

Abstract

The Jewish Leadership of the South Bukovina Communities in the Ghettos in the Mogilev Region in Transnistria, and its Dealings with the Romanian Regime 1941-1944

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This paper examines the Jewish leadership in the ghettos of the Mogilev region in Transnistria, at the time of the Holocaust, and the various approaches and methods that were used by the leadership in its dealings with the Romanian regime at the region under constant threat and in the shadow of death lurking. This study is unique in that it analyzes a double subject – the Jewish leadership and the Romanian regime. The study aims to gain an understanding of the relationship between the two factors during the Holocaust in Transnistria. The study examines the methods used by the Jewish leadership to cope with the challenges they faced as a result of the exceptional circumstances, the policies of the various Romanian authorities and their attitude towards the Jewish committees and the Jewish public in the Mogilev region during the Holocaust period.

Due to the size of the area occupied by the Romanians and Germans, and owing to the continuous battles that were taking place in Eastern Europe, the Romanian authorities in the Mogilev region had a high degree of sovereignty and independence in their decision making, even in the relatively low ranks. It was the middle ranks in the army and the gendarmerie which managed the dealings with the Jewish committees in the region. The attitude of the regime towards the Jewish public and the Jewish committees that headed it, and the changes in this attitude were the result of the

general Romanian policy in regard to the occupied land in Transnistria, and also the outcome of private initiatives of people in the Romanian army and gendarmerie posted in the Mogilev region and situations dependent on them.

This study provides, for the first time, a reliable picture of the motivations and actions of the central functionaries of the Romanian authorities in the Mogilev region regarding the Jewish public and the Jewish committees in the Mogilev ghettos. The study is based, to a large extent on personal files and investigation and punitive files of these officials which are located in the CNSAS – the archives of the secret service in Bucharest, and documents found in the Jägendorf and Carp archives at "Yad Vashem". These materials provided a broad factual base and a key to understanding their actions during their regime in Transnistria.

The war, and more so the deportation to Transnistria, emphasized the differences that existed between wealthy and needy families among the Jews, and between those of high standing in the community and the others. The differences between the communities from south Bukovina and those from north Bukovina and Bessarabia was also intensified in the Mogilev region. The gathering of communities from south Bukovina together with the others – the Jews from north Bukovina and Bessarabia and the Ukrainian Jews who remained in the area after the German-Romanian occupation and who survived the first wave of murders after the occupation – created a hierarchy of different social ranks among the Jews in accordance with their region of origin in Romania.

These social gaps were also brought about by the differences in how they were deported to Mogilev. The communities from south Bukovina were deported together with their leadership, and they were transferred by train with any property that they

were able to take with them. On the other hand, the Jews of north Bukovina, for the most part, left without their leadership, as the heads of these communities had been removed from power a year earlier by the Soviet occupation, and they were marched on foot in terrible weather, and exposed to robbery and rape along the way.

The differentiation and separation between the communities helped the Romanian authorities to establish a system of divide and rule. It also allowed for the Jews of south Bukovina to take part in organizing the deportation to the death camps: Pechora and Scazineti, knowing that the Jews were being deported there because they were not true “Romanians,” unlike the Jews of Dorohoi or south Bukovina. This community- and status-based separation made the Jews of south Bukovina and Dorohoi feel that they had immunity to a certain extent, and this feeling is what helped the Romanian regime get the cooperation of the Jews from the communities of south Bukovina and their leadership in the ghettos.

When the Jews arrived at the Mogilev region in the autumn of 1941, the occupying Romanian regime decided to replace the Obscina, the local Jewish committee appointed by the Germans, with a committee made up entirely of Romanian speaking Jews. Most of these Jews came from south Bukovina and had previously been civil servants. These Jewish committees in the Mogilev region were established and existed on account of a sense of continuity which gave these public servants the traditional authority as known and reliable office holders, and due to the fact that they often chose the best measures to take under given circumstances. Naturally, they also operated thanks to the right and permission granted to them by the Romanian regime. The mandate of this leadership came from its social and moral power as well as from the Romanian regime that was responsible for its appointment and also from the new situation forced upon the Jews by the regime.

The ability of the Jewish public and the committees that led it in the Mogilev region to accurately see the entire situation in which they needed to function for two and a half years was clearly limited. The Romanian regime worked to sever the ties between the Jewish community of Romania and the Jews deported to Transnistria. The Romanians restricted the movement of the Jews in the ghettos, and they were forbidden to leave the perimeters of the Jewish ghettos, whether they were fenced off or not. The only exceptions to this were the heads of the Jewish committees, and sometimes select members of the committees and Jewish professionals or tradesmen who received a pass to move around the region. This provided them with more information which enabled them to get a more accurate picture of the situation than the simple Jew had in the ghetto. Under the circumstances, the committee members did not always share what they knew with the Jewish public in the ghetto, as the vague and limited knowledge they had about the forced labor camps and the starvation death camps in Pechora and Scazineti made it easier for the committees to carry out the task of deporting the Jews, a task they were forced to do.

The Jewish leadership in the ghettos of the Mogilev region combined the old, familiar approaches it had taken when facing the Romanian regime before the war together with new strategies aimed at handling the new, unfamiliar circumstances. The old ways were also used much more in Transnistria due to the circumstances and the danger to the lives of the Jewish public in these ghettos. Some of the approaches taken and strategies used were – in themselves, and in the scope and frequency they were used – exclusive to the Jewish committees in the Mogilev region during the Holocaust, and they are perceived to have been effective because these ghettos were active until the Soviet invasion and the policy of totally annihilating the Jews was not exercised in them.

There were obvious differences between the methods used by the heads of the committees in the various ghettos in the region. These differences stemmed from the personalities of the leaders, their prior experience, and mostly the different situations and circumstances of each ghetto. There were also apparent similarities between the leaders. Two biographic details were found to be common among all the heads of the committees and most of the members of the Jewish committees in the Mogilev region: They were all middle-aged, middle-class, educated people from Bukovina and they had liberal professions such as lawyers, engineers, accountants or doctors. They were all the embodiment of the complex outcome of central Europe of the mid-20th century and had within them the contradiction between a clear Jewish identity and the essence of European culture, with their eloquently spoken German and their bourgeois mannerisms.

The second shared biographic detail is that practically all of them had served in the Austro-Hungarian army during World War I. This was also true for the senior officers of the Gendarmerie and in the Romanian army, and it provided a common language shared by all those whose predominant experience in their youth was World War I.

All of the heads of the Jewish committees in the Mogilev region had an optimistic outlook. Accordingly, the leadership in the ghettos of the region operated from the assumption that the Jews had a good chance of survival, and therefore it was right and wise to cooperate with the Romanian regime, to play for time and save as many Jews as possible. This optimism and strategy is why they were willing to accept having to make difficult decisions like sending 3,000 Jews to the death camp in Pechora.

The Jewish committees in the ghettos of Mogilev received harsh criticism. The heads of the committees had to deal with tough opponents and there were confrontations

about different approaches and clashes between the representatives of various groups. Despite people and groups in the Jewish public condemning and criticizing the Jewish committees in Mogilev, no other group or person in the ghettos of the region came up with an alternative model for working with the Romanian regime. They would only propose to change the extent of the existing model: to use less bribery, to better organize the distribution of aid, to find a more just division of forced labor etc. The interests of the committees and the dominant group of Jews from south Bukovina converged with the interests of their critics in a way that was stronger than the criticism.

In order to maintain the ties with the Romanian government institutions while maintaining a degree of autonomy in the ghetto, the committees required an executive branch with punitive powers and the ability to use force to administer its decisions. This role was fulfilled by the Jewish police. The Jewish police fulfilled some of the tasks that the Romanian gendarmes performed before the police force was established. By operating the police force, the Jewish committee created a power center, not only vis-à-vis the Jewish public, but also in relation to the Romanian authorities, which learned quickly that they were better off using the services of the Jewish police force to perform selective gathering of Jews for forced labor or for deportation from the ghetto. This understanding was also beneficial to the Jewish committees when they needed to negotiate the number of Jews to be sent on a particular labor task or to be deported from the ghetto, as the Romanians depended on the cooperation of the committee to carry out the selective gathering of the Jews.

The Jewish police force was connected and linked with an unbreakable bond to one other institute run by the Jewish committee – The Jewish. The Romanian forces did not always differentiate between the Jewish committee and the Committee for

Coordinating Labor, as in the eyes of the Romanians, the sole purpose of the Jewish committees was to supply and manage the Jewish manpower in the region. The Jewish police force served as the labor committee's enforcer in the various ghettos, and executed the demands of the Romanian authorities for Jewish manpower, as well as implementing the policies of the committees which had adopted the strategy of "salvation through work." Both of these institutions, the labor committees and the Jewish police force, were essential for putting into effect the policies of the Romanian authorities regarding the Jewish public in the region, and the policies of the Jewish committees of the ghettos of Mogilev.

The first assumption of the Jewish committees in Mogilev was that there was a reasonable chance that a large part of the Jews in these ghettos would survive to see the end of the war. The second assumption, which was as true to them as the first, and even more so, was that not all the Jews in the Mogilev region would survive and make it to the end of the war.

These two assumptions led the Jewish committees in the Mogilev region to adopt the strategy of "shifting the burden." This strategy reflects the difficulty to deal with the source of the problem in an organization, because it is not specific enough or the price is too heavy. In such cases, the leaders of the organizations deal with the symptoms of the problem and not the actual problem. This way the leaders shift the burden from the basic problem to the symptoms. They create solutions that alleviate the symptoms but do not deal with the basic problem and even make it worse, and they lose their ability to deal with the actual problem. In the ghettos of Transnistria, the Jewish leadership did just that. It adopted the "shifting the burden" strategy when faced with the difficult and cruel burden of selecting Jews to be deported to the Bog camps, the Scazineti camp and the Pechora camp.

What made the "shifting the burden" strategy possible were the gaps and differences between the various Jewish communities which converged in the Mogilev region of Transnistria and the stratified society which separated the rich from the poor and divided the various communities of Romania. The stratified perspective was based on the assumption of limited solidarity, and the Jewish committees, understanding that they could not save all the Jews, chose to save those that they deemed as more worthy of their help. These were first and foremost the wealthier Jews of the ghetto and then the Jews from the south Bukovina communities. The fact that the Romanian authorities in the region also preferred the Jews of south Bukovina over the other Jews, made it even more difficult for the Jews to feel stronger solidarity, which was already put to a test. The Romanian regime shared the view that the Jewish public was comprised of groups which make up a hierarchy. This outlook affected the decisions regarding the identity of the Jews to be deported from the ghetto.

The Jewish committees shifted the burden from the basic problem –a colony of settlers that the Romanian regime did not want, and they set themselves a less ambitious objective: to save as many Jews from south Bukovina as possible. This objective was reached with relative success, as over 70% of the Jews of the communities from south Bukovina survived.

The Jewish committees in the Mogilev region during the Holocaust were leaders appointed by the Romanian authorities, and their purpose was to execute the regime's orders. However, the committees were given a relatively large leeway in the relationships with the various Romanian authorities in the region, which enabled them to act as an authentic leadership with its unique way of managing the Jewish public it was responsible for.

