

Episode 6 – The Romanian Jews and the Holocaust

Hello, I am your host, Adrian Iosifescu, and this is the sixth episode of the History of Romanian Jews podcast. Today we will discuss the Romanian participation in the Holocaust.

In the period between the two world wars the Bucharest community grew in both numbers and importance. The Jewish population of the city, now the capital of greater Romania and attracting settlers from all parts of the country, increased from 44,000 in 1912 to 74,480 (12% of the total population) in 1930, and to 95,072 in 1940. About two thirds of those gainfully employed were occupied as artisans, workers, clerks, and shop assistants; others were active in the liberal professions, especially medicine and law. In 1920, the statute of the reconstituted Ashkenazi community was officially approved, and in 1931, following the publication of the new law for the Organization of the Cults, the community was officially recognized as the legal representative of the city's Ashkenazi Jewish population. With the reconstitution of the organized community, all Jewish institutions were brought under its jurisdiction. The community's religious, educational and welfare institutions included over 40 synagogues, 2 cemeteries, 19 schools, a library and historical museum, 2 hospitals, a clinic, 2 old-age homes, and 2 orphanages. The spiritual head of the Ashkenazi community during this period was rabbi Jacob Itzhak Niemirower, while the outstanding lay leader was the lawyer Wilhelm Filderman. Like many other Jewish communities in Romania, the Bucharest community and its leaders continued to play an important role in the social and political life of Romanian Jewry.

The Jewish Community of Romania was large and significant economically, socially and culturally. At the beginning of 1940 it had about 800,000 souls, the third largest Jewish community in Europe and the fourth in the world (behind the USSR, Poland and USA). Out of those, about 300,000 have perished in the Holocaust.

The Romanian chapter of the Holocaust was quite atypical. Several different types of Holocaust operated in Romania. Conditions in Bessarabia and Bukovina were different of those in northwestern Romania, administered by Hungary during the war, and still other conditions prevailed in the rest of Romania. Moreover, there were other circumstances in the cities where pogroms took place during 1940 - 1941: Dorohoi in August 1940, Bucharest in January 1941, Iasi June 1941 and occupied Odessa in October 1941. However, to argue, as some historians did, that Marshal Antonescu saved the Jews of Romania is absurd. It's like saying that a man who killed ("only") four in ten Jews would have rescued the other six. A dictator who kills 200,000 people is a criminal.

Atypical is as well the very small number of Romanians who were honored and awarded medals by the Yad Vashem Museum in Israel as "righteous among the nations", in other words, non-Jews who - without seeking any material gain - saved the lives of Jews during the Second World War. In 1990, at the time of the fall of the communist regime, the number of "righteous among the nations" registered in Romania was only 36 people (among them Traian Popovici, mayor of Chernovitsi and Viorica Hagar, President of the "Red Cross" society in Roman). But at the time, there were 3,265 "righteous among the nations" registered in the Netherlands and 2,972 in

Poland. In other words, the number of Romanians "righteous among nations" was tiny, only 1.1% compared to the Dutch or Poles. It is certain that this was not the correct number. Particularly since after 1990, the number of those decorated by Yad Vashem doubled and that is because the Communist regime in Romania has discouraged people from participating in this program. For the Communist regime, the Holocaust was a taboo. There was some talk about the genocide of Jews in northwestern Transylvania, just as a stab to the brotherly Hungary. For the Romanian nationalistic Communism, in the 70s and 80s, when Marshal Antonescu and the Legionnaires were partially rehabilitated, to recognize that there were many who had rescued Romanian Jews from death was an implicit admission that Jewish life in Romania had been in danger.

In 1941, 102,018 Jews lived in Bucharest, although possibly there were more, due to the influx of refugees from other parts of Romania. Many Jewish properties were "Romanized." Jewish professionals were not allowed to work, and Jewish pupils were excluded from public schools. The Federation of Jewish Communities was dissolved and its place the *Centrala evreilor*, in English the Jewish Center, was set up. The only Jewish journal published was *Gazeta evreiasca*, The Jewish Newspaper, which was censored. The Jews of Bucharest were obliged to pay high taxes. Many Jewish men were taken to forced labor. Due to the pauperization of many Jews, the community had to help them. However, Jewish schools – primary, secondary, and higher – were founded. A Jewish theater was opened. A Jewish canteen for the poor also operated. Zionist leaders made efforts to prepare the Jews for emigration to Palestine and dealt with the Romanian government in order to enable emigration.

German penetration into the Romanian economy increased as the Nazis moved eastward with the Anschluss of Austria in 1938, the annexation of Czechoslovakia in 1939, and the occupation of western Poland at the outbreak of World War II. A considerable number of Romanian politicians agreed to serve German interests in exchange for directorships in German-Romanian enterprises. German trade agreements with Romania always demanded the removal of Jews in the firms involved. In this way, Jews were expelled from commerce and industry. In the summer of 1940, Romania gave in to German pressure and transferred Bessarabia and part of Bukovina to the Soviet Union, northern Transylvania to Hungary, and southern Dobruja to Bulgaria. When the Romanian army retreated from these areas, its soldiers murdered many Jews, particularly in northern Bukovina and Bessarabia, accusing them of Soviet collaboration; they also threw Jewish travelers from moving trains. On June 30, 1940, 52 Jews were murdered in Dorohoi by a retreating Romanian regiment.

Hoping to ensure its borders after these forced territorial concessions, Romania, which had not been invaded by the German army, became a satellite of Nazi Germany. The first result of this move was the cancellation of Romanian citizenship for Jews, a measure taken by the government, which included members of the Iron Guard, under German pressure in August 1940. On September 6, when King Carol abdicated, Ion Antonescu, who had been minister of defense in the Goga government, came to power. His government included ministers from the ranks of the Iron Guard, and Romania was declared a Nationalist-Legionary State (the members

of the Iron Guard styled themselves "legionnaires"). The "legionary police" was organized on Nazi lines with the help of German S.S. and the S.D.

The coming to power of Antonescu was followed by a period of anti-Semitic terrorism that began with the confiscation of Jewish-owned shops, together with the posting of signs marked "Jewish shop" and picketing by the green-shirted "legionary police." The reign of terror reached its height when Jewish industrial and commercial enterprises were handed over to the members of the "Legion" under pressure from the Iron Guard. The owners of the enterprises were arrested and tortured by the "legionary police" until they agreed to sign certificates of transfer. Bands of "legionnaires" entered Jewish homes and "confiscated" any sums of money they found. This resulted in a mortal blow to the Romanian economy and a general chaos that frightened even the German diplomats. Antonescu tried on several occasions to control the wave of terrorism, during which a number of Romanian statesmen opposed to the Iron Guard were also killed.

Bucharest Pogrom

On January 21, 1941, the Iron Guard revolted against Antonescu and attempted to seize power in order to carry out its anti-Semitic program in full. While part of the Legion was fighting the Romanian army for control of government offices and strategic points in the city, the rest carried out a pogrom on Bucharest Jews, aided by local hooligans. Jewish homes were looted, shops burned, and many synagogues desecrated, including two that were razed to the ground (the Great Sephardi Synagogue and the old *bet ha-midrash*). Some of the leaders of the Bucharest community were imprisoned in the community council building, worshipers were ejected from synagogues, the Palestine Office of the Zionist Organization was attacked and its director murdered, and wealthy Bucharest Jews were arrested, according to a previously prepared list. Those arrested were taken to centers of the Iron Guard movement: some were then taken into the forests near Bucharest and shot; others were murdered and their bodies hung on meat hooks in the municipal slaughterhouse, bearing the legend "kosher meat." The pogrom claimed 120 Jewish lives. There were no acts of violence in the provinces because the army was in firm control and fully supported Antonescu. This was also Hitler's reason for supporting Antonescu. Romania held an important role in the war contemplated against the Soviet Union, not only as a supply and jumping-off base but as an active partner in the invasion of the country. A period of relative calm followed the Bucharest pogrom and permitted Romanian Jews to gather strength after the shock of the violence. Antonescu, however, was under constant German pressure, for when their revolt failed, members of the Iron Guard found refuge in Germany, where they constituted a permanent threat to his position, as he now lacked his own party to serve as a counterbalance.

In January 1941, Manfred von Killinger, a veteran Nazi known for his anti-Semitic activities, was appointed German ambassador to Romania. In April he was joined by Gustav Richter, an adviser on Jewish affairs who was attached to Adolf Eichmann's department. Richter's special task was to bring Romanian anti-Jewish legislation into line with its counterpart in Germany.

Jassy Pogrom

The Iasi pogrom is probably the best-known event in the history of the Romanian Holocaust. It was a major outbreak of violent antisemitism, yet it was not isolated; rather it was part of long

series of mass-murders committed by Romanian fascists. The Iasi pogrom was followed by the systematic deportation and extermination of the Jews from Bessarabia and Bukovina and by the extermination of the Ukrainian Jews from Transnistria.

In late June 1941, a pogrom broke out in Iasi that resulted in the deaths of thousands of Jews. The Romanian secret service and their collaborators, some former members of the then outlawed Iron Guard, were the instigators of the pogrom. On Saturday, 28 June 1941, at 9:00 p.m., a flare was shot from a German aircraft above Iasi, signaling the beginning of the pogrom. Immediately shots were fired from the streets, from houses, and from rooftops in almost every quarter of the town. At the same time, German and Romanian soldiers and police went to houses and businesses throughout the city to round up Jews, torturing and killing many of them. Those remaining were brought to several collection sites, but primarily to police headquarters. Authorities claimed that those Jews apprehended were Jewish-communists and were believed to have aided the Soviets by signaling to the Russian planes, but Jews of all ages were taken into custody. Both the shooting and the rounding up continued throughout the night, until midday on June 29, when a total of 5,000-6,000 Jews had been assembled. Then, between 2:30 and 3:00 p.m., a false air-raid alarm was sounded, at which point the assembled Jews were fired on from all directions by the Romanian soldiers guarding them. The massacre continued for several hours, until the executioners were exhausted, and less than half of the Jewish prisoners remained alive. In the evening the survivors, numbering between 2,430 and 2,590 people, were marched to the local train station, where they endured an extended counting procedure before being boarded onto freight cars. Between 80 and 200 Jews, including many who were wounded, were crowded into each of the 33 to 39 railcars. Their captors then nailed shut the narrow ventilation slats in the cars. The train was decorated on the outside with slogans identifying the cargo as "Communist Jews" or "Killers of German and Romanian soldiers." Two trains departed from Iasi bearing the survivors of the pogrom that took place in the city. For the next 17 hours the death trains traveled a circuitous route to Targu Frumos, Pascani, Lespezi, back to Pascani, then on to Roman, and finally, back to Targu Frumos, where it stopped. Both evacuation transports resulted in the deaths of hundreds of Jews from heat exhaustion, suffocation, dehydration and suicide during the journey aboard crowded, unventilated freight cars in the heat of the summer. As the first train stopped at Targu Frumos, more than 650 bodies were piled onto trucks and carts and taken to the local Jewish cemetery, where large trenches were dug to serve as mass graves. At Mircesti, 327 corpses were unloaded and buried on the outskirts of the town. At Sabaoani another 300 corpses were removed. From the initial 2,590 people, only 1,076 of the captives survived the journey in the first 'death' train.

The second death train also departed Iasi early on June 30. This transport carried 1,902 Jews who were packed into 18 railcars, along with 80 corpses of those who had been killed earlier. The train took eight hours to reach its final destination at Podu Iloaei, only 20 km from Iasi. As with the first train, hundreds died along the way. Only 708 of the captives reached Podu Iloaei, where they were confined to synagogues or assigned to private Jewish homes. The survivors remained between one and three months before being allowed to return to Iasi.

Based on the lists of the dead prepared by the synagogues in Iasi, 13,266 Jews perished in this pogrom.

The killing of the Jews in Bessarabia and Bukovina

Let's talk now about the killing of Jews in Bessarabia and Bukovina. On June 22, 1941, when war broke out with the Soviet Union, the Romanian and German armies were scattered along the banks of the Prut River to penetrate into Bukovina and Bessarabia. Their combined advance through Bessarabia, Bukovina, and the Dorohoi district was accompanied by massacres of the local Jewish population. On July 17 Romanian and German troops entered Kishinev, the historical capital of Bessarabia. An estimated 10,000 Jews were killed and remaining 75,000-80,000 people were herded into camps in preparation for being taken out of the region in what authorities called 'the purification of Romanian land'.

At the beginning of August 1941 the Romanian army began sending deportees from Bukovina and Bessarabia over the Dniester River into a German-occupied area of the U.S.S.R. (later to be known as Transnistria). The Germans refused to accept the deportees, shooting some and returning the rest. Some of these Jews drowned in the river and others were shot by the Romanian police on the western bank; of the 25,000 persons who crossed the Dniester near Sampol, only 16,500 were returned by the Germans. Some of these survivors were killed by the Romanians, and some died of weakness and starvation on the way to camps in Bukovina and Bessarabia. Half of the 320,000 Jews living in Bessarabia, Bukovina, and the Dorohoi district were murdered during the first few months of Romania's involvement in the war in 1941.

After this period the Jews were concentrated in ghettos (if they lived in cities), in special camps if they lived in the countryside, or in townlets such as Secureni, Yedintsy, or Vertyuzhani. German killing squads and Romanian gendarmes, copying the Germans, habitually entered the ghettos and camps, removing Jews and murdering them. Jews living in villages and townlets in Old Romania (Moldova, Walachia, and southern Transylvania) were concentrated in the nearest large town. The Jews of northern Moldavia, which bordered on the battle area, were sent to the west of Romania: men under 60 were sent to a Targu-Jiu camp and the women, children, and aged were sent to towns where the local Jewish population was ordered to care for the deportees who owned nothing more than the clothing on their backs. The homes and property of these deportees were looted by the local population immediately after they were deported.

On September 16, 1941, those in camps in Bessarabia began to be deported to Transnistria, a region between the Dniester and the Bug rivers, from which the Germans had withdrawn, handing control over to the Romanians under the Tighina agreement of August 30, 1941. The deportations included 118,847 Jews from Bessarabia, Bukovina, and the Dorohoi district. At the intervention of the Union of Jewish Communities in Romania, an order was given on October 14 to stop the deportations. They continued, however, until November 15, leaving all the Jews of Bessarabia and Bukovina [with the exception of 20,000 from Chernovtsy] concentrated in Transnistria. Within two months of deportation, 22,000 Jews died. Some died because they could walk no further, and some died from disease, but the majority of Jews were murdered by

the gendarmerie that accompanied them on their journey. All the money and valuables were confiscated by representatives of the Romanian National Bank.

The Jews remaining in Old Romania and in southern Transylvania were compelled into forced labor and were subjected to wearing the yellow star on their clothing. The prohibition against Jews working in certain professions and the "Romanization of the economy" continued and caused the worsening of the economic situation of the Jewish population.

My father, a young lawyer at that time, was immediately excluded from the lawyers' association and forced into cleaning the streets of Bucharest.

According to the statistical table on the potential victims of the "Final Solution" introduced at the Wannsee Conference, 342,000 Romanian Jews were destined to perish. The German embassy in Bucharest conducted an intensive propaganda campaign through its journal, *Bukarester Tageblatt*, which announced "an overall European solution to the Jewish problem" and the deportation of Jews from Romania. On July 22, 1942, Richter obtained Vice-Premier Mihai Antonescu's agreement to begin the deportation of the Romanian Jews to Poland in September. However, as a result of the efforts of the clandestine Jewish leadership, foreign diplomatic pressure, and pressure by the papal nuncio, Cassulo, Ion Antonescu canceled the agreement. He could afford a measure of independence since Hitler was then seeking the mobilization of additional divisions of the Romanian army against the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, Eichmann's Bucharest office, working through the local authorities, succeeded in obtaining the deportation of 7,000 Jews from Chernovtsy, Dorohoi, and groups from other parts of Romania. These 7,000 were "suspected of Communism" (they were of Bessarabian origin and had asked to return to the Soviet Union in 1940), and had "broken forced-labor laws."

At the beginning of December 1942, the Romanian government informed the Jewish leadership of a change in its policy toward Jews. It would grant Jews deported to Transnistria the right to emigrate to Palestine. Defeat at Stalingrad, where the Romanian army lost 18 divisions, was already anticipated. In 1942–43 the Romanian government began to consider signing a separate peace treaty with the Allies. Although the plan for large-scale emigration failed because of German opposition and lack of facilities, both small and large boats left Romania carrying "illegal" immigrants to Palestine, some of whom were refugees from Bukovina, Poland, Hungary, and Slovakia.

Despite German efforts, the Romanian government refused to deport its Jews to the "east." At the beginning of 1943, however, there was a return to the traditional economic pressures against the Jews in order to reduce the Jewish population. This was achieved by forbidding Jews to work in the civilian economy and by the most severe measure of all – forced labor. In addition, various taxes were imposed on the Jewish population for cash, clothing, shoes, and hospital equipment. These measures, particularly the taxes to be remitted in cash—of which the largest was a levy of 4 billion lei or about \$27,000,000 imposed in March 1943—severely pressed Romanian Jewry. The taxes were collected by the "Jewish center."

At the end of 1943, as the Red Army drew nearer to Romania, the local Jewish leadership succeeded in obtaining the gradual return of those deported to Transnistria. The Germans tried several times to stop the return and even succeeded in bringing about the arrest of the leadership of the clandestine Zionist pioneering movements in January and February 1944. The leaders were released through the intervention of the International Red Cross and the Swiss ambassador in Bucharest who contended that they were indispensable for organizing the emigration of those returning from Transnistria and other refugees in Romania. In March 1944 contacts were made in Ankara between Ira Hirschmann, representative of the U.S. War Refugee Board, and the Romanian ambassador, A. Cretzianu. Hirschmann demanded the return of all those deported to Transnistria and the cessation of the persecution of Jews. At the time, the Red Army was defeating the Germans in Transnistria, and there was a danger that the retreating Germans might slaughter the remaining Jews. Salvation came at the last moment when Antonescu strongly warned the Germans to avoid killing Jews while retreating. Concurrently, negotiations over Romania's withdrawal from the war were being held in Cairo and Stockholm, and thus Antonescu was eager to show goodwill toward the Jews for the sake of his own future.

In the spring, Soviet forces also conquered part of Moldova and they made an all-out attack on August 20. On August 23, King Michael arrested Antonescu and his chief ministers and declared a cease-fire. The Germans could no longer control Romania, for they were dependent on the support of the Romanian army, which had been withdrawn.

Out of the Jewish population under Romanian rule during the war, including the Jews of Bessarabia and northern Bukovina, only 57% survived the Holocaust. The following statistics give the death toll. Out of the prewar Jewish population, 264,900 (43%) were murdered. Of this number, 166,597 perished during the first period of the war, 151,513 from Bessarabia and Bukovina, and 15,064 from part of Old Romania. The rest died during the deportations to Transnistria or in the camps and ghettos of this region: some were murdered; others died in epidemics, famine, or exposure. In areas from which Jews were not deported, 78.2% of the Jewish population was left without a livelihood.

Hungarian Northern Transylvania

As mentioned before, Northern part of Transylvania was handed to Hungary at the beginning of the 2nd World War. The Horthy regime deported 166,061 Jews from there during war and another 151,180 in June 1944, days before the war ended. Only 35,769 deported Jews survived.

Jewish Resistance

Let's review Romanian Jewish resistance to the holocaust.

As soon as Hitler assumed power in Germany (1933), Jewish leaders in Bucharest, mostly Zionists, decided not to remain passive. In November, the congress of the Jewish Party in Romania decided to join the anti-Nazi boycott movement, disregarding the protest raised by the Romanian press and anti-Semitic groups.

On January 29, 1936, the Central Council of Jews in Romania, composed of representatives of both Jewish trends—the U.E.R. and the Jewish Party—was established for "the defense of all Jewish rights and liberties against the organizations and newspapers that openly proclaimed the introduction of the racial regime." At the end of the year, the Council succeeded in averting a bill proposed in the parliament by the anti-Semitic circles suggesting that citizenship be revoked from the Jews. During the same period, the Romanian government attempted to suppress the state subvention for Jewish religious needs, as well as the exemption from taxes accorded to Jewish community institutions. The Council could not obtain the maintenance of the subvention, and it was finally reduced to one-sixth of its allotment.

When Goga's anti-Semitic government came to power, the Council began a struggle against it, gaining support and attention outside Romania. Filderman, president of the Council, left at once for Paris, where he mobilized the world Jewish organizations with headquarters in France and England. He informed local political circles and the League of Nations of events in Romania. At the same time, the Jews in Romania began an expanded economic boycott, refraining from commercial transactions, withdrawing their deposits from the banks, and delaying tax payments. The outcome was a "large-scale paralysis of the economic life," as the German minister of foreign affairs stated in his circular of March 9, 1938. Thus, the dismissal of the Goga government after only 40 days was motivated not only by external pressure but also by the effects of the Jewish economic boycott.

Following the downfall of the Goga government, King Carol's royal dictatorship abolished all the political parties in Romania, including the Jewish Party and the Union of Romanian Jews. The single body of the Jews in Romania was the Union of the Jewish Communities, whose board was composed of the leaders of both Jewish currents. The Union assumed the task of fighting against the increasing number of anti-Jewish measures promulgated by the Romanian authorities under pressure from local anti-Semitic circles and the German government. In some cases, its interventions were successful; for example, it achieved the nullification of the prohibition against collecting contributions to Zionist funds, and, as a result of its protests, the restrictions against the Jewish physicians and the Jewish industrial schools were abrogated. In the summer of 1940, after Romania ceded Bukovina and Bessarabia to the Soviet Union, the Romanian police tried to eject Jewish refugees from those two provinces. The Union's board succeeded in convincing the Ministry of the Interior to annul the measure. When the interdiction of ritual slaughter was decreed, the board obtained authorization for the ritual slaughtering of poultry.

The Zionist leadership negotiated with Antonescu to organize the emigration of Romanian Jews. The minister of finance proposed that the emigration be funded by Romanian assets; which had been frozen in the United States because Romania had joined the Axis. The transaction had to be accomplished through the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), whose representative in Romania was also the president of the Union. In every city, the Jewish community had to register those who wanted to emigrate and were able to pay the amount demanded by the government. The Union's board utilized this agreement as leverage for achieving certain concessions, especially after Romania joined Germany in the war against the Soviet Union.

After Jews began to be deported from Bessarabia and Bukovina to Transnistria, the board delegated Chief Rabbi Safran to intervene with the queen mother, Patriarch Nicodem, and the

archbishop of Bukovina and induce them to intercede with Antonescu to halt the deportations and permit aid to those who had already been transported over the Dniester.

On July 22, when Richter obtained Mihai Antonescu's approval to the deportation of the Jews to the extermination camps in Poland, the clandestine Jewish Council immediately learned of the details of the deportation program and used personal contacts to achieve the repeal of the agreement. Safran invited the archbishop of Transylvania, Nicholas Balan, to Bucharest, since the transports were to be initiated from there. The queen mother was also convinced by Safran to intercede and, together with the archbishop and Ion Antonescu, she did so. Others were also asked to intercede on behalf of the Jews. The papal nuncio, Andreas Cassulo; the Swiss ambassador, Rene de Weck; and even Antonescu's personal physician helped repeal the decision. After overcoming the danger of deportation to the extermination camps in Poland, the Jewish Council began to request the return of those who had survived the deportations to Transnistria. The dealings with the Romanian government began in November 1942 over the question of a ransom to be paid by Zionist groups outside Romania. Eichmann's unceasing interventions prevented a clear-cut decision until, on April 23, Antonescu—under German pressure—issued the order that not a single deportee should return. The Jewish leaders then initiated the struggle for a step-by-step resolution to the problem, asserting that a series of categories had been deported arbitrarily, without previous investigation. Only at the beginning of December did the deportees begin to return. It was, however, a struggle against time, as the front had reached Transnistria.

In the early 1960s, Hannah Arendt wrote "It is hardly an exaggeration to say that Romania was the most antisemitic country in the pre-war Europe".

In assessing the actions of Antonescu and Romania in general towards the country's Jewish population, historian Raul Hilberg concludes that "no country besides Germany was involved in massacres of the Jews on such scale".

The Holocaust historian Paul Johnson wrote "After the Germans and Austrians, the Romanians were the greatest killers of Jews".

Next week when we will discuss Romanian Jews in the Communist Romania.

Until then be well.