

## CONSIDERATIONS CONCERNING MOSAISM IN CARLIST ROMANIA (1938-1940)

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**Abstract.** *The Carlist coup d'état of February 10, 1938 was intended to be the beginning of a New Romania, monarchical, nationalist, rediscovering traditions and respect for work and social harmony. Promising a far-reaching reform of state institutions and the regeneration of the entire nation, which was to rally around the sovereign to protect the country from the dangers that lurked at every turn, the New Regime also paid special attention to the delicate question of its relations with the various religious denominations in Romania. The relationship between the state and the Mosaic culture proved to be extremely interesting, characterized by the concern on both sides not to cross a "red line" and not to violate constitutional provisions. The mutual respect formally expressed in public did not, however, rule out moments of tension, which have always been overcome without escalating the latent conflict between the two sides. The analysis of the relations between the Carlist regime and the representatives of the Mosaic cult is not only a topical historical subject, but also an opportunity for reflection for the servants of Clio, contributing to a better understanding of the dramatic moments Romania went through between 1938-1940.*

**Keywords:** *Mosaism, religious diversity, state, tolerance.*

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The coup d'état of February 10, 1938, orchestrated and carried out under the direct guidance of King Charles II, took place against a backdrop of an evident evanescence of liberal democracy, augmented by the growing popularity of authoritarianism and an increasingly clear propensity of the electorate towards the extreme right-wing forces.

Coming in response to the anarchic movements of nationalist, xenophobic and anti-Semitic youth, the New Regime took on the task of bringing about major changes, both in state institutions and in the axiological system of the entire nation. Therefore, we should not be surprised that Charles II's personal regime would impose an eclectic ideology of its own, a melange of nationalism and unwavering faith in the king, based on the cult of dynasty, the cult of labor, the idea of political order, derived from the anti-liberal and anti-parliamentary intellectual foundations that were in vogue in much of Europe.

The monarch's view of nationalism involved its transformation into a basis for the regeneration of the whole of Romania under the wise leadership of the sovereign. The type of nationalism promoted by the king will be enhanced by

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exploiting the religious beliefs of Romanians to the maximum, in order to legitimize the actions of the sovereign.

From this perspective, the Orthodox Church, which, according to the constitutional provisions, was the "dominant church in the Romanian state"<sup>2</sup> was meant to be a faithful ally of the monarchy, even if a lot of clerics had shown a strong attachment to Codreanu's Iron Guard ideology.

In fact, the king ardently wanted, through Orthodox clergy, to transfer to himself a part of Codreanu's popularity, a popularity boosted in recent years by the political actions of some priests devoted to the Iron Guard.

A strictly hierarchical institution, characterized by order and discipline, the Orthodox Church was called to play a fundamental role in legitimizing the New Regime, in demonizing the Iron Guard and in combating the idea of political pluralism by prominently highlighting the alliance with the secular state led by Charles II's, alliance perceived as "a fusion between the political sphere and a particular type of ecclesiastical sacralization".<sup>3</sup>

It is also worth noting that, throughout the short-lived existence of Charles II's personal dictatorship, the Orthodox Church and the state actively collaborated in the struggle against the real or potential adversaries of the political establishment founded in February 1938, adversaries identified not only among the followers of anti-dictatorial or anti-system political parties, but also among practicing non-Orthodox Christians.

A political regime based on ideological manipulation, on the exploitation of monarchical nationalism or on exacerbating the role of the ancestral faith of the majority of Romanians could only regard with hostility or, at best, with leniency, the manifestation of forms of religious faith other than the official one.

Consequently, the relationship between the authorities and the representatives of the Mosaic cult in Romania is extremely interesting. Originating from the Jewish ethnic group, which was perceived by the far right in Romania as an element dissolving national cohesion and extremely harmful to the Romanian statehood, the followers of the Mosaic cult represented, according to the 1930 census, 4.2% of the country's total population.

The living environment of Mosaic people was predominantly urban. Their percentage in the cities amounted to 14.3% of the total population, while in the villages it was barely 1.6%. There was also a clear disparity in the distribution of

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<sup>2</sup> „Monitorul Oficial” (“The Official Monitor”), partea I, *Legi, Decrete, Jurnale ale Consiliului de Miniștri, Deciziuni Ministeriale, Comunicate, Anunțuri Judiciare. De Interes General, (Laws, Decrees, Diaries of the Council of Ministers, Ministerial Decisions, Press, Judicial Announcements, Of General Interest)*, anul CVI, nr. 148, 27 februarie 1938, p. 1112; see also: Ioan Muraru, Gheorghe Iancu, *Constituțiile Române. Texte. Note. Prezentare comparativă, (Romanian Constitutions. Texts. Notes. Comparative Presentation)*, Bucharest, Actami Press, 2000, p. 99.

<sup>3</sup> Doru Lixandru, *Carol al II-lea, carlismul și carliștii în România anilor 1930 (Charles II, Carlism and Carlism in 1930's Romania)*, Bucharest, Corint Publishing House, 2023, p. 248.

the Mosaic people in the historical provinces: in Oltenia they amounted to 0.2% of the total population, a percentage that reached its climax in Bucovina, where it averaged 10.9%<sup>4</sup>.

The Mosaic religion has its starting point in the Ten Commandments transmitted by God to the Jews through Moses (the Decalogue) when they came out of Egypt under Pharaoh Mineptah. In fact, Moses, through his writings (the Book of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy), would regulate the defining elements of the Jews' religious cult, which is called, after his name, Mosaism.

The Great Union of 1918 brought within the Romanian statehood four Jewish collectivities, different in terms of language, culture, community structure and socio-economic situation.

In the Old Kingdom, the majority were Ashkenazi Jews, related by origin, language, names, prayers and religious rites to their fellow Jews from Poland and Russia. Most of the Jews of the Old Kingdom were speakers of Yiddish, a Judeo-Germanic dialect augmented by Slavic and Romanian borrowings. While communities in Moldova remained under the influence of Hassidism<sup>5</sup>, those in the Muntenia area were much more open to the reception of Haskalei<sup>6</sup>, which was bound to enhance the differences between them. For example, in Bucharest, the confrontation between the orthodox-traditionalist and the modernist-rationalist currents led the followers of the latter to build the Choral Temple (1866-1867).<sup>7</sup>

In the towns of the Old Kingdom, the Jews organized themselves into traditional communities, each with its own religious institutions (synagogue, ritual bath, slaughterhouse, burial society), educational and charitable associations<sup>8</sup>.

Jewish places of worship were of two kinds: the synagogue or high temple and the house of prayer or small temple. Each was served by one or more rabbis. The religious leader of the community had to be a graduate of a theological seminary and was hired on a contract basis. He was required to explain the Mosaic cult, and when asked, to judge and decide on divorces, supervise the hahamim in the preparation of clean meat (kusher), oversee the preparation of the Passover unleavened bread, deliver religious sermons, etc.

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<sup>4</sup> *Enciclopedia de istorie a României (Romanian History Encyclopedia)*, Bucharest, Meronia Press, 2000, pp. 324-325.

<sup>5</sup> Hassidism is a Mosaic mystical ascetic current, which emerged in Poland around 1736 and which then spread to several areas of Eastern Europe.

<sup>6</sup> Haskala is the Hebrew intellectual movement, of Illuminist origins which appeared in the German world around 1770 and which spread to other European states; it is considered a precursor of Zionism

<sup>7</sup> Carol Iancu, *Evreii din România. 1919-1938. De la emancipare la marginalizare*, (*The Jews in Romania 1919-1938. From emancipation to marginalizing*.) Bucharest, Hasefer Press, 2000, pp.70-71.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, p.74.

The Rabbi could be assisted by a preacher, assisted by one or more hahamim (who were in charge of the ritual slaughtering of animals) and a cantor. During the inter-war period, as well as under the Carlist regime, there was a Chief Rabbi of the Jewish communities in Bucharest, who also represented them in the Romanian Senate<sup>9</sup>.

Since the 16th century, a community of Sephardic Jews from Spain, the country from which they had been expelled in 1492, had also been established in Wallachia. At the end of the 19th century, the Sephardic Jews of Bucharest built the Spanish Temple, designed by the architect Grigore Cerchez and modeled on the El Transito synagogue in Toledo. Unfortunately, this veritable monument of art was to meet a tragic fate, falling prey to the irrational hatred of the guards taking part in the January 1941 rebellion. Good Romanian speakers, the Sephardic Jews also preserved their mother tongue: Judeo-Spanish.

The philosopher Jacob Niemirower (1872-1939), who had been an Ashkenazic rabbi in Iași from 1896 to 1911, became the spiritual leader of the Romanian Sephardim from 1911-1921, and was later elected Chief Rabbi of the Jewish communities throughout Romania (1921-1939).

Apart from the Sephardim, the Orthodox community, founded in 1919 by Rabbi Haim Schmuel Schor, also manifested itself in Bucharest. In 1930, the so-called Hungarian, Ashkenazi-Orthodox community, made up of Jews from Transylvania, was added to the community. The two Orthodox entities reunited in 1936 under the leadership of Rabbi David Yehuda Freind, and by 1940 the new community amounted to some 3,600 members, with its own religious institutions.

After 1918, Jews from Old Romania were joined by Jews from the provinces united with the mother country. In Bukovina, they had been recognized as citizens of the Dual Monarchy with equal rights since 1867. Although the German language had been well assimilated in intellectual circles, the Bukovinian Jews remained faithful to their mother tongue: Yiddish.

In Bessarabia, Jews integrated into Russian Judaism, although they continued to communicate in Yiddish. Their status was markedly different from that of their fellow Bukovinian compatriots, and they fell victim to repressive legislation and pogroms by the Tsarist authorities. In 1903, one of the bloodiest pogroms in the history of the Tsarist Empire took place in Chișinău.

The Bessarabian Jews, although they were predominantly part of the Orthodox Jewish mainstream, were undeniably open to Haskala, of which Odessa was the center. Most of the synagogue cantors of inter-war Romania came from this historic province, and the only Yiddish daily newspaper in the whole country, *Unser Zeit*, was published in Chișinău under the guidance of Michael Landau.

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<sup>9</sup> *Enciclopedia României*, vol. I, *Statul* (*The Encyclopedia of Romania, vol I, The State*), Bucharest, The National Printing Press, 1938, pp. 437-439.

In the Maramureş area there was a veritable Yiddish-speaking, ultra-Orthodox Jewish enclave. In the other parts of Transylvania, the Jews had appropriated Hungarian culture and language. From a religious perspective, they had been categorized during the period of Austro-Hungarian dualism into three entities: 1). Orthodox; 2). Neologues (Western Rite) and 3). Partisans of *the status quo*. While religious literature was published in Yiddish and Hebrew, other Jewish publications appeared in Hungarian and partly in German. The largest Hungarian-language daily newspaper in Romania, "Uj Kelet" ("The New Orient"), published in Cluj, was Jewish.

The linguistic, religious and cultural diversity of the Jews in our country gave a special character to interwar Romanian Jewry<sup>10</sup>.

According to official statistics, at the time of the establishment of the Carlist regime, there were 922 synagogues and prayer houses in our country, with 731 rabbis serving in them, trained at the Jewish theological seminary founded in Bucharest in 1927<sup>11</sup>.

To their great merit, the Jews of Romania managed to overcome the rivalries and hegemonic tendencies of some communities, reaching a common denominator in designating a spiritual leader, recognized as the sole leader of the Mosaics throughout the country. It was Dr. Jacob Niemirower, installed as Chief Rabbi of the Jewish communities on May 22, 1921, in an official ceremony held at the Choral Temple in the capital, in the presence of the Minister of Religious Affairs, Octavian Goga and other notables of the time.<sup>12</sup>

Present at the event, the president of the Union of Jews of the Old Kingdom, Dr. Wilhelm Filderman praised Niemirower's appointment as Chief Rabbi, saying that the Jews had the wisdom to find a spiritual leader "who would not be the fanatical representative of a dissent, but a high priest who would synthesize the faith of the whole of Judaism, melting in his great and understanding soul all the splits and thus be a symbol of religion, and not the officiant of a rite"<sup>13</sup>.

The actions carried out by Jacob Niemirower in the spiritual realm fully confirmed the hopes placed in him by the representatives of the Jewish communities in Romania, his shepherding ending on November 18, 1939, when the Chief Rabbi of our country passed into eternity.

The funeral speech dedicated to the life and deeds of Jacob Niemirower was also delivered by Wilhelm Filderman, President of the Union of Jewish

<sup>10</sup> See: Carol Iancu, *op. cit.*, pp. 74-80.

<sup>11</sup> *Enciclopedia României (The Encyclopedia of Romania)*, vol. I, p. 439

<sup>12</sup> Hary Kuller (editor), *O istorie a evreilor din România în date (A History of Romanian Jews in Dates)*, vol. II, *De la 1920, până la 1944*, Bucharest, Hasefer Press, 2000, p. 18.

<sup>13</sup> Teodor Wexler, Michaela Popov (editors), *Dr. Wilhelm Filderman. Un avocat al etniei sale. Un avocat al cauzei naționale a României. Articole, discursuri, memorii, (Dr. Wilhelm Filderman. A lawyer of his ethnicity. A lawyer of the national cause of Romania. Articles. Speeches. Memories)* vol. I, 1921-1948, *sine locum*, 1999, p. 561.

Communities. In proposing a moral portrait of the illustrious deceased, Filderman characterized him as follows: "He was simple, modest and measured. He was simple because he knew that simplicity is the highest of virtues. He was modest, because he knew that only narrow-minded and hard-hearted men become intolerant when by chance they are touched by the wings of fortune, and that too often those who wish to fly too high, melt the lead in their wings and crash, to the misfortune not only of themselves but of those they lead. He was full of measure, for he knew that the higher one has been exalted in life, the more he must curb his thoughts, his words, and his actions. His eloquence was sober, natural, simple, without bombastic phrases, which bewilder crowds in order to lead them astray. (...) His soul was that of a High Priest, because he did not confuse the daily religious writings with Religion, and understanding that Religion is nothing but the harmonization of all man's duties towards God, towards king and country, towards himself and his fellow men, he brought into the efforts necessary for this harmonization, that spirit of conciliation, the result of understanding all opposing interests or beliefs, which is the very foundation of the wisdom of our religion"<sup>14</sup>.

In order to fill the void left by the illustrious deceased, it was necessary to convene an extraordinary congress of the Union of Jewish Communities, which took place in Bucharest on February 4, 1940. The participants decided, by consensus, to appoint Alexandru Șafran (1910-2006), not yet 30 years old, to the post of leader of Romanian Jewry<sup>15</sup>.

Born in Bacău, son of the town's chief rabbi, Alexandru Șafran appeared on the list of potential successors to Dr Niemirower during consultations organized by the Union of Jewish Communities in the run-up to the Congress. Proposed by Rabbi Zirelson, the religious and political leader of the Jews of Bessarabia, Alexandru Șafran quickly became the favorite to obtain the title of Chief Rabbi, despite the serious obstacle of his age.

It is worth noting that in 1940, the only Jewish representative in the country's Parliament was the Chief Rabbi, who was an *ex officio* senator. However, in order to be a senator in the whole of Romania, the law stipulated that a person had to be at least 40 years of age. Under these conditions, Alexandru Șafran risked being declared incompatible as a member of the Senate.

Recalling the period leading up to his election as spiritual leader of the Jews in Romania, Alexandru Șafran noted that, despite the strong support he enjoyed among the communities in Bessarabia, Bucovina, Moldova and Transylvania, there were also opinions in favor of other candidates. For example, Dr. Filderman seemed

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 566-567.

<sup>15</sup> Hary Kuller (editor), *op. cit.*, vol. II, p. 166.

to support Rabbi Thenen from Brăila, while some other intellectuals were inclined to support the Bucharest historian, Dr. Halevy<sup>16</sup>.

The Congress of the Union of Jewish Communities, chaired by Dr. Wilhelm Filderman, had the task, among other things, of appointing the Chief Rabbi of Romania from a list of eight candidates. Referring to them, the political leader of the Jews said: "They are all Romanian citizens: some old, some young. Some with the verbs of youth, eager and adorned, others with the verbs of maturity, moderate and sober. Some with a past of tireless practical work in the public interest, others with a baggage of historical or religious publications that honor us"<sup>17</sup>.

Referring to the democratic character of the Jewish religion, Dr. Wilhelm Filderman asked the voters to make rational use of the opportunity to nominate their spiritual leader, not to be seduced by the passions of politicking or the subjectivism of proximity to a candidate: "Please judge with cool heads. Please detach yourselves from the clans to which you belong, from the influences that have led to this day. Do not let yourselves be subjugated by partisan passions, whether you are partisans of a man, an ideology or an ideal, however worthy the man, however dear the ideal. Passion always clouds the vision, always alters the judgment. But here and today, passion must cease. Today and here, judgment must regain its sovereign rights. Here we elect our religious leader. He must be chosen neither according to our feelings, nor according to the suggestions of others, nor according to the currents to which we have adhered, but according to his deeds and acts, and only if his deeds and acts present a perfect guarantee that he will be able to maintain with honor an institution which must not only be stable - that is, unmoved by passions, feelings or currents - but even eternal, will you choose him"<sup>18</sup>.

The orator's exhortations did not remain without effect, so that the participants of the Congress nominated as Chief Rabbi of Romania the youngest of the candidates, Alexandru Șafran. In announcing the result of the vote, Dr. Wilhelm Filderman expressed his complete loyalty to the winner, even though it was probably not the winner he had chosen.

As Alexandru Șafran recalled, the decision of the Jewish representatives was received with satisfaction at the Palace, in government circles and at the Academy, all of which were "flattered by the fact that, unlike my predecessor (Dr. Iacob Niemirower), I had a perfect knowledge of Romanian language and culture"<sup>19</sup>.

The installation ceremony of the new Chief Rabbi took place on March 3, 1940, at the Choral Temple, in the presence of numerous state officials, headed by

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<sup>16</sup> Alexandru Șafran, *Un tăciune smuls flăcărilor. Comunitatea evreiască din România 1939-1947. Memorii (An Ember Taken Away From Flames. The Jewish Community in Romania 1939-1947. Memories)*, Bucharest, Hasefer Press, 1996, p. 44.

<sup>17</sup> Teodor Wexler, Michaela Popov (editors), *op. cit.*, vol. I, p. 599.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 600.

<sup>19</sup> Alexandru Șafran, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

the President of the Academy, C. Rădulescu-Motru, and the Minister of Religious Affairs and Arts, Ion Nistor.<sup>20</sup>

Dr. W. Filderman, an exponent of the "Jewish congregations of the Old Kingdom", spoke at the opening of the event. After greeting the guests of non-Jewish origin, he referred to the personality of the person elected to head the Mosaic cult, pointing out that his scientific level was clearly higher than his biological age.

Such a situation was possible because Alexandru Şafran had been educated in a Western cultural environment, devoting himself to "secular and religious, philosophical and rabbinical" studies. From the synergy of Romanian, Mosaic and Western cultural elements, a state of equilibrium resulted, which allowed the new Chief Rabbi to try to harmonize all the religious nuances of the Romanian Jews, which meant linking the old Rabbinism with the new, the Western Rite with the Orthodox and the Sephardic.

Apart from the strictly religious issues, Dr. Filderman believes that Alexandru Şafran had three major Jewish aspirations to fulfill: to generate respect, trust and mutual love among all the inhabitants of the country; to urge the youth to practice simplicity, not in the sense of mediocrity, but in that of "exaltation and purification; to cultivate "admiration for the worthiness of ancestors and forefathers" so that, after their model, Romanian Jews "would fulfill in these difficult times for the country, the duty of guarding its borders"<sup>21</sup>.

Alexandru Şafran's inaugural sermon focused on the dangers facing the people of Israel, on the tragedy of the Polish Jews and on the inexorable need to affirm the unity of the Romanian people, which had to be realized around the Zionist ideal.

After being confirmed as Chief Rabbi, Alexandru Şafran also obtained validation in the Senate, with the help of the president of that forum, Constantin Argetoianu, but also with the direct support of the Palace, the Government and the High Court of Justice. In order to make this possible, the legislation was interpreted in the sense that a minimum age of 40 was required only for senators elected in a political capacity<sup>22</sup>.

Although he had the support of the country's ruling circles to become a senator, Alexandru Şafran was greeted with a diverse range of reactions in the legislature, ranging from affability to undisguised hostility. Surprising from the perspective of the young Chief Rabbi was the fact that the scholar Nicolae Iorga, although recognized for his nationalism, with anti-Semitic overtones, did not miss an opportunity to praise him for the accuracy of the Romanian language used in his speeches. At the other end of the spectrum were some of the highest hierarchs of

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>21</sup> Teodor Wexler, Michaela Popov (editors), *op. cit.*, vol. I, pp. 601-604.

<sup>22</sup> Alexandru Şafran, *op. cit.*, pp. 47-48.



the Orthodox Church, the Roman Catholic Archbishop Alexandru Cisar and representatives of the German Evangelical Church<sup>23</sup>.

The territorial mutilations suffered by Romania in the summer of 1940 generated major tensions in the whole society, tensions doubled by a strong wave of anti-Semitism. Under such conditions, Chief Rabbi Şafran tried to exonerate the Jewish community from any responsibility for the tragedy and to intensify his contacts with all the representatives of the Christian churches, hoping that they would support him in protecting his co-religionists, but these efforts proved to be in vain. Referring to his relations with Patriarch Nicodemus during that dramatic period, Alexandru Şafran bitterly notes that "he was rigorously influenced by the anti-Jewish propaganda that was everywhere and he did not hide it. From now on he was very icy and reserved towards me"<sup>24</sup>.

The task of shepherd of Jewish religious communities proved to be extremely thankless for Alexander Şafran, who had to face the challenges of the persecution of the authorities and the Holocaust throughout the area controlled by the Nazi Reich.

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In conclusion, we can state that, although it had serious misgivings about the Mosaic believers, which became more pronounced as it was forced to adopt anti-Semitic legislation, imitating that of Germany, in the hope of obtaining Hitler's benevolence and thus ensuring its survival, the Carlist regime did not consider itself exempt from the obligation to comply with the provisions of Article 19 of the Fundamental Law<sup>25</sup>.

On the other hand, as was to be expected, the Carlist regime found a strong ally in the Orthodox Church, an institution faithful to the Byzantine tradition of cooperating with the state, so that there was mutually beneficial support between the two sides. As for the other religious denominations, the authorities regarded them with a degree of benevolence, neutrality or even hostility that was difficult to conceal, depending on how they perceived each of them.

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*, pp.49-50.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*, p.55.

<sup>25</sup> That article stipulated, among other things, that: "the freedom of conscience is absolute" and that "the state guarantees to all cults equal freedom and protection as their carrying out does not impeach on the public order, good morality and State Security" („Monitorul Oficial") („The Official Monitor"), partea I, , anul CVI, nr. 148, 27 februarie 1938, p. 1112; see also: Ioan Muraru, Gheorghe Iancu, *op.cit.*, p. 99.)