Transitions

Culture, Romania, Society, Southeastern Europe

Teaching the Holocaust in Romania

by **Barbara Frye**
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ARCALIA, Romania–When Leizer Finkelstein was 17, he was summoned, along with hundreds of other Jews, to the police station in his hometown of Iasi, in northeast Romania. It was 29 June 1941. He stood for hours in the station's courtyard on that hot Sunday morning, until police officers began shooting into the crowd from windows above.

He saw friends and strangers fall to the ground, dead. Those left standing–including Finkelstein, four of his brothers, and his father–were then taken to the railway station, where they were jammed into freight cars that were sealed and sent to roll slowly around the Romanian countryside for hours until most inside suffocated or died of thirst.

That same morning, Traian Pastravanu's father, the commander of an army cavalry unit in Iasi, received a phone call from the town's police chief ordering him to send his squad of 57 Jewish slave laborers to the police station. Pastravanu said his father had long objected to the army's use of Jews for forced labor and was in the habit of sending them home on Sundays. When he got the call, his workers were still at their posts, but the elder Pastravanu lied to the police chief, his son says. "He said, 'If you had called one hour earlier, they would be here, but now they're at home,' " recalled Pastravanu, who said he was in the room when his father received the call 63 years ago.

For the next three days the elder Pastravanu held the Jews in a room guarded by Romanian soldiers. He kept at bay the German soldiers who were also part of his unit–Romania was an ally of Nazi Germany at the time–by telling them the room was full of Romanian deserters. Pastravanu's father eventually sent the Jews home one night, wearing discarded Romanian army uniforms and heavily guarded by Romanian soldiers. When the town's pogrom was over, thousands of Jews had been murdered. Days later, Pastravanu's father called his workers back to the unit, his son said, in order to take a head count. They had all survived.

It was World War II. Romania was fighting alongside Germany in hopes of regaining territory that had been annexed by the Soviet Union. Jews were persecuted by Romania's fascist dictatorship, led by Marshal Ion Antonescu, and were accused of being communist sympathizers. They were murdered by the thousands in death trains and mass shootings, and they were deported to camps and ghettos in the country's newly reconquered territory in the northeast, then called Transnistria.

FORGETTING AND REMEMBERING

According to the *Holocaust Encyclopedia*, Romania had about 980,000 Jews in 1933. By 1950, the number was around 280,000. But that didn't stop the government of President Ion Iliescu from stating last year that the Holocaust had not happened in his country.

The remark provoked condemnation from historians, survivors, and academics, and was soon reversed by the government, which admitted that the Romanian wartime regime had been guilty of "grave war crimes, pogroms, and mass deportations of Romanian Jews to territories occupied or controlled by the Romanian army'" from 1940 to 1944. As part of his penance Iliescu established Romania's first Holocaust Remembrance Day, to be marked on 9 October, the date when the first Jews were deported, in 1941, to Trandniester from what was then northern Romania. He also set up a commission, chaired by Elie Wiesel, to investigate what happened during Romania's Holocaust. The group's report is due next month.

But some Romanians weren't surprised by their government's statements. "Under communism, nobody [said] anything about the Holocaust, especially in Romania," said Maria Radosav, who for four years has organized seminars to help teachers deal with the subject in the classroom. "There weren't mass deportations to Auschwitz from the territory of Romania, but that doesn't mean that there was no Holocaust in Romania. We had the pogroms, we had Transdniester, we had the death trains," said Radosav, who teaches courses in Hebrew and Jewish culture and civilization at Babes-Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca.

MIXED MESSAGES IN THE CLASSROOM

Holocaust-education seminars like those run by Radosav are part of an intense debate about the fate of Romanian Jews in World War II that was sparked by the opening of government archives after 1989. Among the most notable research to come out of those documents is that of Jean Ancel, a scholar at the Yad Vashem Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Institute in Jerusalem. Ancel published a study last year that concludes that 420,000 Jews were killed in Romanian-controlled territory during the war. In a paper he delivered at an April conference on the Hungarian Holocaust, Ancel wrote: "[Antonescu's] government issued a statement on 30 October 1941 that Romania 'is one of the nations determined to cooperate effectively for the final solution of the Jewish problem, not only locally but throughout Europe.' "

And while the contemporary debate is primarily about getting the facts straight, recent political trends in Romania lend it some urgency. For example, the second-place showing in the 2000 elections of the nationalist Greater Romania Party has been cited by many Jewish organizations as evidence of some Romanians' willingness to overlook anti-Semitic rhetoric if it comes wrapped in the promise of a return to national glory. The party's platform calls for the return of territory once held by Romania; its leader, Corneliu Vadim Tudor, has reportedly compared Jews to warts and once denied the Holocaust. He has since apologized for that denial, but detractors suspect that his contrition is spurred by political ambition.

In what might seem like a step forward, the Romanian government mandated Holocaust education for high school students in 1999, but a recent analysis of Romanian textbooks shows what a muddled picture some students are still likely to get of the period. Felicia Waldman, a lecturer at the University of Bucharest and a director at the Romanian public policy think tank IDEE, finds that while some books confront the issue matter-of-factly, others persist in exculpating Romanian leaders–especially fascist leader Marshal Ion Antonescu–of any blame. Indeed, some authors credit Antonescu with efforts to save the Jews, while recent scholarship suggests just the opposite.

Virtually every teacher interviewed during one of Radosav's seminars in early September reported receiving the same boilerplate Holocaust education: Six million Jews were killed systematically by the Nazis in other parts of Europe. Romania is not mentioned. But some Romanians' level of ignorance on the subject still has the power to shock even them.

Carmen Bortis, a secondary school teacher from the western town of Resita who attended last year's program, couldn't believe the results of a survey she and her students conducted on the topic. During the past school year, Bortis' students devised a person-on-the-street questionnaire for a local radio station. Twenty-five people were asked if they were familiar with the term Holocaust. Almost no one was. They were also asked if they had heard about atrocities committed against Jews during World War II and if these things happened in Romania. They knew about Hitler and about the extermination camps. A few said the Holocaust had not happened in Romania, but more said they just didn't know.

Likewise, Adrian Bucer, a 29-year-old high school teacher from the western town of Arad, said his students are shocked to hear that it was Romanian soldiers shoving Jews into the death trains.

'WHY DOES THIS MATTER?'

Bucer was one of about 30 teachers attending the last of Radosav's Holocaust education seminars of the year, held in the tiny Transylvanian village of Arcalia. Since she began the program in 2001, about 100 educators from all of Romania's 42 counties have come to these seminars, which take place in a smallish 18th-century castle bristling with onion domes and battlements that has been converted into a research center for Babes-Bolyai University.

The Arcalia program is free for teachers and receives funding from the university, the Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, and the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany. But its scope is limited. Radosav says she accepts about half of the 60 or so who apply each year (in the early years the number of attendees was just 15). Those chosen attend three sessions over the course of a year. Radosav said she looks for younger teachers–most here are in their late 20s. "I wanted young people in this course because it's very, very difficult to change a mentality, to change a way of thinking, to change the education you [received]."

The teachers learn about the history of Jews in Europe and historical and contemporary anti-Semitism. They discuss how the Holocaust has been treated in literature and films, and they hear suggestions for teaching about it themselves.

Some have built web pages. Many have taken their students to Sabbath services and have invited Holocaust survivors to speak in their classrooms. Some have written plays or translated books on the subject. The idea is that they will go home to educate their colleagues as well as their students. Some say their co-workers, and even their students' parents, are enthusiastic, but others report indifference or hostility from other adults. Magdaleno Ceucu, a high school teacher from Pitesti, said her school's other history teacher wasn't interested. Alexandre Copala, a Sibiu secondary school teacher, said her students knew nothing about the Holocaust

before she organized after-school discussions. Meanwhile, she said, other teachers asked her, “Are you Jewish? Why are you doing this? Why does this matter to you?”

TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION

“The truth is, many people are superficially interested [but] they are not so open to be part of this interaction,” said Alexandru David, who teaches high school in the eastern town of Braila. “They say, ‘You are accusing the Romanian people.’ No, not the Romanian people, the Romanian people did not cause the Holocaust.”

David pointed the finger at Romanian leaders, without naming names. The country was led during World War II by Antonescu, until his ouster in a coup in 1944. Antonescu was executed by the communists in 1946 as a war criminal. He is still widely revered in the country for managing to win back, albeit temporarily, much of the territory Romania had lost between the wars. Antonescu is a difficult figure for Romanians, as he also ordered the deportation of tens of thousands of Jews to Romanian extermination camps (though many do not acknowledge this any more than they acknowledge a Romanian Holocaust).

Dealing honestly with Antonescu might prove even trickier than dealing with the murders. Even Pastravanu, for instance, insists that the pogrom from which his father protected 57 Jews was not countenanced by the dictator. Instead, he blames members of a fascist group that had split from Antonescu and, like those textbooks in Waldman’s study, he even credits Antonescu with calling a halt to the massacre.

So the teachers in Arcalia have a lot of work to do. The good news is that their students seem interested. If they can find the right mix of tough-minded honesty and a judicious handling of Romanian heroes, they might succeed. For David, it’s one step in straightening out a country warped by decades of repression and enforced ignorance. “I want to raise a normal generation. I want to show them there is another way.”

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