INTRODUCTION TO THE TESTIMONY OF

Meir Reichman

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I. Introduction. On Resistance

Most histories of the underground resistance during the Second World War don't mention the Zionist youth movements.[1] The agency of the Jews as victims fighting back is an untold chapter of the resistance movements. Nevertheless, rescue actions and interventions of Jewish adult leadership have been thoroughly explored by Holocaust researchers in the last decades. But much less attention has been awarded to the youth, to those unknown youngsters without political strength and economic resources, who stepped up to help others.

The rescue actions of the Zionist youth organizations in Romania and the political activism of young Jews in other movements, in the lead up to and during the Holocaust, were the topic of a research project that I conducted as a Fortunoff fellow at the Vienna Wiesenthal Institute for Holocaust Studies, in 2022-2023. Most research on Jewish resistance has been shaped by Yehuda Bauer's definition of *resistance* as focused on group initiatives and mobilization.[2] The definition was extended by historians like Wolf Gruner to also include individual acts of defiance. Thus, I

[1] For instance, see Patrick G. Zander, *Hidden Armies of the Second World War: World War II Resistance Movements* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2017). *Zionism* refers to the Jewish nationalist movement that has had as its goal the creation and support of a Jewish national state in Palestine.

2 Yehuda Bauer, "Forms of Jewish Resistance," in *The Holocaust: Problems and Perspectives of Interpretation*, 3rd edition, ed. Donald L. Niewyk (Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing, 2002).

refer to Jewish resistance "any individual or group action in opposition to known laws, actions, or intentions of the Nazis and their helpers." [3]

The Holocaust in Romania has become a vast field of study since 1990, researchers dealing especially with the two classic categories of analysis: perpetrators and victims. They have explored the different forms of anti-Jewish persecution, the reactions of the Jewish leaders, and the tragic daily life of the deportees in camps and ghettos. Studies of resistance and rescue, however, still promise many undiscovered histories. In 1990, Dalia Ofer published a pioneering work on illegal immigration,[4] focusing also on *aliyah* from Romania to Palestine during World War II. Professor Iaacov Geller's book discusses the spiritual resistance performed through the Jewish school network, the social and health care system, and the religious actions of the rabbis.[5] Lya Benjamin's study connects resistance with the literary and artistic works created during the Holocaust.[6] A more recent work by Ștefan Ionescu looks at the legal resistance strategies of Jewish officials during Ion Antonescu's regime.[7] In all this, Jewish youth organizations are mentioned only tangentially and have never been analyzed as a distinct agency of defiance and resistance.

One of the main reasons for this lacuna in the historiography seems to be scarce access to sources. In general, underground resistance histories are only partially based on archive documents, as they rather explore secondary literature and testimonies.[8] Since membership in resistance movements was fluid and volatile, and the secrecy of the operations required precisely lack of any proof,[9] many details (like the precise number and names of those involved, the details

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3 Wolf Gruner, "'The Germans should expel the Foreigner Hitler…' Open Protest and Other Forms of Jewish Defiance in Nazi Germany," in *Yad Vashem Studies*, 39 (2), 2011: 13-53.

4 Dalia Ofer, *Escaping the Holocaust: Illegal Immigration to the Land of Israel, 1939-1944* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

5 Iacov Geller, *Rezistența spirituală a evreilor români în timpul Holocaustului* (București: Hasefer, 2004).

6 Lya Benjamin, *Prigoană și rezistență în istoria evreilor din România, 1940-1944* (București: Hasefer, 2003).
7 Ștefan Ionescu, *Jewish Resistance to 'Romanianization,' 1940-44* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

8 Zander, *Hidden armies*, ix.

9 Zander, *Hidden armies*, 60.

of actions, etc.) will simply never be revealed. And this is even more the case with soft-resistance actions (non-armed combat) and with the Jewish underground in general, whose members were individuals deprived of civil rights.

Aware of all various limitations, my research attempted to: 1) reconstitute two case studies of the underground Zionist youth actions investigated in the 1940s by the Romanian Secret Police; 2) discuss broader aspects of youth activism, the political options of Jewish youth and the Zionist dimension of Jewish identity. The main sources in this investigation were written memoirs and oral testimonies from the Fortunoff video archive, produced by former members of Zionist youth organizations.

II. On Methodology. First Encounter with Meir's Story

From a methodological perspective, I did not approach oral testimonies in order to perform a memory studies analysis. Rather, I rely on these accounts as sources of historical facts, filtered by personal experience, aware that most survivors didn't aim to be documentarians.[10] While working in the Fortunoff archive with the search engines of both the Aviary platform and Metadash visual search tool, I used certain keywords to identify the testimonies of those Holocaust survivors who, at some certain point, were members of a Zionist movement or were connected with the Zionist underground during the war. Also, Romania had to be either their country of origin or a transit on the way to Palestine. Hence this introduction, built around the life story and testimony of Meir Reichman, a Jew born in 1931 in Iași, who experienced the Holocaust in Romania and was in temporary collaboration with the Zionist underground in Bucharest in 1944. Other testimonies and memoirs are also called upon for a better contextualization.

Meir Reichman's testimony reveals an exceptional life story. He was an orphan who during the Second World War lived in the Moldovan city of Iași, in a Jewish orphanage requisitioned by

[10] Henry Greenspan, Sara R. Horowitz, Éva Kovács, Berel Lang, Dori Laub, Kenneth Waltzer & Annette Wieviorka, "Engaging Survivors: Assessing 'Testimony' and 'Trauma' as Foundational Concepts," in *Dapim: Studies on the Holocaust*, 28(3) (2014), 194, DOI:10.1080/23256249.2014.951909.

German officers. Towards the end of the war, before departing to Palestine, Meir spent some time in Bucharest, accommodated by a Jewish family. In the Romanian capital, he engaged in specific actions helping the underground Zionist movement. I consider this a key episode in my research, as Meir unveils a precious glimpse into Zionist resistance networks in Bucharest, even though he was only a temporary collaborator.

Recorded in 1993, almost 50 years after his traumatic childhood experiences, and narrated in a non-native language, his story – especially in the transcript version – may appear incoherent, and difficult to follow. And Meir was aware of this: "of course my English is not so good. I thought I missed many words. I cannot express myself exactly." His desire to share stories about his life, framed by historical data, is constantly limited by language difficulties. It is not clear why Meir chose to speak in English (he could have opted for Hebrew, as did many other survivors). A possible reason is the neutral role that English has for survivors and the fact that English became a preferred language for Holocaust discourse after the war.[11] But though saying things is sometimes challenging, Meir does have a lot to tell. And his message is best received when watching the video testimony and not only reading the typed transcript. As researcher Noah Shenker argues, video testimonies draw "from voices, faces, and other expressive elements that work not only in concert, but also in conflict with one another, revealing a more complicated picture of a witness's experiences and how he or she grapples with its aftermath."[12]

Meir's testimony follows the conventional model. He shared his experiences in a factual narrative manner, sometimes inaccurate, diachronic at the beginning, and then with jumps and returns. After a short introduction of himself and his childhood as an orphan, he begins directly telling of one of the most painful episodes of the Holocaust in Romania, the pogrom in Iași that he witnessed as a 10-year-old boy. While he is narrating, his hands are always in the air, with gestures that highlight certain aspects of the story. According to the standardized model for the

[11] An explanation provided by historian Jürgen *Matthäus as to why some survivors prefer to narrate in English*. See Jürgen *Matthäus,* "Displacing Memory: The Transformations of an Early Interview" in *Approaching an Auschwitz Survivor: Holocaust Testimony and its Transformations*, ed. Jürgen *Matthäus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 57.

[12] Noah Shenker, *Reframing Holocaust Testimony* (Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2015), 6.

testimonies, he was filmed with a black background, from the waist up, with frequent zooming in on his face. Though other gestures and positions of the body are not captured, the camera centred on Meir's face shows how transposed he is into the story; the emotion in his voice when he shares sensitive episodes of his childhood (like the episode with the SS officer shooting at him); the expressivity of his serene face and his big brown eyes; and, from time to time, his smile. He usually smiles when telling stories about his life after *aliyah* (for instance, when describing the recruitment process of youngsters by the different Jewish parties in Palestine; or the moment when he met his childhood friend in Israel, at a bus stop). His smile reflects his happiness at the end of the testimony, when he proudly shows the pictures of his children and grandchildren. It is the smile of a survivor, aware that he is a man of many chances and a man who has now his own family.

Though Meir has the main agency in the testimonial process, the testimony is not a monologue. The two interviewers engaged in the narration by addressing questions and suggesting words when Meir had language difficulties, or opening new topics for discussion. Thus, the act of remembering was mediated to a certain degree. In my understanding of Meir's story and the act of testimonial production, some methodological errors occurred through the mediation of the interviewers.

Some questions addressed by the interviewers suggest a slight loss of focus on their part. Though Meir started his testimony by mentioning that he didn't have a family and was raised in an orphanage, one interviewer asked after 10 minutes "Were your-- were your parents observant or was your family, were they religious?" So Meir had to remind her that his parents died when he was a small child. In another section, when Meir shares details about his months in Bucharest in spring 1944, the interviewer still thinks that they talk about Iași: [00:19:15.59] INTERVIEWER: And when-- when you said you-- you ran away, how far away was it from the orphanage? Where did you have-- [00:19:20.78] MEIR REICHMAN: There was no orphanage. At this time I was in-- [00:19:22.85] CREW: This was in Bucharest. [00:19:23.06] INTERVIEWER: I mean in-- [00:19:23.75] MEIR REICHMAN: --in Bucharest. [00:19:24.24] INTERVIEWER: Right, I'm sorry. Right.

In another section, an interviewer made a forced return to a certain episode, even though Meir was already exploring another period of his life. More than 40 minutes into recording, with Meir was talking about the 1948 Independence War, out of the blue an interviewer comes out with a question about life in the orphanage, without any connection with the things Meir is now telling: [00:42:52.62] INTERVIEWER: Could we go back a little bit in your story? Do you remember what life was like in the orphanage during the time that you lived there, after the beginning of the war?

Finally, some questions seem deliberately emotionally charged, contrary to the interview methodology.[13] For instance, an interviewer induces the answer by asking Meir [00:28:51.95] INTERVIEWER: So you had to, as a child, you were contending both with being a Jew, and also with being a Jew who was a Zionist. [And she goes further.] [00:29:03.47] INTERVIEWER: Was that-- but was that difficult for you? Was it painful that even your Jewish-- the other Jewish orphans would bully you? [When replying, Meir tried to nuance his answer, but he was hindered by language issues:] [00:29:16.28] MEIR REICHMAN: Well, that was not the-- How I can I--

Meir went through wars in Romania, Palestine and Cuba and survived them all. Let's take a closer look at his situation as a Holocaust survivor. Meir is one of the few victims in the Fortunoff archive who were not subject to deportation, as most of the testimonies belong to Holocaust survivors who experienced the tragedy of camps and ghettoes in Auschwitz or Transnistria or elsewhere. Though I also investigate pre-war Zionist movements whose members might have experienced later deportations, my focus was on the young Jews from *Regat*,[14] like Meir. He also faced

[13] Shenker, *Reframing Holocaust*, 32.

[14] The Holocaust in Romania began with the systematic politics of destruction against the Jews and the deprivation of their civil and political rights and culminated with the deportation of the Jewish communities from the provinces of Bessarabia, Bukovina and northern Moldavia to the ghettos of Transnistria (1941-1942). The Jewish inhabitants living in the other regions within Romanian borders, *Regat*, faced violence, discriminatory measures, forced labor, and had to adapt to a restrictive life. However, these communities were safe in terms of survival, for here the "cleansing" plans failed.

antisemitic policies and violence in the 1940s, but remained in the country until 1944 when he made *aliyah*.

After arriving in Palestine, Meir struggled to adapt, undergoing different forms of training and political orientation. He was sent first to a yeshiva under the religious Agudat Yisrael party, but ended up in a secular kibbutz. Israel didn't become his permanent home. If *home* was for Meir a volatile concept, difficult to frame, so was probably the notion of *family*. Since he lived most of his childhood in an orphanage, Meir didn't have close relatives to mourn after the Holocaust. But not being aware of family that might have perished during the Holocaust doesn't equate with a lack of what could be called personal trauma. From a psychological perspective, Henry Greenspan showed that *trauma* should be understood as one of several kinds of survivor's anguish. While trauma's particular horror is "unqualified helplessness in the face of imminent annihilation," other agonies might be experienced by victims in the context of genocide.[15] Such agonies were actually behind Meir's decision to testify:

> [00:04:55.53] MEIR REICHMAN: The-- the first years after I-- I passed, and I start a new life, I wanted to forget the past. As an orphan, I will say as an orphan, it was for me, easier to forget than if I will be raised on a normal household, raised with the family, but-- and with parents, mother, father, and so.
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> [00:05:28.21] Later on, after many years, I thought about till-- till about three years, four years ago, three years, '89, '89. I happen to be involved in an accident, which head-on collision. The big guy-- it was a big truck, hit me straight on me. And I got very shocked, very trauma. And it happened to be a big man, a big Polish man, which reminds me of one of the Romanian Germans.
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> [00:07:04.68] MEIR REICHMAN: […] And I went to a consult, I went to psychiatrist. I want to help, and I start getting more and more open, even to my second wife. I never told her

[15] Greenspan et al., "Engaging Survivors," 215.

> what how-- happened to me during the Holocaust, how I survived all the-- all the years, and what misery I had.

Holocaust memories deeply buried were thus revived by an accident four decades later. Meir started to confess as a form of therapy, because, as Dori Laub argues, "none find peace in silence, even when it is their choice to remain silent. Moreover, survivors who do not tell their story become victims of a distorted memory […]."[16] Meir's testimony is a mixture of personal experiences and introspection against a more or less accurate historical background about the persecution of Jews in Romania. Even though he was not a direct victim or witness of some of the events he describes, Meir sketches the history of the Holocaust in Romania out of a sense of duty and responsibility. As Greenspan shows, this aspect is central to many testimonies, as survivors express their need to transmit "messages," which should not necessarily be identified with "lessons":[17]

> [00:08:37.73] We are not supposed to forget. We are supposed to remind, and talk about it, and talk about it. Till there's not going to be, again, a Holocaust, what happened to us. That's what I want to tell my story.

III. Personal and Historical Timeline

While stepping back and forth on the timeline, Meir's testimony revolves around certain main themes. Some have a direct connection with his life story and the ways in which he experienced his Jewishness: the city of Iași in the late 1930s and during Ion Antonescu's dictatorship; life in a Jewish orphanage; emigration to Palestine in 1944 and the different paths for making a living; Israeli's Independence War in 1948. Other themes are developed as part of a mission to disseminate the history of the Holocaust in Romania. Thus, Meir provides more or less accurate details about the arising of antisemitism, the pogrom in Bucharest (January 1941), the pogrom in

[16] Dori Laub, "An Event Without a Witness: Truth, Testimony and Survival," in *Testimony: Crisis of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, eds. Shoshana Felman, Dori Laub, (New York, London: Routledge, 1992), 79.

[17] Greenspan et al., "Engaging Survivors," 194.

Iași (June 1941) and the deportation of the Jews to Transnistria (1941-1942). The following will discuss these themes, while more detailed explanations are provided in the annotations below the testimony itself. A separate section discusses Meir's temporary collaboration with the Zionist underground movement in Bucharest in the summer of 1944.

Iași, an important city in north-eastern Moldova, provided the urban environment in which Meir grew up. He was born in the city in 1931, his mother dying in childbirth. Meir spent his first years with an aunt but was then institutionalized in an orphanage managed by the local Jewish community. In the 1930s, Iași was a city with a large Jewish population, established since the Middle Ages. Out of a total population of over 102,000 inhabitants, the Jews represented 33,7%.[18] The community developed a school network and religious and social institutions, including two orphanages.[19] The cultural life of the city revolved around the Romanian National Theater, an artistic space where the young boy "escaped" from daily life when performing small parts in theater plays. Close to the National Theater was the Jewish Theater, a proud emblem of Yiddish culture and language. Meir's orphanage was located in the center of the city, close to both these institutions, which together symbolized two distinct cultures and languages enjoying the same urban environment.

> [00:34:44.93] MEIR REICHMAN: Yeah, because, of course, in my orphanage there used to be a big Romanian theater, national theater. And I used to participate in play, because children play, and most of the-- of the-- of the actors were Romanian. And there were Romanian plays. So they used to take me to participate in different episodes, you know. I used to-- that I was like the-- the-- the child. That's how they used to adopt me, used to take-- I used to-- they used to take good care of me, and that was before the-- before the war.

[18] Data from *Recensământul general al populației României din 1930*, vol. II (București: Imprimeria Națională, 1938).

[19] I. Kara, *Contribuții la istoria obştii evreilor din Iaşi* (București: Hasefer, 1997).

[00:35:35.59] MEIR REICHMAN: I-- I want only to theater. I never want to move it, till I want in Israel and Palestine. Because most of the-- till the age of 11, I was at the theater. There was a national theater across from this orphanage home on one side. And the other side was a Jewish theater.

[00:35:56.86] MEIR REICHMAN: It was the-- The Green Tree, the name of the theater. And I used to go to see Jewish plays. You know? So--

In this university-city and cultural center of Moldova, the arising of antisemitism during the interwar decades was marked by the student movements, the anti-Jewish propaganda of the university professor A.C. Cuza, and the establishment of the autochthonous fascist Legionary Movement, whose leader, Corneliu Zelea-Codreanu, was an intellectual product of the local university.[20] For many Jewish youngsters, the watershed was passed into a new world order in 1937, when the first antisemitic government was installed, run by Octavian Goga and Cuza. Another testimony from the Fortunoff archive offers a reflection on the consequences of the rising of the far-right for the political choices of a high school student in Iași.

[00:07:05] There was no difference between Jews and non Jews and I never gave it much thought. In 1937, things changed dramatically and it was as if an iron screen was pulled down and separated between Jews and non Jews. […] While we were in the 8th year of high school we were recruited to a paramilitary organization, Jews and gentiles together. We were sent to work, digging tunnels, cleaning etc., but in 1940, the uniforms were taken away.

[00:12:45] I was involved in sports and in the leftist group but there was no organized political movement. There were two students among us who were members of Hashomer Hatzair and went to Palestine in 1939. We knew that there was a place in Iași, near the

[20] Dennis Deletant, *Romania, 1916-1941: A Political History* (London: Routledge, 2022).

> Jewish cemetery, where people met and prepared for going to Palestine. The rest of us were socialists in ideology but were not members of any organization in any formal way.[21]

This government was followed shortly by the authoritarian regime of King Carol II (1938-1940), which in turn collapsed two years later, in the summer of 1940, when Romania suffered important territorial losses. This led to the transformation of the country into a totalitarian state, with racial legislation introduced that eliminated Jews from all spheres of public life.[22] In the summer of 1941, Romania entered the war against the Soviet Union as a Nazi ally. Iași became for Meir and other Jews an uncertain place of tension and fear, where they experienced war as civilians and deprivations as Jews. For some young people, this was precisely the time when they enrolled in Zionist youth movements. In Iași, for instance, Rudi Zimand enrolled in Hashomer Hatzair once the first anti-Jewish decrees entered into force in the summer of 1940:

> "I accepted with enthusiasm, because I saw in emigration and the founding of Jewish settlements in Palestine the only possibility of salvation."

After the war,

> "I considered the communist solution, which proclaims freedom and equality for all members of society, superior to the Zionist solution which benefits only the Jewish people."[23]

Meir also remembers changes in daily life at the orphanage once the war broke out:

> [00:04:48.80] We were very treated badly. We-- we didn't have school. We interrupt the school. Then interrupt everything. We just were-- we were working, and we uh-- how were we called? We did-- [INAUDIBLE] send us away. We were still till the end of the war.

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[21] Yosef F., HVT 3875.

[22] Denis Deletant, *Hitler's Forgotten Ally. Ion Antonescu and his regime. Romania, 1940-44* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

[23] Rudi Zimand, "Cum am străbătut patru regimuri social-politice," *Revista Baabel*, no. 287 (2019), https://baabel.ro/2019/01/cum-am-strabatut-patru-regimuri-social-politice/.

A sketching of the main tragic episodes of the Holocaust in Romania is a main aspect of Meir's testimony. He maps the Holocaust around the two cities he lived in during the war (Iași and, for a short time, Bucharest), which happened to be the stage for extreme violence against the Jews. In the chronological order of the events, physical violence against Jews was first marked by the Pogrom in Bucharest, in January 1941, with 120 victims. During the legionary rebellion against Ion Antonescu, armed legionaries attacked the Jewish neighborhoods and arrested hundreds of Jews who were violently beaten in police basements. Tens of Jews were transported to a forest close to the city and brutally murdered. Others were killed in the courtyard of a butcher shop and hanged on butcher hooks (a brutal episode that is described also by Meir).[24] After two days of atrocities, Antonescu suppressed the rebellion and ended the National Legionary State regime.

> [00:30:24.76] MEIR REICHMAN: But later on, I-- you know, I-- I think what-- when I was in Bucharest that-- that the family where I was waiting, that's when I was-- what do you call it? Waiting for till I go to, uh, Palestine. They told me how two years before, what happened in-- in Bucharest. How the-- the gendarme, the Iron guard, all the-- the ones that they pick up the Jewish for about 200, the very famous Jews from the town, and the bottom to-- to the slaughterhouse.
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> [00:31:06.85] And they cut them and they hang them up in pieces, and they-- and they wrote, that's kosher meat. That's the atrocity which was, because we told them what happened in Iasi in the pogrom. So they tell me, it happened here too, not in the thousands, but in the few hundreds. Because Bucharest was very-- it was very influenced politically by the Jewish people, by the government.
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> [00:31:36.40] And later on, I find out that not only the-- the army, and the political, but every-- the-- the plain citizen of Romania, the-- all the intellectual, they were very much involved to destroy the Jewish-- the Jewish people, only because we're Jewish, nothing else.

[24] Radu Ioanid, *The Holocaust in Romania: The Destruction of Jews and Gypsies under the Antonescu Regime, 1940-1944* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2000), 52-60.

After the Legionary Movement was outlawed and removed from power, Ion Antonescu continued to implement racial and Romanianization policies. In the summer of 1941, when Romania entered the war against the Soviet Union, a tragic pogrom against the Jews took place in Meir's home city. In June, after intense propaganda that accused Jews of being communist spies, the Romanian army together with German soldiers and some local civilians attacked Jewish homes. A main context was the accusation that a year before, in the summer of 1940, when the Romanian army had retreated without a fight from the territories annexed by the Soviet Union, the local population, including Jews, attacked the Romanian soldiers, increasing the humiliation.

During the pogrom in Iași, Jews were killed on the streets and some were shot in the courtyard of the police station, close to Meir's orphanage. Hundreds of Jews, most already wounded, were put into two cattle trains: one went to Podu Iloaiei, a locality less than 30 km from Iași, where the train arrived after eight hours; the other went to Călărași, a city in southern Romania, where the train arrived after seven days. The train cars had windows and doors sealed. In these inhumane conditions, many Jews lost their lives before arriving at the destination.[25]

> [00:05:13.68] We were in a situation in the middle of the-- of the town. And one day in August, the-- the Romanians start taking all the-- the Jewish from different parts of the-- of the city, and just start killing them. They were in front of our-- of this orphanage house was a big place, a big-- like a plaza. So they took few-- quite a few hundred people. And they put gas around them. And they light fire, and hook-- and people started running in hooves and then they shoot them. [INAUDIBLE] they survive, with the machine gun, they shoot them.
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> [00:06:06.24] I saw all this. And like I was about 200 yards from me, in front.
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> [00:06:13.97] INTERVIEWER: How old were you at that time?

[25]Carol Iancu, Alexandru Florian Platon (coord.), *Pogromul de la Iaşi şi Holocaustul în România: Le Pogrom de Iaşi et la Shoah en Roumanie* (Iași: Editura Universității Al. I. Cuza, 2015).

[00:06:15.69] MEIR REICHMAN: I was the old-- I was about 11 years old. 11, 12. And then, another episode which I recall, was the [INAUDIBLE] there was to pick up the people who used to give me red flags. And you say, you're a communist. And used to shoot them. All of them.

[00:06:41.04] There was the big, uh-- the pogrom, what happened in the city Iasi. In two days, they just-- the Romanians and the Germans, they just went wild. There was a rampage. They-- they dragged the people and they just shoot them. They killed them only because-- because they were Jewish. Not-- nothing else.

[00:07:55.98] And the rest of them, they-- they put them in the train. And uh, the cattle train, they lock up like sardines, and they took them out-- out of town. And they let them-- for two or three days, they let them sit over there, and then they open. And who survived to make the grave for them? And then the rest, then they shoot them.

The Holocaust in Romania culminated with the deportation of the Jewish communities of Bessarabia, Bukovina and northern Moldova to the ghettos and camps in Transnistria. The deportations started in the autumn of 1941 but were suspended by Antonescu a year later. Between 105,000 and 120,000 Jews deported from Romania perished in Transnistria, together with 115,000-180,000 local Jews and around 11,000 Roma victims. Some of Meir's colleagues from the orphanage might have been deported, or sent to forced labor.[26]

[00:04:04.58] The bigger kids they took away from the age of 15 till uh-- till 20. And they send them different paths. They send them away to Transnistria, which there was a labor camp, a big labor camp.

[00:46:39.16] MEIR REICHMAN: That was a working camp. They send them to Transnistria, which is a-- [? [NON-ENGLISH] ?] a river, from that Dnipro River, I think. I forgot that's part of the Ukraine. So they send them over there, and they make the camp to die. Just-- just

[26] The International Commission on the Holocaust in Romania, *Final Report* (Iași: Polirom, 2004).

to die, to get rid. I was lucky that they didn't send us. We're supposed to go also though to Transnistria.

Meir survived the Holocaust and, when the war was almost over, left Romania without looking back. The way he related to his city and country of birth is a consequence of the persecution he suffered, but also of his orphan status. Where is home and what is family for an orphan? The official reports of the orphanage reveal in the institutional history the struggle of the administration to properly manage the children's house. Not much can be discovered about daily life inside the orphanage, however. Meir doesn't offer a detailed description either; what he does emphasize, and often, is the discontent he felt around the other children and his wish to go to Palestine:

> [00:28:13.10] MEIR REICHMAN: Yes. I thought, since I remember, I thought I want-- I want to go to Palestine. Because the-- the kids, I remember used to bully me, to say what, Palestine is-- is a very small place. They used to have a song, Palestine is small, it's small. It's no good. OK, so they used to tease me. And I-- I will never forget that, you know?

Unfortunately, Meir never reveals how he became a Zionist, nor if he was ever a member of a youth organization, or ever attended any meetings, or had other Zionist peers. Membership usually involved paying a fee and taking part in training lessons and other activities, which might have been difficult for a child living in an orphanage. The interviewer fails to shed light on this aspect, limiting intervention only to rephrase Meir's information:

> [00:28:51.95] INTERVIEWER: So you had to, as a child, you were contending both with being a Jew, and also with being a Jew who was a Zionist.

Was Meir a conscious Zionist at an early age or was he actually looking for a place he could call home? Probably a bit of both. Zionism was well disseminated in the city of Iași, through the Zionist press and the university student association Hasmonea. While Zionism seems to be a strong side of his pre-teenage identity, Meir's connections with religious Judaism are revealed by his memories of attending the *heder* and keeping some of the Jewish traditions. Religion didn't play a central role in his life, though, and most of his memories of practicing religion are somehow

traumatic. Even when he reached Palestine, after a short experience in a religious institution under the patronage of the religious party Agudat Yisrael, he opted for secular training and life in a kibbutz.

> [00:54:33.52] MEIR REICHMAN: The Agudat Yisrael was not too far from Petah Tikva. There was a new-- a new institution, very new. And like I said, we just came from the boat. And they brought me over there. We were maybe 20 people we were over there.
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> [00:54:54.49] And all the-- the rabbis, they wore beards, you know, and I was not too-- I was afraid. Because when I was-- when I went to cheder till about five years old, from five till one year, maybe one year later. So the rabbi used to put me, and he used to-- because I didn't know the [? alphabet. ?] So he used to give me an—[…]
>
> [00:55:21.91] MEIR REICHMAN: With a rod, he used to put me, you know. So they all used to wear-- that was before the war. They used to wear a black beard, you know, so here I see again, you know. So-- and they give me a--
>
> [00:55:34.41] INTERVIEWER: A yarmulke.
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> [00:55:34.66] MEIR REICHMAN: I was no-- they give me a yarmulke, to sleep with the yarmulke, and to force me to daven, to start daven. And after a while, I didn't-- I didn't want it. I didn't like it.

In 1944, Meir opened a new chapter of his life in Palestine, a chapter also marked by violence as he fought in the Independence War of 1948, aged only 16 years. His description of the night watch when his friend was shot while defending a Jewish settlement recalls one of the many traumas experienced by Meir at such an early age.

> [00:51:43.32] MEIR REICHMAN: Well, the feel-- that was very scary. I tell you that. Because I survived all this, and now I'm in the war. And not that I fought that, then during-- when I was raised in this kibbutz, particular, then a friend of mine, we-- we conquer a hill, not far from the-- from the settlement. And we established a fortified--

[00:52:09.83] MEIR REICHMAN: OK, fort. And we used to have a watch at night. So I was-- one night I went with him to watch. And every couple hours, we used to-- to-- to change the watch. So the Arabs, they were for about quite a few hundred yards from the settlement. And at once, we-- we heard a few shots, from a-- from a machine gun, wild shots. I was on the watch, and my friend was asleep.

[00:52:46.42] So after two hours, or something. I wake him up. I say, [? Avram, ?] let's change. And then I put my hand. And he said-- and it's full of blood. A bullet, a wild bullet, hit him direct when he sleep in a trench. And he was 17. He was 17.

Though one of the contributors to the creation of the Jewish state, Israel was not to be his permanent home, for Meir ended up living in the United States. After a traffic accident that seems to have opened old wounds, he engaged in a therapy process that entailed dealing with his past and sharing his experience and Holocaust history with others.

IV. Political Activism and Resistance in the Testimonies of the Fortunoff Archive

The Zionist underground and youth resistance are not dominant themes in the testimonies of the Fortunoff oral archive. Most survivors, including those from Romania, were victims of deportations to camps and ghettoes, unable to resist persecution but lucky enough to survive and rebuild their lives after the Holocaust. However, there are a couple of life stories that connect. On one level, it's about the Jewish youngsters involved in political activism in the 1930s, once antisemitism started to rise. Most of the survivors that share these experiences are men, with origins in the Moldova region or Transylvania. Some first joined Zionist youth organizations out of a sense of adventure, or wish to belong to a certain peer group that combined Zionist knowledge with boy scouting. But as already mentioned, they started to feel the growing tension of antisemitism once the first anti-Jewish legislation was implemented in 1937 and they became direct victims when Romania transformed into a totalitarian state in September 1940.

For some youngsters, a first encounter with Zionism took place within their families, with parents who were supportive of the Zionist cause. For instance, Martin M. remembered:

> [00:00:11] – […] Our house was a Zionist house and I was a member of a youth movement – Dror Habonim.
>
> [00:07:26] – I was raised on Zionist background and my wishes were that when I get to Israel, I would go to kibbutz and fulfill my Zionist ideas. […].[27]

Others joined Zionist movements against their parents' will, as G. Sandor shows:

> [00:21:22] My parents, they were Zionist. Absolutely. That was, uh, the big help. But not every family were. […]
>
> [00:21:53] […] But as the boys grow, they did what they wanted. So it became obvious that they, uh, joined our organization openly, in spite of the, uh, parents, uh, uh, will. And still, uh, uh, they were, till the end, against, you see. I remember that, uh, some instances, the opposition was so strong that, uh, we really-- we were, uh, giving, you know, some backing by force to tell the parents that we will, uh, defend the boy if you will do something against him, if you are not allowing to come with us.[28]

A different situation confronted Meir, as he didn't have a family he could relate to in this context. Since the political activism was forbidden to all students during the authoritarian regime of King Carol II, Meir must have hidden his belonging to a certain group. Or, he might have embraced Zionist ideals without being a formal member of any actual organization. What Meir emphasizes in his testimony is his strong will to immigrate to Palestine, a desire common to most of his Zionist peers.

Political activism as a response to antisemitism saw some join the Communist movement. For instance, Avraham H. from Suceava remembers that, although his brothers and sisters were Zionists, he was never attracted by Zionism and preferred to remain in Romania and help build a better life there. So, he started to support the Communist youth movements, and later the

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[27] Martin M., HVT 3837.

[28] Sandor G., HVT 230.

Communist party. His political options were influenced also by early interactions with left-wing Zionism and his lack of connections with Judaism. But what turned Avraham into a convinced Communist were the events of September 1940, when the new racial legislation entailed that Jews were no longer allowed to attend public schools.[29]

Resistance during the Holocaust is a key aspect of the political activism of these youngsters. Some young Zionists from different parts of the country moved to Bucharest after they were expelled from training farms, during the Romanianization process. For some, this meant escaping the deportations to Transnistria ordered by Antonescu when Romania entered the war (summer 1941). For others, like Chaim H., Bucharest was the scene of violence that he experienced directly as a victim of the pogrom of January 1941:

> [00:34:44] This is where my story begins. Two or three months before that event, they had expelled us from our farm, and we went to Bucharest. We went to the Zionist Movement, which still had quasi-legal status. All the members of the Zionist groups gathered together in a few buildings in Bucharest. From there, we began to do whatever work we could find-- usually chopping trees, transporting lumber, running errands. Each Zionist group had about 40-50 people. There were four or five groups. So, we were about 200 people living in various apartments around a courtyard. I was only 17 in 1941, and I wasn't involved with the organizational details.[…]
>
> [00:39:09] On January 21st […] They [the legionaries] tied us men to carts and let the horses race forward, with us tied to them. When we got there, they slapped our faces and threatened to do it again if we said a word. Then they made us lie down and they gave us twenty-five lashes with a rubber strap.
>
> [00:41:47] The night before, we were told, they had made our leaders drink terrible things-- spoonfuls of fuel, vinegar. When we saw the leaders, they were all swollen from the beatings. The first night, they killed two of the Zionist leaders: [Rechovski?] and

[29] Avraham H., HVT 3305.

[Blimel?]. They held us in the basement without food. Once in a while they would prick (stab?) us-- I still have a scar on my arm from one (shows arm). Well, I healed.[30]

The legionary rebellion was defeated by Ion Antonescu, who then became the ruler of the state (1941-1944). In this period, the Jews in Regat – and especially in Bucharest – were safe in terms of survival, even if they still had to face oppression, spoliation, forced labor and violence. The fact that the young Zionists in Bucharest were not subjected to deportations allowed them to engage in rescue actions.

The Zionist youth organizations experienced two distinct periods during the war. The first (summer 1940 – summer 1942) is framed by the change of regime in 1940 and the racial legislation and its consequences. However, in these two years, Zionist youth organizations were not banned by any legal provisions. The second period (spring 1942 – August 1944) was marked by institutional transformations within the Jewish communities, with the Jewish Federation replaced by the Jewish Council (Centrala),[31] a state-controlled structure representing the Jews, whose leaders were collaborating with the Antonescu regime. Soon after, on 7 August 1942, the Zionist Organization was disbanded along with all its youth associations.[32] From this point, Zionist activity did not cease, but continued to operate illegally, underground. Subversive actions were deployed also by youth organizations, with some intimately involved in the rescue actions of Jewish victims from Bukovina and Transnistria and of the refugee Jews from Poland. According to the police investigations, in this period the active *halutz* organizations were the leftist Hashomer Hatzair, Gordonia, Dror; the centrist Hanoar Hatzioni; and the religious Mizrachi.[33]

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[30] Chaim H., HVT 3375.

[31] The Jewish Council (Centrala) was the official representative of the Jewish population, imposed by the Romanian authorities and created through Law no. 1090/December 16, 1941, which abolished the former Federation of the Union of Jewish Communities in Romania. Once Centrala commenced work, the intentions of the Romanian authorities to dissolve the activity of the Zionist organization and of the *halutim* became obvious.

[32] Order of Centrala no. 9532, on August 7, 1942.

[33] Notă informativă sintetică a Prefecturii Poliției Capitalei referitoare la anchetarea organizațiilor de tineret sioniste, 24 February 1944, p. 1.

Most of the actions were performed with support and money from the Jewish community in Palestine (Yishuv) and the United States, whose delegates worked from the neutral centers of Geneva and Istanbul. Rescue actions involved not only financial support but also organized coordinated teamwork. The underground network functioned with the tacit approval of the Romanian authorities, who accepted the bribes, but also by establishing connections and working with temporary collaborators for specific tasks. One such temporary collaborator was Meir. In the spring-summer of 1944, while he was in Bucharest waiting to sail to Palestine, he helped the Zionist underground by delivering certain information. As already mentioned, he does not mention the organization he was collaborating with:

> [00:32:37.16] MEIR REICHMAN: […] Also by the end of the, uh, by the end of the war, nearly the end in Bucharest, there was the underground. It was the Jewish underground, which they used to send me with different messages. Because by this time, the Jewish start fighting against the German. It was only a couple of months before the end. But that was organized, and there was fighting against the German. It was like a small underground.
>
> [00:33:18.58] So I used to go and supply them with information for different-- where the Germans are in the city for different parts of the town. I used to supply them with, even with, as I recall, with-- with food, and with information, and with sometimes some arms.
>
> [00:33:38.29] Because I was a little, and it was easy to sneak in between all the streets, not-- not to see me.
>
> [00:33:51.82] MEIR REICHMAN: That-- I remember that the-- this family, they come to me, and someone look. I got some papers here, take that, and run to point, to this post, from now. Because I-- they told me the-- the street, and I just--
>
> [00:34:10.56] INTERVIEWER: You just did it.
>
> [00:34:11.62] He didn't think about why or who.

> [00:34:13.99] MEIR REICHMAN: Also, I didn't look like Jewish. When I was little, I didn't know I was, I looked like-- like a gentile, like a little Romanian. No, it was nothing. I didn't have a big nose. I didn't have nothing. OK? So I was very easy I could--

The underground network always based its rescue activities on collaboration with border smugglers, authorities, Jewish leaders and temporary collaborators for specific tasks, like Meir. At the age of 13, Meir was contributing to the rescue of Jewish victims in Romania, while himself only a helpless boy. Transmitting messages on a piece of paper might not seem like a dangerous action, but had he been caught by the authorities he would have faced the charge of subversive acts against the state.

V. Conclusions

Meir's childhood and youth are marked by episodes in which he witnessed persecution or was in a position of fighter and rescuer, probably without even being aware of it. His testimony is an insight into an exceptional life story lived in exceptional times. Meir was a simple Jewish male, without much education or distinguished intellectual traits. But it is this simplicity combined with exceptional events he witnessed or experienced that makes his life story unique. A man of multiple lives, Meir seems to have been born under the sign of survival: he was the survivor at birth; in the orphanage; he survived the bullying of the Nazi officer who shot at him out of amusement; while preparing to sail to Palestine he missed *Mefkure*, the boat that eventually sank, and embarked on another boat that reached its destination; in the 1948 Independence War his friend was killed by a chance shot whilst on night watch while Meir escaped; years later, as a sailor in the Israeli Merchant Marine, he was stuck in Cuba during the revolution and again survived the shooting.

Through contextualizing and explaining Meir's story, I have tried to show how persecution was perceived in Romania by the young Jewish generation and how they responded to antisemitism. A main focus was on the lives of those Jews who were not deported, but faced oppression in Romania, though able to survive. The status of Meir as an orphan and Zionist is even more revealing, opening new research questions on individual and ethnic identity. Though

underground resistance is a minor aspect of Meir's life during the Holocaust, his entire life is a story of resistance and survival.