

TRANSNISTRIA, A KILLING RAVINE OF ROMANIAN JEWRY

Case Study: Timișoara Jewry

By Jacov Sobovitz

For a long time, I had debated which article to prepare for the Holocaust conference in Timișoara. After much deliberation, I selected the story of the Jews of Bánát and southern Transylvania who had suffered considerably during World War II.

The Jews of Timișoara and the surrounding area suffered during World War II at the hands of the Romanian authorities. About 100 Jews were sent to Transnistria. We will elaborate on this later. The evil and barbarism of the Romanian government during the 1930s, and especially during the time of Marshal Antonescu, were the result of several factors: full partnership with the Nazi regime and the Romanian governments during the period between the two wars that had turned the Jews into slaves, citizens without rights, brutally removed from their homes and transferred to labor camps set up by Roman fascists inspired by the Germans, murdered in cold blood or tortured to death in Transnistria, which became the killing ravine of Romanian Jewry.

The Roots of Romanian Antisemitism

The antisemitism that had manifested itself in Romania between the two world wars had grown directly from the seeds planted in the major events of the country's development that began in the mid-19th century.

For reasons that could differ from one person to another, or from one group to another, powerful antisemitic currents existed in various forms and in varying intensity in the political, cultural and spiritual life of Romanian society. These were present for the most part of the century preceding the rise of the National Christian Party in 1937, the establishment of the royal dictatorship in 1938 and the national-legionary state led by Ion Antonescu in 1940 – in other words, the century that culminated in the Holocaust.

The antisemitic actions of these successive governments were inspired by antisemitic themes that had penetrated the Romanian lexicon of ideas long before the 1930s, as well as by the

growing influence and Nazi power in Germany. While each of these three governments mixed the essential elements of widespread antisemitic concepts in a somewhat different manner – accentuating more or less certain themes, maybe adding to some local notions adapted from non-Romanian antisemitic expression and proposing sometimes more, sometimes less, violence for the fulfillment of their goals – they all represented an essential continuity of the Romanian antisemitic ideas that had originated in the pre-World War I period.

It is true that politicians with radical antisemitic views gained greater legitimacy in the eyes of the public after Hitler's rise to power in Germany. But what was new under the National Christian Party's government during the royal dictatorship, and especially at the time when the power was seized by the Iron Guard and Antonescu, was not the nature of the antisemitism that they had adopted, but the fact that antisemitism had evolved from verbal expressions and occasional outbreaks of violence to governmental politics and state action.

The antisemitic policies of the National Christian Party government, the royal dictatorship and the national legionary state prepared the ground for much more serious events that were about to happen during the war under the Ion Antonescu regime. The latter wanted to eliminate the Jews from Romania through Romanianization (the Jews' dispossession of their goods and their means of subsistence) by deportation, and, finally, by killing them.

This change was supported – or at least accepted – by most political, cultural and religious elites. And this is not surprising. Even this policy change was made within a fundamental continuity with ideas that had been an integral part of the political, intellectual and spiritual discourse of the 19th century struggle for the creation of an independent Romanian state, which Antonescu and his cronies wanted to restore.

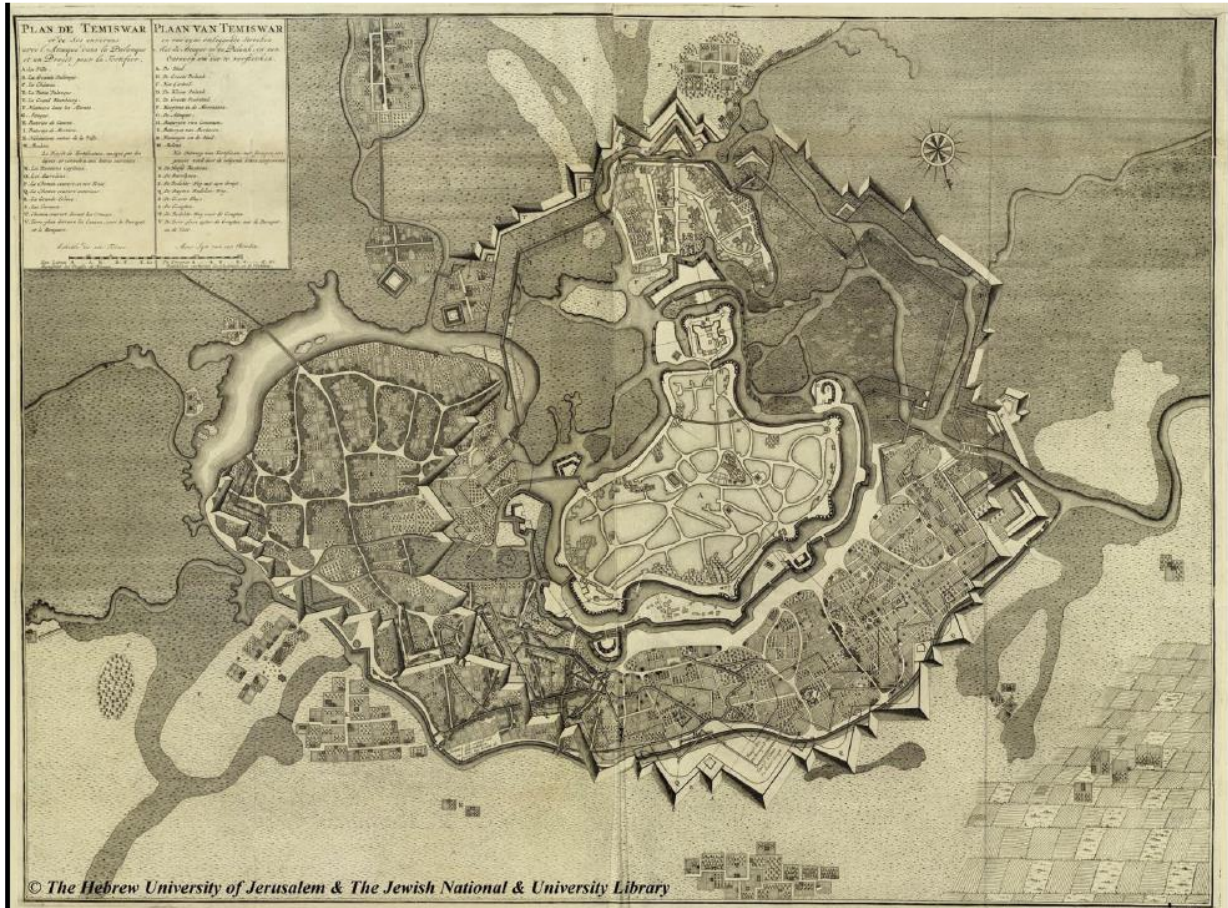
The Jewish Community during the Great Romania State

The Jewish community during the Great Romania state was diverse and numerous, with roots in the histories and civilizations of the kingdom of Habsburg Austria, of Hungary before World War I and of the Tsarist Empire.

Shortly before the end of Hungarian rule in 1918, a Jewish secondary school was opened with a boys and girls division; a commercial school (for boys only) functioned as well. From the early 1920s onwards, the language of instruction was Romanian, though students also learned Hebrew. Local Jews continued to speak Hungarian or German among themselves, as German culture had a much firmer stronghold in Timișoara than in most Transylvanian towns. In the

interwar period, Timișoara was a significant Zionist center. Between 1920 and 1940, the Transylvanian Zionist publication *Neue Zeit-Új Kor* (New Time) was published in the town.

Timișoara



Timișoara is a city in southwestern Romania in the area of Transylvania near the Yugoslav border. Timișoara was under Hungarian rule until 1918 and thereafter under Romanian rule. Jews first established a community there in 1739. During the 19th century, they initiated the industrialization of the city. In 1930, 9,368 Jews lived in Timișoara, comprising about 10% of the city's population.

After World War I, antisemitism increased there, especially in the second half of the 1930s, partially with the spread of strong right-wing ideology among Romanian students at the Timișoara Polytechnic. In 1936, members of the Iron Guard attacked a Jewish theatrical performance and set off a bomb in the audience: two people died and many were injured. Ritual slaughter was outlawed in 1938, and in 1939 some 1,000 Jews were deprived of their Romanian citizenship. In July 1941, the Jews throughout southern Transylvania were moved from small villages to larger cities.

The Jewish population of the city grew from 10,950 in 1940 to 11,788 in 1942 with the arrival of Jews fleeing the persecutions of the Antonescu regime. During the years 1941-1942, most of the buildings owned by the Jewish community were confiscated by the Romanian authorities. In August-September 1942, preparations were made to deport the Jewish population of southern Transylvania, including the Jews of Timișoara, to Nazi camps in occupied Poland. Due to a change in the political and military situation, this did not happen. On August 4, all Jewish males between the ages of 18 and 50 were taken to forced-labor camps. The Jewish community obtained provisions for them and worked to have men released. Many were released or at least sent to work near Timișoara.

Temesvár's first Jews arrived from the Balkans, initially settling temporarily for commercial purposes. Though a permanent Jewish settlement emerged in the first half of the 16th century, the oldest known gravestone is dated 1636. At about that time, Jews organized themselves into a formal community. In 1716, the peace treaty of Passarowitz, which ended Turkish rule in the region, permitted Jews in Temesvár to choose whether they wanted to leave and live in the Turkish Empire or remain and live under Austrian rule: 12 Turkish-Sephardic families (144 people) chose to stay. In 1736, Me'ir Amigo of Constantinople and four other Sephardic families received permission to settle in the town. He and the Viennese Marrano financier Baron Diego d'Aguilar (alias Moses Lopes Pereira; 1696-1759) played a significant role in shaping the organizational life of the renewed Sephardic community. The economic upswing of the region also drew several Ashkenazi Jews from Hungary, Austria and Moravia. Conditions for Jews in Temesvár under Austrian rule were in many respects more difficult than they had been in the Hungarian Kingdom. In 1776, Maria Theresa's Judenordnung (Jewish Regulation) directed at the Jews in Bánát also imposed restrictions on the Jews in Temesvár; conditions did not improve until the region was reannexed to Hungary in 1778.

In the summer of 1942, it became known to leaders of the Jewish community that plans had been made to deport the Jews from southern Transylvania. The leader of the Timisoara Jewish community, Shmuel Ligeti, contacted Jewish leaders in Bucharest. They intervened with government officials to avert the move, and the deportation order was rescinded. During 1944, local Germans (Volksdeutsche) tried to intensify antisemitic activity in Timisoara, but with little success.

The Jews from Bánát and southern Transylvania were among the victims of the deportations to Transnistria. However, we must note that what had happened in these regions was of much

lower intensity. Survivors' testimonies show that 100 Zionist Jews from Timișoara had been deported to Transnistria and never returned. Doctor Paul Grünberger, one of the survivors whose testimony we could consult, saw the freight train in the Chizătau station (where he was doing forced labor) with two wagons carrying Jews from Timișoara to Transnistria. These were the ones who had requested a transit visa through the Soviet Union to get to America. They were exterminated in the above-mentioned reserve beyond the Dniester. It seems that several hundred Jews from the other Transylvanian-Bánát cities experienced the same tragic fate. Probably, such deportations in Transnistria explain why during 1941-1942, the Jewish population of Timișoara had dropped by about 2,300 (from 13,610 to 11,340). In the latter case, however, we have no documentary evidence to confirm that this definitely happened.

The Jewish population was being chased by legionaries who were active also in Bánát. According to the testimony of one of the survivors, Professor Oskar Schwartz, Timișoara Polytechnics students were also trained in such actions. But the decisive role in promoting the cultural, linguistic and religious discrimination of the Jewish population was played – as we have already mentioned – by the army, the police and the state security. Here's how the antisemitism was justified in a report prepared by the Romanian Secret Service entitled "The Occult International Jewish Organizations, their Actions in Romania through the Cultural Leagues, the Masonic Lodges and the Sports Clubs: the Jewish Cultural League Operating in Different Transylvanian Cities." Besides the strictly religious role they sought to impose, there was also the close contact with the irredentist organizations and the Hungarian espionage. Moreover, since this committee did not lack the ultimate Jew from its dignity, it is easy to understand that it was unable to see with good eyes the administration and organization of Wallachia, because the Jews of Transylvania were completely magnetized and absorbed by the aspirations of the Hungarian nation.

Testimonies

Mrs. Geta Neuman

In the autumn of 1942, dozens of Jews were arrested in Timișoara, some of whom had been "guilty" of requesting a transit visa through the Soviet Union to emigrate to India, China or the United States, while others were involved in a Leftist political activity. All were loaded onto freight wagons destined for Transnistria. The first were massacred as soon as they arrived in Transnistria, the others were deported to the Vapnyarka camp and then to Olgopol, and they survived. The names of the 28 Timișoara victims of the fascist regime are inscribed on a

commemorative plaque in the Jewish cemetery. In memory of our martyrs killed by fascist murderers, this commemorative plate was erected for the consecration of their memory and for eternal remembrance.



An excerpt from Tibor Schatteles' book

Among these, there was at least one gentile person: Ecaterina Schatteles, the second wife of Mihai Schattelesz. She was German and Catholic. A few days before the arrest, she was visited by some local Nazi hacks while alone at home. They tried to convince her to divorce or at least leave her Jewish husband “to whom anything might happen” and whom she had married after Mihai (Max) Schatteles was widowed several years earlier, remaining with a young orphan daughter. She refused the Nazis. A few days later, she was taken from her house with her husband and step-daughter. While at the police station, she was called by an official of the forces offering her once again the possibility of separating from her husband, telling her that otherwise she would have to go to Transnistria with him. She remained loyal to her husband. All this was learned by relatives who were permitted to visit them at the Lyceum before the group left on a train of cattle

wagons.

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| Brümmer Irimie | Schmahl Robert |
| Holzer Francisc | Schmahl Elisabeta |
| Holzer Rozalia | Schmahl Susana |
| Holzer Gheorghe | Schmahl Toma |
| Dr. Juhl Maurițiu | Schattelesz Mihai |
| Kreutzer Arnold | Schattelesz Ecaterina |
| Lanyi Alexandru | Schattelesz Hilda |
| Lanyi Elisabeta | Stein Alexandru |
| Lanyi Norbert | Stein Viorica |
| Dr. Mannheim Géza | Taussig Josif |
| Mannheim Eleonora | Taussig Maria |
| Dr. Ornstein Alexandru | Vér Weisz Irina |
| Schönberger Ladislau | Weisz Ladislau |

*A communist Jew deported by Antonescu to Vapniarka shares his story with us: Petru Clej
(written on 29-8-2010)*

Géza Kornis was one of the communist Jews deported to the Vapniarka camp in Transnistria. Originally from Timisoara, he is 93 years old today and lives in Germany, where he emigrated in the 1970s. Today, he answers questions about Antonescu's persecutions, but also talks about his communist past.

Under which circumstances were you deported to Transnistria?

"I was deported on September 6, 1942 after I had been arrested by a security agent called Secoșan from my home in Timișoara on Craiova Street. The arrest was based on suspicion, without being imputed any offence.

In 1939, I joined the anti-fascist movement as a gesture of opposition to the policy of antisemitic bourgeois governments that, through various laws, affected the Jewish population. I want to say that I did not enroll in the communist party, playing a part only in the illegal resistance. I tried to verbally show some well-known Romanians that the political regimes harm not only the Jews, but also the Romanians, conducting a policy contrary to the interests of the state.

The deportation took place between September 6, 1942 and January 15, 1944. I stayed in Vapniarca until the end of May 1943, and then, until the liberation, I was hospitalized in the Olgopol ghetto.

Twelve-hundred Jews from the old Kingdom and Transylvania were sent to Vapniarca. Four hundred and seven were transferred from the Tîrgu Jiu camp, 72 were detained in the Caransebes prison, and 722 were taken from their homes and therefore from freedom. I do not know the number of survivors. In Ribnita, 52 deportees were slaughtered on the night of March 18-19, 1944."

Vapniarca

Vapniarca is a town in the Vinnitsa province of Ukraine, and during the Romanian occupation (October 22, 1941 to March 1944) in northern Transnistria.

In October 1941, a detention camp was set up in the barracks of a Soviet military school at the edge of town. The local Jews, about 700 in number, fled or were murdered by German and Romanian occupiers. In October, the first 1,000 Jews were brought to the camp, most of them

from Odessa, among them Jews from Bessarabia who had fled to Odessa. About 200 perished from typhus. Those remaining were sent out in two shipments under the supervision of Romanian gendarmes and shot in anti-tank trenches.

In 1942, another 150 deportees from Bukovina were brought there, including Jews who had fled from Poland to Bukovina in the fall of 1939. On September 16, 1942, 1,046 Romanian Jews suspected of communism and exiled were brought to the camp, including 554 Jews from various cities in Romania who were arrested at the request of the local authorities without any real charges. When the last transport arrived, the place was declared a concentration camp for political prisoners directly subordinate to the Ministry of the Interior in Bucharest (not to the gendarmerie of Transnistria). In fact, it was a camp for Jews only, for, apart from them, there were Ukrainian criminals, but no political prisoners,

Of the 1,179 Jewish prisoners, 107 were women: the prisoners established a committee whose main goal was to prevent their execution as a result of the camp's regime – hunger, disease, hard labor, and physical and mental torture.

The camp commander instituted strict restrictions on the supply of water and even prevented it altogether. The prisoners overcame typhoid fever by strictly maintaining the cleanliness of the camp but were harmed by the food provided to them, which included *Lathyrus Sativus* (a type of pea used for horse feed) and barley bread containing about 20% straw. Fodder peas, if introduced into human food, causes paralysis of the lower limbs.

About six weeks later, the first signs of spastic paraparesis appeared (this attacks and degenerates spinal cord brain cells, paralyzes the muscles of the lower limbs and then the kidneys). In January 1943, hundreds of inmates came down with this disease. The prisoners declared a hunger strike and demanded medical help and medicine. The Jewish Relief Committee in Bucharest was allowed to send medicine, and aid shipments began to arrive from their relatives. One hundred and seventeen Jews became paralyzed, but it was only at the end of January 1943 that they stopped receiving the animal feed that caused the disease. An inquiry committee established by the authorities in March 1943 determined that 427 Jews were imprisoned for no reason and were transferred to ghettos in Transnistria, but they were returned to Romania and released in December 1943 and January 1944. In October 1943, when the Red Army approached, it was decided to liquidate the camp. The prisoners were divided into three groups. One group of about 80 Jews was dispersed among the deportees in Transnistria, another group of 54 communists was sent to the prison in Rîbnița, Transnistria, and on March 19, 1944,

they were murdered in their cells by the SS. Most of the 565 prisoners were transferred to Romania in March 1944 and interned in the Târgu Jiu camp. On August 24, 1944, after the fall of Ion Antonescu's government, they were released from the camp. Many of the prisoners later became senior officials in Romania's new regime.

Micha Harish

Antisemitism intensified during the interwar period, partially with the spread of strong right-wing ideology among Romanian students at the Timișoara Polytechnic. On November 28, 1938, members of the Iron Guard attacked a Jewish theatrical performance and set off a bomb in the audience, killing two people. These two were my uncle, Shimon Hirsch, the eldest brother of Yosef Hirsch's father (later Harish) and my aunt, his wife Terry.

On my official visit as Minister of Industry and Trade in the Rabin government, I asked the Romanian government during my visit to Timișoara to arrange for me to visit the graves of my aunt and uncle at my father's request. Rabbi Neumann organized a minyan for me with the participation of part of the delegation that had accompanied me.

Yad Vashem Information Center – International School for Holocaust Studies

Sabin Motora

But there was also a miracle: Artur Donath, the president of the Jews in the Vapniarka camp, arrived at Mogilev for a meeting with engineer Siegfroind Jugendorf, who explained to him that Colonel Sabin Motora had become the leader of the Vapniarka camp. Donath said "this is a dream." The transfer order was canceled and most the Vapniarka prisoners survived the war under the protection of Colonel Sabin Motora.

The last commander of the camp was Sabin Motora. He saved the deportees dispersed to the Vapniarka and Grosulovo camps from sure death, risking his own life. Colonel Sabin Motora was recognized by the Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial in Jerusalem as "A Righteous Among Nations" for saving many Jews deported to Transnistria. In the spring of 1944, he refused to surrender the Jewish detainees from the Vapniarka camp to Hitler's forces and returned them to the country.

Righteous Among the Nations Honored by Yad Vashem by 1 January 2018

ROMANIA

In conclusion, Romanian Jewry in general and the Jews of Timișoara in particular went through a difficult and inhumane period. Our consolation is that we have succeeded in establishing a homeland in the Land of our Fathers and are responsible for our fate.

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