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REGIME CHANGES, PUBLIC MEMORY AND THE PURSUIT OF JUSTICE:

THE CASE OF GERMAN-SPEAKING JEWS

IN BUKOVINA (1920-1960)

Theses of PhD Dissertation

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1. **The aims of the thesis:** The establishment of the democratic political system in Romania after 1990 offered new opportunities for coming to terms with the suppressed past. However, this process turned out to be a very difficult and a highly disputed one. Many post-communist societies in Eastern Europe had to re-define their national identity by searching for historical figures in order to replace the “false heroes” created by the communist regimes during the last fifty years. The favourite “new heroes” became those former statesmen who were known for their anti-communist but also nationalist attitude, regardless of the political and moral values they promoted. After the Communist regime had been overthrown in 1989, not only nationalist, but also moderate politicians and even historians began to emphasise the ‘patriotic’ and ‘anti-Communist’ character of the Romanian military dictator Ion Antonescu during the Second World War. Paradoxically, the construction of a democratic society based on tolerance and respect for human rights started by regarding an oppressive military dictator as an acceptable model for the function of head of state. However, the voices of those who experienced the ordeal of Transnistria and other atrocities during the Holocaust carried out by Romanian authorities could not be silenced any longer. The commemorations organised by the local Jewish community opened the process of coming to terms with the domestic Holocaust in Romania. This process of coming to terms, similar to the entire democratisation process in Romania, is an irreversible one. Owing to international pressure but also due to the increasing willingness of the Romanian political class, intellectuals including also some historians, the issue of the domestic Holocaust has ceased to be a taboo any longer during the last decade, even if extreme right-wing voices are still trying to mitigate its impact on the Jewish population of Romania. My doctoral thesis was conceived as a contribution to this process of coming to terms with the country’s past, using the framework of the project

of the University of Sussex related to the life and artistic creation of the Holocaust survivor German-speaking Jewish painter Arnold Daghani born in Bukovina, by reflecting on the interconnection between politics and private life of hundred thousand of persons, who learnt the upheavals of the twenty century.

The influence exerted by political and historical events contributed in many instances to the shaping of the creative personality of artists who consequently have transmitted through their works their own life experience as they have lived through different political regimes in these turbulent years. Such a case is the life and work of Arnold Daghani. Born as a German-speaking Jew in Austrian Bukovina, a province later to become Romanian and subject to the horrible upheaval of the Second World War, Daghani spent the formative years of his artistic life in the political, historical and cultural context of the interwar period. This research focused on the period starting with Daghani reaching adulthood and ending with his final departure from communist Romania. This is the period that coincides with the emergence of the extreme right towards the end of the 1920s and the end of the period of de-Stalinisation in the late 1950s. This was a period of spectacular upheavals in the political life of the country, which dramatically affected above all the Jewish population of Bukovina and Moldavia. The life story of Arnold Daghani served as reference for the interconnection between individual destiny and politics, making a comparison with other individual destinies of German-speaking Jewish intellectuals from Bukovina, such as Paul Celan, Rose Ausländer, Immanuel Weißglass and others.

2. **Research methods:** I approached the subject using English, German and Romanian specialised literature relating to national, religious and regional identity, nationalism, ethnicity and public memory as well as bibliography regarding the socio-political realities in Romania in the period 1930-1960. To prepare this main part of the

theoretical approach of my thesis, I used mainly the book collections of the following institutions: *Library of the University of Sussex*, *The British Library* in London, *Biblioteca Centrală Universitară* in Cluj (Romania), *Biblioteca Academiei Române* in Bucharest, as well as the libraries of the *Freie Universität* in Berlin.

During my research, I processed private and official primary sources, like letters, memoirs, diaries of contemporary victims or simple observers of the political changes during the period under discussion, but also reports, internal confidential files of legislative and executive authorities (minutes' papers, interrogations, declarations, etc). An essential aim of my investigation was to find survivors who knew Daghani during the years of persecution in Transnistria and beyond the river Bug for interviews including oral history into my historical research. Using the methods of the oral history in my investigation I increased also the specificity of my research. A considerable part of the research has been carried out at the University of Sussex processing the impressive narrative as well as pictorial archive material of the Arnold Daghani Collection. A significant research work was done also in the Archive of the Centre for Holocaust Advanced Studies in Washington, at the Centre for the Research of the History of the Romanian Jews (CSIER) in Bucharest, as well as at the branch of the Romanian National Archive in the city of Suceava and in the Federal Archive of the German Foreign Office (Bundesarchiv des Auswärtigen Amtes) in Berlin. I paid special attention to the secondary sources i.e. the analysis of contemporary press and other mass media publications found in the above-mentioned archives and libraries.

Little is known about public memory of the Holocaust in Romania. The most important historical work on the perception of the Holocaust in Romania is *Cartea neagră: Suferințele evreilor din România în timpul dictaturii fasciste 1940-1944* (The black book: The suffering of the Romanian Jewry during the fascist dictatorship) written by Matias

Carp and published in 1946 and republished in 1996. But this book offers only a collateral approach of the questions relating to public memory in the after-war Romania. There are two recent volumes, one in English *The tragedy of the Romanian Jewry* edited by Randolph L. Braham and one in German *Rumänien und der Holocaust* edited by Mariana Hausleitner, Brigitte Mihok and Juliane Wetzel which contains the most relevant studies (some of them also in English) related to the perception of the Holocaust in the after-war and post-communist Romania. A significant contribution to the post-war history of the Jews in Romania was made by Hiltrun Glass with her book *Minderheit zwischen zwei Diktaturen: Zur Geschichte der Juden in Rumänien 1944-1949* published in 2002.

Nevertheless, these studies do not refer to public memory in terms of an all-inclusive investigation regarding the whole Romanian society or mentioning the issue of the judicial investigation against war criminals and their executioners. A subject that in Romania was totally neglected being, a white spot in the contemporary historiography is the issue of calling to account those responsible for the crimes committed during the Holocaust in Romania and Transnistria. My thesis made therefore a first step in order to clarify the main aspects of this ignored subject opening the prospect of further investigations in this field.

The substantial originality of my thesis consists, on one hand in using private primary sources as “documents of life” in order to analyse identity changes caused by the intrusion of the politics in the private sphere and on the other hand being the first approach of the question related to the judicial prosecution of those who were responsible for the crimes of the domestic Holocaust in Romania during the right-wing dictatorship of Marshal Antonescu. Bringing into discussion the role of the Romanian political class and the attitude of the Romanian society during the most inhuman atrocities in the Romanian history of the 20th century, my thesis aims to be also a contribution to the process of

renewal of the Romanian historiography, offering a historical view free of all kind of ideological and demagogical influences.

3. The results: The world of the Bukovinian Jews, including the multi-ethnic culture of Czernowitz, irreversibly disappeared during the upheavals of the Second World War. By focusing on the case of the German-speaking Jews, this dissertation traces the long-term implications of the striking changes that occurred with the Bukovinian German-speaking Jews once their homeland became part of Greater Romania. It was above all the German-speaking Jews that gave this region its distinctive cultural and religious identity, a culture irretrievably destroyed by the tragic events of the Romanian Holocaust. During the interwar period outstanding writers, journalists and politicians of Jewish origin began their careers in the Bukovina, including Rose Ausländer, Paul Celan, Alfred Margul-Sperber, Meyer Ebner and Selma Meerbaum-Eisinger. After describing this culture and the political events that destroyed it, the dissertation focuses on the testimony of Arnold Daghani, a less well-known artist born in Southern Bukowina, who experienced the dramatic events in Czernowitz, Transnistria and the Ukraine after the German-Romanian attack on the Soviet Union in June 1941. His artistic and literary works represent a compelling struggle for justice and for the commemoration of his fellow citizens deported and killed during the Holocaust. By retrieving his neglected testimony, especially about the silent Holocaust beyond the river Bug, and contrasting it with the post-war public record in Romania, this investigation enlarges the range of historical research, making its own contribution to a more critical form of public memory. In this context, the chapters about the investigation of war crimes break new ground. The dissertation also attempted to identify the distinctive features of Romanian anti-Semitism, especially the combination of religious and political prejudice exploited by the Iron Guard. The series of discriminatory laws and decrees against Jews initiated in 1938, amplified in 1940 and completed during the war reached its

most severe character through the ordinances regarding the deportation of the Bukovinian and Bessarabian Jews to Transnistria in summer and autumn 1941. This event can be considered a crucial moment in the process of the destruction of the German-Jewish communities of Bukovina including the community of Czernowitz. The Romanian regime of Marshal Ion Antonescu had the main responsibility for this part of the Holocaust carried out on Romanian soil as well as in the occupied Ukrainian territory under Romanian rule called Transnistria. As so many eyewitnesses confirmed in their oral or written testimonies, it was the Romanian gendarmerie who forced them to leave their homes, who terrorised them along the exhausting marches as well as who kept them under strict surveillance in the ghettos and labour camps of Transnistria. However, one can not deny that the chances of the Jews to survive the Holocaust were bigger in Transnistria under Romanian authority than beyond the Bug in the Reichskommissariat Ukraine, especially from autumn 1942 on when many members of the Antonescu cabinet started to have doubts in a German final victory. After 1942 Transnistria became for many deportees handed over to the SS a place of refuge, where in ghettos like Bershah they could hide waiting for the hoped repatriation or liberation. However, almost 75% of the deportees to Transnistria perished due to the hard living condition, especially during the winter 1941-1942 when most of the victims died of typhoid fever. But executions and mistreatment also increased the number of the victims. The latest figures on this topic show that the total number of the Romanian and Ukrainian Jews who perished during the Holocaust in Transnistria is between 280,000 and 380,000. Therefore it can be no doubt about the existence of a Romanian domestic Holocaust despite of all other aspects like the limited permission to emigrate or the refusal of the Antonescu-regime to deport all the Jews of Romanian into the German death camps. These facts can not be regarded either as a “merit” of the regime nor can absolve the Antonescu-regime from the guilt of the crimes

committed. In fact the ideological origin of the tragic events during the Holocaust goes back to the emergence of modern Romania. The separation, expropriation, deportation, and murder of Jews were possible also because of this tradition of anti-Semitism and the lack of mass support for those who rejected it. Therefore the domestic Holocaust had deep Romanian roots being part of Romanian history.

The horrible experience in Transnistria during the Second World War determined the majority of the Jews of Bukovina to refuse to start of a new life in their native place. The Soviet regime in the northern part of the province established after 1945 was also unfavourable for a flourishing Jewish life, and the chances of emigration were limited. The post-war period was an important time for the aftermath of the Holocaust in Romania and for the perspectives of the survivors. The fifth change of political regime within thirty years occurred in December 1947, when King Mihai I was forced to abdicate and Romania was proclaimed People's Republic. A new dictatorship, in this case a left-wing one, prompted many Jewish survivors to leave Romania, as Arnold Daghani did in January 1958. After 1947 it became more difficult to distinguish between real war criminals and opponents within the army against the communist regime who were put on trial and condemned for alleged war crimes. The topic of the trials against war criminals in Romanian was not sufficiently researched and therefore still raises many questions. In this process of doing Justice for the victims and survivors Arnold Daghani played an important role keeping alive the memory of those who suffered and perished in Transnistria and beyond the river Bug in Mikhailovka, Tarassivka, and other places of horror. He brought into the awareness of the world the existence of the camps beyond the Bug and kept the hope alive that the criminals of Mikhailovka and Tarassivka would be brought to Court. He has done his best in order to start a prosecution as it happened indeed in 1965 when the Prosecution Office from Lübeck took this initiatives but it was beyond his capability to do

more when the prosecutor decided after five years of investigations to close the case because “lack of evidences”.

After such dreadful events affecting the life of hundred thousands of Romanian citizens, my dissertation identifies the tendentious distortions of public memory which prevented these historical events from being properly investigated, highlighting the political and social circumstances under which these commemorations took place and the message they were intended to convey, not least through memorials and monuments. In Romania the public memory related to the Holocaust had in fact two players. The Jews and the state authorities. The latter tried to put the public memory of the Holocaust under their tutelage, adjusting the messages of these commemorations to the ideology they represented. Amazingly at these commemorations Transnistria and the fate of those deported by the Romanian authorities was barely mentioned. Instead of this, it was the “RIF soap” as the symbol of Nazi barbarism that dominated the public commemorations of the 1940s in Moldavia and Bukovina although the Jews of these regions were not deported to the German death camps but to Transnistria. Allegedly the leaders of the Jewish communities did not want to worsen the situation of the Romanian official delegation at the Peace Conference in Paris, ignoring in public the victims of Transnistria. It was the first step towards a silence that lasted over fifty years about the ordeal in Transnistria, which could be re-brought into the centre of public memory only after the fall of the nationalistic communist regime in December 1989.

4. My papers on the topic of the thesis

Identităţi evreieşti în Bucovina interbelică (Zsidó identitások Bukovinában a két világháború között), in: *Cultura*, 1. évf., 33., 27. Oct.-2. Nov. 2004, Bucureşti

The Public Memory of the Holocaust in the Post-War Romania, in: *Studia Hebraica*, 4. sz., The "Goldstein Goren" Centre for Hebrew Studies: Bucharest, 2004

Convieţuiri interetnice si interconfesionale în Bucovina (Nemzetiségi és felekezeti együttélés Bukovinában) in: *Convieţuirea/Együttélés*, 8. évf., 1.-8. sz., Szeged, 2004

Eyewitness Testimonies as a Source of a Historical Analysis of the Deportations to Transnistria (1941 – 1943), in: *Étude balcanique*, No. 4, Sofia 2004

A romániai Holokauszt az utóbbi évek román nyelvű kiadványaiban, in: Schweizer József „Új idea, új cél keresésére szorítanak bennünket“ A magyar zsidó történetírás koncepciói és perspektívái, Mórija Könyvek: Budapest, 2006

Mitul Mareşalului Ion Antonescu în România post-comunistă (Antonescu marsal mítosza a posztkommunista Romániában), in: *Convieţuirea/Együttélés*, Szeged, 2007

Faţete ale unei identităţi complexe: Arnold Daghani, pictorul uitat al Bucovinei (Egy sokoldalú identitás arculata: Arnold Daghani, Bukovina feledésbe merült festője), in: *Convieţuirea/Együttélés*, 11. évf., 1.-4. sz., Szeged, 2007

A háborús bűnösök megtorlása a második világháború utáni Romániában és Magyarországon, in: *Korall*, 8. év., 28.-29.sz., Budapest, 2007

Die Wahrnehmung des "domestic Holocaust" im Rumänien der Nachkriegsjahre, in: Regina Fritz, Carola Sachse, Edgar Wolfrum: *Nationen und ihre Selbstbilder*, Göttingen, 2008

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La justice d'après guerre: les procès des criminels de Transnistrie in: George Bensoussan: *L'horreur oubliée: la Shoah roumain*, Revue d'histoire de la Shoah, Nr. 194, Lessay-les-Château, 2011

Péter Wéber, *ETHNIC AND RELIGIOUS CO-HABITATION IN BUKOVINA UNDER ROMANIAN RULE DURING THE INTERWAR PERIOD (1920 – 1940)*, in: *Nová Filologická Revue*, 8 évf., 2 szám, Banská Bystrica, 2016