

# Timișoara and Its Jews - A Model of Fruitful Coexistence

By Getta Neumann

The history of the Jews in Europe is a troubled one, with periods of peaceful coexistence and tremendous achievements, interrupted by catastrophic spells. Timișoara's history demonstrates the beneficial consequences for the entire population of the mostly harmonious cohabitation of its different ethnic groups and denominations. Due to fortunate circumstances, pogroms and the Holocaust bypassed the city. Moreover, thanks to a special constellation – the balanced multiethnic, -confessional and -linguistic composition of the population – the centuries-long history of the Jews in the city of Timișoara was peaceful, except few disruptions.

## Participation in Jewish events



*Cetate (left) and Fabric Synagogue (Foto: Renée Politzer)*

The collaborative climate was fostered by the notables' and the ordinary people's attendance at events of great significance for the Jewish community, such as the inauguration ceremonies of the synagogical buildings and the community headquarters. In 1865 the synagogue of Cetate opened its gates. It became the largest prayer house in the city at the time and everybody rejoiced in this achievement. The inauguration festivity took place with great pomp – no less than 1500 programs and 1200 entrance tickets were printed. In front of the temple was erected a huge tent for generals and high-ranking officers, and the crowd gathered to the sound of a military orchestra. Rabbi Mór Hirschfeld and Jewish and non-Jewish notables held speeches, and at the end of the ceremony the whole assembly sang the national anthem. On May 7, 1872,

the synagogue was reinaugurated on the occasion of the visit of Franz Joseph I, Emperor of Austria from the House of Habsburg and King of Hungary, Croatia and Bohemia. It was a supreme gesture of recognizing Jews as full citizens, belonging to an important community. Ignátz S. Eisenstädter (1830-1893), an industrialist, president of the community and sponsor of lots of charities, played a decisive role in the construction of the temple. "The motive for his actions was the noble ambition to promote everything that was good, noble and patriotic," wrote Josef Geml, mayor and historian. To understand the extent to which he was respected, we quote Geml's words: "... on April 9, 1893, on the occasion of his funeral ... besides the local Jewish officials and leaders, all the religious communities from southern Hungary as well as the commercial and industrial corporations were represented. 10,000 people attended the funeral procession, the like of which the city had not seen before." (Josef Geml, Old Timișoara. Cosmopolitan Art Publishing House, Timișoara, 2016, pp. 418-419).



*The headquarters of the Jewish Community of Timișoara*

In 1895, at the consecration of the synagogue in the Iosefin district, Mayor Carol (Károly) Telbisz was offered a golden key to the house, a symbolic invitation to participate in the community's inner life. In 1896 the project for the construction of the synagogue in the Fabric district, the work of the architect Lipót Baumhorn, was greeted with enthusiasm in the press. Interestingly, part of the financing of the construction was covered by a lottery organized by the municipality. The sum, 6,000 crowns out of the total of 162,000, made up less than 4% of the cost, but conveyed goodwill. At the inauguration celebration of 1899, true to tradition, numerous notables were present.

The same happened in December 1906 at the inauguration of the building designed also by Baumhorn, str. Gheorghe Lazăr no. 5, for the offices of the Jewish community. The prefect

Gregor Kabdebó, of Armenian origin, his deputy Sándor Ioanovici, with a Slavic sounding name, the mayor Carol Telbisz, of Bulgarian origin, the notary Josef Geml, of German origin, the same as Rudolf Bandl, the chief of police, all celebrated together with their Jewish brethren. Their different ethnic identities illustrated the multifarious composition of the Timișoara population.

### **Interfaith dialogue**

Cooperation between the different religious communities reached unprecedented heights after the Second World War. Rabbi Dr. Ernest Neumann together with Metropolitan Nicolae Corneanu, head of the Orthodox Church, Sebastian Kräuter, Catholic bishop, and other worship leaders, promoted ecumenism, driven by, in the rabbi's words, "the determination to turn all members of our communities into a family, believing in the same God, keeping in mind the words of the prophet Malachi: "Do we not all have the same heavenly Father, did not the same God create us all?" January 12, 1990, an ecumenical service was held in front of the Orthodox Cathedral to the memory of the martyrs of the Romanian revolution in December 1989. The Rabbi and the Metropolitan prayed together, surrounded by the assembled crowd.



*Rabbi dr. Ernest Neumann and Metropolitan Nicoale Corneanu at the memorial service January 12, 1990*

This tradition continues to this day, representatives of Christian churches attending Jewish religious holidays, while Jewish leaders reciprocate by being present at Christian services. This certainly improves communication between the communities and the understanding and acceptance of Judaism and Jewish religious practices.

### **Honours and awards for Jewish personalities**

It is noteworthy that many Jewish personalities were given awards for their excellent achievements and their commitment to public interest involvement. In the second half of the 19th century, four Jewish families received hereditary nobility titles: Israel Derera de Gyarmata, Ignátz

Eisenstädter de Buziaș, Salamon Sternthal de Nagypél and Eduard Gotthilf de Miskolcz. The first was at a certain time president of the Sephardic community, the next 2 were presidents of the Jewish community in Cetate district, the fourth was in the leadership. The editor Ármin Barát and the lawyer Adolf Steiner were royal counsellors. Many Jews were elected members in the municipal council. Among those who were awarded the title of Citizen of Honour of the City of Timișoara are the poet Anavi Adam, the rabbi Ernest Neumann, the opera director at the Wiener Stadtooper and, later, artistic director of the Enescu Festival, Ioan Holender, the filmmaker Peter Dornhelm, the conductor Ladislau Roth, the physicist Peter Freund and others. The lawyer Dr. Adolf Vértes, president of the Jewish community for decades, was such an outstanding personality that, in 1930, the year of his death, a street in the centre of the town was named to his memory Dr. Adolf Vértes Street, now Nicolae Paulescu Street. In 1940, with the introduction of the racial laws, the street was given a different name. Near the synagogue in Fabric is Rabbi Dr. Ernest Neumann Street, honoring the one who for 63 years served as a rabbi and for the last two decades of his life as the president of the community as well, a personality that reconciled and united the citizens of the town.

### **Conclusions**

Based on esteem, trust and humanity, good neighborly and friendly relationships were created that shaped the city's mentality. In an atmosphere of mutual respect, trust and recognition of the Jews as good citizens and useful members of society, immeasurable values have been created in the economic, social and cultural field. In the Timișoara crucible, the coexistence of people of different ethnicities and confessions has proved successful.

For more information please refer to the touristic guidebook "In Search of Jewish Timișoara. More than a guide", Brumar Publishing House 2019, by Getta Neumann.