

A Few Aspects Concerning the Life of the Oradea – Subcetate Jewish Community (the end of the 18th century – the beginning of the 19th century)

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THE HISTORY of Jews in contemporary Oradea differs greatly according to the part of town they used to live in.¹ Unlike Oraşul-Nou and Olosig, where there were many restrictions concerning the settlement of the Jews,² Subcetate Oradea (a component quarter of the city) is known to have been founded by Jews. So, unlike other parts of city, where the Jews settled later, their settlement followed a reverse pattern. Subcetate was founded by the Jews and other minorities settled here later. In both cases, they were forced to fight a constant battle to preserve their identity.

The Jews who had not been accepted in the city started settling here during the third decade of the 18th century. They asked for and received permission only to erect tents; later, in 1740, they were granted permission to build shop booths which were later also used as homes.³

The county authorities, including those in Oradea and Olosig, envious of the Jews' situation, complained to the Aulic Chancellery. On this occasion, it was revealed that the Jews were exempted from public taxes, they had their own administration (their own judges), they could erect booths and tents;⁴ the authorities requested that these buildings be stopped, all the more so considering that the Jews also had the support of the city's commander.⁵ But the buildings continued to exist and later on, during the reign of emperor Joseph II, the Jews were also permitted to build plots of land where to build solid houses.

In 1780, the city no longer enjoyed the statute of fortress because, on the one hand, it was no longer able to keep up with the new military technologies

and, on the other, its existence as such was no longer justified.⁶ In 1782, the city commander, Georg Roth,⁷ with the approval of the Council of Lieutenants, allowed the building of houses near the city on condition that the Jews pay a tax on land and that they agree to having their houses demolished without compensation in the event that the limits of city were reconsidered.⁸ The largest part of the land was given to the Jews, and the unoccupied plots of land were auctioned off three later, in 1786. The military administration was more tolerant than the civilian one.

Afterwards, the Oradea and Velența Jews settled in large numbers on the city's instruction fields, where they founded a new settlement. Subcetate was officially founded in 1792.

The Subcetate Jews, with the approval of the military activities, organised their own civilian administration composed of Jewish representatives, led by their own judge called *primary judge*.⁹ Before this settlement was built, one could assume that the majority of Jews lived in Velența, where the community and primary judge headquarters were located.¹⁰ The first Velența primary judge was mentioned in 1766; the name of his successor, twenty-two years later, appears in historical records (Bród Samu).¹¹ In Subcetate, the issues of the Jewish community, like those of the Christian one, were dealt with by their own judge.

The responsibilities of the Jewish judge were rather similar to those of his Christian counterpart: he was the representative of the community in relation to the local and central authorities, he protected the rights of the community from various abuses, illegal or excessive requirements, distributed and collected the fiscal obligations of the community, controlled community activities, took part in the decisions and meetings of the rabbinic tribunal alongside rabbis, and carried out the decisions and orders of the Diet or the Imperial Court. Besides these, he ensured the efficient functioning of the Jewish institutions (such as the sacred confraternities), supervised the maintenance of Jewish schools, held records on the Jewish population (together with the rabbis), drafted lists of tax-payers, help the community poor, and brought the criminals to justice.¹² He was often subject to pressure from the authorities; the Vienna Court intended to transform the Jewish judge into a mere tool serving to accomplish its goals.¹³

In the settlement analysed here the primary judge was aided in his duties by a deputy judge. The name of the first Subcetate primary judge, Mihály Sámuel, was officially mentioned in 1798, as he signed a protest made on behalf of the entire Jewish community against the limitation of their economic rights and the obstacles that the members of this community had to face.¹⁴

The first tensions emerged after the settlement of the first Christians. Their discontent was triggered by the fact that the Jewish inhabitants paid only the tolerance¹⁵ and protection tax, being exempted from other public duties. All

these obligations had been established during the reign of Joseph II when, as we mentioned above, the land surrounding the city was sold to the locals on the basis of a contract stipulating that immediate tax payment for the plot of land meant that the owners were “exempted once and for all from all public taxes...they were free from the obligation to serve military duty and from any other obligations, these exemptions applying to any independent community in keeping with the laws of the country.”¹⁶

Unlike the Jewish community, the Christian one did not enjoy such exemptions. Following their request addressed to emperor Francis II to receive permission to establish their own regional administrative body, considering that after the withdrawal of the army from the city, the Velența and Oradea councils exerted pressures upon them, the Royal Council of Lieutenants convened in Buda, on January 19, 1796, issued Order 1308, sanctioned by the emperor; the document stipulated that “this newly-established community of 80 houses is entitled to have their own administrative body and no longer depended on the Oradea City Council...; they should have their own judge; this community will not exempted from public obligations, but the military *portio* will not be based on the amount of land or the size of the house owned, it will be established individually based on income.”¹⁷

It was stipulated in the 1802 Subcetate Council Meeting that the first judge of the Christian community, Szabó Ferenc, was to be elected on May 24, 1796; he demanded that the Jews be deprived of some of their rights, such as the right to buy houses. “A brief presentation of the origins and causes leading to the founding of the Oradea-Subcetate cameral town”¹⁸ was made at the beginning of the meeting, its founding date being considered May 24, 1796, the date when the first Christian judge was elected. The despise towards the Jews who had settled here during the military administration and, perhaps, of the army, was reflected in the phrasing of the council meeting minutes: “this (Christian) community is proud to say that there no more refuge place for ill-will and immorality.”¹⁹

Consequently, the strong organisational and material position of the Jews would often come into conflict with the non-Jewish population settled in Subcetate, these tensions frequently ending up in lawsuits filed either by Christians or by Jews. The internal and external causes of conflicts involving Jews was related to the following elements: different culture and religion, inequality of rights, ambitions fuelled by crises and by the traditions of a people who had emerged on the fringes of the society, the reaction of the environment where they settled, obstacles facing societal development.²⁰

During the period analysed in this study, the religious antipathy towards Jews was replaced more and more with a type of dislike stemming from economic

reasons. This external pressure, as well as the internal religious issues, was what kept Jews united.²¹ Economic and financial envy often served as basis for anti-Jewish actions ostensibly motivated by religious reasons.²² The Jew served as scapegoat in times of crisis, he was the misunderstood “foreigner” who kept his religion and did not assimilate, sticking to his lifestyle and behaviour different from those of the host community.²³

The minutes of the City Council meetings are an important source of information on the inter-ethnic relations in Subcetate, as well as on other issues. Here, we can find information about tensions between Christians and Jews, Jews and Christians, Christians and gypsies, but also between Jews and Jews or Christians and Christians.

The leaders of the Jewish community warned them to respect the laws of the country, urged them to establish fair economic relations. Those who disobeyed these rules were punished by fines, beatings and excommunications. The community warned the disobedient ones that they would not help them if they should be arrested by the Christian authorities. The Jewish authorities drew attention whenever possible that each man was responsible for the entire community. The good reputation of the Jews and their religion had to be preserved.²⁴ However, many of the Jews did not respect the authority of the Christian regional administrative bodies. They considered them mere instruments from the outside with the purpose of restoring order and called upon them only when they had to. They did not believe that these bodies would deliver fair judgments in the trials involving Jews and Christians.²⁵

One of the recurring causes was the discontent of the Christians regarding the fact that the Jews living in their houses did not respect the terms of the lease contracts.

In 1806, Sârb Precup filed a complaint against Puliczter Abraham, stating that the latter refused to pay him 20 Renanian florins,²⁶ and when the defendant showed him the contract, he became angry and cursed him, although the understanding had been that if the Jew did not comply with the terms of the contract, he could be evicted in a month without any explanation. There was another fight on May 20, involving Sârb Precup’s servant, Popovici Costa, who wanted to open the china cabinet in Puliczter’s room; at this point, the Jew wanted to beat him up. His guilt was proven, according to the trial decision, by the fact that Puliczter had done “many misdeeds and declared himself to be an enemy of Christians”. Puliczter had to leave his house after the Easter holidays because he failed to observe the terms of the contract, while Sârb Precup was no longer entitled to have any more claims.²⁷ The latter had similar contracts with Christian dwellers as well. In the end, the two parties discussed, reached an agreement and signed a new contract.²⁸ The same Jew, Puliczter Abraham, was

also involved in another case – one not involving rent – where he failed to pay 40 Renanian florins. He bought 8 measures of grain from Szabó János (from Jaca), paying 10 Renanian florins per measure and promising that he would pay the rest of the money in a week's time. Five weeks later, he still had not paid; as he had signed a contract, he was given a one-day extension to come up with the money and all his belongings were seized.²⁹

Balla Ferenc's wife, in an attempt to get rid of the Jewish tenants who had not paid rent, claimed that Fernst Bernad beat her up and hit her over the back with a log. The young man not only denied beating her, but also claimed "the woman locked him in the kitchen and beat him up with a piece of wood." As neither party had any evidence and the host was willing to give up collecting the unpaid rent if the Jews agreed to leave, it was decided that the Jews would leave the house within 24 hours.³⁰

Stealing was among the most frequent complaints for both Jews and Christians. In 1803, the wife of Jew Márton Josef accused Koszta Maria and Kovács Zsuzsi from Episcopia of stealing four fat geese from her. The proof was provided by discovering a quarter of a goose and by Kovács Zsuzsi's declaration, where she admitted to having stolen the birds and taken them to the city together with her accomplice. Koszta Maria's punishment was more severe: she was punished for withholding information as well and forced to pay 4 Renanian florins. They were both sentenced to 12 lashes each for stealing.³¹

David Petru from Valea Mare stated that, on November 26, 1807, he was put up by Levu Mozes, a Subcetate Jew, where his salt and cabbage were stolen, although his son was in the wagon. After questioning both the Jew and his servant in the investigation, it was revealed that the Jew had urged him to bring all his belongings inside the house. As the stolen objects were not found, the "Romanian was considered imprudent and was advised to be more careful next time, while the Jew was ordered to pay more attention to whom he puts up, because it was not wise to receive many wicked people." David Petru threatened the Council to report them if they did not punish the Jew, because there were too many thieves in Subcetate; the Jew was arrested for four hours.³²

Other reasons for tension included the fact that not only did people not pay their incurred debts, but they refused to acknowledge them. Both Jews and Christians had debts.

The lawsuit brought by trader Müller Lajos from Olosig against the Jew Beer Simon from Subcetate started from the fact that the latter did not repay a debt of 150 florins (out of a loan of 400 florins). Beer refused to pay his debt claiming that he borrowed the money to exchange it for silver, counting on half the profit, but continuing to exchange the money. This fact was not included in the contract – which was binding in accordance with the laws of the country –

so, Beer Simon was obliged to pay the 150 florins within 15 days, otherwise the money would be forcefully recovered.³³

There were cases where the one who borrowed money took it upon himself to repay his debt. The Jewish trader Vaisz Jacob from Subcetate borrowed 129 florins in gold and silver and 215 Rhenanian florins in banknotes from Pap Mihai from Cauaceu; although the deadline for returning the money was the date of the Oradea fair on Mardi Gras, he was unable to pay back the loan. However, he acknowledged the loan and certified it again with his signature.³⁴

Mozes Levi complained against Ruscaş Ana, claiming that she refused to pay back 50 florins for 5 Caşovia barrels of wine. In the end, Mozes Levi, seeing that the defendant was not able to sell the wine because it was homemade, gave her a discount of 10 florins on condition that she pay the 40 florins on the same day.³⁵

Tensions also broke out between the local population and the gypsies, who were considered fringe elements; people manifested a permanent tendency to exclude them from society and expel them.

In 1806, Natan Sten filed a complaint against gypsy Irhás István who, on May 8, during the Beiuş fair, dishonoured him and disrupted his business, which resulted in the stealing of a piece of Silesian shroud worth 21 Rhenanian florins; moreover, the gypsy claimed that the Jew agreed to keep the dice and the other elements needed for the game. Although the gypsy, trying to exculpate himself, declared that he had called Natan Stern “Nochem the Jew”, in the document drafted by the chief nobiliary judge one can see that he had called him “Noti the Jew”; moreover, it is also mentioned there that he had been involved in other cases of theft together with other partners. The Jew was searched, but the dice was not found upon his person; all his merchandise was thrown away and ravaged, and his trade was disrupted. The gypsy was punished by having to pay for the shroud; he also received 24 blows for dishonouring the Jew, because “honour is more precious than life” and for disrupting his business. On the other hand, it was decided that he would be expelled, together with his partners, because he never owned a house or a piece of land, so he never was a resident of Subcetate, only a vagrant.³⁶

The same gypsy was involved in another lawsuit brought by Jewess Lebli Teresia, who complained that he owed her 80 Rhenanian florins according to the contract and 10 Rhenanian florins according to their understanding, but he only acknowledged the obligation to pay 3 Rhenanian florins out of the latter sum. Consequently, the judges seized his wagon and sold it to Nagy Mihály of Subcetate for 110 Rhenanian florins; they gave 83 Rhenanian florins to the creditor and the rest to Irhás István.³⁷ Mozes Levi of Subcetate also complained that Irhás István owed him 30 Rhenanian florins. Irhás denied this, but he still had to pay his debt within 15 days, because the contract was binding.³⁸

Tensions among Jews or Christians themselves were not excluded either. It seems that these cases were also solved by Christian institutions. What is certain is that when there were problems between Christians and Jews, these issues were solved by Christian judges.³⁹

Slezinger Mihai filed a complaint against the widow of the goldsmith Markus Graus, because she bought some potash that had been stolen from him. The entire quantity, fifty-six stones and ninety-four pounds, was found upon her, but she declared that she did not buy stolen merchandise and she did not even know it was stolen, because “of the three people, that one who claimed was the host said he had boiled the potash and she could not suspect that the well-dressed man from Aleșd, Papp János”, could have stolen it. As Slezinger Mihai proved that the potash belonged to him, the woman was obliged to compensate him by giving back the entire quantity of potash. If she wanted to get her money back (37 Rhenanian florins and 48 dimes), she should look for the thieves; she also had to pay a fine of 3 Rhenanian florins so as to learn her lesson and not buy stolen merchandise in the future.⁴⁰

A rather unusual case, judging from the decision made in the case, was the complaint of captain Sinkó, who declared that the Jew who was visiting Jonas Fridrik (himself a Jew) bought a pair of trousers from him ignoring the interdiction of trading with soldiers. The buyer lost his purchase and was sentenced to 24 hours in prison.⁴¹

A Subcetate Jew complained that Elek István's wife insulted him publicly. At the trial, where there were a lot of people, in order to insult further both the Jew and the gathered crowd, she raised her skirt and shirt and showed them her naked behind. She was punished to receive 24 lashes for this. Still on this occasion, her daughter in law took off her bonnet and threw it to the ground, insulting those present; as a result, she was sentenced to 24 hours in prison.⁴² The reason for such behaviour is unknown.

The Jews usually tried to maintain good relations with their neighbours, as Christians and Jews helped one another in daily life and especially in times of crisis.⁴³ This can be proven by a case when some Christians sold their houses and often mentioned that their neighbours were Jews. Király Miklós sold his house to Sályi Josef⁴⁴, the house being next to Stern Jakab's and Levi Samuel's homes; Nagy Éva sold hers, which was next to the Jewish hospital and Stern Jakab's property.⁴⁵ When these houses were sold, it did not matter from what community the buyer was. The Jew sold to the Christian, the Christian to the Jew. In 1809, Kovács Mihai, a judge in the Subcetate Council, sold his house to Jew Benes Ferenc,⁴⁶ who sold it to Christian Bencze Togyer in 1810; in his turn, he sold it to Jew Czajzler Laurențiu of Cauaceu⁴⁷ in the same year. Nevertheless,

the Subcetate Council ruled in 1804 that Jews were allowed to buy houses only if there were no Christian buyers and even then, they still had to pay 4 Rhenanian florins and 30 dimes to the city; later, they had to pay whatever sum was established.⁴⁸

These few complaints, be them grounded or groundless, filed by both the Jews and the Christians of Subcetate are indicators of a way of life, reflecting daily existence, and the problems facing communities of various nationalities; law and reality often found themselves in conflict when they were supposed to regulate the direct relations between Jews and Christians.

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Notes

1. Oradea-Nouă, Olosig, Velența, Subcetate.
2. The Oradea Jews were forbidden “to buy a house, to live as tenant without property in a house, to own a store, a bar or a butcher shop, to live off as tenant,...to stay overnight in an inn or in a local’s house.” (Lakos Lajos, *A váradi zsidóság története*, Nagyvárad, 1912, p. 52).
3. Tereza Mózes, *Evreii din Oradea*, Editura Hasefer, București, 1997, p. 31
4. In Oradea-Velența, where there were a lot of Jews at the beginning of the 19th century, they made their livelihood by leasing plots of land, being obliged to perform a series of labours in return (manual or animal labour, carting, various other works), but they were allowed to buy these pieces of land back). (Csiki Tamás, *Városi zsidóság északkelet- és kelet- Magyarországon (A miskolci, a kassai, a nagyváradi, a szatmárnémeti és a sátorajárbelyi zsidóság gazdaság- és társadalomtörténetének összehasonlító vizsgálata 1848-1944)*, Osiris, Budapest, 1999, p. 306).
5. *Ibidem*, p. 32.
6. Leitner Zoltán, *A nagyváradi zsidóság története*, în Fehér Dezső, *Bihar-Biharmegye, Oradea-Nagyvárad kulturtörténete és öregdiákjainak emlékkönyve*, Oradea, 1933-1937, p. 102.
7. Despite his Jewish-sounding name, he was a German. (*Ibidem*).
8. Lakos Lajos, *Nagy-Várad múltja és jelenjéből*, Nagyvárad, 1904.
9. Tereza Mózes, *op. cit.*, p. 50.
10. *Ibidem*, p. 50-51.
11. Leitner Zoltán, *op. cit.*, p. 102.
12. Mihai Spielmann, Lya Benjamin, *Studiu introductiv*, în *Izvoare și mărturii referitoare la evreii din România* (henceforth: *IMER*), volume II part 2, volume coordinated by L. Benjamin, M. Spielmann, S. Stanciu, Editura Hasefer, București, 1990, p. LII.
13. Victor Neumann, *Istoria evreilor din România. Studii documentare și teoretice*, Editura Amarcord, Timișoara, 1996, p. 40.
14. *IMER*, p. 447-451, doc. no. 311; See the entire trial transcript at the National Archives – Bihar County Office (henceforth: AN-DJBh), *Fond Primăria orașului Oradea-Subcetate, inv. 141*, dos. 6 (1798-1803), f. 1-26
15. Maria Theresa introduced this tax in 1749. This proved to be a double-edged sword:

on the one hand, it was a distinctive sign that constantly reminded Jews of their subordinate status; on the other, they enjoyed a certain protection as tax payers. The Hungarian estates and orders never ceased to oppose this tax, because they considered it illegal, a limitation of their own right to impose taxes. Maria Theresa's antipathy towards the Jews was more a religious, not a racial one. On the other hand, the policy towards the Jews of her son, Joseph II, was motivated by economic and social reasons. The Jews were guilty of many "flaws" that could be corrected, as Joseph II said. (Fejtő Ferenc, *Magyarság, zsidóság*, MTA Történettudományi Intézete, Budapest, 2000, p. 36-39). Although he did not abolish the tolerance tax for fiscal reasons, he changed its name to the cameral tax. (Haraszti György, *Két világ határán*, Budapest, 1999, p. 144). On March 31, 1783, Joseph II issued a law favourable to the Jews, „Systematica Gentis Judaicae Regulatio” which he abolished upon his deathbed, but Leopold II, unable to draft a new law, maintained it.

16. Arhivele Naționale - Serviciul Județean Bihor, *Fond Primăria orașului Oradea-Subcetate, Consiliul orașenesc, inv. 143, dos. 177 (1802-1815)* (henceforth: AN-SJBh, *Fond Primăria orașului Oradea-Subcetate ...dos. 177*), f. 2v.
17. *Ibidem*, f. 3-3v.
18. *Ibidem*, f. 2.
19. *Ibidem*, f. 4.
20. Ö. Kovács József, *Zsidók a Duna-Tisza közén. Társadalomtörténeti esettanulmányok, XVIII-XIX. század*, Kecskemét, 1996, p. 9.
21. *Ibidem*, p. 13.
22. Jean Delumeau, *Frica în Occident (secolele XIV-XVIII). O cetate asediată*, vol. II, Editura Meridiane, București, 1986, p. 138.
23. *Ibidem*, p. 138; Victor Neumann, *op. cit.*, p. 38.
24. Jakov Katz, *Hagyomány és válság. Zsidó társadalom a középkor végén*, Hágár, Budapest-Jeruzsálem, 2005, p. 69.
25. *Ibidem*, p. 63
26. Rhenanian florins.
27. AN-SJBh, *Fond Primăria orașului Oradea-Subcetate ...dos. 177*, f. 54.
28. *Ibidem*, f. 54v.
29. *Ibidem*, f. 55.
30. *Ibidem*, f. 11.
31. *Ibidem*, f. 12v.
32. *Ibidem*, f. 76v.
33. *Ibidem*, f. 58.
34. *Ibidem*, f. 69 (6 March 1807).
35. *Ibidem*, f. 77v (28 December 1807).
36. *Ibidem*, f. 55v-56.
37. *Ibidem*, f. 83v-84 (14 October 1808).
38. *Ibidem*, f. 84 (28 October 1808).
39. AN-SJBh, *Fond Primăria orașului Oradea-Subcetate, Consiliul orașenesc, inv. 143, dos. 182*, f. 26.
40. AN-SJBh, *Fond Primăria orașului Oradea-Subcetate ...dos. 177*, f. 69v.
41. *Ibidem*, f. 89v (23 January 1809).
42. *Ibidem*, f. 105v (25 May 1810).
43. Jakov Katz, *op. cit.*, pp. 52-53.

44. AN-SJBh, *Fond Primăria oraşului Oradea-Subcetate* ...dos. 177, f. 15v.
45. *Ibidem*, f. 17.
46. *Ibidem*, f. 98.
47. *Ibidem*, f. 106-106v.
48. *Ibidem*, f. 37.

Abstract

The history of Jews in contemporary Oradea differs greatly according to the part of town they used to live in. Unlike Oraşul-Nou and Olosig, where there were many restrictions concerning the settlement of the Jews, Subcetate Oradea (a component quarter of the city) is known to have been founded by Jews. The Subcetate Jews, with the approval of the military activities, organised their own civilian administration composed of Jewish representatives, led by their own judge called *primary judge*. The first tensions emerged after the settlement of the first Christians. Their discontent was triggered by the fact that the Jewish inhabitants paid only the tolerance and protection tax, being exempted from other public duties. The minutes of the City Council meetings are an important source of information on the inter-ethnic relations in Subcetate, as well as on other issues. Here, we can find information about tensions between Christians and Jews, Jews and Christians, Christians and gypsies, but also between Jews and Jews or Christians and Christians.

Keywords

Oradea-Subcetate, Jews, Christians, gypsies, interethnic relations