

## A FEW CONSIDERATIONS ON THE JEWS IN DOBRUDJA PROVINCE DURING THE OTTOMAN RULE

Natalia Midvichi

**Abstract:** For centuries the cultural diversity of Romanian Dobrudja province has made a big impression on foreigners from all over the world. In this context, the Jewish element influenced the survival of Dobrudja's ethnic mosaic during the Ottoman rule, also contributing to the social and economic development of the province for almost four centuries. Although briefly documented, generally by travelers' memoirs, the main Jewish communities that lived in Ottoman Dobrudja can still be singled out. However, these considerations do not exclude the Jewish diaspora's continuity or development in other parts of the province, yet unattested.

**Key words:** Dobrudja, Ottoman conquest, population structure, Jews

**Cuvinte cheie:** Dobrogea, cucerirea otomană, structura populației, evreii

Despite numerous military conflicts with the neighbouring territories, the Ottoman rule in Dobrudja (1417/1484-1878) also had its peaceful moments that influenced the province's economic development, which was strictly related to the social progress<sup>1</sup>. In this context, the Dobrudjan province turned into an important place of trade and crafts and centre of monetary circulation, playing an essential part in the Jews' settlement or transit through this region in increasing numbers.

Motivated by trade opportunities, as the Ragusans, Greeks and Armenians, or by economic, religious or nationalist shifts, as the Russians, Bulgarians and Germans, in time, the Jewish population settled in is characterised by the cohabitation of the Sephardic element, whose presence here intensified as a result of the great persecutions in the Middle Ages (12<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> centuries) and the Ashkenazi element (native of Poland, Hungary, Russia), which entered the Romanian area since the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

The Ottoman rule in this province is poorly documented in the sources preserved on the Romanian territory. Consequently, this is also reflected on any testimonies regarding the Jewish presence in Dobrudja at that time. Analyzing the few of sources referring to the Jews in Dobrudja – we hereby underline the fact that an investigation of the Turkish or Bulgarian archives would have improved the present study – we notice that they are mostly due to the foreign travelers who crossed the province in their way to Constantinople or back, on political or religious missions. Thus, based on these sources, we were able to draw up a repertoire of the main Jewish communities who lived in Dobrudja during the Ottoman domination.

Chronologically, the oldest information about the Jewish presence in Dobrudja during the Ottoman rule mentions Chilia in the second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Initially a fortress of Byzantine origins<sup>2</sup>, Chilia maintained its strategic role even after the Ottoman conquest, as the Ottoman garrison in Chilia had to supervise the merchant ships sailing on the Danube River in exchange for an imperial passport (*teşkere*) and their supplying with weapons and cereals<sup>3</sup>. In

---

<sup>1</sup> I thank Professor V. Spinei for his helpful suggestions on writing this article.

<sup>2</sup> Giurescu 1997, 220.

<sup>3</sup> *Călători străini*, VI, 444-445.

this context, the Ottoman administration granted the monopoly for wine trade between the lands of Poland, Russia and the south (Morea, Crete and Trebizond) to a Levantine Jew called Joseph Nasi<sup>4</sup>, who would later become famous for his fortune and political status<sup>5</sup>.

In the same period, there was the similar case of Chaim Cohen from Constantinople, another Jewish merchant who had signed a contract with Polish carters for the transportation of certain goods from Poland to Chilia, crossing Moldova and back<sup>6</sup>. Thus, Chilia was a very important customs for collecting import duties on wine barrels and played a significant part in easing transit trade; Jews like Joseph Nasi and Chaim Cohen had a considerable contribution to it.

In mid 17<sup>th</sup> century, according to Evlya Celebi's notes, Chilia counted many *merchants and slave seekers*, and was a rich city, with many inns and *500 stalls for all kind of guilds*<sup>7</sup>. Such details don't confirm nor exclude the possibility that a considerable number of Jews were living inside this fortress' walls, among Walachians, Moldavians, Greeks, Ragusans or Russians.

This presumption is certainly confirmed by Giovanni Battista di Burgo's notes. While returning from a journey to Walachia and Moldova back to Constantinople in 1686, he traveled with a group of Dutch merchants who owned a warehouse at Galați and did trade with Chilia. On this occasion, while visiting Chilia – the terminus point for trade between the West and the Levant, the author found out about the Jewish origin of the Dutchmen's correspondent<sup>8</sup> and, after meeting him, the entire group obtained permission to cross Dobrudja. Such information is of great importance because it underlines the Jewish merchants' secondary utility, that of serving as mediators and translators for the Ottoman authorities.

The development of a consistent Jewish community in Chilia was documented several decades later in the studies of Aubry de la Motraye. In 1711, during one of his many journeys to the Romanian principalities, he crossed Dobrudja and the South of Basarabia in the company of Baron Fabrice and noticed that Chilia had *numerous Turks, Jews, Greeks and several Armenians*<sup>9</sup>. For this matter – and we underline the second position of the Jewish population on this enumeration – I'm inclined to believe that the Jews' prosperity was rather obvious in this city and that they had gained a social status recognised even by the Ottoman administration.

The Jewish presence is also documented in Isaccea, but only since the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Despite the alternating moments of decay and revival, during the Ottoman rule, Isaccea maintained its strategic feature, as the easiest place to cross the Danube – for this, the Turks named it *sag kol* or the right branch, the right side way<sup>10</sup>. At the same time, Isaccea acquired a particular economic significance, characterised by an increasing harbour activity, due both to the building of several supplying deposits and the city's subscribing on the Balkan route to Constantinople<sup>11</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> Inalcik 1996, 238; Sugar 1996, 265.

<sup>5</sup> Gaining the title of Duke of Naxos and Cyclades, Joseph Nasi enjoyed great influence with Sultan Selim II, who even offered him the throne of Wallachia (Solomovici 2001, 66; Singer, Kuller, Geller 2000, 103-105.

<sup>6</sup> Singer, Kuller, Geller 2000, 104; Eskenasy 1995, 50.

<sup>7</sup> *Călători străini*, VI, 446; V, 411.

<sup>8</sup> *Călători străini*, VII, 569-570.

<sup>9</sup> *Călători străini*, VIII, 521.

<sup>10</sup> Mateescu 1999, 68.

<sup>11</sup> This "trans-Balkan road" used to cross through Babadag, Carasu and Bazargic (Popescu 1995, 261).

The Jewish element in Isaccea is documented around 1677-1678, by Ioan Gniński, the Helm Palatine's messenger. While passing through the Danubian city on mission to Sultan Mehmed IV, the Polish herald wrote down several essential notes on Isaccea's ethnic structure, stating that *most of its inhabitants are Greeks, Armenians, Bulgarians, Jews and Turks* and then adding that *there are many stalls for goods, however poor*<sup>12</sup>. In conclusion, the Jewish presence in Isaccea may be explained by the town's commercial character, due to its geographical location.

However, considering the accounts around 1641 of Catholic bishop Petru Bogdan Bakšić that in most of the Danubian harbours the customs-house officers were Jewish (he was referring to the harbours in the vicinity of Walachia<sup>13</sup>), it's likely to believe that Jewish customs-house officers operated in Dobrudjan Danubian harbours, too.

Besides Isaccea, Măcin was another important defensive and transit point in northern Dobrudja, as mentioned by the historical documents about the bridges built here for the Ottoman armies to cross to Moldova in the 15<sup>th</sup> -17<sup>th</sup> centuries. In time, the situation of this border point between the Ottoman Empire and Christianity evolved both economically and socially; thus, two centuries later, in 1846, the French engineer Xavier Hommaire de Hell noted in his voyage the presence of a *mixture of picturesque races*: Romanians, Jews, Cossacks, Russians and Greeks<sup>14</sup>.

Among the Black Sea ports, Mangalia was one of the most important Pontic centres during the Ottoman domination, mainly due to cereal transports to Constantinople<sup>15</sup>. Around 1653, Turkish traveler Evlya Celebi noticed Mangalia's complex administrative situation and particularly its commercial character, describing it as a prosperous trade city counting *almost 300 shops near the harbour and elsewhere*, inhabited immigrant merchants. Thus, among a flourishing population consisting at that time of many Lazi (old Greek colonists settled on the Eastern Black Sea shore and converted to Islamism), a very important Jewish community seems to have developed here, as the traveller mentions the Muslim laws created to solve fairly the disputes between Muslims and Jews.

*There is a joke the Lazi tell to someone who can't go to Kaaba: "You fool, go to Mangalia, which is Kaaba of all wanderers and of the poor". This is how much the Lazi respect this city. There are also many Greeks and Jews, but day or night, the town's law courts are full of disputes between the Lazi and Jews. In Mangalia, if a Lazi slaps a Jew, then it's certain that the one who gave the slap will be punished according to the Shariah*<sup>16</sup>.

The presence of such laws does not prove that the Jews were favoured compared to the other subjects of the Empire but it underlines the impartiality of the Muslim Law. Although it is only mentioned in this context, the law was certainly applied in the other Dobrudjan kadiats as well, just like in every province of the Ottoman Empire.

In 1595, Ragusan trader Paolo Giorgi mentioned that the towns of Constanța, Mangalia, Kara-Harman and Tuzla from the Dobrudjan West-Pontic coast were inhabited by an ethnically

<sup>12</sup> *Călători străini*, VII, 364.

<sup>13</sup> Bitoleanu 1982, 547.

<sup>14</sup> Rareș 1934, 63-64.

<sup>15</sup> *Călători străini*, III, 392, 397.

<sup>16</sup> *Călători străini*, VI, 380.

diversified population<sup>17</sup>. Although he didn't provide more details, we could assume from his statement that the Jewish were also present in Constanța.

Despite the lack of documentation for the 15<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries regarding the Jewish community in Constanța, however doctor Camille Allard noted the same population diversity at the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. While accompanying the French army in the Crimean war (1853-1855), he had the opportunity to spend several months in Dobrudja<sup>18</sup>. Thus, talking about engineer Léon Lalanne's mission in 1855 to build a road from Constanța to Rasova, the French doctor noticed that this initiative had attracted *all the nations of the Orient*, among which he mentioned the Jews, Russians, Cossacks, Turks, Bulgarians and Armenians<sup>19</sup>.

But the stability of the Jewish element in this city is more clearly proven by the construction of the two synagogues: one of them dedicated to the Sephardic rite (*for the Spanish Jews*) and built in 1866<sup>20</sup> on the land donated by Ismail Kemal Bey<sup>21</sup>, while the second one is dedicated to the Ashkenazi (*for the Jews called Polaks*), built in 1872<sup>22</sup>, according to the firman of Sultan Abdul Aziz<sup>23</sup>.

Babadag was another flourishing urban center in the province. There are few references (dating as late as the 18<sup>th</sup> century) to the Jews in Babadag, but the Jewish temples stand as proof of their increased presence here in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. On mission to Constantinople at the end of 1709, Swedish reverend Michael Eneman wrote that in Babadag there was a great number of Jews living together with the Christians<sup>24</sup>. This demographic situation was most likely due to the new status Babadag gained in 1677-1678, as the new capital of Silistra sangeak<sup>25</sup>. However, considering that Babadag was a very important foreign trade junction, situated on the great commercial routes between Constantinople and northern Europe, Jewish traders were definitely present in this region in earlier centuries, too, even if only in transit.

As far as Tulcea is concerned, the historical sources published so far don't explicitly mention the Jews' presence here during the 15<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries. However, Carol Feldman's researches on Tulcea's Jewish community reveal us the presence of Jewish temples in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Thus, the first synagogue in Tulcea is dated to 1843; afterwards, two more synagogues were built – in 1855 and 1860; a Jewish school for the study of the Tora<sup>26</sup> also opened in 1860.

These actions taken during the Ottoman administration are proof of the increased number of Jews in Tulcea<sup>27</sup> and Doctor Wilhelm Hamm's testimony from the second half of

<sup>17</sup> *None of these cities is populated only by Turks or Christians (Călători străini, III, 392).*

<sup>18</sup> Danesco 1903, 15.

<sup>19</sup> Cioroiu, 1996, 28-29.

<sup>20</sup> Ionescu 1904, 647.

<sup>21</sup> Stan 2008, 415.

<sup>22</sup> Ionescu 1904, 647.

<sup>23</sup> Stan 2008, 415.

<sup>24</sup> Karadja 1929, 369; Singer, Kuller, Geller 2000, 111.

<sup>25</sup> Bărbuleanu 1992, 47.

<sup>26</sup> Feldman 2004, 26-28.

<sup>27</sup> Around mid 19<sup>th</sup> c. an important role inside the Jewish community of Tulcea was played by Avram Ellman, the wealthiest trader in the city, who would also become member of the City Hall Counsel and President of the Hebrew Community (Feldman 2004, 27-28).

the 19<sup>th</sup> century confirmed they lived together with Greeks, Bulgarians, Italians, Germans in a greater number than the Serbs and Hungarians<sup>28</sup>.

Several modern researchers also paid special attention to Dobrudja, providing new information on the presence and continuity of the Mosaic element in this province to the end of the Ottoman administration.

Before 1877, the most important information on Dobrudja's ethnic groups was provided by agricultural expert Ion Ionescu de la Brad, who had been asked by the Ottoman authorities of Constantinople to start, together with topographer Gr. Ioranu, a systematic study on the province<sup>29</sup>, consisting of an economic and agricultural evaluation. According to their calculations, the 388 settlements studied in 1850 and belonging to the kadiats of Tulcea, Isaccea, Măcin, Hârșova – all included in Tulcea sangeak; Baba (Silistra County), Kiustenge, Mangalia, Balcic, Bazargic (Varna County) – included in Silistra sangeak, counted approximately 150.000 inhabitants of 12 different nationalities. The study counted 119 Jewish families, contradicting Mihail Czajkowski, who believed that there were 2,500 Jews in Dobrudja in 1841, *who fled Russia, most of them deserters from the Russian army*<sup>30</sup>. According to Ion Ionescu de la Brad's study, the Jews lived mainly in Tulcea, Sulina, Constanța and Măcin, but also in villages, where 140 Jewish houses were counted<sup>31</sup>.

Viscount Alfred of Caston, an eye witness to the events that took place in Tulcea in 1877, published later a brochure on Dobrudja's multiethnicity. Starting with the non-Muslim inhabitants of this province, the French traveler analysed the structure of the population in the „Counties” of Tulcea, Măcin, Constanța, Babadag, Cernavodă and Sulina, providing the number of 228 Jews<sup>32</sup>, which in fact indicates the number of Jewish families that probably lived in the above mentioned Counties.

When former Tulcea consul M. Bielserkovitsch was appointed governor of Dobrudja, he ordered the elaboration of several statistics, also known as *The Bielserkovitsch Regulations*<sup>33</sup>. Unfortunately, the new Russian government (1877-1878) corresponded to the former Ottoman administration of Tulcea sangeak, so *The Regulations* included only the northern Dobrudja, most of the present day Tulcea County. Consequently, the Russian statistics were aimed at Tulcea, Chilia, Mahmudia, Isaccea, Măcin, Hârșova, Babadag, Constanța, Medgidia, Sulina, and registered a total of 222 Jewish families, which was less than the number of Bulgarian, Russian, Greek and Armenian families<sup>34</sup>.

\*

\*                      \*

At the end of this study several conclusions must be drawn. First of all, the sources documenting of Jewish presence during the Ottoman Dobroudja don't completely explain their de facto situation. Chronologically, we didn't find any simultaneous reference on Jewish

---

<sup>28</sup> Iorga 1981, 631-635.

<sup>29</sup> Slăvescu 1943, 113; Bărbuleanu 1992, 53.

<sup>30</sup> Platon 1968, 212; Mateescu 1998, 64.

<sup>31</sup> Ursu 1998, 52.

<sup>32</sup> Cioroiu 1996, 29.

<sup>33</sup> Tafrali 1918, 113.

<sup>34</sup> Ponticus 1939, 48.

presence in different Dobrudjan urban centres; however, the Jews were certainly present in neighbouring centres, possibly in a lower number. Therefore, we might say that these references from foreign travelers are valuable precisely because they render the multiethnic character of the Dobrudjan places they visited.

Although there were more urban centres in Dobrudja under the Ottoman administration than mentioned above, due to lack of information strictly regarding the Jewish present there, we included only the centres where such details are mentioned. We believe that Babadag, Chilia, Isaccea, Mangalia, Măcin, Tulcea were home of the most important Jewish communities in Dobrudja, and it's important to notice that the Jews settled mainly along the Danube river, the main route of any regional or foreign trade. Nevertheless, we must also consider the province's geographical position at the border of the Ottoman Empire, making it possible for the Jews to preserve their traditional occupations unhindered by political changes.

### Bibliography

- Bărbuleanu, C. 1992, *Monografia oraşului Babadag*, Tulcea.
- Bitoleanu, I. 1982, *Unele date despre comunităţile negustoreşti din Dobrogea în timpul stăpânirii otomane*, AIIA Iaşi 19, 541-547.
- Cioroiu, C. 1996, *Etnii trăitoare alături de români în Dobrogea*, Analele Dobrogei, S.N. 2, 1, Constanţa, 26-33.
- Danescu, G. 1903, *Dobrogea. (La Dobroudja). Étude de géographie physique et ethnographique*, Bucarest.
- Eskenasy, V. (Ed.) 1995, *Izvoare şi mărturii referitoare la evreii din România<sup>2</sup>*, Federaţia Comunităţilor Evreieşti din România. Centrul pentru Studiarea Istoriei Evreilor din România, Bucureşti.
- Feldman, C. 2004, *De unde am venit...*, Bucureşti.
- Giurescu, C. C. 1997, *Târguri sau oraşe şi cetăţi moldovene din secolul al X-lea până la mijlocul secolului al XVI-lea*, Bucureşti.
- Inalcik, H. 1996, *Imperiul Otoman. Epoca clasică (1300-1600)*, Bucureşti.
- Ionescu, M. D. 1904, *Dobrogea în pragul veacului al XX-lea: geografia matematică, fizică, politică, economică şi militară*, Bucureşti.
- Iorga, N. 1981, *Istoria românilor prin călători*, Bucureşti.
- Karadja, C. I. 1929, *Le voyage de Michel Eneman de Bender à Constantinople en 1709*, RHSEE 6, 10-12, 365-372.
- Mateescu, T. 1998, *Evreii din oraşul Silistra în timpul stăpânirii otomane*, SAHIR 3, 62-91.
- Mateescu, T. 1999, *Din legăturile oraşului Isaccea cu teritoriile româneşti de la stânga Dunării până la 1877*, Analele Dobrogei 5, 2, 67-96.
- Platon, Gh. 1968, *Informaţii noi privind teritoriul şi populaţia Dobrogei în prima jumătate a secolului al XIX-lea*, AIIA Iaşi 5, 210-216.
- Ponticus 1939, *La Dobrodja. Coup d'œil sur son histoire et son caractere ethnique*, Bucarest.
- Popescu, A. 1995, *Circulaţia mărfurilor la Dunărea de Jos reflectată în Kanunname-le (a doua jumătate a secolului al XVI-lea)*, RevIst 6, 3-4, 255-278.
- Rareş, M. 1934, *Xavier Hommaire de Hell. Un călător prin Dobrogea în 1846*, Analele Dobrogei 15, 60-67.
- Rădulescu, A., Bitoleanu, I. 1998, *Istoria Dobrogei*, Constanţa.
- Singer, R., Kuller, H., Geller, M. 2000, *O istorie a evreilor din România în date*, I, *De la începuturi până la 1919*, Bucureşti.
- Slăvescu, V. 1943, *Correspondenţa între Ion Ionescu dela Brad şi Ion Ghica, 1846-1874*, Bucureşti.
- Solomovici, T. 2001, *România judaică. O istorie neconvenţională a evreilor din România. 2000 ani de existenţă continuă*, I, *De la începuturi şi până la 23 august 1944*, Bucureşti.
- Stan, F. 2008, *Incursiuni în istoria comunităţilor etnice dobrogene*, in Ciorbea V. (coord.), *Dobrogea 1878-2008. Orizonturi deschise de mandatul european*, Constanţa, 407-423.
- Sugar, P. F. 1996, *Southeastern Europe under Ottoman Rule 1354-1804*, in Treadgold D. W. (ed.), *A History of East Central Europe*, V, Seattle.

Tafrali, O. 1918, *La Roumanie Transdanubienne (La Dobroudja)*, Paris.

Ursu, N. 1998, *Considerații privind demografia Dobrogei din sec. XI-lea până la jumătatea sec. XIX-lea*, *Analele Dobrogei S.N.*, 4, 1, 45-55.

**Natalia Midvichi**  
*Universitatea "Al. I. Cuza" Iași*  
*Facultatea de Istorie*  
*B-dul Carol I, Nr.11,*  
*RO-700506 - Iași*