

the Communist period was “better” than the current one and distrust democracy, the market economy, minorities (Jews especially), and state that the current situation in Romania would only be improved by a dictatorship.

Translation from the Romanian by Sean Cotter

About the author:

Victor Eskenasy, a Swiss historian and journalist associated with Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty in Munich and Prague, was born in Romania. He has monitored Romanian extremism and anti-Semitism for years. Among other books and studies, he is co-editor of *The Bibliography of the Jews in Romania* (1991) and author of “The Holocaust and Romanian Historiography: Communist and Neo-Communist Revisionism” (in *The Tragedy of Romanian Jewry*, ed. R.L. Braham, 1994), *Moses Gaster, Memoirs. Correspondence* (1998), and other works.

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Romanian Interest in the Deportation of Roma to Transnistria (1942-1944)

by Viorel Achim, Nicolae Iorga Institute of History, Bucharest

The deportation of Roma to Transnistria is a chapter in the Romanian Holocaust. It is the story of the tragic fate of more than 25,000 Romanian citizens of Gypsy (Roma) origin, who the Marshall Ion Antonescu government deported to the Soviet territory between the Dniester and Bug rivers (called Transnistria), an area at that time under Romanian occupation. Between the summer of 1942, when the first deportations began, and the spring of 1944, when the survivors returned, approximately 11,000 Roma lost their lives in Transnistria, largely due to the terrible living conditions, starvation and diseases. The subject has been late to come to the attention of researchers, the first studies being published only in 1997, but today it benefits from a relatively good historiographical coverage. Minor aspects have

also been covered, for example, the attitudes of Romanian peasants toward the deportation of Roma or the work performed by the deported at kolholzes, farms, and other places.

The fact that research into the deportation of Roma began late is not necessarily a disadvantage. It means that, from the beginning, studies on this subject have been based on archival documents, held to standards of some type, and they have not left room for dilettantish or biased works, although one understands that these kind of works have also appeared. Thanks to the way in which this subject was introduced into historical research, and the way it was brought to public attention, there is no room here for the imprecision we find in the treatment of other subjects regarding the Holocaust either in Romania or in other places.

Of course, in the ensemble of Romanian Holocaust topics, the deportation of Roma is not the most important, because the number of the Jews deported to that territory was much larger and their topics are more complicated. The deportation of Roma is its own, well demarcated subject. The deportation is well documented, because almost all the files created by Romanian authorities and institutions which organized these deportations were preserved, as well as those made in Transnistria by the authorities in charge of the deportees, and these files are available today, in various archives in Romania and Ukraine. The particularity of this subject lies in the special place Gypsies (Roma) held in the ethnic policies of the Antonescu government, and more generally, in the historical characteristics of this population in Romania. These details explain why the persecutions (including deportation) affected only some categories of Roma (the nomads and from the sedentary Roma, those who were considered “undesirable”) and not the entire Roma population (which demographers estimated at 208,700).

In Romania, Roma have been officially recognized, alongside Jews, as victims of the Holocaust. The International Commission for the Study of the Holocaust in Romania, established by the President of Romania, which functioned in the years 2003-2004, gave fitting attention to the Roma deportation. The commission’s Final Report includes a chapter dedicated to Roma (“The Deportation of the Roma and Their Treatment in Transnistria”, in: Tuvia Friling, Radu Ioanid, Mihail E. Ionescu (eds.), *Final Report*, Iași: Polirom, 2005, pp. 223-241). Other chapters of the report, as well as the conclusion, discuss Roma persecution. The report was presented to the President of Romania on November 11, 2004, and in accepting it, the Romanian state accepted responsibility for both the deportations to Transnistria and the Holocaust, in general. Even before the Romanian state officially recognized the Holocaust, Romanian law recognized the persecutions of Jews and Roma by including them in Law 19 from the year 2000, regarding persons who have suf-

fered ethnic or racial persecution between 6 September 1940 and 21 December 1989, that is, during the fascist and communist regimes. Survivors who made claims received special pensions from the Romanian state, according to the length of time they were in Transnistria.

Today, the Romanian public knows that, in the case of Romania, the Holocaust meant the persecution of not just Jews, but also Roma, and more specifically, the deportation to Transnistria of some groups within this minority. The public was also aware of the deportation of Roma during the war, the clearest evidence of which being the hundreds of complaints made by the majority population, in favor of Roma from the respective village or city who were deported or threatened with deportation. In some places, the memory of the Roma deportation was retained for some time after the war, but I believe we can say that, before the discussion of the subject that took place around the year 2000, the great majority of Romanians knew nothing of the fact that some of their fellow citizens were deported to Transnistria during the Second World War. They heard of it only recently, from the mass media or, more recently, from school textbooks. As one who follows the portrayal of the Roma deportation in Romanian mass media, I can say that between 1998 and c. 2005, all categories of the press showed a certain interest in the subject, in any case much larger than their later, diminished interest. In recent years, the subject was placed in school textbooks, in the sense that the lessons about the Holocaust give mention to the Roma deportation.

One might have expected the subject would have been brought to public attention by the Roma themselves, as happened in the West, where the organizations of the Sinti and Roma were the first to draw attention, in the 1970s, to the fact that the Nazi genocide included this population, as well. This kind of activity would have been possible in Romania in the first years after the war and at the beginning of the communist regime. At this time, the authorities encouraged any accusation against the Antonescu regime; Jews, for example, were very active in bringing to public

knowledge the persecutions they suffered in the years of the military-fascist dictatorship. These types of initiatives from Roma organizations were, in contrast, few and meager, even though these organizations enjoyed the support of the new authorities. After the changes in Romania in 1989, one might have expected that the numerous, newly formed Roma organizations would take up, in one way or another, the question of the deportations to Transnistria. This did not happen until much later, beginning at the end of the 90s, when the question was broached of compensation for victims of war-time persecution, money offered by governments and organizations in the West. Only then did Roma NGOs begin to show clear and consistent interest in the deportations to Transnistria, helping survivors to obtain their rightful reparations.

For the ordinary Roma as well, interest in the deportation period is connected to the question of compensation. From my own experience, more precisely from the contacts I have had with many Roma survivors of Transnistria, whom I contacted in order to hear details I could not find in archival documents, I can say that, in the period before the payments were announced, the interest of these people for what they experienced during the war was low. The communist period, in contrast, was of much higher interest. During this period, many families were required to become sedentary, to radically change not only their habits but also occupations, in the course of which the authorities often confiscated their gold (the family's entire savings), etc. I do not believe that the older people resisted discussion of Transnistria due to some fear that these experiences would be repeated; rather, they did so because, in the family and community's collective memories at that time, deportation did not play an important role. Now, however, after the respective individual or family has passed through the procedures of several payment programs, which require the recollection of traumatic deportation experiences, the deportation years are the central element of their past. The tens of Roma survivor interviews published in the last years

are, I believe, proof of this; they reveal the fact that the payment programs provided the opportunity to raise Romas' interest in their own history. The compensations were also a means of legitimization for Roma organizations, which became intermediaries in these procedures, winning the allegiance of those people with whom they worked. It should mention that, for some payment programs, the number of applications reached the thousands, far surpassing the number of survivors, which was small. Those who wanted to interview the survivors discovered they were difficult to find. Most were interviewed, during those years in which the respective programs were in operation.

It was ironic that the oldest survivor of Transnistria—that is, Traian Grancsea, from the village of Merghindeal, county of Sibiu, today 106 years old—did not receive the compensation awarded him by an international organization. The person who helped him complete the application made a mistake in writing his name in Romanian, and not in the way it was spelled in Hungarian, as it appeared in the I.D. of this man born under the Austro-Hungarian empire. This survivor has received the greatest media attention of all the Roma survivors: newspapers have written about him; he has given many interviews, one of which was published in a book; he has often appeared on television; in 2007, he was decorated by the President of Romania for being the oldest survivor of the Holocaust, and on this occasion his picturesque image appeared on the front page of the newspapers; etc. The tragic experience of this person in Transnistria, where his wife was killed and his three children died, did come to public knowledge. It is certain that, of all the individual deportation cases discussed, his is the best known.

One may say that the memory of the deportation to Transnistria is preserved today only in those Roma communities that experienced it, either as a community in all its members (as was the case for the nomads), or as individuals among them. Those communities that did not suffer any persecution during the years of the Antonescu regime have not retained knowledge of this event

from the past. Therefore, I believe that the discourse of some Roma activists, those who make the deportation to Transnistria the central feature of this minority's past and base their identity on it, lacks complete coverage. In Romania, as in other countries of Central and Eastern Europe, the politics of Roma identity privilege the memory of persecutions, with the deportation to Transnistria seen as the extreme example of discriminations and persecutions Roma have known in Romania over the centuries. In recent years, Roma activists have added another element, that is, the slavery of Gypsies in the Romanian principalities until the middle of the nineteenth century, which they see, mistakenly, as a prologue to the deportation to Transnistria.

If we judge interest in the deportation of Roma to Transnistria by the commemorations thereof, we must say that neither the majority population nor the Roma minority pay much attention to this historical event. In recent years, on October 8, the Holocaust Remembrance Day, on the official level and in the academic milieus, commemorative events are organized in Bucharest, which mention, of course, the Roma deportees as well. There have also been events of this kind organized by some Bucharest Roma organizations. Still, the local Roma communities have not had commemorations in honor of those deported to and who died in Transnistria. By the same token, aside from the Holocaust memorial, built in Bucharest with public funds in 2009, which refers explicitly to the two groups of Romanian Holocaust victims (Jews and Roma), there is no other monument or commemorative inscription regarding the Roma deportation, made with public funds or by the Roma organizations. There have, as yet, been no professional historical exhibitions about the deportation of Roma. I believe that there is room here for more to be done. This question is important, because we should expect that, in Romania, the memory of the Holocaust will be maintained primarily by the Roma, who make up a powerful minority, considered numerically.

Translation from the Romanian by Sean Cotter

THE COLLECTIONS OF INTERVIEWS WITH ROMA TRANSNISTRIA SURVIVORS

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