Episode 13 – Romanian Jewish cultural avantgarde

Hello, I am Adrian Iosifescu, your host of the History of Romanian Jews podcast and this is episode thirteen, the last episode. Today we will discuss the Romanian Jews contributions to the Romanian cultural avangarde.

The First Cultural Wave: Dadaism

In the years before World War I, Europe appeared to be losing its hold on reality. Einstein's universe seemed like science fiction, Freud's theories put reason in the grip of the unconscious and Marx's Communism aimed to turn society upside down. The arts were also coming unglued. Schoenberg's music was atonal, Mallarmé's poems scrambled syntax and scattered words across the page and Picasso's Cubism made a hash of human anatomy. And even more radical ideas were afoot. Anarchists and nihilists inhabited the political fringe, and a new breed of artist was starting to attack the very concept of art itself. In Paris, after trying his hand at Impressionism and Cubism, Marcel Duchamp rejected all painting because it was made for the eye, not the mind.

Dada's origins could be traced to the Great War (1914-18), which left 10 million dead and some 20 million wounded. For many intellectuals war produced a collapse of confidence in the rhetoric—if not the principles—of the culture of rationality that had prevailed in Europe since the Enlightenment. Dada embraced and parodied that confusion. "Dada wished to replace the logical nonsense of the men of today with an illogical nonsense," wrote Gabrielle Buffet-Picabia, whose artist husband, Francis Picabia, once tacked a stuffed monkey to a board and called it a portrait of Cézanne.

This new, irrational art movement, was started in Zurich in 1916 at Cabaret Voltaire by three young artists from Romania, Tristan Tzara, Marcel Janco and Arthur Segal and the pair of Hugo Ball and Emmy Hennings and would be named Dada. It got its name from either 'yes, yes' in Rumanian, or 'rocking horse' in French. For Germans the word is a sign of foolish naiveté, joy in procreation, and preoccupation with the baby carriage. Tzara quickly used it on posters, put out the first Dada journal and wrote one of the first of many Dada manifestoes, few of which, appropriately enough, made much sense.

Tristan Tzara described its nightly shows as "explosions of elective imbecility". "Total pandemonium," wrote Hans Arp, a young Alsatian sculptor in Zurich, of the goings-on at the "gaudy, motley, overcrowded" Cabaret Voltaire. "Tzara is wiggling his behind like the belly of an Oriental dancer. Janco is playing an invisible violin and bowing and scraping. Madame Hennings, with a Madonna face, is doing the splits. Huelsenbeck is banging away nonstop on the great drum, with Ball accompanying him on the piano, pale as a chalky ghost."

Dada may also have been influenced by the absurdist French playwright Alfred Jarry, whose 1895 farce Ubu Roi (King Ubu) introduced "'Pataphysics"—"the science of imaginary solutions." It was the kind of science that Dada applauded. Erik Satie, an avant-garde composer who

collaborated with Picasso on stage productions and took part in Dada soirees, claimed that his sound collages—an orchestral suite with passages for piano and siren, for example—were "dominated by scientific thought."

It was not only the war but the impact of modern media and the emerging industrial age of science and technology that provoked the Dada artists. As Arp once complained, "Today's representative of man is only a tiny button on a giant senseless machine." The dadas mocked that dehumanization with elaborate pseudo-diagrams—chockablock with gears, pulleys, dials, wheels, levers, pistons and clockworks—that explained nothing. The typographer's symbol of a pointing hand appeared frequently in Dada art and became an emblem for the movement—making a pointless gesture. Arp created abstract compositions from cutout paper shapes, which he dropped randomly onto a background and glued down where they fell. He argued for this kind of chance abstraction as a way to rid art of any subjectivity. Duchamp found a different way to make his art impersonal—drawing like a mechanical engineer rather than an artist. He preferred mechanical drawing, he said, because "it's outside all pictorial convention." When Dadaists did choose to represent the human form, it was often mutilated or made to look manufactured or mechanical. The multitude of severely crippled veterans and the growth of a prosthetics industry struck contemporaries as creating a race of half-mechanical men.

The absurdist outlook spread like a pandemic—Tzara called Dada "a virgin microbe"—and there were outbreaks from Berlin to Paris, New York and even Tokyo. And for all its zaniness, the movement would prove to be one of the most influential in modern art, foreshadowing abstract and conceptual art, performance art, op, pop and installation art.

Duchamp's irreverence toward science was shared by two of his New York companions, Picabia and a young American photographer, Man Ray. Picabia could draw with the precision of a commercial artist, making his nonsensical diagrams seem particularly convincing. Picabia covered canvases with disorienting stripes and concentric circles—an early form of optical experimentation in modern painting. Man Ray, whose photographs documented Duchamp's optical machines, put his own stamp on photography by manipulating images in the darkroom to create illusions on film. Duchamp created one of the best-known Dadaists pieces and probably one of the most famous art pieces in the history of art - The Fountain. The Fountain consists of a signed piece of a regular white porcelain urinal seen in restrooms all over the world. Duchamp's main goal was to show that the artist had the intellectual power to choose what object becomes art.

The Berlin Dada group is also famous for coming up with a new art-form known as the photomontage. Photomontages represented a new version of collage where media images from newspapers and magazines were cut out to create a work of art with a political message. In Cologne, in 1920, German artist Max Ernst and a band of local dadas, excluded from a museum exhibition, organized their own—"Dada Early Spring"—in the courtyard of a pub. Out past the men's room, a girl wearing a "communion dress recited lewd poetry, thus assaulting both the sanctity of high art and of religion. In the courtyard, viewers were encouraged to destroy an Ernst sculpture, to which he had attached a hatchet.

Dada's last hurrah was sounded in Paris in the early 1920s, when Tzara, Ernst, Duchamp and other Dada pioneers took part in a series of exhibitions of provocative art, nude performances, rowdy stage productions and incomprehensible manifestoes. But the movement was falling apart. The French critic and poet André Breton issued his own Dada manifestoes, but fell to feuding with Tzara, as Picabia, fed up with all the infighting, fled the scene. By the early 1920s Breton was already hatching the next great avant-garde idea, Surrealism.

But Dada, which wasn't quite dead yet, would soon leap from the grave. Arp's abstractions, Schwitters' constructions, Picabia's targets and stripes and Duchamp's ready-mades were soon turning up in the work of major 20th-century artists and art movements. From Stuart Davis' abstractions to Andy Warhol's Pop Art, from Jasper Johns' targets and flags to Robert Rauschenberg's collages and combines—almost anywhere you look in modern and contemporary art, Dada did it first.

Some of the many artists involved in the Dada movement were Hasp Arp, Louis Aragon, Otto Dix, Marcel Duchamp, Paul Eluard, Max Ernst, George Grosz, Richard Huelsenbeck, Man Ray, El Lissitzky, Francis Picabia, Sophie Tauber.

Let's discuss now the Romanian founders of the Dadaism**.**

Tristan Tzara (**Samuel** or **Samy Rosenstock**, also known as **S. Samyro)** was born in the town of Moinesti not far from Iasi on April 28 1896.

Initially, the adolescent Tzara became interested in **Symbolism** and co-founded the magazine Simbolul (The Symbol) with Ion Vinea, with whom he also wrote experimental poetry, and the painter Marcel Janco. Symbolism seeks to represent absolute truths symbolically through language and metaphorical images, mainly as a reaction against naturalism and realism.

During World War I, after briefly collaborating on Vinea's Chemarea (The Call), he joined Janco in Switzerland. There, Tzara's participation in the shows at Cabaret Voltaire, as well as his poetry and art manifestos, became a main feature of early Dadaism. His work represented Dada's nihilistic side, in contrast with the more moderate approach favored by Hugo Ball.

After moving to Paris in 1919, Tzara, by then one of the "presidents of Dada", joined the staff of French magazine *Littérature*, which marked the first step in the movement's evolution toward Surrealism. He was involved in the major polemics which led to Dada's split, defending his principles against André Breton and Francis Picabia, and, in Romania, against the eclectic modernism of Vinea and Janco. This personal vision on art defined his Dadaist plays *The Gas Heart* (1921) and *Handkerchief of Clouds* (1924). A forerunner of automatist techniques, Tzara eventually aligned himself with Breton's Surrealism, and under its influence wrote his celebrated utopian poem "The Approximate Man".

During the final part of his career, Tzara combined his humanist and anti-fascist perspective with a communist vision, joining the Republicans in the Spanish Civil War and the French Resistance during World War II, and serving a term in the French National Assembly. Having spoken in favor of liberalization in the People's Republic of Hungary just before the Revolution of 1956, he distanced himself from the French Communist Party, of which he was by then a member. In 1960, he was among the intellectuals who protested against French actions in the Algerian War.

Tzara was an avant-garde poet, essayist, performance artist, journalist, playwright, literary and art critic, composer and film director. He is known best for being one of the founders and central figures of the anti-establishment Dada artistic movement.

Marcel Janco (Marcel Hermann Iancu) was born in 1895 in Bucharest. As a teenager, in 1912, he was attracted to the symbolist circles and began contributing to Simbolul with Vinea and Tzara while, in parallel, took painting lessons with Jewish artist Iosif Iser ranked as one of the greatest Romanian painters of the first half of the 20th century. In 1916 he associated with Tristan Tzara at Cabaret Voltaire as one of the initiators of the Dada. Here he made good friends with Hans Arp with whom he arranged an exhibition of masks and colored reliefs in 1919, the biggest Dada soiree ever. In 1922 he returned to Bucharest where he contributed to the magazine Contimporanul where he became friends with Maxy.

In Bucharest he earned a reputation as an architect after designing several apartment houses in a style between Cubism and Walter Gropius and Le Corbusier's functional manner. Many of these apartment buildings still exist in Bucharest although not properly maintained. The episode notes present a list of these buildings. He had many one-man shows in Bucharest and abroad. He painted, illustrated books, designed theater sets, wrote art review and theoretical essays.

In 1941 Janco settled in then Palestine and founded the famous artists' community of Ein Hod. His house in Ein Hod is now a small museum.

Arthur Segal (Aron Sigalu) was born in Iasi on June 13 1875 in a fairly wealthy Jewish family, spending most of his childhood in Botosani, a town known for its rich cultural life. It is hardly a coincidence the Romanian national poet Mihai Eminescu, the composer George Enescu and the historian Nicolae Iorga were all born in or in the vicinity of Botosani. Just like Tzara, Segal was forced to leave Romania due to a scandal and at seventeen, he goes to Berlin where he studies at the Academy of Fine Arts, then to Paris and to Munich where he matures as an international artist. He has his first one-man show in Bucharest in 1910. In 1916 he joins the Dada group and contributes to the early shows at Cabaret Voltaire. In 1918 he moves back to Berlin and opens a school of painting. The 1924 Bucharest exhibition is his last association with the artistic avangarde. He is attracted by a new movement, the New Objectivism, which advocated the return to a faithful rendition of reality. He took part in many Jewish art shows such as "Jewish Artists of our Time" in Zurich in 1929 and the Prague "Exhibition of Jewish Artists" in 1930.

The Second Cultural Wave: Surrealism

Surrealism was one of the most extraordinary artistic and intellectual movements of the 20th century. It was a movement distinguished by enormous breadth and richness, and it embraced not only art and literature but also psychoanalysis, philosophy, politics. The surrealists aimed to liberate the human imagination, and their vision, expressed in the works of some of the great artists and writers of the 20th century, has had a major influence on modern life. One of the central themes of the movement was the idea that man is a creature who is driven by desire, which to the surrealists, was th authentic voice of the inner self a path to self-discovery. The many surrealism expressions in art, literature, etc. were inspired by this vision of man as desirous of love, poetry and liberty. This avant-garde movement born in the late twenties, in France, under the strict guidance of André Breton (also called "the Pope of Surrealism"), and got rapidly internationalized. For Breton, desire was integral to life itself although in the early years of the movement the dominant theme was dream, revolution, poetry and above all love, with desire implicit in all these. Here is a who's who list of artists, in no particular order, in literature, art and film who took part in the Surrealist movement: Jean Arp, Louise Bourgeois, Brassai, Yves Tanguy, Luis Bunuel, Salvator Dali, Giorgio de Chirico, Paul Delvaux, Max Ernst, Marcel Duchamp, Alberto Giacometti, Arshile Gorky, Frida Kahlo, Rene Margritte, Man Ray, Joan Miro, Roberto Matta, Henry Moore, Francis Picabia, Louis Aragon, Roland Penrose, George Bataille, Rene Cher, Paul Eluard, Robert Desnos, and so on.
Surrealism was much influenced by Dadaism and by the poet Tristan Tzara we mentioned before and who later join the future French surrealists Breton and Aragon in 1919, and wrote surrealist poetry after 1929. The most famous example was his poem L'Homme approximative (The Approximate Man) from 1931. Meanwhile, Tzara remained in touch with the Romanian avant-garde, which considered him one of its major models.

In Romania, Surrealism began to flourish after 1928, when the first surrealist group collaborated to the magazine UNU (One) directed by the poet Saşa Pană. Among the most important contributors were the Jewish poets Ilarie Voronca, Stephane Roll, Gherasim Luca, the Jewish painters Victor Brauner, Jacques Hérold, Max Hermann Maxy and Jules Perahim. Let us notice that UNU was not called "surrealist", but "of literary avant-garde", and, although its director was in permanent contact with Breton and other French surrealists, whom he translated into Romanian and considered as models to a certain extent, his intention was not to imitate them, but to create an independent and original movement within the general stylistic framework of the international Surrealism. Otherwise, unlike Breton, Saşa Pană had no theoretical ambition, no intention to impose a doctrine in an authoritarian manner, he only tried to set a typical vanguard modus vivendi, which meant total emancipation of the spirit from all social constraints. Naturally, this modus vivendi also implied the observance of a severe moral code that excluded any compromise with the ethics and values of the bourgeois society. This is how one can explain the "excommunications" of those who were found guilty of having aspired to official consecration, to literary glory, a famous case being the exclusion of the poet Ilarie Voronca from the Romanian surrealist group, in 1931. The reason of this radical gesture was, as the poet Stephane Roll (Gheorghe Dinu) pointed out in an article, the fact that Voronca had published "the last treasure of his song" (the volume Incantations) "for 40 lei at a bloated

and mercenary “National Culture” publishing house”, an inexcusable mistake to which the endeavors made by the poet to be accepted in the Society of Romanian Writers were added. (Of course, the model of this exclusion were the famous excommunications dictated by Breton, such as the case of Salvador Dali, nicknamed with the ironical anagram “Avida Dollars”.)

Another important surrealist magazine was **Alge** (Algae), which appeared in 2 series, in 1930 and 1933, with the contribution of the Jewish poets Gherasim Luca, Paul Păun, Aureliu Baranga, Sesto Pals, and of the painter Jules Perahim. Neither this publication was called “surrealist”, but “review of modern art”, although the manner of the poems published here had numerous common points with Surrealism, such as the incongruous associations, the shocking images, the rebellious spirit meant to vex the bourgeois, and also the so-called “pure psychic automatism”, which was searched in the speech of the retarded children, considered to be “visionary”.

Perhaps the most gifted poet of this first surrealist generation was **Ilarie Voronca (Eduard Marcus)** who wrote visual poetry based exclusively on luxuriant images aggregated at random, also called for this reason “imagist poetry”. Voronca had invented in 1924, together with the painter Victor Brauner, the so-called “painting- poetry”, a mixture between poetry and painting following the pattern of the Dadaist collage. His poetic images are born one from another, without premeditation, almost automatically, depending exclusively on the poet’s momentary state of mind. In 1933, Voronca decided to emigrate to France, following Brauner and Hérold’s example, who had left for Paris in 1930. Voronca, like Victor Brauner, Jacques Herold, Gherasim Luca, Paul Păun, Dolfi Trost, and others, was a Jew when the political context in Romania was not favorable to the Jews at all. In France, Voronca continued to write in French and became quite famous. During the War he was a member of the French Resistance, but soon after the War, in 1946, troubled by a sentimental crisis, he committed suicide after a short trip to Romania. Ironically, at that time he was writing a Handbook of Perfect Happiness.

Among the surrealist painters, the case of **Victor Brauner** is extraordinary. He started by displaying his first works at the 1924 international exhibit at the Contimporanul and then again in 1929 and 1930.He contributed to the first Romania’s surrealist exhibit in 1935. He was also an energetic journalist running the 75HP avant-garde magazine and contributing to UNU, Integral and Punct (Point).

After he had been brought into the Parisian surrealist circle by his friends Giacometti and Tanguy in 1933, André Breton thought he recognized in Brauner the surrealist painter he had been expecting since the Second Manifesto of Surrealism, and he highly praised the works exhibited by Brauner at the Galerie Pierre in 1934.

The strangest thing about Victor Brauner is the fact that, before losing en eye in an accident, in 1938, he had been obsessed in his creations by the mutilation of the eyes, so that he had painted several figures with horns coming out of their eyes or with eyes in their hands (see, for example, The Last Journey, 1937), and even a self-portrait with a plucked eye (1931). Another interesting detail of this story is the fact that in several paintings on this subject (such as Mediterranean landscape, 1932, or Magic of the Seashore, 1935) eye mutilation is associated

with the letter D, which is the initial letter of Dominguez, the name of the person who accidentally plucked out Brauner's eye during a surrealist party (as a matter of fact, Oscar Dominguez was also a very gifted surrealist painter of Spanish origin). It seemed that Brauner had anticipated his accident many years before it happened, so that he was considered a visionary who transmitted mediumistic messages in his creations, a perfect example of the surrealist artist.

Like Victor Brauner, the Jewish painter **Jacques Hérold**, born in 1910 in the same Moldavian town, Piatra-Neamţ, arrived in Paris in 1930, and entered the group of André Breton in 1934, but his artistic career developed independently. He also shared with Brauner the same preoccupation with magic and occultism, so that his creations seem to hide a dark secret which can be revealed only by esoteric practices. His first personal exhibition was in Paris, in 1947, and it was followed by another 30 all over the world, as his name became famous in the context of international Surrealism.

Another interesting figure of the Jewish Romanian avant-garde is **Jean David**, born in 1908 in Bucharest. He contributed drawings to the avant-garde Unu and Alge magazines. His Bucharest debut dates to 1929 when he contributed to the official Black-and-White Salon. Two -ne-man shows followed in 1937 and 1938. Like most avant-garde painters, he illustrated books and contributed to magazines like UNU. In 1942, he left Romania in a boat with 12 other Jews, including Theodor Brauner, the brother of Victor Brauner. After being captured by British authorities in Cyprus, he managed to reach Palestrina in 1944. Following his release in 1944 he was drafted into the British Brigade, where he served as a painter until 1946. When the War of Independence broke out in Israel, he was drafted into the Israeli Navy. In 1949 he went to live in Jerusalem, where he was active in developing ceramic arts, works in copper, and artistic wall hangings under the auspices of the Ministry of Trade and Industry. In 1950, together with Marcel Janco, he founded in Israel the artist village known as Ein Hod. He also gained much reputation as a muralist and especially as a designer, having designed numerous posters and other works for the El Al air company.

Unlike most other important figures of the Romanian Avant-garde, Jewish painter **Max Herman Maxy** never left Romania. He was born in 1895 in Braila and his family moved to Bucharest in 1901 where he attended school. His first exhibit of his paintings and drawings in Iasi followed by two one-man shows in Bucharest. In 1923 he started collaborating at the literary avant-garde magazine Contimporanul and is the organizer of the first Contimporanul international exhibit which drew renown foreign artists like Paul Klee, Hasp Arp, Kurt Schwatters, Hans Richter as well as Romanians like Marcel Ianco, Brancusi, Arthur Segal, Victor Brauner. In 1925 he started another publication, Integral with Ilarie Voronca, Ion Calugaru, Brunea Fox and Benjamin Fondane.

He illustrated books by Saşa Pana, Ilarie Voronca, Ion Calugaru, Tudor Arghezi, designed stage sets for the Jewish Barasheum theater and taught at Jewish Art school. In 1949 he was appointed director of the Bucharest Museum of Art.

1933 was a crucial point in the evolution of the Romanian avant-garde, as the political context became increasingly hostile due to the rapid ascent of the extreme right. All surrealist magazines ceased to appear, and their contributors were thus forced to adopt a militant position in their articles published in the communist magazines. Nevertheless, the political engagement of almost all Romanian surrealists must be viewed as closely related to the surrealist project of radically changing the way of life in a future society. Breton himself sustained, in Position politique du surréalisme (1935), that "the authentic art of the present" had to be closely related to the "social revolutionary activity", as its goal had to be the "ruin and destruction of the capitalist society", and a propagandistic art was perfectly justified in a period of crisis. Following the example of their French fellows, the Romanian surrealists openly sustained the Proletarian Revolution, and many of them even joined the Communist Party in a moment when its activity had been declared officially illegal. Socially frustrated because of class and racial discriminations (most of them were of Jewish origin or from proletarian families), their political option was probably perfectly justified at that moment, as the idea of an egalitarian society must have been, from their point of view, extremely seductive. In the articles published during the fourth decade in the left-wing magazines Viaţa imediată (The Immediate Life), Cuvântul liber (The Free Word), Tânăra generaţie (The Young Generation), Umanitatea (Humanity), Reporter, Era Nouă (The New Era), Fapta (Action), Meridian, etc., the Romanian surrealists vehemently denounced the exploitation of the proletariat, the officially encouraged anti-Semitism, the fascist danger, and the increasingly threatening specter of the War, meanwhile sustaining the idea of an "engaged" (or "revolutionary") literature. From this project emerged a series of specific genres, such as the "proletarian poetry", the "proletarian novel", and the "reportage poem", but one may say that the idea of revolution animated the majority of literary creations published at that time by Gherasim Luca, Paul Păun, Gellu Naum, Virgil Teodorescu, Stephane Roll, etc. Therefore, no wonder that the avant-garde was perceived from the very beginning as a dangerous enemy situated, according to Eugene Ionesco's definition, within the very citadel which, with the aid of occult external forces, it was mightily striving to demolish. That was the reason the attacks against it were not confined to pre-war Romania but continued under the Communist regime.
Gherasim Luca, Gellu Naum, Victor Brauner, Jules Perahim, Gheorghe Dinu, Saşa Pană, and others were watched and sometimes arrested for supposed subversive activities.

The problem of the writer's political engagement was issued for the first time in a manifesto entitled The poetry we wish to write, published by Gherasim Luca, Paul Păun and Jules Perahim in the unique number of the magazine Viaţa imediată (The Immediate Life – December 1933). In their opinion, poetry had to thoroughly reflect daily life, as its condition was "the opposition against oppression", in other words, the social revolt. The new poetry had to be simple and aggressive, since it was addressed to the masses, whose class consciousness it was trying to awake.

Gherasim Luca, born Salman Locker,was also known as Costea Sar and Petre Malcoci, was born in 1913 in Bucharest, the son of Jewish tailor Berl Locker. He spoke Yiddish, Romanian, German, and French. Gherasim Luca was the theorist of the poetry, called "proletarian" in a series of articles published in 1935 in the left-wing magazine Cuvântul liber (The Free Word). In his

opinion, tributary to Marxist ideology, the proletarian poetry (which was opposed to the "pure" poetry, considered to be in the service of the dominant class) had to reflect the deep contradictions within the bourgeois society, in other words, its motor had to be the class struggle. The poems published by Gherasim Luca and Paul Păun between 1933 and 1937 were a perfect illustration of this program, through their deliberate anti-aestheticism expressed by the most ostentatious prosaic style, shocking gestures and violence of speech. The poet reflects here the proletarian who hates the bourgeois society; the main theme of the poems is, therefore, the class struggle, as the poem is built on an antithesis between the exploited and the exploiters. Gherasim Luca also published in 1937, in the same manner, a "proletarian" novel entitled Fata Morgana (Mirage), whose protagonist is a communist from Moldova who performs conspiratorial actions under the guidance of the communist party (officially forbidden in 1924). The stake of the book was obviously not aesthetic but political, since it is almost unreadable, the plot is badly constructed, the action is incoherent, and the style can be considered anti-literary par excellence. Gherasim Luca left Romania in 1952, and moved to Paris through Israel. In 1994, at the age of 80, he committed suicide by jumping into the Seine.

Among the members of the surrealist group "Algae", the case of the painter **Jules Perahim** is worth discussing. Jules Perahim was born Iuliu Blumenfeld in Bucharest in 1914. Following the example of Gherasim Luca and Paul Păun, he created in the thirties many paintings and drawings with political message, aiming to criticize the monarchy and the grounds of the capitalist regime in Romania. During the War he was forced to seek refuge in the Soviet Union, as he was in danger to be arrested and imprisoned or sent to a concentration camp as a communist Jew. In the Soviet Union he became one of the leaders of the Romanian Communist Party in exile, and after his return to Romania in 1944, he became a fervent supporter of the communist regime and a strong proponent of socialist realism (in the fifties he produced many works of art with propagandistic purpose). However, during the short period of liberalization started in the late sixties by Nicolae Ceausescu, in 1969, he left Romania for France where he rediscovered Surrealism and gained international recognition as one of its most prominent figures.

Another surrealist poet who initially linked his literary work with communist activities was **Gellu Naum**. Gellu Naum was born in Bucharest in 1915, the son of the poet Andrei Naum, who had been drafted in World War I and died during the Battle of Mărășești, and Maria Naum, born Rosa Gluck. Together with Gherasim Luca, Paul Păun and Virgil Teodorescu, Naum published in 1935, under the guidance of the communist party, a magazine called Tânăra Generaţie (The Young Generation), which was forbidden after only 2 issues. The same year he was arrested because one night he wrote communist slogans on a wall, in Bucharest. In 1936 he published his first volume of poetry, entitled Drumeţul incendiar (The Incendiary Traveler), which he pretended to have been inspired by Victor Brauner's paintings. The poems combine the surrealist technique of "automatic speech" with a subversive political content, as the protagonist is a typical anarchist who performs absurd actions in the spirit of the second surrealist manifesto.

Nevertheless, one must notice that the surrealist group founded by Gherasim Luca and Gellu Naum in 1940 refused to endorse the new socialist realism imposed after 1947 as the only aesthetic formula officially accepted, and that was the reason why the group was forced to dissolve shortly after the establishment of the communist regime, in 1947. Otherwise, the texts published by its members during that period, many of them in French, were entirely apolitical at a moment when not to be politically engaged was considered, from the official point of view, an inexcusable heresy.

Benjamin Fondane or **Benjamin Fundoianu** was born in 1898 Benjamin Wechsler in Iasi in a well-to-do Jewish family. As a child Benjamin spends a lot of time in the north of Moldova in a place known as Fundoaia and hence the name he chooses for himself Fundoianu. From this rural and picturesque area, he received the inspiration for the poems that will later be published in a collection called Priveliști (Landscapes). As a teenage boy, Fundoianu traveled a lot and collected and delved into the local Romanian folklore of the villages, and from that he was inspired to write songs. During and after World War I, he was active as a cultural critic, avant-garde promoter and, with his brother-in-law, manager of the theatrical troupe Insula (The isle).

Fondane began a second career in 1923, when he moved to Paris. Affiliated with Surrealism, but strongly opposed to its communist leanings, he moved on to become a figure in Jewish existentialism and a leading disciple of Lev Shestov. His critique of political dogma, rejection of rationalism and the expectation of a historical catastrophe were outlined in his celebrated essays on Charles Baudelaire and Arthur Rimbaud, as well as in his final works of poetry. In parallel, Fondane also had a career in cinema: a film critic and a screenwriter for Paramount Pictures, he later worked on the movie *Rapt* with Dimitri Kirsanoff, and directed the since-lost film Tararira in Argentina.

During the Second World War, he became a prisoner of war during the fall of France but was released and spent the occupation years in clandestinity. He was eventually found and deported to Auschwitz where he was killed.

The Third Cultural Wave: Lettrism

Lettrism is an avant-garde cultural movement, established in Paris in the mid-1940s by Isidore Isou. In their body of work Isou and the Lettrists have applied their theories to all areas of art and culture, most notably in poetry, film, painting and political theory. The movement has its theoretical roots in Dada and Surrealism. Isou viewed his fellow countryman Tristan Tzara as the greatest creator and rightful leader of the Dada movement, and dismissed most of the others as plagiarists and falsifiers. André Breton was a significant influence, but Isou was dissatisfied by what he saw as the stagnation and theoretical bankruptcy of Surrealism as it stood in the 1940s. In French this movement is called Lettrisme, from the French word for alphabet character, arising from the fact that many of their early works centered on alphabet characters and other visual or spoken symbols. Isou developed this notion in his book *La Créatique ou la Novatique*. His theory is that societies develop not because of the human instinct for survival, but because of the desire to create. If creativity was the highest form of

action, and art was its most visible form, then humanity was in charge of history. In this way, the artist took the place of God, the first Creator or artist. It was, he stated, no less than the complete reinvention of culture and what it meant to be a human being. Isou was fascinated by the popularity of alchemy during the Renaissance and the alchemists belief that everything can be transformed. This is Lettrism in action; it is how music becomes painting and painting becomes film and film become writing : all is endlessly mutable.

Isidore Isou was born Isidor Goldstein in 1925 in Botosani. His mother affectionately called him Izu, the Romanian-Jewish form of his name, which he precociously adopted as his avant-garde *nom de guerre* when he moved to Bucharest while still an adolescent. His first book published in 1947, *L'Agrégation d'un nom et d'un messie* (The Making of a Name and of a Messiah), he described how he was physically attacked for being a Jew, made to work in a forced labor camp, keept trying to escape, was caught up in massacres, and all the time hears rumors of the terrible slaughter of Jews in the north of Romania.

When he arrived in Paris in 1945, Isou began his career at the very height of avant-garde fashion. He was charismatic and good-looking, and he quickly gathered a pack of well-read young hooligans as followers. This new gang of *lettristes* was soon notorious for their punch-ups, their weird, threatening poetry, their girls and their arrogance. Isou now socialized with and insulted the elite thinkers of the Left Bank, including André Breton, Jean Cocteau, Jean-Paul Sartre and others. He recalled that a favorite *lettriste* game was to knock the hat off the now elderly Tristan Tzara as he walked to a café for his morning coffee. The new snotty young heroes of the avant-garde had no time for icons.

This is the self-created legend of Isou, which in the past few decades has been passing into literature and history. It was no doubt that his popularity inspired in 1955 a curious Orson Welles to interview Isou on film. In the film, Isou and another smartly dressed *lettriste* (Isou's then chief lieutenant, Maurice Lemaître) read out a sound poem about snow to a clearly baffled Welles.

Even some of Isou's most faithful followers thought that his ideas became increasingly opaque and impenetrable. The closest intimates were being told by Isou that if they studied hard enough then the secret language of the Universe would be revealed to them. Isou began to refer to himself as *Dieu-Isou* (God-Isou) and peppered his talks and writing with references to the Hermetic tradition and Jewish mysticism. *Lettrisme*, he insisted, was now neither art nor science; it was no less than the reinvention of all human knowledge. Eventually, many of his followers left Lettrisme and followed Guy Debord who started the **Situationist** movement. Under Debord's influence the Situationists despising Isou as a mystic and therefore the enemy of real material revolution which, they thought, had to happen and in fact was about to happen.

After his death in 2007 Isou's reputation continued to get better all the time. A major retrospective of Isou's work was organized at Centre Pompidou and some of his work has been shown in Tel Aviv, Bucharest and New York. His massive archive was acquired by the

Bibliothèque Kandinsky, the leading research library of modern art in Paris. Scholarly books about Isou have being issued in Stanford, Princeton, London, Cambridge and Berlin, as well as Paris.

The consensus seems to be that whatever Debord and his disciples might have said, *Lettrisme* was – or is – the missing link between Dada, Surrealism and Situationism.

This concludes the last episode of my podcast.

Many thanks to all of you who stepped with me through this brief history of Jews in Romania. I'm hopping that many of the topics presented here will be explored in more depth and will continue to enrich the historical, social and cultural legacy of all of us, Jews of Romanian extraction.