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Fighting Antisemitism: Underground Resistance of the Zionist Youth During the Holocaust in Romania

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Abstract

In 1930s Romania, Zionist youth organizations saw a resurgence amid increasing antisemitism and the global political mobilization of young people. These organizations underwent specific stages, throughout the totalitarian regimes of the Second World War, including a semi-legal period during the beginnings of the oppression, followed by an underground phase from 1942 onwards. This shift occurred when the Jewish Federation was replaced by the Jewish Council (*Centrala*), a state-controlled entity representing the Jewish community. This paper explores the clandestine Zionist non-armed resistance efforts carried out by youth organizations in Romania from 1942 to 1944, drawing on archives from the Romanian Secret Police (*Siguranța*). Focusing on the support received from Jewish networks abroad, the discussion highlights the actions of the Gordonia and Dror youth organizations. Notably, members of these groups faced convictions by the Court Martial in 1944 for aiding refugee Jews in crossing the Romanian border and preparing for emigration to Palestine. The argument posits that these acts of defiance constituted a form of Jewish resistance. The overall research endeavour seeks to provide a comprehensive history of Jewish youth activism during tumultuous times – an

often-overlooked aspect in the broader narrative of the Holocaust in Romania.

Keywords: *underground youth organizations; resistance; Zionism; Gordonia; the Holocaust in Romania*

1. Underground movements – methodological challenges of a fluid research topic

Most histories of the underground resistance during the Second World War (Zander, 2017) often overlook references to Zionist youth movements or specific actions of Jews – a category perceived especially as victims. The primary role in resistance narratives is attributed to partisans in Axis-occupied Europe (Laqueur, 2017, pp. 202-238), wherein Jews are depicted as part of these dispersed mixed anti-fascist movements. Jewish resistance is thus approached as a distinct resistance with particular features (Henry, 2014). In this category, the Jewish uprising in the Ghetto of Warsaw stands as the most notorious case of armed resistance under exceptional conditions – as Jews were not only victims of occupation, but also individuals deprived of any civil rights. While armed uprisings in ghettos and camps represent the most forceful responses to the persecution of Jewish victims, more common instances of resistance involve softer forms, such as escape, smuggling, and other acts of defiance on a larger scale. It is important to note that resistance itself remained a marginal phenomenon. Researchers argue that this marginality is defining, as a mass reaction would have manifested as a revolutionary movement instead (Wieviorka & Tebinka, 2006, p. 153). Whether individual or collective, resistance implies the intention to fight, oppose the persecuting power, and engage in transgression by disobeying laws and orders (Wieviorka & Tebinka, 2006, p. 153).

This study explores the covert Zionist resistance activities undertaken by youth organizations in Romania between 1942 and 1944, based on materials from the Romanian Secret Police (Siguranța). Emphasizing the assistance provided by Jewish networks overseas, the analysis underscores the efforts of the Gordonia and Dror youth organizations. In Romania, anti-fascist resistance as a minor political phenomenon arose under similar conditions to everywhere else in Europe. The country was a Nazi ally during the war and not an occupied territory, while following the losses of the provinces under the reign of King Carol II, most of the population supported the dictatorial regime of Ion Antonescu and participation in the war. The few Romanian partisans were joined by villagers revolting against the compulsory army requisitions, as well as anti-fascist inhabitants, Jewish victims or army deserters, and communist activists.ⁱ The main role of civil resistance in the context of anti-Jewish oppression is attributed to humanitarian initiatives, with the Red Cross having a central place in close collaboration with the Jewish leadership (Șiperco, 2003; Deletant, 2006).

The documentation of resistance movements relies only to a limited extent on archival documents, with the majority of information, however scarce, predominantly derived from secondary literature and testimonies (Zander, 2017, p. ix). Even for well-known and intricate

movements such as the French Resistance, survivor memories serve as the primary source of information. The dynamic nature of these organizations and the secretive nature of their operations deliberately avoided creating documents that could now serve as archives for research purposes (Zander, 2017, p. 60). However, due to a critical need for communication, exceptions were sometimes made, resulting in the production of documents. This is exemplified by the case study discussed in this article, which focuses on written correspondence intercepted by the authorities.

The exploration of Jewish resistance has largely been influenced by Yehuda Bauer's definition which emphasizes group initiatives (Bauer, 1989). This definition has been expanded by historians such as Wolf Gruner (2023) to encompass not only group efforts but also individual acts of defiance. When addressing Zionist youth underground movements, I adopt a broader perspective of resistance, considering it as “any individual or group action in opposition to known laws, actions, or intentions of the Nazis and their helpers” (Gruner, 2023, p. 2).

Zionist youth organizations represent a distinct chapter of resistance during the Holocaust. The national Jewish movement advocating the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine had deep roots in Romania dating back to the nineteenth century, with a strong revival in the 1930s (Filipovici, 2024a). A decade later, amidst the dramatic evolution of antisemitism, the Jewish communities in Romania became victims of racial policies (Final Report, 2004) that paved the way for the Holocaust. The tragic plight of the Jews in this eastern European country was the result of a systematic policy of destruction, marked by the deprivation of their civil and political rights. This culminated in the deportation of Jewish communities from the provinces of Bessarabia, Bukovina, and northern Moldavia to the ghettos of Transnistria between 1941 and 1942. In regions within the Romanian borders, Jewish inhabitants faced violence, discriminatory measures, forced labour, and the challenges of adapting to a restrictive life. Despite these hardships, the communities in these areas were relatively safe in terms of survival, as the “cleansing” plans devised by the state’s leader, Ion Antonescu, ultimately failed. In this setting, the Jewish leadership and Zionist youth organizations found opportunities to be active even during the fascist regimes. Their main operational hub was in the capital city of Bucharest, which fortunately remained exempt from mass deportations.

Recent research on the Holocaust in Romania has delved into aspects such as anti-Jewish legislation, the reactions of Jewish leaders to persecution, and the experiences of deportees in the ghettos of Transnistria, with volumes approaching this latter topic from different perspectives (Dumitru, 2016; Solonari, 2019; Harward, 2021). However, there is a

notable scarcity of works exploring the topic of resistance. Iaacov Geller's book (2004) examines spiritual resistance carried out through the Jewish school network, the social and health care system, and the religious actions of rabbis. A more recent volume by Ștefan Ionescu (2015) focuses on the legal resistance strategies employed by Jewish officials during Ion Antonescu's regime. Notably, in Romania and elsewhere, resistance has primarily been examined as an attribute of adults employing a variety of non-violent strategies (Pegelow Kaplan & Gruner, 2020). Furthermore, there has been a lack of a comprehensive monograph on Zionism in Romania, let alone a specific focus on Zionist youth movements.

The initial focus of the text will be on delineating the legal status of Zionist youth organizations during the Holocaust in Romania (1938-1944), providing an overview of the evolution and contextual factors shaping their activities. Subsequently, the paper will reconstruct the micro history of the clandestine rescue mission undertaken by the Gordonia and Dror organizations from 1943 to 1944. The case, which became the subject of a trial at the Court Martial in 1944, will be reconstructed primarily using substantial investigation files identified in the Archive of the former Secret Police in Romania.ⁱⁱ These files encompass a wealth of intercepted letters from Zionist youth, police reports, and statements from individuals involved in the rescue efforts. The research will be complemented by additional archive documents and personal accounts, collectively shedding light on this hitherto unknown story.

2. The evolution of Jewish youth movements

Zionist youth organizations have roots dating back to the pre-World War I eraⁱⁱⁱ and experienced a resurgence in the 1930s across various provinces. These organizations manifested in diverse forms of ideological expression, placing significant emphasis on physical strength and self-defence training. While some of them initially gained recognition from the authorities, the highly politicized society which marked the 1930s saw official restrictions on the membership of Jewish youngsters, particularly students. In 1938, under King Carol II's dictatorship, all youth organizations refusing to pledge allegiance to the king were disbanded, including the Zionist youth organizations.

The royal dictatorship (February 1938–September 1940) followed the brief stint of an antisemitic government (Goga–Cuza) (29 December 1937–10 February 1938) that introduced the initial anti-Jewish legislation concerning the revision of citizenship. This marked a precursor to subsequent far-right, antisemitic regimes. Leading up to the outbreak of war, there was a notable identity “awakening” among many Jewish youngsters, particularly those from acculturated families. This awakening stemmed from an increasing awareness of their Jewish

identity which, unfortunately, transformed into victimhood as Romania implemented racial legislation, systematically excluding Jews from various social and political spheres. This exclusion further intensified the interest of young Jews in Zionist movements. Others sought refuge and safety among illegal communist circles.

During the war, the Zionist youth organizations experienced two distinct periods:

1. During the summer of 1940 to the summer of 1942, Romania embarked on a totalitarian trajectory as the Nazi army advanced in Europe, disrupting the balance of power. In June 1940, the Soviet Army occupied Bessarabia and northern Bukovina based on the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact signed in August 1939. The Romanian army, compelled to retreat without resistance, saw a divided response from the Jewish population – some welcoming the Soviet troops, while others fled to Romania, rejecting the communist takeover (Final Report, 2004, pp. 71-87). In Romania, the royal dictatorship was falling apart. Attempting to save his throne and the country's territory, the king sought concessions from Germany through elaborate antisemitic legislation. This legislation marginalized Jews in society and appeased a large segment of the population that viewed Jews as scapegoats for the country's structural problems. However, the territorial losses in the summer of 1940, including the annexation of northern Transylvania by Hungary in August 1940, led to the king's abdication. His regime was succeeded by the National Legionary State (September 1940–January 1941), which implemented severe Romanianization policies and other forms of violent persecution against Jews. The collaboration between the Legionary movement and Ion Antonescu came to an end following the legionary rebellion and the pogrom in Bucharest,^{iv} in January 1941 – an integral chapter in the Jewish tragedy in Romania.

Following the brief National Legionary State, Romania entered the military dictatorship of Ion Antonescu (1941-1944), the key architect of the Holocaust in the country. Amidst this period, the communities that were not subjected to deportation endeavoured to sustain regular community life and facilitated access to private education for Jewish youth. Despite facing oppression and bearing witness to or becoming victims of pogroms in Bucharest (January 1941) or Iași (June 1941),^v paradoxically, the legal prohibition on their membership in Jewish organizations did not come into effect until August 1942.

2. The second period spanning from the spring of 1942 to the summer of 1944 frames the underground period for the Zionist movements. In January 1942, the Jewish Federation was replaced by The Jewish Council (Centrala),^{vi} a state-controlled structure representing the Jews, whose leaders were subordinated to the Antonescu regime. Soon after, in the summer of 1942 (7 August), the Zionist Organization - led by lawyer Mișu Benvenisti - was disbanded together

with all its youth associations.^{vii} Following this, Zionist activity did not cease but continued to operate illegally, underground, divided between the actions of the older Zionist leaders and those of the Zionist youth. The older Zionist leaders created an underground form of intervention in 1942, called Ezra, The Refugee Aid Committee [Comisia Autonomă de Ajutorare], led by Wilhelm Filderman and Mișu Benvenisti. A. L. Zissu organized an illegal Emigration Office [Oficiul de Emigrare în Palestina] in 1943. The Jewish Council endorsed its own mission in November 1943, under the Initiative Committee of the Relief Works of the Jewish Council [Departamentul de Asistență Socială al Centralei Evreilor]. The Joint Organization, represented in Romania by Wilhelm Fisher, also had its independent activities.^{viii} In parallel, despite the disapproval of the older leaders, the Zionist youth organized underground networks. The Secret Police also documented parallel actions and distinguished between the halutz^{ix} youth movements and the actions of the older leaders working under the Jewish Council or different illegal committees. The latter were financed by Jewish organizations from abroad which allocated a certain share to the pioneer youth. Any collaboration between older leaders and the youth remained limited.^x For instance, A. L. Zissu commented on the formal relations between the Emigration Office and the youth groups who had their own autonomy deriving from their connections and finance from Istanbul: “I protested several times to Jerusalem against this financial autonomy of the halutz youth.”^{xi}

After 1942, the Zionist youth was mobilized by the Jewish Council into special work detachments. But in the meantime, the youth engaged in subversive actions, aiding refugee or deported Jews. According to the police investigations, the active halutz organizations in this period were the leftist Hashomer Hatzair led by Krel Mendel; Gordonia led by Tabacinic Gherș Sunea (president of the Halutz organization in Bucharest) and Dror coordinated by Scarlat Iancu; the centrist Hanoar Hatzioni led by Ițic Hertig (Itzak Artzi); the religious Mizrachi led by Haspel I.,^{xii} and Habonim in Transylvania. As research shows so far, two main episodes marked the history of the youth resistance: the case of young members of Hashomer Hatzair, executed and imprisoned for distributing anti-war, anti-fascist propaganda (March 1942) (Filipovici, 2024b) and the case of young members of Gordonia and Dror (1944), convicted for aiding victims in Transnistria and refugee Jews from Poland and Bukovina to cross the border and prepare for emigration to Palestine. Both cases were tried at the Court Martial but received disparate convictions due to the specific political and war context. The Hashomer Hatzair case caused public shock due to the unexpected death penalty for three adolescents, issued by a judge under Nazi political pressure. The resistance acts of Gordonia and Dror members were

more intricate than the propaganda efforts of their Zionist colleagues, but the evolving war conditions led to a less severe conviction.

3. The rescue actions of Gordonia and Dror youth organizations (1943-1944)

3.1 Main actors

The tragedy of the young boys from Hashomer Hatzair did not yield the impact expected by the Nazis. Post-1942, the subversive acts of the Zionist youth persisted. One of the most perilous actions was coordinated from Bucharest by a few members of Gordonia and Dror, encompassing three main dimensions: 1) providing assistance (money, food, clothes, salt) to Jewish victims in Transnistria and Chernivtsi (Bukovina); 2) facilitating the border crossing for Jewish refugees from Poland, Transnistria and Chernivtsi into Romania; 3) initiating an action of armed defence organized upon the withdrawal of the German armies (in 1944).

The following data extracted from the investigation files provide information about the origins and role of the key members involved in the rescue actions:

Name	Birth year	Home city	Profession	Organization	Member since	Main role in the underground movement
David Tenenbaum	1922	Bălți	Clerk	Gordonia	1932	Refugees matters; correspondence and subventions from abroad; false documents.
Tabacinic Gherș Sunea	1921	Bălți	Clerk	Gordonia	1941	Leader; main organizer; correspondence and subventions from abroad; false documents.
Filip Segal	1922	Buchares	Clerk	Gordonia		Fake stamps and ID cards; education
			Student – Onescu Jewish college, medical			Correspondence with the halutzim from the provinces; refugees.
Iosif Friedman		Vaslui	section	Gordonia		
		Buchares	High school		1943	Connections with the provinces, delivering of documents; refugees.
Felicia Schwartz	1921	Buchares	graduate Clerk at the Jewish Council	Gordonia		Refugees; recruitment
Iancu Zucker	1919	Vaslui	Council	Gordonia	1934	Leader; Connections to Istanbul; subventions and correspondence from abroad; false documents; bribe.
	1921					Correspondence with the halutzim from the provinces; distributing news.
Scarlat Iancu		Iași	No profession Student; Cultura high school	Dror		
Jean Vătărescu	1922	Bacău	school	Gordonia	1941	
	1922	Alexandria			1941	Refugees matters.
Ghizela Blank			Typist			

Table 1. Data about the key members of Gordonia and Dror

While the rescue missions unfolded through organized team work, it was coordinated by David Tenenbaum and Tabacinic Gherș Sunea, leaders of Gordonia, along with Scarlat Iancu, leader of Dror.



Picture 1. Gordonia rescue committee also included Filip Segal, Alșive Blanck, Paula Schraer, Felicia Schwartz, Iosif Friedman and Bianca Finkelstein

Source: ACNSAS, Fond Penal, file 011123, vol. 2, p. 138.

The young people were born around 1920, a period marked by the challenging post-war reconstruction and the integration of the provinces into the new national Romanian state. They represented the first generation of youngsters raised and educated under Romanian administration, facing the difficulties of integration into a nationalist state and the desire to explore their own ethnic identity. When anti-Jewish persecution started, they were in their 20s and were graduates of secondary schools. Most of them originated from Moldavia and Bessarabia,^{xiii} regions with a strong Zionist movement before the war.

Gordonia was established in Bessarabia in the mid-1920s as a socialist Zionist organization – ‘the symbol of working life, of belief in national ideals, and friendly cooperation’ – and merged with other organizations from Bukovina and Bessarabia, reaching around 2,000 members by 1929. In 1927, it also became part of the Zionist Youth Organization from Romania (Vinitzky, 1973).^{xiv} In Moldavia, in the city of Iași, the Zionist Youth joined the training farm of He-Halutz built on the outskirts of Păcurari with the support of the Zionist Federation (Vinitzky, 1973).^{xv} He-Halutz training increased during the 1930s, responding to growing antisemitism with a rise in requests for immigration permits.

Dror – a movement formed through the detachment of radical groups from other organizations – became involved in training during the same period. The geographical distribution of He-Halutz members in 1930 showed that most of the members were from Bessarabia (450), followed by the Old Kingdom of Romania (177), Bukovina (71) and Transylvania (10). Within He-Halutz, the leading organizations were represented by Hashomer Hatzair and Gordonia, with around 400 members in 1933.^{xvi} Every year, tens of young Zionists from Bessarabia emigrated to Palestine, contributing to the construction of the kibbutzim. In 1932, the He-Halutz centre was relocated to Bucharest, and the Floreasca training farm was established on the outskirts of the city for halutzim from all over Romania.^{xvii} With the implementation of the king's dictatorship and the introduction of the state of siege the He-Halutz organization was formally disbanded,^{xviii} although in reality the farm continued to function, tolerated by the local authorities. Due to the intervention of Jewish leaders, its activity was able to be resumed during the king's regime, but collapsed under the National Legionary State.

Sunea and Tenenbaum, the leaders of Gordonia, fled from Bessarabia to Bucharest in the summer of 1940 once the Soviet army entered the province. In a letter addressed by Sunea to one of his friends, he recalls that “both of us left Bessarabia at the head of a group of 35 people in the first days after the Red invasion of June 5700 (1940); we fight, the third year, with enemies from outside and inside, we raised a young generation of leaders and halutzim, with all difficulties.” (Wexler & Popov, 1996, vol. 1, pp. 15-16). During the war, Sunea and his Bessarabian peers faced permanent suspicion from the Romanian police who accused them of communist activity: “More than once we had to run away from home at night because the police was following us.”^{xix} Until the National-Legionary State ordered the closing of the farm, Gordonia and Dror members trained at Floreasca – an “isolated island” far from the fear of fascism (Artzi, 1999, p. 81) and performed the compulsory work required by authorities.^{xx} After the farm was disbanded, Gordonia members moved to the training youth dormitories located in the Jewish neighbourhood of Bucharest, on Anton Pann Street, in crowded rooms separated for boys and girls. On one side, the building hosted the members of Gordonia and Dror; on the other, Hanoar Hatzioni and B’nei Akiva. In the same courtyard, another building led to the offices of the adult Zionist Organization (Artzi, 1999, p. 79).^{xxi} In 1942, the youngsters received work exemption cards from the Jewish Council and enrolled in the halutzim detachment that allowed them to work on private Jewish farms. According to Sunea's testimony, after the Jewish Council replaced the Federation, he was also involved in collecting money for the relief fund within the Assistance department of the Jewish Council.^{xxii}

But the escalation of persecution in Europe and Romania during the war demanded more than just preparation for immigration. From the outset of the persecutions in 1940, the older Jewish leadership grappled with the limited possibilities of halting deportations to Transnistria, aiding the deportees, and persuading the government to allow people to return home (Benjamin, 2003). Leaders such as Wilhelm Filderman (the main political leader of the Jewish community in Romania – an unofficial position he had held since late 1941), the Chief Rabbi Alexandru Șafran, or the Zionist leaders A. L. Zissu and Mișu Benvenisti, cultivated relations with the Romanian authorities at different levels – from the head of state, Marshal Ion Antonescu, to individuals in lower ranks within the police and the Ministry of Interior. Filderman adopted a unique strategy of legal resistance by consistently complaining to local and international authorities about the situation of the Jews through the legal procedure of petitioning. While intentionally revealing the negative impact of the antisemitic measures on Romania's foreign policy and national economy (Ionescu, 2020, p. 92), his petitions were sometimes successful and led to the salvation of a part of the Jewish community (Ionescu, 2020, p. 104). However, frictions within the Jewish leadership sometimes resulted in a lack of common coordination. Emigration to Palestine was a source of tension, particularly between Zionists and non-Zionist factions, and Filderman addressed petitions to international Jewish leaders regarding the limited access of the non-Zionist population to organised legal emigration (Filderman, 2017, vol. 2, pp. 534-535). At the same time, it was precisely the collaboration of older Zionist or non-Zionist leaders with the Romanian authorities that sparked disapproval from the Zionist youth. However, in 1942, Romania suspended the emigration of Jews under German pressure (Babeș, 2013, p. 33). In these difficult conditions, certain members of both the Zionist youth and older leaders established contacts with the Zionist movement abroad, receiving instructions and funds for legal or illegal rescue actions.

In 1943, a pivotal moment occurred in the response of the Yishuv (the Jewish communities from Palestine) to the fate of European Jewry, as efforts were made to reestablish communication with communities in Europe. In March 1943, the Jewish Agency Rescue Committee was created, comprising representatives from all Jewish political groups in Palestine (Ofer, 1991, p. 207). Through the delegation in Istanbul, the committee endeavoured to send funds and aid, and to assist in smuggling refugees from Poland to Slovakia and onward to Hungary and Romania. After a temporary stay in Romania, the refugees were meant to embark on boats from the port of Constanța to reach Palestine. Istanbul was chosen as the communication hub not only due to its neutral status in the war, but also because of its proximity to the Balkans. Utilizing letters, telephone communication, clerks and couriers, the

delegation sought detailed information from the Nazi-occupied territories (information about the plight of Jews, the number and situation of refugees, train schedules, border patrols, the names of policemen that could be bribed etc.). The information was then relayed to Palestine and other Jews in the free world (Ofer, 1989, p. 634). Also, information collected from a certain country served as a warning to communities in other countries (Ofer, 1989, p. 636).

The Jewish Agency delegation was split into two smaller groups: workers of the Mossad le-Aliyah Bet and representatives of Histadrut. Even before 1943, some important representatives worked in Istanbul: Chaim Barlas, the director of the Palestine Office, a leader contested by other movements, but the only one legally recognized by Turkish authorities. Venya Pomerantz, the representative of the kibbutz Meuhad movement, was in charge of communication within the Committee (Ofer, 1991, p. 211) and was, in fact, one of the main recipients of letters from the Zionist youth in Romania. Scarlet Iancu, the leader of Dror, seemed to have been Pomerantz's main connection in Romania, sparking discontent among Gordonia leaders.^{xxiii}

A substantial volume of correspondence from Gordonia was directed to Geneva, specifically to Nathan Schwalb, the representative of He-Halutz. Since January 1941, Schwalb had periodically sent money to all movements in the Halutz. However, the amounts were never sufficient to meet their numerous needs: for the Zionists in labour camps, legal arrangements, secretarial work, couriers, deportation matters, provincial activities, cultural materials, Hebrew teachers, and authorizations etc.^{xxiv} Schwalb also sent flyers, Zionist propaganda brochures, and newspapers printed in Palestine to the young Zionists. A few letters addressed to Geneva were also sent to Dr Adolf Silberschein, an activist with the World Jewish Congress and the intermediary between the Joint and European Jews. Saly Mayer, the representative of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee in Switzerland, was also among the recipients. However, the two Zionist figures from Geneva primarily had connections with the older Romanian Zionist leaders.

3.2 The letters

The correspondence through letters served as the most accessible means to establish contact with Jewish delegates. But the documents had a circuit that involved certain risks. Inexperienced and reliant on the help of others, the young Zionists entrusted their letters to inappropriate connections. For almost two years, correspondence was picked up from various Jewish leaders, including Benvenisti, as well as from Dr Entzer – the director of the Emigration

Office. Replies to the letters were returned either through the same individuals or directly to the couriers – two Swiss journalists who turned out to be double agents collaborating with Gestapo. Scarlat Iancu, the young leader of Dror, testified years after: “The correspondence sent by them through Hans Welti^{xxv} and [Charles] Gyr^{xxvi} [Swiss journalists] who were also agents of the Gestapo was photocopied by the Gestapo leading to the arrest of Benvenisti Mișu, Fischer Wilhelm and the youth.”^{xxvii} During postwar interrogations by the Soviet Intelligence Service, Gustav Richter, adviser on Jewish issues and police attaché at the German Embassy in Bucharest, also revealed the role of the two informants who delivered crucial information to him. The letters were translated and then transmitted to the Romanian authorities (Christoforow, Makarow & Uhl, 2015, p. 377). The Romanian police confirmed in its first reports that the correspondence was provided by Richter and that the Zionist rescue mission was initially labelled as subversive communist actions.^{xxviii} Lists and copies of letters from the Zionist youth are also part of the Yad Vashem archive (Romania collection, Official documentation of Gustav Richter), which includes translations from Hebrew to German, explanatory notes, and the significance of certain coded terms.^{xxix}

Based on the recipients, the letters can be classified in three categories:

1. internal correspondence among the leaders of Gordonia and Dror, and between them and the organizations in other cities (especially in Banat);
2. external correspondence of the leaders with Jewish delegates from Geneva and Istanbul;
3. external correspondence with similar youth organizations from neighbouring countries.

Submitted between 1941-44, these letters provide detailed information about various resistance actions, the structure of the underground network, names of involved members, data about the victims who received help, as well as future plans and objectives. The information gleaned from these letters assisted the authorities^{xxx} in reconstructing the incriminatory facts. The next paragraphs will rebuild the context and course of actions based on the correspondence and declarations of the Zionists, as well as reports from the Secret Police archive.

One of the primary missions focused on assisting refugee Jews from Poland. In response to a request from the Jewish delegation in Istanbul, Gordonia dispatched a courier to Galicia who located a group of young Zionists at the Romanian-Polish border who were seeking help to cross. After strenuous efforts, dozens of Polish Jews, refugees in Chernivtsi, were brought

to Bucharest in various transport rounds using false documents, and accommodated at different addresses. Other refugees (almost 200, according to Sunea) were later brought to Bucharest with the assistance of various Romanian connections. They were coordinated by Gordonia members Tabacinic Gherș Sunea, David Tenenbaum, and Iosif Friedman.^{xxx} Among these refugees, one group of nine Jewish Poles^{xxx} successfully crossed the border wearing the uniforms of the Nazi organization Todt and carrying travel cards of German soldiers who had been mobilized for work. The correspondence also included a picture of two members of this group, which later served to identify the refugees.^{xxx}



Picture 2. Jewish refugees from Poland wearing German uniforms

Source: ACNSAS, Fond Penal, file 011123, vol. 2, p. 125.

The situation of the Polish refugees must be understood within an unusual legal context. In spring 1944, Ion Antonescu signed a decree that updated previous legislation on the illegal border crossing of Jews deported to Transnistria.^{xxx} Giving the increasing number of Jewish refugees from Hungary, the new decree extended the death penalty to Jews from other countries caught illegally crossing the Romanian border.^{xxx} However, this decree was never enforced due to the intervention of Charles Kolb, delegate from the International Committee of the Red Cross, who appealed to Mihai Antonescu, the Romanian deputy prime minister. In response,

M. Antonescu issued instructions to the Ministry of the Interior not to apply the fatal provision of the law.^{xxxvi} M. Antonescu tacitly cancelled the decree with Kolb's promise to assist the fugitives in immigrating to Palestine and to purchase Palestinian pounds with Romanian lei through the Red Cross Delegation.^{xxxvii}

Other refugees, Zionists from Chernivtsi and friends of the Gordonia members, were spotted with false documents in various locations in Bucharest, such as in apartments rented by Zucker Iancu, a Gordonia member.^{xxxviii} Correspondence revealed that these refugees had been prepared by David Tenenbaum who sent them false documents and money through a female member of Gordonia, Felicia Schwartz,^{xxxix} in collaboration with professor Gronich, a teacher from Chernivtsi charged with handling the refugees.^{xl} The first group arrived to Bucharest North railway station in December 1943 and was taken over by Zucker Iancu. Another transport arrived in January 1944 and was received by Iosef Friedman.^{xli}

According to the letters, Gordonia also helped numerous Jews from Transnistria to cross the border. In December 1943, two months after Antonescu ordered the repatriation of certain categories of deportees,^{xlii} a secret envoy made contact with Jews near the banks of the Dniester, in Moghilev, Iancopol, and Tiraspol. A first wave managed to reach Bucharest, using the documents of Romanian invalids and women in mourning clothes posing as war widows. Others used faked German permits: "In this way, we brought 470 people from Ukraine, including 20 young individuals, among whom were also some of our own. I arranged them all in provincial towns as Christian refugees."^{xliii} Some letters offer detailed images of the progressive persecution that marked the milestones of the Holocaust in Romania, including information about the camps and ghettos in Transnistria collected from those who returned or had managed to escape: "We had the opportunity to meet people who had returned from Transnistria: they were no longer themselves, with squeezed faces, hands that hung limply, revealing the difficulties they had endured – lifeless eyes, nervous movements with a seed of madness – individuals who had lost the ability to understand what you say to them, etc."^{xliv} Such letters were signed collectively by the young Zionists, showing thus that the reports from the field were an integral part of the resistance mission.

In the winter of 1944, one of the letters addressed to Nathan Schwalb in Geneva mentioned the assistance provided to Jewish refugees from Czechoslovakia ("real sparks saved from fire"). These refugees were said to live temporarily in Bucharest with fake Christian documents, receiving help from the young Zionists.^{xlv}

During a search of the apartments in Bucharest where refugees and young Zionists were living (on 59 Barbu Văcărescu street, 61 Panduri road, 26 Vitan road), the police found

cartridges, a revolver, chemicals, watches, ink and forged documents.^{xlvi} Sunea repeatedly asked for weapons in his letters to prepare for a defensive action, expecting a violent withdrawal of the Germans: “The Jewish casualties in Poland has taught us that we must be prepared to defend ourselves against such surprises and die with sword in hand.”^{xlvi} A similar action would have been planned in case of a “red invasion,” referring to the Soviet armies.^{xlvi} The letters between Gordonia’s leader David Tenenbaum and Arie Hirsch, leader of Habonim Transylvania, revealed other soft resistance plans involving the editing of news handouts in Romanian and their distribution in Bucharest and the province. Letters were also submitted to the organizations in Timișoara and Arad, containing materials about Palestine, logistical instructions in case of an evacuation of the halutz youth from Bucharest, and advice on how to procure weapons.^{xlix} The connection with the Zionists in Transylvania strengthened after Sunea’s tour of cities in Banat and Transylvania in July 1943, where he held meetings and provided further instructions for the young Jews.¹

A special mission revealed connections between the Zionist youth underground and the Special Operations Executive (the secret British organization). Sunea and Iancu were in charge of releasing two Jewish parachutists (Iacobsohn Gedeon and Kahane Iosif) who had been captured while landing in Romania (in Lipova) and interned in the Timișul de Jos camp.^{li} The Zionists prepared false documents, rented a car, and bribed the military guards, but the plan failed because of a disagreement with Scarlat Iancu.^{lii}

3.3 The network

All these actions involved not only financial support, but also organized and coordinated teamwork. Thus, the underground organizations worked in two departments: Compartment A in charge with border crossing matters (dealing with printing documents, making stamps, and photos) and Compartment B (in charge of “props,” such as tailoring clothes, suitcases etc).^{liii} The network functioned with the tacit approval of the local authorities who were permissive and tolerant in exchange for money. The custom of bribery worked as a constant solution for dealing with difficult situations. Bribes are often mentioned by other young Jews in similar contexts, revealing that the procedure worked not only in unexpected situations, but also as a regular way of keeping the secret police agents quiet.^{liv} Money was also used for paying the Polish and Transnistrian border smugglers who ensured the practical conditions for border crossing. Contacts with the smugglers were established through incognito visits by Sunea and Tenenbaum.^{lv}

Discussions for potential collaboration were also held with the communist partisans from Banat. According to letters and photos, Gordonia members organized a festive gathering in Bucharest, on New Year's Eve in 1943, inviting the partisans and dedicating it to the "organization of workers from Palestine."^{lvi} Connections were also established with communists in Serbia: "I got in touch with them [Serbian communists]. They helped us and are still supporting us in the defence action. We don't know which country our attempt to emigrate will take us to at any cost."^{lvii}

The external correspondence with organizations from neighbouring countries offers a glimpse into how the underground network spread beyond the national borders, with similar actions being performed by young Zionists elsewhere too. In August 1943, Sunea received a letter from Joel Brand, the president of the Jewish communities in Budapest and one of the most prominent figures in the rescue mission of Hungarian Jews (Brand, 2020), expressing the desire for collaboration and to mediate the connection with the delegate from Geneva. Brand also requested information about the Jews of Romania and Transnistria; he proposed a common trip to Poland and even the use of common couriers.^{lviii} Another letter was addressed by Eli Sajo, a young Zionist activist from Budapest: "I promise you that after a short time, I will send you a detailed account of our actions, life, and problems. We would appreciate it if you could also send us a similar account on the next occasion."^{lix} Sajo was caught at the Romanian border in 1944 and deported to Auschwitz (Gur, 2009, p. 210).

The correspondence also offers some insights into the generational conflict between the Zionist youth and the Zionist leaders in Romania. Sunea often complained to Geneva of the passivity of the leaders toward the fate of the deportees in Transnistria: "The Zionist Organization was the last to remember that in Bessarabia and Bukovina there were activist Zionists as well as halutzim and that they were supposed to help them. A lack of even the slightest interest in our friends who are in Transnistria. They justify it by the lack of funds. But that doesn't match the realities. The Zionists still have an influence among the wealthy people, more than the Jewish Council has. Our Zionists could have collected money and sent it there."^{lx} The older leaders managed their own rescue actions, but the lack of communication and the discontent provoked by the fact that they collaborated with the Antonescu regime hindered any good relations with the youth.

The main target of the discontent was usually the Zionist leader Mișu Benvenisti, despite the fact that in critical situations, the youth asked him for help and money.^{lxi} Scarlat Iancu, the Dror youth leader, revealed in his declarations during the Zionist trials in the 1950s that the relation with Benvenisti was conflictual even in 1941. In an authoritarian manner,

Benvenisti seems to have requested that all Zionist youth organizations be dissolved and the youth work under his leadership: “We all refused and then Mr. Benvenisti declared to us that we are excluded from the Zionist organization. Obviously, we didn’t care and continued the activity afterwards according to our conceptions.” The young Zionists tried to limit connections with Benvenisti: “Throughout the war, Benvenisti asked us to communicate with him about our actions, but we didn’t satisfy his curiosity.”^{lxii}

The tensions between the youth and the older leaders are also revealed by other letters that show how the Zionist youth was the backbone of the illegal emigration and rescue operations, working in dangerous circumstances to establish communication channels through couriers and to provide aid. With all that, they were not involved in the decision making, and this caused further great discontent. Moreover, it seems that there was also a discrepancy between their involvement and the places they received on boats for emigration (Ofer, 1991, p. 242).^{lxiii}

However, other youth movements were less radical and managed to work together with the older leaders. This was the case of Hanoar Hatzioni, the centrist youth organization, whose leader Ițic Hertzog (Itzak Artzi) was the youngest member of the adult rescue commission. At age 13, in 1933, Artzi became an active member of a branch of Hanoar in Siret (Bukovina) and then the Hanoar leader at the national level. Similarly to the leaders of Gordonia, he fled to Bucharest once the Soviet army entered Bukovina, in 1940 (Artzi, 1999, p. 81). He recalls that other colleagues opted to return to Bukovina, but one year later, after the re-annexation of the territory by Romania, many of them were deported to Transnistria. Artzi also witnessed the ghettos and camps, but not as a deportee or member of the youth underground, but as the youngest member of the Aid and Rescue Commission led by Mișu Benvenisti (Artzi, 1999, p. 90). Being also a close friend of Wilhelm Fischer, Artzi opted for open collaboration with the older leaders, considering that this was the main possibility to help the victims. In delivering help and money to the Jews in Transnistria he also used contacts and bribes offered to the German officers who accepted to be couriers (Artzi, 1999, p. 91). He was also in correspondence with the Jewish delegates from abroad.

Halutz members in various cities across the country were trained and supervised by the Gordonia leaders in Bucharest. However, Sunea lamented the lack of response from Zionist members in Bessarabia and Bukovina (even though many of them were deported or lost their lives):

To our great regret, we did not find any receptive ears among the Zionists, preventing the initiation of a unified and comprehensive aid effort. Everywhere I turned, there was mistrust, suspicion, with everyone prioritizing personal interests. We found no unity, even among the youth, and had to start anew independently, relying on our limited legal capabilities and meagre resources.

Some answers did come, though, from Kishinev, Chernivtsi and other localities in Bessarabia.^{lxiv} The attitude of certain local Jewish committees in Transnistria – which unfairly benefited from aid intended for all deportees – was also disappointing for the young Zionists: “It’s hard to blame these brothers too. We share this information so that you may understand the extent of the decadence to which the Jews have been brought by the cruel and inhuman persecution of the Nazis and their collaborators.”^{lxv} At the same time, the dire situation of the persecuted victims contrasted sharply with the safe lives of Jews in Bucharest: “Life in the capital city is completely different. There are Jews who have become wealthy and lead comfortable lives without considering the plight of their suffering brothers.”^{lxvi}

Nonetheless, Sunea also levelled harsh accusations against the Jewish representatives from abroad.^{lxvii}

To some extent you bear the blame for their suffering, and carry the responsibility for your inability to help. [...] Understand that our friends solely benefited from our assistance, and if we cannot do more, they will perish by the end of the war. [...] We implore your aid, as we are burdened by the pain and bitterness of all that reaches us from there [Transnistria]. It is impossible to witness the demise of dozens of friends who are starving and ailing. [...] The war has taught us to muster great energy and fight for causes that may not be 100% Zionist. [...] We have done everything within our means. [...] Until you fulfil our minimal request, we cannot sustain the aid effort, and technically, it is impossible to let this summer pass without rescue actions.^{lxviii}

3.4 Investigation and convictions

These actions of the Zionist youth were intertwined with a parallel rescue mission led by older leaders who received funds for Jews, in foreign currency, from Switzerland. Wilhelm Fischer, a committee member of the Zionist organization, handled correspondence with Dr Adolf Silberschein and Saly Mayer, collaborating with other Romanian Jewish leaders, including Benvenisti. Under German pressure, Romanian authorities accused them of currency smuggling, leading to the arrest of numerous Zionists from both the underground youth and the older ranks.^{lxix} The older leaders (Mișu Benvenisti, Samoil Entzer, Jack Rosenzweig, Leon

Filderman, Isac Fux) denied any involvement in the illegal actions of the youth, emphasizing their long-term conflict with the disobedient youngsters.^{lxx} These leaders were released from arrest after a couple of weeks thanks to interventions by the delegate of the International Committee of the Red Cross, Charles Kolb, and the ambassador of Switzerland in Romania, René de Weck. According to a Swiss political report, the arrests exposed German legation efforts to reinforce antisemitic measures in Romania by framing the rescue actions as a sounding plot. Manfred von Killinger, the German ambassador in Romania, accused both the young and the older Zionists of communism and the illegal rescue of refugee Jews. While the former accusation was pure fantasy, the latter was based on real facts.^{lxxi} The Swiss delegates supported the actions of the older Zionists but were disturbed by the independent acts of the youth:

To grasp the extent of bad faith and unawareness exhibited by some of these youngsters, whose statements form the sole basis of accusations against Benvenisti, it's essential to note that in the letters they sent abroad, they consistently reiterated: "There is no connection with Benvenisti and the other old men; they are cowards who only want to work in legal ways and in full agreement with the Jewish Council."^{lxxii}

The external intervention in favour of the older leaders exacerbated the generational conflict. Scarlat Iancu, convicted under false accusations of espionage during the Zionist trials orchestrated by the Soviets in the 1950s, reflected on the events of 1944:

In January 1944, Benvenisti, Fischer, and numerous young Zionists, along with refugees from Poland and Chernivtsi, were arrested. However, the most perplexing aspect is that Benvenisti and Fischer were well-treated and released after 3-4 weeks, while we remained in prison for many months and were subjected to cruel treatment.^{lxxiii}

In the spring of 1944, the defendants who were scattered across rented apartments in Bucharest were caught by the police. The initial arrests led to individuals succumbing to the pressure of interrogations, divulging details about the whereabouts of others. In their declarations obtained after interrogations, beatings and confrontations, they partially confirmed the charges. They admitted to their connections with the Zionist youth in Geneva and Istanbul and acknowledged the assistance received for the Jews of Transnistria, essentially reconstructing the entire network of subversive actions.^{lxxiv} However, they uniformly denied any affiliations with the

communists, assistance provided to Polish Jews, and endeavours to procure weapons^{lxxv} – actions considered threats to state security as per the prevailing laws. In their declarations, the Poles took sole responsibility for border crossings, occasionally mentioning the assistance of various Polish border smugglers and Romanian railway conductors, but consistently disavowing any connections with the Zionists.^{lxxvi} As expected, they also denied their Jewish origins, claiming they were Christian Catholics. Consequently, the Secret Police requested a medical examination of the male refugees to determine whether they were circumcised.^{lxxvii}

Based on letters, depositions, and other material evidence, the police sent to Court Martial only 26 out of over 100 people arrested: seven Zionist youngsters, ten refugees from Chernivtsi, eight refugees from Poland, and one Jew from Timișoara. The rest were released. The trial occurred in April-May 1944, at the Military Court. On July 22, 1944, Section 3 of the Court Martial sentenced 25 defendants to correctional prison for 3-6 months (considering pre-trial detention as part of the sentence). Lasner Ernest, the leader of Halutz youth from Timișoara, received a life sentence of hard labour for desertion and connections with Serbian communists. While the reports of the Secret Police attributed the charges to the “subversive organization of former members of the Zionist organization”, the Court Martial accused each Zionist individually. In the changed political landscape of 1944 with its indications that the Germans would lose the war, Romanian authorities acted cautiously. Even requests for apartment searches were conducted with tact by the police, aiming to avoid creating the impression of a pogrom.^{lxxviii}

The young Zionists faced imprisonment based on the correspondence and other incriminating proof discovered in their possession.^{lxxix} Tabacinic Gherș Sunea, David Tenenbaum, Scarlat Iancu and the other collaborators were accused of various crimes, including desertion, illegal possession of weapons, the instigation to wear the uniform of an allied army without the right to do so, usurping the rights of nationals, fraudulent border crossing and complicity in fraudulent border crossing, forgery of the seal of state authorities, theft, sending clandestine mail, and bribery. The refugees from Chernivtsi faced accusations of bribery and illegal border crossing, while the refugees from Poland were charged with wearing the army uniform of an allied country without the right to do so and illegal border crossing.^{lxxx}

Conclusions

The rescue mission undertaken by the young members of Gordonia and Dror during the Holocaust unfolds in multiple dimensions. The intricacies of their actions, the individuals involved, and the networks they navigated may prove surprising in a historical narrative that

has largely been framed as a story of passive victims. Elements such as forgeries, smuggling operations, and the illicit use of Nazi uniforms may appear almost fictional rather than grounded in reality. However, these unconventional methods were, in fact, commonplace expressions of agency by Jewish youth confronting persecution.

The emphasis on youth in the context of resistance is not arbitrary, even though resistance is commonly associated with older leaders possessing resources, connections with higher-ranking authorities, and political influence. The role of Zionist youth in rescuing Jewish victims is significant, and age should be a central lens for interpretation. Engaging in political mobilization and radicalization can be seen as a distinct expression of youthful energy (Filipovici, 2020). Leveraging classical theories of age and psychosocial development, I highlight that young individuals often exhibit enthusiasm and a desire for movement, qualities that authorities usually seek to channel for political objectives (Erikson, 1968, pp. 233-244). Moreover, this seemingly irrational energy was indispensable for young Jews undertaking high-risk actions during times of persecution.

The dynamics between Zionist leaders and the young members of Gordonia are better understood as a generational conflict rather than a form of cooperation, shaping the contours of the rescue mission. What deserves further attention is the interconnection between the Gordonia case and the rescue efforts of Jewish representatives in Istanbul and Geneva. The delegation grappled with supporting the resistance, but sources reveal the diversity of opinions within the Yishuv, the challenges faced by the Jewish Agency in balancing the needs of Eretz Israel and the Diaspora Jews, and the limited options arising from the lack of practical support from the Allies. These factors collectively resulted in modest outcomes in terms of numbers, with some estimates suggesting around a total of 10,000 people were saved via Istanbul (Ofer, 1989, p. 631).

In the spring-summer of 1944, ten ships embarked on a journey to Palestine, with only nine successfully reaching their destination. Despite the operations being officially illegal, they were orchestrated by the Zionists, including the youth, with the tacit approval of the Romanian authorities (Babeş, 2013, p. 39). While not necessarily categorized as a subversive act, the efforts of the young Zionists to facilitate the emigration of their people to Palestine deserve recognition. The passenger lists might have included refugees assisted by the Zionist youth. Although the Romanian authorities did not actively oppose emigration, they also did not exert effort to support it. Deputy prime minister Mihai Antonescu endorsed the establishment of the Office for Emigration led by Jews, but the meagre results had multiple causes, some of which were revealed in the report of Charles Kolb:

The various governments, including the Romanian, Bulgarian, Turkish and the German military authorities, played their own games with the permits, some refusing free passage while other allowed it, one granting the permit only when the permit granted by another had expired, one demanding free passage on dry land, another by sea routes and so on.^{lxxxii}

Given these circumstances, numerous Jews resorted to boarding illegal ships. While some successfully reached Palestine, for others, the journey ended in tragedy.

While recognizing the importance of acknowledging the underground youth resistance in the history of the Holocaust in Romania, it is essential to resist the temptation of idealization. Numerous aspects remain uncertain, including inconsistencies in the details, the exact number of refugees, and the complete sequence of events. Additionally, the intercepted correspondence itself requires critical analysis, as the police relied on translations from German or Hebrew by Jewish translators. The absence of memoirs from former key members poses another challenge. Furthermore, certain unclear aspects demand further exploration, such as the numerous mentions of authorities (military guards, police, gendarmerie) accepting bribes and facilitating actions in violation of the law. The lack of references to these state representatives in investigations and reports raises questions that warrant further research.

In addition to coordinated actions like those carried out by members of Gordonia and Dror, resistance also encompassed individual acts of defiance. While some of these acts can be traced through archives or testimonies, many may remain an unknown history. The motivations for engaging in resistance have been a subject of inquiry for various researchers, including Walter Laqueur, who explored, among others, the resistance of German Jews. Defying meant undertaking perilous actions with a low success rate and a high risk of extreme punishment. “Was it the desire for adventure or the wish to avenge the murder of members of their family, or a vague feeling of duty, or perhaps a mixture of these and other motives?” (Laqueur, 2001, p. 73). Regardless of the reasons and practical consequences, the histories of resistance should augment the overall narrative of the Holocaust, revealing the active side of the victims.

Notes

ⁱ For instance, see depictions of anti-fascist propaganda and actions connected to the clandestine British Operations in Romania, in Deletant (2016, pp. 90-106).

ⁱⁱ A selection of the documents is also featured in Wexler (2003). However, this volume is not a comprehensive collection of documents, but rather an unfortunate mix of original documents with narrations and interpretations by the editor. Some excerpts from the documents are also included in Kuller (2008). Both works acknowledge the case but fail to provide proper context, framing, reconstitution or identification of the actors. A helpful source was the defendants' depositions during the Zionist trials at the beginning of the 1950s. Some of the convicted were also involved in the Gordonia/Dror case six years prior and made reference to it. (Wexler & Popov, 1996, vols. I & II). Finally, relevant documents and photographs were also identified in Israel, in the Yad Vashem Archive, Romania collection, Official documentation of Gustav Richter, the Adviser on Jewish Affairs in Romania, 1942.

ⁱⁱⁱ For an insight into the beginnings of Zionist thought in Romania, see the synthetic collection of documents in Benjamin & Vasiliu (2010).

^{iv} The pogrom in Bucharest on 21-23 January 1941 represents one of the initial stages of the Holocaust in Romania. The event was planned during the legionary rebellion against Ion Antonescu, when armed legionaries occupied public institutions and police stations. In the meantime, Jewish neighbourhoods suffered violent attacks, with homes, businesses and synagogues burned by the legionaries who were also supported by ordinary civilians. Hundreds of Jews were arrested and tortured with over 120 fatal Jewish casualties. The rebellion was suppressed by Antonescu with support from the German army and the legionaries were outlawed and removed from power (Ioanid, 2000, pp. 52-60).

^v The events in Iași from 27 June to 30 June marked the initial phase of the physical annihilation of Romanian Jews. This pogrom was orchestrated under the orders of Ion Antonescu and carried out by the local military, police, gendarmerie, and the authorities, aided by German army units and some civilian factions. The objective was to eradicate all Jews from the city as part of a broader plan to expel Jews from Moldavia, aligning with Romania's interpretation of the Final Solution. The violence was triggered by baseless accusations of Jewish collaboration with the Soviet army following recent bombings in the city, coupled with rumours of a Jewish uprising and assaults on Romanian soldiers. The atrocities commenced with the detention, robbery, and murder of Jews in the city's outskirts. On 29 June, thousands were assembled at the Police Headquarters courtyard in Iași, where they were subjected to gunfire. The final phase involved the deportation of Jews aboard two death trains. Estimates suggest that between 13,000 and 15,000 Jews perished in the Iași pogrom. For a synthesis of the events, see the *Final Report* (2004, pp. 120-126).

^{vi} The official representatives of the Jewish population, imposed by the Romanian authorities through the enactment of Law no. 1090 on 16 December 1941 that abolished the former Federation of the Union of Jewish Communities in Romania. Once the Jewish Council entered into force, the Romanian authorities made their intentions clear regarding the dissolution of the activities of the Zionist organization and the youth movements.

^{vii} Order of the Jewish Council no. 9532, on 7 August 1942. The activity of the Zionist Organisation during 1941-1944 was led by Mișu Benvenisti and is described in his report (Benvenisti, 1944). Regarding the Zionist youth, the report only states that Benvenisti reactivated Brith Hanoar, including all Halutzian groups, and restored harmonious relations between groups. The steering committee of the Zionist youth was chaired by Benvenisti, with members including Mauriciu Blumenthal, Leon Filderman, Samuel Enzer, and Wilhelm Fischer.

^{viii} ACNSAS, Fond Penal, file 011123, vol. 4, p. 14 (Serviciul de Informații și Cercetări al Siguranței, Report on 3 March 1944). See also Artzi (1999, p. 90).

^{ix} Jewish youth (pioneers) trained to settle in Palestine.

^x ACNSAS, Fond Penal, file 011123, vol. 4, p. 14 (Serviciul de Informații și Cercetări al Siguranței, Report on 3 March 1944).

^{xi} ACNSAS, Fond Penal, file 013322, vol. 10, p. 36. All translations of quotes are those of this article's author, unless stated otherwise.

^{xii} ACNSAS, Fond Penal, file 011123, vol. 4, p. 1-3. (Serviciul de Informații și Cercetări al Siguranței, Referat, 18 February 1944).

^{xiii} Bessarabia emerged as a cradle for Zionist youth movements in the region, significantly influenced by the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 that was also joined by young Zionists. They actively participated in reorganizing the nationalist Zionist movement following the Balfour Declaration. In contrast to other provinces in interwar Romania, Bessarabia boasted large Jewish communities engaged in agriculture, with its youth accustomed to farming and physical labour. The first Hachshara groups (agricultural training centres) were established around 1917 and flourished after the province joined Romania, despite persistent harassment by the Romanian authorities who suspected young Jews of communist affiliations. Kishinev, the main city of the region, served as an important

- Zionist center which hosted the inaugural congress of the halutzim from across Romania in 1921. Bălți, the hometown of the Gordonia leaders, played a pivotal role as one of the colonies for halutzim training in Bessarabia. (Vinitzky, 1973), <https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/Bessarabia01/bes176.html>
- ^{xiv} <https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/Bessarabia01/bes203.html#f203-9r>
- ^{xv} <https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/Bessarabia01/bes203.html#f203-9r>
- ^{xvi} By 1933, the total number of He-halutz members had surged to 8,200 members, attributed to the establishment of urban training groups (Vinitzky, 1973), <https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/Bessarabia01/bes245.html#f245-8>
- ^{xvii} The farm was built in spring 1934 to prepare the youth for emigration, despite the slow pace of emigration at that time. Since the youngsters had to wait for a couple of years before aliyah, the farm engaged them in training and paid work in a brick factory whose owner had made the field available for the construction of the farm. (Vinitzky, 1973), <https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/Bessarabia01/bes256.html>
- ^{xviii} Decret-lege no. 856, Monitorul Oficial no. 34, Part I, 11 February 1938, p. 802.
- ^{xix} ACNSAS, Fond Penal, file 011123, vol. 3, p. 50. (Letter of Sunea to Silberschein). ACNSAS, Fond Penal, file 011123, vol. 3, p. 61. (Letter of Sunea and Tenenbaum to Nathan Schwalb).
- ^{xx} For instance, Filip Segal and Sunea worked at the Artillery Training Center in Vlașca, Bessarabia. ACNSAS, Fond Penal, file 011123, vol. 1, p. 91. (Testimony of Filip Segal).
- ^{xxi} During the pogrom in Bucharest on 21 January 1941, the dormitories were attacked by legionaries and many young Zionists (possibly including Gordonia and Dror members) were apprehended and subjected to brutal beatings at the legionary police headquarters. (Artzi, 1999, p. 85).
- ^{xxii} ACNSAS, Fond Penal, file 011123, vol. 5, pp. 254-255. (Declaration of Tabacinic Gherș Sunea, 4 March 1944).
- ^{xxiii} ACNSAS, Fond Penal, file 011123, vol. 3, p. 60 (Letter of Sunea and Tenenbaum to Nathan Schwalb).
- ^{xxiv} ACNSAS, Fond Penal, file 011123, vol. 3, pp. 3-4. (Letter of Scarlat Iancu to Nathan Schwalb, 25 November 1943).
- ^{xxv} Hans Welti (1914–?), Swiss journalist, correspondent for Swiss newspapers in Romania, courier for Jewish organizations between Switzerland, Romania and Turkey (1942–1944), and informant of Gustav Richter. He was arrested by the Swiss authorities in St. Gallen, in 1945 and 1946, for ‘repeated fraud’ and collaboration with a ‘banned intelligence service’. (Christoforow, Makarow & Uhl, 2015, p. 376).
- ^{xxvi} Karl Gyr (1890–1960), Swiss journalist, was working in Bucharest since 1924 as a journalist for the German-language *Bukarester Deutsche Tagespost*. Starting with the 1930s, he worked for Swiss newspapers and news agencies, and maintained good contacts with the German embassy. In 1942–1944 he served as a courier for Jewish organizations, operating between Switzerland, Romania, Bulgaria, Greece and Turkey, while also providing information to Gustav Richter. After the fall of the Antonescu regime, he was expelled from the foreign press association in Bucharest. After years of surveillance, in 1950, he was arrested by the Romanian secret police. In 1954, he was deported to Switzerland. (Christoforow, Makarow, Uhl, 2015, p. 377).
- ^{xxvii} Iancu Scarlat, Proces-verbal de interogatoriu, 11 October 1952 (Wexler & Popov, 1996, vol. II, p. 634).
- ^{xxviii} ACNSAS, Fond Penal, file 011123, vol. 4, pp. 1-3. (Serviciul de Informații și Cercetări al Siguranței, Referat, 18 February 1944).
- ^{xxix} For instance, Yad Vashem Archive, Romania collection, Official documentation of Gustav Richter, the Adviser on Jewish Affairs in Romania, 1942, p. 128.
- ^{xxx} Serviciul de Informații și Cercetări al Siguranței, Grupa a II-a, together with the delegate of the Court Martial, major Gicoveanu Dumitru.
- ^{xxxi} ACNSAS, Fond Penal, file 011123, vol. 3, p. 47. (Letter of Sunea to Silberschein).
- ^{xxxii} Woitich Vladislav, Woitich Halina (10 year-old girl), Jan Iaszlowicz, Strumik Mihail, Kobus Halina, Kozocynsca Jadwiga, Kulcinska Halina, Jowicka Stefania and Lawaskievici Ionasz – all young people in their 20s.
- ^{xxxiii} During the trial, the defendant presented varying accounts regarding the origin of the uniform and the circumstances in which the picture was taken. For instance, one of the individuals involved claimed that the photograph was captured in a car repair workshop in Poland, where workers were provided with used uniforms. ACNSAS Fond Penal, file 011123, vol. 5, pp. 262-263. (Declaration of Strumik Mihail, 4 March 1944).
- ^{xxxiv} Legea 698/1942, in Monitorul Oficial no. 221, 22 September 1942 (Benjamin, 1993, vol. 1, pp. 223-224).
- ^{xxxv} Decret-lege no. 1069, in Monitorul Oficial no. 123, 29 May 1944 (Benjamin, 1993, vol. 1, pp. 278-279).
- ^{xxxvi} Letter of Mihai Antonescu on 30 June 1944 to Charles Kolb and Vladimir de Steiger, representative of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in Romania (Șiperco, 2003, p. 220).
- ^{xxxvii} Activity report of Charles Kolb, ICRC delegate to Romania, Zurich, 5 April 1946 (Șiperco, 2003, pp. 368-369).

xxxviii Dups Martin, Netty Naghel, Igo Fecker, Hilda Becker, Mina Naghel, Etty Naghel, Froim Kuperman, Teia Kwallenbergk, Fany Barth, Alfred Feckler, Bubi Cahane (the last two were missing). ACNSAS, Fond Penal, file 011123, vol. 4, pp. 1-3. (Serviciul de Informații și Cercetări al Siguranței, Referat, 18 February 1944).

xxxix According to her deposition, Felicia admitted to stealing the identity cards of certain employees from the Hercules cardboard workshop and subsequently delivering them to Jewish refugees in Chernivtsi. In ACNSAS, Fond Penal, file P011123, vol. 1, p. 70. (Declaration of Felicia Schwartz).

xl ACNSAS, Fond Penal, file 011123, vol. 3, p. 8. (Letter of Scarlat, Abassey, Meti Marcovici, Pinkas to Nathan Schwalb).

xli ACNSAS, Fond Penal, file 011123, vol. 3, p. 240. (Introductory report, 9 March 1944, The military prosecutor's office of the Court Martial).

lii In the autumn of 1943, the young Zionists collaborated with the Jewish committee for the organization of repatriations, offering accommodation and food. Additionally, they devised special plans for Aliyah training. ACNSAS, Fond Penal, file 011123, vol. 3, p. 47. (Letter of Sunea to Silberschein).

liiii ACNSAS, Fond Penal, file 011123, vol. 2, p. 139. (Letter of Sunea to Silberschein).

xliv ACNSAS, Fond Penal, file 011123, vol. 3, p. 7. (Letter of Scarlat, Abassey, Meti Marcovici, Pinkas to Nathan Schwalb).

xlv ACNSAS, Fond Penal, file 011123, vol. 3, p. 14. (Letter of Israel to Nathan).

xlvi ACNSAS, Fond Penal, file 011123, vol. 3, p. 241. (Introductory report, 9 March 1944, The military prosecutor's office of the Court Martial).

xlvii ACNSAS, Fond Penal, file 011123, vol. 3, p. 49. (Letter of Sunea to Silberschein).

xlviii Commenting on what could have become a dangerous action, Filderman emphasised in his memoirs the hypothetical nature of Sunea's request and clarified that the potential act of resistance was not targeted against the Romanian authorities (Filderman, 2017, vol. 2, p. 519).

lix ACNSAS, Fond Penal, file 011123, vol. 4, pp. 9-10. (Serviciul de Informații și Cercetări al Siguranței, Report, 3 March 1944).

¹ ACNSAS, Fond Penal, file 011123, vol. 2, pp. 84-86 (Report of Sunea and Tenenbaum to the Secretary Office of Gordonia).

^{li} On the 32 British-trained Jewish volunteers from Palestine who parachuted into Nazi Europe (including nine into Romania) to organize resistance and rescue actions, see Baumel-Schwartz (2010) and Deletant (2016).

^{lii} ACNSAS, Fond Penal, file 011123, vol. 4, pp. 1-3. (Serviciul de Informații și Cercetări al Siguranței, Referat, 18 February 1944). ACNSAS, Fond Penal, file 011123, vol. 3, p. 249. (Introductory report, 9 March 1944, The military prosecutor's office of the Court Martial).

^{liii} ACNSAS, Fond Penal, file 011123, vol. 2, p. 109. (Report letter of Sunea to Nathan Schwalb).

^{liv} Itzak Artzi, a member of Hanoar Hatzioni, recounted the constant surveillance by Siguranța and shared his encounters with Agent Teodorescu, who suspected Artzi of having connections with Jews from abroad. According to Artzi, the agent typically received a substantial payment in exchange for his silence. In more perilous situations, Teodorescu would increase the amount, compelling the young Zionists to seek assistance from wealthy older Jewish leaders (Artzi, 1999, p. 61).

^{lv} For instance, in the autumn of 1943, David Tenenbaum visited cities and villages in Romania, donning a high school Christian student uniform or Romanian peasant clothes. His aim was to locate the Halutzim youth in work camps and identify potential border smugglers. In ACNSAS, Fond Penal, file 011123, vol. 2, p. 109. (Report letter of Sunea to Nathan Schwalb).

^{lvi} ACNSAS, Fond Penal, file 011123, vol. 2, p. 115. (Report letter of Sunea to Nathan Schwalb).

^{lvii} ACNSAS, Fond Penal, file 011123, vol. 2, p. 115. (Report letter of Sunea to Nathan Schwalb).

^{lviii} ACNSAS, Fond Penal, file 011123, vol. 2, p. 77. (Letter of Joel Brand to Scarlat Iancu, 7 August 1943).

^{lix} ACNSAS, Fond Penal, file 011123, vol. 2, p. 80. (Letter of Eli Sajo to Sunea, 7 August 1943).

^{lx} ACNSAS, Fond Penal, file 011123, vol. 2, p. 151. (Letter of Sunea to Nathan Schwalb).

^{lxi} ACNSAS, Fond Penal, file 011123, vol. 1, p. 36. (Siguranța, Referat, 7 March 1944).

^{lxii} Scarlat Iancu, Declaration, 5 April 1951 (Wexler, Popov, 1996, vol. II, pp. 630-631).

^{lxiii} Also, ACNSAS, Fond Penal, file 011123, vol. 3, p. 59. (Letter of Sunea and Tenenbaum to Nathan Schwalb).

^{lxiv} ACNSAS, Fond Penal, file 011123, vol. 2, p. 152 (Letter of Sunea to Nathan Schwalb).

^{lxv} ACNSAS, Fond Penal, file 011123, vol. 3, p. 7 (Letter of Scarlat, Abassey, Meti Marcovici, Pinkas to Nathan Schwalb).

^{lxvi} ACNSAS, Fond Penal, file 011123, vol. 3, p. 9. (Letter of Scarlat, Abassey, Meti Marcovici, Pinkas to Nathan Schwalb).

^{lxvii} Sunea was unaware that the letters were being intercepted. Nevertheless, the inadequacy of financial aid emerged as a major concern in the entire correspondence between the Zionist underground in Europe and the delegation in Palestine. Delegate Vania Pomerantz also criticized the financial decisions of leaders like Ben

Gurion. However, Gurion emphasized in a discourse held in 1943 that while the Jewish Agency's primary goal was Eretz Israel, other Jewish organizations in the free world, such as Joint or the World Jewish Congress in the USA, should have taken responsibility for the victims in Europe (Vago, 1989, p. 593). According to some opinions, the Yishuv leadership mistakenly prioritized local needs in Palestine over the situation of Jews in Europe: "much more money was raised in Eretz Israel than the amounts sent to Europe, but it was used for local purposes. The priority in allocation of the financial resources was one of the weakest points of the Yishuv leaders" (Vago, 1989, p. 599).

^{lxviii} ACNSAS, Fond Penal, file 011123, vol. 2, p. 153. (Letter of Sunea to Nathan Schwalb).

^{lxix} The arrests propelled the older leader A. L. Zissu back to the forefront of the Aliyah committee. In 1943, he organized an alternative Zionist leadership advocating for emigration by sea. The youth appeared to place more trust in him than in Benvenisti, as he effectively facilitated sailings in spring 1944. However, due to his independent stance, he was later removed from his position as the representative of the Jewish Agency. (Ofer, 1991, pp. 253-254, 259).

^{lxx} ACNSAS, Fond Penal, file 011123, vol. 4, pp. 1-3. (Serviciul de Informații și Cercetări al Siguranței, Referat, 18 February 1944). Filderman invoked the lack of cooperation between older leaders and the youth to argue that the leaders were not involved in the subversive acts of the youth movements (Filderman, 2017, vol. 2, p. 519).

^{lxxi} Political report, 5 February 1944 (Șiperco, 1998, p. 116).

^{lxxii} Charles Kolb to the Committee, 18 February 1944 (Șiperco, 1998, pp. 357-359).

^{lxxiii} Declaration of Scarlat Iancu, 5 April 1951 (Wexler, Popov, 1996, vol. II, pp. 630-631).

^{lxxiv} The declarations during the investigations in ACNSAS, Fond penal, file 011123, vol. 1.

^{lxxv} Sunea declared that 'the truth is that I did not bring any Jewish Poles; in fact this would have been impossible.' ACNSAS, Fond Penal, file 011123, vol. 5, pp. 254-255. (Declaration of Tabacinic Gherș Sunea, 4 March 1944).

^{lxxvi} The declarations of the Poles, in ACNSAS, Fond Penal, file 011123, vol. 5, pp. 264-267.

^{lxxvii} ACNSAS, Fond Penal, file 011123, vol. 5, p. 268. (Confidential Note of Prefectura Poliției Capitalei. Direcțiunea Poliției de Siguranță to the Forensic Medical Office Ilfov, no. 7664, 29 February 1944).

^{lxxviii} ACNSAS, Fond Penal, file 011123, vol. 4, p. 15. (Serviciul de Informații și Cercetări al Siguranței, Report on 3 March 1944).

^{lxxix} According to the correspondence from the Central Zionist Archives analysed by historian Dalia Ofer, the rescue mission in Istanbul was astonished by the unexpected turn of events and the apparent loss of almost a year's worth of work. Drawing from archives in Israel, Ofer highlights this episode within the context of strained relations between older Zionist leaders and youth movements. However, she refrains from naming the specific actors or providing additional details. (Ofer, 1991, p. 251).

^{lxxx} ACNSAS, Fond Penal, file 011123, vol. 8, pp. 371-373. (Curtea Marțială a Comandamentului militar al capitalei, Secția a 3-a, Proces-verbal no. 4184, file no. 5212/1944).

^{lxxxi} Activity report of Charles Kolb, ICRC delegate to Romania, Zurich, 5 April 1946 (Șiperco, 2003, p. 370).

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