

Anca Filipovici

Young and Restless

Political Activism and Resistance among Jewish Youth in Romania

Abstract

Based on testimonies from the Fortunoff Video Archive and other personal accounts, this article delves into the political options and the mechanisms of political mobilisation among Jewish youngsters in 1930s and 1940s Romania. Primarily involved in two distinct forms of activity – within the Zionist youth movements and the communist movement – their early political engagement represented a defiance of antisemitism and adult authority. Simultaneously, it served as an alternative island of safety and stability. By exploring various personal experiences in specific political contexts, I argue that the political involvement of youngsters should be analysed as a manifestation of juvenile energy and a unique form of agency for victims of antisemitic persecution.

Introduction

Jewish resistance during the Holocaust in Romania has been predominantly portrayed as a history of adults. The topic itself is still less explored, even though, in recent years, researchers have started to discuss not only the persecution of Jews, but also the agency of the victims as demonstrated through the actions of the Jewish leaders, intellectuals, and professionals who sought to influence political processes and decisions affecting Jewish communities. What scholarship has yet to reveal is that political activism and resistance during the Holocaust were also characteristics of some young Jews – adolescents and individuals in their twenties – who lacked political authority, significant financial resources, or influence over decision-makers.

It is their history that I tried to uncover as a Fortunoff Research Fellow at the Wiesenthal Vienna Institute from 2022 to 2023, while exploring the testimonies of Zionist and communist Jews within the Fortunoff Video Archive. Drawing upon this research, this article examines various individual experiences from different regions of Romania, and it aims to discuss the political activism of Jewish youngsters, during the interwar period and the Holocaust. Starting with the 1930s, political choices were dynamic and sometimes volatile, as youngsters looked for alternatives to counter the prevailing nationalist atmosphere. At the same time, one has to be aware that political involvement was not characteristic of all young people. Some of them were deeply rooted in tradition and religious life, while others simply lacked interest in challenging activities.

Age represents a key concept in my research, as I argue that political mobilisation and radicalisation at a young age within a highly politicised society like interwar Romania can be interpreted as a form of disobedience and manifestation of the specific energy of juveniles.¹ According to classic theories of age and psychosocial devel-

¹ Anca Filipovici, "The Youth of the Unified Nation: Social Control and Discipline in Romanian Interwar High Schools", *New Europe College "Ștefan Odobleja" Program Yearbook 2018–2019* (2020): 137–164.

opment, youngsters manifest exuberance and a thirst for action that state authorities usually attempt to channel according to their political agenda. However, when these attempts fail, other entities may seek to manipulate the energy of youth for their own purposes.²

Framed within different political orientations, Zionism was perceived by young Jews in interwar Romania as the main alternative and an island of safety in a nationalist atmosphere in which antisemitism and far-right discourse flourished, influenced by developments in Europe. Zionist youth organisations first emerged in nineteenth-century Galicia, modelled after English scouting and the German *Wandervogel* (Wandering Bird) movement. The self-organisation of youth debuted as a form of rebellion against the generation of their parents and as a consequence of the modernisation process. In the Austro-Hungarian Empire, these young people benefited from mass education as a mechanism for social mobility, yet they also faced different forms of modern everyday antisemitism, leading them to reject assimilation.³ While breaking away from the world of their parents, young Galician Jews enrolled in youth movements created as peer-group mediums, promoting sports, hiking, and a sense of independence. In the decades following World War One, particularly in the 1930s, the movements spread throughout Europe and became focal points for Zionist ideology – the nationalist Jewish movement advocating for the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine.

In the twentieth century, the period of youth represented a decisive phase in the personal histories of individuals, a time when they exhibited a high degree of openness to political commitment and ideologies.⁴ This natural exuberance and spontaneity evolved into a form of courage and a thirst for action that surpassed rationality in dangerous times, framing the resistance of Jewish youth during the Holocaust. Much of the research on Jewish resistance has been influenced by Yehuda Bauer's definition⁵ focused on group initiatives and mobilisation. The definition was expanded by historians like Wolf Gruner to also encompass individual acts of defiance. While my own work primarily focuses on organised Zionist groups, individual acts are also highlighted. Thus, I refer to Jewish resistance as “any individual or group action in opposition to known laws, actions, or intentions of the Nazis and their helpers”.⁶

Zionism remains an open field of study in Romanian historiography. Despite the complexity of the topic and its potential to reveal many histories, no comprehensive monograph has yet been written. In recent decades, studies on Zionism have been authored by historians such as Lya Benjamin⁷ or Hary Kuller.⁸ Dalia Ofer discussed Zionism as a gateway for escaping the Holocaust in the 1940s, with references to Romania,⁹ and has been followed by the more recent research of Adina Babeş and Alex-

2 See Erik Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (London: Faber & Faber, 1968), 233–244.

3 Zvi Lamm, *Youth Takes the Lead: The Inception of Jewish Youth Movements in Europe* (Tel Aviv, Yad Yaari, and Givat Haviva: Hashomer Ha'tzair Institute for Research and Documentation, Sdar-Zalam, 2004), 49.

4 *Ibid.*, 19.

5 Yehuda Bauer, “Forms of Jewish Resistance”, in *The Holocaust: Problems and Perspectives of Interpretation*, 3rd ed., ed. Donald L. Niewyk (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing, 2002).

6 Wolf Gruner, *Resisters: How Ordinary Jews Fought Persecution in Hitler's Germany* (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 2023), 2.

7 Lya Benjamin, Gabriela Vasiliu, eds., *Idealul sionist în presa evreiască din România: Antologie: 1881–1920* (Bucharest: Hasefer, 2010).

8 Hary Kuller, “La a 60-a aniversare a Statului Israel”, *Buletinul Centrului, Muzeului și Arhivei istorice a evreilor din România* (2008): 11–34.

9 Dalia Ofer, *Escaping the Holocaust: Illegal Immigration to the Land of Israel, 1939–1944* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

andru Florian.¹⁰ Theodor Wexler has published some significant collections of documents on the Zionist trials; however, these lack a method for organising the vast amount of documents and lack an in-depth introductory study.¹¹ Consequently, information about youth movements is disparate and sometimes contradictory. The sources reflect either the truncated perspective of Romanian authorities or the subjective approach of former pioneers or older Zionists. Meanwhile, Hebrew historiography provides a rich parallel source on the topic, albeit less accessible to researchers in Romania.¹² The realm of resistance and rescue holds many undiscovered histories as well. A pioneering work in this area is Iacov Geller's book,¹³ which delves into the spiritual resistance performed through the Jewish school network, the social and health care system, and the religious actions of the rabbis. Lya Benjamin's volume¹⁴ connects resistance with the literary and artistic works created during the Holocaust, while a more recent volume by Ștefan Ionescu¹⁵ examines the legal resistance strategies of Jewish officials during Ion Antonescu's regime. So far, Jewish youth organisations have been only tangentially mentioned and have never been thoroughly analysed as a distinct agency of defiance and resistance.

One of the main reasons for this lacuna in historiography might be the limited access to sources. Generally, underground resistance histories rely only partially on archival documents, instead exploring secondary literature and testimonies.¹⁶ Since membership in resistance movements was dynamic and the secrecy of operations required precisely a lack of concrete proof,¹⁷ many details (such as the number and names of those involved and the specifics of the actions) will only be partially revealed through research. And this is even more the case with soft-resistance actions (non-armed combat) and the Jewish underground, whose members were civilians deprived of any political and civil rights. As for resistance within the illegal communist movement, historiography has mainly focused on the construction and image of "the Judeo-Bolshevik myth"¹⁸ on the one hand, and the relationship between Jews and communism on the other,¹⁹ with sporadic references to the involvement of young Jews in the communist youth movement.

This article endeavours to shed light on this lesser-known history by utilising testimonies from the Fortunoff Video Archive, along with other personal accounts and archival documents, to unveil the individual dimension of political activism and resistance among young Jews. While working in the Fortunoff Video Archive with the search engines of both the Metadash visual search tool and the Aviary platform, I used specific keywords to identify the testimonies of those Holocaust survivors born

10 Adina Babeș and Alexandru Florian, "The Emigration of the Jews in the Antonescu Era", *Holocaust: Studii și Cercetări*, 4 (2012): 16–34.

11 Teodor Wexler and Mihaela Popov, *Anchete și procese uitate: 1945–1960*, 2 vols. (Bucharest: Fundația W. Filderman, 1996).

12 Efraim Ofir, *In the Lions' Den: The Zionist Movement in Romania Before and During World War II* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: The Diaspora Research Institute, Tel Aviv University, 1992).

13 Iacov Geller, *Rezistența spirituală a evreilor români în timpul Holocaustului* (Bucharest: Hasefer, 2004).

14 Lya Benjamin, *Prigoană și rezistență în istoria evreilor din România, 1940–1944* (Bucharest: Hasefer, 2003).

15 Ștefan Ionescu, *Jewish Resistance to "Romanianization", 1940–44* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

16 Patrick G. Zander, *Hidden Armies of the Second World War: World War II Resistance Movements* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2017), ix.

17 *Ibid.*, 60.

18 Radu Ioanid, *The Sword of the Archangel: Fascist Ideology in Romania* (Boulder, CO: East European Monographs 1990); Paul Hanebrink, *A Specter Hunting Europe: The Myth of Judeo-Bolshevism* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2018).

19 See, for instance, Dmitry Tartakowsky, "Parallel Ruptures: Jews of Bessarabia and Transnistria between Romanian Nationalism and Soviet Communism, 1918–1940" (PhD diss., University of Illinois, 2009); Robert Levy, *Ana Pauker: The Rise and Fall of a Jewish Communist* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2001).

around the period from 1920 to 1930, and who were at some point affiliated with a Zionist movement or connected to the Zionist underground during the war. Location served as a selection criterion, with Romania being either the country of origin/residence or a country they transited on their way to Palestine.²⁰ Although my initial focus was on Zionism, some of the resulting testimonies revealed other types of youth political involvement, particularly engagement in the communist movement. The personal histories of survivors who were politically active in their adolescence could be categorised into specific typologies, thus confirming the hypothesis that the primary forms of political involvement during the interwar period and/or during the Holocaust were either specifically Jewish (mainly nationalist Zionism, and to a lesser extent socialist Bundism) or transcended the ethnic dimension, ranging from democratic models (socialism) to radicalisation (communism).

In selecting relevant testimonies from the Fortunoff Video Archive, I did not use a quantitative approach. Instead, I revealed those testimonies that I deemed to be representative for explaining early political engagement. In this respect, I selected those testimonies in which survivors do not limit mentioning their membership in political movements as just one of the many experiences in their lives, but go deeper into analysing their choices and actions within a specific context. The Fortunoff Video Archive stands out as the first American institution dedicated to collecting Holocaust video testimonies, with a primary focus on capturing the human dimension of suffering rather than the historical background.²¹ While my intention was not to conduct an exhaustive analysis of the testimonial process, I aimed to highlight individual insights. My focus was on experience and reflectivity, rather than on memory or its instrumentalisation.

Based on testimonies from the Fortunoff Video Archive and supplemented by additional personal accounts, this article first discusses political engagement in Zionist movements. Subsequently, it explores alternative political avenues available to Jews in interwar Romania, thereby aiming to elucidate the diverse mechanisms and motivations influencing young Jews' adoption of specific ideologies. The final section is dedicated to the Zionist underground during the Holocaust in Romania, shedding light on the experiences of Zionist youth from neighbouring countries who collaborated with Romanian Jews to facilitate the emigration of Jewish victims to Palestine.

20 Although Metadash serves as a valuable tool for filtering testimonies based on various criteria, its limitations become evident when aiming for specific results. For instance, using keywords like "sabotage", "Zionists", "Zionist organisations", "resistance", "Jewish resistance", "Hashomer Hatzair", "Dror-ha-Bonim", and "underground movements" yielded only a few results for Romania – between one and three testimonies. However, when the same keywords were used without filtering based on birthplace, a significantly greater number of testimonies were retrieved (e.g. 155 for "resistance"). To ensure no relevant testimony was overlooked, all thirty-four testimonies from survivors born in Romania were thoroughly examined. Subsequently, the search was extended to the Aviary platform, which allows for filtering based on various combinations of keywords. In this case, the location "Romania" did not exclusively denote the birthplace but rather any mention of the country in different contexts. Out of a total of 4,690 Fortunoff testimonies, 803 were found to have some connection with Romania. By filtering these results and adding additional keywords relevant to the topic, twenty-nine testimonies were selected. It is worth noting that these testimonies also included accounts from survivors of other nationalities who transited through Romania as illegal refugees during the Holocaust, particularly young Zionists.

21 Noah Shenker, *Reframing Holocaust Testimony* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2015), 21.

Youth Engagement in Zionist Movements from Romania

And the goal was as any Zionist organization to made, as soon as possible, our aliyah to Israel and live in Israel. So therefore, all our existence, it became as the main goal, Israel. So we went to families to convince them, to argue with them, to collect money from them, as every Jewish, Zionist organization in those times. [...] But we care about to convince them to prepare themselves and go to Israel. [...]

So as good Boy Scouts, every weekend, we took our rucksack, our things, and we went to the woods. And there, sometimes, we met other groups. And it happened to be just from the German minorities. And not want once, I remember we had fight with them, because they had the antisemitic words, you know. And, we were very much eager to not let them dominate us.²²

This is how Sandor, a Jew of Hungarian origin, born in 1920 in Transylvania – part of the Romanian state after World War One – recalls his early political involvement in the Zionist centrist youth movement *Hanoar Hatzioni* (The Zionist Youth), around the age of twelve. Like many other Jewish children and adolescents, he joined a movement that offered a taste of adventure, a sense of belonging to a peer group, and the feeling of participating in a historical mission – to make aliyah to a land he had never seen but which felt like home. On the other side of the Carpathians, in Bukovina – another province that joined Romania after 1918 – Chaim experienced a similar period of joy. In Vatra Dornei, his hometown, he remembers two Zionist youth groups, *Bnei Akiva* (Children of Akiva) and *Hanoar Hatzioni*, with him and his brothers joining the latter. In their youthful exuberance, the desire for fun and adventure is also underscored by Chaim, who enjoyed playing sports and singing songs with fellow members. The youth movement additionally served as a conduit for connecting with Zionism and the Hebrew language, which the members had previously been exposed to in Jewish primary school. Thus, for young Jews in Vatra Dornei, formal education and leisure time indirectly fostered their alignment with Zionism.²³

Among Jewish organisations, Zionist groups were the most prevalent. Outside the Regat,²⁴ these organisations often bore regional features, influenced by the cultural legacies of the former empires to which the provinces had belonged. While many organisations had been established in the preceding century, Zionist movements experienced a resurgence beginning in the 1930s, with various forms of ideological expression, and with a strong emphasis on body strength and self-defence training. In the Regat, popular organisations included the leftist *Hashomer Hatzair* (The Young Guard), *Gordonia*, and *Dror* (Freedom); the centrist *Hanoar Hatzioni*; the right-wing *Betar*; and the religious *Bnei Akiva* and *Hamizrachi Hatzair*. In Bukovina, Cernăuți emerged as the first hub of the Zionist *Hashomer Hatzair* in 1918. In Bessarabia, the most active youth organisation was *Tzeirei Zion* (Youth of Zion), encompassing different political orientations. In Transylvania, youngsters joined *Ha-*

22 Sandor G., Holocaust Video Testimony (HVT) 230, Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies, created at 19 December 1983.

23 Chaim H., HVT 3375, Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies, created at 26 June 1992.

24 Regat or Vechiul Regat (the Romanian Old Kingdom) denotes the historical territory encompassed by the first independent Romanian state, created through the union of the Danubian Principalities – Wallachia and Moldavia in 1859. After incorporating Northern Dobruja and ceding the southern portion of Bessarabia to Russia in 1878, the Kingdom of Romania was proclaimed in 1881 under the reign of King Carol I.

bonim (The Builders), Hanoar Hatzioni, *Mizrachi*, Hashomer Hatzair, Bnei Avoda, and Dror.²⁵

This ideological diversity is further exemplified by the testimony of Joseph M., a Jew from Oradea, Transylvania, who was a member of a Zionist religious group:

There was a very active Zionist movement. The strongest political group was the Mizrahi section which was a religious Zionist organization. There were some Leftist youth movements, like the Ha-Shomer Ha Za'ir which wanted to build a Socialist Israel and then there were some general, non-Partisan Zionist movements. Ha-Shomer Ha Za'ir was very successful; they promoted the Kibbutz movement. There was a religious, pioneer movement called the Halutz. They wanted to live communally while following the Torah to the letter. Their motto was: 'Israel without the Torah is like a body without a soul.' I participated in the Mizrahi youth movement which was called B'nai Akiva.²⁶

This wide array of ideologies and movements within Zionism challenged the Jewish youth. In practice, at such a young age, the ideological dimension of these organisations initially caused confusion but gradually gained significance over time. What adolescents prioritised in the initial stages was the familiarity of the peer-group environment, the sense of adventure that offered freedom, and the feeling of personal fulfilment through engagement in a collective mission. This trajectory towards a particular political "faith" also marked the youth of Yitzhak Artzi, a Jewish boy from Bukovina who joined Hanoar Hatzioni at the age of thirteen, and who later became a Zionist leader and member of the Knesset in Israel.²⁷

I joined Hanoar Hatzioni by chance. I used to ironically say that I stumbled upon the movement where the dancing was better and where there were more beautiful girls. Only after that did the ideology come into play. The driving force behind joining the youth movement was the search for companionship and the opportunity for self-expression and self-realisation.²⁸

Sandor, Chaim, Yitzhak and many other Jews of their age were members of Jewish organisations, but also students enrolled in secondary public schools.²⁹ In inter-war Romania, secondary schooling became a tool for mass education and Romanianisation, particularly in the multiethnic provinces annexed after 1918, and it aimed at reinforcing national identity.³⁰ At the beginning of the 1930s, in the context of a highly politicised society, students enrolled in public schools were officially prohibited from participating in youth organisations with political aims. A decade after the establishment of the national state, Romanian society was deeply divided by a political and economic crisis, marked by corruption and a lack of trust in democracy and traditional parties. The nationalist propaganda depicted the country's multiethnic diversity as a burden, while the far-right discourse scapegoated primarily Jews for structural problems. This turbulent period framed the formative years of adoles-

25 For a more detailed description of these organisations in Romania, see Anca Filipovici, "Alternative Identities at the Periphery of a National State: Hashomer Hatzair and the Zionist Youth from Romania", in *Jüdische Jugend im Übergang – Jewish Youth in Transit: Selbstverständnis und Ideen in Zeiten des Wandels*, eds. Knut Bergbauer, Nora M. Kissling, Beate Lehmann, Ulrike Pilarczyk, and Ofer Ashkenazi (Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg), 249–268, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110774702-010>.

26 Joseph M., HVT 2865, Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies, created at 5 May 1995.

27 All translations of quotations are by this article's author, unless stated otherwise.

28 Yitzhak Artzi, *Biografia unui sionist* (Bucharest: Hasefer, 1999), 66.

29 Around 13 per cent of the secondary school population at the national level was Jewish, while in certain regions and cities their percentage was even higher. See Filipovici, "The Youth of the Unified Nation", 142.

30 Irina Livezeanu, *Cultural Politics in Greater Romania: Regionalism, Nation Building, and Ethnic Struggle, 1918–1930* (Ithaca, NY, and New York: Cornell University Press, 2000).

cent Jews born around the Great War and the creation of the Romanian state. Traditionally, the main voices of the political scene belonged to parties, political movements, certain professional categories, or specific social classes. However, a new actor with significant potential for political activism and radicalisation emerged: adolescents.

Therefore, school authorities deemed organisations with political aims unsuitable for student participation. According to the 1929 Secondary School Regulation, the status of a student was considered incompatible with that of a political activist, especially within organisations not under state control.³¹ The provision primarily aimed at curbing the influence of the autochthonous fascist Legionary Movement, which attracted a significant portion of Christian youth. However, Zionist organisations were also perceived as potentially leading to political radicalisation, communism, and disloyalty to the country. It is important to note that the communist movement was illegal, as the Communist Party of Romania had been banned by law since 1924.³²

The Secondary School Regulation of 1929 was reinforced in 1934 with the establishment of the paramilitary state youth organisation *Straja Țării* (the Sentinel of the Motherland), which claimed a monopoly over all youth in Romania, regardless of ethnicity, in an attempt to counter anti-establishment movements. Like other contemporary youth organisations, *Straja Țării* aimed to restore social conformity by channelling youth energy through leisure activities.³³ By 1938, when King Carol II instituted his authoritarian regime, *Straja Țării* gained autonomy. Officially, all other youth organisations were disbanded, including the Zionist youth organisations.³⁴

The authoritarian regime of the king, commonly referred to as the royal dictatorship that lasted from February 1938 to September 1940, was preceded by a short-term antisemitic government led by O. Goga and A.C. Cuza. From December 1937 to February 1938, that government introduced the first anti-Jewish legislation on the revision of citizenship.³⁵ These measures served as the prelude to subsequent far-right antisemitic regimes, but also acted as a catalyst for an identity “awakening” among many Jewish youngsters, especially those from more integrated families. They began to recognise their Jewish identity as it progressively transformed into victimhood. Personal accounts reveal this transformation and the mechanisms of political engagement during this tumultuous period.

For instance, in his oral testimony, Yosef F. reflects on the consequences of the rise of far-right regimes on his political choices, while he was a high school student in Iași, Moldova. He points out that, during adolescence, daily interactions between Jews and non-Jews were never problematic, but this abruptly changed in 1937. Though some of his colleagues were involved in the Hashomer Hatzair organisation and were preparing for emigration, he did not join any movement, but he considered socialism as an ideological option.³⁶

31 Article 247 of *Regulamentul de funcționare a școlilor secundare* (Bucharest: Imprimeriile statului, 1929).

32 From 1924, the authorities violently banned any activities of the communist organisations through the provisions of the so-called Mărzescu Law (Legea nr. 21/1924 pentru persoanele juridice, *Monitorul Oficial*, Part I, no. 27, 6 February 1924).

33 John Springhall, *Youth, Empire and Society: British Youth Movements, 1883–1940* (London: Croom Helm, 1977), 18.

34 Lege pentru organizarea și funcționarea Străzii Țării, *Monitorul Oficial*, Part I, 15 December 1938.

35 On this topic, see Philippe Henri Blasen, *La “primauté de la nation roumaine” et les “étrangers”: Les minorités et leur liberté du travail sous le cabinet Goga et la dictature royale (décembre 1937–septembre 1940)* (Cluj-Napoca: Casa Cărții de Știință, 2022), 36–64.

36 Yosef F., HVT 3875, Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies, created at 5 December 1996.

Other colleagues, such as Rudi Zimand, joined Hashomer Hatzair once the initial racial decrees were enforced in the summer of 1940. His experience is revealed in a written testimony:

I accepted with enthusiasm, because I saw in emigration and the founding of Jewish settlements in Palestine the only possibility of salvation.

After the war,

I considered the communist solution, which proclaims freedom and equality for all members of society, superior to the Zionist solution, which benefits only the Jewish people.³⁷

For Rudi, the Zionist experience served as a journey towards rediscovering the essence of his ethnic identity. Before August 1940, he was even a proud member of Straja Țării. However, in his case, the socialist ideology promoted in Hashomer Hatzair facilitated his eventual transition to communism.

The pendulous relationship between left-wing Zionism and communism, along with communism itself as a political choice, was also encountered by other Jewish youngsters who believed that the solution for a harmonious society should extend beyond ethnic boundaries, and who advocated the proletarian revolution. However, before delving into left-wing radicalism, it is essential to highlight other options outside of Zionism.

Alternative Political Options

At the dawn of the twentieth century, two main Jewish political movements emerged in opposition to each other: Bundism and Zionism. Bundism found strong support in Poland, Russia, Lithuania, as well as in Bukovina and Bessarabia, two regions that came under Romanian control after the Great War. The Fortunoff Video Archive contains only twelve testimonies that mention the connection to or the affiliation with the Bund movement, none of which are from Romania. The socialist movement remained relatively marginal in an agrarian country like Romania that, at the time, had a small proletarian class which faced violent repression by the state during the workers' strike in 1920. The main adherents of the Bund movement were Jewish workers promoting a form of cultural autonomy centred on the Yiddish language. They rejected not only Zionism but also the option of assimilation.³⁸ The Jewish Workers' Movement (Bund) in Bukovina and the Socialist-Democratic Party³⁹ emerged from the socialist international movement with a diverse, multiethnic membership in this former Austro-Hungarian region. After the Great War, the Bund reorganised itself within the Romanian borders in 1922, establishing its own daily newspaper published in Yiddish – *Dos Naye Leben* (The New Life), a named that changed several times due to harassment by the local *Siguranța*, the secret police.⁴⁰ According to one of the former Bukovinan leaders of the Bund, although the move-

37 Rudi Zimand, "Cum am străbătut patru regimuri social-politice", *Baabel*, 17 January 2019, <https://baabel.ro/2019/01/cum-am-strabatut-patru-regimuri-social-politice/>.

38 Zvi Gitelman, "A Century of Jewish Politics in Eastern Europe", in *The Emergence of Modern Jewish Politics: Bundism and Zionism in Eastern Europe*, ed. Zvi Gitelman (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2003), 4.

39 In 1927, the formation of the Socialist-Democratic Party in Romania resulted in the incorporation of the Bukovina party into the central political entity. However, despite this integration, the Bukovina party maintained only a marginal position within the political landscape throughout the interwar period.

40 Joseph Kissman, "The History of the Jewish Worker Movement Bund in Bukovina", trans. Jerome Silverbush, JewishGen, accessed 9 April 2024, https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/bukowinabook/buk1_129.html.

ment resisted radical infiltrations and chose not to align with the Comintern, many young relatives of Socialist-Democratic Party members were recruited by the communists.⁴¹ Youth and education constituted major themes in the Bund's programme, manifested through its cultural organisation *Morgenrot* (Morning Red), which coordinated vocational schools with Yiddish as the language of instruction.

Morgenrot was chaired by Wilhelm Ippen, a member of the Socialist-Democratic Party who seemed to have been investigated, though not convicted, for disseminating revolutionary propaganda in the 1920s.⁴² As research so far has shown, Wilhelm encouraged his daughter to become involved in politics. A school report from 1930 details the case of Hella Ippen, a high school student in Bukovina who was a member of the Socialist-Democratic Party, alongside her father. According to investigations by school authorities and the police, she paid membership fees, attended political meetings in Cernăuți, at the Workers' House, and participated in the socialist congress in Vienna in 1929. As a result of these activities, she was expelled from school and arrested, accused of having compromising connections with the communists. School authorities exhibited an overt disdain for Hella's political involvement:

The police description of the student and her association with what they deemed to be disguised communists no longer requires proof, as both she and her father admitted to her membership in a political organisation. They acknowledged her attendance at meetings and a political congress alongside other youths, thus posing a genuine threat to school discipline and the educational objectives set for other female students.⁴³

The fate of this family took an even more tragic turn, as its members were deported to Siberia during the Soviet occupation of Bukovina in 1940.⁴⁴

The involvement of some Jewish adolescents in left-wing political parties or movements led the authorities to label any form of Jewish activism as "communist". According to Jaff Schatz's case study on communist Jews in Poland, several factors drove certain Jews to radical movements: it was not only about psychological aspects or social and economic shortcomings, but also a "shared social predicament and cultural heritage" that shaped the political identity of the communist Jews, as well of their Zionist peers.⁴⁵ Schatz draws on some of the common traits shared by Jewish Messianism and Marxism that could explain the preference of some Jews for the communist option. Both ideologies embraced a teleological perception of history, whereby the final state was one of harmony and emancipation. They both advocated for an activist approach by the individual, while emphasising collectivism over individualism. Additionally, both stressed the importance of moral standing and the pursuit of justice.⁴⁶

Beyond intellectual interpretations, the testimonies of Holocaust survivors provide new insights, with a broader and more comprehensive understanding of context and political choices, into identities and trajectories concerning radicalisation. For instance, the Fortunoff Video Archive contains the testimony of Avraham H., a Jew from Suceava deported to Transnistria in 1941. In his adolescence, he felt a connection with the communist movement, which he considered the proper vehicle for

41 Kissman, "The History of the Jewish Worker Movement".

42 Ibid.

43 Arhivele Naționale Istorice Centrale (Central National Historical Archives, ANIC), Ministry of Education, file 360/1930, 189.

44 Kissman, "The History of the Jewish Worker Movement".

45 Jaff Schatz, *The Generation: The Rise and Fall of the Jewish Communists of Poland* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 21.

46 Ibid., 49–50.

combatting not only antisemitism, but also social injustice. He explains that ideas about justice were abstractly depicted from the Torah. However, it was witnessing the daily struggles of impoverished farmers compared to affluent people that stirred his outrage.⁴⁷

With the rise of antisemitism in the late 1930s, young Avraham began to question both the options Jews had for defying persecution and the significance of religious faith. He admits that his disillusionment with God led him to outwardly adhere to religious commandments for the sake of his family, while internally abandoning his belief in God. Simultaneously, his peers became increasingly politically aware in response to the looming danger. Despite his siblings' involvement in various Zionist organisations, Avraham did not entertain the idea of Zionism. His reservations stemmed from both ideological differences and the practical difficulties of obtaining emigration certificates – a possibility for those with training and resources. Another option seemed much more viable: the communist underground, even if the members – most of them Jewish, according to Avraham – were frequently arrested.⁴⁸ Becoming a communist did not make things easier, as communism was illegal in Romania and activists, regardless of their ethnicity, were perceived as threats to national unity. Communist propaganda among the youth was disseminated through individual supporters or various organisational channels, such as the Union of Communist Youth established in the early 1920s under the supervision of the Comintern. Although the movement operated intermittently underground, its influence was marginal until the post-World War Two period when it gained prominence. With only a few hundred members, it primarily engaged in subversive propaganda and organised illegal strikes.⁴⁹ In any case, a communist young Jew was manifested as a teenager rebelling against his parents' generation, the state authorities, and, as Avraham's introspection reveals, against Jewish tradition and religion.⁵⁰

As Romania joined the war against the Soviet Union, the escalation of the persecution of the Jews drove many young Jewish individuals towards radicalisation within the communist movement. Their primary objective was to disseminate anti-war propaganda and recruit fellow peers into their cause. Left-wing Zionist movements appeared to provide fertile ground for such recruitment efforts. Menahem Fermo, a young Jew who was a member of Hashomer Hatzair in Bucharest in 1940, reflected on this phenomenon in his written memoirs. He remarked on the propensity of individuals, across the various locations worldwide where both communist parties and Hashomer Hatzair existed, to embrace communism, or be persuaded to do so.⁵¹

Based on the tragic experiences Menahem endured as a member of the Zionist left-wing movement during the Holocaust, his statement reflects the harrowing reality faced by his Hashomer Hatzair group. In a tragic case now known as the Cultura high school youngsters' affair, his group underwent a penal investigation, followed by a trial and conviction by a court martial in 1942. Throughout the war, Hashomer Hatzair's *ken* (headquarters) was located in Bucharest, within three cold rooms of a larger building serving as a shelter for all Zionist youth organisations. Carol Buium, a Jewish youth from Bacău, served as the chief of the *ken*. He gathered small groups

47 Avraham H., HVT 3305, Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies, created at 15 October 1991.

48 Ibid.

49 See Adrian Cioflăncă, "Preliminaries for the History of the Romanian Communist Youth Union", *Studia Universitatis Babeş-Bolyai – Historia*, no. 1–2 (2007): 75–105.

50 Schatz, *The Generation*, 53.

51 Menahem Fermo, *Scrisorile pe care nu le-am scris* (Bucharest: Hasefer, 2007), 141.

of young members and imparted Zionist teachings to them, as he recalls in his memoirs:

[...] we gathered around the table, about four or five of us, each with a glass of water and a notebook in front of us. A few biscuits were scattered on the table. Everything seemed like a meeting of classmates preparing lessons together. I played the role of the trainer.⁵²

Regular activities included lessons in Jewish history and Hebrew language, and lectures on Zionist doctrine and Marxist theories of class struggle: “we are Zionists because we are socialists”, Menahem reminisces.⁵³ These activities, which hinted at a form of spiritual resistance, took on a dangerous hue in 1942 as the Antonescu regime revealed its intentions to dismantle institutional organisations within Jewish communities, replacing them with state-controlled structures. Despite lacking approval from adult Zionist leaders, the training groups led by Carol persisted in meeting.

Hashomer Hatzair emerged as one of the most frequent options for Jewish youth during times of peril, as recalled by its members. Most of the youngsters, both boys and girls, originated from middle-class assimilated families across the country, particularly from Moldova, and had completed at least secondary education. Although their parents typically disapproved of their involvement in Zionist activities, these youths felt a revolutionary impulse to take action, fuelled by their youthful energy. However, their lack of maturity hindered them from translating this energy into concrete actions. Alexandru Elias, another teenager who in 1942 joined Hashomer Hatzair at the age of sixteen, recalled this sentiment:

For several months, I was a member of the Zionist organisation Hashomer Hatzair. At the time, we viewed it as our beacon of hope for addressing the issues of persecution and antisemitism. In this charged atmosphere, some of us entertained discussions about organising self-defence units. Though we were naive and lacking in experience, we were fuelled by our ideals. In reality, we didn't undertake any concrete actions, but contemplating self-defence felt natural to some of us. We were seventeen years old, some were twelve or fourteen, fifteen years old; we were rebellious by nature; the older ones among us felt a pressing need to protest and take action. We harboured a profound sense of wounded dignity, revolt against injustice, and concern for potential dangers. [...] Eventually, we collectively chose the path leading back to Palestine, our ancestral homeland, as the modern state of Israel had not yet come into existence. This decision represented our form of struggle, our resolve.⁵⁴

This passive stance underwent an abrupt transformation overnight in the spring of 1942, catalysed by an incident that embroiled these young boys and girls in an act of sabotage. Three recently recruited members of Hashomer Hatzair, who were also classmates at the Cultura Jewish high school, seemed to have been activists in the underground communist movement. As part of their propaganda efforts, they were tasked with distributing banknotes inscribed with anti-regime slogans on the streets of Bucharest.⁵⁵ However, when apprehended by the police, the material evi-

52 Carol Buium, *Un sionist în vremea lui Antonescu și după aceea* (Bucharest: Hasefer, 1999), 56.

53 Fermo, *Scrisorile*, 49.

54 Alexandru Elias, “Curajul elevilor evrei de la Liceele Cultura – București 1942”, *Institutul Național pentru Studiarea Holocaustului din România “Elie Wiesel”*, accessed 9 April 2024, <https://www.inshr-ew.ro/alexandru-elias-curajul-elevilor-evrei-de-la-liceele-cultura-bucuresti-1942/>.

55 Between 1942 and 1944, various communist groups and organisations affiliated with the Anti-Hitler Patriotic Front disseminated propaganda materials opposing the war. In this context, banknotes were issued with signatures from the Patriotic Youth Front, according to “Referat al Serviciului Poliției de Siguranță către Cur-

dence and subsequent interrogations implicated numerous other Zionist youths, even those uninvolved in any communist activities. In the ensuing days, many were arrested, although Carol and two others managed to evade capture by hiding for two years.⁵⁶

Under the pressure exerted by the Gestapo, who sought to exploit this incident as a prominent example of punishment for subversive communist activities, the Romanian authorities responded swiftly, albeit with superficial and violent measures. Carol Buium was charged in absentia as the leader of the group and labelled a “communist activist”. Furthermore, the entire Hashomer Hatzair organisation was unjustly branded as a “communist entity”.⁵⁷ As Menahem concludes, “Zionism equals communism has settled comfortably into the Romanian version of Nazi ideology.”⁵⁸ He was also imprisoned for a week in the basement of the secret police, beaten and interrogated with specific torture methods, and then transferred to Malmaison, the transit prison of the military court.⁵⁹ However, Menahem was one of the Zionists who were not prosecuted: he was released from prison shortly before the trial commenced.⁶⁰

The file compiled by the secret police and presented to the court martial accused twenty youngsters of organising and attending conspiracy meetings, as well as collecting or contributing money to the Red Aid and producing/distributing communist propaganda materials. Disturbingly, no differentiation was made between Zionists and communists, or between those actively involved and those who were not. The trial commenced on 20 April 1942 and stretched into the early morning hours. The verdict delivered shocked the audience: three of the young defendants – Zalman Leon, Moscovici Iancu, and Elias Corneliu – were sentenced to death and subsequently executed on 10 June 1942 at Jilava. Another three were sentenced to death in absentia, while the remaining defendants received lengthy prison terms ranging from twenty to twenty-five years.⁶¹

Though acting without the consent of the adult Zionist Organisation, the leaders (including M. Benvenisti) and the school principals testified in favour of the convicted, asking for clemency.⁶² However, clemency was not granted until after the conclusion of the war. This case was marked by confusion and a stark disjunction between the acts committed and the severity of the punishment. Nevertheless, in the ensuing years, the Zionist youth engaged in more complex and organised activities that were deemed subversive.

tea Marțială”, 21 March 1942, in ANIC, fond Procesele comuniștilor și organizațiilor revoluționare din România, 1917–1944, file Organizația comunistă de la liceul evreiesc Cultura, roll 1564.

56 Fermo, *Scrisorile*, 95; Buium, *Un sionist*, 63, 67.

57 Prefectura Poliției Capitalei, Serviciul Poliției de Siguranță, Proces-verbal 14 March 1942, in ANIC, fond Dosare Personale ale luptătorilor antifasciști întocmite de MI 1917–1944, roll 1168, frames 608–612.

58 Fermo, *Scrisorile*, 97.

59 *Ibid.*, 111.

60 Some young Zionists from Dror, Gordonia, and Hashomer Hatzair (which were not involved in the investigation) were still supervised by the police and deported to Transnistria in the autumn of 1942. Some of them returned in 1944, while others perished. In Fermo, *Scrisorile*, 142.

61 Verdict no. 1097, 21 April 1942, in ANIC, fond Procesele comuniștilor și organizațiilor revoluționare din România. 1917–1944, file Organizația comunistă de la liceul evreiesc Cultura, roll 1564.

62 Mișu Benvenisti, “Sionismul în vremea prigoanei”, *Viața evreiască* no. 7–10 (1944): 28. Fermo recalls that, initially, the adult Zionist leaders showed reluctance to become involved in the matter at all. In Fermo, *Scrisorile*, 238.

Zionist Youth Organisations during the Holocaust

I was involved in a Jewish underground organization. I used to supply them with information such as where the Germans are located in different part of the town. Because I was a small child, it was easy for me to travel without being detected. I just took orders. At one time I was asked to deliver a message written on a piece of paper to a post office. When I was a child I did not look like Jewish. I looked like a normal Romanian boy.⁶³

This testimony comes from Meir, a thirteen-year-old Jewish orphan who briefly collaborated with the Zionist underground during the summer of 1944. Although Meir did not provide specific details about the network he was assisting, it is possible that he was involved with the Zionist youth underground. Additionally, adult members of the illegal Zionist Organisation conducted parallel rescue operations through initiatives such as the Aid and Rescue Commission or the Relief Works Initiative Committee,⁶⁴ operating under the *Centrala* (Jewish Central Office), the official representative institution of Romanian Jews since 1942.⁶⁵

As illustrated in the preceding section, the political activism and resistance within Hashomer Hatzair in 1942 emerged from a blend of youthful hope and energy, intertwined with nascent communist sabotage actions. Despite the shock and peril experienced by many young Jews as a result of this event, underground activism did not diminish. On the contrary, as I will outline briefly in the subsequent pages, various other Zionist movements embarked on clandestine missions aimed at rescuing Jews.

Zionist underground movements and youth resistance do not emerge as prominent themes within the testimonies of the Fortunoff Video Archive. Most survivors, including those from Romania, were victims of deportations to camps and ghettos, unable to resist persecution but fortunate enough to survive and rebuild their lives after the Holocaust. However, a few life stories do intersect with this narrative. During the Holocaust in Romania, Zionist youth organisations experienced two distinct periods. The first began in the summer of 1940 and lasted for two years. In August 1940, as the Nazi army advanced in Europe and the balance of power shifted, Romania underwent a transition to a totalitarian state under the dictatorial regime of King Carol II. This transformation ushered in elaborate antisemitic legislation that marginalised Jews from society.⁶⁶

During this period, Jewish youngsters faced expulsion from public schools and from the state youth organisation *Straja Tarii*. Yosef F. provides an account of his time in the paramilitary organisation, when he and his non-Jewish colleagues engaged in various community service activities. However, following the events of 1940, Jews were no longer permitted to participate in the organisation, and their uniforms were confiscated.⁶⁷

63 Meir R., HVT 2570, Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies, created at 19 May 1993.

64 Arhivele Consiliului Național pentru Studierea Arhivelor Securității [National Council for the Study of the Securitate Archives] (ACNSAS), Fond Penal, file 011123, vol. 4, 14 (Serviciul de Informații și Cercetări al Siguranței, Report on 3 March 1944).

65 The *Centrala* comprised the official representatives of the Jewish population, imposed by the Romanian authorities and established through Law no. 1090 on 16 December 1941, which abolished the former Federation of the Union of Jewish Communities in Romania. With the implementation of the *Centrala*, the intentions of the Romanian authorities to dismantle the activities of Zionist organisations and *halutzim* (pioneers) movements became evident.

66 Decret-lege no. 2650, 8 August 1940, Privitor la starea juridică a locuitorilor evrei din România, *Monitorul Oficial*, Part I, 9 August 1940.

67 Yosef F., HVT 3875.

Despite the antisemitic trajectory, the territorial losses suffered in the summer of 1940 led to the abdication of the king. His regime was succeeded by the National Legionary State for a brief period from September 1940 to January 1941. However, this period came to an end following the Legionary Rebellion and the pogrom in Bucharest that occurred in January 1941.⁶⁸ Among the victims of this violence were Zionist youngsters like Chaim, the seventeen-year-old Jew from Vatra Dornei and a member of Hanoar Hatzioni. In his testimony, he recounts the sequence of events, which included his forced relocation to Bucharest after Zionists were expelled from training farms in Bukovina.⁶⁹ Unfortunately, Bucharest did not prove to be a safer haven in the winter of 1941. The Legionaries organised violent attacks against Jewish neighbourhoods, brutally assaulting hundreds of victims in the Legionary police cellars. Members of the Hanoar Hatzioni group, including Chaim, were among those targeted in these assaults.

The legionary rebellion was defeated by Ion Antonescu, who installed a military dictatorship (1941–1944) and became the chief architect of the Holocaust in Romania.⁷⁰ The situation for Jews deteriorated progressively, exacerbated by the deportations of communities from Bessarabia, Bukovina, and northern Moldova to Transnistria in the autumn of 1941.⁷¹ In January 1942, the Jewish Federation was replaced by the Centrala. The second distinct period for Zionist organisations commenced in the spring of 1942 and persisted until the end of the war. In the summer of 1942, on 7 August, the Zionist Organisation, led by lawyer Mișu Benvenisti, was disbanded along with all its youth associations.⁷² With all Zionist activities deemed illegal, this period can truly be considered as the “underground years”. Both the adult Zionist underground and the youth organisations engaged in subversive parallel actions during this time.

One complex mission that became the subject of a trial at the court martial in 1944 was carried out by members of the Gordonia and Dror youth organisations, operating from Bucharest. Their primary activities were revealed through intercepted correspondence that was handed over to the Romanian authorities by the Gestapo. The archival files of the secret police reveal that, throughout 1943, the young leaders of these youth organisations transmitted information from the territory and made requests to Jewish delegates from Geneva and Istanbul. Financed by Jewish communities from Palestine and the Western free world, individuals such as David Tennenbaum, Tabacinic Gherș Sunea, Scarlat Iancu, and their colleagues coordinated rescue missions for groups of deportees from Transnistria who entered Romania with forged papers. They also facilitated the emigration of Jewish refugees from Poland.⁷³

68 For the history of the National Legionary State, see the chapter on this topic in Dennis Deletant, *Romania, 1916–1941: A Political History* (London: Routledge, 2022), 102–119. See also the recent and comprehensive work on Romanian fascism by Constantin Iordachi, *The Fascist Faith of the Legion “Archangel Michael” in Romania, 1927–1941: Martyrdom and National Purification* (London: Routledge, 2023).

69 Chaim H., HVT 3375.

70 For a broad view on the Antonescu regime, see Dennis Deletant, *Hitler’s Forgotten Ally: Ion Antonescu and His Regime. Romania, 1940–44* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

71 On the deportation of Jewish communities to Transnistria and the Romanian administration of this territory, see Vladimir Solonari, *A Satellite Empire: Romanian Rule in Southwestern Ukraine, 1941–1944* (Ithaca, NY, and London: Cornell University Press, 2019), 97–123.

72 Order of Centrala no. 9532, 7 August 1942. The activity of the adult Zionist Organisation from 1941 to 1944 was led by Mișu Benvenisti. In his report on the wartime period, he barely mentions the youth organisations, stating that he reactivated Brith Hanoar including all Halutian groups and restored harmonious relations between groups. There is no special mention of the Hashomer Hatzair case. In Benvenisti, *Sionismul*.

73 The intercepted correspondence and other relevant documents of the investigation are available in the ACNSAS, Fond Penal 0011123/8 vols.

Gordonia and Dror operated not only with financial backing from Jewish delegates but also through collaboration with border smugglers, couriers, bribed officials, and Zionist underground networks abroad. A significant chapter in the history of Eastern European underground movements belongs to the young Zionists in Hungary who orchestrated the Tiyul (meaning “trip”) Operation – a large-scale effort to smuggle Jews across the Hungarian border into Romania and, from there, across the Black Sea to Palestine.⁷⁴ This operation gained momentum particularly after March 1944, with tacit approval from the Romanian authorities, which facilitated the emigration of refugees without direct involvement.⁷⁵ David Gur, a former member of Hashomer Hatzair, documented the Tiyul Operation, detailing the rescue process: illegal migrants were equipped with forged documents, funds, and instructions before boarding trains to border towns, where they connected with local smugglers to cross the border. According to Gur, approximately 15,000 Jews successfully crossed the border, with most reaching Palestine. However, the operation was halted after 23 August 1944, following the regime change in Romania.⁷⁶ Individual accounts provide vivid descriptions of Zionist youth members’ activities at the Romanian border. While some missions were successful, others ended tragically, such as in the case of Alpar Yehuda, a Hashomer Hatzair member, who attempted to establish a new Tiyul Operation route in South Transylvania but was captured by police and sent to Hungarian ghettos.⁷⁷ Similarly, Aranyi Asher, a Dror member, engaged in complex activities, including weapons training, the evasion of forced labour, the procurement of forged documents, and the smuggling of Jews into Romania, often by personally going to the border. He was eventually arrested by the Gestapo in Oradea.⁷⁸

The Fortunoff Video Archive also reveals testimonies of survivors in neighbouring countries who were in contact with Romanian Zionist youth or actively collaborated on border-crossing matters. These interactions predominantly occurred during 1943 and 1944, a period in which Romanian actions against Jews began to ease due to shifting war dynamics. Antonescu suspended deportations to Transnistria and allowed certain categories of individuals to return. Simultaneously, the stance towards Jewish refugees from Poland, Hungary, and other countries became more lenient, despite Antonescu’s initial directive to kill any foreign Jew crossing the border without legal documentation.⁷⁹ Two examples from the Fortunoff Video Archive

74 Beginning in 1942, parallel operations were initiated, and they were coordinated by separate networks that smuggled refugees from Poland and Slovakia into Hungary. The Jewish Pioneer Underground primarily consisted of young refugees from various Zionist movements who organised themselves upon arrival in Hungary. On some of these networks, and especially the actions organised by Joel Brand, one of the core figures of the Budapest Relief and Rescue Committee, see Daniel Brand, *Trapped by Evil and Deceit: The Story of Hansi and Joel Brand* (Brookline, MA: Cherry Orchard Books, an imprint of Academic Studies Press, 2020).

75 On the conditions of emigration and the duplicatory attitude of the Romania authorities, see Adina Babeş, “Romanian Jewish Emigration in the 1940s”, *Holocaust: Studii și cercetări* 5 (2013), 32–42.

76 David Gur, *Brothers for Resistance and Rescue: The Underground Zionist Youth Movement in Hungary during World War II*, ed. Eli Netzer, trans. Pamela Segev and Avri Fischer (Jerusalem: Gefen Publishing House, 2007), 14.

77 *Ibid.*, 38.

78 *Ibid.*, 41.

79 Decret-lege no. 1069, *Monitorul Oficial*, Part I, 29 May 1944. It supplements the measures leading to the death penalty (such as various robberies and the unauthorised wearing of a uniform) with fraudulent border crossings by Jews from other countries. The decree was enacted in response to the growing number of Jews attempting to cross the border into Romania who, according to the minister of justice, posed a potential threat to state security. However, the article was not enforced following the intervention of Charles Kolb, a delegate of the International Committee of the Red Cross in Romania, who appealed to Prime Minister Mihai Antonescu. Antonescu agreed to refrain from taking action in exchange for Kolb’s assistance in facilitating the emigration of refugees to Palestine. See the activity report of Charles Kolb, ICRC (International Committee of the Red Cross) delegate in Romania, Zurich, 5 April 1946, in Andrei Șiperco, ed., *Acțiunea internațională de ajutorare a evreilor din România: Documente 1943–1945* (Bucharest: Hasefer, 2003), 368.

illuminate common practices and strategies of illegal border crossing, the dynamics between young Zionist refugees and the Romanian authorities, and the support extended by local Zionist youth underground networks.

Dan Z., a high school graduate and member of Hashomer Hatzair from Slovakia, balanced training for aliyah with compulsory work during the war. In 1942, he and his wife successfully crossed the border from Slovakia to Hungary with the aid of the movement and with practical guidance from smugglers. He spent two years under the Horthy regime, forging stamps and documents, until the Nazi army entered Hungary. In 1944, his wife managed to depart for Palestine on a boat with an emigration certificate, while Dan attempted to join her later. Crossing the Romanian border in Arad using the fake documents of a deaf mute, he was apprehended by border authorities. Despite their awareness of his Jewish identity, Dan underwent brief interrogations before being released in Arad, where the Jewish community provided support. During his two-month stay, he collaborated with the local Zionist movement, endeavouring to establish contacts with smugglers back in Hungary. Dan acknowledges receiving aid from members of various Zionist groups who “collaborated” with authorities through bribery, a common tactic of Jewish victims during their persecution. He facilitated his movements by slipping banknotes to police agents when questioned about his identification papers. After reaching Bucharest and staying in an apartment with friends from Hungary, Dan awaited passage on a boat from Constanța. In August 1944, he finally made aliyah aboard the Bulbul boat.⁸⁰

Ezra, originally from Germany, managed to reach Romania through stops in Vienna and Budapest in 1944, using forged German documents. He accessed Romania via an entry point in the Arad area. Prior to embarking on this journey, he had prepared himself by learning basic Romanian phrases from a friend, including numbers, directions, and colloquial expressions, anticipating potential interactions with authorities. Upon arriving in Arad, Ezra was warmly welcomed by members of the Jewish and Polish resistance movements before continuing his journey to Bucharest by train. However, en route, their group was apprehended by the police and detained in a closed camp – a sanatorium near Târgu Jiu – where they were provided with shelter and food. Their release came following the removal of Antonescu from power in August 1944. Ezra subsequently travelled to Bucharest and eventually reached the port of Constanța.⁸¹

Another significant aspect that warrants attention is the assistance rendered by young Zionists to local Jewish victims in northern Transylvania, which was annexed by Hungary in August 1940 following the Second Vienna Dictate. One of the limited testimonies on this subject comes from Larry H., a young Zionist Jew born in Czechoslovakia. He fled to Budapest in 1942 and was later assigned to a labour battalion in the Transylvanian town of Baia Mare. According to his testimony, prior to his own deportation to Auschwitz, he aided the local Jews by clandestinely smuggling bread into the ghetto of the town.⁸²

80 Dan Z., HVT 3547, Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies, created at 21 May 1993.

81 Ezra B., HVT 3310, Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies, created at 31 October 1991.

82 Larry H., HVT 341, Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies, created at 13 August 1984.

Conclusions

The testimonies within the Fortunoff Video Archive not only provide an in-depth understanding of the motivations and importance of youth political mobilisation, but also unveil a broad typology of political commitment. Zionist youth organisations began to proliferate in the 1930s within the context of a highly politicised Romanian society and a wider trend of youth mobilisation across Europe. In this atmosphere, Zionism emerged as the primary political choice for young Jews who actively opposed antisemitism. Through oral testimonies preserved in the Fortunoff Video Archive, as well as through other sources, it becomes evident that Zionist movements held various meanings for Jewish adolescents: serving as a familiar peer-group environment; providing a refuge from antisemitic surroundings; offering a platform for rebellion against authorities and older Jewish generations; and functioning as a means of political engagement with the explicit goal of emigration. An analysis of the geographical origins of members indicates that although Zionist movements were active throughout the country, regions that became part of Romania after 1918 exhibited a higher presence of these movements. This can be interpreted as a specific mechanism of resistance to cultural Romanianisation and assimilation. The regional dimension undoubtedly requires further research.

The outside perspective on the Zionist organisations indicates an unstable and tense relationship with the authorities, whose attitude varied between acceptance, tolerance, and prohibition. There was a prevailing perception among the authorities that any Jewish political involvement was inherently communist and subversive. Testimonies play a significant role in elucidating why some young Jews opted for communism, often catalysed by initial experiences within Zionist organisations. While testimonies are inevitably shaped by present subjective perspectives on the past, personal accounts generally indicate that the choice for radicalisation stemmed from particular perceptions of Jewish identity, religious faith, and the trajectory of society. Regardless, both Zionism and communism emerged as primary responses among a politically engaged youth within a society characterised by extremes.

Finally, engagement in political movements led to a distinct form of youth resistance during the Holocaust, marked also by the interaction between left-wing Zionists and communists. While written documents now provide a wealth of information on this topic, the personal accounts preserved in the Fortunoff Video Archive were crucial in confirming that underground youth networks were active both within Romania and abroad. These networks operated in parallel with adult networks and played a significant role in rescuing Jewish victims through support and collaboration. Scholars of the Holocaust have argued against romanticising the Holocaust testimonies, showing that witnesses should not be perceived as heroes, especially in the case of victims deported to ghettos and death camps, where “terms like ‘heroic’ and ‘dignified’ become orphans in this obscure universe”.⁸³ However, in the case of resistance pioneers who demonstrated the will and determination to save others, even if the outcomes were not always large in numbers, survival can be seen as a testament to their actions – a victory over oppression.

⁸³ Lawrence L. Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991), 27.

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Anca Filipovici is a researcher at the Romanian Institute for Research on National Minorities in Cluj. She was awarded a PhD in history from the Babeş-Bolyai University of Cluj in 2013. She is the author of a monograph and of several articles and studies exploring ethnicity and antisemitism in interwar Romania, with a focus on the history of Jews, the history of youth, and discipline and education in interwar schools. She is the recipient of several fellowships from Romania, Austria, and Germany, and she was recently awarded the C. and N. Weickart Postdoctoral Fellowship at the Fritz Bauer Institute in Frankfurt am Main for the period from 2023 to 2024.

Email: filipovicianca@gmail.com

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