

### The image of the Jews in the Romanian collective mentality and their past and present situation in Romania

Oltean, Anca

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Konferenzbeitrag / conference paper

#### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Oltean, A. (2012). The image of the Jews in the Romanian collective mentality and their past and present situation in Romania. In L. Soproni, & I. Horga (Eds.), *Media and European Diversity / Médias et Diversité Européenne* (pp. 395-404). Bruxelles: Bruylant. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-70218-4>

#### Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer CC BY Lizenz (Namensnennung) zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu den CC-Lizenzen finden Sie hier:  
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/deed.de>

#### Terms of use:

This document is made available under a CC BY Licence (Attribution). For more information see:  
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0>

# THE IMAGE OF THE JEWS IN THE ROMANIAN COLLECTIVE MENTALITY AND THEIR PAST AND PRESENT SITUATION IN ROMANIA

ANCA OLTEAN

*University of Oradea, Romania*

*Abstract: The Jews of Romania were a particular ethnic group which, during history, had to bear a lot of discriminations. In modern epoch they could attend schools only by paying substantial fees, very few of them had the Romanian citizenship until 1918 and they could not be active in all professions. The interwar period meant for the Jews the time when they had the most rights in Romania, while, during the war, the anti-Jewish laws, forced labour, deportations in Transnistria were established, and the Jews from North-West Transylvania were sent by Hungarian authorities in German concentration camps.*

*Romanians often displayed feelings of hostility towards the Jews, mostly in periods when the situation of their country was precarious. This paper will also present a few negative features used by Romanians in order to define the Jews.*

*Last, but not least, the author wanted to show how the Holocaust was regarded by historians and politicians. And here, I noticed that in communist times, when the political elites had the intention to assimilate the Jews, it was considered that during the Holocaust several democratic groups were persecuted or, later, the responsibility for Holocaust was put only on Germans. During post-1989 period, integral or partial negation of Holocaust, or its trivialization by comparison, continued to exist.*

*Keywords: Jews, discrimination, difference, stereotypes, perception of Holocaust*

## The situation of the Jews in Romania in modern and contemporary epoch

In Romania, the Jews constituted a particular ethnic group which did not want to assimilate. Because of the fact that they were not Christians, they were subject to discriminatory treatment. For example, in Modern epoch in Romanian countries the Jews were allowed to attend schools only by paying substantial fees, they could not own land, they could not be active in all professions. The article 7 of the Constitution in 1866 mentioned that the Romanian citizenship to be granted only to Romanian inhabitants. Under the pressure of the Congress of Berlin, a new article was adopted, which did not change the situation too much. According to the new rule, the Jews were naturalized individually, and in practice, until 1918 a very small number of Jews received the citizenship, namely the ones who fought in the war of independence.

In the book entitled *Răscumpărarea evreilor: Istoria acordurilor secrete dintre România și Israel (The Ransom of the Jews. The extraordinary secret bargain between Romania and Israel (The Ransom of the Jews, The extraordinary Secret Bargain between Romania and Israel)*, Radu Ioanid describes very well the situation of the Jews in Romania and the discriminations they had to bear: “During the time where they were working as intermediaries (preceptors, distributors of manufactured goods or sellers of alcoholic drinks, products whose fabrication was controlled by boyards), the Jews were acknowledged some rights. In turn, immediately when they manifested interest towards other jobs or for civil and political rights, they became “a social danger”, “the plague of the society”<sup>1</sup>.

Being discriminated, the Jews were not allowed to work in the domain of railways, customs, in the production of salt and cigars. They were forbidden to buy land and starting with 1884 they could be no more itinerant merchants in villages.

---

<sup>1</sup> Radu Ioanid, *Răscumpărarea evreilor. Istoria acordurilor secrete dintre România și Israel*, Polirom, Iași, 2005, p. 36.

The two laws from 1893, the Law of primary education and the Law of secondary and university education provided the free education only for Romanians.

After the union of 1918, Romania becomes a state where 30% of the population was made up of minorities. After the union, the Jews obtained the Romanian citizenship through the Constitution of 1923. The period 1923-1927 constituted the period of grace for the Romanian Jews. During this time they had the most rights.

The Carol the 2<sup>nd</sup>'s royal dictatorship and later, the dictatorship of Ion Antonescu, restrained a lot the rights of the Jews. In 1940 the marriages between Jews and Christians were forbidden. Other restrains of the rights of the Jews are described by Radu Ioanid in his book *Răscumpărarea evreilor*<sup>2</sup>. Thus the Jews were not allowed to sell products which constituted the monopoly of the state, they were excluded from the practicing of their jobs, respectively from the professional associations in which they took part (The Association of doctors, the Writers' Union, the Architects' Society, etc). Also, in 1940, it was forbidden by law that the Jews could be professors and students. The forced labour became compulsory. During the governance of Ion Antonescu, a large part of the Jewish Population from Bessarabia, Bucovina and Moldova was deported. Ghettos and concentration camps existed in Bessarabia, Bucovina and Transnistria. The Jews from North-West Transylvania, found under Horthyst occupation, were deported in German concentration camps.

During the communist period, the minorities were closely controlled, the state trying to assimilate them, to erase religious differences. Many Jews became close collaborators of the communists, but they were subjects to the anti-cosmopolite campaign with anti-Semitic character initiated in the last years of Stalin. At the same time, the Jews tried to emigrate in Israel. After their departure, their property entered in the possession of the communist state. In Romania, during 1945-1953, several Jewish organizations were constituted which in time dissapeared and their role was taken over by the Jewish Democratic Committee, an institution controlled bu communists who wanted to supervise closely the Jewish Community. As it results from the files existent in the National Archives branch of Oradea, the Jews from Oradea and the ones from Romania tried, in the first years after the war, to recuperate their houses and furnitures confiscated during the fascist occupation, they tried to support and to offer to their fellows counseling with the support of the community. They tried to organize cultural activities, they offered the Jews who had no qualification the chance to learn a job, they tried to support the ill people and the orphans. At the beginning, they achieved all these things with the support of some institutions of their own (sanitary, educational, orphanages), which subsequently entered in the possession of Romanian state. A number of Jews became communists, and they denied their origins, but most of them choose to emigrate to Palestina (Israel after 1948). During the British mandate in Palestine, the communist supported the immigration of the Jews in Palestine, as counter reaction to the British power. They did not abandon the idea of spreading their system in Israel, and the ones who emigrated were politically prepared, thing which did not have the expected success. At the same time, the zionism was condemned by the Romanian Communist Party, a lot of zionists being interogated. Radu Ioanid, in his book *Răscumpărarea evreilor*, argues that for every Romanian Jew who emigrated to Israel, the Jewish state paid money to Romanian authorities, a condemnable fact, kept secret even in present times<sup>3</sup>.

---

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 40-42.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 95-117.

## Stereotypes and opinions existent in Romanian territories with regard to the Jews

In his book, *Imaginea evreului în cultura română (The image of the Jew in Romanian culture)*<sup>4</sup>, Andrei Oișteanu noticed the main prejudices of Romanian people with regard to the Jews, as reflected not only in popular literature but also in the cult literature. His study is an intellectual survey, but several of the sources he presents have a tendentious character. Some of the aspects underlined by Oisteanu are presented below.

The Jews were considered foreigners, just like the other ethnic groups, by Romanians, especially in the context of affirmation of patriotism and of national specificity. They were discriminated because they were foreigners and for their religion.

In modern and contemporary epoch the Jews enjoyed a negative popularity in the writings of some Romanian authors, while during the communist times the Jews were ignored, very few things being written about them. Andrei Oișteanu gives examples of the way in which the Jews were rallied during the past. They were considered the bearers of hooked noses and of side whiskers, red skin and freckles. The hooked nose was a negative esthetic characteristic but also a symbol of treachery. It was told also that they were blobber-lipped and they had “out of socket” eyes. In caricatures, they appear “flabby”, “grinned”, “lascivious”, “bloody”. In Central Europe, they were perceived as people with beared and side whiskers. They were considered ugly and foul-smelling. In Moldova, the Jewish traditional clothes were rallied, being a real source of conflicts. The Christian punished the Jews by mowing their beards and side whiskers. They were named “red people” because of the red hair and beard, they were considered repugnant because they had freckles. They were considered dirty and bearing an ugly smell, as emphasized by expressionists such as “stinking Jews”, “it stinks like a Jew”. They were criticized for their supposed unbearable smell of garlic and onion. At the same time, Jewish woman were considered beautiful: “The Beautiful Jewish Woman”.

Claudia Ursuțiu, in the article “Stereotypes and anti-semitic clichés in the interwar parliamentary discourse (1919-1930)”<sup>5</sup>, included in the collective volume *Dilemele conviețuirii. Evrei și neevrei în Europa Central-Răsăriteană (“Dilemmas of cohabitation. Jews and non-Jews in Central and Eastern Europe”* identifies a few clichés which dominated the Romanian collective mentality and were reflected in the Romanian interwar parliamentary speech (1919-1930). Some clichés are emphasized below:

- A. “The Jews control the national economy”: under this aspect subjects such as Jewish finances, “the speculator”, “Jewish merchant”, “Jewish parasitical industry” are treated, alongside the theme of the Jewish publican who doctored and poisoned alcoholic beverages and the theme of Jewish publican who doctored and poisoned alcoholic beverages and the theme of the parasitical Jew, who controlled “bread, paper, concrete, carbonic acid, sugar and forest’ industry”.
- B. “Jewish invasion” which has as purpose Romania’s transformation into a colony: it is presented as a systematic immigration, which has as objective the dilution of Romanian element from Romanian cities and the denationalisation of Romanian provinces.
- C. “Romanian cities” appear as a consequence and a necessity of the Jewish invasion, which implies extreme solutions as expropriation of Jewish properties from Romanian cities or an infusion of Romanian “blood” from Romanian villages.
- D. The Jew-“enemy of the Romanian nation”. The Jew appears as “traitor”, “plotter”, “slanderer of Romanian people”. Some of these ideas reappeared after 1989.

---

<sup>4</sup> Andrei Oișteanu, *Imaginea evreului în cultura română*, Humanitas, București, 2004.

<sup>5</sup> Ursuțiu, Claudia, “Stereotypes and anti-semitic clichés in the interwar parliamentary discourse (1919-1930)” in Ladislau Gyemant, Maria Ghitta (coord.), *Dilemele conviețuirii. Evrei și neevrei în Europa Central-Răsăriteană (Dilemmas of cohabitation. Jews and non-Jews in Central and Eastern Europe)*, Institutul Cultural Român, Centrul de Studii Transilvane, 2006.

- E. The Jew in the Army – in this sense the Jew is described as “coward”, “deserter”, “spy”, “traitor”. A.C. Cuza militated for cleaning the army of Jews.
- F. The Jews in the press, education and medicine. Jewish journalists “misconstrues” the truth and “poison the souls”, they want to demolish the national values and support foreign movements, such as Boshevik movement. In education, the Jewish teacher is seen as someone who “poisons” the souls and therefore the elimination of Jews from the system of education is required. The problem of elimination of Jewish doctors appear more rarely. Sometimes the Jewish doctor appears as a “dangerous element for the physical, but also the mental health of the Romanian soldier”.

## **The perception of Holocaust during the communist period and after 1989 in Romania**

In order to understand the attitude of the Romanian state towards the Jews during to communist times, the work entitled *Raport final (Final report)*<sup>6</sup>, elaborated by the International Commission for the Study of Holocaust in Romania, may be considered very important. On the list of the members of the Commission for the study of Holocaust are found important names such as Elie Wiesel, Radu Ioanid, Jean Ancel, Ioan Scurtu, Liviu Rotman, Michael Shafir, Ladislau Gyemant. Although the main objective of the book is to analyze the degree of guilt of Romania with regard to its Jews in the period of Holocaust, we have identified a chapter which presented a special interest to us, namely *The Distorsion, Negation and Minimalization of Holocaust in postwar Romania*. Studying the attitude manifested towards the Romanian Jews by the communist historiography, we can see which was the image of the Jews in that period, how they were perceived. Because a positive attitude towards the Jews means to acknowledge the fact that they suffered during the Holocaust and condemn all who contributed to the common sufferance of the Jews. Or exactly this thing the communist historiography did not do. The authors of the volume consider that the Holocaust was distorted in postwar Romania, understanding by distorsion “the operation to modify the dates of the historical realities for political and propagandistic purposes. Although is not strictly necessary limited to communist period, the concept of distorsion refers especially to this period, a period when all historical writings were under the controll of political censorship”<sup>7</sup>.

Romania’s attitude towards the Holocaust was that of “state organized forgetting”<sup>8</sup>. The second attitude manifested by the communist historiography was that of negationism, an attitude explained by the authors: “In case of negationists, we do not deal with re-examination of historical facts already known or with a motivated critic of some previous interpretation, but with a try, more or less explicit, of denying the Holocaust”<sup>9</sup>. During the communist time, historians did not attribute the Holocaust only to Jews, but also to political opponents of the Nazis, especially the communists: according to Roller, “thousands of democrat citizens” were kept prisoners in German concentration camps. Moreover, the communist historians ignored pretty often the racial aspect of Hitler’s politics. In the period of anti-sionism and anti-cosmopolitanism, “the historiography passes through a process of forced marxization, nationalism and the theme of ethnical minorities does not represent one of the priorities of research established by stalinist commandments”<sup>10</sup>. Subsequently, in the framework of increasing nationalism, “terms such as Holocaust, final solution, genocide are sistematically avoided when making reference to what happened under

---

<sup>6</sup> Tuvia Friling, Radu Ioanid, Mihail E. Ionescu (eds), *Raport final*, Polirom, Iași, 2005.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*, p.339.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 345.

Romanian administration”<sup>11</sup> Even Antonescu will be rehabilitated. Also, the authors pronounce themselves against the “trivialisation by comparison” of the Holocaust, a common approach in Romania, but also in the West. We can draw the conclusion that, during the Communist regime, the Jews were considered undesirable intruders who had to be assimilated.

Concerning the perception of the Jews in the communist period, Michael Shafir concludes that: “This was, for example the case of Romania, where, under the rule of Ceaușescu, the references to the Jews’ extermination were limited to the North of Transylvania, occupied by Hungarians, without mentioning the extermination of Jews from Transnistria under Marshal Antonescu’s regime or attributing it exclusively to the Germans”<sup>12</sup> At the same time, in Romania, Marshal Ion Antonescu seemed to have been perceived as a saviour of the Jews, rather than a person guilty of their deportation. “The historiography of Nicolae Ceaușescu’s epoch presented to the readers a Romania abandoned by the Occident and forced to become allied with Hitler in order to defend the part of their territory which remained sovereign after Basarabia and North of Bucovina surrendered in front of Russians as a consequence of the ultimatum of June 1940, and the yielding of North of Transylvania to Hungary after the Diktat of Viena, in August 1940. While Jewish sufferance was rarely mentioned, and the role played by Antonescu independent of German influence was kept under silence, it was insisted, however, on the fact that the Marshal refused to deliver the Jews to the Germans”<sup>13</sup>.

As Michael Shafir has indicated<sup>14</sup>, the attitude of the Romanians towards the Jews was not positive in the first years after the Revolution of 1989. This problem is reflected in the favorable way in which characters who belonged to the Iron Guard, such as Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, or who collaborated with the fascists such as Ion Antonescu were looked at after the Romanian Revolution. Thus, while a party successor of the Iron Guard, “Noua Românie creștină” (New Christian Romania) suggested the canonization of Codreanu, Greater Romania Party (Partidul România Mare) proposed the canonization of Ion Antonescu by the Romanian Orthodox Church.

After the Romanian Revolution, some controversies appeared in Romania with regard to the Holocaust. Thus, Michael Shafir identifies more types of negation of Holocaust: integral negation, deflected negation and trivialization by comparison of Holocaust.

The integral negation of Holocaust means to deny the fact that Holocaust existed and victims were Jews. This type of negation is also used by the leader of Greater Romania Party, Corneliu Vadim Tudor, who upholds on the assertion of some foreign historians, in their attempt to deny the Holocaust. He claimed that the Germans could not kill 6 million Jews, that this action was practically impossible. The Holocaust, as seen by Corneliu Vadim Tudor, “was only a Zionist strategy in order to collect from Germany approximately 100 billions DM, in 40 years, and to keep under terror anyone who did not agree with the Jewish yoke”<sup>15</sup> What was more interesting in Romania, as Michael Shafir has pointed out, was the fact that here the negationist literature was promoted by some democrat and pro-Occident intellectuals.

Another type of negation which is identified by the author is the deflected negation. By deflected negation Michael Shafir understands: “Deflected negation does not deny the Holocaust, but it transfers the guilt on the members of other nations or it minimizes the participation of their own nation, reducing it to “aberrant” nations whose importance would be insignificant”<sup>16</sup> The author identifies several types of deflected negation: the one who attributes the responsibility for the extermination of the Jews exclusively to Germans, and the second approach assumes that there were individuals, culpable for the Jews’ extermination, belonging to their own nation, but as a rule these were small, insignificant groups

---

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 353.

<sup>12</sup> Michael Shafir, *Între negare și trivializare prin comparație. Negarea Holocaustului în țările postcomuniste din Europa Centrală și de Est*, Polirom, Iași, 2002, p. 30.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 63.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 31.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*, p.36.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*, p.49.

of that nation. It is obvious that, without Germans, the Holocaust would not have existed, but without the collaboration of the states subordinated to Nazi Germany, the Holocaust would have been achieved with more difficulty. Though we acknowledge that a small part of Romania was guilty for the faith of the Jews, the movement being known under the name of the Iron Guard, this is considered insignificant and not representative for the Romanian people<sup>17</sup>.

Finally, another attitude identified by the author in post-1989 Romania, is “trivialization by comparison” of the Holocaust, which is understood by Michael Shafir as in the following way: “Thus, trivialization by comparison will refer to the attempts of juxtaposing the Holocaust to other atrocities (Holocaust vs. X), but also to the trivialization of Holocaust by comparing it with other violent but cyclical events in the history of humanity (as, for instance, the war) or to the extirpation of the difference among Holocaust’s victims and the victims of other events which take place regularly”<sup>18</sup>. Shafir refers to Emil Constantinescu, the first president of Romania who lectured on Romanians’ common guilt for Holocaust. His merit is that of having acknowledged the Jews’ suffering and demonstrating solidarity with the Jews: “But the same authorities organized deportations, created concentration camps and promoted racial legislation. We feel today responsible for this inconsequentially [...]. The innocents’ death can be neither forgiven, nor redressed, or forgotten.[...] It is my duty, as President of Romania and of all Romanian citizens, to be the guarantor of this memory, no matter of how painful this could be; it is my duty to keep alive the memory of the Romanian Jews who felt victims of the genocide”<sup>19</sup>.

With regard to the trivialization by comparison of Holocaust, I would add that shoah is a unique fact in history, which can not be compared with any other persecution or extermination during history. As Alain Besançon<sup>20</sup> puts it, Nazism and Communism are two dictatorships which can be compared, but the Holocaust (*shoah*) cannot be compared with any other suffering, as human suffering can not be quantified.

As a conclusion, we can state that the Jews were frequently persecuted in Eastern Europe and in Romania, as they were considered foreigners. Although Andrei Oișteanu highlights the hostile attitude of Romanians towards their Jews, there are authors who do not question the proverbial Romanian tolerance. Thus, Carol Iancu states that “manifestations of hostility towards Jews are taking place in moments of tensions and crisis”<sup>21</sup>. Having different habits and traditions, as creditors and commercials, pretty often they aroused feelings of rejection on the Romanian side. Nevertheless, we need to acknowledge our faults in order to achieve a progress in the future and to learn the lessons of the past.

## References

1. Besançon, Alain, *Nenorocirea secolului: despre comunism, nazism și unicitatea “soah”-ului*, Humanitas, București, 2007.
2. Friling, Tuvia; Ioanid, Radu; Ionescu, Mihail E. (ed.), *Raport final*, Polirom, Iași, 2005.
3. Iancu, Carol, *Evreii din România (1866-1919): de la excludere la emancipare*, Hasefer, București, 2006.
4. Iancu, Carol, *Mituri fondatoare ale antisemitismului din Antichitate până în zilele noastre*, Hasefer, București, 2005.
5. Ioanid, Radu, *Răscumpărarea evreilor: Istoria acordurilor secrete dintre România și Israel*, Polirom, Iași, 2005.
6. Oișteanu, Andrei, *Imaginea evreului în cultura română*, Humanitas, București, 2004.
7. Shafir, Michael, *Între negare și trivializare prin comparație: Negarea Holocaustului în țările postcomuniste din Europa Centrală și de Est*, Polirom, Iași, 2002.

---

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 51.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*, p.107.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 120.

<sup>20</sup> Alain Besançon, *Nenorocirea secolului. Despre comunism, nazism și unicitatea “soah”-ului*, Humanitas, 2007.

<sup>21</sup> Carol Iancu, *Evreii din România (1866-1919): De la excludere la emancipare*, Hasefer, București, 2006, p. 3.

8. Ursuțiu, Claudia, “Stereotypes and anti-semitic clichés in the interwar parliamentary discourse (1919-1930)” in Ladislau Gyemant, Maria Ghitta (coord.), *Dilemele conviețuirii. Evrei și neevrei în Europa Central-Răsăriteană (Dilemmas of cohabitation. Jews and non-Jews in Central and Eastern Europe)*, Institutul Cultural Român, Centrul de Studii Transilvane, 2006.