

Felicia Waldman

From Taboo to Acceptance

Romania, the Jews, and the Holocaust

The existence of Jews on Romanian territory was suppressed under Communism. Romania's complicity in the Holocaust was a taboo. In the post-Communist era, attitudes were slow in changing. President Ion Iliescu's remark that there had been no Holocaust on Romanian territory represented a particularly low point. Only with the integration of Romania into international organisations and the convening of the Elie Wiesel commission of inquiry did the climate change. Now Romania is increasingly willing to accept responsibility, to commemorate the victims of the Holocaust, and to integrate the country's Jewish heritage into its national remembrance culture.

Jewish life in modern-day Romania can be traced back to the 2nd century C.E., when Jewish soldiers reached the region through the Roman army's conquest of Dacia.¹ Under Romania's Communist regime, the words "Jew" and "Jewish" were taboo. Their history, culture and religious identity were barely acknowledged despite the fact that they were recognised as a religious community and enjoyed the same limited rights as members of other minority confessions. Even the Holocaust was taboo. The Romanian view on the history of the Second World War was simple: All had suffered under Fascist rule, and the Communists had defeated Fascism.

After the fall of Communism in 1989, this attitude changed only slowly. On the one hand, Romania made little effort to track down perpetrators of the Holocaust.² On the other hand, the integration into international organisations meant that the country became more susceptible to external pressure. On 21 March 2002, shortly before a NATO summit, the government passed a resolution making "organisations and symbols of a fascist, racist or xenophobic nature and the glorification of persons guilty of crimes against peace and humanity" punishable under law.³

Initially, however, an external impetus was required. And President Ion Iliescu provided the occasion. In an interview with the Israeli daily *Ha'aretz* on 24 July 2003, he had the audacity to claim that there had been no Holocaust on Romanian soil. This caused a storm of outrage. A 2002 study estimated the number of Holocaust victims

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¹ For a chronology of Jewish life in Romania, see:

<www.romanianjewish.org/en/mosteniri_ale_culturii_judaice_03_13.html>.

² Marco Maximilian Katz, *Anti-Semitism in Romania* (Bucharest 2003); Report of the Centre for Monitoring and Combating Anti-Semitism in Romania (Bucharest 2004).

³ Andrei Oișteanu, "Holocaust: Definition Attempt", in *The Holocaust and Romania. History and Contemporary Significance* (Bucharest 2003), p. 147.

in Romania and in its occupied territories to be 420,000 people.⁴ In a second conversation with *Ha'aretz* one month later, Iliescu stated that Jews had the same claim to compensation for confiscated property as all other Romanians. But with the land being poor, one should not convey to Romanians the sense that the Jews were trying to “squeeze it dry”.⁵ This second lapse again caused considerable irritation. The Romanian government made efforts to contain the damage. One result was the deployment of the International Commission on the Holocaust in Romania, which came into existence on 22 October 2003. This commission was comprised of historians from Romania, Israel, and the United States and was led by Nobel Laureate Elie Wiesel. It was tasked with the investigation and evaluation of the facts of the Holocaust in Romania and was to make recommendations as to how this historical knowledge should be treated. On 11 November 2004, the commission presented its final report. According to this report, between 280,000 and 380,000 fell victim to the Holocaust on former Romanian soil, including its occupied territories. Furthermore, the commission suggested how the topic should be anchored in education and the culture of memory.⁶ Since then, the official treatment of Romanian history has changed. The government followed the recommendations of the Wiesel Commission. For a long time, both the public and political spheres had been reluctant to recognise the history of Romanian Jews as part of Romanian history. Until recently the curriculum spoke of the “history of Romanians” rather than the “history of Romania”. Minorities were scarcely mentioned. In the meantime, sensitivity to the treatment of its minorities and the Jewish heritage has increased. Where there once had been Jewish life, cultural and architectural heritage as part of local history were brought to public consciousness by various initiatives. Integrating the local population into the protection of these locations is possible, not least because the preservation of cultural heritage is bound to have a positive effect on tourism and the local economy.⁷

Even on the national level, awareness has grown that Romania's Jewish heritage is an integral part of Romanian culture. In 2003, the Foreign Ministry, along with the U.S. government and the University of Bucharest, organised the international symposium “Minorities, Cultural Heritage, and Contemporary Romanian Civilisation”. The aim was to encourage interethnic cultural dialogue, especially under consideration of Romania's Jewish heritage. The Ministry of Cultural and Religious Affairs created a consultation centre for European cultural programmes. Along with the *European Institute for Cultural Routes*, the centre is examining the possibility of including Romanian-Jewish sites in the *European Jewish Heritage Routes*.⁸ When Romania was chair of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, the committee was negotiating the creation of a “Path of Hasidic Culture”.⁹

⁴ Jean Ancel, *Romanyah* (Jerusalem 2002). On the issue of methodological difficulties and source problems in calculating the exact number of victims, see Wolfgang Benz, “Die Dimension des Völkermords. Einleitung”, in idem, ed., *Dimension des Völkermords. Die Zahl der jüdischen Opfer des Nationalsozialismus* (Munich 1991), pp. 1–20; Christa Zach, “Rumänien“, in *ibid.*, pp. 381–409.

⁵ Michael Shafir, “Deconstructing Holocaust Denial: Romania's Cucumber Season Revisited”, *RFE/RL East European Perspectives*, 22–25 (2003).

⁶ Report of the “Elie Wiesel” International Commission on Holocaust in Romania; <www.inshr-ew.ro/en-index.htm>, pp. 386–388. Regarding the number of victims, see, p. 179.

⁷ <www.ideo.ro/jewish_heritage/>.

⁸ <www.culture-routes.lu/>.

⁹ <www.eurocult.ro/agenda/index.htm>.

Jewish History in Politics

Since the Romanian president's scandalous claims, the climate has changed. Jewish history is increasingly making inroads into national memory. The memory is inextricably connected to Romania's responsibility for the Holocaust, the postwar compensations for confiscated Jewish property, as well as the post-Communist compensation and reparation payments to the victims of the Holocaust.

The government has followed the Wiesel Commission's advice and introduced an official Holocaust commemoration day. It is 9 October, the day on which, in 1941, the first Jews were deported from Romania's northeast to the Romanian-occupied part of Ukraine known as Transnistria. On the first Holocaust Commemoration Day in 2004, President Iliescu mentioned for the first time in public the death trains, the mass deportations, and the pogroms in Romania. Now he acknowledged that antisemitism had been a part of state ideology before the war broke out. These words were received very positively abroad, where Iliescu's statements had caused great uproar just one year earlier. In Romania, however, the speech went virtually unnoticed.

Since then, Holocaust Commemoration Day has been observed every year: The parliament calls a special session during which the president and a minister give speeches. Schools have essay and drawing competitions and organise exhibitions and meetings with survivors. In 2005, Romanian Foreign Minister Mihai Razvan Ungureanu inaugurated a study centre for Hebrew at the *Alexandru Ioan Cuza University* and laid a wreath at the Holocaust Memory Obelisk in Iași in memory of the victims of the Iași pogrom on 29 June 1941.¹⁰ On 9 October 2005, the *Elie Wiesel National Institute for Holocaust Studies in Romania* was opened. And on 9 October 2006, the cornerstone was finally laid for the National Holocaust Memorial in Bucharest, whose construction represents another one of the Wiesel Commission's recommendation. However, this has yet to be realised.

Sites of Memory

Before the Second World War, nearly 800,000 Jews lived in Romania. Today, there are about 8,000. They are organised in 40 congregations, 22 communities, and 90 groups.¹¹ Many former Jewish buildings, such as synagogues, schools, and cemeteries are in poor condition or have been abandoned, especially in regions where no more Jews live. The only possibility of preserving several of these buildings is to use them as museums, cultural centres, or public institutions.

¹⁰ The Iași Pogrom marks the beginning of the destruction of the Romanian Jews. According to the Wiesel Commission's final report, 14,850 Jews fell victim to the pogrom, see, p. 126.

¹¹ Congregations are considered to be associations of more than 30 members, communities have 8–30 members while groups consist of one to eight members. On the Romanian-Jewish congregations, see Jean Ancel, Victor Eskenasy, *Bibliography of the Jews in Romania* (Tel Aviv 1991); Paul Cernovodeanu et al., eds., *The History of Romanian Jews*, 1–5 (Tel Aviv 2002–2004); Carol Iancu, *The Jews of Romania (1866–1938)*, 1–3 (Bucharest 1998–2006); Radu Ioanid, *The Ransom of the Jews* (Chicago 2005); Victor Neumann, *The End of a History: The Jews of Banat* (Bucharest 2006).

The *Federation of Jewish Communities* turned the former synagogue of the Tailors Guild (*Shnaydershil*) in Bucharest into a Jewish museum and the Great Synagogue into a Holocaust museum. Two additional Jewish museums have been created in the synagogues of Iași and Bačau. In Cluj, the *Babeș-Bolyai University* bought a synagogue and made it the *Moshe Carmilly Weinberger Institute for Jewish Studies*. The *Tranzit House* foundation, created in 1997, rented the former *Poalei Tzedek* synagogue from the *Federation of Jewish Communities* and opened a centre for modern art.¹² The synagogue in Șimleu Silvaniei now hosts the *Northern Transylvanian Holocaust Memorial Museum and Education Centre*.¹³ It provides a permanent exhibition and preserves the memory of Jewish life in this region through many activities. Private donations have enabled the Sighișoara synagogue to be turned into a cultural centre committed to the preservation of Jewish heritage and sometimes also used for religious services. The synagogue in Gheorgheni, where over 1,000 Jewish inhabitants had lived, was made into a memorial by 92 Auschwitz survivors as long ago as 1946. Many memorial sites of this kind are currently coming into existence, which is chiefly the result of the initiative of Holocaust survivors.

Of the 99 still existing synagogues, 48 can still be used.¹⁴ The Ministry of Culture has recognised the most important of these synagogues as part of the Romania's national cultural heritage. This made it possible to apply for funding for restoration and maintenance.¹⁵

There are 802 Jewish cemeteries in 714 towns or villages in Romania.¹⁶ 108 of them can be used. Unlike in Prague, Jewish cemeteries in Romania are not classified as cultural memorial sites. Nonetheless, some of them function as places of commemoration. In the cemeteries in Iași, Târgu Frumos, and Podu Iloaiei, there are mass graves containing the victims of the death trains used to murder the survivors of the Iași pogrom. Next to the mass grave stands the memorial obelisk in front of Iași's Great Synagogue, which dates from the 17th century. A memorial plate at the former police station states: "Between 29 June and 2 July 1941, 13,000 Jews were murdered in Iași. Hundreds were killed in this courtyard." It is incomprehensible that the building should today contain a pizzeria.

Another kind of commemoration is practiced at the Ștefănești cemetery in the district of Suceava, where no more Jews live. Hasidic Rabbi Admor Friedman was buried here before his remains were exhumed in the 1980s and taken to Israel. Many Jews, as well as Christians from the area, still visit the gravesite. They pray or leave handwritten notes as is done at the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem so that Rabbi Friedman, whom they honour as a saint, may console them in their misery or grant them wishes.

¹² <www.tranzithouse.ro/history.htm>.

¹³ <www.mmhtn.org>.

¹⁴ <www.jewish.ro>, <www.cimec.ro/Monumente/LacaseCult/EN/Documente/BazaDate.htm> counts 93 synagogues. Some can be seen at <www.romanianjewish.org/en/fedrom_03.html>.

¹⁵ This applies to the Great Synagogue in Bucharest, the neological synagogue in Arad, the synagogues in Pitești and Bačau, the neological and the orthodox synagogue in Oradea, the synagogue in Bistrița, the neological synagogue in Brașov, two orthodox synagogues in Caransebeș, the synagogues in Dej, Târgoviște, Deva, Hațeg and Orăștie, to two synagogues in Iași, the synagogues in Baia Mare, Seini and Sighețu Marmatiei, two synagogues in Drobeta Turnu-Severin, two synagogues in Târgu Mureș, the wooden synagogue from the 18th century in Piatra Neamț, the synagogues in Caracal and Șimleu Silvaniei, two synagogues in Satu Mare, the synagogues in Sibiu and three in Timișoara.

¹⁶ There are 148 cemeteries in places where Jews still live, and 654 in locations where no Jews live.

Additional places of commemoration for Jewish history include the former ghettos. During the Second World War, there were 11 ghettos and two labour camps in northern Transylvania.¹⁷ Memorials to the victims now stand at the sites of the ghettos in Oradea, Târgu Mureş, und Someş.

Research and Documentation of Jewish Life

In addition to the Universities in Bucharest, Cluj, Iaşi, Craiova, and Timișoara, which have research projects concerning Jewish memory, there is the *Elie Wiesel National Institute for Holocaust Studies in Romania*. It was founded by the government following the Wiesel Commission's recommendation and continues its work. It researches the history of the Holocaust, gathers and publishes documents and reports, and offers educational programmes.¹⁸

The *Association of Romanian-Jewish Holocaust Survivors* is an important initiative that commemorates victims and preserves Jewish heritage. The association organises events and has created didactic material that was accepted by the ministry of education and is now used in schools. The association co-produced the documentary film *The Forgotten Holocaust*. Members are featured in media presentations as contemporary witnesses and give talks as part of teacher training courses on how to handle the Holocaust in schools.

Museums also provide an important contribution to the research and documentation of Jewish life in Romania. The Jewish Museum in Bucharest, under the leadership of the *Federation of Jewish Communities*, documents Jewish life in today's Romania in a permanent exhibition. The Bucharest Holocaust Museum displays posters concerning anti-Jewish legislation as well as the persecution and murder of Jews during the war. The museums in Iaşi and Bačau are dedicated to local Jewish history. The *Elie Wiesel House – The Jewish Culture and Civilization Museum*, in the Maramureş region, commemorates Wiesel's childhood in his house of birth. Wiesel was deported from Sighet at the age of 15. The *Elie Wiesel House* communicates local Jewish traditions. It hosts a large collection of photographs and personal items that once belonged to the Jews who lived there. The memorial museum in Șimleu Silvaniei documents the Holocaust in Transnistria. Other museums have also proclaimed their interest in featuring the topic of Jewish history. Paradoxically, the smaller the number of local Jews, the greater the interest seems. A travelling exhibition on Romanian synagogues, curated by the *Federation of Jewish Communities*, has been presented in Romania and abroad. In 2005, the *National Historical Museum* displayed the remains of Jewish ritual objects that had been destroyed in the Second World War.

The *Museum of the Romanian Peasant* in Bucharest offered a cultural programme in the first six months of 2008 called “In Conversation with the ‘Others’ – the History of the Neighbours” that also focussed on Jewish heritage.¹⁹ There is hardly anything left

¹⁷ Oliver Lustig, *Procesul ghetourilor din Nordul Transilvaniei* (Bucharest 2007). The ghettos were in Oradea, Târgu Mureş, Someş, Baia Mare, Satu Mare, Cluj, Reghin, Sfântu Gheorghe, Șimleu Silvaniei, Bistrița and Sighet, the work camps in Târgu Jiu and Caransebeș.

¹⁸ <www.inshr-ew.ro/en-index.htm>.

¹⁹ These conversations were part of the “PUZZLE” project for the promotion of intercultural dialogue, funded by the European Commission and coordinated by the Romanian Cultural Ministry’s Council for European Culture Programmes, <www.muzeultaranuluiroman.ro/index.php?page=acasa&articol=34>.

of the former Jewish quarter. However, there are no plaques commemorating the facts of its existence. The organisation *e-cart.ro* has initiated the project “Marcel Iancu – Architect” that is funded by the Ministry of Culture and documents the Jewish contribution to the development of modern architecture in Bucharest.²⁰

The international organisation *Centropa* salvages memories of Jewish life in Central and Eastern Europe and makes its findings accessible in databases on its Web site.²¹ *Centropa* has undertaken numerous projects on Jewish memory in Romania. On the basis of family photographs and personal histories, the team has conducted over 100 interviews concerning Jewish life before, during, and after the Holocaust and has incorporated their results into a travelling exhibition. This was shown in 2007 on the occasion of an OSCE anti-discrimination conference in Bucharest.

Jewish History in Schoolbooks

In the late 1990s, there were increasing calls for the history of the Jews in Romania and the tragedy of the Holocaust to be given more attention in schools. An Israeli-Romanian commission of historians was to make appropriate suggestions, but it never convened. Schoolbooks did include material on the history of the Jews in Europe and on the Holocaust, however, information concerning Romania's role was scarce and often confusing.²² One notable exception was Stelian Brezeanu's 12th-grade history textbook.²³

In 1999, the Holocaust was first included in curricula as a mandatory subject in secondary school history classes. Its implementation, however, took a long time.

Since 2004, the history of the Holocaust has been taught to 7th- and 10th- to 12th-grade students. There is sometimes even the possibility of taking additional courses as electives.²⁴ The curricula and schoolbooks were revised according to Wiesel Commission recommendations. Nonetheless, even the most ambitious history instructors were reluctant to teach the topic. The cause is simple: It requires them to teach something about which they know nothing or about which they were previously misinformed. Either they learned nothing about the subject under Communism or – under the influence of hectic media campaigns that swayed between being antisemitic and sometimes philosemitic – something falsified or perfunctory. A thorough retraining of Romania's roughly 10,000 history teachers would be desperately needed.

In 2005, the Ministry of Education and Research instigated a national teacher training programme on the topic of the Holocaust and thus encouraged a number of activities. The programme financed special seminars at the universities in Cluj and Bucharest, didactic material, educational material, as well as trips to Yad Vashem (Jerusalem) and to Shoah memorials. There is also a fund to promote translation of Holocaust-related publications into Romanian. The *Association of Romanian-Jewish Holocaust Survivors* compiled teaching aids that included testimonies and anthologies of rele-

²⁰ <<http://cimec.wordpress.com/2008/07/11/marcel-iancu-inceputurile-arhitecturii-moderne-in-bucuresti>>.

²¹ <www.centropa.org>.

²² Felicia Waldman, “Coming to Terms with the Recent Past: Holocaust Education in Post-Communist Romania”, *RFE/RL East European Perspectives*, 14–15 (2004).

²³ Stelian Brezeanu, ed., *Istorie. Manual pentru clasa a IX-a* (History of Romania. 12th grade textbook), Rao Educational (1999).

²⁴ Florin Petrescu, *Istoria evreilor. Holocaustul* (Bucharest 2005).

vant secondary literature. The Ministry of Education has made it accessible to schools. Similarly, publications on the Roma genocide were compiled and distributed. Michelle Kelsos's documentary film about the deportation of the Roma to Transnistria, *Hidden Sorrows*, is available with additional educational materials on DVD. The *Research Centre for Culture and Civilisation of Southeastern European Jewry* at the University of Craiova published, with the support of the Austrian national fund for the victims of National-Socialism, two volumes of documentation on oppression and Jewish forced labour following research conducted in French and Romanian archives. In 2007, as part of the PHARE programme of the European Union, the Ministry of Education organised teacher training courses on anti-discrimination as well as on the promotion of Roma culture. The new 2007 guidelines also mandate teaching the topic of minorities to 10th- and 12th-grade students.²⁵

Jewish Cultural Life Today

Despite its small number of members, the Romanian *Federation of Jewish Communities* possesses its own media. These include the newspaper *Realitatea Evreiască* (The Jewish Reality), the state-funded publisher *Hasefer*, and a documentation centre for Romanian-Jewish history, which publishes a bulletin and other printed matter. In addition, there are 21 communal libraries, 11 choirs, and five music groups that participate in national and international festivals.

One Romanian-Jewish institution that has defied time is the Jewish Theatre. Founded in Iași in 1876 by Avram Goldfaden, the “father of Yiddish theatre”, this first professional Jewish theatre in the world was in operation until the Second World War. Famous Jewish actors who were otherwise banned from performing in public theatres could appear on stage there. In 1948, the Jewish Theatre was founded anew in Bucharest and was able to continue under communist rule. In 1991, it organised an *International Yiddish Theatre Festival* in Bucharest, which was followed by a second event in 1996. The National Theatre of Iași has functioned annually since 2002 as the host of the week-long *International Jewish Drama Festival “Avram Goldfaden”*.

In Sibiu, the European Capital of Culture 2007, the *Federation of Jewish Communities* organised “Euro-Judaica” – the European festival of Jewish art and culture.²⁶ There were klezmer concerts, exhibitions, films, and theatre as well as speeches and discussions. Other festivals for the promotion of the cultural heritage of minorities have been organised in the past few years by the government agency for interethnic relations. The Romanian film director Radu Gabrea recently produced the documentary film *Romania, Romania: II Looking for Schwartz*. The film tells the history of klezmer music, which has many roots in Romania.

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²⁵ Order 1529 “On the inclusion of cultural diversity in the national curriculum”, Official paper of the Monitorul Oficial R.A. (18 July 2007).

²⁶ <www.sibiul.ro/program-evenimente-sibiu-2007/pannonia-klezmer-band-ungaria-festivalul-european-de-cultura-si-arta-evreiasca-euroiudaica-2007.html>.