

First steps in researching your Jewish Botosani roots

a very short guide

Background:

1. Places:

Botosani is a city, but it was also the main city of the county by the same name. By 1894, Botosani had the 3rd largest Jewish population in the old Kingdom of Romania, 17 thousand Jews out of total 32 thousand. Other settlements in the Botosani county were Harlau, Sulitsa, Stefanesti, Burdujeni, Bucecea. Other Jews might have lived in the many villages in the county. Some might have lived all their lives in one place, others might have moved to other place following the marriage, and some might have moved through several places during their lives.

2. Civil State Registration:

Civil state registration in Romania started in December 1865. Before that it was carried out by the community, but very few registers remained, and many were not registered. In the 1st decade, many, especially girls were not registered at birth.

The registration was performed at the city hall in every city, town or commune (center of several villages). Thus, there were tens if not more of possible places where the registration of events was performed. The civil state registers are kept for 100 years in the place of the registration, and only then transferred to the local branch of the National archives in Botosani.

The registers of the settlements that were part of the former Dorohoi county are now at Botosani. The registers of Harlau and Burdujeni are now at Iasi and Suceava respectively.

3. First Names:

Botosani Jews in the second half of the 19th century, usually used Yiddish first names. Those names had sometimes Romanian localized version – like Bercu or Hershcu instead of Berl/Hersh. Only the rich families used European 1st names – Max, Oscar, Jacques etc... Romanian typical 1st names were very rarely used.

4. Surnames:

The Romanian State never required Jews to adopt surnames, unlike any of the other places in Europe. For generations the Ashkenazi Jewish naming practice was X son of Y – or in Romania, X sin Y. Jews that immigrated to Romania from outside in the 1st half of the 19th century might have abandoned the surnames adopted as a result of foreign laws.

Adoption of surnames in Romania was voluntary, slow. In Botosani, as a city far away from the capital, it was slower. Even when adopting a surname, most Jews would not register it with the authorities, as the law required, from 1895 and on. At least 50% of Botosani Jews did not have surnames in the second half of the 19th century.

Romanian law required people to have civil marriage. Starting with mid-1880s, kids of

couples who only had religious marriage might have been registered as illegitimate, carrying the mother's name and surname (if she had one).

5. Dates:

Romania used Julian calendar until 1919. There was a difference of 12/13 days between Julian and Gregorian calendar in the 19th/20th century respectively. While this might create confusion – that is not the big problem. Romanian records are not consistent in registering ages. Our experience shows that even after emigration, Romanian Jews did not record the true birth date – sometimes they were close, usually several years away.

Guides

1. Places of origin:

Botosani might be the place of origin of your ancestor – but it might be the county and not the city. Try to determine, as best as you can the exact place of origin. Ellis Island manifest, naturalization papers can be the source to this information. However, sometimes they are not accurate, as the info supplied by the immigrants was not accurate.

2. First Names:

It is important to determine the names people carried in Romania. Your Romanian ancestor almost surely was not a John, Henry, Harry, Louis etc... While some names have immediate equivalence, others might not have, or the person might have chosen a totally different 1st name rather than the expected one. Usually, the tombstone would carry the Hebrew name of the person. The Hebrew name would be fairly easy translated into the Yidish Romanian one, though sometimes, in case of a double name the person might have been known by only one of the names, not necessarily the 1st one.

3. Surnames

As surnames were rare in Botosani – the surname your ancestor carried might have been adopted only at Ellis Island, or even in the states. The surname itself might not be very important. Spelling of the name is usually meaningless, as many Jews did not write Romanian, so the clerk would register whatever he thought he heard.

4. Family members

this is a major info. For each emigrant:

- a. Name. Hebrew name if possible.
- b. Date of birth (usually it will not be accurate)
- c. Place of birth

For the heads of families, it would be very useful to gather information about their parents (tombstones, death certificates). Any information about siblings, might also add pieces to the puzzle.

Good luck,

Sorin Goldenberg