

The Persecution of Jews in Romania: Excerpts from Mihail Sebastian's Journal (1938–1944)

Abstract

Mihail Sebastian (1907–1945) was a Romanian Jewish journalist, playwright and novelist and longtime resident of the cosmopolitan city of Bucharest. Throughout his life, Sebastian stated that he did not have a close relationship with Judaism and instead felt very much a Romanian. Romania's long tradition of antisemitic sentiment gave way to fascism's influence in 1938. Ion Victor Antonescu, the appointed leader of Romania's government and head of the right-wing alliance, the Iron Guard, aligned the Kingdom of Romania with the Nazi regime in 1940. Following this pact, Romania's government began an officially sanctioned program of persecution against Romania's Jewish minority population of 759,000. While the Romanian state was hesitant to cooperate with the Nazis' plans for mass deportation of Jews to the East, through the deliberate massacre, smaller forced removals, and poor living conditions, estimates of around 280,000 men, women, and children died in Romania because of policies enacted by the Antonescu regime.

Sebastian's diary reveals the extent to which the Romanian government and non-Jewish Romanians carried out its own racist policies. Sebastian was not deported, nor was he forced to live in a ghetto. But these diary entries show the discrimination he faced on a daily basis from his neighbors, and the effect of official policies of poor food rations, confiscated property, and forced labor.

After accepting Germany's impending defeat in 1944, Antonescu was forced to resign and the remaining Jews in Romania were never deported to concentration camps in the East. Mihail Sebastian survived the war, as the final entry reveals, and reluctantly welcomed peace as the Red Army entered the capital. He died less than a year later in a traffic accident. 1450

Source

1938

Bucharest, Monday, 22 August

[...]

I dropped by Marietta's to see if there was any news of Mircea. (He was not answering his telephone.) He has been at Miercurea-Ciuc since the first of August.

On this occasion I saw Marietta unrestrained: she is choking with anti-Semitism. Not even the fact that she was talking with me, nor the fact that I was in her house, could stop her from ranting and raging against potbellied Jews and their bloated, bejeweled women—though she did make exception for about a hundred thousand “decent” Jews, probably including myself since I have neither a potbelly nor a bloated wife. Otherwise her language was just as in *Porunca Vremii*. I didn't hesitate to tell her so. And I left there feeling poisoned.

[...]

1941

Monday, 4 August

Early this morning the sergeants and policemen went from house to house in various parts of town—and woke people to inform them that not only Jews aged twenty to thirty-six, but also those aged thirty-six to fifty, must report to police headquarters. The alarm I felt at first is returning. Are we again facing a mass roundup of Jews? Internment camps? Extermination? When I went out at ten, the city had a strange air: a strange kind of nervous animation. Agitated groups of people hurrying around. Pale faces lost in thought. Looks that wordlessly question one another, with the mute despair that has become a kind of Jewish greeting. I quickly did some shopping to prepare our rucksacks for this afternoon, for when we had decided to present ourselves. Shops were taken over by Jews buying all kinds of things for their departure. After a couple of hours there were no more rucksacks on sale anywhere. The shops selling canned goods had only a few odds and ends (it was impossible to buy a tin of sardines, for example). The price of the simplest things suddenly shot up. I went to Calea Vacaresti to buy a couple of canvas hats for Benu and myself, and the labels with yesterday's price (160 lei) had been covered over with the new price (250 lei) in ink that was not yet dry.

[...]

Tuesday, 9 September

We were supposed to start wearing the “six-cornered star” tomorrow morning. The order was given to the Community and passed on to police stations. But there was a change of mind following an audience that Filderman^[1] had tonight with the Conducator.^[2] The change of mind does not give me any pleasure. I had grown used to the idea that I would be wearing a yellow patch with a Star of David. I imagined all the unpleasantness, all the risks and dangers, but after a moment's alarm I not only resigned myself but began to see in that sign a kind of token of

identity. Even more, I saw it as a kind of medal, an insignia certifying my lack of sympathy for the vile deeds around us, my lack of responsibility for them, my innocence.

In the courtyard of the Great Synagogue, where the commissions carry out their requisitioning, I meet all kinds of old familiar faces from my days at university and in journalism—people I have not met for many a year. I seem to have grown terribly old, if I compare myself with them.

[...]

Sunday, 19 October

I went this morning to a Giesecking concert at the Philharmonic (the Schumann concerto, a Bach Brandenburg concerto for flute, piano, and violin, Beethoven's *Fourth Symphony*). I got the ticket at the beginning of last week, after a lot of hesitation and a sudden final decision: come what may, I'm going to go! But the pangs of conscience started at once. I was ashamed of myself. Could I possibly be so light-minded and unscrupulous as to go to a German concert in these bitter days? Hundreds of Jewish families from Bukovina are right now in forced exile! Thousands of Jews are in labor camps—including Benu! Each day, each hour, fresh horrors and humiliations press down on us—and I go to the Philharmonic! I made up my mind to return the ticket and in no event to attend the concert. But at the moments of greatest indignation, another voice began to creep through. Why should we do penance? Why should we so absurdly give up things? Why should we deny ourselves the few pleasures remaining to us? I haven't listened to any music since the spring, when they took my radio away. A concert—such a fine one at that—will allow me to forget and be happy for an hour. How many pleasures are left to me? Until yesterday evening and right up to this morning, I didn't know if I would go. I went.

[...]

Tuesday, 21 October

All Jews are obliged, under a law that appeared in this evening's papers, to deliver items of personal clothing to the state. The required quantity is laid down for each of seven categories: from those without any income to those with an annual income of 500,000 lei. It would be hard to copy the whole text, which in terms of anti-Semitism is perhaps the wildest and most unexpected thing I have read up to now. A Jewish person who earns 10,000 lei a month is obliged to donate: four shirts, ten pairs of underpants, four pairs of socks, four handkerchiefs, four towels, four flannels, three suits, two pairs of ankle boots, two hats, two overcoats, two linen blankets, two undersheets, two pillow covers, two pillowcases, two sheets. The amounts demanded of the highest income bracket are beyond belief: thirty-six shirts, twelve suits, twelve overcoats, and so on. It is so grotesque that I'm not sure it isn't a sick joke. I see that the law does not bear any signature, so I wonder whether it was not sent to the typesetter by some prankster. For if it is in earnest, you realize after the first moment of comical stupor that it is actually tragic. The cost of the items in question is far above the income that is taken as a criterion! If each Jew were to give all the money he earns, he still could not manage to buy all the things demanded of him. The penalty is five to ten years' imprisonment, or a fine of 100,000 to 500,000 lei.

I had a long sleepless night. Only after four in the morning did I manage to drop off at last. All the time I thought of how my departure might be organized. It is becoming the obsession of my life.

[...]

1942

Thursday, 10 September

The train with the deported Jews left yesterday afternoon after halting a few hours at Chitila. A truck loaded with food and clothing set off too late, first for Chitila, then for Ploiesti—after which it turned around and came back. A dazed stupor. There is no room for feelings, gestures, or words.

By chance I was with Aristide at the Bellu cemetery. He was taking flowers for Mafalda (it is twenty-two months today since the earthquake). But I thought of the millions of dead who have no name or grave. I thought especially of those long convoys of Jews, neither alive nor dead, who have been hurled into a satanic agony. A big earthquake would come as a godsend. Mafalda had the good fortune to die in a few seconds. It was a moment of terror—not days, weeks, months, and years.

Jews will have no bread every fifth day. Their sugar ration has been cut from two hundred grams to one hundred, while for Christians it remains at six hundred grams.

[...]

1944

Saturday, 16 September

I am not willing to be disappointed. I don't accept that I have any such right. The Germans and Hitlerism have croaked. That's enough.

I always knew deep down that I'd happily have died to bring Germany's collapse a fraction of an inch closer. Germany has collapsed—and I am alive. What more can I ask? So many have died without seeing the beast perish with their own eyes! We who remain alive have had that immense good fortune.

And now? I don't know.

And now, life begins. A kind of life, which has to be lived. The only thing for which I longed was freedom. Not a new definition of freedom—but freedom. After so many years of terror, we don't need to have it explained to us what freedom is. We know what it is—and it cannot be replaced by any formula.

NOTES

[1] Wilhelm Filderman: lawyer, chairman of the Federation of the Union of Jewish Communities in Romania, the principle Jewish umbrella organization.

[2] The Romanian equivalent of Führer, referring to Antonescu.

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