

THE SCHOOL SYSTEM, A FACTOR OF EMANCIPATION, ASSIMILATION AND DISCRIMINATION OF JEWS IN ROMANIA

CRISTINA GUDIN

University of Bucharest, cristina.gudin@istorie.unibuc.ro

Abstract

The present study aims to capture some of the aspects of the relationship between Romanians and Jews, the targeted field being that of education. The school system, an area on which there have been extensive disputes over time, has been used in turn by participants in the training process as a tool for assimilation, discrimination and emancipation. During the period of consolidation of national consciousness, the majority gave shape to the desire to eliminate differences and opened public schools for minorities in order to assimilate them faster. Subsequently, finding shortcomings in the application of the principle of compulsory primary education among Romanians and the over-representation of Jews in the public sector, the latter were restricted access to free schooling. The introduction of restrictive provisions for other levels of education was the expression of the radicalization of Romanian society, especially in the twentieth century. On the other hand, these discriminatory measures boosted the opening and development of Jewish schools, and thus the emancipation of the Jewish population.

Keywords: school system, Jews, education, law, assimilation, discrimination, emancipation

*
* * *

In the modern and contemporary Romanian society, the presence of minorities has more than once been the pretext for a special interest manifested in connection with the Greeks, Gypsies, Jews and others. The attention oriented towards the inhabitants belonging to the different ethnic groups supports a varied argumentation, in the centre of which was the need of the Romanians to define themselves in relation to the Others and to consolidate the consciousness of belonging to a nation.

The preoccupation for cancelling the differences took different forms, such as: the imposition of a dress code agreed to by the majority (in this sense, in 1859 Minister Mihail Kogălniceanu recommended to the rabbis of Moldavia to encourage among the Jews the transition from the "Galician" dress to the "European" one¹), the application of the same taxes for all merchants and craftsmen, regardless of ethnicity, the control of minority schools and even the acceptance of non-Romanian students in public schools.

The intention of the present study is to analyse some aspects of education that demonstrate the fluctuating relationship between the authorities and the Jewish community and how the school system has served as a means of emancipation, assimilation and discrimination.

However, from the beginning it is necessary to specify that the treatment applied to the Jews in the Romanian space was not an atypical one, because in other societies also the non-Romanians had to give up their cultural individuality. This was a condition that allowed non-Romanians to enjoy natural rights, the alternative being the condemnation to a marginal existence².

Also, the way in which Jews were perceived is not specific to Romanians, being known that minorities were valued negatively, in the sense that they were generally considered a bad thing, similar to factions, selfish groups that did not care about the common good³. According to a careful analysis of the evolution of Jewish schools in the modern era, three stages have emerged, as follows: 1851- early 1870s; 1870s - 1893; 1893-1914.

During the first period, the intention of the authorities to attract Jewish children to the public primary education coexisted with the opening of Jewish schools maintained by the community by paying a fee called *gabela*. The private education was preponderant until the first years of Alexandru Ioan Cuza's reign, when an intense campaign to authorize

¹ Andrei Oișteanu, *Imaginea evreului în cultura română [The image of the Jew in Romanian culture]*, București, Editura Humanitas, 2001, p. 58.

² Allan Bloom, *Criza spiritului american. Cum universitățile au trădat democrația și au sărăcit sufletele studenților [The crisis of the American spirit. How universities have betrayed democracy and impoverished students' souls]*, București, Editura Humanitas, 2006, p. 30.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 30.

the functioning of private schools in accordance with the sanitary norms and with criteria linked to the quality of the teaching began. Behind this campaign was the desire to impose the assimilation of minorities through a unique curriculum, as well as through them being taught in Romanian and living alongside their Romanian colleagues. This last aspect favoured the traditions of the Romanian schoolchildren and their adoption by the minority students. The result was the contracting of the private segment, only in Wallachia the private schools reducing their number by 52% (from 250 to 120 schools), simultaneously with the increase of the public sector by 45%.

The forceful intervention on private education was temporary, but it marked the tendency to open public schools to non-Romanians, as evidenced by the law of instruction of 1864 which did not restrict the enrolment of minorities. The immediate consequence of the 1861 measure was the overcrowding of state-funded schools, which affected the quality of the teaching process. The continued attraction of Jews led to the saturation of the elementary school public sector, to which also contributed the fact that primary education was free and that the acquisition of a higher qualification involved the compulsory graduation of the first cycle of studies. Felt more and more acutely, the presence of Jews in public schools gave rise to the comment that the state invested rather in the formation of minorities, preparing them to compete with Romanians in the economy. This was the reason why in 1893, by the law on primary and normal primary education of Take Ionescu, provisions were introduced regarding the registration of minorities. Thus, admission was allowed only within the remaining places available after the enrolment of Romanian children and tuition fees were established in the amount of 30 lei in cities and 15 lei in villages⁴. The effects of the normative act did not take long to be felt, consisting in the massive decrease of the number of Jewish students, the most affected being the girls for whose schooling the families were less willing to sacrifice themselves from a financial point of view. Some concrete examples are useful to better appreciate the scale of the consequences of the law of 1893, namely: at the girls' school no. 1 from

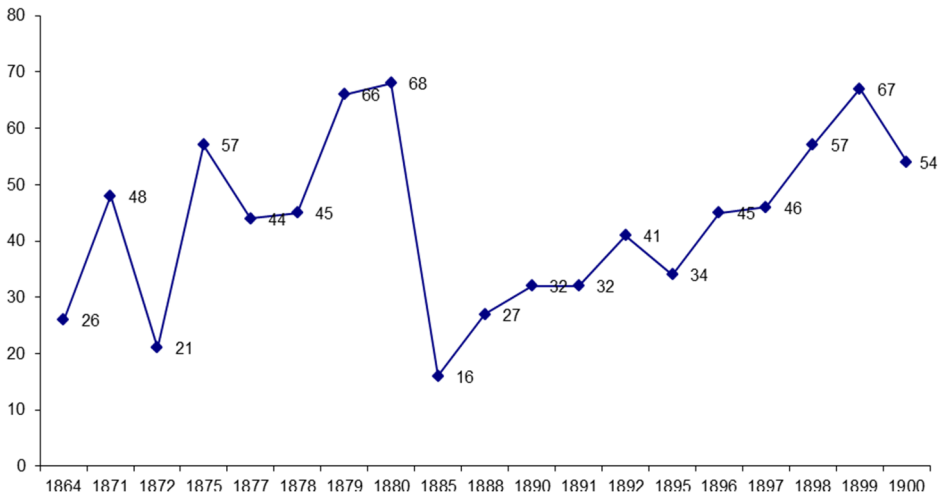
⁴ *Antologia legilor învățământului din România [Anthology of education laws in Romania]*, București, Editura Institutului de Științe ale Educației, 2004, p. 51.

Sărărie (Iași County) out of the 61 girls, 49 were withdrawn (80%); at the primary school no. 1 from Nicolina (Iași County) out of 99 Jews, 84 were forced to drop out of school (85%). Although the effects were less devastating, in Bucharest too about 20% of Jewish schoolchildren found themselves unable to cover taxes⁵.

The conclusion that emerges is that since 1893 the school system has considerably diminished its role as an important tool in the assimilation of Jews, the responsibility of their training falling primarily on their own educational institutions. However, the state has not stopped exercising control over the private sector, which has been revived in the context of Take Ionescu's law. The revitalization of private education was favoured by the insufficiency of the public school network, as well as by the lack of budgetary resources necessary to complete it.

The evolution of private schools in Bucharest

EVOLUȚIA ȘCOLILOR PARTICULARE DIN BUCUREȘTI
(1864/1865-1900/1901)



The discriminatory provisions led to the development and consolidation of Jewish schools, especially after 1893, when societies interested in the cultural emancipation of Jews appeared, such as: The

⁵ Liviu Rotman, *Școala israelito-română (1851-1914) [Romanian-Jewish school (1851-1914)]*, București, Editura Hasefer, 1999, p. 134.

„Cultura” Society from Iași, „Junimea israelită” from Ploiești, The Jewish Society for School from Brăila - 1894, The Society for the Training of Romanian Jewish Children from Bucharest - 1895. The investment in schools by these societies, together with the sustained effort of the communities, led to the expansion of the number of Jewish schools, reaching in 1900 in Romania a total of 54 elementary education institutions (37 for boys, 14 for girls and 3 mixed) and in 1912 reaching 82 schools (31 for boys, 24 for girls and 27 mixed)⁶. At the same time, there was a diversification of the profile of schools by establishing secondary schools (the first Jewish secondary school dating from 1895 in Bucharest) and vocational schools (for example the vocational school "Ciocanu" in Bucharest - 1898 or the girls' vocational school "Reunion of Israeli Women" in Iasi)⁷.

During all this time, Jewish schools were under the ever-closer supervision of inspectors of the Ministry of Cults and Public Instruction, who inserted in their reports references to the identified deviations, even as early as the end of the nineteenth century. Thus, the auditor from Bucharest, after visiting the schools maintained by the Spanish Jewish community, observed that: “In these schools, in addition to ritual studies, the subjects provided in the primary schools are also taught. But because the subjects in the state school curriculum are taught only two hours a day and because the teaching staff is recruited from young Jewish-Spanish students attending medical school, therefore inexperienced and unfamiliar with the teaching requirements, the result is more formal than real; it is taught more extensively than intensively ⁸”. The same discouraging situation for the quality of the educational process was invoked after attending the exams at the end of the year held at the Romanian Jewish school in Bucharest, where in the second grade, drawing was "well taught", whereas “reading is done in a completely Jewish dialect, without any haste, reading the words above without understanding them; poetry is recited like a machine without [students]

⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 145-146.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 142.

⁸ Arhivele Naționale Istorice Centrale (A.N.I.C.), fond Ministerul Cultelor și Instrucțiunii Publice (M.C.I.P.), dosar 762/1890, fila 174.

realizing how little of its content; in grammar, everything is learned by memorization and the children understand nothing, any rule is known perfectly, but as something historical; geography is also memorized, without knowing where the places it says from the mouth are, and if you take them out of it, they do not know where it is". In arithmetic, "learning by heart" put students in an unfortunate situation: "they know the rules, but they don't know how to apply them, and they are very slow in arithmetic." The Calligraphy was treated entirely randomly, so the students have no rules, they don't even know how to hold a pen, mixing up letters (Hebrew, German and Romanian), so that they can never write intelligibly and their writing doesn't follow even the most basic rules"⁹.

In the third grade of the same school, although "all the subjects were well taught", "the habits contracted in the previous two classes are impossible to remove, namely: reading and writing Hebrew, pronouncing like that and everything done mechanically, because that's how they are learned from the two lower classes ". In conclusion, "the educational results are very poor and the money is wasted, only ruining some children, who learn neither Romanian nor Hebrew"¹⁰.

The inspectors' findings were not specific only to Jewish schools, but to all public or private schools that had lost the battle with the standards set by the Ministry of Cults and Public Instruction regarding hygiene in schools and school performance, in the context of difficult conditions (improper buildings rented by the communal authorities from private individuals not according to functionality, but according to the value of the rent, teaching staff recruited until 1879 according to flexible and insufficiently formulated criteria, text books of questionable quality, incomplete and outdated school furniture). This almost general reality, as well as the lack of an alternative, justified the continuation of the functioning of schools even when the irregularities were constant.

Despite the discouraging reality, however, the progress made by Jewish schools cannot be denied, especially since by the end of the 19th century new conditions had emerged.

⁹ *Ibidem*, dosar 163/1891, fila 250.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

Thus, students in private schools were required to take the exams at the end of each year of study in front of teachers in public schools, unless their schools had not adopted the curriculum of state-subsidized schools. In addition, private students who did not pass the exams three times in a row were automatically transferred to public schools. Therefore, these were other ways in which the authorities exercised control over the private sector.

The reaction of many principals to these challenges was to adopt the curriculum that was applied in public schools, to which were added specific subjects (for example, in Jewish schools, the additional subjects were: Hebrew and German, religion, history and geography of the Old Testament¹¹). Moreover, in order to prevent the numerical decrease of their students by transfer to public schools, measures were taken to: improve the quality of the teaching staff by hiring graduates of the *École Normale* in Paris; increase school performance by equipping buildings with libraries and laboratories; diversify the educational offer. The good connection to the market trends in terms of occupations led after 1900 to the establishment in the vocational schools of electro-technics and car repair departments¹².

All these were indications that beyond the discriminatory restrictions that appeared in the school legislation of the 19th century, the Jewish community managed to transform the inhibitory provisions into stimulating factors that led to cultural emancipation through schooling.

However, the barriers raised before the Jewish population were far from being dispelled. During the interwar period, there was a campaign organized by Iași students against their Jewish colleagues, that took the form of street confrontations and resulted in the arrest of young malcontent people, the threat of their exclusion from the university and the assassination in autumn 1924 of police prefect Constantin Manciu by Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, student at the Faculty of Law in Iași. The tense atmosphere was maintained for five years, during which time the students were in contradiction with their own teachers and with the representatives of the local authority. The outbreak of the conflict was

¹¹ Liviu Rotman, *op.cit.*, p. 249.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 144.

linked to the text of the Constitution of 1923, more precisely to Article 7 which gives Jews the opportunity to acquire Romanian citizenship. This led to the efforts of ethnic Romanian students to limit Jewish access to university education by applying the principle *numerus clausus*, so as to respect the correspondence between the number of places for Jews in higher education and the percentage of the Jewish ethnicity among the Romanian population¹³. The faculties of Law and Medicine were mainly targeted.

The offensive against the Jews also had economic causes that manifested themselves after 1929 in the context of the economic crisis and the rising of unemployment among intellectuals. Between 1922 and 1926, there was a substantial increase in the number of students at the two universities, Iasi and Bucharest, reaching approximately 18,000 students, a figure that exceeded 4 times the number of students before the First World War. The growth trend continued: in the academic year 1926/1927 there were 27,903 students, of which 5,364 non-Romanians (4,390 Jews, 509 Hungarians, 465 Germans)¹⁴. The analysis of the data related to the year 1926/1927 highlights the presence in the indicated university centres of 19.2% minorities, the majority among them being represented by young Jews (81.8%). Compared to the total number of students enrolled then, it results that Jews constituted 15.7%, a much higher percentage than that held by this minority in Romanian society (4-5%).

The tendency to increase the numbers enrolled in university education was maintained and in 1933/1934 it reached 38,869 students, with a significant decrease in the proportion of minorities.

However, the presence of Jews was considered too high. Between 1936 and 1938 their percentage rose to 8% at the University of Bucharest, 10% at the University of Cluj and 15% at the University of Iași¹⁵.

¹³ Sorin Lavric, *Noica și mișcarea legionară [Noica and the legionary movement]*, București, Editura Humanitas, 2007, pp. 44-45.

¹⁴ Zigu Ornea, *Anii '30. Extrema dreaptă românească [The 1930s. The Romanian extreme right]*, București, Editura Est, 2008, p. 465.

¹⁵ Lucian Boia, *Capcanele istoriei. Elita intelectuală românească între 1930 și 1950 [The pitfalls of history. The Romanian intellectual elite between 1930 and 1950]*, București, Editura Humanitas, 2011, p. 97.

This reality illustrates the over-representation of Jews in urban areas (on average 13-14%, specifying that in Bessarabia cities were populated by Jews in a proportion of about 27%, and in Moldova by 23%, but there are also cities - Iași, Botoșani, Focșani - where almost 50% of the inhabitants were Jews).

Another justification for the numerically important presence of Jews in the universities was related to the higher degree of literacy among this minority, as well as to the increased interest, compared to the majority population, in education and training. Beyond a better awareness of the benefits of schooling, the orientation of Jews towards school had a pragmatic motivation that stemmed from the fact that in the absence of citizenship, for areas such as the judiciary, the army or public administration were prohibited for Jews. In these conditions, it is not surprising that the Jews turned to the liberal professions (medicine, law, journalism) that they seemed to dominate, and where they were considered as competing with the Romanians. Statistics confirm this situation: in 1936, 25% of doctors in Romania were Jews, as well as 20% of graduates and doctors of science¹⁶. Another proof of their discriminatory treatment in the 19th century is that education was the only path towards a public career, with public schools hiring exclusively teachers who held the status of citizen.

It was only after the First World War that the situation changed and Jews entered state-subsidized schools, with barriers being maintained for university education, where Jewish access was limited to lower positions, and even there in small numbers. This situation was encountered mainly in the faculties to which Jewish students were directed (for example in the Faculty of Medicine)¹⁷. The period of the Antonescu regime was another instance of the application of the double standard, this time distinguishing even among the Jews. Thus, some were deported to Trans-Dniester as a consequence of their pro-Soviet attitude, and others were allowed to organize a parallel education, given that they had been excluded from state-sponsored schools. In this context, a College for Jewish students was established in Bucharest in 1941, in whose educational offer were found almost all the important university disciplines.

¹⁶ Zigu Ornea, *op.cit.*, p. 465.

¹⁷ Lucian Boia, *op.cit.*, p. 97.

At the head of the college was the lawyer Marcu Onescu, and the teaching staff consisted of 62 teachers, responsible for teaching subjects that were grouped into 3 sections: letters and philosophy; science, economics and business; human biology. The change in the political context after the events of August 1944 made it possible to equate college studies with those of state education. Thus, the college from Bucharest was an example of the educational institutions that ensured continuity in the training of Jewish intellectuals during the Second World War.

Without intending to exhaust the aspects that highlighted the fluctuating relations between the Romanian authorities and the members of the Jewish community, the present study has tried to demonstrate the fluidity in the rapport of majorities to minorities. The lack of a constant attitude towards the Jewish population has meant that for several decades the same institution, the school, has played a triple role: an instrument of assimilation, discrimination and emancipation of Jews. What could be seen was the functioning of the law of compensation which meant that when public schools were opened to Jews, the establishments maintained by the Jewish community stagnated in terms of numbers and school performance, and when discriminatory provisions regarding minorities were applied, the private sector expanded and diversified.