



Book Review

Historical Implications of Jewish Surnames in the Old Kingdom of Romania. By Alexander Avram. *Studies in Jewish Onomastics*. University Park, PA: Penn State University Press. 2021. Pp. 296. Price \$115.00. ISBN 13: 9780271091426.

The historical implications of specific Romanian and Romanized surnames are the unique loci of inquiry in this volume. While the stated goal of the author—Alexander Avram, the Director of the Hall of Names and Central Database of Shoah Victims' Names at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem—is to produce a comprehensive study of the surnames used by Jews in the Old Kingdom of Romania, this volume accomplishes so much more for the academic study of personal names. Avram's approach to history applies onomastic tools, especially the linguistic and semantic features of names, "as an additional and valid research method that enables the historian to verify and/or clarify different aspects, trends, and processes within the context of the history of the Jews" (4). In this way, the study serves to propose a new historical research method that uses onomastic inquiry to verify and confirm certain historical claims. Six specific historical claims are addressed in the operative chapters of this volume (chapters 3–9). Before addressing the historical claims in these chapters, a review of the book's reference-volume components should be foregrounded; these components include a historical background (chapter 1), methodological approach (chapter 2), and three appendices that provide a significant amount of background, methodology, and data that any researcher of personal names would find valuable.

The historical overview (chapter 1) addresses key issues in the history of the Jewish people in Old Kingdom Romania. Of especial importance in this history is Avram's description of a key divergence of narrative, as Jews during this era are presented in one of two diverging ways: scholars either completely ignore the presence of Romanian Jews in pursuit of a specific agenda or out of ignorance, or they stress the profound longevity and influence of a Jewish presence in greater Romanian society. The rise of Romanian nationalism and responses

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to the so-called “Jewish Problem” in nineteenth century Europe contributed to the anti-Semitic and anti-Jewish distortions of the history of Romanian Jews. Onomastics, Avram suggests, will help bridge the division between these opposing claims and, ultimately, can serve to “decisively refute the anti-Jewish claims that negatively characterized the Jewish presence and minimized their contribution to Romanian society” (28).

Avram’s methodological approach (chapter 2) is grounded in a firm understanding of the composition of Jewish names and Jewish naming practices. A typology of Jewish surnames identifies common features through which names are organized. These categories include surnames indicating Kohen or Levite origin, which are those patrilineally descended from the biblical Aaron (34); rabbinical surnames, indicating the surnames used by “rabbinical authorities, famous religious scholars, and heads of communities” (34); “surnames developed from toponyms” (35); patronymic and matronymic surnames (35–36); surnames related to occupation (36–37); “surnames derived from personal characteristics” (37); and a category titled “artificial surnames” (37–38), which includes names that were created by administrators or the bearers themselves. Though Jews had settled in Romania over the course of half a millennium and the antiquity of a Jewish presence in Romania is well established, we still find that these communities attempted to assimilate to Romanian customs and cultures, and adopted local languages. Many diaspora communities are faced with a choice when they enter a new land: assimilate to local customs and learn other languages or risk gaining the designation of a perennial foreigner. Some Romanian Jews adapted their surnames to the local language while others adopted Romanian names outright. Avram defines Romanized surnames as “foreign non-Romanian surnames that were adapted, through different procedures, to the Romanian language” and includes those that “are completely or partially identical to native Romanian surnames, either through adaptation or, mostly, by simple adoption of a local preexisting surname” (42). At this point, Avram discusses *Entlehnung*, or linguistic loan, and examples that demonstrate varying degrees of influence on the composition of these surnames.

Three appendices serve as a valuable reference for those studying Jewish and Romanian personal names and people. The first, titled “List of Jewish Intellectuals and Artists in Romania Prior to WWII,” serves to inform a case study of Jewish intellectuals living in Romania (chapter 8). This list of personal names is organized by trade and distinguishes Romanian or Romanized names from Sephardic names. The second is a list of surnames that were used by Sephardic Jews in the Old Kingdom of Romania, with one of three additional pieces of data (when available): a birthplace, permanent residence, or a wartime place.

The third appendix can function as a stand-alone dictionary of surnames. Described as a preliminary attempt at an inventory of Romanian and Romanized surnames used by Jews in the Old Kingdom of Romania (194), the names that appear in this list come from a greater names research database. Each name is presented according to a convention established in Alexander Beider’s *A Dictionary of Jewish Surnames from the Russian Empire*. Included data are the hereditary surname; Romanian spelling along with diacritics; the location(s) in the Old Kingdom where the name is extant; and the type of name, including a rudimentary etymology according to the typology listed above. Avram provides an example of an entry with all elements in place:

Ameiroaie [Romanian spelling: *Ameiroaiei*] (Jassy, Țigănși) Matronymic: from Talmudic male given name *Meir*, of common use among Jews. *Meiroaia*, derived from *Meir*, meaning *Meir’s* wife, daughter <prefix a-; -ei> {*Amoraii*} (196–97).

While *Ameiroaie* has origins in the Rabbinic material, other Romanized names have biblical origins. Examples include names such as *Șloimaru*, listed under *Schloimaru*, from the Yiddish *Shloyme* and, ultimately, deriving from the biblical name *Solomon*. Toponymic names related to villages and geographical landmarks are also abundant, each reflecting the bearer’s location at the time the name was adopted. Surnames also demonstrate assimilation with local cultures, as demonstrated by, for example, the patronymic *Nicu*, a hypocoristicon of *Nicolae*, from the biblical *Nicholas* that was popular among Romanian Christians and “documented among Jews in the twentieth century” (248). Assimilation and intercultural melding are apparent throughout many other entries in this valuable dictionary.

Six historical claims are addressed over seven essays that appear in chapters 3–9 of this volume. In chapter 3, titled “Antiquity of Early Jewish Settlement through the Prism of Surnames,” Avram addresses the presence of Jewish permanent settlements before the surges in Jewish immigration in the early- to mid-nineteenth century. The appearance of Jewish surnames in historical documents, cemeteries, and structures such as synagogues illustrates communal presences that date as early as the beginning of the seventeenth century. Living in Romania allowed the Jews opportunity to adapt and develop their own names, oftentimes adopting local practices of nicknaming. Nicknames occasionally made their way into the official record.

Chapter 4, titled “Demographic Aspects: Rural and Urban Settlement; Internal Migrations,” investigates surnames related to toponyms and certain occupations, establishing a Jewish presence in rural villages prior to the early-nineteenth century migration. While most Jewish surnames based on toponyms were related to urban centers, Avram argues that these were places initially settled by immigrants who would adopt a surname at that time. Avram concludes that “over 21% of the toponym-based Romanian surnames (and 40% of the

records thereof) used by Jews in the Romanian lands refer to names of remote or obscure villages, located mostly in northern Moldavia and northern Bessarabia” (77). Names, in this case, can help demonstrate that vibrant rural Jewish communities were a reality in Old Kingdom Romania.

Chapter 5, titled “Socio-economic Profile of the Jewish Population,” explores the trades and professions of the Jewish populations of Romania as they appear in surnames. Data reveal that two-thirds of the occupation surnames (291 representing 6,954 individuals) are related to manual crafts (97), which challenges the Romanian historical narrative about Jews’ principal occupation in commerce and trade. Based on this semantic analysis, Avram concludes that “Jews did not focus on highly esteemed sectors; they did not seek out only wealthy patrons, but catered to all sectors of the population including simple peasants” (122).

In chapter 6, titled “Jewish Identity as Reflected in Romanian Surnames: From Traditional Separation to Integration,” surnames demonstrate at least some integration into greater Romanian society, roughly similar to their Hungarian, Polish, and Russian neighbors. Avram asserts that the primary difference is in the socio-economic strata occupied in each of these cultures; compared to other places in Eastern Europe, Jews in Romania were “perhaps less limited to the middle and upper socio-economic strata” (144). Nevertheless, we are left with a Jewish community more integrated into greater Romanian society than had been previously argued by scholarship.

Chapters 7 and 8 work together to answer an important question: “What was the Romanian governing circles’ attitude to the Jewish population’s tendencies toward integration and the reflection of those tendencies as expressed in the Romanization of Jewish surnames?” (28). Chapter 7 (“The Romanian Authorities’ Attitude: From Invited Settlers to Undesired Subjects”) follows the government’s historic response to Jewish presence and attempts at integration. Avram argues that government attitude surrounding Jewish surnames was always ambivalent, though by the Holocaust period the Romanization of Jewish surnames was opposed at the governmental level, which itself reflected contemporaneous Nazi policy surrounding Jewish names. By focusing on the names of Jewish intellectuals, chapter 8 (“A Case Study: Jewish Intellectuals and Romanian and Romanized Surnames”) reveals that Romanization was not just related to gradual acculturation; rather, it was a process of intentional integration into society that included both gradual and immediate name changes.

A short chapter 9 (“A Different Group: The Sephardim in the Old Kingdom”) explores a short list of Sephardic Jewish names in extant texts from the Old Kingdom. Avram concludes that because Sephardic Jews bore more in common with Romanian society, they were more likely to better integrate into society than Ashkenazi Jews. In this way, Sephardic Jews rarely Romanized their surnames.

In this volume, Alexander Avram outlines and carries out a methodology that approaches the semantic value of surnames in a way that informs, confirms, and verifies critical elements of Jewish history in Romania. This methodology takes the semantic value of surnames seriously, each one offering a glimpse into the life of a community that some scholars have ignored or, worse, denied. Avram confronts anti-Jewish sentiments that are embedded in the study of Romanian history and utilizes the study of names to illustrate that native and immigrant Jewish populations worked to acculturate and integrate into greater Romanian society. Historians and those working outside the field of onomastics should be attentive to Avram’s study of names and the six historical claims he derives from it; names have the power to speak justice to the contexts of the individuals who held these names, especially when those individuals can no longer speak themselves. With careful attention to the contexts of names and naming practices, historians might adopt and adapt Avram’s methodology to their own work. Beyond the volume’s six essays that appear in chapters 3–9, the book’s reference-volume components are especially relevant for any onomastician studying personal names. As a work in the field of onomastics, Avram’s volume advances the methodological utility of surnames and, therefore, this valuable work should be lauded.

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