

The clandestine immigration of Romanian Jews between 1946 and 1947

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AFTER AUGUST 23, 1944, Romania entered a dark period in its history from which it would only emerge four and a half decades later. The decision to break out of the coalition with Germany and France and to fight alongside the United Nations – the USSR, England and USA – had been perceived by the majority of the Romanian population as a historical watershed. This limited optimism – characteristic for that period – generally occurs when a moment of crisis is believed to end; this optimism can be affected or even cancelled in the next stage, but, psychologically speaking, it is justified.

The political and military decision made on August 23, 1944 marked not only a new beginning for most of the Romanian citizens, but also a good beginning; while it is true that this could incorporate old practices, attitudes and mentalities, these were part of a different social and political structure and pointed to a different direction of general development than the one society had gone through previously.

The effects of the disappearance of the regime deposed by insurrection were different for the various segments of the Romanian population; their previous status played an important role in these differences of perception. Between the end of the fourth decade of the 20th century and 1944, the Jews had to endure a discriminating and aggressive jurisdiction, followed by deportations and murders.

Under these circumstances, the entry of the Soviet troops in Romania was greeted by the Jewish population (despite the violence's inflicted by the Soviet soldiers on peaceful Romanians) as an action meant to preserve their lives and to restore the normality that had been taken from them.

The Romanian Communist Party and its collaborators, protected by the Soviet

troops, using an efficient, violent, insinuating, constant and flexible propaganda, did not waste any time in taking over the public, economic and military space of the country. Throughout this process, they managed to win over a few segments of the population by displaying a seemingly democratic programme, but they were far from obtaining the support of the majority. Some Jewish citizens of Romania supported the communist left, because they considered them to be opponents of the fascist right and because they believed that their trust and support would be duly rewarded in a normal mutual fashion. During the first two post-war years, the Jewish population was able to see that the communist promises were empty and that their hopes were only partially realised.

The general support of the Jews towards communism can be demonstrated neither immediately after August 23, 1944 nor later. On the contrary, anti-Bolshevik actions of some Jewish representatives were noted in some cases (without being motivated by Zionist options). There were Jews who embraced communism without reservations (either because they considered that communism, situated to the left of the interwar political spectrum, provided individual or collective chances or for opportunistic reasons), as well as Jews who expressed doubts about communism and were publicly and openly opposed to it.¹

The communist attempts to subordinate the Jewish population of Romania² were not successful, so that in fact, the Jews neither became nor represented the constant ethnic ally of the communists. Some of them, considering and accepting communism as an alternative to their previous life, discovered that it was a threat to fundamental human rights, just like fascism before it.

Added to this, one can mention another dramatic aspect that invalidated a different kind of expectation. The communist perspective of general economic recovery was not realistic given the state of poverty in the countries that had gone through a war in which the Jews had to endure the horrors of the death camps and the antisemitic pressures. A communist regime represented a threat to some social and economic structures that a large number of the Jews depended on, as they were an important factor of capitalist development and were thus negatively influenced by anything that affected capitalism.

On September 29, 1947, the Union of Romanian Jews – a member of the Jewish Unity Front, a protocol signed by the Romanian Jewish organisations that forbade separate negotiations in matters that concerned the Jewish population as a whole – held a meeting to analyse the activity of the organisation from February 1 to the moment when the meeting took place. The Activity Report was presented on this occasion, including the its main actions both as an individual entity and as a member of the Front. From this latter point of view, the Report drew attention to the fact that many objectives had not been fulfilled:

the organisation failed to assimilate the Jewish widows, orphans, invalids who suffered in massacres and deportations with the categories with which they could be assimilated, stipulated in the I.O.V.R. Statute; they failed to secure the restitution of the buildings of materials confiscated by the State; the Jewish communities did not receive enough subsidies to maintain their own religious, cultural, social and medial organisations; the imported goods (tools, clothes, food) sent to support the needy were not exempted from import tax.

As far as its own activity is concerned, a relevant aspect was represented by the visits made in the counties, which revealed the frightening state of poverty encountered in some places, despite the efficiency of the organisational reconstruction: "We visited almost 200 Jewish families in Dorohoi, who live in abject poverty. There are families who do not even have a pillow to lay their heads or a blanket to cover themselves."³

The clandestine emigration of some Jews is also mentioned, with the observation that this was not a secondary phenomenon: "A strong emigration current troubled Jewish matters in recent months."⁴ People leave after giving up their belongings; in some cases, such illegal crossings of the border were successful, in some others not, and the state filed lawsuits against hundreds of Jews, accusing them of attempting to cross the border illegally; these people were given over to the Martial Courts in Timișoara, Oradea and Cluj. The suspicion that the Jewish community organisations were involved in any way in organising these departures: "These chaotic immigrations were not planned by the Jewish organisations. But some people used this opportunity to attack the Jewish organisations on the grounds that they supported this immigration."

When individuals or whole families give up their previous status, their properties and jobs and put themselves through a novel experience, this means they reached a crisis point that had to be surpassed at any cost or risk. This was a state marked by the absence of any other alternative, as well as by the awareness of the existing economic and social structures to provide a credible solution.

An order of the General Police Administration, dated May 7, 1946,⁵ contains information about the large number of Jews who were trying to leave the country illegally for America and Palestine. During the month of March, 33 Jews had been detained by the border authorities, of whom 28 were from Northern Transylvania; in April, 44 were detained, of whom 33 from Northern Transylvania.⁶

The Report drafted by the Sălaj Gendarme Legion of the Oradea Gendarme Inspectorate makes a synthesis of the illegal border crossings between Romania and Hungary between 1946 and 1947. The area covered by the jurisdiction of the Sălaj Legion coincided with the border between Romania and Hungary, supervised by the Valea lui Mihai and Carei gendarme units (with a total length

of 82 km – the former sector covered 46 km, while the latter 36 km). The illegal border crossings analysed in the material were grouped in two categories: smuggling goods and border crossings of compact groups of Jews who were headed for Palestine and America via Hungary.

The research done based on the available data led to the identification of specialised organisations that recruited people and organised the crossings for groups of up to 20 people in exchange for large sums of money and valuables. When the defendants were interrogated, they admitted that the organisation had been active for “approximately four months”, that each person paid up to 10.000.000 lei, plus valuables, and that the crossings were done on three routes: from Valea lui Mihai to Nyírbátor; Carei – Foieni (forest) and Carei – Urziceni to Vállaj and Nyírbátor – Ungaria.

As a result of the large number of crossings, a “secret order of the Hungarian Government” was issued, asking for the enhanced supervision of the border; consequently, the Nyírábrány border police received 20 extra soldiers. The Hungarian authorities turned back to Romania a group of 60 Jews who had crossed the border illegally (at the time, they were in the care of the Valea lui Mihai Jewish community, but their intentions were not known).

In order to strengthen the security of the border area and to stop the flow of Jews, as well as to detain those who were trying to cross the border, four teams were made up on the Romanian territory, supervising predetermined areas and routes in each of the two gendarme units; fixed stations were also established where it was believed that the most favourable crossing points were located.⁷

On May 24, 1947, the commander of the Sălaj Gendarme Legion sent an informative note to his superiors in Oradea, sending them some data from the Carei Gendarme Unit. Thus, in the localities near the Hungarian border “there were large groups of Jews who had come from all over the country with the aim of crossing the border illegally into Hungary, Germany and from there to Palestine or America”; many of them had been detained during their attempt to cross the border and, in some cases, they had been helped by Soviet soldiers; one mentioned the case of three soldiers of the Russian army who, “armed with machine guns, guided small groups of Jews to the border in exchange for large sums of money”; after crossing the border, the Jews were expected by representatives of the JOINT organisation, who provided them “with means of transport to Germany, and from there, to Palestine and America.” The informative note also mentioned the fact that the Jews took significant risks by giving up all the assets they had in Romania: “very many of them sell their goods and those who do not have (material goods – our note) apply for loans in order to succeed in crossing the border illegally.”⁸

On May 26, 1947, the Bihor Gendarme Legion sent an Information Order

to Sectors 1-12, notifying them about the fact that the Romanian Zionist organisations were involved in organising the illegal border crossings (a fact apparently confirmed in a discussion by the head of the Arad Zionist organisation). The crossings were facilitated by those who were in contact with or who had had professional ties with the border authorities in exchange for money. Thus, on April 22, 1947, 20 young Jews had been detained for attempting to cross illegally into Hungary; they had paid 15 million lei to a non-commissioned gendarme officer working with the border authorities.⁹

On June 13, 1947, the Oradea Gendarme Inspectorate asked the Gendarme Unit in Valea lui Mihai to supervise closely the owner of the “STOP” Restaurant, who was suspected of organising the border crossings together with a border official working there in exchange for 500.000 lei each.

On July 1, 1947, an informative note of the Oradea Gendarme Inspectorate showed that a facilitator of the Jews’ illegal border crossing had been identified; his name was Klein Francisc, the owner of the “STOP” Restaurant in Valea lui Mihai. As no certain evidence proving his involvement in this action could be found, except for suspicions, one took “steps to supervise him and the other people living in the same building.”

On July 21, 1947, the Oradea Regional Security Inspectorate informed the Police Office of the Gendarme Inspectorate about Klein Francisc’s arrest and the fact that he had been referred to the Sălaj Tribunal Prosecutor. A handwritten note mentioned that he had been involved in “facilitating the illegal border crossings of the Jews.”¹⁰

The fact that some Jewish families sold all their possessions was an indicator of their intention to leave the country. On July 9, 1947, the Police Office of the Oradea Gendarme Inspectorate considered that the fact that shoemaker Beer Moise of Mănăştur village was selling his property demonstrated his intention to leave the country or his irrevocable decision, the man now waiting “for the order to leave”.

The first part of the note made reference to the previously formulated hypothesis that the clandestine crossings were directed by the Jewish community, as follows: “every Jew who wants to emigrate to Palestine goes to sign up at the Jewish community; those who are not married, or are married but do not have children are given preference. After signing up, they have to wait until the community informs them that they have to go. The Jewish community has people employed both in Valea lui Mihai and in Hungary, who make sure that they cross the border safely and take care of them.” Another memo of the Oradea Gendarme Inspectorate, dated October 31, 1947, refers to the same issue, the preparations for leaving the country by giving up one’s property: “Following a search in the Satu Mare Jewish quarter, conducted on the night of

October 25/26, 1947 by the authorities of the Satu Mare Economic Board, it was discovered that 35 out of the 40 inhabitants of the searched apartments had packed their belongings, probably with the intention of crossing the border into Hungary with various destinations.”¹¹

The state of facts presented in another document that cannot be dismissed as untruthful or willingly exaggerated disproves the theory of an effective and fast solution to their situation.

On July 30, 1947, the Oradea Gendarme Inspectorate included in one of their own informative notes some accounts of the Gendarme Unit in Valea lui Mihai about the desperate plight of those who had come there with the intention of crossing the border.

After giving up their lifetime possessions, they had become dependant on improbably means of survival. The image of these aimless groups of people deprived of a future or of minimal living conditions was tragic: “one can see daily at the Jewish church in Valea lui Mihai entire families who wander around for months, naked, hungry, infested by parasites and suffering from various contagious diseases.” Since their situation was very serious and their attempts to cross the border more and more numerous (“The gendarme units and the border officials send 30-40 families who had tried to cross the border illegally to the Prosecutor’s Office every day”), the authorities were require to intervene to remedy the situation; urgent measures had to be taken regarding “these people who looked like skeletons and, if left to chance, they could make the other locals ill.”¹²

This evident increase on the number of Jews in the localities near the Romanian-Hungarian frontier, with the manifest and officially recognised intention of crossing the border, is also explained – besides everyone’s inner motives – by the fact that the borders were not secure, there were real opportunities of crossing to the other side, and such attempts were not quite as incriminating as they would later become. The steps taken to ensure the securisation of the borders were sporadic and known in advance; moreover, there were information and cooperation relations – in exchange for money, however much it was – involving those who guarded the borders and the guides. No matter how risky this latter activity was, there was good money to be made, which lessened or cancelled the fear of danger.

On the night of June 26/27, 1947, two guides from Carei were detained, together with a group of Jews (1 from Chişinău, 4 from Iaşi, 3 from Botoşani, 2 din Bucharest). Although the guides declared that they wanted to cross the border into Hungary, the truth was presumably different: they had been hired to ensure the group’s clandestine crossing of the frontier.¹³

In July 1947, it became evident that the Jews’ intention to leave the country had

grown stronger and some members in the leadership of the Jewish community had been involved in this process (the informative note made reference to the Maramureş situation). The same material drew attention to an alarming increase in the exchange rate of the dollar, because those who left needed foreign currency; this situation led, on the one hand, to economic instability and, on the other, to an increase in the price of some foods; for instance, the price of edible oil doubled in the course of one week.¹⁴

The foreign currency or the gold coins discovered upon people who were detained were confiscated and given over to the National Bank of Romania. On August 25, 1947, the Gendarme Unit in Valea lui Mihai sent an informative note about detaining a group of 9 Jews; some of them had, besides small sums of dollars and forints, two gold coins, one French and one Italian.¹⁵

On September 19, 1947, the Gendarme Unit in Ocna Şugatag send information to the Maramureş Gendarme Legion about the state of irritation and unrest among Jewish traders triggered by the rumour that, beginning with October 1, 1947, each town will have its state-owned collective farm, that private shops would cease to exist and their merchandise would be confiscated and signed over to these farms. Considering such unfavourable circumstances affecting their condition and profession, as well as uncertainty for the future, a part of the Jews chose clandestine immigration. There was some suspicion that their chosen border point would be Carei-Sanislău, that these crossings were facilitated by the employees of the border authority (in exchange for money); the Jews would be taken to Budapest, to a triage centre directing them to Palestina via Vienna and Palermo.¹⁶

Fears concerning the minimisation or cancellation of private initiative and property spread much faster in a society (ethnicity) characterised by economic initiative, independence and the respect of private property; communism, by attacking private property, affected the very foundations of a way of life as deeply rooted in the mentality of this people as the private property of land had been in the case of the Romanian peasants who saw themselves suddenly stripped not only of their lands, but also their tools, cattle, status, view on life and way of relating to reality.

On the night of September 15/16, 1947, the gendarmes in the Valea lui Mihai unit had stopped a group of seven Jews who were trying to cross the border into Hungary; five were from Bucharest, one from Sighet and one from Galaţi.¹⁷

The Romanian border crossings were also used by Jews from abroad, who faced a double risk: first, they had to cross into Romania and then, from Romania, both journeys being made clandestinely. According to an informative note on July 4, 1947, the gendarmes of the Câmpulung on the Tisa unit discovered the Jews Hodea Pavel, Schwartz Izrael and Heiselman Marton, all from the

USSR, hiding in the woods. After being caught, they were transferred from one authority to another, giving birth to bribery suspicions; faced with this situation, the Oradea Gendarme Inspectorate asked the General Prosecutor's Office of the Oradea Court of Appeals to solve this case. The memo drew attention to the following implications of this case: the unit handed the detained Jews to the Gendarme Legion that investigated the case and noted the intent to cross the border illegally; afterwards, they were handed to the Maramureş Tribunal Prosecutor; its chief prosecutor "informed the Legion that this crime did not fall under the jurisdiction of the Maramureş Tribunal."

The Legion, by means of Report no. 2302 of June 17, 1947, handed the three Jews to the Cluj Military Tribunal that issued arrest warrants for them.

After they were handed over to the Cluj Military Tribunal, the Legion Commander was invited to the Maramureş Tribunal Prosecutor by Prosecutor Minca, who informed him that someone denounced him for having released the three Jews for the sum of 50,000,000 lei plus a golden watch, instead of handing them over to the Maramureş Tribunal and now the fellows were walking around undisturbed.

The Legion Commander, together with his Education Aide, informed the Prosecutor that the accusations were slanderous and that the three Jews had been handed over to the Cluj Military Tribunal, which was proven by the documents signed upon their reception, as well as by the telephone confirmation of the Cluj Military Tribunal.

After issuing the arrest warrants, the Cluj Military Tribunal, by means of Order no. 504555 of June 25, 1947, returned the three Jews to the Legion, declining its competence in favour of the Maramureş Tribunal.¹⁸

The informative note of August 25, 1947, of the Sălaj Gendarme Legion observe that the Jewish emigration had reached alarming numbers; lately, and especially during the month of August, there had been massive shifts of population in the towns of Carei and Valea lui Mihai (the figures presented are telling of the magnitude of this phenomenon; in order to have a complete picture of the emigration process, with its successes and failures, one should also have information about the figures of those who managed to cross the border,¹⁹ as such cases definitely existed) who had settled there temporarily with the evident intention of continuing their journey and make a life for themselves elsewhere.

"The border authorities send us groups of 30-50 Jews to be handed over to the Military Tribunal of the Cluj Third Military Region on an almost daily basis."

Thus, in August, the Legion observed that the total number of Jews who had been apprehended by the border authorities for attempting to cross the border illegally and sent to stand trial was 276.

Taken by surprise by the stabilisation actions, they almost starved to death; when they crossed the towns while being transferred from the border to the legion, they could only rely on the small financial aid received from the local Jewish communities. (...)

It was also determined on this occasion that the Jews who were trying to cross the border illegally into Hungary came from all over Romania and they had sold all their assets; now, they found themselves deprived of all possessions and sent to stand trial.

The investigation of the immediate post-war realities, from the point of view of clandestine immigration, shows the magnitude of this Jewish withdrawal in the face of communist aggression and proves that the Jews did not support it, even when facing personal risks. After the clandestine immigration subsequent to August 23, 1944, the *alia* later decisively demonstrated the majority of Jews did not accept communism.



Notes

1. Harry Kuller, *Evreii în România anilor 1944-1949 – evenimente, documente, comentarii* -, Editura Hasefer, București, 2002, p. 108.
2. Florin-Răzvan Mihai, *Organizații de masă în slujba P. C. R.: Comitetul Democrat Evreiesc, 1945-1953*, in *Arhivele totalitarismului*, XIV (2006), no. 52-53 (3-4), pp. 205-215; Corneliu Crăciun, *Comitetul Democrat Evreiesc – o șansă falsă, o diversiune reală*, în *Contribuții la istoria evreilor din Bihor*, Editura Arca, Oradea, 2009, pp. 140-187.
3. Harry Kuller, *op. cit.*, p. 109.
4. We would like to mention that this date is the date of the first historical record we identifies and that it cannot be regarded as the first manifestation of this phenomenon. Subsequent archival research will conduct to uncovering data that will precisely indicate the beginning of the Jews' clandestine immigration.
5. DJAN-BH, Fond Leg. Jand. Bihor, inv. 32, ds. 25/ 1947, f. 8 și v.
6. *Ibidem*, f. 101-105.
7. *Ibidem*, f. 181.
8. *Ibidem*, f. 54.
9. *Ibidem*, f. 185, 182, 259.
10. *Ibidem*, f. 222, 378.
11. *Ibidem*, f. 257.
12. *Ibidem*, f. 250.
13. *Ibidem*, f. 248.
14. *Ibidem*, f. 341.

15. *Ibidem*, f. 331.
16. *Ibidem*, f. 332.
17. *Ibidem*, f. 236 și v.
18. in a previously quoted informative note dated July 9, 1947, we find about such a successful case: „The tailor Marcovici Marcius, from the village of Copalnic-Manastur Satu Mare, crossed the border illegally into Hungary to go to Palestine.” (*Ibidem*, f. 222).
19. *Ibidem*, f. 338.

Abstract

Immediately after August 23, 1944, a part of the Romanian Jews manifested their distrust or opposition towards the new evolution of the country under Soviet domination and towards its political and economic future that they considered harmful to their expectations and interests. A radical means of expressing their lack of support for the communist regime taking over the country was to abandon it and look for their future elsewhere, primarily in Palestine. In this respect, many Jewish families or individuals from various regions and even from abroad took the risk of clandestinely crossing the border between Romania and Hungary. Some of them were caught and sent to stand trial, some other succeeded in their endeavour. The large number of such attempts (according to some documents we found in the National Archives – Bihor County Office) point to a general attitude of distrust and lack of support for communism on the part of the Romanian Jews.

Keyword

Jews, Romania, Palestine, clandestine immigration, illegal crossings, border.