

UNDER FOUR DICTATORSHIPS. TEN YEARS IN THE LIFE OF A TRANSYLVANIAN
JEWISH COMMUNITY
ALBA IULIA 1940-1950

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For the Jews, the decade 1940-1950 - a time in which the history of Romania had witnessed no less than four dictatorships (the royal, the Iron-Guard-Antonescu and the Antonescu dictatorships, as well as the establishment of the communist regime) - was a time of bitter ordeals and affliction. The evolution of their general situation has been better known lately, chiefly due to the researches carried on in the last two decades¹. We believe that

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it would be very interesting and useful to reconstruct the way in which great historical events and upheavals were mirrored in the everyday life of a provincial Jewish community, namely that of Alba Iulia, where a well preserved communal archive enabled us to make such an approach².

Until 1848, Alba Iulia was the first and only officially acknowledged Jewish community in the Great Principality of Transylvania, amounting to 98.7% in 1785-1786, 88.6% in 1813 and, on the eve of the 1848 revolution, to 42.5% of the urban Jewish population in the province³. With the liberalization of the Jews' access to towns after 1850, Alba Iulia, residence of the Chief-Rabbi of Transylvania, gradually lost its central position, turning into an ordinary provincial community, whose regional influence covered only the central part of Transylvania.

In the first half of 1940, after almost a century of tribulations common to all Transylvanian Jews, bearing the stamp of the 1867 civil emancipation, the tendencies towards assimilation into the Hungarian language and culture up to World War I, the unification of Transylvania with Romania after 1918, the Jews' reorientation to Zionist ideals, the rise of the far right and anti-Semitism in the inter-war period, the community institutions still functioned rather normally, in agreement to the Community statutes which granted their autonomy. The general assembly gathered on March 17, 1940, the last for a long period of over four years, after the due homage paid to king Carol II, voted the budget and the new Executive Committee, presided over by Filip Glück, accompanied by two vice presidents, a legal expert, a cashier, an auditor, a treasurer, four curators, 25 full and 6 deputy members, as well as specialized commissions for taxes, appeal, supervision and educational issues⁴. The Community focused its attention on confessional and social assistance activities (assistance programs for Jewish refugees, poor children, Jews taken to the army) as well as on educational issues. For instance, a curriculum of religion courses for Jewish high-

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school students was elaborated under the supervision of Chief-Rabbi Maurițiu Krausz⁵. Nevertheless, against the background of everyday concerns, ill omens announcing the cessation of normality loomed more and more menacingly. As early as November 1938, Iron Guard members had blown up the synagogue, which led to the establishment of a permanent night watch at the communal institutions. The Community was carrying on its activity under more and more straining circumstances, which

brought about stern restrictions concerning the warming and lighting of the synagogues and school. In August 1940, upon the adoption of the first racial legal measures by the pro-German Gîgurtu Government, the Executive Committee's appeal to solidarity and mutual financial and moral support deemed that "considering the Jews' extremely critical situation" the very existence of the communal institutions was at stake⁶.

Indeed, with the establishment of the Iron Guard - general Antonescu dictatorship, the decree issued on September 9, 1940 prohibited the activity of urban communities with less than 400 families⁷. As the number of taxpaying families in Alba Iulia was around 200, the communal institutions ceased their activity until January 1941, period in which the Community registers did not record any meeting of the Executive Committee. According to later testimonies, Iron Guard terror manifested itself, among others, in the seizure of Jewish shops (for instance, the one belonging to the honorary president of the Community, Ferdinand Fuchs), in the closing and devastation of the Jewish club, etc⁸.

After the Iron Guard rebellion, when Ion Antonescu took over the power, the life of the Community resumed its course under the circumstances of a strict control exercised by the authorities. The general assembly was not summoned until June 1944 and the Executive Committee met only with the Police Department's authorization. Every year, the community school had to ask the authorities to grant them permission to function. New members could be received only with the authorities' approval. Since 1942, the communal autonomy was even more restricted by the establishment of

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the Jewish Central Office, which, by the agency of its County Office, controlled and supervised the Community's activity in every field. The Executive Committee was reorganized in the form of five departments (confessional, educational, financial, statistical and social assistance), whose members were all appointed by the authorities. The departments and the chief-rabbi were due to present monthly reports of activity to the Central Office. They introduced a new evidence and accounting system, the financial affairs of the Community being also under a strict centralized control. The educational activity, the medical assistance for pupils were supervised by the Central Office, exclusively empowered to employ or dismiss the teachers and doctors. The petitions to the authorities were to be filed only through the County Office of the Jewish Central Office, whose expenses were covered from the communal taxes, subscriptions and school fees⁹.

Side by side with the limitation of the Community's autonomy by centralization and strict official control, the period of Antonescu's dictatorship bore the imprint of a constant avalanche of restrictive measures, financial extortion and violation of human rights. The Jews were excluded from liberal professions and they were forbidden to employ Christians in their service. The "Romanization" of the ritual slaughter houses prevented them to observe the dietary laws. They needed a special authorization to travel outside the town and were allowed to go to the town market only after ten o'clock. With the outbreak of the anti-Soviet war, the members of the county communities (Sebeș, Teiuș, Vințu de Jos, Uioara, Ighiu) were massed in Alba Iulia and the local community was compelled to board and support them. Set free after six months, the members of these communities were brought back to Alba Iulia in 1943. The Community's real estates were expropriated in 1943, passing under the administration of the National Center for Romanization. Actually, the Community could rent the buildings and mend them on their own expenses, which reveals that the authorities' intention was only to extort them. Besides regular taxes, extraordinary fiscal duties were imposed on the Jews within the frame of the National Unification and Defense loans, they were compelled to donate money for the future Palace of the Invalids, as well as clothes; all in all, between

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1941-1943, the Jews of Alba Iulia were due to pay an overall sum of 40 million lei under the circumstances in which the communal budget was not over 3,7 million lei in 1943. The Jews taken to the forced labor teams in Boju, Cânepiște, Brad, Deva, Focșani, whose equipment was supplied by the Community, could get exemption in exchange for onerous taxes. The requisition of the Jewish school building, the eviction of the Sephardic rabbi from his house, the levying of taxes on bread by the Town Hall, deemed abusive even by the authorities, rounded off the picture of this repressive system which stamped a heavy and indelible mark upon the life of the Alba Iulia Community between 1941-1944¹⁰.

In spite of the very difficult circumstances, all along these years the community had strived to fulfill its mission and keep up the main communal institutions. A special stress was laid on social assistance activities: free boarding for the evicted, aids for the poor, Jews in forced labor teams, Jewish pupils without financial means, who were supplied with food, clothes, shoes, fire wood. They collected clothes, pills and money for the Jews deported to the trans-Dniester region and for those in the forced labor camps. They donated blankets, bed clothes, mattresses, pillows to the Red Cross. They set up a home for children, a free soup kitchen for the evicted and the poor of their own Community, they received and boarded twenty five orphans repatriated in the fall of 1943 from the trans-Dniester region. In bearing the financial burden of these expensive activities, besides its own resources, the Community could also rely on the support of the JOINT and the Jewish Central Office¹¹.

At the cost of great efforts and difficulties, they managed to keep up the main communal institutions: the two synagogues, the seven grades elementary school, with three schoolteachers accompanied by a religion and a Hebrew teacher, the ritual bathing establishment, the court of justice for internal affairs, presided over by the chief-rabbi. Several initiatives to further develop these institutions, such as the projects for an apprentice school, a book-binding course, an electrotechnic workshop, a cultural circle for

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young Jews¹², were thwarted by the enormous financial difficulties, materialized in a chronic communal budget deficit, which increased year by year. The sole solution was to constantly increase the ritual and social assistance contributions, the gabela, the fees for school, ritual bathing and synagogue pews. More or less successfully, they resorted to donations and fund collections, side by side with the drastic cutting down of the expenses, which resulted in low salaries for communal employees, often not paid in due time and far below the inflation rate, in spite of scarce attempts to offer them compensations¹³.

The great difficulties, the impossibility to cover their needs and fiscal duties also affected the atmosphere within the Community, aggravating the dissensions and conflicts which had never missed. The Sephardic Community was discontented because its leadership was not officially acknowledged and they were not given a separate building for the religious service but during major festivals. Then, there was a latent conflict between the religious and the non-religious, the latter being compelled to pay the gabela even though they did not observe the dietary laws. In 1943, Abraham Isac was denied appointment as head of the educational department because "he is not a religious man"¹⁴. On objective - but also subjective - grounds, they had never managed to collect the fiscal contributions as expected, the huge amount of their arrears aggravating more their financial difficulties. Several well-to-do members refused to pay their share of the decided fiscal duties and even to participate in the communal activities because they were not included in the Executive Committee. Others were dissatisfied with the fact that the distribution of the fiscal duties was not in agreement with the financial situation of the taxpaying members, blaming the community leadership for not including representatives of the poorer

strata of the community in the tax distribution commission. It was impossible to put into effect coercive measures to collect the taxes but in the case of people who were granted exemption from forced labor or special licenses to practice their profession. For the rest, they could do nothing but to send them endless

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appeals and summons, threaten them with the authorities, religious punishments or boycott from the part of the other members of the community, means which the Executive Committee eventually hesitated to resort to¹⁵.

The consequence was an increase in the budget deficit from 46% in 1942 to 60% in the spring of 1944, which placed them in the impossibility to cover the social assistance expenses, to pay the salaries and the taxes due to the state. In order to find a solution, on June 11, 1944, after a long intermission, the authorities agreed to summon the general assembly of the Community, but only 61 of the 211 taxpaying members participated, as the opposition led by Maurițiu Schächter, whose protests against the Executive Committee had grown more and more vehement, boycotted the meeting. Consequently, it turned into a monologue of the leaders of the Executive Committee (president Filip Glück, secretary-general Emil Finkel) and of the County Office (president Aladar Springer), in which they appealed to the spirit of sacrifice and solidarity of the more prosperous members of the community. It was for the first time that official documents of the Community hinted at what "happens to our brothers right under our eyes" and urged them to become aware of the fact that "in crucial hours earthly possessions are of no avail [...] misfortune does not choose and afflicts us all equally". As none of the present members raised any criticism or objection, the Executive Committee decided that they had managed well the Community's finances and reconfirmed the leadership in all its capacities¹⁶.

This status-quo triumph of the community leadership proved to be quite short-lived, the crucial historical events in the aftermath of the 23rd of August Insurrection and the fall of the Antonescu regime leading to major changes in the communal microcosm of Alba Iulia as well. The dissolution of the Jewish Central Office and the setting up of the Federation of Jewish Communities in Romania was followed in October 1944 by a general injunction to replace the old Executive Committees with interim Commissions, elected in keeping with the representation of the political parties among the Jews in every locality. As there were no Jewish political parties in Alba Iulia, on January 1, 1945, the interim Commission was appointed by

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electing its 33 members from the socio-professional categories (merchants, craftsmen, people of liberal professions, employees), accompanied by two Sephardim and two Zionist representatives. Maurițiu Schächter was elected by secret vote president of the Board, which consisted in three members, while the former president Filip Glück was appointed honorary president. In his reception speech, the interim president, instated full president in the general gathering of March 4, 1945, launched an ambitious agenda of changes in the spirit of "today's democratic views", which envisaged to associate people outside the Board to the making of decisions, to fairly distribute the fiscal duties between the social categories and grant them autonomy to decide the due share of their members, to raise the salaries of the community employees, to immediately replace the leadership members who did not participate in the Board's activity¹⁷.

The first concern of the new leadership was to implement the compensatory measures for the damage suffered by the Community during the previous dictatorships. Beginning with November 1,

1944, they took back the expropriated real estates belonging to the Community. At the same time, they recovered the money and clothes collected for the forced labor teams as well as the rolls of the Jewish school confiscated in 1942. They recovered the furniture and the goods of the Jewish club, plundered by Iron Guard members in 1940. They took over the assets of the former communities of Vințu de Jos, Teiuș, Ighiu and Sebeș. Ritual slaughter was again authorized and the community school regained the right to issues officially acknowledged diplomas. They asked the authorities to find and arrest the criminals who had blown up the synagogue in 1938 and made a list of the Iron Guard members in town guilty of crimes against Jewish inhabitants. At the same time, they issued good conduct certificates for people who wished to demonstrate their favorable attitude towards the Jews. They set up an inquiry commission to investigate the activity of the former Community leadership and of the County Office, which consisted in five members (an engineer, two accountants, a carpenter and an upholsterer). The conclusions of the inquiry, published in May 1945, absolved the leaders of the former County Office, and the former president Filip Glück silenced his many op-

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ponents and critics by offering the Community a plot of land for young Jews to work¹⁸.

Between 1945-1947, the Community's activity was further on focused on social assistance issues and on the good functioning of the communal institutions. They offered assistance to Jews who had returned from forced labor camps, to refugees who had come from northern Transylvania during the military operations, to former political prisoners, to repatriated deportees. They collected money for Red Cross caravans that were searching for Jews deported from northern Transylvania. They made collections for the Jews of Budapest, boarded and supported a group of orphans from northern Transylvania and Budapest. They kept on assisting the needy and poor pupils of their own Community. In May 1946, the kitchen soup provided a number of 185 people with free meals. Community employees were granted bonuses to make up for the high prices. They organized a medical station, where medication was free, and set up a popular loan bank "in order to help ordinary people". They restored the communal institutions: repaired the synagogues and the chief-rabbi's house, employed a deputy rabbi, a chacham and a bailiff, reopened the elementary and the Talmud Torah schools, the ritual bathing establishment and the communal court of justice for civil cases. The Chevra Kadisha and the Union of the Israelite Women also made their contribution to the communal activity¹⁹.

In spite of the JOINT's consistent support, the financial situation of the Community soon worsened against the background of the general economic crisis. The alarmingly rising inflation thwarted any budget anticipation and the salaries and financial aids gradually lost their effective value. The monetary reform of August 1947 dealt a final blow to the financial situation of the Community, over 212 million lei, which were never recovered, remained locked up in the National Bank. The current expenses were augmented by extraordinary taxes, such as their due share to the war compensations decided in the Armistice Convention with the United Nations or the 2 million lei contribution for the erection of two monuments in honor of the Red and Romanian Armies. In exchange, in the summer of 1946,

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when the 20 million lei state subvention for the schools was distributed, the Jewish school received only 360,000 lei, which the community leadership deemed quite "insignificant". The Denominations' Law issued in the same year stipulated that the assets of the dissolved associated communities were to be taken over by the state²⁰.

In order to find solutions for the financial difficulties, the Community leadership was compelled to resort to means similar to those fiercely criticized in the past: constant increase of the taxes, new fiscal duties (for instance, everyone who wished to be called up to the Torah had to pay a fee), rise in the kasher meat price, ceaseless review of the list of people entitled to assistance, sanctions against those who were in arrears. The discontent generated by these measures was accompanied by a recurrent rekindling of the older conflict with the Sephardim, who were canceled the right to have their own prayer house, while their rabbi, Nachman Kahan was forced to leave town. In exchange, they set up an Agudat Israel organization, which demanded to receive a separate prayer house and to establish a commission for ritual issues. In 1947, when Maurițiu Krausz left the country, the Alba Iulia Community was deprived of a chief-rabbi as well as of the chacham and the religion teacher²¹.

The constant decline in the financial situation and the inner state of conflict within the Community were accompanied by more and more obvious external political pressures. As early as January 1945, the sessions of the Board were opened by president Maurițiu Schächter with eulogies and homage paid to Stalin, the Allies, King Mihai and the August 23 insurrection. From April 1945 only members of the organizations of the National Democratic Front (set up and supervised by the communists) were accepted in the Executive Board and the members of the Community were persistently urged to join these organizations "in order to prevent fascist horrors to happen again". They pursued a line of action often adopted in the future, with the gradual taking over of the communal affairs by the communists' screen organization - the Jewish Democratic Committee (JDC) -, namely, the man who was to come up with these suggestions was a person vulnerable to blackmail, in this case the former secretary-general Emil

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Finkel, easy to handle because he had held a leading office during the war. The Community was summoned to participate in the festivities organized by the NDF as well as in the citizens' night watch troops²².

The intrusion of the political factor in the internal affairs of the Community was also conspicuous in the authorities' interference in the leadership's structure. The secretary-general Tiberiu Neumann was dismissed in May 1945 because he "does not work in agreement to the democratic principles". President Maurițiu Schächter, who had repeatedly resigned because of the financial difficulties, was each time reinstated by the overwhelming majority of the general assembly of the Community, who trusted him. Nevertheless, in May 1947 he was replaced, together with the entire Executive Board, with an interim Board led by Ernest Löwe. These evolutions were a prelude to the radical changes which were about to take place in the entire Jewish life due to the establishment of the communist regime. In April 1945, on the occasion of president Roosevelt's death, Schächter eulogized the American leader, saying that "he was a true friend of the Jews all over the world", a champion of Zionist ideals, who had claimed that "one should support every action that has in view the reconstruction of the Eretz" and a promoter of the "national religious spirit" in schools, speech which also contributed to his replacement. In the general meeting held in November 1945, Schächter asserted with courage that the "Jews, subject to so many ordeals in the last years [...] are now once more compelled to defend their interests by themselves and cannot look anywhere for help", and in 1946 he made an appeal for the support and development of "our ancient institutions"²³.

The first omen of the radical changes in the communal life following the establishment of the new communist regime appeared as early as November 2, 1947, when the Community was ordered to report to the Police Department on any aid received from abroad. By the end of the same month, the presidents of the communities all over the country were summoned at the JDC office in Bucharest,

where they were informed about the replacement of Wilhelm Filderman, the leader of the Federation of Jewish Communities in Romania, with counselor Rosenkranz and also about the decision to re-

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place all the executive committees in the country. The new Boards were to include women as well. The authorities were to inspect communal schools and control the way in which they adapted the curricula, chiefly concerning Hebrew and Yiddish, Jewish history and religion. JOINT aids were not to be accepted anymore, except the support for soup kitchens destined exclusively for poor children, sick or disabled people unable to work. They decreed that everybody had to get employment, craftsmen being compelled to set up cooperatives based on a "collective work program". In order to make the Jew put up more easily with the new state-of-facts, they promised that "the change of regime will not impinge upon the communal autonomy" and that religion would not be affected. At the same time, they hinted at the possibility to recover the communal funds locked up in the stabilization period and they granted a subvention for the schools²⁴.

The next step was taken in February 1948, at the meeting with the presidents of the communities, held at the Bucharest Federation, by stipulating the principle of strict centralization. They decided that the JDC was to have full control over the Jews' relations with the official authorities and on their cultural activities, and that everybody was compelled to get employment in the industrial or agricultural fields. In March, they launched the "re-stratification" slogan, which meant - according to the explanation given by the local representative of the JDC, Ludovic Leeb - that "only those who work will have food". They set up re-stratification sub-departments for employment, organization of apprentice schools and workshops, trade and agricultural cooperatives, made up of twelve representatives of the communal Executive Board and of the JDC, as well as of eight professors²⁵.

In April 1948, the Ministry of National Education was granted control over the school budget, and in the next month they introduced a new accounting system and started to check the citizenship of all the Jews²⁶.

Confronted with the avalanche of changes, the Community leadership made strenuous efforts to save at least some elements of communal autonomy and spiritual identity. They strived to employ a new chief-rabbi or at least to promote chacham Zoltan Markovits to the office of deputy rabbi, but both attempts failed. They rejected the insinuation that the leavened

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bread received from America was not "kasher". At the suggestion of the Central Orthodox Israelite Office of Cluj they fasted in May 1948 "for the improvement of the situation in Israel"²⁷.

But the JDC responded without delay, on May 30, 1948 they peremptorily requested the resignation of president Löwe and of the entire Board. The JDC representative was spoke about the full authority of the JDC to control Jewish affairs, "like a central Headquarters". The Board attempted to resist but on June 15 the legal expert Ferdinand Jozsef was removed and, on June 28, president Löwe resigned "because of my health and other duties". The general assembly gathered on July 11, 1948, presided over by Ludovic Leeb, elected the new leadership: Izidor Schlesinger, president, Adolf Ganz, vice-president and the head of the new re-stratification commission. The commission for appeal was presided over by Ladislau Dukasz, the secretary general of the local JDC and the all-present Ludovic Leeb was its auditor. As a concession, in order to appease potential discontent, the Executive Board also included a representative of the religious Jews²⁸.

The new Board started to hasten the implementation of the radical changes in the communal

life. They set up a commission to check all the community employees. The compulsory fiscal contribution was replaced with voluntary donations. They reviewed the list of those who were granted assistance and free of charge access to the soup kitchen and ritual bathing establishment, trying to persuade the formerly assisted people to get employment at the factories of Hunedoara and Cugir. They closed the ritual slaughter house. In September 1948, the school was taken over by the state and they stopped teaching Hebrew and religion. They closed the Agudat Israel prayer house and reorganized the home for children, Ladislau Dukasz criticizing the unhealthy "nationalist-chauvinist spirit" that had prevailed in education. In order to "enlighten the poor religious masses" concerning the necessity to "annihilate nationalism, support democracy" and "the importance of the assistance granted by the Soviet Union", the JDC initiated a program of political-cultural lectures. After the Soviet model, they promoted Yiddish at the expense of Hebrew, seen as a means to spread the "nationalist spirit". Speeches delivered in Yiddish could be for the first time

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heard in the meeting held on August 29, 1948, and ideological lectures were to be delivered in this language as well. A superficial but nevertheless telling sign was the replacement of the term "sir" with "friend" in the official memoranda and other documents of the Community, while in June 1949 the term "comrade" appeared. The attendance list of the meeting ended with the sentence "Long Live the Popular Republic of Romania!"²⁹.

In order to implement these measures they made use of the services of people whose part played in the past had made them susceptible to blackmail. Thus, in the meeting held on August 29, 1948, the former president of the County Office of the Jewish Central Office, Aladar Springer was compelled to eulogize the new leadership and the JDC, which "has made praiseworthy efforts" to "do away with poverty and hardships". On the same occasion, the representative of the religious Jews, Ilie Herșcovici, expressed his joy for being able to speak Yiddish and for the fact that "religion was in no danger". The adherence to the consensus spirit demanded by the new regime was conspicuous in November 1949, when the forced donations for the erection of "Casa Scânteii" were "joyfully" offered by all the members - according to the minutes of the meeting.

The process in which communal institutions were used to persuade the Jews to integrate in the new system ended in February 1950 with the adoption of a Statute, the "constitutive document" elaborated by the Federation of Bucharest. After the document was signed by all the 200 members of the community (instead of the 50 minimum number of required signatures), the new leadership was appointed, presided over by Henrik Bruckman and with Ludovic Leeb as vice-president³⁰.

After ten years of turmoil, ordeals and struggles for the preservation of the institutional autonomy and spiritual identity and even for physical survival, the Jewish Community of Alba Iulia turned into a depersonalized wheel within the centralizing and leveling mechanism of the communist regime, which stamped its nefarious mark on the evolutions in the next half of century.

NOTE

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