

the Romanian capital, which commemorates the persecution of Jews and Roma.

Although in 2002 a government decree (ratified in 2006 as a law) made Holocaust denial, the glorification of war criminals, the public dissemination of fascist symbols, and the establishment of fascist organizations and parties into criminal offenses, in Romania there have been no prosecutions against either Holocaust deniers or extreme right-wing organizations.

*Translation from the German by John Kenney*

*About the author:*

William Totok, M.A., born 1951, lives as a freelance writer in Berlin. He was a member of the International Commission to Investigate the Romanian Holocaust, which submitted its final report in 2004, which came out one year later in book form. Recent publications: *Episcopul, Hitler si Securitatea. Procesul stalinist împotriva "spionilor Vaticanului"* in România [The Bishop, Hitler, and the Securitate: The Stalinist proceedings against the "Vatican Spies" in Romania], Iasi 2008; and the study "The Timeliness of the Past: The Fall of Nicolae Paulescu" in Peter Manu and Horia Bozdoghina, ed. *Polemica Paulescu: stiinta, politica, memorie* [The Paulescu Polemic: Scholarship, Politics, Remembrance], Bucharest 2010.

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## Perceptions of the Holocaust in Contemporary Romania: Between Film and Television

by Victor Eskenasy, Frankfurt am Main

In spite of the relatively large number of studies and collections of documents published in the twenty years since scholarly research in Romania was liberated, be it under the aegis of the Elie Wiesel Institute for the Study of the Holocaust or the Hasefer Publishing House (of the Jewish community), the Holocaust and its perceptions continue to be subjects of controversy, contestation, and confrontation.

The limited impact of studies completed or advanced in the two decades following the opening of Romanian archives, whether they come from Germany, Israel, or Romania itself, has at least three major explanations.

The first is denial of the Holocaust, one of the faces of the well rooted anti-Semitism that has a long history in Romania. The second may be the constant refusal of influential and

widely popular public intellectuals, made known particularly by television, to take part in debate. In contrast, these opinion leaders – admirers and students of the philosophy of the interwar cultural figures Mircea Eliade and Constantin Noica, among others, who in their youths were followers of the pro-fascist movement the Iron Guard – have distanced themselves as much as possible from debating the Holocaust. Their excuse has most often been to put an equals sign between Nazism and Communism, enabling their insistence on supporting the study of what, through abuse of analogy, has been called "the Red Holocaust." Finally, a third explanation for resistance and indifference manifested towards the results of the research on the Holocaust as it happened during the war years in Romania

and its territories, is the ridiculous low number of copies printed at usually exorbitant prices of the published books, which have made them unavailable to the ordinary people.

In such an atmosphere it was to be expected, and to a certain extent in the nature of things, that the task of educating, engaging, and making the public aware of the horrors and particular aspects of the Holocaust in Romania would be taken up by the state television and cinema, two areas that, alongside the Internet, are extremely accessible and popular.

However, over the last twenty years, a single Romanian film production, produced with modest means, has addressed the Holocaust. Directed by Radu Gabrea, the 2009 „[Gruber's Journey](#)” ([Călătoria lui Gruber](#)) is a direct reference to the great pogrom of Iași, in June of 1941, and the „creative” means the Antonescu regime used to exterminate Jews: moving thousands of Jews in convoys of sealed train cars, lacking ventilation, water, and food, under a terrible heat, until their deaths by suffocation. Radu Gabrea, who models his work on Andrzej Wajda, states in an [interview](#) that he attempted, purposely, to bring to light „a case carefully hidden by the Romanian authorities.” „The film is a [metaphor for deceit](#), for the fact that the truth of what really happened in Iași had been concealed”.

The reception of the film, whose final Romanian subtitles, for the main character Curzio Malaparte and the commander of the German garrison in Iași, omit various „unpleasant” remarks about the Romanian army, was mixed. The editors of a [Romanian film database](#) went so far as to add an “explanation” to the site, stating that this was the first film to treat “the massacre of Jews in Iași in 1941 (an event which, it seems, remains to be proved).” If the 2005 publication of the [final report](#) of the

International Commission, led by Elie Wiesel, about the Holocaust in Romania and in the territories occupied by the Romanian army during the Second World War, had the good effect of awakening young documentary filmmakers’ interest, their projects encountered indifference and substantial financial obstacles.

“[The Odessa Project](#)” is a typical case. Begun in 2008 by Florin Iepan, a young director from Timișoara, the film intended to document the extermination of c. 20 thousand Russian and Ukrainian Jews, an Antonescu government reprisal following the occupation of Odessa and the explosion that destroyed the Romanian headquarters, but as of today (April 2011), it has not been finished.

A veritable intimidation campaign was launched against the project and the film’s director with, according to Iepan, “extremely violent, hysterical, anti-Semite and xenophobic” commentaries, accompanied by the refusal of the competent institutions, Romanian Television among them, to follow through with promised financial support. The director changed his project, in the hope of highlighting “this nationalist, conservative group that blocks any serious discussion of coming to terms with our history.” Iepan’s desire to “make people aware that Romania, too, has a fascist past” remains, so far, only a good intention.

The case of the Odessa documentary calls into question, among other things, the attitude of the Romanian Television Society, with its choices and strategies that change according to Romanian diplomatic priorities (entering NATO and the European Union), the international context (dominated by relations with the United States), and the personal convictions of various Television chairmen. It

is notable that state television produced the a documentary, in three episodes, directed by Cristian Hadji Culea, "The Holocaust under the Antonescu Government", broadcast in 2009. The film has been distributed under the aegis of The Association of Jewish Romanian Victims of the Holocaust, an NGO created in 1991 with the aim of "offering legislative, moral, and material support to the surviving victims of the Holocaust and maintaining its memory."

Following the model of the famous "Shoah" by Claude Lanzmann, the well-known documentary film-maker, by bringing together testimonies from survivors and commentaries by Romanian scholars of the Holocaust, contributed, to a certain extent, to the development of a public discussion, but its real impact is difficult to quantify. The fact that it was broadcast by the state television late at night, and that the discussions of it were held largely in shows only broadcast abroad, on TVR International, had obviously limited, any serious public debate of the event and any actual increase in awareness of the Holocaust in the Romanian society.

The year 2009 was something of a watershed. Accepted into NATO and the European Union, tentatively released from the monitoring and attentions of western states, Romania and its politicians seemed to return to their old traditions, attitudes, and convictions. On the historical level, denial is in bloom, encouraged by the indifference of the media. Television continues to play an ambivalent role, but recent developments reveal that some negative perceptions of history are encouraged, developments such as the violent denial of the Holocaust and of studies undertaken under the aegis of the Elie Wiesel Institute in Bucharest, as well as the rejection of the

national legislation that prohibits the veneration of war criminals.

The Holocaust was practically omitted from remarks on a [documentary](#) praising General Ion Antonescu, broadcast by TVR 2 and widely distributed over on the Internet. Instead, also well distributed on the Internet, the TV show "True History" (sic!), hosted by one of the most eloquent revisionists and anti-Semitic historians in Romania, Colonel (retired) Mircea Dogaru, produced under the aegis of TVRM Educational, in June 2010, often focused on the Holocaust, in order to completely reject all available historical data. The show, which had as a pretext and title, "[The Jewish Situation in Romania \(1939 – 1945\)](#)", consisted of a series of attacks on the government and the 2002 government order (which prohibited anti-Semitic and racist propaganda and the veneration of war criminals) on the grounds that it "limited free speech." Produced with another prominent denier, professor Ion Coja, the TV program went so far as to declare that the Ion Antonescu regime did not exterminate the peoples deported to Transnistria during the Second World War, that Jews and Gypsies were only put in "isolation, so they could not do any harm to the Romanians", that the concentration camps were pure fiction, the Jews being actually "sheltered" in village abandoned houses, etc.

The poisonous effect of Romanian Television's ambivalent attitude, shown in the programs and documentaries mentioned here, is beyond any reasonable discussion. And a survey by the Bucharest Soros Foundation, published April 2011, on the subject of "[Youth Civic and Political Involvement](#)", shows that young people born after the fall of Communism, after 1989, believe 41% of their teachers are nostalgic for the Communist period, that 50% of high school students believe

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

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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.