

Oradea at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries.

The contribution of the Jewish world to the urban development

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THE DEVELOPMENT of a settlement has always been influenced by a series of factors each of which playing an important part in its establishing in the reality of a certain geopolitical area. Undoubtedly, the human factor is the most important. The way it expresses, from generation to generation, its commitment to the town of village it belongs to leads both to the latter's development and to a specific requirement related to the standard of living in terms of material and cultural aims. Where there is a tradition of ethnic diversity, the cohabitation with and respect for the other are a common everyday issue, even if political interests of a certain historical period can create inter-human dissensions, they represent the only duty that can grant both the advancement of the community and their existential framework.

Beginning with the 11th century, Oradea has gradually grown into an important administrative and religious centre of Central and South-Eastern Europe. This status has been preserved since then, irrelevant to the state it belonged to – the Kingdom of Hungary, the Principality of Transylvania, the Ottoman Empire, the Habsburg Empire, the Austrian-Hungarian Empire, the Kingdom of Romania, the People's and the Socialist Republic of Romania, the Republic of Romania. In spite of this diversity of state belonging and, implicitly, of political regimes, Oradea constantly preserved several fundamental features that allow it the chance to featuring its human and spiritual uniqueness: multi-ethnicity, multi-religiousness, multiculturalism. Thus if we consider the urban development of Oradea since the early Middle Ages until the first half of the 20th century, the main conclusion that emerges is that the citizens of Oradea have always managed to bring their contribution to the promotion of tangible and

intangible values that have ensured their chance to recognition.

The presence in Bihor and Oradea in the Middle Ages of Romanians, Hungarians, Italians, Germans, Slovaks, Macedonian-Romanians, Serbians, Jews, etc. – the enumeration of ethnicities followed their length of time they lived in Bihor – which belonged to the following denominations: Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Reformed (Calvinist, Unitarian, Evangelical), Greek-Catholic, Mosaic, led not only to maintaining constant contacts with the world of Europe in general, that is with Western and Eastern civilizations, but also the maturation of a group consciousness in which the maintenance of ethnic individuality and faith did not encumber with the common interest of the city which meant the development of the built and everyday life areas.

Modern and contemporary ages in Oradea brought about changes in the number and proportion of the ethnic structure, changes to be taken into account when discussing the involvement of the members of the society in Oradea to regain the old brightness of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries when Oradea became an unrivaled centre of Transylvanian Renaissance if we are to consider the library of the Roman Catholic bishopric, the most important astronomical observer in Central Europe, the Fortress of Oradea which began its completion in the new Italian style, and the enumeration could go on.

The call of the Macedonian-Romanians and of the Jews to live and activate here among the traditional inhabitants – Hungarians and Romanians mainly, but also Germans, Slovaks, Serbians, Ruthenians, etc, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries effected their major involvement in the changes that were to transform Oradea into a modern city in terms of urban planning and standard of living, meeting the demands of the times. Their entrepreneurial spirit, which caused the remarkable revival of trade, manufacturing industry and, naturally, the built environment unquestionably demonstrates that the separation of medieval mentalities had occurred due to the significant contribution of the above mentioned populations precisely because had assumed from the very beginning the condition of citizens of Oradea.

After 1860 when the administrative union from which the modern Larger Oradea emerged, took place, the Jewish community, reaching a considerable number in a relatively short time, started promoting their own interests, most of which served the city. Their effort of legitimacy, along with Romanians, among the other nationalities to political and social rights in the Austrian-Hungarian Empire evolved in conjunction with the transformation of the city into a prestigious commercial, industrial, banking, and urbanistic, cultural landmark. Whether we refer to Orthodox Jews or to Neologians – who then disputed, inter alia, issues aimed at their aligning to power¹ -, neither of them hesitated to initiate and sustain a series of initiatives to result in the renewal of the framework

of living together.

At the turn of the first millennium, architectural modernization was completed in Oradea at a time when the Austrian and Austrian-Hungarian authorities imposed mandatory changes in terms of town planning and systematization with respect for the European models of the time. The change was also required by the need of buildings to cover the claims resulting from population growth which between 1850–1890 was of 44.69%, respectively from 18,904 to 47,018. In this context the Jewish community brought a decisive contribution as in 1910 they reached to a population of 15,040 (24.4%) out of 61,034 inhabitants of the settlement². It was obvious that the Jews understood that their support for changes in the economic, social, commercial, financial, industrial, and spiritual realities was the only way they could be taken into consideration in their attempt to obtain – within a restrictive political system – rights equal to those empowered at the time, the Hungarians and the Austrians.

In order to understand the dimensions of the contribution of the Jewish community to the general effort of development of the time, we would start by finding out their specific socio-professional composition. Strictly speaking of the professional range, the diversity it displays demonstrates their indisputable willingness to work. Orthodox Jews or to Neologians turned out to be architects, lawyers, doctors, industrialists, contractors, retailers, printers, small tradesmen such as painters, tailors, shoemakers, furriers, barbers, tinsmiths, stone carvers, goldsmiths, watchmakers, even bricklayers or carpenters³. Each of them, according to their social position and financial strength contributed to the renewal of Oradea at all levels: social, economic, architectural, and cultural. Undoubtedly, community elites – intellectual, banking, commercial, etc.-, by assuming administrative initiatives or an attitude of patronage in some cases, supported the completion of outstanding achievements for the town.

In 1899, the city's chief engineer, Busch David completed a statistics according to which in Oradea „...there were 103 streets with 2897 houses, most of them one-storeyed (2720), a total of 131 had one floor, and 17 had two floors. At that time there was only one building with three floors in the town”⁴. There is no doubt that the reference was about building used as dwellings and not about locations of the Hospital (1872), the Market Hall (1894), the Post Office (1895), the Court House (1898)⁵. Considering the above mentioned details, it is obvious that there was a need of development in this respect for the benefit of the inhabitants whose number and living claims increased, and that what it was at stake was the New Town where the future centre of the city had been established. It is equally true, as our statistics shows that the dominant population in that area was the Jewish which represented 41.25% of the total amount of Hungarians, Romanians, Macedonian-Romanians⁶. Obviously,

that explains the appearance of Secession palaces here. A second question that must be taken into account is the economic one more exactly related to the need of concentrating both business and living spaces on floor along the main streets and marketplaces. With regard to wholesale warehouses and industrial complexes appearing at the same time, they were directed to the districts of Velenta and Subcetate, where the Jewish community represented 69.17%⁷. There is a mention of the fact that the completion of industrial units there was also due to the existence of the railways that ensured the take of the goods to be delivered directly from the source.

A first conclusion arising from these explanations is that the Jews in Oradea supported the architectural modernization of the city in several directions of interest. One was that of civil architecture, the series of Secession palaces used for housing and trade being eloquent in this respect. Union, Ferdinand and December 1 Squares, Republic Boulevard are dominated by the palaces of Moskovits, Weiszlovits, La Roche și Darvas, Fücsl, Stern, Sonnenfeld, Ullman etc. They emerged in a cityscape where, at a certain moment later, there appeared buildings used for administrative purposes (the City hall), for tourism (Parc Hotel), or for cultural and touristic purposes (The Theatre, the „Black Eagle” Passage, and immediately distinguished themselves by their massiveness which was possible due to the financial potency of a part of the Jews and their pride to the fore. A second interest was directed toward the building of complex industrial plants, both as urbanistic forms and functions and as standard technology. Food, chemical, textile, leather, printing industries developed rapidly as they were supported by a part of the community members (Weiberger, Anfricht, Moskovits, Löwy, Reich, Weiszberger, Weiszlovits, Roth, Löbl, Lederer etc.)⁸. This was also due to the banking and credit institutions that were ready to meet the industrialists’ demands. It is hard for us not to notice that the participation of the Jews in the managing board of the *Bank of commercial credit and production of Bihor County*, of the *Bank of Savings of Bihor County*, of the *Bank of economy and industry*, of the *Bank of mortgage*, etc., meant very much when funds were requested by Israelites entrepreneurs⁹. Pleiades of architects and contractors who worked in construction in Oradea in the 1900th proved to be valuable and acknowledged in Central and South-Eastern Europe. Some of them were Oradea-born Jews and some came from other parts. Vágó László and József, Komor Marcell, Jákab Dezső, Bach Nándor, Reisinger József, Markus Gèza, Rendes Vilmos, Guthman József, Spiegel Frigyes are the architects to whom we owe the existences in Oradea of the palaces Moskovits, Vágó, Darvas-La Roche, Stern, Fücsl, Okányi-Schwartz, Ullman, Sonnenfeld, Black Eagle, the latter being an emblem of the Secession city, as well as of the School of Gendarmes, the Chamber of Industry and Trade (residing at no.3,

D.Zamfirescu street), and last but not least, the Orthodox Synagogue. Many of them are considered to be among the main promoters of the Secession trend in Central and South-East Europe which, similarly to the Art Nouveau, focused on the modernization of the architectural language. The projects of the above listed architects were often materialized by Jewish entrepreneurs of Oradea: Incze Lipôt and Lajos, Schiffer Miksa, Rosenberg Izsó or the firms Gold et Co., Rosenthál and Kraus, Weiszlovits; some of them were the builders, others were the providers of the necessary raw materials (bricks, tiles, artificial stone, marble, brass etc.).

It is obvious that the history of arts in Oradea will always consider the cosmopolitan character of the settlement. The presence here, along the medieval, modern and contemporary ages, of a multi-ethnic society left its mark on human interrelations in terms of economic, social, religious, cultural life, and on the directions taken to support, in a certain historical period, some foundational initiatives by each nationality living on the banks of the river Crisul Repede. Many pieces of architecture, preserved in the current landscape of the city, come to prove the truth of these lines. Oradea today urges us admire its historical and architectural monuments that are found to be representative of the local people's propensity for recognition also by this kind of achievements. The Fortress of Oradea (Renaissance), the Palace and the Roman Catholic Basilica, the Orthodox Cathedral (the Moon Church), the Greek-Catholic Church, the Reformed Church – Olosig (Baroque), the Neologic and Orthodox Synagogues (eclectic), the tenement houses and palaces of the end of the modern era (Secession), the Greek-Catholic Seminary and Normal School (neo-Romanian), the Orthodox Blue Church (Byzantine) are but a few examples to demonstrate the role of the inhabitants here over time, in support of a constructive approach that features Oradea (Nagyvárad, Grossvardein). It is a city whose urbanistic assets have always been marked by the local ethos that influenced in the long time its architectural heritage. An example in this respect, for the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, is the Jewish contribution to the perfection of the urban image of Oradea, of then and today. We conclude that „He who does not recognize this, is a man with preconceived ideas”¹⁰.

(Translated by Magda Danciu)



Notes

1. T. Mozes, *Evreii din Oradea*, București, p. 79-88
2. *Ibidem*, p.124; I.T Cont, *La situation politique des Juifs de Bihar pendant la Diktat de Vienne*, in *Transilvanian Review*, Volume IX, No. 3, Autumn, 2000, p. 61; L.

- Borcea, Gh. Gorun, (coordonatori), *Istoria oraşului Oradea*, Oradea, 2007, p.215
3. T. Mozes, p. 125, 129-130
 4. *Ibidem*, p. 124
 5. Péter Z., *3 secole de arhitectură orădeană*, Oradea, 2003, p. 46 – 47, 63; L. Borcea, Gh. Gorun, *op. cit.* P.247-252,
 6. T. Mozes, *op. cit.*, p.129
 7. *Ibidem*
 8. *Ibidem*, p. 99 - 102
 9. *Ibidem*, p.102
 10. *Ibidem*, p. 98

Abstract

It is a paper that addresses a topic related to the art-society interrelation within the community of Oradea in the second half of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century.

It pinpoints the role played by the Jews in both urban and architectural modernization of Greater Oradea in a historical context in which local people proposed adapting a level of daily life specific to those times. Representing more than 30% of the population of the city and being part of its financial and intellectual elite, the Orthodox and Neolog Jews here were a dynamic factor in supporting innovations at the social, economical, cultural, and architectural levels at the turn of the 1st and 2nd millennia.

The industrial architectural complexes and Secession palaces are the examples to demonstrate the involvement of both Jewish financial decision-makers and architects and contractors in the process of the shift of the city on the banks of the Crisul Repede river from the medieval stage to the modern stage of its existential level and beyond it.

Keywords

Jewish community, the modern era, urban modernization, manufacturing industry, Secession palaces, financial and intellectual elite.