

# Alyiah<sup>1</sup> of Romanian Jews – socio-statistical facts (historical approach)

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## Abstract

*This paper addresses the issue of alyiah of Romanian Jews to Israel, before and after its establishment. It discusses the topic of emigration by analyzing the socio-political factors that determined and influenced it, and by employing a historical approach. The main emigration periods to be considered are: before the Second World War, during the WWII, and after the establishment of the Israeli state.*

## Keywords

alyiah; Romanian Jews; Second World War; Holocaust; Israel

## I. Introduction

Migration has been an important social issue in Israel for the past 50 years and even before, during the Yishuv<sup>2</sup> times.

In the case of Israel, migration has been considered a unique phenomenon for if migrants to other places try to find a new home in their destination, in the Israeli case Jews were seen as strangers in their countries of origin and through emigration, they found their home. The idea of uniqueness is also supported by the idea that Israel cannot be characterized like other countries by large-scale immigration, but only the immigration of Jews that was encouraged and facilitated while their integration was constantly supported.

The Law of Return of 1950 through which the policy of Jews alyiah to Israel was given an open door states that they have the natural right to return to their historic homeland and that every Jew has the right to settle in Israel and to immediately and automatically acquire Israeli citizenship upon arrival.

The Law of Blood, *jus sanguinis*, determines eligibility for citizenship by

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<sup>1</sup> Translated from Hebrew language by 'to ascent', it is the term defining the emigration of Jews from the diaspora to the land of Israel, before and after its establishment.

<sup>2</sup> This is the term referring to the body of Jewish residents in Palestine, before the establishment of the State of Israel.

means of ascriptive, ethnic-religious criterion based on identification that includes Jews, children and grandchildren of Jews and their nuclear families, even if there are non-Jews involved. This needs to be proved by means of written, documentary evidence or legal testimony.

The terminology used in the case of immigrating to Israel is *alyiah* or going up while the opposite, going down is *yerida*. These two concepts are widely used in Israel, in both the private and public discourse, while the term *hagira*, or migration, is not commonly used.

This complements the differences that exist between migration to Israel and migration to other countries.<sup>3</sup>

## II. Early emigration

Romanian Jewish emigration to Eretz Israel has a long history. The first documented experiences of this kind go back to the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century when the Chief-Rabbi of Bucovina, after short breaks, arrived to Tzfat – Safed, where his tomb is a place for pilgrimage nowadays.<sup>4</sup>

Since that day, the *alyiah* of Jews from Romania has been a continuous process characterized by different dynamics and processes.

At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, long before Theodor Herzl, in Romania, several associations for working the land of Eretz Israel were established. Their representatives participated in December 1881 in the first conference in the history of Zionism, which took place in Focsani (Romania).

Following that Conference, several caravans with emigrants-immigrants headed towards Eretz Israel, where they built the first settlements in the modern colonization, Ros Pina and Zichron Iacov, as well as others like Rison le-Zion, Iessud ha-Maale, and Tahla.<sup>5</sup>

In 1882, the emigrants (*olim*) from Moinesti and Barlad constituted an important part of an *alyiah* wave of that year, which in the history of Zionism was named second *alyiah* to Palestine.<sup>6</sup>

In the interwar period, the *Halutim*, those pioneers that were trained for working the lands, emigrated without particular obstacles, all governments being pro Zionist, considering their specific interests to get rid of as many Jews as possible.<sup>7</sup>

## III. Emigration during the Second World War<sup>8</sup>

The emigration of Jews from Romania in the early 1940s was considered a viable solution in the process of the ethnic cleansing objective. Therefore, in the 1940s the Romanian leadership was in favor of Jewish emigration.

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3 Judith Shuval, „Migration To Israel: The Mythology of Uniqueness”, *International Migration*, 36 (1) (1998): 3-5.

4 Radu Ioanid, *Răscumpărarea evreilor. Istoria acordurilor secrete dintre România și Israel*, (The Ransom of the Jews: The Story of Extraordinary Secret Bargain Between Romania and Israel), (Bucharest: Polirom, 2005), 20.

5 Ioanid, *Răscumpărarea*, 20.

6 Liviu Rotman, *Evreii din România în perioada comunistă, 1944-1965*, (The Jews in Communist Romania, 1944 – 1965), (Bucharest: Polirom, 2004), 89.

7 Rotman, *Evreii*, 21.

8 For more details please see Adina Babeș & Alexandru Florian, „The emigration of the Jews in the Antonescu Era”, *Holocaust. Studii și Cercetări* (Holocaust. Study and Research), vol. IV, no. 1 (5) (2012), respectively Adina Babeș, „Romanian Jewish Emigration in the 1940s”, *Holocaust. Studii și Cercetări* (Holocaust. Study and Research), vol. V, nr. 1(6) (2013).

Still, several other characteristics defined the emigration of Romanian Jews to Palestine: it depended on the international context (the German authorities were against emigration for it could have jeopardized their relations with the countries in the Middle East), it was under the influence of the geopolitical conditions (being supported by different Jewish associations, international organizations and organized by private companies), and Romania had its own position towards Jewish emigration adapted to the international context.

The state would show interest in solving the Jews' fate but only in discussions with representatives of foreign countries and international organizations. They were sensitive to the insecurity of travels for it could have led to a negative image of Romania in the international arena. That was because the boats used for emigration were in bad condition, overcrowded, and sometimes their navigation was not guaranteed, as most of the time it would take place under different flags (e.g. Bulgarian, Greek, and Turkish).

However, the Romanian authorities were also sensitive to the high amounts of money that could be collected if the emigration was to take place under its responsibility and not that of private companies. Therefore, they would do their best to bring those transportations under their approval, which implied that they would receive the money the Jews were paying for the trip.

Since the establishment of the National Legionary State in September 1940, the Jewish leaders in Romania requested the state's support for emigration. The letter they addressed received a positive response; the state's authorities accepted the departure of Jews who had the adequate papers.

Later that year, Ion Antonescu issued a draft Order for creating a specialized directorate within the Ministry of Interior that would deal specifically with Jewish emigration. The Legionary Rebellion of January 1941 impeded the actual implementation of that order.

On the day Romania entered the war, a draft law concerning the Jews emigration was issued. Yet, that document remained an intention for when the war came the extermination of Jewish population was a more powerful tool in getting rid of the Jews. The next year, in July 1942, during the Meeting of the Economic Council, a debate arose concerning the necessity and possibility that the Jews' emigration be controlled by the state.

In the year of 1944, when the war had a clear turn in favor of the Allies, Mihai Antonescu declared himself, without yet taking concrete actions, in favor to the Jewish emigration.

During the entire World War II, the emigration of Jews to Palestine was a risky solution. More, it was a costly operation and it took place only due to the efforts of the Jewish organizations. The Romanian authorities considered it an important way of acquiring financial resources and did not consider emigration as an alternative to the „final solution“.

However, this was maybe the only solution at the time, and for some 3,000 Jews, it became a certainty. Unfortunately, for almost 1,000 of them it was their last trip.

#### **IV. Emigration after the Second World War**

In pre-war Romania, there were 757,000 Jews, only 300,000 were found in broken Romania in September 1944.

After the Second World War, Romania was the country in southeastern Europe with the largest number of Jews. The Jewish population who survived the Holocaust found that, with the coming of communism, its only salvation was immigration to Israel.

The next few lines will be dedicated to a short presentation of the Jewish population of Romania after the Second World War and the political context in which the immigration took place.

The several and continuous years of persecutions were followed by the coup d'état of August 23, 1944 that brought some hope for the surviving Jewish community in Romania, especially in the sense of restoration of civil rights, restitution of property, and reinstatement in their professional activity.

A decree-law issued on December 14, 1944 abolished „all the racial laws“ that have been previously enacted; however, even if that decree restored full citizenship to the Romanian Jews it failed to settle the status of Jewish refugees from the annexed territories.

That would in the end of 1946, after prolonged negotiations between the Ministry of Justice and the leaders of the Jewish community at the time. However, only on May 29, 1947, a decree, restoring citizenship to all Jews deprived of it through the discriminatory legislation during the Antonescu regime or by territorial changes was issued.<sup>9</sup>

If the first article of this Law specified that 'are and remain rescinded all the legislative measures that have been taken against the Jewish population', immediately after its enactment limitations and delays in implementing it would be noticed. For example, the evacuation of Jewish properties would be procrastinated by tenants, who took advantage of the racial laws and occupied a property, and eventually ended up remaining there.

More, some other Jewish properties that entered the usage of the state, and school cafeterias that operated there would never be returned to their rightful owners. All that produced significant stir within the Jewish community.

Other areas in which the Jews faced discrimination after the end of the war were related to citizenship, the assets of those that died or never returned the official status of descendants of pogroms and deportations victims, difficulties in recognition of diplomas, etc.<sup>10</sup>

They were isolated by the destruction of Jewish life, endangered by violent campaigns, and threatened by mounting anti-Semitism. At the same time, the State of Israel come into being and the unlimited Jewish immigration process started.

Right immediately after 1944 the aliyah of Romanian Jews to Israel was subject to the decision of the Joint Commission for Control in Romania that approved every person wishing to make aliyah. In fact, that Commission gave supervision over emigration to USSR. However, Romanian was an important source of Jews wishing to immigrate to Eretz Israel, that being explained by several visits of important political Jewish leaders to Romania.<sup>11</sup>

The Romania Jews emigration after 1945 was formed, according to Eliezer Frenkel, a Jewish lawyer who interviewed eleven prominent Romanians, by two categories of Jews wishing to emigrate.

The first category was composed of those who registered with Palestine Emigration Office, and were deprived of all means of livelihood. The second category included refugees and persons liberated from the concentration camps; they formed the largest number.<sup>12</sup>

Between 1945 and 1948, there was a restrictive period of emigration. Yet on October 21, 1945 the Red Cross National Society organized the first transportation of 1,000 Hungarian, Polish and Romanian Jews on Transylvania boat. Other Zionist organizations initiated the emigration of Jews in other parts of the world.

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9 Peter Meyer, Weinryb, D. Bernard, Duschinsky, Eugene, and Sylvain, Nicholas, (eds), *The Jews in the Soviet Satellites*, (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1953), 518.

10 Rotman, *Evreii*, 64-65.

11 Liviu Rotman, *Evreii*, 90-91.

12 Meyer, *The Jews*, 530-531.

On January 31, 1946, the approval for the immigration of 2,205 Jews to France and Mexico was asked, while on June 17 a similar request was addressed for 440 Jews to Costa Rica.

Some of those that immigrated to these countries and to many others would eventually choose to arrive in Israel. The general situation was of great difficulty for organizing the aliyah to Palestine.

Important illegal emigration waves took place that found its peak in 1946-1947. Many of those that emigrated between 1946 and 1948 were not allowed to enter Palestine that was under a British Mandate, being settled in Cyprus, where they would be put in camps. According to statistical data, approximately 23,000 Romanian Jews lived in Cyprus during those years.<sup>13</sup>

According to the figures published in 1947 by the Romanian section of the World Jewish Congress, the total Jewish population living in Romania<sup>14</sup> after 1947 was 428,000.<sup>15</sup>

It is interesting in mentioning here the changes the numbers of Jewish population in Romania went through and the causes for this. In 1944, it was estimated that the Jewish population was around 300,000, while in 1947 the numbers increased to 428,000.

The difference of around 100,000 came mostly from the Romanian Jews survivors from Transnistria, Hungarian and German camps, as well as the Jewish refugees from Northern Bucovina and Bessarabia. These are in fact the survivors of the 457,000 Jews living in Bessarabia, Bucovina and Transylvania. Added to this, the remaining 28,000 might have been refugees mainly from Poland and a certain number could be assigned to the natural increase.

By June 1947, the Jewish Telegraphic Agency reported that for emigration to Palestine were registered about 150,000 Jews, more than double compared to the 70,000 at the end of 1944. However, the number of those who emigrated legally or illegally from Romania in 1947 totally amounts to 40,000.<sup>16</sup>

In 1948, direct emigration was still permitted, but large sums of money needed to be paid for the issuance of passports and exit visas. At the end of 1948, the JDC insisted of having full control on emigration and excluded Zionist organizations and foreign Jewish agencies from this process.<sup>17</sup>

After the creation of the State of Israel, the aliyah from Romania went through good, difficult and very difficult periods. Still, the existence of a massive aliyah of Jewish population had certain consequences: it almost reduced to zero the Jewish population in Romania, ending more concretely a historical chapter of its presence in the country.

It influenced the social and economic dynamics in Romania, by definitely changing a certain environment where the Jews were an important component. Thirdly, this brought influence on Romania's international relations, with Israel, as well as with the Western world, the Arab states and USSR.<sup>18</sup>

The position of communist authorities regarding emigration immediately after the Holocaust, until the creation of the State of Israel was built on two important issues. The first one was ideological; the second one was a more practical one, strictly linked to the emigration process. The Romanian authorities nor banned the emigration, neither encouraged it; they had non-intervention policy and actions.<sup>19</sup>

The Jews were particularly interested in making aliyah and immediately after the enacting of the Israeli State, an internal document of the Jewish Democratic

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13 Meyer, *The Jews*, 90-9.

14 It is understood Romania less Southern Dobrudja, Northern Bucovina, and Bessarabia.

15 Meyer, *The Jews*, 516.

16 Meyer, *The Jews*, 516.

17 Meyer, *The Jews*, 548.

18 Rotman, *Evreii*, 89.

19 Rotman, *Evreii*, 92.

Committee, the Communist Party's tool in the Jewish community, mentioned several causes of emigration: the poor salaries, the peril of anti-Semitism, the easiness for girls to build a family in Israel, the fact that all the Jews were leaving the country, and the necessity to be with one's family.<sup>20</sup>

If one refers to Romania along with the popular interest in making aliyah, there was also Israel's interest in promoting Romanian Jews emigration. This is very well captured by the diplomatic documents of the time. On the June 9, 1948, Moshe Sharett, minister for foreign affairs in the provisional Israeli government of 1948, sent the telegram by which he asked Ana Pauker, at that time minister for foreign affairs of the Romanian government, to official recognize the State of Israel and its government.

On the June 11, 1948, Ana Pauker extended the official recognition by Romania of the State of Israel and its government. On the July 3, 1948, Ana Pauker responded again to Moshe Sharett and expressed the agreement of the Romanian Government for the establishment of the Legation of the State of Israel in Bucharest.

November 13, 1948 was the date when Mr. Reuven Rubin<sup>21</sup> received accreditation as the first representative of the State of Israel in Bucharest. Romania was one of the first countries to recognize Israel, and the only country in the communist Europe of the second part of the twentieth century to have continuous and uninterrupted relations with the State of Israel.

The next official documents between the two countries addressed the important issue of emigration. On the March 11, 1949, Moshe Sharett sent Ana Pauker a letter specifically addressing the issue of immigration. „But, one of the problems which deeply concern the Government is regarding the immigration of the Romanian Jews to Israel“.<sup>22</sup>

According to the data published by the Statistic Department of the Jewish Agency, 118,939 Jewish people emigrated from Romania during those years.<sup>23</sup>

Yet, in order to fully understand the situation in which the Jewish population of Romania was from 1948 to 1952, one must not ignore two determining factors: the international evolution of the Romanian Communist regime and the Soviet policy toward Israel.

The evolution of the communist regime in Romania followed the common pattern of all the satellite countries, the elimination of all opposing political groups and the purges of their own party. Although this purge was part of a campaign against „cosmopolitanism“ as going forward to the Soviet world, in its first phase, it did not imply the elimination of the Jews; this would be launched in May 1952, when it had a distinct anti-Jewish character.

The second factor is evidently the most complicated and important one. The emigration of Jews from Romania depended much on the Soviet Union's interests in consolidating a foothold on the eastern side of the Mediterranean, which reached its peak in 1947.

If the political situation affected the Jews in Romania, their economic activity started to be affected when in June 1948 the nationalization of the industry was proclaimed. About forty per cent of the Jewish population in Romania was engaged in commercial field, which means that around 140,000 persons were deprived of any source of regular income; this number included the children, housewives and elderly people.

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20 Rotman, *Evreii*, 98.

21 Reuven Rubin was born on November 13, in town in the southeast of Romania. He was the Israeli State representative in Romania since November 30, 1948 and until December 10, 1949.

22 Victor Bostinaru (coord), *România – Israel. 50 de ani de relații diplomatice, 1948 – 1969*, (Romania – Israel. 50 years of diplomatic relations, 1948-1969), vol. I, (Bucharest: Sylvi, 2000), doc. 4, 6.

23 Hachohen, Deborah, *Immigrants in Turmoil. Mass Immigration to Israel and its Repercussions in the 1950s and After*, (New York, Syracuse University Press, 2003), 267.



As an intermediate conclusion, it is obvious that the increasing number of Romanian Jews must have seen emigration as their only salvation in the 1948-1951 period.

The period of 1952 to 1957 was the darkest of the Romanian aliyah for that was the time when the communist regime imprisoned the leaders of the Zionist movement in Romania.<sup>24</sup>

Concerning the aliyah, a harsh anti propaganda developed; on the other hand, a pressure towards making aliyah increased. Yet, this was not the Communist Party's double politics, but a unique one having a public and a hidden purpose, that of decreasing the Jewish population in Romania.

This is supported by economic and material arguments like the existence of more jobs and living places as the Jews left. Still, the communist authorities were surprised by this phenomenon's proportions that they couldn't or didn't expect.

More, another reason for emigration freezing in 1952 was the effect of aliyah on the Romanian economy. In addition, the international arena, with the increasing anti-Semitic, anti-Zionist and anti-Israel environment did not favor Jews' aliyah to Israel. In a couple of years, this situation will become of full interdiction.<sup>25</sup>

The next eight years (1958-1966) were a period of revival of the aliyah with an average of 14,000 olim leaving per year. The following year, from 1967 to 1968, was a period of crises with an annual average of 550, while between 1969 and 1974 the annual average grew to 3,000 olim. The annual average decreased to 1,500 olim between 1975 and 1989, and between 1991 and 1994, the annual average was 500 olim.<sup>26</sup>

The statistical data allowed me to build a sociological portrait of the olim, by referring to three distinct periods, 1948-1951, 1969-1973 and 1983. One third of the Romanian Jews who immigrated to Israel between 1948 and 1951 were either less than 14 years old or over 60 years old.

Women emigrated in greater numbers than men did; most olim were married, followed statistically by widows and widowers. Their jobs were civil servants, tradesmen and simple workers; they settled mainly in Haifa, Tel-Aviv and the central areas of the country.<sup>27</sup>

The aliyah from 1969 to 1973 consisted mainly of 18 to 29 year old persons, although there were some who were over 55 years old. They were highly educated with an average of 10.6 years of schooling, of which one third had been to college. Religion was significant for only 20% of them with a considerable difference between the older people (over 65 years old) who had received a Jewish education and the young people (less than 30 years old) who had not. Academic and intellectual life was well represented while blue-collar workers were not.

Hebrew was for the majority of the olim the language of daily life and work in Israel. However, Romanian was the language of communication with family or friends. This was also relevant for their social life, which developed mainly among other Romanian olim, because only the young were open to olim from other countries. By the year 1983, the number of Romanian born olim was 283,000. Those using Hebrew grew, but still around 40% continued to speak Romanian at home. The predominant jobs among them were mainly in academia.<sup>28</sup>

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24 Carol Bines, *Din istoria imigrărilor în Israel, 1882-1995* (From the History of Jewish aliyah to Israel, 1882 – 1995), (Bucharest: Hasefer, 1998), 92.

25 Rotman, *Evreii*, 103-104.

26 Bines, *Din istoria*, 93-94.

27 Bines, *Din istoria*, 95-97.

28 Bines, *Din istoria*, 100-105.

## V. Conclusions

The immigration of Romanian Jews to (Eretz) Israel made the subject of several researches. The issue of their aliyah is addressed from many approaches: political, diplomatic, historical, sociological and statistical.

Bringing these approaches together could offer to the reader a broader and more coherent image of the Romanian Jews aliyah. This happened over many decades that covered almost the entire twentieth century, and even years before. Their emigration went through difficult and sometimes very difficult times and was subject to many political decisions and diplomatic negotiations. According to statistical data, by the end of the twentieth century, the number of Romanian olim in Israel was 283,000.

The emigration of Romanian Jews to Israel is documented since the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, being a continuous process since then. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Zionist ideology was the major push that determined important number of Jews to take the road to Erez Israel. In the horrendous years of the 1930s and 1940s, the emigration to Palestine was under the whims of authorities, their decisions, and influenced by the international context.

With the coming of communist regime, the emigration of Romanian Jews to Israel went through good, bad and very bad times, when it was completely banned. The communist authorities would very soon understand the economic prospects of Jewish emigration and would make their best to increase their benefits of this „business“.

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