

Providential Rescuers or Collaborationist Traitors? Depictions of Romania's Jewish Center (*Centrala Evreilor*) and Its Leaders in Jewish Diaries, 1942-1944

During the Second World War, Nazi authorities appointed “Jewish Councils” (*Judenräte*) to help with the administration of the non-ghettoized and ghettoized Jewish communities in regions occupied by Germany or in the German sphere of influence. Ghettoization was envisaged as an intermediary (and convenient) stage before the implementation of a “final solution” to the so-called Jewish Question. During and especially after the war, many Jews criticized members of the *Judenräte*, the ghetto police, and prisoner functionaries as Nazi collaborators and traitors. After the defeat of Nazism, some of the surviving “Jewish Council” members were attacked, marginalized, or prosecuted for their wartime conduct in criminal and/or honor courts.¹ Busy with the work of reconstruction, postwar societies across Europe and Israel celebrated the heroic models of human behavior under Nazi rule embodied by partisans, ghetto fighters, and other armed resisters. Consequently, little attention was paid to the diversity of the aims and positions of Jewish functionaries during the controversial cooperation-collaboration of “Jewish Councils” with German occupation authorities.

Only from the 1970s on has a more complex understanding of the difficult position and dilemmas faced by the “Jewish Councils” and the agency they displayed developed among historians, survivors, and Israeli and European societies. Books by scholars like Isaiah Trunk, Yehuda

1 On Jewish postwar honor courts, see Laura Jockusch and Gabriel N. Finder, eds., *Jewish Honor Courts: Revenge, Retribution and Reconciliation in Europe and Israel After the Holocaust* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2015).

Bauer, and Primo Levi have played a major role in changing perceptions of the “Jewish Councils.”² These authors showed that in light of the Nazis’ murderous policies and the desperate situation of Jewish communities, Jewish leaders’ options were extremely limited, and in general, each “Jewish Council” behaved quite differently. In spite of the extreme conditions confronting Jews in occupied Europe, many “Jewish Councils” tried to save their communities—often through the “rescue through work” strategy—and provided food, healthcare, education, and other social services to their co-religionists. Additionally, they sometimes supported underground militia groups as they prepared for armed revolts.³

The concept of resistance itself changed from an initial narrow emphasis on armed resistance to a broader resistance informed by the Hebrew term *Amidah* (“standing up against”), which encompassed forms of non-military resistance such as rescue, food smuggling, intra-communitarian help, education, religion, and spiritual resistance.⁴ While the past decades have witnessed a boom in scholarship examining the ghettos and “Jewish Councils” in those parts of Europe that were in the Nazi sphere of influence, there are still many gaps in the scholarship on the “Jewish Councils,” especially for countries like Romania, the country that was second only to Germany in the amount of the Jews murdered by state authorities and their paramilitary collaborators.

As a result of the pressure applied by Nazi authorities and the staff of the German Legation in Bucharest—especially the SS expert in Jewish affairs Gustav Richter—and inspired by both Germany’s model and local antisemitism, the pro-Nazi, antisemitic, and genocidal regime of Marshall Ion Antonescu that governed Romania between September 1940 and August 1944 abolished the traditional umbrella organization of the local Jews, the Federation of the Union of Jewish Communities of Romania (FUCER) in December 1941. FUCER was replaced with the equivalent of a collaborationist and centralized organization called the *Centrala Evreilor din România* (hereafter, the Jewish Center). Resembling a Nazi-

2 Isaiah Trunk, *Judenrat: The Jewish Councils in Eastern Europe under Nazi Occupation* (London: Macmillan 1972); Yehuda Bauer, *They Chose Life: Jewish Resistance in the Holocaust* (New York: The American Jewish Committee, 1973); Yehuda Bauer, *Rethinking the Holocaust* (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 2001); Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988).

3 Bauer, *Rethinking the Holocaust*, 119–42.

4 See, for instance: Trunk, *Judenrat*; Bauer, *They Chose Life*; Bauer, *Rethinking the Holocaust*; Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*; Robert Rozett, “Jewish Resistance,” in *The Historiography of the Holocaust*, ed. Dan Stone (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 345–47; Dan Michman, *Holocaust Historiography: A Jewish Perspective* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2003), 217–48.

style *Judenrat* and similar organs established in France and Slovakia, the Jewish Center was placed under the supervision of Radu Lecca, the (gentile) Government Appointee for Resolving the Jewish Question (the title changed in 1943 to Commissar for Jewish Affairs). Local Jewish and gentile elites saw Lecca as a German spy and an antisemite.⁵ The new organization commenced its activities in February 1942 and was dismantled in October 1944, several months after the demise of Antonescu.⁶ During its approximately two and a half years of existence, the Jewish Center was in charge of local Jewish affairs, including daily administration, taxation, housing, welfare, healthcare, the “donation” of assets to the state treasury and other agencies and social welfare organizations, and carrying out a census of Jewish inhabitants and their assets. According to the 1942 census, a total of 292,149 Jews lived in Romania, of which 272,573 Jews lived on the core territory of Romania (Wallachia, Moldova, Southern Transylvania, and Banat) and another 19,576 in Bessarabia and Bukovina.⁷

- 5 Radu Lecca was a Romanian boyar educated in Vienna who was convicted as a spy in 1930s France and was close to Nazi circles as a collaborator of Alfred Rosenberg. Lecca wrote economic articles for the *Völkischer Beobachter* and other Nazi newspapers; had close relationships with Nazi diplomats in Bucharest; and acted as a mediator between the German Legation in Bucharest and the Antonescu regime. Lecca wrote his memoir in the 1960s while serving a long prison sentence for his wartime actions. He tried to justify his wartime activity; downplay his involvement with the Antonescu regime; and claimed that he struggled to improve, and ultimately save, the lives of the Jews. While the general framework of his memoirs about his fair, just, honest, and philosemitic behavior is highly problematic, some of the technical details he offered about the Jewish Center are corroborated by official documents and Jewish sources, and for this reason, they represent a useful source. Radu Lecca, *Eu i-am salvat pe evreii din România* (Bucharest: Roza Vânturilor, 1944). On Lecca as a greedy, corrupt, and antisemitic individual who spied for the Germans, see Lya Benjamin, ed. *Evreii din România între anii 1940-1944: Legislația antievreiască* (Bucharest: Hasefer, 1993), XLII; Radu Ioanid, *The Holocaust in Romania: The Destruction of Jews and Gypsies Under the Antonescu Regime, 1940-1944* (Chicago, IL: Ivan R. Dee, 2000), 115, 246-47, 284-86.
- 6 Jean Ancel, *The History of the Holocaust in Romania* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2011), 303, 461; Benjamin, *Evreii din România*, XLII–XLVI; Tuvia Frilling, Radu Ioanid, and Mihail Ionescu, eds., *Final Report: International Commission on the Holocaust in Romania* (Iasi: Polirom, 2004), 212; Hary Kuller, *Evreii în România anilor 1944-1949* (Bucharest: Hasefer, 2002), 93; Corneliu Pintilescu, “The State of Siege and the Holocaust in Romania: An Incursion into the Origins of the Legal Framework for the Operation of the Camps under the Antonescu Regime,” *Holocaust: Studii și Cercetări* 14 (2021): 339-67; Bela Vago, “The Ambiguity of Collaborationism: The Center of the Jews of Romania, 1942-1944,” in *Patterns of Jewish Leadership in Nazi Europe, 1933-1945*, ed. Israel Gutman and Cynthia J. Haft (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1979), 287-309.
- 7 Viorel Achim, “Evreii în cadrul recensământului general al României din 6 Aprilie 1941,” *Caielele Institutului Național pentru Studierea Holocaustului din România “Elie Wiesel,”* no. 2 (2008): 35.

An era of retributive justice followed Romania's decision to abandon the Axis powers and join the Allies on August 23, 1944, which included criminal trials at the People's Tribunal between 1945 and 1946 (an ad hoc court established as a result of the Armistice Agreement to prosecute the Antonescu regime's war crimes), as well as purges, the confiscation of property, and professional sanctions. During this period, the new state authorities, public opinion, and many Jews stigmatized and prosecuted most of the Jewish Center's leaders as collaborators and traitors for their activities during the Antonescu years. The former leadership of the Jewish Center, including Matias Grünberg (alias Willman), Nandor Gingold, and Adolf Grossman-Grozea, received long prison sentences and also had their property confiscated by the People's Tribunal.⁸ After consolidating its power by 1947, the communist regime sentenced other Jews based on flimsy evidence and accusations of Jewish nationalism (Zionism), economic sabotage, and treason as it purged society and the communist party of "unreliable" and "cosmopolitan" elements.⁹

While historians of Romania and the Holocaust—including Bela Vago, Jean Ancel, Lya Benjamin, and Radu Ioanid—have examined some aspects of the Jewish Center's wartime activities and its interactions with the Antonescu regime based on official documents, the topic remains under-explored.¹⁰ For example, very little is known about how Jewish inhabitants regarded the Jewish Center and its activities during the war.

8 Iuliu Crăcană, *Dreptul în Slujba Puterii: Justiția în Regimul Comunist din România 1944-1958* (Bucharest: Institutul Național pentru Studiul Totalitarismului, 2015); Frilling et al., *Final Report*, 316; Vago, "The Ambiguity of Collaborationism," 305-8; on post-Antonescu retributive justice, see: Cosmin Sebastian Cercel, "Judging the Conductor: Fascism, Communism, and Legal Discontinuity in Postwar Romania," in *Law and Memory: Towards Legal Governance of History*, ed. Uładzislau Belavusau and Aleksandra Gliszczyńska-Grabias (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 228-245; Emanuel-Marius Grec, "Romania: Historiography on Holocaust and Postwar Justice Studies," *Eastern European Holocaust Studies* 1, no. 1 (2023): 259-70; Andrei Muraru, "Justiție Politică Românească: Holocaustul și procesele criminalilor de război: Cazul Transnistriei," *Holocaust: Studii și Cercetări* (2018): 89-184.

9 Liviu Rotman, *Evreii din România în perioada comunistă: 1944-1965* (Iasi: Polirom, 2004); Veronica Rozenberg, *Jewish Foreign Trade Officials on Trial: In Gheorghiu-Dej's Romania 1960-1964* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2022); Veronica Rozenberg, *Destinul unui evreu comunist într-o democrație populară* (Oradea: Ratio et Revelatio, 2022).

10 Ancel, *The History of the Holocaust in Romania*; Lya Benjamin, *Prigoană și Resistență în Istoria Evreilor din România, Studii: 1940-1944* (Bucharest: Hasefer, 2001); Benjamin, *Evreii din România*; Ioanid, *The Holocaust in Romania*; Vago, "The Ambiguity of Collaborationism," 287-309.

Addressing this question would reveal Jews' perspectives—based on personal documents produced by Jews—on the local *Judenrat* and its interactions with the Antonescu regime, offering contemporaneous insight into how educated Jews (the only group who wrote diaries in Romania during the Second World War) of different generations and genders perceived the “Jewish Councils.” This approach would go beyond the sources produced by perpetrators as well as “Jewish Councils” official discourses and justifications for their wartime activity in the postwar era, which is the source base most historians have relied on until recently. For this reason, this essay analyzes depictions of the Jewish Center—its activities and its interactions with the Jewish community—in (educated) Jews' diaries written during the Antonescu era in Romania.¹¹

During the last few decades, Holocaust diaries have captured the attention of various scholars who have assessed their usefulness as sources for understanding Jewish individual and communal life during the Second World War, notably their authors' and communities' experiences, as well as their responses to the Nazis' and their collaborators' genocidal policies. Diaries written during the Holocaust are especially valuable for understanding what the experience of living under the constant threat of death meant to their authors. They provide crucial and invaluable evidence of the human dimension of this genocide, which is difficult to discern from other types of primary sources. Properly contextualized and critically analyzed, diaries are important historical sources. Historians such Alexandra Garbarini, Amos Goldberg, David Patterson, and Alexandra Zapruder have emphasized the various uses and importance of Holocaust diaries for their authors and for postwar societies, in addition to scholars who seek to reconstruct Jewish experiences and understand their trauma, their struggles to redefine their identities, and their responses to the Nazi occupation.¹²

11 I have examined eight Jewish diaries written during the Antonescu regime by Maria Banuş, Emil Dorian, Wilhelm Fidlerman, Hilda Kliffer, Petre Solomon, B. Brănişteanu, Miriam Korber-Bercovici, and Mihail Sebastian. They were published after 1990. Only the first five first journals contain references to the Jewish Center.

12 Alexandra Garbarini, *Numbered Days: Diaries and the Holocaust* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006); Amos Goldberg, *Trauma in First Person: Diary Writing in the Holocaust* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017); David Patterson, *Along the Edge of Annihilation: The Collapse and Recovery of Life in the Holocaust Diary* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1999); Alexandra Zapruder, *Salvaged Pages: Young Writers' Diaries of the Holocaust* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002).

*The Antisemitic Policies of the Antonescu Regime
and the Jewish Center*

One of the major preoccupations of the Antonescu regime was how to “solve” the so-called Jewish Question. Ion Antonescu, a high-ranking military officer, came to power in September 1940, when his predecessor, King Carol II—a self-proclaimed dictator since 1938—abdicated in favor of his son Mihai I and transferred executive power to Antonescu, who became the “leader” (*Conducător*) and prime minister of Romania. Antonescu, the new dictator, and his initial governing partners, fascist members of the Legion of the Archangel Michael (hereafter, Legionaries), expanded the antisemitic laws and policies initially adopted by Carol II. This was done by adopting new and more radical anti-Jewish restrictions, carrying out systematic Aryanization (called Romanianization), and perpetrating mass violence (for example, the Legionaries’ attacks on Jewish individuals, their homes, businesses, and communities). The two partners disagreed on the style and pace of antisemitic policies and methods of governance more generally. While both Antonescu and the Legionaries were radical antisemites, the former envisioned a gradual and “legal” persecution of Jews, while the latter pursued a fast, more violent form of persecution. Vying for control of the state, the two groups engaged in a civil war in January 1941 (known as the Legionary Rebellion), which was won by Antonescu, who benefited from the army’s support. After the purge of the Legionaries, Antonescu ruled Romania as a military dictator until August 1944, when he was deposed in a coup organized by King Mihai I, opposition parties, and the military. After the Legionary Rebellion, Antonescu did not abandon antisemitism. On the contrary, when Romania joined the invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, Antonescu further radicalized Romania’s antisemitic policies. The Jews of Bessarabia, Bukovina, and Transnistria (an occupied Soviet territory bordering Romania) were the primary targets of these policies. The Antonescu regime adopted numerous—though inconsistent—antisemitic laws and engaged in mass murder, ghettoization, internment, and deportation, especially in Romania’s Transnistrian “colony,” which caused the deaths of up to 420,000 Jews by August 1944.¹³

13 For example, according to the reports sent by Bucharest-based German diplomats to Berlin, the Romanian racial (antisemitic) laws stipulated twenty-four legal definitions to determine who was Jewish. These contradictory laws created confusion among the local bureaucrats who had to implement them. See Frilling et al., *Final Report*, 181–204; Ștefan Cristian Ionescu, *Jewish Resistance to ‘Romanianization,’ 1940–*

Aiming to “cleanse” the reconquered provinces of Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina of Jews, Romanian state officials engaged in the mass murder of tens of thousands of Jews during the first months of the anti-Soviet war and deported the survivors of these killings into the former Soviet territory of Transnistria, which was administered by the Romanian military. For a while, Transnistria seemed to be a “promising” location for the deportation of Bukovinian, Bessarabian, and other allegedly “disloyal” Jews, and for Romania’s colonization and empire-building efforts. After Antonescu’s hopes to push the Jews deported from Transnistria into the German administered *Reichskommissariat Ukraine* were crushed by German military officials’ refusal to accept more Jews into their occupation zone, Antonescu decided to use Transnistria as a dumping ground for undesirable Jews and Roma while he awaited the results of military operations in the Soviet Union and the potential forced emigration of Jews from Romanian territory.¹⁴

The Antonescu government continued to discuss various solutions to the Jewish Question, including their deportation to occupied territories in the Soviet Union or their emigration to Palestine. According to decree no. 319 adopted on January 30, 1942, which established the Jewish Center, one of its main goals was to prepare for the emigration of Jews from Romania (article 3, paragraph d).¹⁵ Until the clarification of the military

1944 (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 34–65; Goran Miljan and Anders E. B. Blomqvist, “The Unwanted Citizens: The ‘Legality’ of Jewish Destruction in Croatia and Romania during World War II,” *Comparative Legal History* 11, no. 2 (2023): 226–255; on Romania’s participation in the Holocaust, see, for instance Ancel, *The History of the Holocaust in Romania*; Frilling et al., *The Final Report*; Dennis Deletant, *Hitler’s Forgotten Ally: Ion Antonescu and His Regime: Romania, 1940–1944* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); Ioanid, *The Holocaust in Romania*.

14 See, for instance, Deletant, *Hitler’s Forgotten Ally*; Diana Dumitru, *The State, Antisemitism and Collaboration in the Holocaust: The Borderlands of Romania and the Soviet Union* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Grant T. Harward, *Romania’s Holy War: Soldiers, Motivation, and the Holocaust* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2021); Armin Heinen, *România, Holocaustul și logica violenței* (Iași: Editura Universității Alexandru Ioan Cuza, 2011); Michelle Kelso, “Recognizing the Roma: A Study of the Holocaust as Viewed in Romania” (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2010); Ion Popa, *The Romanian Orthodox Church and the Holocaust* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017); Svetlana Suveica, “Local Agency and the Appropriation of Jewish Property in Romania’s Eastern Borderland: Public Employees during the Holocaust in Bessarabia (1941–1944),” *European Holocaust Studies* no. 2 (2019): 133–156; Marius Turda, Adrian-Nicolae Furtună, “Roma and the Question of Ethnic Origin in the Holocaust in Romania,” *Critical Romani Studies* 4, no. 2 (2021): 8–33.

15 On the Antonescu regime’s plans for solving the Jewish Question through emigration, see: Mihai Chioveanu, “The Paper Solution: Jewish Emigration from

operations and their relocation or emigration, Antonescu decided to keep approximately 275,000 Jews under surveillance in Romania and Transnistria, to concentrate them and appoint Jewish collaborators to oversee them, and to exploit them economically. The result was the creation of a national Jewish council known as the Jewish Center. From the German perspective, this compulsory expatriation meant “relocating” Romanian Jews to Bełżec death camp in occupied Poland, and by summer 1942, Nazi leaders convinced Romanian officials, including Ion and Mihai Antonescu, to approve of this plan and deport the remaining Romanian Jewish population, which numbered around 275,000 persons from the core provinces of Romania (Wallachia, Moldova, Southern Transylvania, and the Banat) to Bełżec. In the fall of 1942, the Romanian decision-makers changed their mind, postponed the deportation, and abandoned the Bełżec plan.¹⁶ Because Nazi leaders needed Romania’s participation in the anti-Soviet war and its raw materials (especially oil), they resigned themselves to the idea that Romania would carry out an autonomous Jewish policy—including limited emigration to Palestine—until the end of the war.¹⁷

Established in February 1942, the Jewish Center was tasked with reorganizing, centralizing, controlling, expropriating, and preparing for the emigration/deportation of Jews from Romania.¹⁸ The initial draft law was prepared by *Hauptsturmführer* Gustav Richter, the German Legation’s

Romania during the Holocaust,” *Studia Politica: Romanian Political Science Review* 9, no. 3 (2009): 425-44; Dalia Ofer, “Emigration and Immigration: The Changing Role of Romanian Jewry,” in *The Destruction of Romanian and Ukrainian Jews during the Antonescu Era*, ed. Randolph L. Braham (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997). The goal of facilitating Jewish emigration resembles the tasks assigned to other Jewish organizations in Nazi Europe. See the case of the Reich Association of the Jews in Germany and the General Union of French Israelites in France.

16 Ancel, *The History of the Holocaust in Romania*, 457-509; Frilling et al., *Final Report*, 215; Ioanid, *The Holocaust in Romania*, 238-58.

17 Ioanid, *The Holocaust in Romania*, 238-58; Lecca, *Eu i-am salvat*, 177-93. In his autobiographical report published in 1944, Zionist leader Mișu Benvenisti recalled that during his first meeting with Richter, the main message he received from the Nazi SS specialist in Jewish problems was Germany’s opposition to Jewish emigration to Palestine. Benvenisti, *Sionismul în vremea prigoanei* (Bucharest: Viața Evrească, 1944), 11-12.

18 Decree no. 319 was published in the Official Bulletin, *Monitorul Oficial*, no. 26 on January 31, 1942. See: *Colecție de Decrete Legi și Regulamente, Decizii, privitoare la organizarea evreilor din România* (Bucharest: Editura Centralei Evreilor din România, 1942), 5-12; Ancel, *The History of the Holocaust in Romania*, 494-95; Benjamin, *Evreii din România*, XLIV; Ioanid, *The Holocaust in Romania*, 34-35.

special advisor for matters related to the Jewish Question and Aryanization, who submitted the draft law to the Romanian government.¹⁹ Romanian ministers, especially Mihai Antonescu, who was behind the policy of legalized persecution of Jews, agreed in principle with the main ideas in the draft law, but he disagreed with significant parts of it, such as ghettoization and the demand that all Jews in Romania wear a yellow star. Consequently, Mihai Antonescu assigned Lecca to modify the law so as to tailor it to the Romanian authorities' plans for the Jews, which mainly sought to "solve" the Jewish Question in such a way that it would not negatively affect the country's economy. Lecca abandoned Richter's calls for the compulsory yellow star and the segregation of all Jews into ghettos and labor camps, and he removed other stipulations he suspected would be economically harmful to Romania. The result was a significantly revised draft that aimed for the gradual dispossession, exploitation, and emigration of Romanian Jews.²⁰ The Nazi officials in Romania opposed the idea of allowing Jews to immigrate to Palestine or Allied or neutral territories and kept trying to persuade Romanian officials to agree to the deportation of all the country's Jews to the German-occupied General Government (occupied Poland). Ultimately, as historian Bela Vago has shown, Romanian authorities played the decisive role in choosing most of the Jewish Center's leaders and planning and controlling its activities. Indeed, they rejected German requests to control this organization, though the Nazis did have some indirect influence through their agents who had infiltrated the Romanian government.²¹

The foundation of the Jewish Center was preceded by the dismantling of the traditional organization of Jews in Romania, FUCER, and the removal of its leader Wilhelm Filderman, who had decades of experience defending the rights of his co-religionists. The attack on established Jewish organs and leaders seemed to have been one of the main goals behind this restructuring of organized Jewish communities.²² A few of the new Jewish leaders were chosen by Richter on the advice of a counselor

19 On the role of Gustav Richter during the Antonescu regime, see Constantin Iordachi and Ottmar Trașcă, "Ideological Transfers and Bureaucratic Entanglements: Nazi 'Experts' on the 'Jewish Question' and the Romanian-German Relations, 1940-1944," *Fascism: Journal of Comparative Fascism Studies* 4, no. 1 (2015): 48-100.

20 Benjamin, *Evreii din România*, XLII-XLIII; Lecca, *Eu i-am salvat*, 176-87.

21 Vago, "The Ambiguity of Collaborationism," 289-90.

22 Ioanid, *The Holocaust in Romania*, 34. On Filderman's history of defending Jewish rights in Romania, see: Ștefan Cristian Ionescu "Legal Resistance through Petitions During the Holocaust: The Strategies of Romanian Jewish Leader Wilhelm Filderman, 1940-44," in *Resisting Persecution: Jews and their Petitions during the Holocaust*,

for the German Legation in Bucharest, Herman von Ritgen; these new leaders were among the latter's friends and business partners who seemed to be compliant and opportunistic. Various officials suggested potential employees for the new organization: Lecca and Ion and Mihai Antonescu approved some of the names proposed by the Germans and added their own recommendations, and other Romanian officials suggested potential Jewish leaders too.²³ The replacement of the old Jewish leadership with new Jewish leaders took place suddenly and without notice. Lecca, several of his Jewish collaborators (and future leaders of the Jewish Center), and other people (probably plainclothes policemen) showed up at FUCER's headquarters in Bucharest the evening of December 17, 1941, and took over the building. Summoning the staff together, Lecca told them that everyone would keep their jobs except Filderman, who Lecca claimed had harmed the Jews. Lecca also requested that employees hand over all correspondence sent to Great Britain and the United States, as the Antonescu regime was suspicious of Jewish leaders' connections with international Jewish and non-Jewish organizations and their advocacy attempts on behalf of Jews that were directed toward the Allied Powers' governments.²⁴

Based in Bucharest, the Jewish Center established branches in every county (*județ*) in the core provinces of Romania (the Old Kingdom, Southern Transylvania, and the Banat) and significantly increased the number of the official Jewish community's administrators as compared to its predecessor.²⁵ This new bureaucracy included many former leaders and high-level administrators who had worked for FUCER. Notably, the Jewish Center did not have any branches in the newly "liberated"/occupied areas of Bessarabia, Bukovina, and Transnistria, which had a different legal status than zones under military administration.

ed. Wolf Gruner and Thomas Pegelow Kaplan (New York: Berghahn Books, 2020), 92-113.

23 Lecca, *Eu i-am salvat*, 176-80.

24 Wilhelm Filderman's "Note on the installation of the Jewish Central Office, December 17, 1941," in Wilhelm Filderman, *Memoirs and Diaries*, vol. 2: 1940-1952 (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Yad Vashem, Tel Aviv University, 2015), 262.

25 Frilling et al., *Final Report*, 212; Lecca, *Eu i-am salvat*, 229. The significant expansion of the Jewish community's bureaucracy in Antonescu's Romania was caused by the need to respond to the regime's goals to control and exploit the Jews, and by the need to provide more social services to the impoverished Jews. This resembles similar developments throughout Nazi Europe among the "Jewish Councils" in countries such as Belgium, France, and the Netherlands. Laurien Vastenhout, *Between Community and Collaboration: "Jewish Councils" in Western Europe under Nazi Occupation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

A number of women worked for the Jewish Center; they were usually relegated to lower-level positions typically seen as “feminine” jobs, such as secretary, typist, and social worker. All the high-level positions that also came with higher salaries, social prestige, and power were held by men. In his autobiography, Zionist leader Mișu Benvenisti noted the contribution of Zionist women, together with other Jewish women, to the Jewish Center’s social welfare activities, which aided Jewish deportees in Transnistria.²⁶ Overall, in terms of its personnel, the Jewish Center reflected older gender hierarchies, which resembled the structure of many “Jewish Councils” throughout Nazi Europe.²⁷ The only Jewish woman who occupied a position of (limited) authority in wartime Romania was Mela Iancu. She headed the Jewish Center for the Protection of Mother and Child, which was an educational-welfare organization that supplied food, education, clothes, healthcare, and shelter to thousands of women and children, including orphans from Transnistria.²⁸

Administratively, the Jewish Center consisted of eight main departments: finance, welfare/aid, education, healthcare, publishing, professional retraining, emigration, and religious affairs.²⁹ Lecca appointed several local pro-German Jews who had not held any leadership positions prior to the war as the main leaders of the Jewish Center. They were almost unknown to the Jewish public. Thus, the journalist Henric Ștefan Streitman, a former convert to Christianity who returned to Judaism and enjoyed good relations with Romanian elites, became the Center’s

26 Benvenisti, *Sionismul*, 24.

27 On the presence of women among the Jewish Center’s employees, who composed around 23 percent of the staff according to some partial postwar data, see: Centrul pentru Studiarea Istoriei Evreilor din România “Wilhelm Filderman” [The “Wilhelm Filderman” Historical Research Center of the Romanian Jewish Community, hereafter, CSIER], Fond VII, File 196/1945. For the rare presence of women in leadership positions in Nazi Europe, see: Anna Nedlin-Lehrer, “Women in Dror and Gendered Experiences of the Holocaust,” in *Is This a Woman? Studies on Women and Gender During the Holocaust*, ed. Denisa Nešťáková et al. (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2021), 123–141; and Laurien Vastenhou, “Female Involvement in the ‘Jewish Councils’ in the Netherlands and France: Gertrude van Huijn and Juliette Stern,” in *Is This a Woman?*, 142–60; Joan Campion, *In the Lion’s Mouth: Gisi Fleischmann and the Jewish Fight for Survival* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1987).

28 Sylvia Herscovitz, “Jewish Women’s Activities during the Holocaust in Romania: Mela Iancu, Director of the Jewish Center for the Protection of Mother and Child,” *Holocaust: Studii și Cercetări* 13 (2020): 73–93.

29 *Activitatea Centralei Evreilor din România* (Bucharest: Tipografia Informația Zilei, 1944); Lecca, *Eu i-am salvat*, 191–229; Emil Dorian, *The Quality of Witness: A Romania Diary, 1937–1944* (Philadelphia, PA: The Jewish Society of America, 1982), 195.

president; physician Nandor Gingold was appointed secretary general (in fact, the real head of the Center); and William Grunberg, a journalist and former Zionist who became an adept proponent of “territorialism,” was appointed the director of the Center’s press.³⁰ According to historian Jean Ancel, when Filderman was replaced, he asked other Jewish notables to remain in the Jewish Center and not resign in solidarity with him. Many stayed. Several Zionist leaders, such as Mișu Benvenisti, also joined the Jewish Center and held important positions, justifying their choice by arguing that they realized it was the only way they could help ordinary Jews and especially those who were the most endangered by Antonescu’s and Nazi Germany’s policies.³¹ Overall, there was no shortage of employees as working for the Jewish Center came with major benefits, including the exemption from forced labor and deportation, high salaries, a reduced work schedule (until noon), travel permits, the authorization to practice professions, and the potential for economic enrichment through bribery.³² In 1943 and 1944, the importance of the Jewish Center decreased, and its activities significantly diminished because it was no longer able to raise the money required by the authorities, who frequently negotiated with former traditional and Zionist Jewish leaders—even though they were not part of the official organization—over important issues like emigration from Romania because these men were better-known abroad.³³

Overall, as Bela Vago and the Elie Wiesel International Commission on the Holocaust in Romania have argued, the Jewish Center did *not* transform into a typical Nazi-style *Judenrat* as was envisioned by officials of the Antonescu regime and their Nazi partners. This happened because in spite of its collaboration with German and Romanian authorities in controlling and dispossessing Jews, organizing forced labor, and assisting with selective deportations, the Center also tried to help the Jews in Romania. It did so by petitioning for their rights; collecting and distributing financial and material aid to impoverished community members and deportees; providing legal aid for Jews targeted by Romanianization

30 Frilling et al., *Final Report*, 212–21; Vago, “The Ambiguity of Collaborationism,” 291–92; on Jewish territorialism, see: Laura Almagor, *Beyond Zion: Jewish Territorialist Movement* (London: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2022).

31 Ancel, *The History of the Holocaust in Romania*, 495; Benvenisti, *Sionismul*, 9–19; S.C. Cristian, *Patru ani de urgie* (Bucharest: Timpul, 1945), 105–15; Frilling et al., *Final Report*, 217.

32 Cristian, *Patru ani de urgie*, 105–10; Lecca, *Eu i-am salvat*, 191–93, 222, 229; see: the internal correspondence of the Jewish Center, CSIER, Fond III, File 315/1943.

33 Vago, “The Ambiguity of Collaborationism,” 296–302.

policies and forced labor; and organizing rescue and repatriation operations on behalf of Jews in Transnistria. Leaders of the Jewish Center, such as Gingold, also enlisted the assistance of former community leaders including Filderman, “sometimes for tactical reasons, sometime out of convictions.” Vago aptly summarized the Jewish Center’s activities as an “ambiguous form of collaboration.”³⁴ Historian Lya Benjamin also offered a nuanced evaluation of the behavior of the Jewish Center’s employees: she argued that Jewish bureaucrats were, in general, competent and well-intentioned in spite of the organization’s official mission, which called for controlling the Jews of Romania and isolating them in a special “ecosystem” shaped by their inferior and precarious legal status.³⁵

In his memoirs, the former Chief Rabbi of Romania Alexander Safran also gave a balanced assessment of the behavior of those among the Jewish Center’s leaders who collaborated/cooperated with the Antonescu regime. While Safran considered Gingold, Streitman, Grossman, and William to be “collaborators and traitors,” he recognized that other officials, such as Theodor Loewenstein and Dr. Kammer, who occupied second-tier positions were “honest people and good Jews” who helped the Jewish community.³⁶ He also recalled that Gingold and Grossman claimed that they respected him and supported his efforts to save the Jews during the war and expected him to help them after the war “through the bad times that were awaiting them.”³⁷ Safran acknowledged that in spite of the Jewish Center’s initial reluctance to help the deportees in Transnistria on the pretext that the territory fell outside its jurisdiction (which only covered Romania proper), the organization eventually participated in large-scale humanitarian operations in the province.³⁸

34 Frilling et al., *Final Report*, 217; Benjamin, *Evreii din România*, XLIV; Vago, “The Ambiguity of Collaboration,” 296-302.

35 Benjamin, *Evreii din România*, XLIV.

36 Safran, *Resisting the Storm*, 87-91. On the major role of Theodor Loewenstein in helping Jewish orphans and assessing their psychological health during and after the war, see Dana Mihăilescu, “Early Postwar Accounts on Jewish Orphans from Transnistria,” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 36, no. 3 (2022): 353-71.

37 Safran, *Resisting the Storm*, 139-40.

38 On the Jewish Center’s participation in humanitarian aid for the deportees in Transnistrian camps and ghettos, see: Ștefan Cristian Ionescu, “Jewish Humanitarian Aid for the Transnistria Deportees,” in *More Than Parcels: Wartime Aid for Jews in Nazi-Era Camps and Ghettos*, ed. Jan Lániček and Jan Lambertz (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2022), 227-54; Ana Bărbulescu, “The Underlife of Transnistria’s Ghettos: Recategorizing and Reframing Social Interaction,” *Journal of Holocaust Research* 35, no. 3 (2021): 196-213.

Jews' Perceptions of the Jewish Center

Forced to live without their traditional organizations, ordinary Jews recorded their views about the Jewish Center in their wartime diaries, focusing on their interactions with the organization and its employees and leaders. There is significant variation in the content devoted to the Jewish Center in these diaries, ranging from a few lines to numerous entries. While diarists generally criticized the Jewish Center, they also recorded neutral, technical details about the functions of local Jewish Center's branches or reported on their interactions with them. Petre Solomon was one such diarist.

A young student from Bucharest who aspired to become a writer, Solomon (b. 1923) was enrolled in the Jewish College Onescu in Bucharest between 1941 and 1944. His first poems were published in 1944. From the 1930s to the 1960s, Solomon kept a diary, part of which was posthumously published together with other autobiographical writings in the 2000s. Solomon survived the war, never emigrated from Romania, and became a well-known writer and translator. His diary contains only sparse references to the Jewish Center as this topic did not seem to be a main topic of interest. Most of his entries refer to literature and encounters in his daily life. At the same time, his diary reveals that he had a negative perception of the Jewish Center. On October 2, 1942, he confessed that he somehow obtained an exemption from forced labor (after he completed three months of forced labor in 1941) through the Jewish Center, but he did not refrain from criticizing the organization and its mission. He considered the Jewish Center to be "an institution created to systematically and rationally destroy the Jews through the centralization of all their personal data."³⁹ Solomon continued to pay attention to the activity of the Jewish Center and discussed the publication of *Gazeta Evreiască* (*Jewish Gazette*, GE), the newspaper edited by the Jewish Center, and its editorial activity. He mentioned its announcements of numerous antisemitic regulations and restrictions and GE's advice on how to avoid the practical and legal problems that resulted from breaking these laws.⁴⁰

Usually, ordinary Jews perceived the Jewish Center and its leaders through the lens of their daily interactions with employees of its local branches. Thus, the practical problems people encountered in their daily lives while trying to comply with numerous antisemitic laws and regula-

39 Petre Solomon, *Am să povestesc cândva aceste zile: Pagini de jurnal, memorii, însemnări*, vol. I (Bucharest: Editura Vinea, 2006), III-12.

40 Solomon, *Am să povestesc cândva aceste zile*, vol. I, 133-34.

tions and, at the same time, earn a living and survive the war informed their—usually negative—opinions about their local Jewish Center's leaders and employees, even as they simultaneously maintained a rather positive view of the (national) Jewish Center's leaders in Bucharest. The capital was far away, and its Jewish leaders enjoyed prestige that stemmed from their remoteness and peoples' hopes (sometimes illusions) that they would be able to gain justice for the Jews of Romania. The diary of Hilda Kliffer offers an example of this perspective.

A teenage girl from Târgu Frumos, Kliffer (b. 1929) wrote a diary that covers the period from 1941 to 1944. During those years, she was not deported and stayed in her hometown together with her family. The diary stops in 1944, around the time the Red Army arrived, and it is unclear what happened to the author in the postwar period. In addition to many entries about her private life, Kliffer's diary contains frequent references to the Jewish Center, which illustrates her preoccupation with the leadership of the local Jewish community.

She frequently recorded her hatred of the head of the local branch of the Jewish Center, a man named Solomon Lederhordler, whom she described (on July 20, 1943) as a cunning man, a crook, a charlatan: "the worst enemy of my family ... and a vampire to Jewish humanity."⁴¹ Kliffer stated that Lederhordler refused to help her family on many occasions. Specifically, she recorded that her father had an argument with Lederhordler related to the local community's contribution to the special tax levied on Jews—the enormous sum of four billion lei—by the authorities of the Antonescu regime in 1943. Hilda hoped the tide would turn, Lederhordler's fortune would reverse, and she would be able to take revenge on him for the harm done to her family.⁴² On July 22, 1943, Hilda complained again in her diary about Lederhordler: "We had the misfortune to have a leader who, instead of taking care of his community, tried to profit personally from the laws that recognize some rights for Jews."⁴³ From a comparative perspective, this would place Lederhordler within the category of Jewish leaders like Chaim Rumkowski, who during the Holocaust collaborated with the authorities and were willing to sacrifice individual Jews to save the community and enjoyed the profits and power of their position.⁴⁴ Kliffer also blamed Lederhordler for

41 Dan Petre Popa, ed., *Jurnal de fata din Tg. Frumos* (Bucharest: Albatros, 2007), 14-17.

42 Popa, *Jurnal de fata*, II, 14-15, 16-17, 28, 31. See, for instance, the diary entries from July 20 and 22, 1943 and August 1, 1943.

43 Popa, *Jurnal de fata*, 16.

44 On the complexity of Jewish leaders' conduct and limited choices ("choiceless choice" in Lawrence Langer's words) in other parts of Nazi Europe, see Bauer,

adding her uncle Avram to the list of men to be recruited for forced labor in spite of the fact that he had an exemption as a useful employee.⁴⁵ Kliffer's father tried to intervene with local policemen by showing them Avram's exemption certificate and the law that extended the validity of that legal certificate, but to no avail. Their advocacy was only successful after the family paid a bribe to the policemen.⁴⁶ Blaming Lederhordler for selfishness and clientelism and for protecting two of his friends with whom he was engaged in shady business, the diarist cursed him and expressed her wish to strangle him with her own hands.⁴⁷ Kliffer believed that Lederholder ran a corrupt dictatorship from which he and his friends profited, including by stealing from the community's soup kitchen and poor children's rations.⁴⁸

Kliffer also mentioned in her diary that her father had another threatening incident with Lederhordler, who accused him of sabotaging the state budget by refusing to contribute money to buy equipment for the Jewish forced labor detachments. He then threatened to denounce Kliffer's father to the police. Eventually, her father contributed a small sum, but he decided that if the Jewish Elder continued to harass his family, he would lodge a complaint about Lederhordler's behavior at the Jewish Center headquarters in Bucharest and at the prosecutor's office.⁴⁹

Kliffer's diary suggests that some Jews perceived the activities of local Jewish Center leaders as unconstructive for the community and as primarily driven by self-interest and self-enrichment. In general, Kliffer's assessment of Jewish Center leaders was nuanced. While she expressed her distrust of local Jewish officials and their willingness and efficiency to help poor Jews or those who had already been deported, she admired Fred Șaraga, a Jewish official from Iași who spearheaded efforts aimed at aiding deportees in Transnistria, especially Jewish orphans. Together with other Jewish notables, Șaraga managed to accomplish the repatriation of the orphan children to Romania from the camps and ghettos in Transnistria in 1943-1944.⁵⁰

Rethinking the Holocaust; Gordon Horowitz, *Ghettostadt: Łódź and the Making of a Nazi City* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2008); Lawrence Langer, "The Dilemma of Choice in the Deathcamps," *Centerpoint: A Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies* 4, no. 1 (Fall 1980): 53-58; Vastenhout, *Between Community and Collaboration*.

45 On Jewish forced labor in Romania, see: Dallas Michelbacher, *Jewish Forced Labor in Romania, 1940-1944* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2020).

46 See the entries on August 3 and 4, 1943. Popa, *Jurnal de fata*, 30-31.

47 Popa, *Jurnal de fata*, 16, 22, 28.

48 Popa, *Jurnal de fata*, 69.

49 Popa, *Jurnal de fata*, 59-61.

50 Popa, *Jurnal de fata*, 76, 95. On Fred Șaraga's role in helping Jewish deportees, see: Matatias Carp, ed., *Cartea Neagră: Suferințele evreilor din România: 1940-1944*,

A Bucharest physician, journalist, and writer who had a leftist democratic worldview, Emil Dorian kept a detailed diary from 1936 to 1956. This is one of the most important diaries written by Romanian Jews, and it reflects the author's mature and insightful understanding of the Jewish community, Romanian society, and domestic and international politics, as well as the author's numerous social connections and sources of information. He frequently recorded in his diary information about the Jewish Center and his negative perception of the institution, highlighting the self-interest, corruption, irresponsibility, and entitlement of the Jewish Center's leaders. On February 7, 1942, Dorian recorded the publication of the law that established the Jewish Center and its goals and blamed it for closing down the Jewish newspaper *Renașterea Noastră* (*Our Resurrection*), to which he was a contributor.⁵¹ A few days later (on February 26, 1942), Dorian again criticized the Jewish Center's leaders for surreptitiously summoning Jewish notables to a synagogue where officials of the Antonescu government declared them hostages to be shot if the Jews or communists perpetrated crimes against the state. The authorities eventually released the hostages, but Dorian recorded the outrage of one of the hostages, a lawyer L. S., who futilely questioned the Jewish leaders about "why he had been chosen and how come none of the *Centrala's* [Jewish Center's] leaders was on the list."⁵² On June 7, 1942, Dorian again criticized the Jewish Center for acting as a government mouthpiece in transmitting the Antonescu authorities' recommendation not to visit the cafes located in downtown Bucharest to avoid any potential antisemitic incidents, which triggered panic among the Jews. No such violence took place at that time.⁵³

A few days later, Dorian criticized a Jewish Center's women's committee—recruited from the wealthy *haute* bourgeoisie—that organized a public meeting in a school and tried to raise funds to feed orphans in Transnistria by using classist arguments to appeal to the public's generosity. According to Dorian, who attended the meeting, the wealthy ladies argued that Transnistria's orphans, on whose behalf they were fundraising, came from good families and were accustomed to a life of comfort and plenty before the war and, thus, had to be rescued quickly. The implication of this "blunder," as Dorian termed it, was that orphans from

3 vols., 2nd ed. (Bucharest: Diogene, 1996); Ancel, *The History of the Holocaust in Romania*, 408; Mihăilescu, "Early Postwar Accounts"; Safran, *Resisting the Storm*.

51 Dorian, *The Quality of Witness*, 195.

52 Dorian, *The Quality of Witness*, 198-99.

53 Dorian, *The Quality of Witness*, 211.

poor families did not need urgent aid because they were already used to poverty and deprivation, which outraged his sense of social justice.⁵⁴

Sometimes Dorian interacted directly with Jewish Center leaders and recorded details about these meetings in his diary. For example, on July 6, 1942, he was visited in his home by Streitman, the president of the Jewish Center and a former journalist who knew Dorian from prewar press and literary circles. Dorian observed that Streitman was not altered by his influential job and remained an intellectual and socialite who continued to have an ambivalent and flexible approach to morality: "He is still a master of metaphysics; he cultivates books, people, and paradoxes, and adheres to that position between 'black and white' which reflects so well his extreme flexibility."⁵⁵ Streitman shared with Dorian his idea that the Jews should change and adopt "a more heroic attitude toward life ... he cannot understand the Jews' immense love of life, of life under any circumstances and at any price," which would have allegedly improved the government's attitude toward them. Dorian criticized Streitman's cynicism, cheap philosophizing, and conformism, and especially his idea of changing the Jews in the middle of a Europe-wide mass murder that explicitly targeted them.⁵⁶

Dorian also criticized some of the new upper-level employees of the Jewish Center for (what he saw as) their negative influence on the Jewish community. On August 4, 1942, he noted that many lawyers joined the Jewish Center for easy jobs, forced labor exemptions, bribes, and access to power after being expelled from the Bar Association as a result of Antonescu's racial laws:

A gang of Jewish lawyers who lost their jobs have descended like a swarm of locusts on the Jewish community. They are all crowded in the leadership of the Central or have camouflaged themselves in various bureaucratic organizations which bear down in the Jews' work, purse, and morale. To avoid forced labor, they have infiltrated all the combines [committees] where the decisions are made about the future of Jews; they have resumed their ways as racketeers, bribetakers, denouncers. This is a plague we will not be rid of until the end of the war.⁵⁷

54 Dorian, *The Quality of Witness*, 212-13.

55 Dorian, *The Quality of Witness*, 214-15. On Streitman's flexible morality, see: Vago, "The Ambiguity of Collaboration," 291-92.

56 Dorian, *The Quality of Witness*, 214-15.

57 Dorian, *The Quality of Witness*, 217.

Dorian also noted that it took most of the Jewish public only a few months to figure out the real goals behind the foundation of the Jewish Center—the control and surveillance of Jews as the prelude to their exclusion from Romania—and after several months of neutrality and even a welcoming attitude, they subsequently became hostile to the Center's leaders.⁵⁸ In general, Dorian distrusted the Jewish Center and its leaders, who he accused of being willing to fully collaborate with the pro-Nazi Antonescu regime on the total exclusion of Jews in Romania by supporting the regime's antisemitic legislation and policies concerning forced labor, dispossession, and deportation. This distrust is evident in his diary entries from August 8, 1942 and May 12, 1943.⁵⁹ Another entry (from November 5, 1942) similarly illustrates Dorian's distrust toward the Jewish Center: when bookstores in Bucharest displayed lists of names and personal details of Jewish authors whose books had been banned, Dorian suspected that the Jewish Center had supplied the data to the authorities.⁶⁰

Dorian was particularly harsh toward the Jewish supervisors of the forced labor battalions who showed unnecessary zeal, mistreated the men, and denounced them for breaching regulations and not working long or hard enough. He blamed the Jewish Center for ignoring the terrible impact of forced labor on the men who performed it.⁶¹ Dorian also criticized the new head of the Jewish Center in Bucharest Nandor Gingold—who took over as leader in 1943—for his insistence that even though he was not Jewish (Gingold converted to Christianity in 1941), he was dedicated to rescuing the Jews from destruction. Dorian also condemned Gingold for his shallowness, describing how Gingold showed off Antonescu's response—good wishes for those Jews who were “good Romanians”—in his New Year's (1944) greetings and claimed that receiving them was a personal distinction.⁶²

During the final year of the Antonescu regime (1944), Dorian wrote in his diary less frequently and usually discussed military and political

58 Dorian, *The Quality of Witness*, 219.

59 Dorian, *The Quality of Witness*, 217, 220, 280.

60 Dorian, *The Quality of Witness*, 241.

61 Dorian, *The Quality of Witness*, 217. This accusation is problematic as many other sources show that the Jewish Center supplied the forced labor battalions with necessary materials and even hired lawyers to defend men accused of breaching the forced labor regulations or advocated in support their requests for exemption from forced labor. See, for instance, the 1942-1943 internal correspondence of the Jewish Center, CSIER Fund III, Files 319/1942, 392/1943, 395/1942, 390A and 390B/1943.

62 Dorian, *The Quality of Witness*, 302. On Gingold's resignation, see: Vago, “The Ambiguity of Collaborationism,” 303-4.

events, his fears of potential antisemitic violence, and hopes for liberation. Only three entries refer to the Jewish Center, its leaders, and their behavior. On April 3, 1944, he recorded the news that Gingold had resigned from his leadership position and commented ironically on Gingold's wartime role and motives for resignation, speculating that Gingold, opportunistically, was trying to escape possible retribution as the Red Army was fighting its way across Romania's eastern borders:

Dr. Gingold, leader of the *Centrala*, has resigned from the "high, self-sacrificing position" he held in order to bring happiness to the Jews of Romania. They say ... [he had been declared an honorary Romanian and] he requested to be drafted in the army. No one can figure out what prompted him to desert at the eleventh hour. Whose wrath did he seek to avoid? Where does he want to hide?

Calling his resignation "appalling," Dorian also jotted down that the Jewish man who informed him about this development accompanied the news with a terrible curse directed at Gingold, and that many other Jews shared his opinion.⁶³

The Bucharest writer and former lawyer Maria Banuș kept a diary from 1927 to 1999 (during the Second World War, it covered the years 1943 and 1944 especially well). In her diary, Banuș rarely referred to the Jewish Center; only from time to time did she record her interactions with and opinions about the Jewish Center, its leaders, and employees. Banuș's diary entries focused mostly on her struggles in daily life, her romantic life and dreams, intellectual life, and her cooperation with the communist underground. Born into an assimilated Jewish family and married to a construction engineer who managed to keep his job during the war, Banuș did not engage in formal paid work, but she studied, wrote, tutored students, and helped the communist party clandestinely by fundraising and hosting communist activists hiding from the authorities.

In her diary entries, Banuș usually criticized the Jewish Center and its leaders. On March 29, 1943, for example, Banuș complained that her husband waited in a long line in the courtyard of the Jewish Center to authenticate his college degree in order to be able to continue to practice his profession and, thus, to avoid the dreaded forced labor detachments.⁶⁴

63 Dorian, *The Quality of Witness*, 305. Gingold was replaced by Grossman-Grozea. See: Kuller, *Evreii în România*, 93.

64 Maria Banuș, *Însemnările mele*, vol.1 (Bucharest: Cartea Românească, 2011), 368.

On April 4, 1943, Banuș criticized the Jewish Center's leaders, particularly Gingold, as privileged "big shots" for not responding to the appeals of struggling actors from the Jewish theater Barașeum, who wanted to be paid on time. She also complained that Jewish Center leaders failed to help the professors and students of the Jewish College Onescu who needed to obtain exemptions from forced labor. Banuș emphasized how Gingold tried to run away from his responsibilities when confronted with the requests of the desperate Jewish professors and students and tried to brush them off by sending them to Radu Lecca, who did not help them.⁶⁵ On May 21, 1943, Banuș again criticized the head of the Jewish Center for supporting Antonescu's demands that the Jews contribute to the financing of the anti-Soviet war with the vast sum of four billion lei.⁶⁶ Banuș continued to express her frustration a few days later, when she complained that the Jewish Center increased members' contributions to its budget by 25 percent.⁶⁷ Banuș also recorded, usually in negative terms, her interactions with mid-level Jewish Center bureaucrats who came to assess the value of the property owned by Banuș's family.⁶⁸

Together with other Jewish women, boys, and teenagers, Banuș participated in the provision of aid to deportees in Transnistria, which was organized by the Jewish Center's subcommittee on aid, located in a synagogue in Bucharest. In spite of the committee's good intentions, Banuș noted the defective management of the collection process, including the use of inaccurate addresses of potential donors and the problematic recruitment of personnel, some of whom (especially those from wealthy families) seemed completely disinterested in their work.⁶⁹

At the same time, Banuș also noted some of the achievements of the Jewish Center, no matter how meager they were in her opinion. For example, on July 15, 1943, she wrote in her diary that Gingold was able to secure Antonescu's promise to postpone the payment of four billion lei as a military tax on the Jews.⁷⁰ Several months later, on November 12, 1943, she recorded that the Jewish Center gave a pair of shoes to an orphan who had returned from Transnistria barefoot.⁷¹

Wilhelm Filderman, the deposed leader of the Jewish communities, whose December 1941 removal was one of the main goals of the initiative

65 Banuș, *Însemnările mele*, vol. 1, 376.

66 Banuș, *Însemnările mele*, vol. 1, 404.

67 Banuș, *Însemnările mele*, vol. 1, 415.

68 Banuș, *Însemnările mele*, vol. 1, 421-23.

69 Banuș, *Însemnările mele*, vol. 1, 433.

70 Banuș, *Însemnările mele*, vol. 1, 406.

71 Banuș, *Însemnările mele*, vol. 1, 472.

to replace FUCER with the Jewish Center, also wrote a diary during the war, which was recently published together with his memoirs. Understandably, his diary (and memoir) reflect a negative opinion—partially informed by his resentment about losing his position—about the Jewish Center’s leadership, as he wrote in his farewell letter addressed to FUCER employees in late December 1941: “The leaders of the Central Office are puppets in the hands of Radu Lecca, who is an agent of the Germans.”⁷²

The diaries of educated Jews suggest a pattern of criticism toward the Jewish Center and its leaders, who were usually blamed for collaborationism, personal profiteering, and communal neglect. The diaries also rarely acknowledged the difficulties faced by the Jewish leadership or their achievements (especially in the realm of social work). These assessments were based on diarists’ interactions with the Jewish Center and its leaders; on authors’ personal observations of the Jewish Center’s activities; or on rumors that circulated in the Jewish community, and they seem to have been strongly influenced by powerful emotions, fears, hopes, subjectivity, and perhaps some bias. Although the diarists usually complained bitterly about the problems affecting the work of the Jewish Center—clientelism, corruption, self-interest, and inefficiency—most maintained their faith that they would survive the war, and they sometimes acknowledged the merits of the Jewish organization. This attitude was probably rooted in the fact that the diarists had not been deported from their homes and cities or cut off from their social networks, even though they had been subjected to other antisemitic measures such as forced labor and various forms of dispossession.⁷³

Conclusion

On the one hand, from the ego documents analyzed in this chapter, it is clear that Romania’s wartime Jewish Center collaborated with the Antonescu regime, collecting and surrendering financial and material contributions to the public treasury, and, with regard to the antisemitic laws, refrained from organizing or engaging in armed resistance or even directly challenging the regime and its policies. Furthermore, some of the Center’s leaders abused their power, attempted to enrich themselves

72 Filderman, *Memoirs and Diaries*, vol. 2, 262–63.

73 On the Romanian Jews’ hopes that they would survive the war and regain their rights and assets, see Ștefan Cristian Ionescu, “Debates on the Restitution of Romanianized Property During the Antonescu Regime, 1940–1944,” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 34, no. 1 (2020): 45–62.

through corruption, and exaggerated their importance. On the other hand, the Jewish Center simultaneously played a significant role in helping many Jews survive Antonescu's genocidal policies. This was achieved especially by providing social welfare services to impoverished members of the Jewish community in Romania, and offering crucial legal aid to Jews who legally contested the Romanianization of their property and their conscription into forced labor battalions—in addition to other antisemitic regulations. The Jewish Center also sent critical—though insufficient—aid to Jewish deportees in Transnistria and advocated for the repatriation of some orphans and other vulnerable groups of deportees from camps and ghettos in Transnistria. Archival sources and ego documents demonstrate that these achievements were the result of the work of numerous dedicated mid- and lower-level employees of the Jewish Center—many of whom were former functionaries of the Federation of the Union of Jewish Communities of Romania (FUCER) and of other Jewish organizations and political parties—and the Aid Commission, and were not the results of efforts made by the leadership of the Jewish Center.⁷⁴ The latter seemed more inclined to accept the antisemitic laws, directives, and measures adopted by Romanian and German officials and lived in fear of being replaced or deported to the camps. In spite of these partial achievements, which improved the lives of some Jews, most Jewish eyewitnesses held a predominantly negative opinion of the Jewish Center, its leaders, and employees, which they recorded on the pages of their diaries.

The diaries of educated Jews usually show their authors' lack of understanding of the complexity of the situation and the difficult choices faced by Jewish Center leaders who were caught between their desire to help their coreligionists and pressure from extremely antisemitic Antonescu officials, who until fall 1942 engaged in mass violence against and the dispossession and deportation of Jews in Romania—sometimes directly targeting Jewish leaders (through hostage taking and deportations). These perceptions were probably due to the acute material needs, shortages, expectations, and constant threats they confronted in their daily lives, in comparison to the relative normalcy of the prewar years and diarists' lack of insight into all the Jewish Center's activities. The diarists could not easily and quickly grasp the Jewish Center's struggle to navigate the

74 Filderman established the Aid Commission to help Jewish victims of Romania's antisemitic policies by collecting and distributing material aid to those who faced violence, poverty, forced labor, and deportation. From 1942 on, the Aid Commission was formally affiliated with the Jewish Center but maintained its autonomy.

pressures placed on it by both the Antonescu regime and Germany while maintaining their non-military efforts to ensure the physical survival of the community. Educated Jews' perceptions did not reflect the real achievements of the Jewish Center and its local organs, and this corresponds to a widespread pattern among many Jews living in other countries under Nazi influence who had difficulty comprehending some of the positive aspects of "Jewish Councils"—especially related to social work and material aid—and focused mostly on negative aspects like corruption and self-aggrandizement.

Scholars, such as Alexandra Garbarini, who have examined Holocaust diaries produced in areas under direct German administration in Central, Eastern, and Western Europe have noted an evolution in their tone from initial hope to a sense of despair, an observation especially relevant for the period of 1942 through 1943, when an increasing number of Jews understood the scale and intensity of Nazi genocidal policies and abandoned writing or were killed. However, the diaries produced by educated Jews in Romania only partially reflect this pattern. Many of them continued to write and hope that they would survive the war. Diary entries from the latter days of the Antonescu regime (1943-1944) that discuss the activities of the Jewish Center seem to be more positive compared to those from the previous years and more willing to acknowledge the organization's efforts—though insufficient and sometimes flawed—to help Jews survive the war. This partially positive assessment probably reflects the distinctive features of the Romanian chapter of the Holocaust in which officials of the Antonescu regime gradually softened its anti-semitic policies (from fall 1942 on), notably in the core provinces of Romania, abandoning mass murder and allowing intra-community aid, partial repatriation from Transnistria, and limited immigration to Palestine.

After the collapse of the Antonescu regime, most of the Jewish Center's leaders, including Gingold, Grunberg-Willman, and Grossman-Grozea, were arrested and prosecuted for war crimes at the People's Tribunal in a special trial focused on the group associated with the Jewish Center. In February 1946, the court sentenced the former Jewish leaders to lengthy prison terms, but all were released early. The only leader who seems to have escaped a brush with the postwar criminal justice system was ZStreitman.⁷⁵

75 Frilling et al., *Final Report*, 316; Vago, "The Ambiguity of Collaborationism," 305-8.