

# Romanian Jews in America: Early Immigrant Vignettes

by Vladimir F. Wertsman

Although Romanian immigrants to America appeared for the first time in the 1880 U.S. Census, in reality Romanian Jews had arrived much earlier, at least in the middle of the nineteenth century. According to historical documents, in 1860 a group of Romanian Jews had already established their first synagogue in New York City at 10 Hester Street in Lower Manhattan. The synagogue was later moved to 89 Rivington Street in the same neighborhood, adopting the name of First Roumanian-American Congregation, Shaarey Shamoyim (the Hebrew name for Gates of Heaven). It is still in existence, with a seating capacity of over 1,600 people, and it has been recognized as a historical landmark. Many leading cantors and musicians came out of this synagogue, including the prominent opera singers Jan Pierce and Richard Tucker.

However, the first mass immigration of Romanian Jews to America (about 40,000) took place between 1880 and 1910. The majority came with families. Many—men, women, and children—worked long hours (10–12 hours per day, 6 days a week) in factories or home sweatshops. Some specialized as pants makers; others were peddlers with pushcarts; still others painted apartments, baked bread, or had small “candy stores” (variety stores). The majority spoke Yiddish and Romanian in their homes, but their children quickly learned English in U.S. schools. Many immigrants used the Seward Park branch library of the New York Public Library at 192 East Broadway. Boys and girls attended vocational school to become skilled workers and earn better wages.

Despite their difficult lives, Romanian Jews enjoyed dining, drinking wine, singing, and dancing; they recalled their land of origin in a popular Yiddish song called “Rumanye, Rumanye,” which entered the repertoire of many cantors. The immigrants read Romanian and Yiddish newspapers and attended a Romanian Jewish theater and an opera house on

the Lower East Side. Among the famous performers there were comedian Sigmund Mogalesco and Joseph Latteiner, who had a romantic music carnival. Romanian Jews established their own organizations: Romanian American Brotherhood (1884) and United Romanian Jews of America (1908), followed by a Romanian Jewish Emancipation Committee. Romanian Jewish believers mostly belonged to the Orthodox strain of Judaism; there were also small Hasidic groups.

The young Romanian Jewish immigrants who were born in Romania before World War I and came to America with their parents integrated themselves in the mainstream of American life in spite of the challenges of immigration and the living conditions in their new home. They did so through college/university education or, in many cases, through self-education. By means of their talent and ingenuity they distinguished themselves in a variety of fields during the first half of the twentieth century.

## The Arts

**Abraham Harriton** (b. 1893 in Bucharest): noted landscape and figure painter, represented in permanent collections of American and Israeli museums as well as private collections; served in the U.S. Army in World War II.

**Norbert Horowitz** (b. 1909, in Cernauti): Yiddish language actor and author of radio scripts as well as the book *Yiddish Art After World War II*.

**Max Jacobs** (b. 1888, in Braila): composer and conductor of several American symphonic orchestras; collected a unique library of symphonic music, including standard and rare works of the last five centuries.

**Romanian Journal of International Affairs.** Special Issue, 2003. Vol. IX. *Romanians Abroad: Thoughts, Reflections, Feelings, History, Suggestions, Proposals.* Bucharest: Romanian Institute of International Studies "Nicolae Titulescu." 291 pp.

Published under the auspices of Romania's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, this issue has a special historical significance—it is the first journal in Romania's history (monarchic, communist, postcommunist governments) devoted entirely to Romanian communities outside their land of origin. A product of 50 Romanian contributors, the essays contain information on Romanians living in Albania, Argentina, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Canada, Cyprus, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, New Zealand, Serbia & Montenegro, Spain, Switzerland, Ukraine, United Kingdom, United States, and Venezuela. In addition, there are two important documents included: Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, adopted by states of the Council of Europe; and the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages.

Essays vary in length, from two to more than ten pages. Some describe the history of Romanians in their adopted country; others deal with organizations, noted personalities, achievements, and aspirations; only a few include official census figures on the size of the Romanian population. The common denominator of all writings is pride in the Romanian ancestry and heritage and the desire for closer relations with Romania.

This volume is useful for reference purposes in academic, public, and special libraries with collections on Romania and Romanians, taking into account that the majority of essays and the appended documents are in English. A few are in French, Spanish, or German.

Despite the publication's merits, it is hoped that a new edition—stimulated by further research—will be more comprehensive, incorporating information on people of Romanian heritage living in Ireland, Israel, Macedonia, Russia, Sweden, and other countries for which there are already known research materials, both in Romanian and in other languages, as well as a significant number of immigrants from Romania. Also desirable are a common methodology for all contributors, bibliographic sources at the end of essays, and thorough proofreading to avoid typographical errors and omissions.

**Moissaye Marans** (b. 1902, in Chisinau): prominent sculp-

tor; member of the American National Academy of Design, American Academy of Fine Arts; recipient of numerous awards. His work is reproduced in art books and national magazines and newspapers.

**Moyshe Oysher** (b. 1907, in Lipcani): cantor in leading American synagogues; as a concert artist, staged several tours and appeared in several motion pictures including *The Cantor's Son*, *Yankel der Schmidt*.

**Edward G. Robinson** (b. 1883, in Bucharest): outstanding and prominent actor who appeared in dozens of Hollywood movies; gathered one of the largest and finest collections of records and paintings. An accomplished linguist, he was proficient in Spanish, Italian, French, German, Hebrew, Romanian, and Russian.

## Education

**Solomon F. Bloom** (b. 1903, in Harlau): professor of modern history at Brooklyn College, City University of New York; author of books and articles on modern Western civilization.

**Emanuel Gamoran** (b. 1895, in Balti): distinguished educator and guest lecturer in several American and foreign universities; author of books and articles on Hebrew and religious education; leading figure in professional organizations focused on Jewish education.

**Isac Leon Kandel** (b. 1881, no birthplace given): professor of education at Teachers College, Columbia University; editor of encyclopedias and professional journals; author of *The History of Education*, *Comparative Education*, and other texts.

**Paul Klapper** (b. 1885, no birthplace given): president of Queens College, City University of New York, 1935–1952, after serving as professor of education and dean of the School of Education; author of books and articles on methods of education.

**Arnold Noah Lowan** (b. 1898, in Yassy): professor of physics at Yeshiva University in New York; consultant for Naval Research Laboratories and fellow at the Institute for Advanced Studies in Princeton, New Jersey.

**Itzhak Sankowsky** (b. 1908, in Chisinau): teacher of art at the Museum of Fine Arts and Allan Lane Art Center, Merion, Pennsylvania; teacher of art in high schools; recipient of prizes for paintings on Jewish themes.

**Morris Scherago** (b. 1895, in Roman): professor of bacteriology and head of the Department of Bacteriology at the University of Kentucky; visiting professor at various American and foreign universities; active in professional organizations.

**Jacques Schnier** (b. 1898, in Constanta): psychoanalyst and educator of arts; served as captain in the U.S. Army during World War II and as a seaman during World War I.

**Shalom Spiegel** (b. 1899, in Stanesti de Jos): professor of medieval letters at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America; taught also in Israeli universities; published books on Jewish prophets; received several professional awards.

## Engineering

**Benedict Cohn** (b. 1913, in Bucharest): engineer, aerodynamicist, chief of the Southern California engineering office of Boeing for over 20 years; responsible for aerodynamic design and wind tunnel development of Boeing Sea Ranger, B-29 and B-50 Superfortresses, Stratojet, and many other military craft.

**Melach Joseph Nusim** (b. 1881, in Vaslui): mechanical engineer, consultant on steam turbine and centrifugal compressors; worked for General Electric, Westinghouse, and other prestigious firms.

## Law

**Jacob H. Berkowitz** (b. 1885, in Yassy): after admission to the New York State Bar, worked as a special investigator on school health problems and child welfare legislation.

**Gustave Louis Goldstein** (b. 1899, in Bacau): lawyer in private practice who served as Israeli honorific consul for several western states in the United States; held leading positions in professional and Jewish-American organizations.

## Medicine

**Charles Davison** (b. 1891, in Moinesti): neuropsychiatrist, neuropathologist, and educator; worked for several hospitals in Pittsburgh and taught at Columbia University; contributed more than 100 articles to medical journals.

**Louis Finger** (b. 1901, in Cernautzi): Assistant clinical professor at Albert Einstein Medical School in New York; worked for various American and German hospitals; received commendations from Presidents Roosevelt and Truman for service on draft boards.

**Leib Golub** (b. 1905, no birthplace given): gynecologist who worked for several hospitals in Philadelphia; author of articles on pelvic malignancy and dysmenorrhea.

**Leon Kolb** (b. 1890, in Cernautzi): Associate clinical professor of pharmacology and therapeutics at Stanford University Medical School; practiced medicine in Austria; collected graphic arts and rare Bibles; wrote two novels.

**David Lehr** (b. 1910, in Sadagura): professor at New York Medical College, specialized in internal medicine and pharmacology; internationally known for work with sulfonamides; also taught at universities in Austria and Sweden.

**Michael Lucacer** (b. 1899, in Soroca): phthisiologist (specialist in chest disorders); worked for American and Italian hospitals; published more than 60 papers in U.S. and foreign medical journals.

**George Ornstein** (b. 1892, no birthplace given): specialist in lung diseases; professor at New York Polyclinic Medical School and Hospital and New York Medical College; served as captain in the U.S. Army Medical Corps and published more than 70 articles.

**Hyman Rappaport** (b. 1899, in Chisinau): pediatrician; worked for various New York hospitals and held leadership positions in professional organizations.

**Harold Nathan Segall** (b. 1897, in Yassy): cardiologist; worked for hospitals in Montreal, Canada; author of numerous articles on congenital heart disease, anatomy of circulation in the liver, and heart sounds and murmurs.

**Israel Spanier Wechsler** (b. 1886, no birthplace given): neurologist and professor of neurology at Columbia University; authored textbooks; served as consultant for the U.S. Selective Service System during World War II.

## Publishing

**Leon Daniel** (b. 1901, in Yassy): editor and journalist specializing in photojournalism; worked for the *New York Times*, Associated Press, and Overseas Press Club.

**Joseph Kissman** (b. 1889, in Paltinoasa): editor and author in both English and Yiddish; published studies on the history of Romanian Jews during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; contributed to Jewish encyclopedias and periodicals.

**Hildegard Lewy** (b. 1903, in Cluj): specialist in the history of religion and the languages and history of the Near East; author of numerous books on the Nuzian feudal system, the Persian chronology, the origin and significance of the Magen David, and other topics.

## Religion

**Joseph Hager** (b. 1900, in Radauti): rabbi at Wall Street Synagogue, New York; editor of the *Synagogue Light* in the 1930s; founder of yeshivas in the New York metropolitan area.

**Max Nussbaum** (b. 1908, Suceava): rabbi at Temple Israel in Hollywood, California; member of numerous religious organizations; author of books on philosophy, nationalism, Israel, and other topics.

**Melech Schachter** (b. 1913, in Bucovina): rabbi at Congregation Adath Jeshurun, Bronx, New York; lecturer of Talmud at Hebrew University in New York and of history and Tanach at Teachers Institute in Philadelphia.

**Harry E. Schwartz** (b. 1899, in Chisinau): rabbi at Congregation Beth Israel, Hempstead, New York; served as chaplain to the Hempstead and West Hempstead Fire Departments.

## Trade & Industry

**Saul Abrams** (b. 1893, in Bucharest): senior partner of Rhode Island Wholesale Grocery Company; co-founder of the Providence Jewish Community Center; director of the Jewish Home for the Aged; member of other Jewish organizations.

**Manuel Aronowitz** (b. 1895, in Vaslui): involved in real estate, insurance, and apparel businesses in Tampa, Florida; leader in various Jewish organizations.

**Oscar M. Lazarus** (b. 1887, in Yassy): formed a partnership with his brothers and became president of the Benrus Watch Company; active in various Jewish philanthropic organizations.

**Samuel Lemberg** (b. 1897, in Chisinau): real estate mogul; became president of Midwood Management Company in New York; served as president of the New York Real Estate Security Exchange; member of various Jewish philanthropic and welfare organizations.

**Ben Milberg** (b. 1901, in Raducani): manufacturer; president of M.G.M. Factors Corporation; member of various Jewish welfare and charitable organizations.

**Ira Rosenzweig** (b. 1897, no birthplace given): leather goods merchant; owner of R & K Leather Goods and Novelty Company, New York; chief sponsor of a Jewish school for girls and a Jewish hospital.

**Meyer Ruchman** (b. 1901, in Hotin): executive, owner of M. Ruchman Company in Fort Wayne, Indiana, and president of Indiana Rolling Mill Baling Company as well as of Wabash Smelting Company in Fort Wayne; active in civic and philanthropic organizations.

**Charles Sontag** (b. 1895, in Mihaileni): executive; supervisor of state beverage stores in Pennsylvania; active in various civic and philanthropic organizations.

**Jules Ziegler** (b. 1900, no birthplace given): theatrical agent; made significant contributions to the American theater by discovering and introducing to the public new talents. 📖

## Bibliography

*American Jews, Their Lives and Achievements: A Contemporary Biographical Record.* New York: American Jewish Literary Foundations, 1958. 2 vols.

Hapgood, Hutchins. *The Spirit of the Ghetto: Studies of the Jewish Quarter of New York.* 1905; new edition, 1965.

Kissman, Joseph. "The Immigration of Romanian Jews up to 1914." *YIVO Annual of Jewish Science*, vols. II-III, 1947-48, pp. 160-179.

Rischin, Moses. *Promised City: New York's Jews, 1870-1914.* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1962.

Sanders, Ronald. *The Lower East Side: A Guide to Its Jewish Past.* New York: Dover, 1979.

Wolfe, Gerard. *The Synagogues of New York's Lower East Side.* New York: New York Univ. Press, 1978.

**Vladimir F. Wertsman** is chair of the Publishing and Multicultural Materials Committee of the Ethnic and Multicultural Information Exchange Round Table (EMIERT) of the American Library Association and the 2003 winner of the David Cohen/EMIERT Award for scholarly work in multicultural librarianship. Born in Romania and trained as a lawyer, he immigrated to the United States in 1962.

got diversity?  
Join NAME!



The

National

Association for Multicultural Education. . .  
is the primary organization advocating for educational  
equity and social justice, through education  
that is multicultural, at all levels of education.

save the date!

NAME's 15th Annual International Conference

November 9-13th, 2005

Hyatt Regency Atlanta, GA

[www.nameorg.org](http://www.nameorg.org)