

Aspects of the Interwar Activity of the Hebrew Women Association in Oradea

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THE JEWISH community of Bihor has been noted, over time, through a substantial contribution to the development of the economic, social and cultural area. The reliability, responsibility, practical sense, respect for the cultural and education are, in fact, just a few of the defining features of this ethnic group.

Like other ethnic groups, the Jews have sought, quite naturally, to interact with the societies in which they settled in the course of the historical time. They have acted consistently on multiple levels in those communities, a fact strongly highlighted even at the level of family nucleus.

The Jewish historiography has known lately a more pronounced closeness to the many facets of social and cultural life developed by the Jewish population in the collectivities they have become part of.

Knowledge of the cultural history of the Jews in the city on Crișul Repede River—beyond its fascinating and human, synchronic and diachronic side—is essential to understand the mechanism that facilitated the developing process of the society in this city located at the Western border of the country.

In terms of the Jews' relationships with the Oradea society, they fitted into the rules of tolerance and mutual respect. The city was, "by definition," multicultural, multiethnic and open. Akos Dutka said about these attributes that they had been fully implemented at the level of the civil society in this city on Crișul Repede River: "Oradea accepted everyone; [this town] loved the man of talent . . ." Szabó Dezső thought in the same terms: "there were in it [in the city] all the contradictions, the whole solidarity, the entire faction, all the germs that determine the future . . . because life here was cheerful and tireless."¹

The local Jewish population was able to build a good community life, a fact that can also be seen at the level of the cultural, religious and charitable associationism.

In this article, we intend to present the defining issues that marked the inter-war activity carried out in the community of Oradea by the *Hebrew Women's Association*, which fit in the whole assembly of the local female associationism.

During the interwar period, the women meetings acted in familiar directions (culture, education, religion, philanthropy), which developed and materialized in a more

compelling manner in the new social and political realities. The youth education (religious, economic, hygienic, domestic), the cultural development, the moral improvement of the individual, the social assistance were the basic pillars of the activity carried out by the women's meetings.

Therefore, the education of the younger generation based on those rules was a key goal for the Hebrew women in Oradea, as well.

A basic feature of the Jewish meetings, which were held during the interwar period, was their perpetuation in the second half of the 19th century, their constant and functional adjustment to the realities of the time, their fusion with the spirit of the community.²

One can retrieve these characteristics in the destiny of the meeting we are directing our attention to.

After the World War I, the Meeting confronted with a real touchstone of its capacity and vitality. The dramatic economic situation, subjected the effectiveness of the administrative leadership to a tough test. Even during the "great war," the Meeting managed, in critical conditions, to set up a tailoring workshop where female members made clothing for children whose parents had been conscripted to the front.

As a whole, the society was confused and pauperized following the World War. The morality was losing ground in the face of corruption, venality and sultry individualism; that is why the woman, regardless of ethnicity and religion, was called upon to engage in the economic, moral and cultural recovery of the postwar society, along with the main institutions of the State.

The Hebrew woman did not lack courage, determination, practical sense, altruism and compassion, in achieving such goals, intensively reported by the interwar time. Therefore, she was concerned to continue the implementation, in the middle of the community, of the charitable works and values in which she believed: the rigor, hard work and respect for religion and culture.

According to the documentary sources, the *Hebrew Women's Meeting in Oradea* was established in 1864-1865, when a group of women decided to gather weekly an amount of money up to two florins, in order to help the poor and sick women. Its first report on the work done for charity was also written during the year 1866. Following the call to the local Jewish community to embrace the goals of the meeting, the number of women members increased considerably, which resulted in fleshing out of some more consistent actions of this kind. The new conjuncture, otherwise favorable to such moves, led out the establishment, in 1888, of the statutes of the meeting (for its operation in legal terms), which were submitted by the Hungarian Ministry of the Interior for approval.³

The statutes provisions, grouped in 20 articles, were resumed, with small changes, in 1924. We do specify that most statutes of the associations and cultural meetings organized by the Jewish communities can be characterized as clear, accurate and dominated by a heavy democratic spirit.

The purpose of the Meeting was stated in the first article: "to help the poor households, in particular [of] those of female gender, with particular regard to the sick, those without any earnings, widows and orphans."⁴ They also aimed at organizing an orphanage for the Hebrew girls (actually it came through in the year 1906, this also func-

tioning in the interwar years) and founding as many similar establishments “through which to raise the morals of the girls and women of religion and the development of their ability to win.”⁵

The entire charitable and cultural activity was coordinated by the leadership of the Meeting, which consisted of the following: the Committee (made up of housewives, in general)—led by a President, two Vice Presidents, a Secretary, a Treasurer, a Controller, a Solicitor, three Censors and fifty women, to which they added the decision-making forums represented by the General Assembly (which debated the current issues, voted the budget and analyzed the final accounts) and the Ordinary Assembly.

The meeting had four categories of members: founders, ordinary, honorary and supporting members. Any Hebrew woman could become an ordinary member, being compelled to pay an annual fee of three florins. Any man or woman, regardless of religion or ethnicity, could sign up as a supporting member, being under the obligation to pay an annual fee of three florins.⁶

The leadership of the meeting was secured, during the period we are concerned about, by Schütz Albertné⁸ in whose mandate the Association knew the most prolific activity, especially under administrative and charitable aspects.⁷

In 1924, the *Hebrew Women Meeting in Oradea* submitted an application for the acquisition of legal personality to Bihor County Courthouse. One year later, the Association received this important status, a fact written in the legal documents at position 57.

The main form of activity of the meeting during the prewar period was to organize balls for charity, most of them taking place in the hall of the architectural complex “Black Eagle,” the most spacious in the city at that time. This form of activity was also maintained in the interwar years, with notable results. The quality of their development, freshness of the programs attracted a large number of participants with refined tastes and motivated requirements, so that they were held until the end of the interwar period, holding a remarkable place in the daily life of the Jewish community, and of Oradea city, as well. As such, the balls organized by the Meeting, especially those from the 30’s, gained a special audience among the citizens of Oradea city due to their high moral purpose, relaxing atmosphere and the novel artistic manifestations.

The tea dancing parties were also held regularly by the leadership of the Meeting. They were meant to raise public awareness in order to support the philanthropic goals displayed by the society. Each time, the participants donated money to assist the needy Jewish students, war orphans and the poor population of the city in general.

Gradually, these events became not only moments of leisure, but also artistic and social events that were designed to create cohesion at the level of the local Jewish community. The entertainment was associated every time by the women members of the society with the cultural, social and charity dimensions through which the local civil society had to be made aware of at all times.

The parties, musical concerts, school festivals, theatrical performances, most of charitable purpose, were carried out throughout the entire inter-war period, the results being recorded in the reports and in the administrative balance sheets. As a rule, they were organized by the “Purim”—“Feast of Joy.”

They also promoted the cultural and scientific manifestations, of high intellectual attitude, after which the charity fund of the Association increased financially, but also with food and clothing. Every year, they organized fundraisings, in particular to purchase firewood, which was distributed to the families with a precarious financial situation.

They directed the charitable activity both to individual aids, as well as to support some institutions such as hospitals, orphanages, nursing homes, nurseries, etc. For example, in 1922 the Meeting spent—for charity aims—the amount of 184,282 lei, out of a total income of 226,315 lei. They distributed food, fuel and other goods.

For example, in 1922 the Meeting spent—for charity aims—the amount of 184,282 lei, out of a total income of 226,315 lei. They used the money to help some families covered by the ruthless pauperization spectrum, to purchase firewood, clothing (warm clothes, socks and boots), food and school supplies, of which numerous children, regardless of their ethnicity and religion, benefited.

For more than two years, the Meeting managed to have a considerable number of women members (916) and a budget of 224,809 lei.

In 1923, the Meeting set up a home for old women without any material support (at first four women benefited from the services of this institution).

On the same charitable coordinate, in 1928 the Meeting, in collaboration with the Women's Union for Supporting the Jewish Hospital, opened up a new home for the elderly and an orphanage for boys was expanded.⁸

In turn, the young women were helped to discover their good qualities that they would further develop in social relations. Many fundraisings were organized to help the sick students from the Oradea residential schools, the required sums coming from the membership fees, from capitalizing the interest on bank deposits (orphans' accounts, Margit Kecskeméti's account), from various donations and from some individuals or local institutions. We will mention only the "Nest" Charity Association and Leisure Time, which donated the amount of 74,934 lei, with a philanthropic purpose, to the Hebrew Meeting on December 1933.⁹

During the interwar period, the Meeting was also concerned with the operation of an older people's kitchen for the poor people of the city. The institution provided both the opportunity to serve a meal for small prices and to serve lunch—free of charge—for a certain number of people who did not have any income.

In the spring of 1931, the Municipal Council of the city debated over the issue regarding the popular kitchens that were operating in Oradea. The economic crisis further prompted the head of the social service of the City Hall to submit, for consultation, a report on the aids granted by the municipality to these charitable institutions, the allocated budget exceeding the anterior rated figures by far. Therefore, the local government was unable to provide financial support, spreading the idea of closing them from May that year. Finally, at the proposals submitted by Böszörményi and Dr. Soas, they decided to support the charitable kitchens from the funds Rimanoczy and Csetivo.¹⁰ Unfortunately, shortly after, they also had to stop granting these funds for charities.

In 1939, according to the statistics (which included the names of the 33 local cultural and charitable associations and was drawn up by the cultural service of the Town Hall

in Oradea), *The Hebrew Women Meeting* in the city was mentioned along with other Jewish associations such as the *St. Hevra-Cadisch Meeting*, the *Jewish Popular Cuisine* and the *Association for the Protection of the Hebrew Orphans*. It mentioned that the meeting was a functioning one, asserting itself by the seriousness and commitment to the goals stipulated in the statute.¹¹

In conclusion, we appreciate that the *Hebrew Women Meeting* functioned in the mentioned period with a well-shaped goal: to help and educate the others. They made everything rigorously, clearly and applied to the general purpose of the Meeting. All these features unequivocally emerge from the reports, statements, balance sheets and other supporting documents kept in the archive or in the press of the time. The activity of Meeting was integrated into the dynamics of the community spirit manifestation specific to the inter-war period, distinguished by devotion, sacrifice and selfless spirit.

In such a context, the historical assessment of the work of the *Hebrew Women Meeting* in Oradea, in terms of the charitable and cultural objectives, is not only a necessity, but also a moral debt. A historical excursion operating without prejudice or hostile spirit is truly an honest, responsible and European act.



Notes

1. Tereza Mózes, *Evreii din Oradea* (București: Editura Hasefer, 1997), 95.
2. Mihaela Frunză, „Feminismul ca și ideologie,” *Journal for the Study of Religious and Ideologies* 2, 6 (2003): 5; Corneliu Crăciun, *Contribuții documentare la istoria evreilor din Bihor* (Oradea: Editura Arca, 2009), 51–52.
3. Arhivele Naționale-Serviciul Județean Bihor (în continuare: AN-SJBh), *fond Tribunalul Județului Bihor*, dos. 7/1924–1925, f. 36; Ladislau Gyémánt, “Les Juifs de Transylvanie à l’époque du dualisme (1867–1918),” *Transylvanian Review* 18, 2 (2009): 45; Codruța Cuceu, “Identity under (Re)construction. The Jewish Community from Transylvania before and after the Second World War,” *Journal for the Study of Religious and Ideologies* 7, 19 (2008): 31; János Fleisz, *Metamorfoza unui oraș (1850–1940)* (Oradea: Editura Europrint, 2007), 103.
4. AN-SJBh, *fond Tribunalul Județului Bihor*, dos. 7/1924–1925, f. 4–5.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid., f. 5v; Mózes, *Evreii*, 115.
8. Mihai D. Drecin and Gabriel Moisa, “Repere ale implicării comunității evreiești în viața orașului Oradea,” *Crisia* (Oradea: 2009): 24.
9. AN-SJBh, *fond Tribunalul Județului Bihor*, dos. 7/1924–1925, f. 26–29, 36; Mózes, *Evreii*, 115–116.
10. *Gazeta de Vest* 505 (1931): 4.
11. AN-SJBh, *fond Primăria Municipiului Oradea*. dos. 11/1939, f. 198; Fleisz, *Metamorfoza*, 203–204.

Abstract

Aspects of the interwar activity of the Hebrew women association in Oradea

The Hebrew Women Meeting in Oradea was established in the years 1864-1865. As it was specified in the first article of the statutes, its purpose was to help the poor people, especially the older and poor women, the sick, poor widows and orphans. The Meeting also sought to organize an orphanage for the Jewish girls (fact that came true in 1906, also operating in the interwar years), the establishment of as many similar institutions through which to raise the girls and women's awareness towards Hebrew religion. In 1924, the Hebrew Women Meeting in Oradea submitted to the Bihor County Court an application to acquire legal personality. Over a year, the association received this important status.

Throughout the interwar period, the meeting acted to help the needy Hebrew scholars, war orphans and the poor population of the city in general. It organized parties, musical concerts, school festivals, theater performances, most of them of charitable purpose.

The Hebrew Women Meeting worked during the mentioned period with a well-stated purpose: to help and educate the others. They made everything rigorously, clearly and applied to the general purpose of the Meeting. All these features emerge clearly from the reports, statements, balance sheets and other supporting documents held in archives or in the journalism of that time.

Keywords

Meetings, women, Jews, interwar, charity