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ROMANIA AND THE HOLOCAUST: DELICATE REAPPRAISAL OF A FATEFUL PAST

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Hidden in plain sight. The Holocaust Memorial in Bucharest. (Photo: Daniel Ursprung)

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Romania and the Holocaust: Delicate Reappraisal of a Fateful Past

Editorial

During the Second World War, Romania was directly responsible for the deaths of between 280,000 and 380,000 Jews and approximately 11,000 Roma. This is one of the most important insights of the final report of the Historical Commission led by Nobel Peace Prize laureate Elie Wiesel, which was appointed in 2003/04 by Romanian President Iliescu to investigate the role of Romania under the regime of the military dictator Ion Antonescu. The Romanian authorities only acknowledged the responsibility of the Antonescu Regime reluctantly. The trigger for the establishment of the Wiesel Commission was not the desire to deal with the past, but rather the increasingly apparent outrage in Western countries over the denial or trivialization of the Romanian role in the Holocaust, including by official representatives of the state like Iliescu himself. The official acknowledgement of the responsibility of the Romanian state for the mass murders must also be seen in the context of the country's then forthcoming admission to NATO and the EU. Nearly seven years after the state officially recognized its responsibility for the crimes of the Antonescu regime, there is no sign of a critical public discourse on this dark chapter of Romanian history and no general awareness of this tragedy in wide circles of the public. Some of the recommendations of the commission have indeed been implemented – like the establishment of a Holocaust Memorial in Bucharest. As the items in this issue of *Euxeinos* show, however, indifference and apathy continue to prevail, while the popular treatments of the topic in the media get bogged down in vague statements in the best case, while in the worst case they deny responsibility. Although by now not only foreign historians, but increasingly also Romanian historians have dealt with the topic and brought to light many specific aspects

of it through valuable new archival discoveries and findings, outside this circle of specialists there has not been a broad societal debate about Romania's responsibility for the persecution and murder of Jews and Roma.

The following articles illuminate the theme from diverse perspectives. Mariane Hausleitner traces an overview of the nature of engagement with the Antonescu regime in the postwar period, especially focusing on the flourishing Antonescu cult after 1990, and briefly discusses the current state of research. In William Totok's article the reaction to the Wiesel Commission's report is described. The author notes that in purely quantitative terms a hostile-revisionist reception prevailed, while a historical-critical reception only appeared to a limited extent. Victor Eskenasy notes a similar phenomenon in terms of popular depictions of the Holocaust in film and television. Despite an impressive number of serious scholarly works and document collections, in this area a very ambiguous handling of the issue still prevails. There are three main reasons for this: the prevalence of denialism as a result of traditional anti-Semitism, the reluctance of prominent intellectuals to address the general public, and finally the inaccessibility of the specialist literature due to high prices and limited editions. Finally, Viorel Achim's contribution focuses on a too often forgotten aspect of the Holocaust: the deportation of about 25,000 Roma in Romanian-occupied Transnistria (the area between the rivers Dniester and Bug), nearly half of whom did not survive. Compared to the nineties, the reappraisal of Romanian History in relation to the Holocaust and the Second World War has indeed made some progress. Nonetheless, as these articles demonstrate, a critical examination of its own history on a broad basis may still be a while in coming.

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The Cult of Antonescu and the Delayed Reappraisal of the Romanian Holocaust

by Mariana Hausleitner, Free University of Berlin

After General Antonescu came to power in September 1940, Romania became an important ally of the German Reich. Ion Antonescu ruled for five months jointly with the Iron Guard, a widespread fascist movement. In January 1941, the Iron Guard attempted to oust the general through an insurrection. Hitler sided, however, with the general, as order was the German Reich's priority in Romania. The country was intended as a staging ground for the scheduled attack on the Soviet Union and its oil wells were of central importance to the German war effort. During the insurrection a pogrom occurred in Bucharest, in which over one hundred Jews were murdered.

In the first weeks after the attack on the Soviet Union, the persecution of the Jews took on a new dimension. In the city of Iași in northeastern Romania on June 29, 1941, around 13,000 Jews were murdered by gendarmes, soldiers, armed legionnaires and civilians. There were many more victims in the summer of 1941 in Bessarabia and North Bukovina, districts which the Romanian army had been forced to evacuate in June 1940 due to a Soviet ultimatum. After the recapture of these areas, through the end of 1941, between 45,000 and 60,000 Jews were murdered by the Romanian army and small units of the German Einsatzgruppe D. In August 1941, the German Reich ceded the Ukrainian territory between the Dniester and Southern Bug rivers, called Transnistria, to its Romanian ally as an occupation zone. Afterwards, the Gendarmerie deported Jews from Bukovina and Bessarabia to that area. This region was utterly devastated throughout the war, and roughly 130,000 Jews fled or were killed. The largest massacres were carried out here: in Odessa the Romanian army murdered about 20,000 Jews in October 1941. In Transnistria

there was no earning potential, and the deportees could only secure food by selling their meager portable possessions to farmers. Jews from Bessarabia, in particular, came to Transnistria without any possessions following long marches. Hundreds of thousands starved or died of deficiency diseases like epidemic typhus. In Bucharest Ion Antonescu, who had risen to Marshal, had allowed a plan to ethnically cleanse Romania to be drawn up. In October 1941, Sabin Manuilă, director of the Central Statistical Institute, devised a plan for the systematic expulsion of 3.5 million non-Romanians. Communities of Romanian minorities from abroad were to be settled in place of the Hungarians and Ukrainians, while Manuilă spoke cynically of a "one-way transfer" of Jews and Gypsies/Roma. The first 20,000 Roma were deported in 1942. In 1943, the intended expulsion of over one million Slavs from Bessarabia and North Bukovina remained in its earliest stages, because the condition of the Romanian army had drastically worsened after the defeat at Stalingrad. Already by the spring of 1944 the Red Army had captured Bessarabia and North Bukovina. On August 23, 1944, Marshal Antonescu and Prime Minister Mihai Antonescu were arrested by the King. As a result, the Romanian army was able to make an about-face, fighting thereafter on the side of the Red Army to recapture North Transylvania, which Hungary had gained by the Second Vienna Award of 1940.

Ion and Mihai Antonescu were put to death on June 1, 1946, after a trial in which the mass murder of the Jews and Roma played only a marginal role. At its center stood the Romanian army's devastation of the territory of the Soviet Union. However, the magnitude of the mass crimes was known, because in 1946 Matatias Carp, the secretary of the Fede-

ration of Jewish Municipalities published many documents in Black Book. The Suffering of the Jews of Romania 1940-1944 (*Cartea neagră. Suferințele evreilor din România 1940-1944*). This book disappeared from Romanian libraries, however, after Stalin ordered the confiscation of the corresponding Black Book about the mass murder of Jews in the territory of the Soviet Union.

After 1949 only the murders in Iași were discussed in Romania and the Wehrmacht was blamed for them. Nothing was published about Bessarabia and North Bukovina. After 1986 occasional publications appeared on the deportation of the Jews from North Transylvania, which belonged to Hungary between 1940 and 1944.

Outside Romania, however, research was carried out from the 1980s about the mass killings in Romania and Transnistria: the Israeli historian Jean Ancel published a comprehensive document collection on the subject. Randolph R. Braham covered the deportations from North Transylvania in a benchmark work on the Hungarian Holocaust. In Germany, Armin Heinen wrote his dissertation on the fascist movement in Romania. Even after the fall of Ceaușescu in December 1989, only a few intellectuals in Romania took an interest in these works. It was above all the members of the Federation of Jewish Communities who, through the publication of documents, attempted to clarify the dimensions of the mass murder of Jews in the Romanian peripheral regions. In contrast, many Romanians contributed encomia on the struggle of Marshal Antonescu against Bolshevism. On the petition of members of the ruling "National Salvation Front," on June 1, 1991, Antonescu was honored with a minute of silence in the Senate on the occasion of the 45th anniversary of his execution. Only the re-

presentatives of the Hungarian minority left the room in protest. Streets were named after Antonescu and busts of him installed in several large cities. Countless publications appeared celebrating him as a patriot who reclaimed Bessarabia and the Bukovina in 1941. Many Romanian politicians themselves hoped for annexation of both regions after the collapse of the Soviet Union. At that time Romanian historians in the Republic of Moldova also took up the Cult of Antonescu, while members of the Slavic minorities vehemently criticized it.

Some Romanians called for a judicial rehabilitation of Antonescu and when the first step to this end was taken in November 1997 by the chief public prosecutor, eight members of Antonescu's regime were rehabilitated. Two United States Senators vehemently protested against this, and as a result only a few state secretaries from the regime were rehabilitated in 1998. Besides family members, the initiators of the rehabilitation were notably politicians of the Greater Romania Party. This party, led by a former "court poet" of the Communist Party, has made a name for itself by its hate campaigns against Jews, Hungarians, and Roma. In the elections of November 2000, the party gained 20% of the vote, making it the second largest force in parliament. Governmental responsibility passed to the Party of Social Democracy, led by Ion Iliescu, which between 1993 and 1995 had ruled with the support of the Greater Romania Party.

Iliescu's party wished after November 2000 to distinguish itself from its former allies and positioned itself in opposition to the Greater Romania Party and in favor of a quick integration into NATO and the European Union. In the course of the war against Afghanistan, a close cooperation with the

United States began and this new alignment brought about a renunciation of the cult of Marshal Antonescu. Afterwards, General Chelaru, who until February 2000 had been a member of the General Staff of the Romanian Army, took active part in the ceremonial dedication of an Antonescu bust in Bucharest while in uniform, which was criticized in the United States. Soon afterwards Mihai Chelaru lost his post. In March 2002 Prime Minister Năstase, jointly with the ministers of the interior, justice, and culture, issued an edict banning racist agitation and holocaust denial, under penalty of a prison sentence. For a long time the edict could not be adopted in parliament, largely because the delegates of the Greater Romania Party opposed it.

In October 2003, to secure support for himself Ion Iliescu, as Romanian President, provided for the creation of a "Commission on the Holocaust and its Aftermath in Romania" (see the article by William Totok). It was chaired by writer and Nobel Prize winner Elie Wiesel, who had been deported from North Transylvania to Auschwitz as a child. Half of the commission's members were well-known historians from Romania, Israel, Germany, and the United States, while the other half were representatives of Jewish organizations. Exactly one year later the Commission presented a voluminous report, the central point of which was the mass murder committed against the Jews on Romanian and Ukrainian territory. The total number of fatalities was estimated to be between 280,000 and 380,000. It also referred to the 11,000 Roma who died in Transnistria. The report also noted the strength of the Greater Romania Party, which had denied the Romanian Holocaust.

In December 2004, Iliescu commended the commission's report and decorated the writer decoration for their direction of it. Yet

before the end of his term in office, Iliescu granted the same decoration to two anti-Semites who had been vehemently criticized in the report: it was given to Corneliu Vadim Tudor, the leader of the Greater Romania Party, as well as to the historian Gheorghe Buzatu, a long-time representative of the Party in the Senate. Buzatu also directed an endowment for the rehabilitation of Marshal Antonescu. As a result, Elie Wiesel and Randolph R. Braham indignantly returned their decorations to Iliescu.

The report of the Holocaust Commission first appeared in 2005 in Romanian and English. Shortly afterwards, the creation of a research institute in Bucharest named for Elie Wiesel was announced (Website: <http://www.inshr-ew.ro/>). It published analysis of the Holocaust and current anti-Semitic trends. 2005 also saw the introduction of an education ministry-approved textbook which informed high school students about the history of Jews and the Holocaust. A Holocaust commemoration day was designated. The streets that had been named after Antonescu were renamed.

Still, not all remnants of the 13 years of a persistent Antonescu cult have been erased, although in public only extremist fringe groups deny the Romanian Holocaust. But there is no debate about the comprehensive plans for ethnic cleansing during the war years. The report compiled by the commission compiled in one place research findings which had not been previously discussed in Romania. For American and Israeli researchers the crimes against the Jews have stood in the foreground, while much less work has been done on other peoples discriminated against during the war years like the Roma and the Slavs. Even less is known about the deportation to Transnistria of Romanians

who refused military service on religious grounds.

Translation from the German by John Kenney

About the author:

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southern Ukraine, the rehabilitation of communism. Selected publications: *Die Rumänisierung der Bukowina. Die Durchsetzung des nationalstaatlichen Anspruchs Großrumäniens 1918-1944*, München 2001 [The Romanization of Bukovina. The enforcement of the nation-state claim of Greater Romania 1918-1944], Munich 2001; *Deutsche und Juden in Bessarabien 1814-1941. Zur Minderheitspolitik Russlands und Großrumäniens*, München 2005. [The Germans and the Jews in Bessarabia 1814-1941. On the minority policy of Russia and Greater Romania], Munich 2005. e-mail: m.hausleitner@t-online.de

Reception of the Final Report of the International Commission for Investigation of the Romanian Holocaust ("Wiesel Commission")

by William Totok, Berlin

The history of the scholarly and journalistic reception of the events of the years 1941 to 1944 is part of the history of the Romanian Holocaust. The creation of an international commission in the autumn of 2003, which investigated the Romanian Holocaust and one year later issued its final report, was preceded by scores of press campaigns, in which there was some demand for the rehabilitation of the military dictator Ion Antonescu and those members of his cabinet who had been convicted as war criminals after 1945. To the post-communist cult sparked by Antonescu was added an extremely questionable interview in which then Romanian president Ion Iliescu relativized the Holocaust. The interview, published in the Israeli newspaper "Ha'aretz" on 25 July 2003, took the international public by surprise. So as not to politically strain and potentially

jeopardize Romania's intended European integration, an international commission for the investigation of the Holocaust was created in the fall of 2003. One year later, acting under the chairmanship of Nobel Peace Prize winner Elie Wiesel, the commission presented its final report, which was subsequently published on the internet in both English and Romanian. Later the final report was published in book form by the Romanian publisher Polirom. The publication of the report and in particular the conclusions and recommendations contained within it brought about a variety of reactions.

In the public reception four tendencies became apparent: 1.) positive-factual; 2.) distanced-ironic; 3.) historical-critical; and 4.) dismissive-revisionist. However, a key statement in the conclusion of the commission's fi-

nal report played a crucial role in the perception and representation of events: “Of all the countries allied with Germany, Romania was – after Germany itself – responsible for the largest number of victims. The murders in Iași, Odessa, Bogdanovka, Domanevka, and Peciora were among the cruelest which were committed against Jews during the Holocaust. Although Romania had actually sent fewer Jews to Nazi Germany than neighboring Hungary, this does not mean that it did not commit genocide against the Jews. The problem of the Holocaust in Romania is in the first place a Romanian problem, which should be acknowledged and dealt with by Romanian society.”

1. THE POSITIVE-FACTUAL RECEPTION

The articles published in the press after the official presentation of the report summarized the reasons for the establishment of the Commission. The historical events were well-described, but the role of Romania was cautiously left aside. A striking feature of the newspaper reports published in Autumn 2004 is that the above-quoted conclusion was not mentioned.

2. THE DISTANCED-IRONIC RECEPTION

A few days after the publication of the report several newspapers published commentary, in which the authors used the strikingly polemical formulation “Red Holocaust” – as opposed to the “Brown Holocaust” – and suggested in this way the equivalence of the Holocaust and the Gulag. Basically, these journalistic contributions conveyed the idea, often formulated after 1990, that the historical process of coming to terms with the past should prioritize the four decades of communist dictatorship, and only focus secondarily on the four years of the

Antonescu dictatorship and the related racially motivated atrocities against Jews and Roma. Concurrently the pejorative designation of the report as the “Iliescu-Wiesel Report” appeared in this context, thereby making apparent a political alienation from the post-communist president and also indirectly questioning the historical and political credibility of the holocaust report.

3. THE HISTORICAL-CRITICAL RECEPTION

Of course, the report also led to a number of serious accounts, reviews, and debates. Studies drawing on the commission’s report have, however, only appeared in relatively small numbers and have only reached a narrow circle of readers. Many of them also come from the pens of members of the commission, whose work has been called into question by increasingly ostentatious rejection.

4. THE DISMISSIVE-REVISIONIST RECEPTION

From a purely statistical standpoint, in the period from 2004 to 2011 more hostile articles were published than ones which actually sought to promote a critical process of coming to terms with the past on the basis of the final report. These articles, which have appeared again and again since 1990, have put into circulation conspiratorial, trivializing, relativist, and holocaust-denying theories which are now also particularly expressed and disseminated by active internet users in electronic forums, numerous blogs, and countless letters to the editor. The most commonly expressed views include the following indisputable assertions:

- Romania did not exterminate the Jews and Roma; the Romanian state in the time of Antonescu had in fact saved the Jews;

- The Romanian state facilitated the emigration of the Jews to Palestine and in this manner preserved them before the annihilation;
- Hungary and Germany were in reality the only states responsible for the destruction of the Romanian Jews, because there were no extermination camps in Romanian-administered (occupied) Transnistria;
- Synagogues and Jewish schools and cultural institutions had been able to function undisturbed under Antonescu;
- Antonescu had not yielded to German pressure and the Romanian Jews had not been delivered to Nazi Germany;
- Antonescu had actually maintained friendly relations with the leaders of the Jewish community and ultimately saved Jews from the attacks of the anti-Semitic fascist organization, the "Legion of the Archangel Michael" (also known as the "Legionnaires" and the "Iron Guard");
- As evidence for this claim a nonexistent testament of Wilhelm Fildermann is repeatedly cited;
- During the pogrom of January 1941, no Jews had been suspended on meat hooks in the Bucharest slaughterhouse, but rather Legionnaires;
- The rebellion of the Legionnaires against Antonescu in January 1941 had basically been nothing more than a production of the military dictator, who was secretly supported by Communists and Freemasons;
- The authors of the report, along with the earlier dissident writer Paul Goma, were given the derogatory name "Holocaustologists" and it was insinuated that their investigation of events under Antonescu was intended to prove Romania's anti-Semitic policy so as to place the country in the "New World Order," dominated by Jewish organizations, and rob it of its national identity;

- The casualty figures of 28,000 to 38,000 Romanian and Ukrainian Jews given in the final report are portrayed as exaggerated, and the report described as an attempt to find historical cover to impute Romanian blame for the Holocaust, so as to finally force the Romanian state to pay spurious reparations;
- Radical nationalist politicians and intellectuals, like avowed Holocaust denier Ion Coja, the chairman of the Bucharest branch of the organization "Vatra Românească" (Romanian Home) and head of the League to Fight Anti-Romanianism (LICAR), and Corneliu Vadim Tudor, the chairman of the far-right Greater Romania Party (PRM), continue to plead for a rehabilitation of the former fascist military dictator Ion Antonescu, whom they describe as the victim of a Jewish-Bolshevik conspiracy.

CONCLUSION

The publication of the final report of the International Commission to Investigate the Romanian Holocaust has not necessarily led to a new culture of debate free from nationalistic clichés and prejudices.

Perhaps the most important success of this document is the official recognition of the responsibility of the Romanian state for events under Antonescu and the favorable adoption of its conclusions and recommendations by the Romanian authorities. The final report's recommendations were partly put into practice. In Romania 9 October is Holocaust Remembrance day; in most textbooks, the events of the years 1941-1944 are depicted accurately; and in Bucharest, the so-called "Wiesel Institute" was established, which deals with the history of the Romanian Holocaust, finances publications, and organizes memorial events and conferences. In addition, a Holocaust memorial was established in-

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

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

- Lucian Năstasă, Andrea Varga (eds.), *Minorități etnoculturale. Mărturii documentare. Țigani din România (1919-1944)* [Ethnocultural Minorities. Documentary Accounts. The Gypsies in Romania (1919-1944)], Cluj-Napoca: Centrul de Resurse pentru Diversitate Etnoculturală [Center for Resources for Ethnocultural Diversity], 2001, pp. 591-626;
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