

## THE JEWISH COMMUNITY FROM PITEȘTI

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### Abstract

*The Jews are considered to have come to the area of Pitești after 1829, as they were driven away by the persecutions from Galicia and were attracted by the new trading possibilities that opened up in the Romanian principalities, especially in Moldavia. The Jewish community became equal with the Romanian citizens a century later, when the 1923 Constitution gave equal rights to all Romanians, regardless of religion, nationality, wealth, etc.*

*Shortly after, in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Jewish community from Pitești was enjoying administrative and religious autonomy. The community had a very modern view regarding education, believing that children should start going to school very young. In 1900 the community built a new school for its children and one year later they started to build a synagogue next to the school.*

**Keywords:** Jewish community, education, synagogue.

### Geographic and historical background

Pitești Municipality is located in the southern-central part of Romania, between the Southern Carpathians and the Danube, in the north-western part of Wallachia, at the intersection of the rivers Argeș and Doamnei. The altitude of the town ranges from 250m on the southern part and 356m on the western part and it has an area of 4.073 hectares.

The population of Pitești has grown dramatically since 1930 and in the last decades it has become constant at around 170.000 people, from which 99% declare themselves as Romanians and 1% are Gypsies.

The first signs of human presence in the area date back to the Paleolithic era. The settlement has developed as a commercial, handicraft and agricultural centre, and by the beginning of the 14<sup>th</sup> century it was considered a town. The first written record about Pitești date back to May 20<sup>th</sup> 1388, when the ruler of Wallachia, Mircea cel Bătran, approved a mill to the Cozia monastery, located on the border of Pitești, thus becoming one of the oldest marketplaces together with Câmpulung, Curtea de Argeș, Brăila and Slatina.

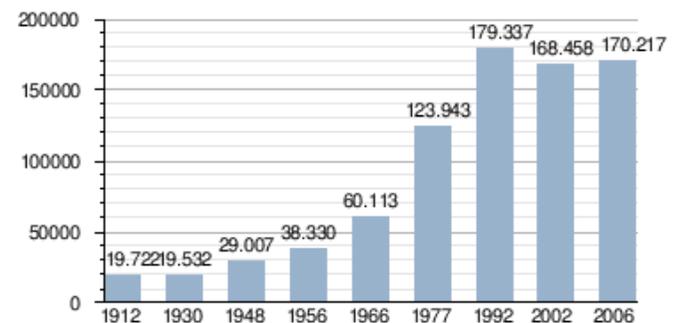


Image 1: Demographic evolution of the population from Pitești according to different censuses.

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In 1746 in Pitești there were seven or eight churches and the number of houses reached 250, accommodating approximately 1.250 inhabitants. In 1791 the town was described as a *little market place with eight churches, a monastery and several large houses belonging to the local aristocracy*. The fiscal records show that in 1824 there were 5.000 people living in Pitești in 700 houses. In 1859, after Moldavia and Wallachia were united under Prince Alexander Ioan Cuza, the population of Pitești grew to 7.229, from which 65% were farmers and freelancers, 20% craftsmen, 15% merchants and 0, 2% were manufacturers. The town was divided in 4 districts symbolized by different colors; there were 1400 houses, a regular Romanian school and two private schools, a German and a Greek one, and a private boarding school for girls, where they were studying in German and French. There were also ten orthodox churches, one Armenian, a synagogue and a hospital with 30 beds. In September 1872 Pitești became an important railway station, after the Pitești-Bucharest-Buzau railways were opened.

### **The origin of Jews in Romania**

There are documents that prove the presence of Jews on the territory of Romania since the time of the Dacian tribes, in the Greek colonies from the shores of Euxinos. However, the Jews are considered to have come to this area after 1829, when the treaty from Adrianopole ended the commercial monopoly of the Turks in Wallachia. The Jews were driven away from Galicia by the persecutions that they went through in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the first part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and were attracted by the new trading possibilities that opened up in the Romanian principalities, especially in Moldavia, where the authorities were more tolerant.

However, during the Russian influence upon the Romanian principalities in 1826-1856, there were several restrictions which directly affected the Jews. A mandatory condition for gaining civil and political rights and also for renting land was to be a Christian.

During the 1848-1849 revolution the Jews were promised the emancipation, but the program written by Mihail Kogalniceanu proposed a *gradual emancipation of the Israelites from Moldavia*. In 1864 Alexandru Ioan Cuza declared that *"I wanted to give you everything, but it was not possible. You will have a gradual emancipation"*. Even though the life of the Jews became better during the rule of Cuza, there were still some restrictions upon them, such as the circular letter of Prime Minister Golescu from 1861, which did not allow the Jews to settle in to villages as inn or bar owners, nor to lend properties, and the Israelites who were already living in rural areas where given 15 days to leave.

The first legal steps from exclusion to emancipation of the Romanian Jews were made in 1866-1923. Article 7 in the 1866 Constitution stipulated that Romanian citizenship was given only to Christians, who meant that Jews were not able to obtain citizenship, and as a consequence they were excluded from other rights too, such as buying land, the right to vote or to be elected in public positions. There was an



*Image 2: The synagogue from Pitești.*

attempt to give citizenship to Jews in 1879, but the procedure was very complicated and hence abandoned.

Only in 1919 an order of the Romanian government made the Jews totally equal with the Romanian citizens. The true emancipation was made through the 1923 Constitution, which gave equal rights to all Romanians, regardless of religion, nationality, wealth, etc.



*Image 3: Pitești in 1793.*



*Image 4: Post card showing St. Nicholas church.*



*Image 5: The marketplace from the valley.*



*Image 6: Mare Street.*



*Image 7: The County Museum of History and Natural Sciences.*



*Image 8: The former City Hall of Pitești.*

## **The Jewish community from Pitești**

The first documents in the Pitești City Hall regarding the presence of Jews in the area date back to 1834. In an order of the Department of Interior Affairs there is a reference about the Jews who were crossing the country, with no other information regarding their destination or origin, nor about the reason why they were travelling.

In 1881 the number of Jews in Pitești was 1500, approximately four times more than the Catholics and fifteen times more than the Gregorian (Armenian) population. The Jews were evenly distributed in the town's four districts, which proves that they were living in good understanding with the majority of the population.

During the next year, after the assassination of Tsar Alexander the 2<sup>nd</sup>, the massacres from Russia forced a large number of Jews to migrate from Russia and Poland towards the Romanian areas. By 1882 the Jews became the largest community, numbering 14% from the total of 11.050 inhabitants of Pitești, which became one of the few towns outside Moldavia, where the Jewish population exceeded 10% from the total number of inhabitants. Starting with the rule of Tsar Alexander the 3<sup>rd</sup> (1881-1894), who appointed an ultra reactionary government, and until the First World War, the history of Jews in Russia went through a series of exceptional laws and massacres made with the complicity of the authorities.

## **Internal management and professional structure of the Jewish community from Pitești**

In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the Jewish community from Pitești was enjoying administrative and religious autonomy. This is proved by the reaction of the community towards the mayor's order from February 26<sup>th</sup> 1866, which requested the leaders of the Israelite, reformed and Armenian churches to submit information about their movable and unmovable property, their income, taxes, subventions and expenses. The Jewish community, who was used to having complete autonomy, saw this request as an intrusion into its internal affairs and failed to give out the information under the excuse that their officials had been changed very often and the newly elected ones were not in the possession of this data.

Another expression of independence is shown by the reaction of the religious leaders towards the mayor of Pitești, who wanted to reduce the taxes on the meat consumed by the Hebrew community in 1867. These taxes were claimed to be too high by some members of the community, however the mayor's intervention was seen again as an intrusion into the community's internal affairs.

The role of women in the Jewish community was to raise the children. They were good mothers and had a lot of children. They were also merchants and left home quite often to sell their merchandise at different seasonal markets. They had no public attributions or any interference with the community's management. The right to elect the community's leaders was given only to some representative members, chosen according to when they settled in town and to their social prestige.

There were two motives that caused all the problems and disagreement in the community: the election of the leaders and the meat tax, which was always considered to be too high. Every election was followed by a disclaim of the chosen ones and these protests often reached the local administration, the mayor and sometimes appealed to higher instances, such as the prefect's office or a minister. Also, when the mayor took the side of the contestants regarding the meat tax, the Jewish leaders accused the local authorities that they interfere with their internal affairs.

The community had a very modern view regarding education, believing that children should start going to school very early. In 1868 the Jews had two schools: one for children aged between 4 and 7 and another one for learning the specific aspects of the Jewish religion. Besides these two schools funded by the community, Jewish children frequented the public schools from Pitești, since the 1864 law regarding public education allowed children of any nationality and religion to study. In 1900 the community built a new school for its children on no.3 November 19 Street.

On September 23<sup>rd</sup> 1901 the community elected the "*Jewish Community's Final Committee*" and handed the list of members to the mayor of Pitești. The document was stamped with the Community's logo that comprised of an eagle and a writing that read: "*Schegemainde Israelites*" and „*The Israelite Community Romania*".

On May 1<sup>st</sup> 1908 the Jewish community from Pitești funded the "*Israelite society for mutual help*", which had the aim of helping the sick and the mourning families with the funerals.

There are also records in the city hall of Pitești about the debates regarding the moving of the Jewish cemetery, around 1915-1916.

During the First World War the Jews from Pitești took part in the battle to unify the territories inhabited by Romanians and even gave a hero, writer and critic Iosif Netzler-Trivale, commander in battalion 4 from Argeș, who died in combat while defeating the Zimnicea area in 1916.

The Jewish population started to decrease. In the interwar period, in 1930, only 0, 3% of the inhabitants of Argeș County were Jewish. Most Jews lived in towns, as 2, 2% of the urban population from the county declared itself as being Jewish.

## **Architectural heritage**

### **The synagogue**

After the 1919 order of the Romanian government which gave equal rights to the Jews with the Romanians, the Jewish community from Pitești started to build a new synagogue on no.1 November 19 Street, next to the new school. The construction of the building lasted between 1920-1924, a time when the true emancipation of the Jews took place on a political level, as the Constitution from 1923 gave equal rights to all Romanian citizens, regardless of their religion, nationality, wealth, etc.

The synagogue from Pitești was built in the Moorish style and its height is underlined by the vaulted elevation of the central nave. The facades are simple, with a rhythm given by the window openings. The interior decoration is inspired by the local elements.

The building is the only synagogue that still exists in Pitești and it is considered a historical monument of local importance, being registered as AG-II-m-B-13414 on the 2010 Historical Monuments List.

Today the building is well maintained, but the main space of the building is used only a few times a year, during the important holiday celebrations. During the rest of the year the few members of the assembly meet in the entrance hall of the synagogue.



*Image 9: The synagogue from Pitești.*



*Image 10: The synagogue from Pitești.*



*Image 11: The synagogue from Pitești.*



*Image 12: The synagogue from Pitești.*



*Image 13: The synagogue from Pitești.*



*Image 14: The synagogue from Pitești, main entrance.*



*Image 15: The synagogue from Pitești.*



*Image 16: The synagogue from Pitești – interior.*



*Image 17: The synagogue from Pitești – laying down the cornerstone.*



*Image 18: The synagogue from Pitești – interior.*



*Image 19: The synagogue from Pitești – furniture.*



*Image 20: The synagogue from Pitești – interior.*

## The former Jewish school

The Jewish community from Pitești had a very modern view about education, and believed that children's education should start at a very young age. In 1868 the community had two schools, one for children aged 4 to 7 and another one for the religious education of the young.

In 1900 the community started to build a new school, in the centre of Pitești, on no.3 November 19 Street, in the vicinity of the city museum, the central post office and the 1907 Park.

The building is a historical monument registered as AG-II-m-B-13415 on the 2010 Historical Monuments List and it is in a good physical condition. It has been recently repaired and in 2009 was turned into a modern restaurant.

The building has two stories and a nice courtyard. On the first storey there are several smaller spaces furnished with tables and on the second level there is a large room designed for special events, such as weddings.



*Image 21: The former Jewish school – main entrance.*



*Image 22: The former Jewish school.*



*Image 23: The former Jewish school.*



*Image 24: The former Jewish school – interior image from the ground floor.*



*Image 25: The former Jewish school – interior image from the upper floor.*

### **The Jewish cemetery**

The Jewish cemetery from Pitești is located on Dârzul Street; it is surrounded by a brick wall and has a rectangular shape. It is well maintained and permanently guarded. It contains approximately 500 graves of different shape and size, most of them simple and with few decorations. The tomb of Rabbi Hascal Wechsler, who died in 1940, at the age of 83 is located in this cemetery.



*Image 26: the Jewish cemetery from Pitești – the monument of Rabbi Hascal Wechsler.*



*Image 27: The Jewish cemetery from Pitești – tombstone.*



*Image 28: The Jewish cemetery from Pitești – tombstone.*



*Image 29: The Jewish cemetery from Pitești – the surrounding wall and the entrance gate.*



*Image 30: The Jewish cemetery from Pitești – general view of the graves.*



*Image 31: The Jewish cemetery from Pitești – general view of the graves.*



*Image 32: The Jewish cemetery from Pitești – general view of the graves.*



*Image 33: The Jewish cemetery from Pitești – general view of the graves.*



*Image 34: The Jewish cemetery from Pitești – tombstones.*



*Image 35: The Jewish cemetery from Pitești – tombstones.*



*Image 36: The Jewish cemetery from Pitești – tombstones.*



*Image 37: The Jewish cemetery from Pitești – tombstones.*



*Image 38: The Jewish cemetery from Pitești – tombstones.*



*Image 39: The Jewish cemetery from Pitești – tombstone.*



*Image 40: The Jewish cemetery from Pitești – tombstone.*



*Image 41: The Jewish cemetery from Pitești – tombstone.*

## Personalities

**Iosif Netzler-Trivale** (born on May 13<sup>th</sup>, 1889 in Pitești, co.Arges – died on November 10<sup>th</sup> 1916 in Zimnicea, co.Teleorman).

Iosif Netzler, also known as Ion Trivale, was born in Pitești in the family of Adolf and Sarlota Netzler, who lived on no.13 Crinului Street. His father was a merchant.

Iosif studied in the I.C. Brătianu high school from Pitești and then graduated the Linguistic and Philosophy Faculty from Bucharest in 1910 and the University of Jena, Germany.

In 1910 he was enrolled in the Romanian army as a soldier. In the Second Balcan War he participated in the campaign from Bulgaria as was part of the 4<sup>th</sup> regiment of darabans *Argeș*, between June 23<sup>rd</sup> and August 27<sup>th</sup> 1913. On August 1<sup>st</sup> 1914 he became a first sergeant in reserve and on October 16<sup>th</sup> a sub lieutenant in reserve. In the summer of 1916 the Romanian army prepared to enter the First World War and Iosif Netzler's battalion was sent to the Zimnicea area to guard the border. On November 10<sup>th</sup> 1916 battalion 4 of the 4<sup>th</sup> regiment of darabans Argeș was sent to war to stop the enemy from crossing the border, and during this fight Iosif Netzler, a promising literary critic, lost his life.

On November 17<sup>th</sup> 1933 the remnants of the hero Iosif Netzler were brought to Bucharest and buried with honor in the Filantropia Cemetery. He was decorated post-mortem with the medal "Commemorative Cross" on January 26<sup>th</sup> 1917 and with the "Danube" strap.

The name Ion Trivale was given to the woods, a district and a street from Pitești.

The great literary critic George Călinescu wrote about Iosif Netzler in his work "The History of Romanian Literature":

*"If Ion Trivale had not died young, Romanian literary critic would have had a different face today, because it is not difficult to guess that behind the natural imperfection of his start lied the future of a remarkable critic (...). His chronicles represent, for the years when they were written (1912, 1913), the most serious and substantial critical feuilletons."*

### List of literary works:

- *Literary chronicles*. Bucharest, 1914.
- *The guilt of today's war. Dialog between Teutofilus and Gallomanus*. Bucharest, 1915.
- *Literary chronicles*. Edited and foreword by Margareta Feraru, Bucharest, 1971.

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### Translations:

- Mark Twain. *Library of Humor*. Bucharest, 1916

**Leopold (Lazar) Schobel** (born on October 8<sup>th</sup> 1918 in Danes, co.Tarnava, died in December - 2003, in Pitești)

Leopold Schobel was born in Danes, co.Tarnava on October 8<sup>th</sup> 1918. His father was a merchant and his mother was a housewife.

He went to the elementary school from Danes, then studied at the "Prince Nicolae" high school from Sighișoara and graduated in 1937.

In the autumn of 1944 he was deported to Birkenau-Auschwitz together with his mother, sister-in-law and 7-year old niece. When they arrived, all three women were taken from the train station directly to the gas chambers, traumatizing him for the rest of his life. Leopold Schobel spent approximately 8

months in Auschwitz, until the camp was liberated by the Russians. He was one of the few survivors among the Jews deported from Northern Transylvania in May 1944.

On his return to Romania he moved to Pitești, where he had been the president of the Jewish Community from Pitești between 1993 and 2002.

Leopold Schobel died in December 2003 at the age of 85. He was buried in Pitești in the Jewish cemetery. His friends used to call him Lazăr...

**Mauriciu Blank** (born on July 8<sup>th</sup> or 20<sup>th</sup> 1848 in Pitești, died on 1929)

Mauriciu Blank was born in Pitești, as the eldest son of Lebu Blanco, the descendant of a Jewish family that came to Romania in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, called Durrera el Blanco. He studied in Vienna and was the first Romanian who obtained a diploma in commercial and financial science in Vienna and Leipzig.

In 1863 Mauriciu Blank returned to Romania and was hired by Jacob Marmorosch, the owner of a trade and loan company, who started his business in 1848 in Bucharest. Until 1857 Jacob Marmorosch worked closely with his brother-in-law, Jacob Lobel, who convinced in 1865 the managers of the Ottoman Imperial Bank from Constantinople (controlled by British and French capital) to open a branch in Bucharest under the name *Banque de Roumanie*.

Six years later, in 1869, Mauriciu Blank became part of the business and in 1870 Jacob Marmorosch retired to Vienna, where he stayed until his death on December 30<sup>th</sup>, 1904.

Jacob Marmorosch's trade and import company was transformed into Marmorosch, Blank and Co. Bank in 1874, with a capital of 172.000 lei, acting only as a loan institution under the Isac Lobel Bank from Vienna. Mauriciu Blank became the partner of Jacob Marmorosch and gave up all other commercial affairs, focusing strictly on the bank's financial business. Marmorosch, Blank and Co. Bank became the largest financial institution after the National Bank. Its headquarters moved from the Lipscani area to Doamnei Street, to a building designed by the famous Anghel Saligny.

In 1877 Marmorosch, Blank and Co. Bank financed the Romanian government's military campaign to obtain the state independence, and later on it funded different state investments, such as the construction of different railways, tunnels, the sewage system of Bucharest, the refurbishment of the Constanta harbor and it contributed to the industrial development of the country.

Blank was also involved in the Jewish community's activity by funding several cultural institutions, theatres, publishers, etc. As recognition of his activity in the service of the state, in 1883 the parliament allowed him to become a landowner and in 1906 was awarded the order *The Crown of Romania*.

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[http://museum.ici.ro/muntentia/Piteşti/romanian/descrierea\\_oraşului\\_Piteşti.htm](http://museum.ici.ro/muntentia/Piteşti/romanian/descrierea_oraşului_Piteşti.htm)
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