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THE LIFE OF JEWISH COMMUNITY UNDER ION ANTONESCU AND THE JEWISH COMMUNITY'S RESPONSE TO THE HOLOCAUST IN ROMANIA

The Federation of Jewish Communities and the Resistance to Antisemitism and Terror

The Role of Dr. Wilhelm Filderman (September 1940-December 1941)

The decisive role in the organization of the Jewish struggle for survival during the Holocaust was devolved to the institutions of the Jewish community.¹ An entire institutional network for religious services, community culture, education, and social assistance was charged with addressing the moral, social, intellectual, and material needs of Jews during the regimes of Ion Antonescu.

Between 1940 and 1941, the Federation of Jewish Communities (*Federatia Uniunilor de Comunitati Evreiesti*; FUCE) played the leading role. The president of the Federation, Dr. Wilhelm Filderman, was the initiator and political leader of Jewish life at that historical moment when the Jewish community in Romania was confronted with the most complex problems of its entire history. Although his activity had to be focused on solving everyday problems (as all the antisemitic measures had a direct effect at this level), his efforts did not have only an administrative dimension. Solving those many problems required great tact, political vision, flexibility, and the capacity to adapt to a specific historical context. Wilhelm Filderman adopted appropriate tactics in response, such as petitions and audiences with the prominent figures in Romanian political and clerical life who had influence in governmental circles and agreed to intervene on behalf of Jews. He continued this activity even after the dismantling of the Federation.

“The patent of petitions was held by Filderman,” wrote Theodor Lavy, a Zionist leader. “The Zionists fought against the system of petitions. However, not only were petitions the sole means for expressing demands or protest, but the fact that they were delivered was a success in itself.”² Between September 1940 and December 16, 1941, the Federation attempted to address problems arising from antisemitic measures, which were affecting the Jews in general, or only some social classes of the Jewish population, via petitions sent to Antonescu and other state authorities. It was Filderman who created a certain style of

¹ See no.

² Dr. Theodor Lavi, “Petitiile doctorului Filderman,” *Viata noastra*, Tel Aviv, November 30, 1979.

petition. His responses were always prompt and direct, citing statistical, historical, and political arguments that reflected the negative effects of the measures on Romania as a whole, and not just on the survival of the Jewish community. He also demonstrated that the antisemitic measures in Romania were frequently harsher than in the other Axis countries. Ultimately, the Federation would face the consequences of the Legionary terror (September 1940 to January 1941), the acceleration of the Romanianization process, and the regime of terror imposed after Romania became engaged in the anti-Soviet war (e.g., deportations, the Iasi pogrom, propaganda based the Judeo-Communist myth, antisemitic psychosis, hostage taking, the yellow star, deportations to Transnistria, the right to offer assistance to camp prisoners and people deported to Transnistria, and compulsory labor).

The Struggle against Legionary Terror and Legislation

(September 1940–January 1941)

After the first antisemitic measures adopted by the National Legionary State, the Federation's leadership considered the most important threat to the Jewish population—and to Romania, in general—to be from the Legionary movement and the Legionary ministries in the government. The leaders of the Federation, therefore, attempted to make personal contact with the head of state.

On September 11, 1940, the Federation issued one of the first protest memoranda against the Ministry of Religions' decision to suppress most of the synagogues and forbid cultural-religious activities. According to the memorandum, "Newborn Jewish children cannot receive religious blessings; Jews cannot be religiously married anymore. Also, to bury our dead, we must await the approval of authorization requests to the Prefecture, to the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and to the Ministry of Religions." The memorandum—signed by Dr. Wilhelm Filderman, Chief Rabbi Dr. Alexandru Safran (representative of the Mosaic Cult in the former Senate), and Josef M. Pincas (president of the Sephardic communities)—asserted that "public order is thereby being threatened and anarchy provoked, because religion was always public order's guarantee. By suppressing the places of worship, anarchy is instilled in the spirit, and this does not respect one of the most natural human rights, which is to believe in and pray to God."³ At the same time, by delivering the memorandum, Dr. Wilhelm Filderman obtained and received an audience with the Conducator on September 17, 1940, which represented an encouraging success. During the meeting, Filderman presented

³ Ancel, *Documents*, vol. 1: p. 475-476.

the consequences of the decisions taken by the Minister of Religions and the many other problems that plagued the Jewish population during that period. He demonstrated that the adopted measures violated current laws and generated uncertainty and mistrust among merchants and industrialists since all of the country's laws compelled them not to stop production and supply. Through his requests, based on law and justice, Filderman tried to avoid social and economic movements on a national level.

The Conducator wrote back, asking Filderman "to show understanding and to make the members of the Jewish community from all over the country understand that General Antonescu cannot perform miracles in one week....I assure Mr. Filderman that if his colleagues do not undermine the regime directly or indirectly, the Jewish population will not suffer politically or economically. The word of General Antonescu is a pledge."⁴ On September 19, a new decision of the Ministry of National Education for Religions and Arts suspended the implementation of the September 9 resolution on places of worship (temples and synagogues) until there was a definitive regulation on the status of associations and religious communities in Romania. This did not mean that the Legionnaires gave up closing the synagogues in some places or stopped terrorizing the Jewish population. To the dismay of the FUCE leadership, the promises of the Conducator were not fulfilled. It looked as though neither the enforcement of antisemitic measures nor the Legionnaires' terrorism could be stopped. Therefore, the FUCE leadership continued sending memoranda to the government presenting data and facts on the Legionnaires' violence and abuse of the Jewish inhabitants.

On December 9, 1940, after receiving one of the memoranda, the Conducator wrote the following resolution: "The Ministry of Internal Affairs together with a Legionnaire from the Legionary forum designed by Mr. Sima will urgently investigate all of these cases [in the memorandum]. The findings will be written in a report and presented to me as soon as possible. If I find that the claims are accurate, I will take measures. I pledge that I will respect the promises made to the citizens of this country, and I think that the partnership with the Legionnaires is real, not just words."⁵ During December 1940, some dozens of memoranda were sent.

On January 2, 1941, Dr. Filderman sent a memorandum drawing a parallel between the situation of Jews in Germany, Italy, and Hungary and their situation in Romania. Filderman concluded:

⁴ Ibid., p. 475-476.

⁵ Ibid., vol. 2: p. 47.

In three months of government, Romania has issued laws that go further not only than Italian and Hungarian laws, but also than German laws, before and after the issuance of the Nuremberg laws....Then, either Hitler and his Germans, Mussolini and Horthy were wrong, or Romania [will experience] a social and economic disaster, unprecedented and unique, with all the consequences that this disaster could engender....The multitude of laws and decisions adopted in these three months took more rights from Romanian Jews than the National Socialists have taken in eight years from German Jews, including the laws adopted after 1938 aiming to punish them; to Italian Jews in eighteen years; and to Hungarian Jews in three years. To this legislative over-performance we could add here instances of torture, confiscation of fortunes worth hundreds of millions...I sent a memorandum to you regarding these issues. You ordered an investigation...But this order was not carried out by the Tribunal, but by the defendants...In different places, Jewish claimants—called in front of a table on which there were revolvers—were obliged to [declare] that nobody had touched them....That investigation is distorted because it was not made objectively and worse, not only did the terror not stop...it grew.

In conclusion, Filderman reviewed all the promises made by the Conducator in regard to solving the Jewish problems and showed that these promises were not respected. He wrote, “Though the Conducator first promised that only the Jews who came to Romania after 1913 will be eliminated from society, in reality this expulsion is made without any criteria; if the Conducator himself pledged that Jews will be replaced gradually, in reality they are replaced faster than they have been in other countries. Also, Jews cannot benefit from Romania’s resources either in the future—as the Conducator has declared—or at present, because even today they cannot live, having been condemned to die of hunger, just when their proportion to the Romanian population is reduced by half. Therefore, Romanianization is half-solved.”⁶

⁶ Ibid., p. 115.

In his explanations, Filderman did not accuse Ion Antonescu, but he did accuse the Iron Guard. He stressed the difference between Ion Antonescu's approach and the Legion's as well as the fact that the Legionnaires revolted against the Conducator's policy by trying to solve the Jewish problem on their own. At the same time, Filderman believed that as a Romanian and as a Jewish leader he had to make known to Ion Antonescu the gravity of the situation in which the Legionnaires had placed Romania. The documents drafted by the Federation leadership regarding the Legionary terror reflected the drama of the Jewish population's everyday life at that time and also Filderman's belief that to protect Jewish interests was also to protect the Romanian national interest. FUCE's memorandum on Legionary terror also contained an assessment of material damages: damage from the January 1941 pogrom alone amounted to 382,910,800 lei.⁷

FUCE's Response to Romanianization (February 1–June 22, 1941)

After the exclusion of the Legionnaires from government and the reorganization of Antonescu's cabinet, the Jewish population was confronted with new forms of antisemitic policies. Under these circumstances, the leadership of the Federation asked the government to do the following: restitute assets taken by Legionnaires; interrupt the illegal closure of Jewish firms; slow down Romanianization; modify laws on the expropriation of urban assets; discontinue ghettoization; authorize the Jews of Panciu to return to their homes; stop the evacuation of Sibiu Jews from their homes; remove offensive language in official documents and end the slandering of Jews as saboteurs; restore the right to work of Jewish craftsmen and apprentices; and understand that the policy of dismissing Jews from their jobs would hurt the economy.

*FUCE's Response to Terror and Exceptional Measures Declared
during the War against the Soviet Union (June 22–December 16, 1941)*

In the context of the wartime regime of terror and at a time when the measures made Jews the object of extermination policies, the Federation focused all its forces and political wisdom on safeguarding Jewish lives. The pogroms of Iasi, Bessarabia, and Bukovina as well as the deportations to Transnistria were also serious developments that put the FUCE leadership to the test. "In those days," wrote *Curierul Israelit* in February 1945,

⁷ Matatias Carp, list, CSIER, fond III, dos. 55, f. 16.

one needed prudence in efforts to safeguard the life of Jewish leaders themselves and to eliminate the possible serious and painful consequences that government measures had for the Jewish population. For this reason, Jewish leaders could not protest against the crimes in Bessarabia and Bukovina, because it would have been considered an insult to the army; also they could not protest against the description of the Iasi pogrom in the Council of Ministers' communiqué as to the execution of 500 Judeo-Communists. They could not protest and interfere, directly or in writing, against the extremely dangerous and suspicion-laden context of the first [Anglo-American] air raids on Bucharest, when Jews were blamed by police for signaling targets to the bomber pilots.”⁸

Still, the FUCE leaders carried on with the same intensity. But they began to employ another type of discourse in their memoranda, one that focused on such points as the patriotic feelings of Jews in the Old Kingdom, Jewish participation in the Romanian wars for independence and territorial unification, the re-enlisting of certain Jews in the army, the accusation of “Judeo-communism” (contesting it by showing that in the Soviet Union the Jewish religion and Jewish bourgeoisie were persecuted as much as the religions and bourgeoisie of other ethnic groups there). They also asked that criminal punishments be meted out on an individual, rather than collective basis and protested against mass evacuations and deportations to camps and to hostage taking, since—they pointed out—all of these measures were illegal.

The Iasi pogrom (June 29–July 6, 1941) was a taboo topic with FUCE leaders, who confined their efforts to helping survivors of the death trains, who had been deported to Calarasi-Ialomita and Podu Iloaiei, to return to their homes. After the bloody events in Iasi, the FUCE leadership released an official announcement to the Jews, signed by Filderman, Rabbi Safran, and Secretary general Matatias Carp. Jews were asked to show maximum social discipline and obedience to the rule of law. They were told to black out the lights, not to listen to or spread rumors, not to discuss military and political matters, not to dispose of or

⁸ *Curierul Israelit* (heretofore C.I.), vol. 35, series 2, February 23 and 25, 1945.

waste food, and to respect the army, “the country’s shield and also our shield, a shield for everyone.”

Along with his colleagues, Filderman carried out a steadfast struggle against the mandatory wearing of the yellow star. They drafted the first protest on July 15, 1941, which aimed for the abrogation of the law, claiming that it would “hinder Jews from traveling, from buying supplies, from reporting to the authorities.”⁹ Filderman sent a memorandum to Marshal Antonescu on September 5, which stated: “I cannot transmit an order to the Jewish community without having a legal basis. I have no other options—if the order is maintained—than to accept the consequences and give up the leadership of Jewish community in the country by offering my resignation.”¹⁰ On September 6, in a memorandum to Nicodim, the Patriarch of Romania, Filderman and Safran requested the protection of the Jews in the name of religion and human rights.¹¹ On September 8, Filderman obtained an audience with Marshal Antonescu and came accompanied by the Jewish architect H. Clejan. The main purpose of the meeting was to discuss the yellow star. “After a short conversation, the Marshal said to Mihai Antonescu: ‘All right, issue an order to forbid the wearing of the sign throughout the country.’”¹² During a session of the Council of Ministers, the Marshal explained that the measure had “great consequences for the public order and from other points of view. The representatives of Jewish community came to me, and I promised them to strike down this measure.” Considering the results of this “battle,” Israeli historian Theodor Lavy observed, “it was a battle in which the victims were victorious.”¹³

Federation leaders were also prompt in mobilizing Jews for the tasks demanded by the regime. Thus, FUCE mobilized Jews to pay a tax-in-kind for the so-called reunification debt. The Federation’s appeal, which led to Jewish compliance, stated: “Our task is to give to the country all we can give and even more, unconditionally, for the country’s wealth is our wealth and everyone’s wealth. The duty to pay this tax-in-kind is the mark of the highest expression of patriotism.” Although they were unable collect the entire requested amount of ten billion lei, the Jewish population did donate four times more than the other nationalities. By May 20, 1942, Jews donated 1,994,209,141 lei.¹⁴ After this date, the duty to pay the remaining amount was transformed into a tax.

⁹ Ancel, *Documents*, vol. 2: p. 428

¹⁰ Ancel, *Documents*, vol. 3: p. 123.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 126.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 30.

¹³ *Problema evreiască în stenogramele Consiliului de miniștri, 1940-1944*, ed., Lya Benjamin (Bucharest: Hasefer, 1996), p. 307 (henceforth: Benjamin, *Stenograme*).

¹⁴ Carp, *loc.cit.*

Desperate FUCE Attempts to Stop Deportations and Rescue the Jews of Bessarabia and Bukovina

FUCE mobilized Jews from across the country to show solidarity with the Jews of Bessarabia and Bukovina, the counties of Dorohoi and Herta, and those deported to Transnistria from all over Romanian territory. (Most Jews in Romania had relatives among those deported.) In light of the news coming from Bessarabia and Bukovina, Filderman wrote two memoranda. The first was sent on October 9, 1941, to Marshal Antonescu and his wife which stated that deportation was tantamount to death. He then begged that the deportations be stopped.¹⁵ The second memorandum was sent on October 11 to the Marshal. In this memorandum, Filderman repeated, “It is a death sentence, death without any charges except being defined as a Jew. I beg you do not let such a tragedy happen.”¹⁶

On October 14, 1941, at 7 a.m., Filderman announced that, at his request, he was going to meet with Mihai Antonescu, vice president of the Council of Ministers. The meeting lasted forty-five minutes. Mihai Antonescu promised to give the order that Jewish intellectuals, craftsmen, industrialists, merchants, and all urban and rural landowners not be deported. At the end of the meeting, Filderman filed a memorandum in which he beseeched Mihai Antonescu to take measures to bring back the deportees, one of the most important reasons being that among them were Jews from the Old Regat, Jewish veterans of Romania’s wars, decorated disabled veterans, and war orphans.

On October 19, Filderman sent another letter to Marshal Antonescu informing him of Mihai Antonescu’s agreement to spare all the Jewish intellectuals, craftsmen, and industrialists in Cernauți—a measure that had not been applied in Chișinău, where all Jews were forced to leave, and their bodies “lay between Orhei and Rezina.” Filderman dwelled on the illegal nature of these deportations, which also spread to southern Bukovina and Dorohoi County. Filderman emphasized, “I did not protect and I do not protect the guilty. Those guilty must be punished. I protect only the innocent people and those who are deprived of their human rights, granted by law, as a result of an administrative measure.” Filderman asked the Marshal to extend Mihai Antonescu’s decision to spare some professional categories to the Jews in Bessarabia, “[b]ecause intellectuals, merchants, industrialists and landowners

¹⁵ Matatias Carp, *Cartea neagra: Suferintele Evreilor din Romania, 1940-1944*, vol. 1, *Legionarii si Rebelliunea* (Bucharest: Diogene, 1996), vol. 3: p. 96.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

suffered under the Bolshevik regime, either Christians or Jews, and not only Romanians, but also thousands of Jews in Bukovina and Bessarabia were deported to Siberia.”¹⁷

Despite the pressure, the Conducator did not agree to review his decision regarding the deportation of all Jews, especially from Bessarabia. His reaction to Filderman’s appeals was quite strong. In response to the October 19 letter, he accused the Jews, especially those from the new provinces, of causing the “terrible suffering of the Romanian people in 1940, when all that happened had the Jewish community as source of inspiration and execution.”¹⁸ Several days later, on October 26, almost all newspapers with a wide distribution published Marshal Antonescu’s response to Filderman’s October 9 and October 11 letters. The Conducator reproached Filderman for acting as prosecutor instead of a defendant because he defended Jews who had committed “heinous acts against the tolerant and hospitable Romanian people.” The Conducator then concluded, “their hatred is the hatred of everyone, it is your hatred.”¹⁹ Following the publication of Antonescu’s open letter, the authorities launched a domestic and international press campaign. This campaign was used to intensify antisemitic policies.

Undaunted, Filderman carried on his struggle. On October 25 he sent a reply to the Conducator, in which he reaffirmed his support for the merciless punishment of persons found guilty and his objection to the unfairness of innocents being sent to their deaths.²⁰ He reinforced his argument that Jews could not be identified with Bolshevism, just as the Romanian people should not be conflated with the Iron Guard.²¹ On November 3, after referring to examples of Jewish devotion to Romania, Filderman stressed that Jews had participated in the wars for the retrieval of Romanian territory and that Jews never acted against the state and the Romanian people’s interests.²²

Ovidiu Al. Vladescu, secretary general to the Presidency of the Council of Ministers, answered on behalf of the Marshal. Vladescu sarcastically dismissed Filderman’s pro-Romanian and patriotic statements on behalf of Jews as “lawyer’s tricks” and then reaffirmed the Marshal’s policies on the Jews: first, all Jews who came to Romania after 1914 and those from the liberated counties had to leave with no exceptions; and second, Jews from the Old Kingdom and those who came to Romania before 1914 could stay if they respected the laws of the state; yet those who were considered communists, were involved in subversive

¹⁷ *Buletinul Centrului Muzeului si Arhivei Istorice a Evreilor din Romania*, no. 6 (2000): pp. 75-77.

¹⁸ *supra* fn. 17.

¹⁹ Matatias Carp, *op.cit.*, p. 103.

²⁰ Ancel, *Documents*, vol. 3: p. 287.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 287, fn. 20.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 330-331.

propaganda, were associated with the state's enemies, or finally, those considered saboteurs, were also slated to leave. He then added, "The rest can be tolerated as long as they do not steal our rights."²³ FUCE's activities angered Romanian authorities and the German advisor for Jewish Affairs, Gustav Richter. As a consequence, FUCE was dissolved by Decree-law no. 3415 of December 16, 1941.²⁴

The Establishment of the Jewish Center and its Role in Jewish Society, 1942-1944

After the dissolution of FUCE, the Jewish Center (*Centrala Evreilor*) became the only organization authorized to represent the Jewish community's interests and to organize community life by following government policy priorities. Indeed, the Jewish Center was the Romanian version of the German *Judenrat*. Marshal Antonescu approved the political and organizational structures of the Jewish Center as well as the organization of its leadership, which were published by the *Monitorul Oficial* (Official Gazette) on January 30, 1942. The Jewish Center was led by a president, secretary general, and steering committee, which worked on issues such as professional training, migration, social assistance, schools, culture, media, publishing, finance, and religion.

The government charged the Jewish Center with the following tasks: the representation of Jewish interests in Romania and the administration of the former Federation of Jewish Communities; the organization of the Jews according to governmental regulations; the retraining and organization of Jewish labor; the preparation of Jewish migration; the organization of Jewish cultural and educational activities; the organization of Jewish social assistance; the organization of Jewish professionals; the publication of a Jewish journal in Romania; the sharing of information and data demanded by Romanian authorities regarding Romanianization; the updating and filing of all Jewish graduation papers; the management of Jewish memoranda sent to government authorities; and the execution of all government regulations and administrative orders through the Commissariat for Jewish Affairs.²⁵ Furthermore, in its local activities, the Jewish Center used its county offices and the local communities. H. Streitman was appointed the first president of the Jewish Center. N. Gingold, originally the secretary general, replaced Streitman as president in December 1942.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ancel, *Documents*, pp. 379.

²⁵ *Legislatia*, no. 53, p. 178.

Despite the dissolution of the Federation, local Jewish communities continued their activities. According to Jewish Center resolution no. 48/1942, “existing Jewish communities organized in accordance with the statutory law on religious denominations shall continue to function.”²⁶ These communities further coordinated the organization of the Jewish faith as well as Jewish schools and cultural institutions. They also coordinated the administration of social assistance and the organization of a statistical service. Yet, on June 25, 1943, government resolution no. 189 mandated that the leadership committees of the Jewish communities and evacuees were to be dismantled. They decided instead to establish a number of representative committees, which would be attached to the local committee of the host communities. These representative committees were responsible for the administration of the community’s patrimony, registration of the evacuated population, and collaboration with the committee of the host community for introducing and applying measures regarding the interests of evacuees.²⁷

The communities, like all the other Jewish institutions, conducted their activities under the control of the Jewish Center. The Center’s leadership repeatedly asked for obedience, evoking the specter of harsh punishments. In its attempt to impose authority, the Jewish Center could rely on the support of the state administration through the government representative for Jewish issues. Subsequently, the Jewish Center was placed by law under the strict control of Radu Lecca. By the Ministry of Labor’s resolution of September 8, 1943, Lecca’s job specifications were: (1) to organize, with the Army High Command, Jewish compulsory labor; (2) to supervise and control the enforcement of regulations on the practice of certain professions by Jews; (3) to replace the government representative for the regulation of the status of Jews; (4) to draft, in agreement with the Ministry of Interior, the policies necessary for the surveillance of the Jews, as required by the protection of public order and safety; (5) to regulate and authorize, under the supervision of the Ministry of Interior, temporary travel permits for Jews; (6) to regulate, authorize, and organize Jewish migration; (7) to solve all economic, social, and cultural problems of the Jewish community; and (8) to suggest any other measures concerning Jewish matters.

The president of the Jewish Center appointed its clerks, auxiliary institutions, and representatives in the country, all of whom had to be approved by Lecca. The Jewish Center’s leadership also had to submit detailed reports on their activities to Lecca several times a year. Furthermore, Lecca had control over the budget and financial balance sheet of the Jewish

²⁶ *Activitatea Centralei Evreilor din Romania* (Bucharest, 1944), p. 40.

²⁷ *Legislatia*, no. 57, pp. 185-190.

Center.²⁸ Upon its inauguration, the Jewish Center sent the following message to the Jewish community: “By order of Marshal Ion Antonescu, the Jewish Center in Romania was established and invested with the mission to manage the interests of the Jewish community in Romania. We were called to organize the Jews under the new regime. This regime asks Jews to obey all government legislation, to be disciplined, to support national priorities, to refrain from upsetting Romanians, to lead a life of decency, and to obey the decisions and advice of the Jewish Center.”²⁹

The Center’s demands were indicative of the new policy of the Antonescu regime regarding the Jews. A few days after its establishment, the Center leadership (President Streitman and his general-secretary, Dr. Gingold), were summoned by the prefect of Ilfov, General Emil Palangeanu, who asked them to collaborate on maintaining public order and discipline among the Jews. He also asked the Jewish Center to watch out for Jewish extremists and to prevent them from stirring up the population. He advised the leadership of the Jewish Center to establish an internal police, which would be able to contribute to the enforcement of official legislation and administrative measures. The Center leadership was given a list of hostages who would be held responsible for Jewish law breaking.

On February 24, 1942, General Vasiliu summoned Streitman and Gingold to the Ministry of Interior and promised them he would refrain from adopting any severe measure against Jews. He also asked that the Jewish population be made to understand that it had been under constant suspicion after the attitude it displayed during the 1940 withdrawal from Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina, so the government was obliged to take safeguard measures. General Vasiliu also ordered the dismantling of hostage camps, though that did not mean that all hostages were set free. The Jewish Center drafted a new list of Jewish leaders taken hostage in April 1943. Of course, none were members of the Jewish Center’s leadership.³⁰

The Census of Persons Considered to be of “Jewish Blood”

The first official task assigned to the authorities of the Center was to organize the census of those considered to be “of Jewish blood,”³¹ which followed patterns in Germany and German-occupied countries, where the *Judenrat* was typically assigned such tasks. The census was considered necessary in order to give an accurate assessment of the number of

²⁸ Ibid., p. 45.

²⁹ *Legislatia*, no. 81, pp. 250-251.

³⁰ See doc. number. ____.

³¹ *Legislatia*, no. 54, pp. 179-180.

Jews—a step necessary for the bureaucratic organization of deportations, forced labor camps, and physical extermination. The results of the census were to be deposited in the Archive of the Jewish Center and put at the disposal of Gustav Richter to help him organize the anticipated deportation of Jews from the Old Regat and southern Transylvania.

The Policy of Money Extortion

One of Center's core tasks was the extortion of money from the Jewish population, a process in which Radu Lecca played a decisive role. "The need for extra-budgetary money was continuously rising," Lecca wrote in his memoirs. "Mrs. Antonescu asked for money for her patronage, Mihai Antonescu was always demanding money for the county of Arges, where he built schools, churches, etc., in order to gain popularity in case elections would be organized. And then Killinger had many needs, too...." According to Lecca's statements, Jews were saved precisely because of the amounts they gave to the above-mentioned persons. "All of these enormous expenditures," he concluded, "were being covered by the fees levied on exemptions from forced labor and on authorizations for professional practice."³² These funds were transferred to the government via Lecca based on his signed approvals.³³

Actions against Deportations in 1942

Ample documentary material records Dr. Filderman's activities after the Federation was closed. Although marginalized, Filderman remained at the forefront of rescue efforts. He acted on the belief that he had an obligation "as a Jew and as a Romanian citizen who knows the Jews' problems better than anyone else, to get the attention of the leading organizations on the serious [possibility] that some antisemitic measures might have deleterious consequences both for the Jews and for Romania's situation."³⁴ Thus, he was the Jewish leader who led the fight against the resumption of deportations to Transnistria in 1942. Filderman suggested that deportations should be used only as an extreme measure decided by courts for well defined offenses. He also urged the government to respect the principle of individual responsibility and to make sure that the families of the condemned would not be punished unless they were caught hiding the criminal.³⁵ Simultaneously, Filderman took steps against the Nazi-requested deportations of the Jews from southern Transylvania and Banat to

³² Radu Lecca, *Eu I-am salvat pe evreii din Romania* (Bucharest, 1994), p. 205.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ AnceI, *Documents*, vol. 4: p. 551.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

the Nazi extermination camps, which the Antonescu regime had accepted during this first phase.³⁶

In his memoranda to the government, Filderman referred to the long-term presence of the Jews in Transylvania. By comparing the situation of the Jews in Romania to that of other countries, he recommended that Italy and Germany should be left to assume the risk of deportations. He suggested that Romania should solve the “Jewish issue” once there was a common decision on the fate of Jews in all Axis countries and on the fate of the European countries themselves. Filderman drafted several memoranda to be signed by Romanian Transylvanians (intellectuals, traders, factory owners, craftsmen, presidents of the Chambers of Commerce) and sent to Antonescu. The essence of these memoranda was that the deportations should not take place because Transylvanian Jews were useful to local socio-economic life. His efforts were reinforced by the activism of local Jewish leaders from Transylvania and Banat, and the pressure put on the Antonescu regime by the representatives of the Jewish community contributed to the government’s decision to postpone the mass deportations of Romanian Jews.

*The Tax in Kind, the Ambiguous Position
of the Jewish Center, and Filderman’s Deportation*

In spring 1943 the government decided to impose a new exceptional tax-in-kind worth four billion lei on the Jews. Radu Lecca sent the decision to the Jewish Center on May 11, 1943:

“Please be aware that the government takes into account the fact that Romanian soldiers give their lives in combat, while the majority of the Jewish population continues to enjoy the freedom to trade and live protected from war. The government has therefore decided that the Jewish population should make an effort to pay 4 billion lei as a special tax-in-kind....Please be aware that the government has decided that the Jews who do not want to pay the tax...shall be punished by deportation to Transnistria, and their property shall be nationalized....We would like to draw your attention to the responsibility that the leaders of the Jewish

³⁶ *Stenogramme*, no. 145, p. 442.

community have... in order to enforce the above-mentioned decision of the government.”³⁷

Gingold summoned Filderman and other Jewish leaders for an advisory meeting. After reviewing the devastating effects of the 1941-1943 anti-Jewish legislation, Filderman indicated that the Jewish community in Romania was unable to pay the full amount. In contrast to Filderman, Gingold adopted the stance taken by Lecca: Jews were privileged, and so it was natural that they should pay additional taxes. Filderman rebutted this argument by showing that Jews did not ask to be spared from military obligations, that they, too, were serving the country in labor detachments for which, unlike the Romanian soldiers, they received no healthcare, pensions, clothes, or work equipment from the Romanian government.³⁸

Gingold asked Filderman to submit his position in writing. Filderman’s text was addressed to Gingold. Gingold then gave it to the Conducator, who found it impertinent. As a punishment, Filderman was deported to Transnistria at the end of May 1943 and set free after three months, following the personal protests of key Romanian political figures, such as King Michael, Queen Mother Elena, and NPP leader Iuliu Maniu.

Gingold’s Resignation and the Intensification of Jewish Efforts

Upon his return from Transnistria, Filderman continued to be in the forefront of actions in defense of the Jews. A chronology of meetings he had with different ministers and other officials in spring and summer 1944 shows some of the critical problems facing the Jewish community in this final stage of confrontation with the antisemitic policy of the Antonescu regime. On March 7, Filderman pleaded with the National Center for Romanianization against the decision to evacuate the Jews belonging to “exempted categories” from the Romanianized houses. Then, on March 18, Filderman discussed with the Minister of Interior the need to take precautions for the safety of Jews in areas where the German forces were retreating. On March 20, he requested that Jews be allowed to leave cities with a high concentration of German troops. Later, on April 25, Filderman filed a memorandum with the Ministry of Interior asking for clarification about the rumor of government plans to make the wearing of the yellow star compulsory and the ghettoization of Jews from the Moldavian cities of Iasi, Vaslui, Barlad, Husi, Tecuci, Galati, Focsani, Bacau,

³⁷ CSIER, fond III, dos. 405, f. 30.

³⁸ AnceI, *Documents*, vol. 4: pp. 567-571.

Piatra Neamt, and Roman. Then, on May 12, he protested against the government decision to form labor battalions in northern Moldavia and to charge Jewish communities with providing equipment, food, transportation, and accommodation for these detachments. Filderman argued that these government measures were illegal since they ignored statutory limits on the ages of those drafted in the battalions (the second measure ordered all Jews between fifteen and fifty-five years old to participate in labor detachments) as well as the fact that it did not exclude those with exemption cards. On May 19, Filderman presented the Presidency of the Council of Ministers a petition regarding the right of Jews to use the bomb shelters during air raids. He wrote: "After the Jews were forbidden the holy right to life, after being denied resettlement both in villages and towns, now they are being denied the right to protect themselves by using bomb shelters." He sent a note to the Ministry of Interior on August 23, informing the minister that on the night of August 19, on Stefan Mihaileanu Street at the corner of the Secret Service headquarters, somebody had written on the wall: "The Voice of London = The Voice of Judah." The same message was found written on a building on Carol Boulevard. He argued that both inscriptions incited the population against the Jews.³⁹

Given this intense activity and its results, it became obvious that Filderman was the true leader of the Jewish community in Romania. This de facto power and the fact that he could rely on some leaders in the Jewish Center itself helped him to influence the decisions taken by the Jewish Center. Filderman advocated continuous resistance, rather than open rebellion. His numerous memoranda were a form of protest and resistance that affirmed the dignity of Romanian Jewry and strongly contributed to survival in times of extreme oppression.

Israeli Historian Bela Vago evaluated the role of the Jewish Center in this way:

...the Center was imposed on the Jews; its leaders accepted their roles without a mandate from the Jews, and were seen as representatives of the anti-Semitic regime and of the Nazis, and not of the Jews. They were not considered as representatives of Jewish interests even when subjectively they were acting as such. By serving the interests of the Nazis and Romanian anti-Semitic authorities, they facilitated the task of the rulers in depriving the Jews of their property; in ejecting tens of thousands of Jews from

³⁹ CSIER, fond III, dos. Filderman, f.s 30-33.

their dwellings; in mobilizing and exploiting manpower and material resources; in humiliating the Jewish population; and bringing about the rapid impoverishment of the Jewish masses. However, this assessment leaves the arena wide open for accusations ranging from clamors for death sentences to traitors, to brandings as an opportunistic, servile, effacing fringe-group that subjectively tried to help the Jewish community precisely by exploiting its privilege as a sector of the anti-Semitic establishment.

The Center did not become a Judenrat and a Nazi tool as was intended....⁴⁰

The former leadership of Romanian Jewry had the possibility to counteract some of the anti-Jewish measures. Their political power and influence increased at the same rate as the international situation moved in favor of the Allies, while the Jewish Center's leaders became increasingly isolated. However, it must be emphasized that the Jewish Center sought assistance from former Jewish leaders—sometimes for tactical reasons, sometimes out of conviction. Whether directly or indirectly, this helped the Jewish population by encouraging cultural life and leading to acts of resistance and rescue in the face of government plans for deportations to Transnistria. Thus, the Jewish Center reflected the general Romanian policy ambivalence during the second part of the war by its subservience to or collaboration with the regime, but also by some rescue efforts.

Social Assistance and Health Care in Times of Oppression

Both FUCE and the Jewish Center provided social assistance during these times of state-organized oppression. An important part was played by the Autonomous Commission of Assistance (CAA), which was established in January 1941. The CAA benefited from the beginning from the subvention paid by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, which was allowed to continue its work in Romania during the war. During the first months of its activity, the CAA worked to help the victims of the Legionary pogrom. Later, in summer 1941, it focused on assisting those evacuated from the countryside and small towns

⁴⁰ Bela Vago, "The Ambiguity of Collaborationism: the Center of the Jews in Romania, 1942-1944," in *Patterns of Jewish Leadership in Nazi Europe, 1942-1945*, ed. Yisrael Gutman and Cynthia J. Haft, trans. Dinah Cohen, et. al. (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1979), p. 308.

and the victims of the Iasi pogrom. In late 1941, through the efforts of the Federation, the CAA began helping Jews deported to Transnistria. The authorization was given on December 17, 1941.

The International Red Cross channeled large sums of aid money through the CAA to Romania. In January 1943, the first delegation of the CAA and the Social Assistance Department of the Jewish Center went to Transnistria. Their mission was to become acquainted with the realities there and to supervise the distribution of aid. The report drafted by F. Șaraga, head of the delegation, indicated that (1) all the help that was sent through the Jewish Center covered only an extremely small part of what was necessary; (2) the situation of the 5,000 orphans was disastrous; (3) the whole camp population was underfed, weak, and lacked clothing. The report also indicated that the deportees could be saved only by using them in productive jobs and by providing them with more clothes, medicine, and food.⁴¹ But in spite of all the efforts, the help continued to be insufficient. After his return from Transnistria, Filderman wrote a report to the prime minister, dated August 8, 1943, describing the critical situation of the deportees. Clearly, for the leaders of the Romanian Jewish community the fate of the deportees in Transnistria represented a constant preoccupation. The efforts to save and aid the Jews there were part of the overall struggle for survival.

The Jewish community worked to supply healthcare for Jewish work detachments since no government subsidy was offered at any time. Because Jews were barred from using Romanian hospitals, and because Jewish hospitals and health centers as well as personal and community ownership had been Romanianized, it was crucial for the Jews living under the Antonescu regime to receive the social and medical assistance carried out by the Jewish Center and other community organizations.

The Repatriation of Jews Deported to Transnistria

As the front neared Romanian territory, Jewish leaders and Filderman, in particular, increased their efforts to enable the return of the Transnistria deportees. Thus, on January 2, 1943, Filderman pleaded with the government to save the two- to sixteen-year-old orphans by sending them to Cernauți. He argued that these children could not possibly be blamed for any crimes and that given their poor health, emigration was not a viable solution. He also requested of Ion and Mihai Antonescu that Jewish deportees originally from the Old Regat and Dorohoi be repatriated, as there was a high risk that most of them would die.

⁴¹ CSIER, fond III, dos. 300, ff. 200-205.

The issue of the repatriation of deportees was high on Filderman's agenda after his return from Transnistria. Thus, on August 4, 1943, he informed General Vasiliu about the plight of the deportees from Dorohoi, Darabani, and Herta who were interned in the Moghilev camp. On September 23, 1943, he asked Vasiliu for the Jews in Transnistria to be moved away from the German army's paths of retreat. Filderman sent a memorandum to Vasiliu and Mihai Antonescu on October 12, 1943, explaining that many innocents had died in the camps, and on November 17, 1943, he was informed that Antonescu had ordered the concentration of all deportees in Vijnita, where the Jewish Center was asked to build barracks for them (the decision was unfortunate as the allocated space was too small to accommodate all deportees).⁴² On November 24, Filderman submitted a list to the Council of Ministers of localities where the repatriated could be resettled: Jews from the Old Regat and southern Transylvania were to return to their homes; those suspected of dangerous political liaisons were to be interned in an Old Regat camp; Jews from Dorohoi and southern Bukovina were to be resettled in county capitals; and those from Northern Bukovina were to be resettled in Cernauți, Strojinet, Gura Humorului, and Siret. Finally, the memorandum suggested that Bessarabian Jews be resettled in the towns of Chișinău, Bălți, and Soroca, while healthy people could be sent to other towns. Special proposals were drafted on family reunification, and the government was asked to pay the transportation costs of repatriation.

On February 25, 1944, Filderman was received at the Ministry of Interior, where he asked once again for the repatriation of all deportees, presenting the issue as a matter of life and death. He argued against the charge that the Romanian population in Bessarabia and Bukovina was hostile to repatriation by explaining that this argument unfairly associated the Jewish population with a group of agitators and speculators and that in Dorohoi the Romanian population welcomed the return of the deportees.

Partial repatriation began in the second half of December 1943. On December 20, the 6,053 Jewish inhabitants of Dorohoi who survived deportation were sent back to their hometown. On March 6, 1944, 1,846 children of the over 5,000 orphans were repatriated. Filderman sent a note to the government on March 11, 1944, offering humanitarian reasons (over half of the deportees had died in two years) and pointing out the economic benefits of repatriation as well as politically positive outcomes (e.g., the Soviets could not use the Romanian Jewish deportees).⁴³

⁴² *Problema evreiască*, no. 176, p. 525-529.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, fn. 39.

Antonescu ordered general repatriation in March 1944, yet the decision came too late to organize the repatriation of the last group of deportees, which happened to be the most numerous. Only the following categories of deportees were repatriated by train: inhabitants of Dorohoi, orphan children, the 500 political prisoners from the Vapniarka camp, and former internees in Grossulovo. Between March 17 and March 30, 1944, the CAA and delegates from the Jewish Center's Department for Assistance, together with the Romanian authorities, also organized the repatriation of 2,538 people from different camps and ghettos in Transnistria. The fate of the remaining tens of thousands of deportees left in Transnistria is difficult to know. In a letter to Mihai Antonescu, Filderman expressed his regret for the failure to repatriate all Jews because of the postponement of the general repatriation decision, a "delay that, according to the information received up to today, cost the lives of about 15,000 deportees."

The Parallel Jewish Education System

The October 14, 1940, law on the Jewish educational system had extremely deleterious effects for Romanian Jews, who were consequently forced into a cultural ghetto. In this context, the Jewish community and then the Jewish Center took upon themselves the difficult task of ensuring education at the primary, secondary, even university levels. In fact, the reorganization of the Jewish educational system in the new circumstances was an expression of Jewish resistance and determination not to let the young be victims of moral, intellectual, and professional degradation.

According to S.M. Litman, principal of the Jewish "Cultura" High School in Bucharest, "The way in which the students expelled from the public education system were absorbed [into a parallel system] was a chapter of glory and a miracle of perseverance." But everything happened against the background of oppression, massacres, compulsory work, deportations, and insecurity. All of these developments affected both students and teachers. Moreover, many school buildings were requisitioned and transformed into barracks for Hitler's troops. Classes were held in old houses of worship, former restaurants, and insalubrious basements or attics. Yet, educational activities continued in spite of these many hardships and in spite of the fact that both the students and teachers were recruited for compulsory work.

Cultural and Artistic Life: The Jewish Theater in Bucharest

Many educated Jews, especially those who specialized in humanities, writers, journalists, and artists, were banished from the cultural infrastructure of Romanian society. As a consequence, they continued working in the Jewish community and became involved in cultural, educational, artistic, or publishing work. A reciprocal relationship was established in which both sides benefited: the community and then the Jewish Center understood not just the cultural, but also the social importance of continuing traditional Jewish cultural life; in their turn, Jewish intellectuals understood that involvement in these activities was a chance to survive, economically and morally.

Thus, in the new context of cultural ghettoization, Jewish educational, religious and cultural institutions became, for a certain part of the Jewish population, genuine forms of moral and economic support. Of course, nothing was similar to the times before the war. Instead of dozens of Jewish newspapers, now there was only one, and most of the Jewish cultural activity occurred in Bucharest. But even there, the only Jewish cultural center left was the Barasheum Theater. Nevertheless, given the sheer concentration of Jewish intellectual elites in this city, Jewish cultural life there was exceptionally intense relative to what happened outside Bucharest, where synagogues, schools, and Jewish intellectuals lost their traditional cultural functions. In these areas, Jewish schools remained the last bulwark against complete cultural ghettoization.

Synagogue and Religious Life

Despite the presence of undercover government agents, synagogues were always full. Former Chief Rabbi Safran recounted, “On the two Sabbaths I preached [at the Malbim Synagogue], a large number of Jews came especially to hear my sermon. As there was not enough space for them all, they crowded at the windows and doors of the synagogue and filled the surrounding streets.”⁴⁴ This heavy attendance was an expression of Jewish solidarity, of hope that in the synagogue they could find out the latest news about the events that were to be expected. It was also a means of passive resistance against persecution and discrimination, as for example, when the first commemoration of the victims of the Bucharest pogrom (January 22-23, 1941) was held on March 4, 1941. Rabbi Safran’s sermon was received by those present both as a cry of revolt and as encouragement to face the hardships. The manner in which the entire ceremony was conducted, in a synagogue full to capacity,

⁴⁴ Alexandru Safran, *Resisting the Storm: Romania, 1940-1947*, ed. Jean Ancel (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1987), p. 74.

implicitly represented an act of passive resistance. Even in the days of the Jewish Center and of the harsh control exercised by the Ministry of Religions, the synagogue remained a site for educating the youth, a place for recollection and mutual support. In spite of the uncertainties of everyday life, in spite of severe constraints and threats, Romanian Jews followed their traditions, maybe with even more fervor than in peaceful times.

Conclusion

The Jewish framework of institutions functioned along the lines of civil society organizations and was closely associated with Jewish daily life and the material, moral, and spiritual fate of the discriminated minority. Even the Jewish Center—an institution directly subordinated to the state—was compelled by the circumstances of those times to factor in the interests of formal and informal traditional Jewish institutions.

In more peaceful times, when Jews enjoyed the same rights as all other Romanian citizens and were integrated into Romanian society—at least according to the constitutional and democratic provisions—the Jewish community's institutions were generally confined to ethno-cultural and religious issues. When Jews lost many of the rights of citizenship and became the object of statutory discrimination, when they were deprived of their property and their jobs, the community institutions were there to help manage the crisis and work on behalf of individual and collective survival through self-management, self-administration, self-organization, and most important, mutual assistance in every life.