

THE UNKNOWN STORY OF AVRAM GOLDFADEN AND THE BEGINNINGS OF JEWISH THEATRE IN ROMANIA*

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Abstract. This article proposes a topic yet not sufficiently discussed, referring to a significant period in the development of culture, viewed not only from the Romanian perspective, but especially from that of Jewish culture, to the development of which Avram Goldfaden made a significant contribution, without whom there would be no theatre for Jews today.

Keywords: *Theatre; Jews; Holocaust; Culture; Barascheum*

To contextualize the subject to be discussed in this article, we would like to begin by explaining what Holocaust means: Professor Mihai Chioveanu defines the term in his work *The Holocaust, a warning from history* as follows: “[...] the systematic, mass murder, sponsored by the state, Nazi Germany and its allies, in concentration and extermination camps [...]”¹

Israil Bercovici² – Romanian playwright, director, biographer, and memoirist – speaks in his work *O sută de ani de teatru evreiesc în România (A Hundred Years Of Jewish Theatre in Romania)* not only about the history of Jewish theatre in Romania, but also paints a portrait of Avram Goldfaden whom he calls the “founding father” of Romanian Jewish theatre.

Goldfaden appeared out of nowhere, like Venus rising from the sea, an enigma. All we know about him is that he was an actor, musician, director, playwright, and manager. From the very beginning, he seemed to be endowed with all the necessary knowledge related to dramaturgy, having the information he needed about theatre, not only in general, but in particular about Jewish theatre in Yiddish, which was still unknown at that time.

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¹ Mihai Chioveanu, *Holocaustul. Un avertisment al istoriei*, Editura IRIR – Institutul Român de Istorie Recentă Publishing House, Bucharest, 2005, p. 1.

² *Evrei din România – Breviar biobibliografic*, Israil Bercovici (1921-1988). Poet, playwright, translator, literary historian, and journalist writing in Yiddish, p. 64.

In this regard, Bercovici notes: “This theatre man appeared in a Jewish world for which theatre was generally completely foreign. In Jewish life, there were not even the most primitive elements of theatre: no audience, no actors, no repertoire, not even the slightest desire to act or create theatre. Goldfaden’s appearance is an enigma. In Jewish life, even in the environment in which A. Goldfaden grew up, there was no trace of an atmosphere in which a man of the theatre could have developed.”³

Bercovici will demonstrate that A. Goldfaden was not an unknown figure who appeared out of nowhere and that Jewish theatre has a fascinating past and history. “[...] They will help us clarify the ‘enigma’ and prove that Jewish theatre did not fall from the sky ready-made and that the miracle was not a miracle at all, but an experience accumulated over the centuries which, when it encountered favorable conditions, bore fruit.”⁴

According to historian Noah Priloutzki, the idea of theatre in Jewish culture emerged after the founding of other European theatres. This is because Jewish theatre lacked a significant figure who could assert himself and his authority, confirming that it was an institution as significant as other theatres. He also mentions that Jewish theatre lacked the authority of a cultural personality who could assert its importance, its true value, and attest to it as an institution in its own right.

Dr. Schatzky considered Avram Goldfaden a genius, the one who managed to bring about change for the better and bring Jewish theatre to light, making it recognized and accepted.

“A. Goldfaden accomplished what many of his predecessors had aspired to achieve. His predecessors lived at a time when a permanent Jewish theatre was unimaginable. Director Limberg of Frankfurt thought, at the beginning of the 18th century, of establishing a permanent Jewish theatre [...]”⁵

However, Avram Goldfaden’s qualities and initiative were not appreciated by all critics and researchers at the time.

Nahum Ausländer, Uri Finkel, and Iehezkiel Dobruşin, three researchers and critics of Yiddish theatre, were considered significant personalities in the theatre world, contributing significantly to laying the foundations of pre-Goldfaden theatre.

Similarly, the great Russian-born actor Solomon Mihoels, director of the Jewish Theatre in Moscow, questioned and criticized Goldfaden’s initiative to establish the first permanent Jewish theatre. “Goldfaden did not invent Jewish theatre. Popular Jewish theatre knocked stubbornly on the door of Jewish culture all by itself. Here is an excerpt from a German newspaper published in 1838, some forty years before Goldfaden founded the Jewish theatre in Iaşi, and two years before Goldfaden’s birth.» [...]”⁶

³ Israil Bercovici, *O sută de ani de teatru evreiesc în România 1876-1976*, Kriterion Publishing House, Bucharest 1982 p. 17.

⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 29.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 34.

He made his debut in Iași, adapting and preparing his plays for the theatre right from the start of his career.

“Even though he began his theatrical career in Iași, resorting to a repertoire that was not particularly sophisticated, he conceived his dramatic material for the theatre from the very beginning [...]”⁷

In Romania, Jewish theatre and its starting point are closely linked to the name of Goldfaden in 1876.

A few years later, Jacob Schatzky began a new study of Jewish theatre, taking Avram Goldfaden’s work and name as his starting point.

He noted: “Goldfaden is rightly considered the founder of Jewish theatre. Even though his memoirs were published as *Biography of the Jewish Theatre*; his life and biography are non-existent. He tells nothing about his childhood and youth, but is instead wholly devoted to this miraculous phenomenon, the founding and history of Jewish theatre.”⁸

Noah Priloutzki said that Jewish theatre lacked the authority of a cultural personality who could assert its importance and true value. These aspects were missing from Jewish theatre for it to be recognized as an institution in its own right. This was also the case with Jewish theatre in Romania.

It seems that Goldfaden did not lack these qualities; moreover, he did not create by imitating another model, as was the case with other cultural institutions, but by taking as many elements as possible from Jewish culture, which he then transposed into his plays. He selected these elements according to whether or not they contained a small “seed of theatricality.”⁹

Israil Bercovici includes passages from Avram Goldfaden’s personal diary in his work. It seems that Goldfaden’s idea to lay the foundations for the first Jewish theatre in Romania was actually inspired by the Librescu family.

The idea that Goldfaden had in mind when he left for Iași in 1876, considered by many to be the year the Jewish theatre was founded, was to publish a newspaper.

We also learnt from Goldfaden that when he reached Iași, the local audience was entertained in various salons around the city by local singers performing Jewish songs, as well as some of his own writings. Therefore, he decided to create a mix of these songs, with prose and some intrigue, and present them to the audience in the form of a theatre performance.

A few months later, in the fall of that same year, his dream came true, what would become the first Jewish theatre in Romania emerged then.

As with any beginning, Goldfaden encountered some minor setbacks. Jews needed humor in their shows and did not hesitate to create humorous moments that would make the audience laugh.

All these moments were organized in Imen Mark’s summer garden, at “Pomul Verde” (The Green Tree). Upon learning that Avram Goldfaden was in Iași, he asked him to perform an artistic number for his guests, which meant that Goldfaden had to present his works in front of them, but alone.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 40.

⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 41.

The first complete review was written by the poet Mihai Eminescu. He appreciated this new beginning, while at the same time criticizing the “low value of dramatic literature.”¹⁰

In his review, Bercovici said that the poet “[...] immortalized a significant moment in Jewish cultural history, the founding of the theatre, born in the midst of the effervescence of the national, cultural, and political affirmation of modern Romania.”¹¹

Goldfaden and Grodner subsequently performed in Botoşani, Galaţi, Brăila, and finally Bucharest.

Four years after the establishment of the Jewish theatre, in 1880, Goldfaden, who was in Warsaw, called Grodner to join him. In 1883, he performed in Riga, but soon had to leave with his wife and other actors for London after the Jewish theatre was banned in Warsaw.

Grodner wrote and translated several plays, including *Cîntecul lui Faitl prostul* (The Song of Faitl the Fool), a comedy in three acts performed in 1876, and was the first to translate Nestroy’s play *Lumpazivagabundus* into Yiddish, which was performed in Bucharest in 1878.

He also played in Sulumita, where, unfortunately, he did not have a significant role.

Israil Bercovici did not have much biographical information about Goldfaden’s assistant at that time, Suher Goldştein. Neither his date of birth nor his hometown is known, only that he died in 1887 in Odessa. He became known in Iaşi while performing in Imen Mark’s summer garden shows.

He landed the role of the young wife in Goldfaden’s first vaudeville show, *Legătura de lemne* (The Woodpile), in which he starred alongside Israel Grodner.

Together with his stage partner, he contributed to the establishment of the first permanent theatre in Iaşi, under the direction of Avram Goldfaden. However, alongside Grodner and Goldstein, Goldfaden went on his first tour of Moldova, and during that time a small troupe of actors was formed in Bucharest, consisting of Grodner, Mogulescu, and Spivakovski, which Suher also joined.

“With these two actors, Grodner and Goldstein, Goldfaden set out to ‘create a permanent theatre in Iaşi,’ as he wrote to Finkel on October 4, 1876. But after a few performances, the weather turned cold and it was no longer possible to perform in the garden. The only hall Goldfaden could rent was refused by its owner, a certain Reicher, on the grounds that ‘the troupe of Jewish singers would dirty it’.”¹²

Goldfaden and his troupe went through difficult times. While they were in Botoşani to organize their first performance, they were forced to postpone the show and hide from military patrols recruiting young men for the army.

However, this was a good opportunity for Goldfaden, who, inspired by the way the military selected recruits and the reactions of those involved in the process, wrote a new play: *The Recruits*. The performance was both a success and a failure.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

¹¹ *Ibidem*,

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 63.

It was well received by the public, but financially it left much to be desired. He noted at the time:

“The theatre was full. I stood in the wings and recited the text from memory. The audience applauded a lot, especially the last dance. The theatre was full, but very little money came in. After settling the accounts, I still owed the hotelier a few hundred francs. It was impossible to perform in that hall because torrential rains had flooded the roads and it was impossible to get there. I had to leave the troupe, consisting of the two actors, Grodner and Goldstein, as collateral, go to Galați, rent a hall, and borrow money to bring them back.»¹³

The period he spent in Galați was also significant in his career. Here he met Reb Moïșe Bas, a painter with no formal training. A few lines later, we learn that he was, in fact, a very good house painter with the mind of a child trapped in the body of a sixty-year-old adult.

During this period, the playwright also brought Sara, the first female artist of the Jewish theatre, into his troupe.

The actress Sara Segal, for that was her full name, was born in the city where they had arrived, Galați, in 1859, and died in New York in 1904.

Her voice made her famous under the name “Păsărica” (Little Bird), which is why Goldfaden took her with him and his actors, as he needed a good voice for his plays.

Goldfaden’s troupe later moved to Brăila, and in the spring of 1877, according to Goldfaden’s autobiography, they arrived in Bucharest.

According to Israil Bercovici, Bucharest seemed to be the ideal place for building a Jewish theatre, and Goldfaden brought his contribution to building beautiful and successful dream.

In the summer of 1877, Avram Goldfaden was asked to coordinate a new show: *Mătușa Sosie* (*Aunt Sosie*), a comedy in five acts.

“A poster dated August 25, 1877 announces that the play Aunt Sosie, a comedy in five acts by A. Goldfaden, will be performed ‘for the benefit of the beloved poet and playwright Mr. A. Goldfaden’ and that, in addition, Mr. A. Goldfaden will recite his new creations: *Se prăbușește cerul* (*The Sky is Falling*), *Lampîțki și Astrimski* (*Lampîțki and Astrimski*), *Capul evreiesc să trăiască* (*Long Live the Jewish Mind*). We then encounter titles such as: *Guturaiul* (*The Common Cold*), *Cei doi surzi* (*The Two Deaf Men*), *Băiatul polonez* (*The Polish Boy*), *Bogătașul sărăcit* (*The Impoverished Rich Man*), *Omul cu douăzeci de capete* (*The Man with Twenty Heads*), *Mireasa mută* (*The Mute Bride*), *Un pahar cu apă* (*A Glass of Water*), *Iankl croitorul* (*Yankl the Tailor*), *Ce-i de făcut?* (*What Is to Be Done?*) Such titles remained on the billboard for many years to come.”¹⁴

We understand from Bercovici’s words that what made Goldfaden special was the fact that he drew inspiration for his writings from social life.

One of his plays, written while he was in the attic of a house in Botoșani, (*Recruții*) *The Recruits*, reflected his experiences upon arriving in the city. Then, in Brăila, he wrote another play inspired by the sinking of a ship.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 64.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 69.

Later, in his autobiography, he confessed that he chose Romania to establish the first Jewish theatre because the Jewish population of this country was unfamiliar with the concept of dramatic literature. “The physical and spiritual nourishment of our audience at that time consisted of a good glass of Odobesti wine and Jewish songs. We don’t come to the theatre to have our heads filled with sad things. We have enough troubles at home with our wives and children. We come to the theatre to be entertained. We pay a penny and want to have fun, we want to laugh from the bottom of our hearts.”¹⁵

Below are the plays written and directed by Avram Goldfaden, the father of Jewish theatre:

Braindele Kozak, Recruții (The Recruits), Bunica și nepoata (The Grandmother and the Granddaughter), Intriga (The Intrigue), Șmendrik, Mireasa capricioasă (The Capricious Bride), Mireasa mută (The Mute Bride), Ix-Mix-Drix, Chibriturile (The Matches), Guturaiul (The Common Cold), Patru farfurii de porțelan (Four Porcelain Plates), Vrăjitoarea Ni-be-ni-me-ni-cucurigu (The Ni-be-ni-me-ni-cucurigu Witch), Misitul sau Războiul ruso-turc (The Middleman or The Russo-Turkish War), Cizmarul vesel (The Merry Cobbler), Vă las sănătoși (I Leave You in Good Health), Fabricantul de nasturi (The Button Maker), Cizmar și croitor (Cobbler and Tailor), Mortul viu (The Living Dead), Mătușa Sosie (Aunt Sosie), Un pahar cu apă (A Glass of Water).

Critic G. Abramski analyzed Goldfaden’s entire body of work and wrote his well-founded opinion about his performances.

He refers to only a few of them: *Ix-Mix-Drix, Guturaiul (The Common Cold), Cizmar și croitor (Cobbler and Tailor), Un pahar cu apă (A Glass of Water), Cizmarul vesel (The Merry Cobbler)*. He says that they were inspired by tasteless French vaudevilles and did not originate in Jewish culture.

He praises Goldfaden’s play *Mătușa Sosie (Aunt Sosie)* as his best work, harshly judging *Mireasa Mută (The Silent Bride)*: “I remember this play with indignation. How can the author not realize that among the audience there may be people whose aesthetic sensibilities are offended by such nonsense! [...]”¹⁶

At the end of his review, Abramski promises his readers that in his next publication he will also show them what Goldfaden does well in his plays.

In the year Goldfaden came to Bucharest – 1877 – Ion Ghica founded an organization that would be responsible for the administration of theatres: *Societatea dramatică (the Dramatic Company)*.”

In order to be able to carry out his activities legally, Goldfaden contacted the director of the Romanian National Theatre at the time and founder of the “*Societatea dramatică*” organization: Ion Ghica himself.

According to Israil Bercovici in his study, the documents of the first contact between the two are kept in the State Archives in Bucharest.

What do they contain? The repertoire of the period, the theatre companies, the actors of the Jewish theatre at the time, and even information about Avram Goldfaden.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 70.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 72.

Avram Goldfaden then organized tours in Russia in the summer of 1879, in cities such as Kharkov, Saint Petersburg, and Moscow, introducing Jewish theatre into the mainstream of theatrical culture.

As had happened before, his creations did not escape criticism, which was not always objective.

For example, B. Weinstein wrote in his memoirs: “I remember when Goldfaden first arrived in Odessa with his troupe. That was in the summer of 1879. His play *Ni-be-ni-me-ni-cucuriuu* or *Cizmarul travestit în rabin* (The Shoemaker Disguised as a Rabbi) was a great success. It was a very funny play. The theatre was shaking with laughter [...]”¹⁷

While Goldfaden was in Russia, performing not only with his troupe but also with his brother’s troupe, Mogulescu was performing plays written by himself, Lateiner, and Horowitz at home in Bucharest.

A few years later, on September 14, 1883, Jewish theatre was banned in Russia. As a result, the actors in Goldfaden’s troupe were forced to return to Romania or leave for England or America. As for Goldfaden, he left for Warsaw, where he ran a Jewish theatre for three years. Then he left for America, where his plays were also appreciated.

He organized a new troupe and performed the play *Trompeta fermecată* (*The Enchanted Trumpet*) at the Romanian Opera House.

He tried to establish a drama school in America, but once again encountered obstacles, this time financial. His financial situation at the time was precarious, given the competition in the theatre, which also led to moral difficulties.

He then left for Paris, where he founded a new theatre troupe, which he closed down fairly quickly, and in the fall of 1890, he left the city, arriving in Lvov, where his work as a poet was much more appreciated.

Two years later, he returned to Romania and resumed his role as director at the Jignița Theatre, where he worked alongside actors Marcu (Mordehai) Segalescu, Lazăr Zuckermann, and, somewhat later, Iacob Kalich, Carol Schramek, Malvina Treitler-Löbel, and H. Goldenber. Together with them, he staged the play *A zecea poruncă* (*The 10th Commandment*).

Unfortunately, however, his work was once again hampered by the newly emerged “commercialism.” The directors of other theatres in Bucharest prevented him from continuing his work, and French and German plays began to be staged at the Jewish theatre. Moreover, competition between theatres was beginning to be felt.

What kept the Jewish theatre going and prevented it from collapsing was a large part of the Jewish population, who felt a certain love for what Goldfaden had done and was doing. He was loved and appreciated by them because of the Goldfaden repertoire he had built up over time.

“[...] On the other hand, the love of the vast majority of Jews ensured the durability of Jewish theatre, gave it the strength to spread throughout the country and, from there, to spread its wings everywhere in the world where there are Jewish

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 78.

communities. [...] However, Goldfaden's repertoire has remained largely alive and fresh, and even today the most discerning theatregoers find in it interesting stage material and theatrical lessons that have lost none of their validity."¹⁸

The play *Sacrificarea lui Isac* (*The Sacrifice of Isaac*) created a rather strange situation. Kalman Juvelier wanted to perform Goldfaden's play, but he had neither the text nor the scores for the instrumental part.

He did not contact Goldfaden to ask for the text, as at that time it was not customary for plays to be purchased directly from their authors.

However, luck smiled on Juvelier, who happened to meet Bernfeld. A young man who had seen the show and remembered not only the entire musical score, but also the text. Goldfaden found out about this and filed a complaint against Juvelier for stealing the play.

Since the issue was not resolved in court, it eventually resolved itself.

We learn from a magazine of the time, *Egalitatea*, that Kalman Juvelier's troupe later performed the play for the benefit of Goldfaden.

"Those at the National Theatre were not satisfied with the responses given by the director of the Jewish troupe, but the trial did not end with a verdict, as Goldfaden and Juvelier reached an agreement between themselves. Two requests signed by Goldfaden have been preserved from that same year, in which he asks for permission to perform his plays. These requests also reveal some interesting economic details. Not only was the disagreement between Goldfaden and Juvelier quickly resolved, but from the same magazine, *Egalitatea*, we learn that on July 15, 1895, Juvelier and Berta Kalich's troupe performed *The Sacrifice of Isaac* for the benefit of ... A. Goldfaden [...]."¹⁹

Trying to get back on his feet financially, he organized a tour around the country with Jacob Gartenstein, but it didn't work out. In Brăila, he tried to whip up a new play inspired by a tragedy that happened in the local port a few days before they got there, but that was a bust too.

His last attempts, *Iudith și Holofern* (*Judith and Holofern*) and the translation of *Voievodul țiganilor* (*The Gypsy Voivode*) by Strauss, were also unsuccessful.

In 1891, after twenty years of activity, Goldfaden's career came to an end.

Avram Goldfaden left the country and subsequently left the theatre world.

In 1906, in New York, he wrote his first play in Hebrew, a one-act play called *David în război* (*David in War*), selecting young actors from the Hebrew language association.

The play ran for only two years, as Goldfaden fell ill and gradually became weaker.

The last play he wrote in New York was a dramatization of George Eliot's novel *Daniel Deronada*. His drama *Ben Ami*, translated as *Son of My People*, did not bring him much joy, as it had nothing in common with the text that had inspired him.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 93.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 94.

The play premiered on Christmas Day 1907 at the People's Theatre. After the performance, the audience applauded Goldfaden and showered him with flowers, even a wreath.

He managed to enjoy five performances. During the last performance, he claimed that he was not feeling well and left. That was the last time the father of theatre was seen.

A year later, on November 9, 1908, he passed away, leaving behind a huge legacy for what Jewish theatre meant and still means.

Israil Bercovici notes here:

"The first performance was received very well. Goldfaden was called to the stage countless times, the applause and enthusiasm growing from one act to the next. At the last act, he received flowers and a wreath. The old father of the theatre had the pleasure of attending five performances. During the fifth performance, he said at one point that he was not feeling well and left the hall. A few days later, on January 9, 1908, Goldfaden left the stage of life, giving New York one last great performance, his funeral."²⁰

For forty years, Jewish theatre was in good hands, and Goldfaden's contribution, along with the style he created and became known for, the Goldfaden style, are still appreciated today.

However, this period was not without its detractors who tried to push him out of the spotlight.

One such moment was 1940, which was to mark Jewish theatre and the entire territory of Romania, along with its Jewish population, in a significant way.

In the fall of that year, more specifically on September 6, Carol the 2nd of Romania abdicated, and General Ion Antonescu came to power. With his arrival, a military-fascist dictatorship was established.

At the beginning of his dictatorship, Marshal Ion Antonescu established the political principles and priorities that would govern our country from that moment on.

These included total nationalism, which meant intolerance towards ethnic pluralism and the elimination of "foreigners," especially Jews, as part of the new project to modernize the Romanian nation.

Yad Vashem – the World Holocaust Remembrance Centre – published an article *The Holocaust in Romania*, which includes, among other things, a subchapter entitled "Anti-Jewish attacks orchestrated by the National Legionary State." Thus: "On November 27, 1940, several Legionary detachments of terror carried out what they called 'revenge' for the assassination of C. Z. Codreanu. These actions were directed against the leaders of the Carol the 2nd regime and against the Jews. As a result, sixty-five former leaders of the Carol the 2nd regime were killed in their cells at Jilava prison. Two days later, Legion assassins shot the former prime minister, the renowned historian Nicolae Iorga. These events poisoned the Legion's relationship with Antonescu and especially his relationship with Horia Sima, the Legion's commander. The "revenge" against the Jews began

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 102.

with fines and illegal taxes, random arrests and searches, looting, evictions from villages, acts of torture, rape, and Nazi-style public humiliation.

Subsequently, the first law proclaiming the new status of Jews in Romania, which also expressed integral nationalism alongside Nazi-style racist policies, was signed in the summer of that year by King Carol the 2nd, Ion Gigurtu, President of the Council of Ministers, and I.V. Gruia, Minister of Justice and professor of law at the University of Bucharest.

This law classified Jews in Romania into three categories:

I. Jews who had entered Romania after December 30, 1918;

II. Jews who had served in the army between 1877 and 1878 during the War of Independence or World War I;

III. Jews who had become citizens under the 1919 decree.

Those in the first and third categories were deprived of their right to work in public service, to own property, to perform military service or pursue a military career, to become lawyers or notaries public, or to work in theatres or cinemas.

Furthermore, these Jews were no longer allowed to have Romanian names, and their religion could no longer be integrated into that of Romania.

Two days later, the Minister of Religion and Culture issued Resolution No. 42181, which stipulated that all state and private theatres, as well as opera houses on Romanian territory, had to dismiss Jews from their institutions.

As Israil Bercovici mentions in his study, after one day, the General Directorate of Romanian Theatres and Operas sent a notice to the Ministry of the Interior and General Security.

The text of the notification is as follows:

“Based on the provisions of the Law on Theatres and Performances of March 1937 and the Ministerial Decisions of August 15 and September 8, 1940, all Jewish personnel from the National Theatres, Romanian Opera Houses, private theatres, whether subsidized by the state or not, as well as from any artistic or theatrical groups or organizations, are to be immediately removed from their positions, functions, dignities, or qualifications. No exceptions will be made in this regard”.

A few days later, on September 26, Ministerial Decision No. 44400 was issued, allowing Jewish artists “[...] to perform in purely Jewish theatres and groups, on private stages – in compliance with the general operating rules of the theatre law – and having the obligation to mention on their signs and in all advertising materials the specification: ‘Jewish theatre’”.

Felicia Waldman, Coordinator of the Center for Jewish Studies at the Faculty of Letters of the University of Bucharest, writes in her article “The Barascheum Phenomenon in World War II Romania” that the theatre’s name comes from a significant figure in the Jewish community in Romania: Yehuda ben Mordehai (Iuliu) Barasch.

Iuliu Barasch was born in 1815 in Galicia, and twenty-one years later he enrolled and studied philosophy at the University of Leipzig. In 1839, he transferred to the University of Berlin where, after two years, he graduated with a degree in medicine.

In 1855, Iuliu Barasch became the first Jewish doctor to teach at a university in Bucharest.

Barascheum or “Casa Iuliu Barasch” was first mentioned as a conference hall in 1879 when Saniei Marcus gave his lecture on the Khazars.

Later, various conferences and events were organized here by personalities such as Moses Gaster, Lazăr șăineanu, M. Stăureanu, and Elias Schwarzfeld.

Returning to Israil Bercovici’s study, he mentions those who contributed to the establishment of the new Jewish theatre, which was to comply with the new rules imposed by the state.

Beate Fredanov, Alexandru Finți, and M. H. Maxy are therefore mentioned.

Later, the writers Barbu Lăzăreanu, Mihail Sebastian, Felix Aderca, I. Ludo, Ioan Massoff, Eugen Mirea, Isaiia Răcăciuni, actors Agnia Bogoslava, Maria Sandu, the Gambero sisters, Jeni Șmilovici, Villy Ronea, Matei Cassvan, Al. Marius, composers and musicians Alfred Mendelsohn, Mircea Brucăr, Prof. Dagobert Bucholtz, Edmond Deda, B. Bernfeld, Leopold Feldman, Radu Negreanu, H. Mălineanu, Teodor Cosma, Elly Roman, H. Schwartzman, Eduard Lindenberg, directors Sandu Eliad and Moni Ghelerter, painters Marcel Iancu, W. Siegfried, architects E. Mahler and Lilly Haber.

Initially, the first new theatre troupe, created in 1939, did not operate at the Barascheum Hall, but tried to obtain authorization to operate at the Roxy Hall, but was unable to do so. Why?

This hall was located too close to state institutions such as the National Bank of Romania, the Prefecture, the Post Office, the Court, and the University.

Isaiia Răcăciuni applied for a permit for a group of actors on September 30, 1940, to begin performing in a Jewish theatre in a Jewish neighborhood.

A month later, under the leadership of writer Felix Aderca, actors Alexandru Marius, Alexandru Finți, Beate Fredanov, and Maria Sandu requested operating authorization from the state for a new theatre troupe, which included actors Renee Pressiano, Marga Hagiescu, Nuți Petroniu, Eugenia Arbore, Ion Focșăneanu-Pache, Jean Revo, Mișu Einhorn, and Victor Godeanu. The writer Mihail Sebastian and Ioan Massoff joined the troupe as literary advisors.

The Barascheum Hall obtained operating license number 9335 on October 18, 1940, issued by the Minister of Culture and Arts, Isaiia Răcăciuni.

However, the approval process was quite complicated and took some time. It was not enough to have the approval of Isaiia Răcăciuni, but also that of the Entertainment Commission, which confirmed that the hall was suitable for organizing shows, the Artists’ Union, the Social Police, and, last but not least, the Capital Military Command.

The Capital Military Command postponed approval of the request for six months, during which time the artists prepared performances, even though they had no legal right to perform.

“Following numerous interventions and appeals signed by prestigious cultural figures, on January 17, 1941, the Ministry of Culture and Arts approved the following report from the General Directorate of Romanian Theatres and Operas: ‘By prohibiting Jewish artists from performing on Romanian stages and

in Romanian artistic groups, Jewish actors have been left unemployed, without the possibility of performing in any theatre. By Ministerial Decision No. 44400 of September 21, 1940, Jewish artists are granted the right to perform in purely Jewish theatres and groups, on private stages, operating in accordance with the provisions of Article 153 of the theatre law and being required to mention on their signs and in all advertising materials the specification 'Jewish theatre' [...]."

Below are the conditions under which the troupe of actors and the Barascheum theatre could operate legally:

"[...] Considering all these provisions, we are of the opinion that a single Jewish troupe should be authorized to perform in Romanian, in a Jewish theatre and in the Jewish quarter. This Jewish troupe, which we could authorize, is that of the petitioners, all artists with a reputation on stage, and the theatre hall is the "Barascheum" in the Jewish quarter of "Văcărești," located on Ionescu de la Brad Street, at the corner of Udricani Street. This theatre hall is the only one that is purely Jewish in character and the only one that can accommodate a Jewish troupe.

The Jewish troupe under the direction of Messrs. Al. Marius, Cassvan, and Finți could be authorized to perform in the "Barascheum" theatre under the following conditions:

- 1) All artistic and administrative staff must be Jewish.
- 2) Performances must be in Romanian, with a repertoire that fully complies with the provisions of Article 2 of Ministerial Decision No. 44400 of September 21, 1940.
- 3) They shall be subject to the permanent control and supervision of the General Directorate of Theatres.
- 4) They shall not give performances during the major Christian holidays specified here: the three days of Christmas, Epiphany, Holy Week, and Easter until Thomas Sunday inclusive.
- 5) Not to give performances during the three Legionary holidays: September 6, September 13, and November 8.
- 6) To wall up the entrance door to the Barascheum Polyclinic on Udricani Street and to make the entrance through the main entrance of the theatre, so that the entrance from the Udricani Church is completely closed.
- 7) All Jewish artists in this ensemble must have special permits from the General Directorate of Theatres.
- 8) Any public political demonstrations in this hall are to be avoided.

Based on this report, the opening and operation of the Jewish theatre at "Barascheum" is authorized, under the conditions set forth in the above report. Approval is granted for the current season, i.e., until May 31, 1941."

At that time, Bercovici notes, the general director of theatres was the writer Liviu Rebreanu, and the Jewish Theatre at Barascheum received official approval to operate on January 17.

The report he drafted removed points 4, 5, and 6 and added new provisions. A new condition for operation was that artists had to pay attention to how they spoke Romanian, i.e., Romanian had to be spoken correctly, and there had to be an arbitration committee.

Below are the new operating provisions for the Barascheum theatre:

1) The authorization is granted to Messrs. Al. Marius, E. Ocneac, and Solo [Ivloni] Ghelerter, who are jointly and severally liable to us and their employees for the operation of the theatre.

2) All artistic and administrative staff shall be Jewish.

3) Performances shall be in pure Romanian and the repertoire shall comply in full with the provisions of Article 2 of Ministry Decision No. 44 400 clin 21/IX/1940.

4) The theatre shall be subject to the permanent control and supervision of this General Directorate.

5) It shall have the authorization of the Entertainment Commission for its theatre premises and shall strictly comply with its conditions.

6) All Jewish artists of this company shall have special authorizations from the General Directorate of Theatres.

7) Any kind of public political demonstration shall be avoided, both at performances and in the internal running of the theatre.

8) We appoint an arbitration committee, composed of Messrs. Marcu Barasch, Em. Ocneanu, and S. Ghelerter, to resolve any misunderstandings or conflicts between artists, or between them and financial entrepreneurs, so as to ensure smooth and normal operation. The decisions of the arbitration committee shall be binding on all employees and participants of the theatre.

Approval is granted for the current season, i.e., until May 31, 1940.

The Barascheum Jewish Theatre officially opened on March 1, 1941.

Below is part of the repertoire of the Jewish Theatre, with a particular focus on the Barascheum Theatre.

Avram Goldfaden:

The Recruits (Di rekrutn)

The Woodpile

(Dos bintl holt)

Fişel Harabagiul and his servant Sider

(Fişi der balegole urn zain kneht Sider)

The World as a Paradise

(Di velt a gan-edn)

The Enlightened Man in Love and the Enlightened Fanatic (Der farlibter maskil un der oifgheklertter hosid)

Plays performed in Romanian at the Barascheum Jewish Theatre

1941

N. Kanner-Nican; Eugen Mirea and Elly Roman – *Ce faci astă seară? (What are you doing tonight?)* Music: Elly Romam and H. Mălineanu Sets and costumes: W. Siegfried Artistic director: Sandu Eliad

Margareth Kennedy – *Frații Sanger (The Sanger Brothers) (Gema)* Adaptation by Sergiu Millorian, Set design and costumes: M. H. Maxy, Artistic director: Moni Ghelerter

1942

Albert Kreingold – *De la Noe pînă la Goe (From Noah to Goe)*; Elly Roman – *Cavalcada melodiilor (Cavalcade of Melodies)*; Tristan Bernard – *Cafeneaua mică (The Little Café)* (Romanian version: N. Stroe Set design and costumes: W. Siegfried Artistic director: Sandu Eliad); Jacques Offenbach – *Domnul Choufleury primește ... (Mr. Choufleury Receives ...)* (Romanian version: Sergiu Millorian Artistic director: Temișana-Goldman-Capon); N. Kanner-Nican, Eugen Mirea and Elly Roman – *Vraja unei nopți de vară (The spell of a summer night)*, (Music: Elly Roman, Set design and costumes: Ditta Fruchter, Artistic director: Sandu Eliad);

1943

Sergiu Millorian – *Dulce stea cu inimă de mărgea (Sweet Star with a Heart of Pearl)* (Music: Eugen Jose Singer, Set design and costumes: Vali Samuero, Artistic director: Sergiu Millorian); Ion Pribeagu and N. Kanner-Nican – *Din glumă în glumă (All jokes aside)* (Music: H. Schwartzman and Eugen Koffler, Set design and costumes: Mayer and Caniuc, Artistic direction: Sandu Eliad); Scarlat Froda – *Fata cu părul de aur (The Girl with Golden Hair)* (Lyrics: Eugen Mirea, Music: Elly Roman, Set design and costumes: W. Siegfried, Artistic direction: N. Stroe); Lică Abramovici – *Micul Guliver (Little Gulliver)*; Louis Verneuil – *Familia Flax (The Flax Family)* (Music: Teodor Cosma, Set design and costumes: W. Siegfried, Adaptation and artistic direction: N. Stroe); Elly Roman – *Ce faci după masă? (What Are You Doing After Lunch?)* (Set design and costumes: W. Siegfried, Artistic direction: Elly Roman);

1944

Henry Bernștein – *Melo* (Set design and costumes: M. H. Maxy, Artistic director: Moni Ghelerter); N. Stroe, Elly Roman and Aurel Feldștein-Felea – *Corabia lui Stroe (Stroe's Ship)* (Music: Elly Roman, Set design and costumes: W. Siegfried, Artistic director: N. Stroe); N. Kanner-Nican and Eugen Mirea – *Allo Barașeum* (Music: H. Mălineanu and Teodor Cosma, Artistic direction: Sandu Eliad); Lică Abramovici – *Copiii în luptă cu școala* (Children at War with School); *Paradisul copiilor* (Children's Paradise); *Micul Gulirer în tranșee* (Little Gulirer in the Trenches); Ion Pribeagu, I. Berg, and Harry Negrin – *Ca la noi la nimeni* (Only in Our Country) (Music: Edgar Cosma and Gigi Klein, Set design and costumes: G. Osterer and Fanny Maximilian, Artistic director: Dinu Negreanu) H. Berger – *Potopul (The Flood)*: Adaptation by Mihail Sebastian (Stage music: Sergiu Nadler, Set design and costumes: M. H. Maxy, Artistic direction: Moni Ghelerter and Dinu Negreanu).²¹

Through this study, I wanted to highlight the fact that the Jewish Theatre, both as an institution and as a concept, has been a significant subject in the history of the Jewish people. The Jewish people have gone through difficult times throughout history.

Without this theatre, it would have been much more difficult for them to overcome the trials they were subjected to.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 252-284.

Moreover, an even more significant moment was the apparition of the Barascheum Theatre in 1940.

Here, many Jewish actors found a place where they could be at peace and safe from the dangers and oppression they had been subjected to.

Without Avram Goldfaden, Jewish theatre would not have existed. He is responsible for the creation of this institution, which has survived to this day.

With his amazing strength and fortitude, distinguished by his talent and mastery, he laid the foundations for an extraordinary story.

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