

**“They have never returned”
Holocaust and Jewish Community from Northern Transylvania
– Review –***

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“*The first* transport with Jews left Sighet on May 16, 1944 and the last one left Oradea on June 27, 1944. On this date, Northern Transylvania became, like most European countries, Judenrein”.¹ These sentences published in the first of the two volumes that we are focused on are extremely relevant in the context of the Northern Transylvanian Holocaust events.

In 1944 over the course of two months and a half an entire ethnical group from the Northern part of Transylvania, namely the Jews, was the subject of extensive gathering operations in the ghettos and deportations. These operations were organized and conducted by the Hungarian authorities in collaboration with the Germans. Only a few survivors returned home from concentration camps. In the same time, their stories about the life and death of the beloved ones remained untold for many decades. For this reason both historians and the general public did not know for a long time what happened in a not so distant past.

From the beginning I have to stress that a great merit of these two volumes is that they give the Holocaust survivors of Northern Transylvania a chance to tell their stories. Their memories were completed by another 20 interviews with Romanian and Hungarian ethnics who have witnessed these events. The anti-Semitic measures and manifestations, prior to the deportation of the Jews, taken by the Romanian authorities before 1940, and followed by the Hungarian officials after the second Vienna arbitration in 1940 were also provided.

A peculiarity of the Holocaust in Northern Transylvania and in Hungary is that the deportations of the Jews have taken place relatively late compared to the rest

* *Depoziții despre viață și moarte. Holocaustul din Nord-Vestul Transilvaniei. Cercetare de istorie orală* (Depositions about life and death. Holocaust in North-Western Transylvania. An oral history research), ed. and introd. Ioana Cosman; Interviews by: Ioana Cosman, Daniel Stejerean, Adrian Oneț, Dinu Gherman, Cosmina Paul, Aura Pinteș, Adrian Boda (Cluj-Napoca: Argonaut, 2009), 506 p. ISBN 978-973-109-196-9; and *Shoah în Transilvania de Nord, Depoziții despre viață și moarte. Cercetare de istorie orală* (Shoah in Northern Transylvania. Depositions about life and death. An oral history research), ed. Ioana Cosman, (Cluj-Napoca: Argonaut, 2010), 317 p. ISBN 978-973-109-206-5

¹ *Depoziții despre viață și moarte. Holocaustul din Nord-Vestul Transilvaniei*, 105–106.

of Europe, although the anti-Semitic measures were already enacted. The Hungarian authorities have resisted until March 1944 the German pressure to “resettle” the Jewish population. Many of the Jewish interviews emphasize the fact that their situation worsened after 1940, but in the same time they were confident that the end of the war would restore their old way of life. For this reason only a small number of Jews tried to flee to Romania or to escape ghettoization in 1944.

As we have already shown, at the basis of the volumes are the interviews taken with witnesses and victims of the Holocaust from the nine Transylvanian counties. The most part of the interviews were taken by the editor of the two volumes, Ioana Cosman, as part of her doctoral research. Besides editing the interviews, Ioana Cosman also used important archival documents from the Romanian and Hungarian Archives, and bibliographical references, in order to develop a theory regarding the tragic events in the Introductory Study. The great merit of her research is that she brought to the knowledge of the Holocaust the case study of the Jews from Northern Transylvania. Their sufferance was left unspoken mostly because during the Communist dictatorship researches focused on this topic were more or less discouraged by the regime. Thanks to this research thirty-two of the few remaining survivors were interviewed, their stories were recorded and published, and their voices could be heard.

The two books complete each other since the interviews are divided between the two by the counties from where the survivors were deported. The extensive Introductory Study that opens *Depoziții despre viață și moarte* serves as well for the second book *Shoah în Transilvania de Nord*. The two books, therefore, must be read together, for a general knowledge of the topic of the Holocaust in Northern Transylvania.

Depoziții despre viață și moarte. Holocaustul din Nord-Vestul Transilvaniei. Cercetare de istorie orală was published in 2009. It groups 27 interviews recorded in four counties: Bihor, Satu Mare, Sălaj, and Mureș; one of the interviews comprised actually two interviews with Kain Ernő and his wife, Elena, from Dindești, Satu Mare. The book introduces a study on the relationship between Holocaust, memory and representation, signed by Doru Radosav, followed by a consistent Introductory Study of the Shoah in Northern Transylvania signed by Ioana Cosman. Both studies are translated into English, so they can facilitate the work of foreign researchers who are focused on similar topics or who are in search for theories regarding one of the most atrocious moments of the 20th century. The volume ends with an Index of names and places, in order to facilitate the researcher’s work. Second volume *Shoah în Transilvania de Nord. Depoziții despre viață și moarte. Cercetare de istorie orală*, published in 2010, reunites 24 interviews with Jews, Romanians, and Hungarians from Bistrița-Năsăud, Cluj and Maramureș counties; they are accompanied by a short Editor’s Note, and an Index of names and places at the end. In both cases, at the bottom of the page, the editor has offered some explanations, as well as translation of recorded Hebrew words, in order to facilitate the reading.

As we mentioned before, the volumes are reuniting the memories of the Jews surviving the Nazi concentration camps with memories of witnesses of the events of the Second World War. The interviews are confronting two completing

realities offering two perspectives: the one of the victims, and the one of the observers. While the stories of the Christian witnesses end with trains full of Jews leaving from different Transylvanian stations (see Octavia Bărbos' story from Bistrița-Năsăud), the Jewish stories only begin when the trains leave the station, following a terrifying account about the perspective of death. But the phrase most commonly used in both cases is that "they have never returned". This phrase haunts the destiny of the Jewish communities from Transylvania either that they physically disappeared, or have emigrated after the war.

Every interview has its uniqueness, since it presents the interviewee's personal history combined with that of his community. Both Jewish interviewees as well as their Romanian and Hungarian neighbours emphasized that the Jewish community was perfectly adapted to the Transylvanian society of the interwar period despite some anti-Semitism reactions coming from the rest of Romania. Most of the representatives of the three ethnic communities were fluent in Romanian, Hungarian, and German – the Jews also knew Hebrew (or Yiddish) – and this was the result of the multinational component of Transylvania. All the interviewees also emphasized that what happened during Holocaust was tragic and horrific and that the disappearance of the Jews marked the whole Transylvanian community just as much as the war did. However, the Final Solution was unimaginable for all of the interviewees, as Simeon Leichter notes: "Because nobody thought that they are going to be taken to crematory, to hell".¹

Without aiming to assign blame to one country or another, the two books give voice to the silent ones – the Transylvanian Jews – and recreates the past, giving the reader a chance to familiarize with the details of the Holocaust in Northern Transylvania. Knowledge of such atrocities can prevent new ones to happen.

¹ *Shoah în Transilvania de Nord. Depoziții despre viață și moarte. Cercetare de istorie orală*, Ioana Cosman (ed.), Argonaut, Cluj-Napoca, 2010, p. 202.