issues, the Jewish community was confronted, after World War II, with the problems of self-defining, something that marked the Jewish life in the inter-war period. At the end of World War I, when Banat, Transylvania and Partium were annexed to Romania, the Jewish population found themselves in the position of a double minority. Three orientations for defining the self-identity were shaped in this period, the Jewish population being divided among those who still considered themselves a Hungarian minority of Mosaic faith, those who were in favour of a rapprochement to the Romanian population, which would have meant the integration within the majority population, and those who adopted the Zionist ideology, seeing themselves as members of the Jewish nation and considering that the only viable solution for the future was the establishment of a Jewish state. After World War II, the old dilemmas of self-identity resurfaced. The Jews who had been in favour of assimilation within the Hungarian population saw themselves betrayed by a people with whom they had lived side by side for centuries. A part of those who had returned from the concentration

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3 Hary Kuller, „Eвреii din România anilor 1944-1949. Evenimente, documente, comentarii”, Ed. Hasefer, București, 2002, pp. 61-62. The activity of *Joint* was subsequently banned by the Romanian Communist Party.

and labour camps considered the communist ideology, which argued in favour of internationalism and social equality, the possibility of a new start and integrating in society. Besides those who chose this integration in the communist society, two other orientations were visible: the supporters of integration in the Romanian society and of the denial of the past and the supporters of emigration to Palestine, America or the Western countries as the sole viable option for the future. A very small proportion of the Jewish population, especially the Jewish intellectuals in Transylvania, remained loyal to the integration within the Hungarian population adopting a leftist ideology. The number of those who defined themselves as belonging to the Jewish nation and who considered emigration the only viable solution for the future grew significantly when the Jews became aware of the fact that the communist regime was not willing to acknowledge the Jewish population as a separate nation and that anti-Semitism was present in the new society as it had been in the old one.

In order to punish and convict the war criminals, the so-called People's Tribunals were created by Ministry Decree no. 312 in April 1945<sup>4</sup> Such tribunals functioned in Old Romania where they tried the cases of war criminals who had been active in Southern Transylvania, which had been part of Romania during the war, and in Cluj Napoca, where those who had committed war crimes in Northern Transylvania were convicted. The People's Tribunal in Cluj started its activity in July 1945, the public prosecutors being Dr. Andrei Paul, Grigore Râpeanu and Dr. Simion Pop. The first trial started in March 1946 with 193 defendants, while 195 defendants were tried during the second trial under the accusation of involvement in the implementation of the anti-Jewish legislation, in the ghettoisation and deportation of the Jews.<sup>5</sup> The most important war criminals were convicted in absentia, as they had left the country together with the retreating Hungarian troops. According to the verdict of the People's Tribunal, 30 people were sentenced to death, 50 to forced lifetime labour, the others being sentenced to forced labour for shorter periods. None of those sentenced to

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4 Bucharest State Archives. The Presidency of the Councils of Ministers, Transcripts, 1945, File 10/1945.

5 Mures County Archives, Mures County Museum Collection, Cluj People's Tribunal, Prosecution Act, File 612/1946.

death was executed and those who had been sentenced to many years in prison were gradually released.

Between February 12 and 14, 1945, the Parliament of Northern Transylvania was convened in Cluj-Napoca, an event that was in fact the Congress of the Northern Transylvanian Branch of the National Democratic Front. Twenty-two members were elected in the Executive Committee, of whom 9 were Romanians, 8 were Hungarians, 1 was German and 4 were Jewish. During the debates, the Democratic Jews' Communities (DJC) put forward the demands of the Jewish people referring to the abolishment of fascist laws, punishing the war criminals, returning the assets and goods taken by the Romanians and the Hungarians, reorganising the community life and institutions in order to achieve community autonomy and the freedom to emigrate to Palestine or to other countries. As the new communist regime did not have a significant influence on the DJC, the Jewish Democratic Committee (JDC) was established in the summer of 1945 and it took over the role and activity of the DJC.

The anti-Jewish laws were abolished in Romania on September 1, 1944 (Official Monitor, September 1944, Law no. 641) and the effective reorganisation of the Jewish communities and the Zionist institutions started; the Status of Nationalities was adopted on the same occasion, but it did not acknowledge the Jews as a nationality in its own right. The Jews regained their civil rights, but lost the right to be a nationality in itself, separate from the Romanian or Hungarian nations. In this period, the Communist Party was the only one in favour of acknowledging the Jews as a separate nation, so it should not be surprising that many Jews joined this party right after the war, embracing the communist ideology. The new communist regime considered the Jews to be their allies in the period immediately following the war, as they were the most bitter enemies of Hungarian nationalism and territorial revisionism.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, the Jews considered the communists and the Red Army as the liberators and saviours of the Jewish population. In July 1945, under the leadership and control of the Communist Party, Jewish Democratic Committees were set up in every town or village where there used to be traditional Jewish communities. According to Hillel

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<sup>6</sup> Victor Neumann, „Istoria evreilor din România. Studii documentare și teoretice”, Editura Amarcord, Timișoara, 1996, pp. 249-250.

Kohn, an important personality of the Transylvanian Jews after the war, the JDC was a spontaneous social organisation based on the need for mutual assistance and solidarity. In its first months, the JDC saw several achievements. As a result of their intervention, the period spent by the Jews in labour or concentration camps was considered military service, while the widows and the orphans were treated as war widows or orphans; soon enough, however, it became clear that the JDC was nothing but a control organisation of the Communist Party that wished to control the Jewish community and society. Its program became evident, as was its wish to reduce the influence of religious and Zionist institutions. Beginning with 1948, the JDC started a fierce fight against the Zionist organisations, their assets were confiscated and the Zionist leaders were convicted as enemies of the regime.

Following the general nationalisations by the communist regime, the Jewish population that was still suffering after the War lost all means of livelihood (approximately 60% of the Jewish population were involved in trade, crafts or had businesses of their own). The policy of redrawing the social hierarchy, conceived by the Communist Party afterwards, had a negative influence on the Jewish religious communities. Another blow for the communities was the nationalisation of community schools; in addition, through the Law Decree 589, the Jewish religious orthodox, neolog, status quo ante and Sephardic communities were unified under a single religious community named “the Mosaic Cult”, controlled by the Communist Party. On June 16, 1948, under the auspices of the JDC, the assembly of rabbis and Jewish community representatives elected, by secret vote, Moses Rosen as Chief Rabbi of the Jewish Communities in Romania. His opponent was David Safran, the nephew of the former Chief Rabbi Alexandru Safran, a supporter of Zionism who was not well-liked by the communist regime. Later on, the Jews were eliminated from all important leadership positions and from the political life.

The integration of the Jewish population in the communist state structure in Romania was an evident failure. Ever since its establishment, the communist regime tried its utmost to obtain control over the Jewish religious communities and to reduce their importance and role in the life of the Jewish community. The spreading of Communist ideas and the lack of religious leaders facilitated this process; if, during 1944-1946, many Jews

saw communist and leftist ideas as the path towards social and economic revival, they soon lost their confidence in the new regime and joined the ranks of those who considered that their future was emigration or the establishment of the Jewish state and aliyah. The failure of the communist regime highlighted the fact that the most important secular and religious leaders left Romania: in 1947, Chief Rabbi Dr. Alexandru Safran took over the position of rabbi of the Jewish communities in Geneva, in 1948 the secular leader Wilhelm Filderman emigrated to France. As a consequence of the communist measures, the number of those who chose aliyah increased significantly in the first years after the establishment of the Jewish national state. Between 1948 and 1963, the communist regime intermittently allowed the emigration of 400000 Jews to Israel and to the western countries.

### **Case Study: Sighetu Marmăției**

The first Jews arrived in Sighetu Marmăției at the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century: in 1742, there was already a permanent settlement there. Their number rose from 142 in 1785 to 3380 in 1880 and reached 10144 in 1941. The first synagogue was built in 1807 and the first community rabbi was Juda Kahan. The city soon became the most important Hasidic centre in Transylvania under the leadership of the Teitelbaum rabbinical dynasty. Both Chevra Kadisha and Chevra Misnajot functioned in the city. Besides these institutions, there were also some organisations dealing with mutual aid and charity. The mutual aid society of the craftsmen, *Handwerker Unterstuetzungs Verein*, was established in 1883 and it built its own synagogue, *Poalei Tzedek* (The Freedom Workers). The women organisation, active in the field of charity, was founded towards the end of the 1880s or the 1890s in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Other organisations were founded in the same period: *Malbis Arumin* (Dress the Naked), whose main purpose was that of providing clothing for schoolchildren and *Sandakaut*, a society helping the poor young mothers. The house for community assistance was built in 1894, where food was provided for very low prices. Beginning with 1901, it started levying a permanent fee paid both by the community members and the local authorities. The Jewish children went to the Talmud-Torah school; a Sephardic primary school was established at the beginning of the

20<sup>th</sup> century. A yeshiva was established in 1858, while a Jewish publishing house was founded in 1874, where 200 books were printed until 1944. During the inter-war period, Zionism gained ground in Sighetu Marmăției, the most important Zionist organisation being Mizrahi.

In 1940, after the annexation of Maramureș county to Hungary together with the other counties in Partium, Banat and Transylvania, anti-Jewish laws were introduced here. In 1941 and 1942, many Jews were rounded up and taken to compulsory labour camps and on the eastern Ukrainian front, where many lost their lives. On April 20, 1942, the ghettoisation process started; in fact, there were two ghettos: the large one was in the downtown area and consisted of four streets where the majority of the Jews were located and the smaller one that housed Jews from the surrounding area. Fifteen thousand Jews were forced to live in these four ghettos. The living conditions in the ghetto were very difficult. Soon after their arrival in the ghetto, the Jews started to organise themselves: all sorts of assistance organisations were established that supervised the distribution of food, a labour office that dealt with the distribution of people for forced labour, trying to protect the sick and the ailing. An office for hygiene and health – that mobilised all the doctors in the ghetto – was established to ensure medical supervision under the circumstances of minimal hygiene in the ghetto. The intellectual and religious leaders, approximately 140 people, were locked up in one of the town synagogues. The Jews in the Sighet ghetto were deported with four transports, the first leaving on May 16, 1944 and the last on May 22, 1944. Approximately 12000 were deported from Sighetu Marmăției.<sup>7</sup>

After the end of the war, the first who returned were those from the forced labour groups who started the reorganisation of the community and religious life. According to the records that are still property of the community – the first census of those who returned done by the International Jewish Congress – there were 2300 Jews in the town in 1947, the majority of whom lived before the war in the neighbouring towns and in Bukovina. The religious life was reorganised under the leadership of rabbi Moses Teitelbaum, who was the leader of the Sighetu Marmăției Jewish commu-

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7 Randolph L. Braham, „Az észak-erdélyi holokauszt földrajzi enciklopédiája”, Editura Park Koinonia, Budapesta-Cluj Napoca, 2008, pp. 227-229.

nity. According to community records, the majority of those who returned until the beginning of 1945 were Jews who had not lived in Maramureş county or in Sighetu Marmatei and who chose to emigrate as soon as they were given the opportunity, seeking their future in the West or in Palestine. The records also show that those who returned did not have any means to support themselves, their houses had been taken over by the locals and their only income was provided by the International Red Cross who gave them some money, clothes and medication. Those who returned immediately started the reorganisation of the Jewish community of Sighetu Marmatei and to revive the community institutions from before the war. By the summer of 1945, the community canteen, the hospital, the mutual aid organisation, the women's association were already in place, organisations aimed at supporting the returned and the war widows and orphans.

The reorganised Orthodox Jewish community led by rabbi Moses Teitelbaum soon found itself in conflict with the Sighetu Marmatei branch of the JDC. During the first months of activity of the JDC, the majority of the Jews mistook it for *Joint*, which led to significant organisational issues. The third pillar of influence in Sighetu Marmatei was the reorganised Sephardic community led by rabbi Gross. As in other places, what the JDC wanted here was to take absolute control over the Jewish community life. Ever since the first meetings held in the first part of January 1946,<sup>8</sup> the committee headed by Dr. Andrei Markus wanted to divide the responsibilities between the committee and the community. Even though the community argued for the importance and role of the community according to the pre-war situation, the committee first wanted to assume its role in the political life and education of the Jewish population. The community was to be responsible only as far as the social life of the Jewish community was concerned. Even though the majority of community members wanted to revert to the old order, when the autonomous community was present in all aspects of the Jewish life (religious, social, cultural), beginning with 1946 the community started to lose ground in front of the committee.

In order to have a better influence, the committee decided the unification of the committees in Maramureş county, so that, during the meeting on January 31, 1946, the JDC in Sighet and Maramureş county already

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8 Maramureş County Archives, Jewish Democratic Committee, Fond 35, file 2/1946, p. 1-2.

had 3700 members, of whom 1200 lived in the town of Sighet. This time, the committee assumed the position of leader of the social life, distributing the aid received from *Joint*; the canteen where approximately 300 people received food (especially the war orphans, the elderly and the sick) was also patronised by the committee. The committee established homes for apprentices, a dormitory for girls where 50 orphan girls were trained as seamstresses. It also took over the community role as far as the cultural life was concerned, focusing on the “correct” education of the Jewish masses and showing them the path to follow towards the “democratic rebuilding” of the country. The JDC also dealt with the recovering of the assets and goods of the Jews who had been deported to the Nazi concentration camps and acted on behalf of the town population both socially and politically. In 1946, the Jewish Democratic Library started its activity, the organisation having an explicitly educational purpose, while the Women’s Association was already active under the authority of the Jewish Democratic Committee.

The first president of the committee was Dr. Armin Gutman, while the vice-presidents were Hilel Roth, Mozes Lehrman, Ignațiu Fogel, Lazar Farakas, Alexandru Smuk, Erno Fish and Kalman Kahan.

The leadership of the Jewish population was not the only bone of contention between the community and committee. If the committee wanted the Zionist activity to stop and the reduction in the number of those who emigrated to Palestine or the western countries, the community, led by rabbi Moses Teitalbaum, was in favour of emigration and argued that those who stayed in the country had the duty to support those who chose emigration. Rabbi Moses Teitelbaum’s influence is seen especially after the establishment of the state Israel when the majority of the Jews in Maramureș chose to emigrate and settled in Israel.

After the 1949 Decree Law 589, when the Orthodox, Neolog, Status quo ante and Sephardic communities were united under the umbrella of the Mosaic Cult, the community lost its influence completely, its place being taken by the JDC. The newly established community was reorganised on the basis of the Jewish Communities’ Statute, a document that can be seen to this day at the headquarters of the Sighet Community. The failure of the community regime to assimilate the Jewish population can also be seen in the case of Sighetu Marmăției. If, according to the 1948 census,

there were 2308 Jews living in the town, their number dropped to 1381 in 1956, to 159 in 1966; following the period of emigrations, in 2008 there were only approximately 20 Jews living there.

The case of Sighetu Marmației is a small-scale reflection of the Jews' situation all over Northern Transylvania. After surviving the Nazi extermination camps, the Jews returned to their native places hoping for a better future. In the first post-war years, they tried to rebuild the Jewish society that existed before the war and regarded the new regime as an ally in this attempt. A part of the Jews who returned to Sighetu Marmației could no longer imagine their lives according to the old patterns and chose to emigrate. The number of Jews who emigrated to Israel and to Western countries increased once it became evident that the communist regime did not wish to acknowledge the Jews as a nation in its own right and to integrate the Jews in the socialist society.