
I.2. HISTORY AND HISTORIOGRAPHY

The Reconsideration of an Important Chapter of Human Solidarity (1944)

Some Jewish and Romanian opinions

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AT THE end of the ninth decade of the last century, there was a genuine concern aimed at reconstituting some actions meant to save the Jews from Hungary and Northern Transylvania in the spring and summer of 1944, when the “final solution” was applied in this European region. Jewish historians and memoirists, as well as Romanian ones, got involved in this endeavour.

Therefore, on May 27th, 1988, Prof. PhD Moshe Carmilly-Weinberger delivered—at “Nicolae Iorga” History Institute in Bucharest—a conference presentation on *Romania’s Help to Save the Jews during the Nazi Time*.¹ He noted the fact that the Holocaust was the subject of a substantial literature which presented the way in which the Nazis and their acolytes committed their inhumane deeds. However, the professor did not disregard the obvious fact that there was still missing “a serious and thorough paper on the saving operations that took place in Romania and with the help of the Romanians.”² To his mind, “the Jews’ rescue and transit *in and through* Romania can be divided into two periods:”³ before and after the outbreak of the Second World War. In 1939, for instance, after Poland had been invaded, about 20,000 Jewish refugees (from Germany, Poland, Czech Republic and Slovakia) “struggled” to get to Hungary via Romania.⁴

After he had evoked the “barbarities” of the years 1941–1944, the Neolog Chief Rabbi of Cluj concluded “it is an elementary moral duty not to forget and to reveal the fact that there was a ray of humanity enjoyed by the Jews in Romania during those years.”⁵ He found it undeniable that, in Central and South-Eastern Europe, “there was a single possibility, for the Jews, to get out of the ring of fire of the Nazi terror, only one hope to save themselves . . . This frail path towards life was a well-known fact by the Jews

living the Nazi hell. This explains the path taken by the refugees from everywhere to Romania. There came Jews from the Warsaw crushed by bombing, from Austria, Czech Republic and the Jews from Hungary,⁷⁶ which included (starting from August 1940, following the Vienna Award)⁷ Northern Transylvania, as well.

He made special reference to the rescue of the Jews from Northern Transylvania; for Professor Moshe Carmilly this action represented “*an integral part of the actions undertaken in Romania* as it was here that they were to continue.”⁷⁸ The best-known border crossing point was the village Aiton, situated near Cluj, on Romanian territory. “Therefore, as the memoirist emphasises, links were logically established with the inhabitants of this village, in order to find among them people willing to fraudulently cross Jewish refugees over the border for a certain sum.” It was, obviously, an action that endangered the life of “the smuggler.”⁷⁹ Only the young people could walk such a road (in fact, called “the path to salvation,” n.n.) in a few hours.¹⁰

Those people (both Jewish and Romanians) who got involved in the rescue actions or helped the refugees from Hungary and Northern Transylvania are also nominated in the pages of this memorialist text. Most names will also be mentioned in other historiographical reconstitutions, which is why we will not mention them again to avoid repeating them too often. Nevertheless, we find fascinating Moshe Carmilly’s testimony on “the journey”¹¹ he took, together with his wife, from Cluj to Bucharest: “we left, not without fear, but determined to take a risk, in order to follow *an already used path*, at my suggestion, by *thousands of other Jews*. We arrived at Aiton, and from there at Turda; several days later we were travelling through Bucharest with fake documents.”¹²

The journalist Constantin Mustață, in order to get more information on the rescue “actions” to save the Jews from Hungary and Northern Transylvania (by organising their “fraudulent” crossing of the border into Romania), addressed to Professor Raoul Șorban, who had become a conspicuous person,¹³ especially after having been awarded the title of *Righteous Among the Nations*. The interview he took was published in a book by the same author¹⁴ in 1988.

As far as he was concerned, professor Raoul Șorban confessed that “in those difficult times [for the Jews], I also helped them, by getting in touch with some trustworthy people from Turda, namely my brother-in-law Victor Cupșa, lieutenant-colonel, the commander of the Recruitment Office, with Dumitru Foica, an official working at the prefecture, colonel doctor Ghiță Bran and so on. Thanks to them, the journey of hundreds of Jews, coming from more remote areas, was made without taking any risks till Bucharest.”¹⁵ Of a certain interest is Raoul Șorban’s statement on the involvement of the Romanian Legation from Budapest, which had issued “hundreds or even thousands” of passports for the Jews who entered Romania in Arad, “where a group of Jews (led by Rafael Rosenfeld) was preparing them to be sent to Bucharest.”¹⁶

The novelist Francisc Păcurariu, in a chapter¹⁷ of his book on *Românii și maghiarii de-a lungul veacurilor* (The Romanians and Hungarians throughout the Centuries), makes some comments about the actions to save the Jews. In his assessment, they were “hastily organised,” yet, at the same time, they were “based on courage and personal ingenuity.” Nevertheless, they were efficient since “thousands and thousands of people sentenced”¹⁸ to extinction were saved from a certain death. Among those who contributed

to the development of such “operations” are mentioned Professor Emil Hațieganu, Dr. Iuliu Hossu (Greek-Catholic Bishop), the art historian Raoul Șorban, the student Vasile Moldoveanu, the lawyer Aurel Socol and the driver Releanu.¹⁹

In the summer of 1988 the American Professor Randolph Braham, Head of the Department of Political Sciences at the City College of New York and the Director of the Rosenthal Institute for Holocaust Studies²⁰ came to Bucharest. He held two conference papers with the following titles: “Historical Revisionists and the New Right in Western Europe and the USA (at ‘Romania’ Association)” and “Concepts on the Holocaust and Holocaust Features in the Years of the Second World War in Hungary” as well as in Northern Ardeal occupied after the Vienna Awards (at the History Museum of the Communist Party, of the Revolutionary and Democratic Movement in Romania).²¹ It was known that he was a very prolific historian and that he had published, up to that time, (as author and co-author) over 20 books, most of which dealing with the issue of Holocaust in Hungary and, hence, the one in Northern Transylvania.

Using the documents of the time—in order to decipher the actions to save the Jews in 1944—and also the testimonies published in various countries in the world by direct witnesses and subjects,” Gh. I. Bodea, the researcher from Cluj, wrote a paper which he published in *Almanahul Steaua* in 1988, with the significant title: “The Operation ‘Humanity.’”²² It reproduced fragments, of argumentative nature, from books and articles signed by Béla Vago, “The Ambiguity of Collaborationism: the Center of the Jews in Romania”²³ (published in Jerusalem in 1979), A. D. Finkelstein²⁴ (whom we mentioned in the first part of our speech on historiography), Raoul Șorban,²⁵ Vasile Moldoveanu,²⁶ Aurel Socol,²⁷ Fischer Ernő,²⁸ and Tudor Bugnariu.²⁹ After he had rewritten, in a personal manner and with the purpose of justifying his title, some commentaries taken from the works of the aforementioned authors, Gh. I. Bodea recreated a passage from a contemporary document. It is about the *Informative note* (from 25 May, 1944) of the General Police Directorate in Bucharest, where the following commentaries were made:

From the inspections and investigations made by Turda Police, it follows that many Jewish people from Cluj have been trying to evade the restrictive measures of the German authorities by fraudulently crossing the border into Romania, starting from May this year.

Some of these, managing to escape the vigilance of the Romanian authorities in the border area, must have gotten to Constanța, where they have been waiting for the right time to cross the border into Palestine. . .

Crișan Vasile, also called Tili, favoured many Jews to fraudulently cross the border into Romania. . . He is followed by the Gestapo.

Dr. Aurel Socol, the Romanian lawyer from Cluj, conducting business with the Jews, was arrested by the Gestapo officers.³⁰ This documentary source has an exceptional historiographical value since it confirms memoiristic recollections, meanwhile attesting the fact that there was some information gathered by the authorised state institutions which drew attention to the rescue actions of the Jews in 1944.

The interest in this historical issue remained as active as ever also in 1989, when *Magazin istoric* (Historical Magazine) became conspicuous, in its pages being published two significant interviews and a memoirist text. The first interview was published in the March issue of the abovementioned magazine, and it was taken by Florentina Dolghin. Her interviewee, the American Professor Randolph L. Braham was an acknowledged authority on Holocaust in Hungary, being the most informed and competent historian of this tragic experience lived by a large number of European Jews.

In the introductory note (that anticipates the interview) Florentina Dolghin appreciated the activity of the American specialist using the following words:

*Relying on a huge amount of archival documents, the press of that time and extensive bibliography of various countries, including Romania, the works of the American professor address, in a comprehensive manner, the history of the extermination action of the Jewish population. . . . Within this area of concern, Randolph Braham also did some research on the situation of the Jewish population in our country, especially that in the north-western part of the country under the Horthy occupation during the Second World War, following the Vienna Award.*³¹

After mentioning the fact that he was from Romania and that he was educated in Romanian (“a language I continue to speak, to use directly in reading and writing”), R. Braham stated that “most Jewish people survived” in Romania in 1944 as opposed to what had happened in other countries “occupied or dominated”³² by the Nazis. In Hungary, for instance, the Jewish population “outside the capital” (Budapest) was “barbarically destroyed, in a fast tempo.”³³

The rescue actions of the Jews from Hungary and Northern Transylvania represented, according to R. Braham, “a significant aspect of the Jewish issue” in Romania, which became “a true oasis for thousands of Jews hounded and sent to gas chambers and crematoria in Auschwitz.”³⁴

The Nazis “put pressure on the Romanians so that they would take actions to prevent such an exodus;” consequently, the Romanian government “issued a decree law that harshly punished the Hungarian Jews who fraudulently crossed the border” from Hungary to Romania as well as all those who helped them. However, this measure was “formal” since it was “never applied.”³⁵

The Romanian authorities gave “confidential instructions asking the local institutions at the border involved in such activities to facilitate the entrance of Jews who had arrived” from Hungary in Romania. As the American historian concluded, this “happened thanks to the Romanian people, its traditional humanity”³⁶.

It is remarkable the following assessment, of a generalising nature, made by the American historian: “The Romanians have done their best to help cross the border as many Hungarian Jews as possible. Once they reached Romania they were not subjected to unreasonable constraints. Thousands of Hungarian Jews crossed the border illegally into Romania since the date Hungary started their massive deportation. Most of them settled down in Bucharest, Arad and Timișoara.”³⁷

On the occasion of his visit to Romania, R. Braham was also concerned with finding “some documents about the Holocaust in Transylvania.” He managed to read documentary sources—“by the courtesy” of “Romania” Association and of the General Directorate of State Archives in Bucharest—, which, according to his own statement, would allow him to “bring research up-to-date and would contribute to broadening the chapter dedicated to Holocaust in Northern Transylvania under Horthy occupation.”³⁸

The discoveries he made—which, although “they do not change his tenets on the Holocaust essentially—offer the possibility of some “nuances,” of some “details of the Holocaust in Northern Transylvania.”³⁹ One of the final considerations of the American historian referred to “the attempts of some German historians to fade away the historical phenomenon” called the Holocaust.

Through this interview, the historian Randolph L. Braham made his *views* known in Romania; these views he made until 1988 referred to the tragic fate of the Jews in Northern Transylvania and, simultaneously, to the attitude of the Romanians under these circumstances. Some of them (from the simple peasant to intellectuals and representatives of the authorities, such as members of General Consulate in Oradea) brought their contribution to the rescue actions of the refugees by creating the opportunities of illegal crossings of the border from Hungary in Romania.

An interview with the professor Moshe Carmilly Weinberger was also published in *Magazin istoric* (Historical Magazine) from October 1989 which had been taken, however, the year before by the editor Dorin Matei.⁴⁰ In his answers, the American professor reiterated the essential data of the issue he had presented in the previous memoirist texts. Therefore, we will no longer repeat them here, except for the finding—which was real and objective—“that there is missing a serious and thorough paper on the saving operations [of the Jews] that took place in Romania and with the help of the Romanians”⁴¹.

A short article entitled *S-a întâmplat atunci, sub ocupația horthystă* (It happened then, under Horthy occupation)⁴² was also published in the same issue of the mentioned magazine. It records a few “testimonies of some survivors” regarding the people they had saved from death. Firstly, it is about peasant Gheorghe Godincă (from the village Valea Seacă, Maramureș County), who took the risk of saving a Jewish family from the village Bistra, respectively that of Stauber Mosoru’s (who had a wife and four children), taking them to his house and hiding them in the basement.⁴³

Another case was “told” by Salomon Francisc from Giurtelecul Hododului (Sălaj County), who “lost his entire family,” during the Holocaust, thus being its sole survivor and also a credible witness to history. On October 9, 1944, Salomon Francisc, who was in a labour company, managed to escape and, after some adventures, to reach the village Treznea (where in 1940 the Horthy had committed terrible atrocities against Romanian inhabitants), where he was housed (“in the attic of a barn”) by a local peasant.

After a terrifying night, he took on “devious” roads to Zalău. He reached the village Curitău, where Ion Fati accommodated him for two nights “risking his life.” He was also fed by two other villagers (Ilie Mureșan and Petra Dumitru), whom he knew. Afterwards, he left for his native village where he was at the moment of “liberation”

on October 20th, 1944. He was also helped by Anișca Pupușoi (his former nanny), Teodor Cosma, the ranger Eremia, Vasile Ienci, Vasile Ioniș, Aurelia and Vasile Zoicaș.⁴⁴

We have in front of us “the sincere testimonies about humane and inhumane, about ruthlessness and humanity, the great deeds of ordinary people in times of terrible suffering.”⁴⁵

In the context of the events of 1989 one can not ignore *The Round Table* which focused on *saving the Jews from the north-western territory of Romania (1940–1944)*. Dr. Moshe Carmilly-Weinberger, Raoul Șorban, Adrian Riza and Mihai Ungheanu took part in it. The entire text of their speeches was published in *Almanahul Luceafărul* in 1989 and was reproduced in Adrian Riza’s book on *Rețelele omeniei* (Humanity Networks)⁴⁶ (1995). This is over 65 pages long, yet we will not refer to its conceptual context, but we will bring up-to-date only those fragments with an undeniable significance, from the historiographical perspective of our approach. We noted, for example, Mihai Ungheanu’s desire: “It is an imperative request to continue to build an accurate and true image of the historical circumstances that led to the extermination of the Jewish population living in the territory occupied by the Hungarian army in 1940–1944.”⁴⁷ Adrian Riza’s standpoint relates to it: “Of course ... the most compelling fact remains the full disclosure of the Romanian contribution of the help given during this period to rescue the Jews.”⁴⁸ However, this historiographical reconstitution faces real difficulties, since, as Raoul Șorban pointed out, many people who helped saving the Jews, endangering their lives, “no longer exist.”⁴⁹

The following assertion made by Moshe Carmilly Weinberger sounds like a warning: “There were some events connected to the rescue actions of the Jews (from Northern Transylvania and Hungary—our note) in Romania. They are either written about or not; God himself cannot annul the things that have happened.⁵⁰ Nor can the people by subjectively manifesting some interest, especially of political nature. Nevertheless, silence is the most eloquent proof of complicity in blocking the ‘path’ towards the truth of historical facts and events.”

Therefore, we can say that studying this reality of the year 1944, caused by the Holocaust, has reached a stage of recovering most existing information, especially the memoirist sources, with a few exceptions. Documents from the archives of the state institutions have also been investigated; they contain data on those involved in the rescue actions as well as the policy of the Hungarian authorities towards the Jews which consisted of gathering them in ghettos and deporting them to death camps. □

Notes:

1. Adrian Riza, *Rețelele omeniei* (București: Editura RAI, 1995), 225–243.
2. *Ibid.*, 225
3. *Ibid.*, 226
4. *Ibid.*, 227. The statement is supplemented with the following statement: “The [Jewish] refugees began to escape from the clutches of the Nazis following untrodden paths, on foot, by train and,

- later, by ships on the Danube. Many [of them] reached Cluj. Their number increased week after week. It became necessary to establish a Committee for the refugees in Cluj [in 1936]. At my initiative and under aegis of the Neolog Jewish Community, this committee was established; its members have sought to address, through heroic work, the complex and difficult issues of rescuing the Jews.” In turn, the Romanian authorities “not only turned a blind eye, tolerating the activity of the Committee, but also helped us pass them through to Bucharest” (Ibid.).
5. Ibid., 231.
 6. Ibid., 232.
 7. Ibid., 233. We also transcribe the way in which the American professor finds out that, by enforcing the Vienna Dictate, the Romanians in Hungary were “separated by a long and difficult to control boundary line. This frontier stretched from Békéscsaba to Braşov. In the towns of Cluj, Oradea and, to some extent, Târgu-Mureş, which were near this borders . . . , they could thus establish several escape routes to Romania ”
 8. Ibid., 232.
 9. In a later extract of the conference, Professor Moshe Carmilly asks himself a fully justified question: “Is it allowed to name these saviours?” (Ibid., 237).
 10. Ibid., 234.
 11. Ibid., 240. He mentions that he has described this experience in an article with the title *Întrecere cu moartea* (Death Race).
 12. Ibid., We also find out that the document that was on the Chief Rabbi when he crossed the border was on the name of Akós Szabadosi.
 13. This fact is confirmed by Raoul Şorban himself, who stated that “My participation in saving the Jews became more known today than that of some Romanians under the Hungarian occupation due to the international recognition and the title I received from Yad Vashem” (Ibid., 249). “Many Romanian and Jewish people” took part, of course, into this “large scale” action.
 14. Constantin Mustaşa, *În vâltoarea vremurilor. Rememorări. Confesiuni. Atitudini* (Bucureşti: Editura Militară, 1988), 245–253.
 15. Ibid., 248.
 16. Ibid., 252.
 17. This is entitled *Începutul sfârşitului sau mijirea unor noi orizonturi*.
 18. Francisc Păcurariu, *Românii şi maghiarii de-a lungul veacurilor* (Bucureşti: Editura Minerva, 1988), 507.
 19. Ibid.
 20. Florentina Dolghin, [Interview with] Prof. Randolph L. Braham (S.U.A.) about: *România – o adevărată oază pentru evrei în cel de-al doilea război mondial*, *Magazin istoric* 3 (1989): 36.
 21. Ibid.
 22. Gh. I. Bodea, “Operaţia Omenia,” *Almanah Steaua*, (1988): 59–69.
 23. Ibid., 59–60.
 24. Ibid., 60–63.
 25. Ibid., 63–69.
 26. Ibid.
 27. Ibid., 65–66.
 28. Ibid., 66–67.
 29. Ibid., 67.
 30. Ibid., 67.
 31. *Magazin istoric* 3 (1989): 36.
 32. Ibid.
 33. Ibid.
 34. Ibid.

35. Ibid.
36. Ibid., 36–37
37. Ibid., 37. About the concerns of the General Consulate of the Kingdom of Romania in Oradea, R. Braham believes that he “watched carefully the measures taken by the fascist authorities in order to commit the Jews from Northern Transylvania to ghettos and to deport them” (Ibid.).
38. Ibid.
39. Ibid.
40. Moshe Carmilly-Weinberger, “1940–1944. În acele vremuri grele poporul român și-a păstrat demnitatea și omenia,” *Magazin istoric* 10 (1989): 43.
41. Ibid., 41.
42. I. Micu, “S-a întâmplat atunci, sub ocupația horthystă,” *Magazin istoric* 10 (1989): 43.
43. Ibid.
44. Ibid.
45. Ibid.
46. See Riza, *Reșelele omeniei*, 139–204.
47. Ibid., 140.
48. Ibid.
49. Ibid., 225–243.
50. Ibid., 225.

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Abstract

The Contribution of Some Jewish and Romanian Historians and Memoirists
(during 1986–1989): Reconsider an Important Chapter of Human Solidarity (1944)

The author examines the books, studies and articles on the historical issue of saving the Jews from Hungary and Northern Transylvania (in 1944) from a certain death by helping them to cross the border illegally to Romania. This is about a significant aspect of the solidarity actions with the tragic fate of the Jews living in the mentioned area that were ghettoised by the Horthy authorities and deported to the death camps of Auschwitz and Birkenau. Both Jewish and Romanian memoirists have issued their commentaries and participated in conferences on this reality. The present paper reproduces edifying texts, in this respect, which were written by Moshe Carmilly-Weinberger, the journalist Constantin Mustață, the novelist Francisc Păcurariu, the historians Randolph Braham, Gh. I. Bodea, I. Micu and Adrian Riza.

Keywords

Romanian and Jewish historians, journalists, Moshe-Carmilly, Adrian Riza, historiography.