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# HOLOCAUST IN A TRANSNISTRIAN TOWN: DEATH AND SURVIVAL IN RYBNITSA (1941-1944)

## Abstract

The publication of *Neighbors* by Jan Gross generated a wide debate in Poland about the participation of the Poles in the Holocaust. Jedwabne was a Polish village where the titular nationality massacred the Jewish population. The name of this village became a generic name for the participation of the other Eastern European nations in the Holocaust. In this paper, I examine the particularities of the Holocaust in Rybnitsa- a small town in the Transnistrian region of the Republic of Moldova.

**Keywords:** Transnistria; Holocaust; Rybnitsa; Republic of Moldova; Memory; Jedwabne; Romania; USSR; Nazi Germany; World War II.

## Historical Context

Throughout its history, Rybnitsa has experienced numerous changes of borders. Founded in 1628, Rybnitsa is a small town which today lies in the contested Transnistrian region of the Republic of Moldova. From its foundation to the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Rybnitsa was inside the Polish Kingdom. In 1793, after the second partition of Poland, this town passed to Russia. Then, after the October Revolution of 1917, it was involved in the Civil War, which made it practically a no man's land for several years. In 1924 it became a part of The Moldovan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (MASSR) inside the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, which was a part of USSR. During the interwar period, Rybnitsa was on the Soviet-Romanian border. This border was highly militarized, and the town was under a special border regime.

In 1940, MASSR was dissolved, and a part of it was ceded to Ukraine, while the other part united with a part of Bessarabia to become Moldovan

Socialist Republic (MSSR). During World War II, Transnistria became a venue of the Holocaust. From 1941-1944, Rybnitsa was occupied by Romania, which was an ally of Nazi Germany. From 1944 to 1990, it was again a part of MSSR, inside USSR. Finally, from 1990 until the present, it is situated in Transnistria, which in 1990 proclaimed its independence from Republic of Moldova, though this independence is not recognized by international community.

The name Transnistria was used for the first time in 1941, by the Romanian administration. At that time, Transnistria was totally different from what we know today as the secessionist region of Transnistria, inside the Republic of Moldova. Then, between 1941 and 1944, Transnistria was a territorial entity, which stretched from Nistru to Bug. This territory was not incorporated inside Romania, but it was governed by the Romanian administration. To a certain extent, the only issue which can be brought up in relation to the contemporary Transnistria is the fact that both territorial entities have had an unclear international status.

## **Research Questions and Methodology**

This paper will show that Rybnitsa deserves a special place in the historiography of the Holocaust. First of all, during the World War II, it was the only place in Transnistria to host both a Jewish ghetto and a prison for Jewish political prisoners. This fact allows for a multilateral evaluation of the Holocaust in this region. In contrast to the studies of the Holocaust from other regions, there is not much information on the Holocaust in Transnistria.

Irina Livezeanu, a scholar who surveyed the historiography on the subject of the Holocaust in Transnistria, suggested that there is a need for a local study of the Transnistrian Holocaust. This need grows from the necessity to catch up with the Western scholarship of the Holocaust.<sup>1</sup> The most famous local study of the Holocaust was conducted in the Polish village of Jedwabne by Jan Gross.<sup>2</sup>

At the moment when Germany invaded Poland, Jews represented half of the population in Jedwabne. The other half of the population was Polish. In his book, Gross argues that, before the arrival of Germans in the village, the Polish half of the village massacred the Jewish half. At the beginning of this project, I suspected that Rybnitsa would be another Jedwabne, but throughout the research I concluded that Rybnitsa is different.

Prior to World War II, Jews represented a third of the population, in this small town. In 1941, joint Romanian and German forces were approaching very fast. Nevertheless, the dynamics of violence followed different patterns. First of all, Rybnitsa was occupied by joint Romanian and German efforts. When Romanians entered the town they sought contact with the local Moldavian population, whom they regarded as being Romanians.

In fact, the Moldavians who spoke both Russian and Romanian were employed by the Romanian administration. According to Alexander Dallin, "the Moldavian minority was transformed into ethnic elite by the new regime".<sup>3</sup> Apart from Moldavians, Rybnitsa had a large Ukrainian and Russian speaking population. In this sense, Rybnitsa is a good case study of a multicultural community, which at a certain point in time, experienced waves of violence.

Taking into consideration the remarks from above, my paper will provide a more nuanced representation of the Holocaust in Eastern Europe. It will try to answer the following questions: Which were the main stages of the Holocaust in Transnistria and how they were implemented in Rybnitsa? How was the daily life in a Jewish ghetto under the Romanian administration? What was the role of the locals in the Holocaust?

After the War, the Soviets held trials to prosecute all the instances of the collaboration with the Romanian and Nazi authorities. It is important to state that although these trials refer to the post-war developments, they shed some light on the local history during the war. In fact, the existence of the detailed records from the Soviet trials provided a major impetus for this research. The collection on "The War Crimes Investigation and Trial Records from the Republic of Moldova, 1944-1955" consists of sixty one trials organized by the Moldavian Soviet authorities in order to investigate the war crimes and enemy collaboration in Moldova and Transnistria.

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) obtained the records in this collection from the Archives of the State Security and Information Service of the Republic of Moldova, in June 2004. The interesting issue is that these documents are still not accessible in Moldova. Looking at these documents I realized that they comprise the detailed proceedings of the trials concerning most of the leaders of the Jewish ghetto in Rybnitsa. Nevertheless, in order to grasp some useful information from the proceedings of these trials, one has to understand the context in which these trials took place.

On the 2<sup>nd</sup> of November, 1942, the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, one of the Soviet central governing authorities, issued a decree “On the establishment of the Extraordinary State Commission for the Establishment and Investigation of the Crimes of the Fascist German Invaders and Their Accomplices, and of the Damage They Caused to Citizens, Collective Farms, Public Organizations, State Enterprises, and Institutions of the USSR (ChGK)”.<sup>4</sup>

According to Sorokina,

the commission had broad powers: it had the right to conduct investigations of Hitler’s war crimes and to determine the material damage suffered by the USSR, to coordinate the activities of all Soviet organizations in this field, to reveal the names of war criminals, and to publish official reports on their findings.<sup>5</sup>

ChGK was a central authority but it had multiple subdivisions in each district of the USSR. In order to gain more credibility, the central office of the Commission was staffed with scholars from the Soviet Academy of Sciences.

Although members of the Soviet Academy of Sciences offered their prestige, most of the fieldwork was conducted by more than 100 local subdivisions of the ChGK, which operated in various administrative-territorial units of the USSR. The fact that the local branches of the ChGK had to perform most of the work had a direct impact on their structure. In this sense, each local branch consisted of three members: the first secretary of the regional party committee, plus the heads of the corresponding local Council of People’s Commissars and the NKVD-KGB. Sorokina argues that most of the work was done by the NKVD-KGB because the party and state institutions were busy with other matters.<sup>6</sup>

The materials provided by ChGK were used by the Soviet authorities not only to publicize the material losses inflicted by the Nazi invasion. The Soviet prosecutors relied on these materials to initiate a series of post-war trials of former Nazi collaborators. Like all the victors’ trials, these trials were accompanied by a triumphant rhetoric. However, the most important element is that the trials used the materials provided by the NKVD to ChGK. Due to the participation of NKVD in the Soviet repressive campaigns many historians are still reluctant to use the proceedings of these trials as historical documents. As Sorokina dully acknowledges:

Nearly a half-century later, it must be recognized that the Stalinist plan to create the phantom of a “public prosecutor” of fascism was a success. The ChGK fulfilled its representational function during the war years, and in the postwar years faithfully kept the topic of “war crimes” sealed off from Soviet society. The documentary materials it created and collected, however, have turned out to be the latest Russian mass grave. In the process of excavating it historians will for a long time come to be faced with the sometimes fruitless task of distinguishing “ours” from “others”, and executioners from victims.<sup>7</sup>

On the methodological level, I am focusing on a close reading of the materials from the four trials, which involved former chiefs or deputy chiefs of Rybnitsa ghetto. Although they were victims of the Romanian administration, these Jewish leaders were prosecuted as war criminals by the Soviets. In this sense, the proceedings of these trials are oversaturated with Soviet ideological content. Nevertheless, through a very careful reading it is possible to extract some basic patterns of the daily life in a Jewish ghetto. These materials are corroborated with the survivors’ accounts, either in the forms of memoirs or oral interviews. The oral interviews belong to the collection of USC Shoah Foundation Institute for Visual History and Education.

In terms of published sources, there have been published numerous collections of primary documents on the Holocaust in Transnistria. Jean Ancel is among the most prolific authors of the collections of primary documents.<sup>8</sup> The problem is that the documents in these collections are not contextualized. They are just documents concerning the Romanian administration in Transnistria.

## **History and Memory of the Holocaust in Moldova**

Along with the Great Wars, the Holocaust has probably become one of the most popular historiographical themes of the twentieth century. In fact, there is a whole discipline dedicated to The Holocaust and Genocide Studies. Nevertheless, in the post-communist Eastern Europe, the Holocaust has become subject to intensive historical research only in the last decade. Throughout the communist period, the ruling regimes sought to shape a class-centered historical narrative. In this sense, they discouraged any reference to instances of genocide.

In relation to the historiography of the Transnistrian Holocaust, it is interesting that there has been much more work on the historiography of the Holocaust, than on the Holocaust proper. It was not difficult to find articles on the historiography in general. It was difficult to find some publications on the Holocaust in Transnistria. In the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century four articles were however published on the Holocaust in Moldova: three of them in English.<sup>9</sup>

In contrast to the Soviet period, when they served class interests, after 1991, “many Moldovan historians simply chose to serve a new ‘master’: nationalism”.<sup>10</sup> If during the Soviet period, Holocaust was ignored due to the necessity to preserve the unity of the Soviet working class, then during the post-Soviet period, Holocaust is ignored due to the necessity to preserve national unity.

In the Moldovan context, “national unity” has two different interpretations. The Republic of Moldova emerged as the successor of the Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic (MSSR) -one of the fifteen Soviet republics. After the end of World War II, the boundaries of MSSR were arbitrarily drawn by Soviet authorities to comprise Bessarabia- the eastern part of Greater Romania-and a slice of Transnistria – a Ukrainian territory, which during the World War II was governed by Romania.

With some exceptions, after 1991, some Moldovan citizens sought to preserve the boundaries of the post-Soviet Republic of Moldova, while others pleaded for the (re)unification with Romania. The former are known as Moldovanists, while the later as Romanianists. Both categories display an ethnic understanding of the nation, and do not leave a place for national minorities in their nationalist discourses. Accustomed to the politicization of history, most of the Moldovan historians belong either to the Moldovanist or to the Romanianist camp. In this sense, they avoid the evidence which contradicts their national credo. At the same time, some historians let the documents speak for themselves and do not provide a contextual narrative.

In his article on the historiography of the Holocaust in Moldova, Dmitry Tartakovsky shows how the Romanianist historians employed similar samples of thinking as the Romanian extreme right from the interwar period.<sup>11</sup> The main idea of the extreme right was that Jews were to blame for the Holocaust, because most of the Romanian Communists were Jews and they undermined the existence of the Romanian state.

Referring to this narrative of victimization, Vladimir Solonari, states that:

Running through this account is a theme of victimization: Romania was forced to renounce ancient territories, its subjects were exposed to foreign, malign rule, and it was abandoned by its Western allies and Communized against its own will.<sup>12</sup>

One example of this narrative is that most of the Romanianist historians still argue that the Tatarbuniar uprising of 1924 was inspired by the Soviet Union through its Russian and Jewish agents.<sup>13</sup> In fact, it emerged out of the failed policies of the Romanian administration, which could not help the local farmers to sell their products on the markets of Odessa.

Another instance of politicized history is provided by the story that claims that only Jews welcomed the Soviet authorities in June 1940.<sup>14</sup> According to Tartakovsky, the increasing popularity of this myth, especially inside the Romanian Army, contributed to the policy of ethnic cleansing.<sup>15</sup> In fact, contrary to this belief, dissatisfaction with the Romanian administration was displayed by many Bessarabians irrespective of their ethnic background.

An important dimension of Tartakovsky's argument is the fact that Moldovan identity is so fragile that the issue of Holocaust serves to strengthen it and to justify the self-victimization of the local community. Along with other contested historiographical topics, Holocaust serves as a gradient with which to assess the loyalty or disloyalty of the Moldovan citizens. Any individual, from any ethnic group is expected to confirm his or her loyalty to the Moldovan state by blaming the Jews for Holocaust. Otherwise, if ethnic minorities do not agree with this point of view, they confirm their status as "foreigners".

Romanianist historians were very influential in the early 1990's, when the idea of the (re)unification with Romania was dominant among the Moldovan political elite. Afterwards, they were still influential, but their influence has diminished in the first decade of the current century. In 2001, the rejuvenated Moldovan Communist Party (MCP) came to power. Immediately, it started to promote the inclusion of national minorities into the definition of Moldovan identity. The new authorities started to pay more attention to the issue of Holocaust. For example, in January 2006, Ministry of Education required secondary school teachers to organize activities of Holocaust commemoration.<sup>16</sup>

At the same time, MCP promoted a concept of aggressive Moldovan nationalism, which denied any common history to Republic of Moldova and Romania. In this sense, Dumitru shows how some Moldovanist

historians blamed only the Romanian administration for the crimes associated with the Holocaust.<sup>17</sup> In this part of the story, the central figure is “the Romanian policeman” who equally repressed all the population, not just Jewish people, in what is now the Republic of Moldova.

## **Participation of the Locals in the Holocaust**

Before proceeding to the understanding of the local participation in the Holocaust, one needs to understand the ethnic background of the local population. According to Shachan, “there is no evidence as how many Jews were in Transnistria before the invasion. The last census was in 1926, and this had some results on the national minorities and their concentration”.<sup>18</sup> Referring to the census of 1926, Galushchenko mentions that the district of Rybnitsa had a total population of 47,731.<sup>19</sup> Among them: 23,064 Ukrainians (48.32%), 17,023 Moldovans (35.66%), 4,422 Jews (9.26%), 1,809 Russians (3.78%), 1,138 Poles, 28 Germans and 15 Bulgarians.<sup>20</sup>

Concerning the number of Jews during the first months of the Nazi invasion into the USSR, it is difficult to provide some estimates, because some of the local Jews, in particular industrial workers and Party members, were evacuated by the Soviet authorities. Others came to Rybnitsa while trying to escape from the Nazi invasion of Bessarabia. Still others were deported by the Romanian army, which sought to get rid of the Jews and to send them to the territory occupied by the German army. Moreover, the deported Jews brought with them a different understanding of Jewish identity, while the local Soviet Jews had a more secular perception of their identity. Thus, despite of the fact that I use a common denominator for all the Jews in the area, to be a Jew in Romania was rather different from being a Jew in the Soviet Union.

With all the details from above it is still relevant that both Romanianists and Moldovanists ignore a very important issue. They do not ask a fundamental question: “What the local population was doing during the Holocaust?” As Solonari claims:

The majority of today’s citizens of the Republic of Moldova either witnessed or participated in the events referred to above or are descendents of those who did. Mass killings of civilians, their incarceration and deportation, confiscation of property and its distribution among locals (the policy

of “Romanization”), then the partial return of those evacuated—these extraordinary events could not but implicate directly or indirectly many of the locals, whether Jews or not, and no one could have escaped knowledge of what went on.<sup>21</sup>

The fact that historians avoid this question has a direct impact on the ways in which Moldovan society remembers, or rather forgets, its participation in the Holocaust. For his article, Tartakovsky conducted some interviews among the Moldovan college students. As a result he claims that most of them are not familiar with the Holocaust and very few of those who are familiar know that the current territory of Moldova was one of the Holocaust venues.<sup>22</sup>

Moreover, even those few Moldovans who know about the Holocaust deny any share of responsibility for the participation of the local population. In order to improve this situation Dumitru suggests that:

It would therefore be important to study the role of the local Bessarabian and Transnistrian populations during the Holocaust, as this could help clarify the choices that individuals faced.<sup>23</sup>

One of the main questions of my research paper is to study how the population of Rybnitsa was involved in the Holocaust, on the local level.

In relation to the participation of the locals in the destruction of the Jews, Dallin suggests that most of the local population was neutral toward the Romanian administration. He states that “there was no implicit endorsement of the new regime, but also no rejection of it”.<sup>24</sup> This opinion is also endorsed by the authors of a recent article, which compares the behavior of the local population in Bessarabia and Transnistria.<sup>25</sup> According to them, the population of Transnistria was less likely to be involved in violent actions against Jews. Moreover, Transnistrians were more likely to help the Jews. The authors were very surprised to discover that:

One of the most remarkable findings from all our research in Transnistria was actually a nonevent: we did not find evidence of a single anti-Jewish pogrom anywhere in Transnistria. Pogroms in Bessarabia were reported by survivors and are referenced in archival material and secondary sources, but the same cannot be said for Transnistria, as we found no evidence of such activities in survivors’ testimonies, government records, or the secondary sources we consulted.<sup>26</sup>

Referring to the paragraph above, my research seems to confirm the fact that the participation of the local non-Jewish population in the destruction of their Jewish neighbors was more a result of a passive observation rather than to active participation. In comparison with the trials of the Jewish leaders from Transnistria, the same trials from Bessarabia mentioned actions of mass killings. For example, in the trial of Pavel Sergienko, a policeman from Rezina, a Bessarabian town across Rybnitsa, reveals that in July 1941, several hundreds of Jews were buried alive on the outskirts of the town.<sup>27</sup> So, it seems that in Rezina, the destruction of the local Jews was more in line with the events from Gross's study of Jedwabne in Poland.

Dumitru and Johnson claim that the distinction between the patterns of violence in Bessarabia and Transnistria is related to different nationality policies conducted by the Romanian and Soviet state in these provinces. On the one hand, during the interwar period, Bessarabia, being a Romanian territory, was subjected to the Romanian right-wing administration. In these circumstances, local popular anti-Semitism was reinforced by the Romanian state and its policies.

On the other hand, Transnistria was a part of Soviet state, and in this sense, the local population was involved in a policy where all Soviet nationalities were treated equally.<sup>28</sup> The same opinion is shared by Alexander Dallin, who mentions that:

this area, especially its southern part, was closer to a "melting pot" of nationalities than most parts of the USSR; settled entirely from the outside, it had no "indigenous stock". As a result, the nationality question played a rather "subordinate role in this area."<sup>29</sup>

A different picture emerges out of the testimonies provided by the Holocaust survivors. In this sense, Shachan, whose book is based primarily on the interviews conducted with the Holocaust survivors, mentions that: "Many of the local non-Jewish residents of Transnistria treated the deportees with hostility, and there were frequent cases of locals who were directly involved in murdering deportees."<sup>30</sup>

Moreover, Shachan profoundly doubts the pacifist character of the local population, which was raised in the spirit of Soviet friendship of peoples. He states that:

What is astonishing is that those involved in killing and torturing the Jews were primarily groups of Ukrainian youths who had been educated under

the Soviet regime and who had no doubt been friends with Jews in the Komsomol-the Communist youth organization.<sup>31</sup>

## **Stages of the Holocaust in Transnistria**

Referring to the different stages of violence in Rybnitsa, it is crucial to compare it with the developments on the whole territory of Transnistria. Transnistria has experienced three main periods in which considerable changes occurred:

### **1. July-August 1941**

During this period, Einsatzgruppe D-led by Colonel Otto Ohlendorf-together with the German Eleventh Army and the Romanian Third and Fourth Armies marched through the territory of Transnistria and engaged in what is known as “the Holocaust by bullets”. As a basic pattern emerged in which Jews were ordered to gather somewhere in the locality. They were then executed on the outskirts of the localities, preferably in wooded locations. At this stage, Romanians started to deport Jews across Nistru, but Germans refused to accept them on the premises that the Jewish question would be solved at the end of the war. At that time, the Blitzkrieg was supposed to last only for several weeks.

### **2. September 1941- February 1942**

On August 30, 1941, Germans and Romanians signed the Tighina Agreement. This Agreement laid the basis for the Romanian administration in Transnistria. A point from this document clearly denied to the Romanian side the possibility of deporting Jews beyond the borders of Transnistria. As a consequence, the Romanian government issued Order 23, which stipulated the necessity to gather all the Jews in ghettos or concentration camps. At the same time, Jews were to be put to work, and they would receive a minimum wage. Jews were mostly employed for various construction works, including restoring bridges and building roads. Despite the small amount of their wages, most of the testimonies suggest that Jews did not receive any payments.

During the same period, Antonescu started the deportations of Jews from Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina to the ghettos of Transnistria.

Some deportees were transported on carts, while the vast majority had to walk. Those who could not walk were shot on the spot. In this sense, Transnistria became a place of death marches. During this stage, most of the Jews died of exhaustion on their way to the ghettos. As a matter of fact, the deportees could enter Transnistria only through five crossing points. Rybnitsa was one of these crossing points. Approximately 25,000 Jews crossed into Transnistria through Rybnitsa.<sup>32</sup>

### **3. March 1942- March 1944**

To a certain extent, this stage witnessed a decrease of violent deaths. Most of the detainees died of disease or hunger. The Romanian administration referred to these instances of death as to “the deaths of natural causes”. Only at the end of the period, in March 1944, when the Soviet army was rapidly advancing, did the retreating German units occasionally gather Jews and shot them.

### **Stages of the Holocaust in Rybnitsa**

Now, it will be interesting to consider how the stages of violence in Transnistria were implemented in Rybnitsa. Referring to the first stage, there is not much information about the fate of the local Jews, who were shot in July-August 1941. As a matter of fact, this stage of the Holocaust is the least documented. The only certainty is that the majority of the Jews, shot during these two months, were local Ukrainian Jews. In terms of numbers, Ancel points to the fact that: “out of 3,500 local Jews, only 1,467 were still in Rybnitsa as of December 1941. The remainder had been inducted into the Soviet army or killed by the Nazis, or they had escaped”.<sup>33</sup>

Because of the fact that Rybnitsa was on the bank of Nistru, and it was one of the main crossing points for the deportees from Bessarabia and Bukovina, it was regarded as a town of salvation for the deportees. Some of the deportees managed to bribe local officials in order to get their names on the local registration lists. In this sense, they avoided being sent to the so-called death camps, which were concentrated closer to Bug. If the deportees did not succeed in saving themselves, many left their children with sympathetic local families.

According to Ancel, some of the deportees managed to leave their children with the local Christian families while others married their

daughters to local Romanians. Furthermore, Ancel argues that: "This phenomenon, described in gendarmerie reports, was apparently unique to Rybnitsa and the Balta district, because the convoys passing through this area were bound for the Bug."<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, despite these sporadic instances of survival, most of the Jews, who crossed into Transnistria through Rybnitsa, died in the death camps of the Southern Transnistria.<sup>35</sup>

In comparison to the Jews from the concentration camps, Jews from the ghetto were in a privileged position. If in the concentration camps, the fate of the inmates was entirely in the hands of the local police, then, in the ghettos, Jews had a share of local autonomy. Undoubtedly, police had a big influence on the developments in the ghetto, but local Jewish leaders had their share of power. The authority of the local Jewish leaders increased throughout the years of the Romanian occupation. The main reason for this increase in the influence of the local Jewish leaders was that the Romanian administration did not know the realities on the ground.

In this sense, it was simpler to appoint some locals who knew the local context. In addition, the fact that the Jewish ghettos did not have a coordinating authority added to the chaos in the region. Yitzhak Arad argues that the Transnistrian ghettos were subordinated to three authorities: gendarmerie or the Romanian police, the army and the praetors (local administrators).<sup>36</sup> He also states that as a consequence of the existence of multiple authorities, there was a high level of corruption.

Indeed, the evidence from the Soviet post-war trials of the Jewish leaders confirms the existence of corruption. All the four leaders of the Rybnitsa ghetto subscribed to the claim that they bribed the local chief of the police in order to register new persons in the ghetto or to save women and children from hard labor. Sometimes, during the proceedings of the trials, they recognized the fact that they took a share of the goods, which were to be brought to the Romanian administration. For instance, in September 1944, Shtrahman Nahim, the Deputy Chief of Rybnitsa ghetto from 1941 to 1944, confessed that he took a watch from a Jew who wanted to be registered in the ghetto.<sup>37</sup>

Because of the high concentration of Jews, Rybnitsa was regarded with suspicion by the Romanian authorities. A report by the Secretary-General Gelep of the Interior Ministry is illustrative of this suspicion. On March 31, 1942 he sent to the administration a Siguranza report, which stated that 1,500 Jews deported to the Rybnitsa ghetto were roaming the streets and marketplaces. He concludes, that "The Christian population is enraged

and requests the authorities' intervention."<sup>38</sup> In this case, the authorities did not postpone their intervention.

According to Radu Ioanid, the number of Jews in Rybnitsa decreased steadily. If in April 1942, there were 1,371 Jews, then in March 1943 there were 600, and in November 1943, there were 462 Jews.<sup>39</sup> At this point, I am not sure about the reasons for such a decrease in the population. One possible reason could be the fact that some of the Jews from the ghetto were deported to the concentration camps. In the testimonies of Samuil Vainshtok, the chief of the Jewish ghetto from September 1941 to April 1942, he mentioned the deportation of 500 Jews from Rybnitsa to the concentration camps.<sup>40</sup>

The proceedings of the trial did not mention any specific locations for the concentration camps. They generally are present in the text as "German concentration camps". It is highly likely that these German concentration camps were situated in the Southern Transnistria, which was an area with compact German population. It is also possible that these camps were situated on the Eastern shore of Bug, on the territory which was under the administration of the German state.

Nevertheless, he mentioned that these deportations occurred in the fall of 1941. The file of Samuil Boshernitsan, the next chief of the ghetto from April 1942 to December 1943, does not refer to the fate of some 700 missing Jews.<sup>41</sup> Finally, the file of Shtrahman Nahim, the deputy chief of the ghetto from 1941 to 1944 mentioned that in November 1943, he participated in the deportation of 100 Jews to a concentration camp. Out of one hundred, only 54 survived until the end of Romanian administration.

Another likely explanation for the decrease in the population of the ghetto can be the worsening of the epidemic situation or the lack of food. As in any other ghetto, the local population suffered from a constant lack of food. On the other hand, the witnesses to the trials of the ghetto's chiefs refer to the aid, which arrived from the international Jewish organizations in 1943.

Yet other factors also accounted for the decrease in the Jewish population. The local authorities did not wait for the orders from the center. As often happens, local authorities engaged in some type of preemptive reprisal. They ordered the verification of registration papers among the detainees of the ghetto. Those who did not have papers, or could not bribe the authorities to get the papers, were shot. Thus, according to the proceedings of Shtrachman trial, on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of March 1942, 48 Jews from the ghetto were shot. The files of the Romanian gendarmerie provide more

details on this subject. An analysis of these files shows that Benditer Ihiel mentions that 48 Jews were gathered in the central square of the town and shot at the order of Captain Gheorghe Botoroaga, because they left the ghetto in search of food.<sup>42</sup>

The last instance of recorded violence in Rybnitsa, under the Romanian administration, was witnessed on March 19, 1944. On this date, some 50 Jews from the prison of Rybnitsa, were shot by a retreating SS unit. These prisoners had a special status: they were brought to Transnistria, as political prisoners from all the territory of Romania. This story is remarkable not only because it was the last instance of recorded violence in Rybnitsa. It became known in the literature of the Holocaust as “the massacre of Rybnitsa”. Matei Gal was one of the three Jewish survivors of the massacre. In 1996, Gal gave an interview to the Shoah Foundation. In this interview, he briefly recollects some details of the massacre.<sup>43</sup>

According to Gal,

The morning of March 19, 1944, appeared to be the same as other numerous days in the prison. There was no sign of a future massacre. Moreover, on that morning, prisoners were brought into the courtyard and told that, due to the rapid advancement of the Soviet army, soon all of them will be transferred to Romania. So, all of us [prisoners] were preparing for our departure. Then, the administration of the prison told us that we will have to wait until evening, because there were no trains for us. First of all, the Romanian administration had to evacuate the Romanians and the local collaborators... In the evening, we heard some noise in the basement. It was the sound of shooting and shouting. At a certain point, the door of our cell opened, and I saw a couple of men in SS uniforms. Then we aligned at the wall and the officer ordered the shooting. It was a miracle that I survived as all my cellmates perished.<sup>44</sup>

## Conclusion

When I started the research for this paper I thought that I would be able to confirm the model, provided by Jan Gross in his analysis of Jedwabne. However, this paper illustrates a different scenario. If in the case of Jedwabne, the Polish half of the population massacred the Jewish half, then in the case of Rybnitsa, the vast majority of the massacres were conducted by the Romanian or German armies. The locals from Rybnitsa were passive observers to these instances of violence. This passivity

was expressed not only in relation to the participation in the massacres. Locals were also reluctant to help the Jewish population. So, in contrast to Jedwabne, where locals were active participants, in Rybnitsa, the local population was a passive participant of the Holocaust.

It is important to notice that, to a certain extent, Rybnitsa is a symbolic site, which illustrates the ways in which the destruction of Jews could have evolved in Romania. In July-August 1941, Einsatzgruppe D and Romanian army units were involved in the massacre of the local Ukrainian Jews. Then, Jews from Bessarabia and Bukovina were deported to Transnistria. Finally, with the massacre from the local prison, Rybnitsa signaled what could have happened to all the Romanian Jewry if Soviet troops had not entered Romania. Nevertheless, this is not to conclude that the Soviet army was a liberator for all the Eastern European nations. What at the beginning seemed like a liberation, was soon to be perceived as an occupation. In other words, all liberations come at a price.

NOTES

- 1 Irina Livezeanu. "The Romanian Holocaust: Family Quarrels". *East European Politics & Societies*, no.16, 2002: 934-947.
- 2 Jan Gross. *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001.
- 3 Alexander Dallin, *Odessa, 1941-1944: A Case Study of Soviet Territory under Foreign Rule*. Iasi: Center for Romanian Studies, 1998, 89.
- 4 M. A Sorokina. "People and Procedures: Toward a History of the Investigation of Nazi Crimes in the USSR", in *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 6, no. 4 (2005), 797.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 801.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 823.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 831.
- 8 Jean Ancel. *Transnistria, 1941-1942: The Romanian mass murder campaigns, volume 1-3*. Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 2003.
- 9 Diana Dumitru. "The Use and Abuse of the Holocaust: Historiography and Politics in Moldova", in *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 22, no. 1 (March 20, 2008): 49 -73; Dmitry Tartakovsky. "Conflicting Holocaust Narratives in Moldovan Nationalist Historical Discourse", in *East European Jewish Affairs* 38, no. 2 (2008): 211-229; Vladimir Solonari. "From Silence to Justification?: Moldovan Historians on the Holocaust of Bessarabian and Transnistrian Jews", in *Nationalities Papers* 30, no. 3 (2002): 435-457.
- 10 Diana Dumitru. "The Use and Abuse of the Holocaust: Historiography and Politics in Moldova", in *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 22, no. 1 (March 20, 2008), 51.
- 11 Dmitry Tartakovsky. "Conflicting Holocaust Narratives in Moldovan Nationalist Historical Discourse", in *East European Jewish Affairs* 38, no. 2 (2008): 211-229.
- 12 Vladimir Solonari. "From Silence to Justification? Moldovan Historians on the Holocaust of Bessarabian and Transnistrian Jews", in *Nationalities Papers* 30, no. 3 (2002), 441.
- 13 Tartakovsky, 213.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 216.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 222.
- 16 Diana Dumitru. "The Use and Abuse of the Holocaust: Historiography and Politics in Moldova", in *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 22, no. 1 (March 20, 2008), 64.
- 17 *Ibid.*
- 18 Avigdor Shachan. *Burning ice: The ghettos of Transnistria*. Boulder: East European Monographs, 1996, 159.
- 19 Oleg Galushcenko. *Populația RASSM (1924-1940)*. Chisinau: Tipografia Academiei de Științe, 2001, 72.

- 20 *Ibid.*
- 21 Solonari, 436.
- 22 Tartakovsky, 212.
- 23 Diana Dumitru. "The Use and Abuse of the Holocaust: Historiography and Politics in Moldova", in *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 22, no. 1 (March 20, 2008), 65.
- 24 Dallin, 91.
- 25 Diana Dumitru, and Carter Johnson. "Constructing Interethnic Conflict and Cooperation: Why Some People Harmed Jews and Others Helped Them During the Holocaust in Romania", in *World Politics* 63, no. 01 (2011): 1-42.
- 26 *Ibid.*, 24.
- 27 RG-54.003 Moldovan Service of Security and Information (former KGB) Archive, The US Holocaust Memorial Museum Archives, Washington DC, f.42.
- 28 Dumitru and Johnson, 16.
- 29 Dallin, 63.
- 30 Shachan, 342.
- 31 *Ibid.*, 167.
- 32 Ancel, 65.
- 33 *Ibid.*, 81.
- 34 *Ibid.*, 82.
- 35 *Ibid.*, 81.
- 36 Yitzhak Arad. *The Holocaust in the Soviet Union*. University of Nebraska Press, 2009, 236.
- 37 RG-54.003 Moldovan Service of Security and Information (former KGB) Archive, The US Holocaust Memorial Museum Archives, Washington DC, f.44, p. 192.
- 38 Ancel, 695.
- 39 Radu Ioanid, and United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. *The Holocaust in Romania: The Destruction of Jews and Gypsies under the Antonescu Regime, 1940-1944*. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2000, 201.
- 40 RG-54.003 Moldovan Service of Security and Information (former KGB) Archive, The US Holocaust Memorial Museum Archives, Washington DC, f.44, p.193.
- 41 *Ibid.*, f. 6.
- 42 Ihiel Benditer. *Vapniarca. Lagarele Vapniarca si Grosulovo, inchisoarea Rybnitsa, ghetoruile Olgopol, Savrani, Tridubi, Crivoie Ozero si Trihati*. Tel-Aviv: ANAIS Ltd., 1995.
- 43 Gal Matei, interview by Cornelia Maimon Levi, February 14, 1996, The University of Southern California (USC) Shoah Foundation Institute's Visual History Archive, The US Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington DC.
- 44 *Ibid.*

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