

UNIVERSITATEA DE MEDICINĂ, FARMACIE, ȘTIINȚE ȘI TEHNOLOGIE
« GEORGE EMIL PALADE » DIN TÂRGU MUREȘ
ȘCOALA DOCTORALĂ DE LITERE, ȘTIINȚE UMANISTE ȘI APLICATE
DOMENIUL : FILOLOGIE /

TEZĂ DE DOCTORAT

Doctorand:

Catinca Oncescu

Conducător științific:

Conf. univ. dr. Dumitru – Mircea Buda

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**ROMANIAN WRITERS OF JEWISH ORIGIN IN THE 20TH
CENTURY LITERATURE**

SUMMARY

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The present thesis, *Romanian Writers of Jewish Origin in the 20th Century Literature*, intends to be first and foremost a chronicle of Jewish heritage in the Romanian literary world, a vast monographic study of what being a human being, a Jew, a writer meant in the bloodiest century of modern history, the century of the three deadly totalitarian regimes: Fascism, Nazism, and Communism. Our thesis brings a new perspective which follows the rise of anti-Semitism in Romania, the personal and literary experiences of some writers of Jewish origin in the years preceding World War II, the posttraumatic stress disorder (later referred to as PTSD) and the guilt felt by the survivors of the death camps, the rise of Communism and the position taken by Jewish writers who had seen themselves once again restrained by a new form of dictatorship, as well as the exterior exile and the interior estrangement transposed in pages of high literary value. The 20th century is not only the century of totalitarianisms but also the century of the Jews, as they were the ones who suffered one of the most outrageous crimes ever committed against a group of people. Hunted by the Nazis, surviving the camps and the death marches, returning to another kind of dictatorship, Jewish identity and survival have been challenged like never before.

Although thousands of pages have been written on this topic, the present thesis brings a new perspective, less explored, following the rise of anti-Semitism in Romania, the personal feelings and literary expressions on Jewish writers of inter-war period, the traumas and the posttraumatic stress syndrome of Jewish writers who survived the Holocaust, the interior and exterior exile that were transposed in literary pages of high value.

The strength of our thesis and its novelty is given first and foremost by the analysis and synthesis of a huge volume of documents belonging to different domains: history, literary criticism, philosophy, history of religion, psychology and even psychiatry. More than that, we managed to integrate these various approaches in a thesis of literature. This thesis is one of the first trials of exploring the works of Romanian writers of Jewish origin from the perspective of posttraumatic stress disorder. We paid a special attention to the voices of the Jewish women, the previous studies neglecting the literature written by the Romanian women of Jewish origin. Last, but not least important, is the fact that we analysed the works of less known writers such as Ury Benador with his novel *Ghetto 20th Century*, Eva Heyman's diary, or Emil Dorian's diary. We left completely the borders so strictly imposed by the stereotypes so deeply rooted in the collective mind, turning rather to types, types that we developed after analysing the vast material. There are no clear borders between the types, the main link being their Jewish descent.

Usually the researchers studied the Jewish issue from one point of view, be that history, philosophy, literature or culture. Our intention was to unite all these multiple perspectives, because the Jewish writer of the 20th century cannot be separated from the history that he lived and which marked him. The thesis avoided the moralizing tone although many writers confessed in their works or interviews that their intention was to leave behind the hell they had been through and to make sure that such horrors will never happen again. Not all of them were professional writers; some of them were the product of History at its darkest moment. The aim of such a multidisciplinary approach was to bring to light the complex links between literature and the other fields of study.

Parts of the results of our research have been published in academic journals and collective volumes. We should mention the following: in the volume *Reading Multiculturalism. Human and Social Perspectives. Literature* we published the study *Nationalism and Anti – Semitism in Modern Romanian Culture*), in the collective volume *Culture in Globalization: Identities and Nations Connected*. Literature we published the study *Double identity or non-identity: Mihail Sebastian: For 2000 Years*), other articles being published in the *International Romanian Humanities Journal*(*Elie Wiesel – Memory Does Not Forgive: Night, Behind the Wires: Gisella Perl's Story, The Man of Paradoxes: Mihail Sebastian*).

Each of these writers had to define and redefine himself permanently, both with his/her inner self, as well as with the self imposed onto him by force from the outside. On the one hand we have the world of the individual, with dreams, friendships, loves and hopes, on the other hand we have the world of the Jew, marginalized, beaten, tortured, exiled.

Structured into four chapters and a conclusion, the thesis follows closely the life stories of ten writers that we considered representatives for the chosen topic: Mihail Sebastian (*Jurnal – Journal 1935 - 1944, De două mii de ani – For Two Thousand Years*), Emil Dorian (*Jurnal din vremuri de prigoană 1937 – 1944 – Diary in Times of Persecution: 1937 - 1944*), Maria Banuș (*Însemnările mele 1927 – 1944; Însemnările mele 1945 – 1999 – My Entries 1927 – 1944; 1945 – 1999*), Eva Heyman (*Am trăit atât de puțin – I Lived So Little*), Elie Wiesel (*Noaptea – Night*), Norman Manea (*Întoarcerea huliganului – The Return of the Hooligan, Anii de ucenicie ai lui August Prostul – The Apprenticeship Years of Augustus The Fool , Despre Clovni. Dictatorul și Artistul – About Clowns: The Dictator and the Artist*), Nina Cassian (*Memoria ca zestre*), Miklos Nyiszli (*Am fost medic la Auschwitz - Auschwitz. A Doctor's Eyewitness Account*), Gisella Perl (*Am fost doctoriță la Auschwitz - I Was a Doctor in Auschwitz*), Ana Novac (*Frumoasele zile ale tinereții mele – The Beautiful Days of My Youth*). Each one of them tries to convey in his personal, emotional and intellectual way the degradation of a

patriarchal world, the intensity of the terror and the loss of any possibility of living a full and happy life.

The first chapter entitled: *Terminology and concepts* is subdivided into seven subchapters and it defines the concepts and ideological ideas that lead to the most horrific experiments of modern history. It is mostly a theoretical and historical part, yet the personal touch is given to it by the vast documentation and the various sources we used to make up the general framework of the stage on which the most horrific *game* of modern history was going to be played. We cannot understand the work of these writers if we do not have a deep understanding of the world that shaped them.

We followed with the analyses of the 20th century anti-Semitism, starting from the general European framework and restraining its register to Romanian anti-Semitism, by underlying its specific manifestations and by following the Romanian Jewish community from the creation of the modern state to the fall of Communism.

When we talk about Romanian anti-Semitism, we must understand that it is a very special case. It has almost nothing to do with the racial prejudices of the Nazi anti-Semitism. Romanian anti-Semitism must be seen as a profoundly nationalist movement, filled with orthodoxy, in an almost fanatic way, encompassing however economic reasons as well. It is in this context, and meanwhile aligning with the European trend, that Romania passed more than 100 laws against the Jews, eliminating them gradually from professional, cultural and educational circles. The dark period which follows is marked by the pogroms of Iași and Bucharest (1941) and the deportations to Transnistria's camps. The Commission for the Studying of Holocaust in Romania established in its *Final Report* that even though the Iron Guard had shown an open and strongly violent anti-Semitism, at the time of deportation and pogroms the movement had been labelled illegal and thus Romania, led by Marshall Ion Antonescu, is to be blamed for these crimes.

With the installation of Communism in Romania, the place of the Jew in society somehow changes. Many Jews, out of principle or simply because they saw themselves protected from the discrimination they had faced in the previous regime if they embraced the ideas of the left, adhere to this new political agenda. In time, however, they realise that Communism is also a form of dictatorship, that writers are either constrained to write only for and about the Party or to be taken out of the shelves of the libraries. There will be writers of Jewish origin who embrace totally this new utopia and dedicate their work exclusively to the Party. Others will be part of this new propaganda machinery up to a point when they choose exile, while others choose exile from the very beginning, knowing that a person cannot create real literature unless he is totally free from any kind of constraint.

Being a study of literature, a bridge was needed to connect the historical facts with the creation of literary works. For this, we have chosen to speak about the image of the Jew, moving from stereotypes, cultural and literary, to typologies. The choice of writers was based on defining these typologies. As far as Romanian literature is concerned, we abandoned the stereotypical approach, which has been the subject of one of the best experts in the field, Andrei Oișteanu who has exposed the image of the Jew in his famous book *Inventing the Jew. Antisemitic Stereotypes in Romanian and Other Central – East European Cultures*. As stated above, our personal approach follows a different line, that of typologies. Because of the vastness of the subject and the almost 100 years it covers, the typologies could have been multiple, however, we decided upon four which we have considered the most representatives in the monographic study we intended to realize: the chronicler (Sebastian, Dorian, Banus, Heyman), the survivor (Wiesel, Nyiszli, Perl), the exiled – that eternal *other* (Manea, Banus, Cassian), the communist (Cassian, Banus).

Actually there is no clear line between the types. Starting from their work, their life, their experience as misfits, survivors, diarists, women, each of them belongs narrowly to one type more than to other, and yet, broadly to a little bit of each, no clear line being possible to be traced. As you will observe, though divided into four big typologies, there are no clear cut limits and many of the writers can be placed in more than one, as basically the questions that torments all of them through their lives is the same: *Why the Jews?*, *Who am I?*, *Can someone create in a dictatorship, of either kind, left or right?*.

The second chapter entitled *A World Adrift* deals with the diaries written by Romanian writers of Jewish origin, most of them published long after their death, but which offer a vivid picture of the rise of anti-Semitism, of the restrictions that are imposed on them, of their feelings and fears, dreams and worries. The first subchapter intends to clarify what a literary diary really is: is it just a piece of literary work, a fictionalised reality or can it level up to a historical document, thus becoming more than just literature but also a real picture of the society that produced it? Although there are many literary works that start from the author's personal experience, the diary is probably the most intimate one, the closest link between the narrator and the reader, the gate through which the receiver of the message is let in the soul of its creator. We exemplified our point by choosing four diaries that we considered the most important: Mihail Sebastian's *Journal*, Emil Dorian's *Jurnal din vremuri de prigoană (Journal from Times of Persecution: 1937 – 1944)*, Maria Banuș' *Însemnările mele (My Entries)*, and Eva Heyman's *Am trăit atât de puțin (I Lived So Little)*. With these diaries we get the picture of life as a Jew in the 1930s and 1940s from multiple perspectives: the assimilated Jew, the

woman, the girl, life in the ghetto, the writer, the accomplished doctor, life as a Jew in Old Romania versus life as a Jew in Transylvania.

The next chapter, *Identity, Memory and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder in the Jewish Writers' Work* is probably the most scientific one as it deals with psychological and medical terms such as identity, memory and PTSD. This type of analyses goes beyond the well-established previous approaches of the works, as it views the Jews and their work from a more intimate and personal perspective. Before analysing the literary works of Jewish writers from these perspectives, we must define the terms. Defining identity is not easy as it is a very complex term with many meanings and approaches but it is important to understand these terms as the anti-Semite years preceding the Holocaust itself and life in the camps challenged profoundly this identity. The Holocaust and the years before it tried and partially succeeded in annihilating the Jews not only from an identity point of view but also physically. Personal identity was reduced to numbers or to labels, no longer seen as friends, not even as people.

The writers discussed in this chapter also come from different part of Romania, are of different ages and profession, yet they were Romanian citizens, most of them assimilated, speaking Romanian in their houses, having well established positions in their community. Suddenly, under the force of history, they are denied everything, being reduced to their religious identity, even if that was not their most defining one.

We went however one step further. The Fascist regime was not the only one that shaped the identity of these people. If up to this point we have dealt mostly with Jewish issues in Fascist regimes, we turned to the other totalitarian regime that shaped the 20th century, trying to see what being a Jew and a writer meant in Communism. In this respect, we chose to exemplify the search for identity by choosing Norman Manea, who is a special case. Born in a Jewish family, being deported to a Transnistrian camp, surviving humiliation and loss, he returns to a new world, where the Fascist regime was replaced by another dictatorial regime. Identity is a central theme again, this time not only his identity as a Jew, but also his identity as a writer in the utopian Communist society. One of his recurrent themes will be the role of the artist in a totalitarian regime and one of the first novels that deals with this is *The Apprenticeship Years of Augustus the Fool*. Although at first glimpse we assume that Augustus is the fool, he is actually the only lucid person, able to see beyond the curtain of hypocrisy, the creator of a new world and meanwhile an actor in the world created by others, but a world in which he is mostly an observer rather than a protagonist. He learns to juggle with this double identity which is the only way in which he can survive in a totalitarian state.

The next subchapter deals with PTSD, the survivor's guilt and the place memory plays in recovering after the most horrific traumas of deportation, humiliation, loss and survival. The three writers taken into consideration are Elie Wiesel (with his most famous novel *Night*), Norman Manea (*The Hooligan's Return*) and Miklós Nyiszli (with his autobiographical story: *Auschwitz: A Doctor's Eyewitness Account*). First a definition of PTSD was needed and for this we studied the American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual Of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition*.

The last subchapter deals with the new identity that is somehow imposed to these writers, that of the hooligan. The hooligan of Romanian literature is far from being a wrecker. Present in the writing of Mircea Eliade, Mihail Sebastian and Norman Manea, the hooligan is in fact a misunderstood, a misfit, permanently oscillating between the wish of being accepted and the wish of being at peace with his own self. *How did I become a hooligan?* by Mihail Sebastian comes as a response to the scandal that followed the publication of *For Two Thousand Years* and the *Preface* written by his mentor, professor Nae Ionescu, whose words show a deep anti-Semitism rooted in the Romanian consciousness. For Manea, the hooligan is a misfit, a spiritually exiled, seen as an enemy by the Jews, but meanwhile as a Jew by all the others. Exile is not a solution, not even a temporary one in the case of Manea.

The last chapter of the thesis, *Romanian Female Jewish Writers: Behind the Wires*, deals with the least discussed topic of the Jewish issue in the century of the Holocaust: that of Jewish women, writers, deportees. The first subchapter will make an analysis of what being a Jewish woman meant, their roles at the time as well as the shift of identity that the Holocaust brought in their case as well.

Gender is a highly discussed topic in our society. However, although millions of pages have been written on the Holocaust, its consequences, there is this niche which has barely been touched, especially as far as Romanian women writers of Jewish origin are concerned. Jewish women were the first sacrificed, together with their children, they were the first who had to deal with public opprobrium as they saw their children deprived of so many things, such as education, friendships, and they themselves were not spared: the ones who survived selection in the death camps had to work hard to in order to make it through the day. Yet, we know so little about their stories.

Two lives again put into the same situation: women and teenagers and their fight for survival. They present the same harsh reality, in different styles, as the perceive loss and destruction differently. However, the ones who are lucky enough to return, Gisella Perl and Ana Novac, find the power to rebuild their lives and see the best in people again. Or at least try to do so.

Ana Novac's story becomes an account of survival at all costs, while Gisella Perl's memoir is the story of loss and destruction, but also the indictment of a person who has nothing more to lose. Gisella Perl's account, *I Was a Doctor in Auschwitz*, is harsh, accusatory, and full of anger and pain. She writes to liberate herself, but her account is transformed in a prosecution's indictment in which she is both the prosecutor and the victim, the spokesperson for those who she could not save and died in the hands of the Nazis.

In order to be able to talk about the work of Cassian and Banuș, we must understand first the world in which they created so that we can grasp their choices, their self-criticism, to understand them as women, writers and Jews. For this, we introduced a short subchapter about social realism, a literary current which influenced both of their creations.

The last subchapter will concentrate exclusively on Romanian women writers of Jewish origin, how they dealt with the challenges of their gender and identity, their oscillation between anti – Semitism, Communism and exile, women who wrote openly about their experience as women, writers, Jewish, Romanians, or simply as females caught in the worst of times. As anti – Semitism increased, some turned to Communism, seen as the only solution in order to survive, only later understanding that Communism also reduced women to a simple object, and thus they chose exile. Some were lucky enough to survive and tell their story, while others vanished in the fields of Auschwitz. Their testimonies come mostly from their diaries in which we are introduced to a universe we can hardly imagine ever existed.

Put in a mirror, all these confessions or slices of lives from dark times seem to have nothing in common. Yet, they all tell the same story, with different words, but with the same pathos and they manage to offer a picture of a piece of history.

In conclusion, following the destinies, typologies of some of the Romanian writers of Jewish origin of the 20th century, the thesis follows the collective tragedy of a community in a world adrift, a tragedy that was lived, survived or not, by each of them in his or her own way. Going through approximately the same events, which were played on the large scale of world history, each of these writers had a personal response to them. Some were writers by vocation; others were transformed into writers by circumstances, but all of them were marked forever by their only *fault*: that of being a Jew.

Each of these writers has to learn to define his / her own self and to try and live in the newly created worlds by the two totalitarian regimes that defined the previous century. Their identity goes through many stages, as they try to reposition themselves in the hurricane of the events that force them to go back to their origin or to live with PTSD, the survivor's syndrome or exile. The survivor's

syndrome derives exactly from a moral dilemma that has no logical answer: survival was due to chance on the one hand, but then a question arises: why me?

Actually, they are trying to unite the two worlds that they are part of, but this unification of parallel universes is impossible. On the one hand, we have the world of the individual as belonging to humanity through birth, with dreams, hopes, friendships, and on the other hand, we have the world of the individual as a Jew, marginalised, beaten, tortured, exiled.

Each of these writers is telling us a story and each of the stories is about pain, faith, suffering, the construction of a new identity which is of utmost importance in a world in which morality, beauty, goodness seem to have lost their value. The tragic fate of the individual is played on the tragic stage of history, personal existence finding itself permanently reported to the collective one.

It cannot be denied that the 20th century was the century of extremes: extreme violence, extreme war and extreme doctrines: Fascism, Nazism and Communism. However, no social, ethnical or religious group was so highly challenged and systematically destroyed in an industrial manner as the Jews. That is why the 20th century is not only the century of totalitarianisms and wars, but we think we are endowed to call it also the century of the Jews.

It is in this context that we chose to discuss the works and lives of the Romanian writers of Jewish origin, as their writings are strictly connected to their lives. Maybe more than in any other time, being challenged by the times they lived in, their works strongly reflect their life. The writers we have chosen to speak about are just a small part of the Romanian writers of Jewish origin that lived in the 20th century, but we considered them the most representative in the structure of our thesis and our argumentation. They came from different parts of the country, from the Old Romania, from Bukovina or Transylvania, they were born Romanian citizens or were citizens just for a few years, they were writers of profession or, on the contrary, they became writers by chance, as a product of History at its worst. Thus, our thesis *Romanian Writers of Jewish Origin in the 20th Century Literature* has taken us on a long journey during which we have dealt with a variety of topics that are more or less reflected in their works. The writers taken into discussion deal with various subjects, however, what connects them is their Jewish descent.

The story of all these writers is the same to a certain extent. They are robbed of their identity in various ways, they lose friends, and they are marginalised by society only because of their descent. In a hostile environment, they have to redefine their identity and their position in face of the world which proves to be a difficult task. Yet, they do not give up, as Mihail Sebastian proves in his brilliant essay *How I Became a Hooligan*.

Their journeys become journeys into a past that needs to be known and needs to be assumed by both historians and literary critics. Some works are of high literary value, while others become simple reports of the unspeakable. Yet, all must be heard and all must be analysed in order to get the large picture of what being a Jewish writer meant in the century of totalitarianism.

By covering a period of more than eighty years, the thesis proves to be a vast monograph not only of the Romanian writers of Jewish origin, but also of the Romanian society of the time. Even though we tend to have an idyllic image of Romania between the two World Wars, Sebastian and Banuș, in their diaries and works, show us a completely different image. Yes, indeed, it was a period of flourishing literature and culture, but meanwhile, it was a period marked by deep anti-Semitism in which these writers feel on their own skin what being a Jew means. Friendships and relationships are under continuous negotiation, and they find themselves in a world adrift that lost its moral and intellectual values.

Telling almost the same story from different perspectives, we can get a deeper understanding of not only the literary life, but also of the society of the times they describe. Their testimonies transcend time and space and show us the deep tragedy of the Jews in the 20th century. Different, yet so similar in their way, each story is about loss, identity, friendship, reshaping of identity and exile as a new form of deportation. The vast monograph offers us the image of the Jewish writers in Romania, as well as of the world they lived in, becoming thus a valuable literary and historical document.

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