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**Biographical note**

Mihai Lukacs is an independent theatre director and a cultural historian of Holocaust and Jewish studies. He wrote and directed performances as well as published articles on Holocaust representation in theatre and the Jewish and Roma engagement with the topic of Holocaust memory in the arts. He completed his PhD in 2015 at Central European University.

# REPRESENTING THE HOLOCAUST IN ROMANIA AFTER 1945: FROM YIDDISH THEATRE TO POPULAR LITERATURE

Mihai Lukács

### Abstract

Between the end of the Second World War and the late 1970s, artists in Romania responded to the trauma of the Holocaust through theatre and literature, navigating censorship, ideology, and the disappearance of witnesses. In 1945, orphaned survivors of the Transnistrian camps performed their memories at the Barasheum Theatre, assisted by theatre practitioners. That same year, under Iacob Mansdorf's direction, the IKUF Theatre developed a new model that combined socialist realism with collective mourning. Holocaust themes remained central in postwar Jewish theatre, including productions such as *Night Shift* (1949) and *The Diary of Anne Frank* (1957), which introduced more personal and psychological dimensions. These artistic forms gradually reflected the shifting ideological and social climate of socialist Romania. The article incorporates an autotheoretical approach that combines personal narrative with critical theory, drawing on memoir, philosophy and political reflection. Through this hybrid method, the text engages with key issues in Holocaust studies, including post-witness memory, archival research and the politics of imagination. It argues that Romanian representations of the Holocaust contribute to a broader understanding of the functions and challenges of historical representation today.

**Keywords:** autotheory, representation, memory, imagination, Holocaust, theatre, phantasy

This paper explores the representation of the Holocaust in Romanian art between 1945 and the 1970s and how this specific form of historical representation can engage with contemporary debates in Holocaust studies regarding post-witness memory, the archival turn, and the ongoing question of representation's purpose. To deepen the analysis, the paper incorporates an autotheoretical approach, a hybrid genre that merges personal narrative with critical theory, by blending memoir, philosophy,

and political reflection. This involves reflecting on my own experiences working on three unconventional artistic performances that addressed the representation of the Holocaust in contemporary research-based theatre. Besides the physical disappearance of direct witnesses, a new approach to Holocaust education and representation has emerged. This shift is grounded in archival research and has been enabled by the unprecedented accessibility of freely available online information. Resources now include digitized collections of written and filmed testimonies, as well as documents published by institutions such as the Shoah Foundation, Yad Vashem, or the Arolsen Archives. Numerous online encyclopedias present key events and figures, while social media platforms circulate shared experiences in the form of excerpts, podcasts, or videos (Urman et al., 2023). Hoskins (2011) associates this new Holocaust memory ecosystem with the condition of informational post-scarcity as part of a new culture, which generates a high volume of inaccuracy or one-sided views on complex topics (Grabowski & Klein, 2023) that can even lead to the propagation of new digital forms of antisemitism. The distortion of Holocaust-related information cannot be filtered in an analogue method anymore, as the flow of information overcomes human control. New technological solutions are being searched at the moment to interact with the vast amount of online Holocaust information, including generative AI integration that focuses on Holocaust memory. The amount of accessible archived materials, reactions, and interpretations of particular traumatic historical events is continuously increasing, making the "analogue" analysis even more difficult and incomplete.

The classical or pre-Kantian philosophy assumed that suitable forms of representation are adequate to the realities they evoke while modern or post-Kantian philosophy assumed the generalised crisis of representation as one of the major problems to be addressed. As the Lacanian philosopher Alenka Zupančič wrote, representation is one of the key concepts of modern thought and one of the ideas that we are struggling with today: "If one were to name one central issue that distinguishes the rise of modern thought, it is perhaps none other than precisely the issue of representation, its profound interrogation, and the whole consequent turn against the logic of representation." (Zupančič, 2004, p. 197). Far from solving the crisis of Holocaust representation, the new post-scarcity conditions offer new challenges in terms of representation, interpretation and imagination.

Representation involves not only visual images but also acts of imagination and illusion. It draws upon concepts such as synthesis,

autonomy, duality, and resemblance, all of which shape how meaning is constructed and perceived. Although representation appears infinite, it doesn't point to a fixed object; instead, it is caught in an endless chain of signifiers, constantly referring to something else. Repression helps us keep a distance from certain representations that might affect us too strongly. It allows us to push away thoughts or memories that disturb or unsettle us. The Real, in Lacanian terms, that we have no possible access to, stands for the limits of representation itself. It lies beyond what can be fully captured by language or mental images. Representation is always incomplete and alienating for the subject by distancing it from any direct experience. The tension between representation and direct experience remains a central issue in philosophy and critical theory, especially after the digital turn. In this particular historical context, the claims that Holocaust literature, poetry, and art, in general, can be read as testimony (Felman & Laub, 1992) can find new meanings. The poetry of witnessing the Holocaust was not a new phenomenon, as the historical experiences of war, slavery, torture, or killing had previously found expression in poetry through which the survivor asked the reader to bear witness and extreme attention (Rowland, 2014). This ethical contract with the reader transformed poetry into a performative protest—not only as an exercise in empathy, but as a different kind of engagement that operated, and continues to operate, as a real experience. These dynamics are especially present on stage, in imaginative performances that give meaning to historical traumatic events such as the Holocaust, mediated not by direct experience but through the presence of live bodies on stage.

The contradiction/distinction between memory and imagination was/is based on the dangers of distortion of memory, a strong interdiction based on Adorno's 1949 statement on the barbarism of writing poetry after Auschwitz and on Hannah Arendt's approach to the horror of the Holocaust: "the horror of the concentration and extermination camps can never be fully embraced by the imagination for the very reason that it stands outside of life and death" (Arendt, 1966, p. 444). Nevertheless, instead of putting an interdiction on further representation as an impossible task, the unprecedented destruction that was the Holocaust shifted the previous models of artistic representation, the usage of existing traditions and conventions in describing atrocity, undermining the possible assumptions about the limits of representation (Feldman & Sicher, 2024). Moving away from romantic or modernist conventions, the authors of what Feldman and Sicher called "poesis in extremis" also avoid the

form of documentary realism as expected in artistic testimony (Young, 1988). Artists who experienced the Holocaust themselves did not stop producing art, but on the contrary, the unprecedented reality that they experienced and survived made them use their craft and aesthetics in new artistic directions, as a necessary endeavour to preserve the will to live (Goldberg, 2017). The artistic voice continued to struggle "with the traumatising effects of dehumanisation by addressing the alienation of self and body and exposing the blurring of the distinction between life and death" (Feldman & Sicher, 2024, p.6). In this effort that became essential to stay alive, artists who experienced the Holocaust, like Ida Kamińska or Jerzy Jurandot, were more productive than they were before.

In the first decades after 1945, the major global topics of the Holocaust in terms of research and also artistic representation were the anti-Jewish policy in Europe (including ghettos and camps), the Jewish resistance, and the rescue of Jews (Baumel-Schwartz & Shrira, 2023). The interplay between memory and imagination in Romania brought into focus two distinct political sites, each carrying different historical and symbolic weight: Auschwitz and Transnistria. These were seen as the two places of absolute horror, one connected to the victims of the German state in Northern Transylvania, Western and Central Europe and the other as a location of Romanian state-run extermination. These distinctions, with their silences and moments of painful attention, are still common nowadays in Holocaust research, representation, and public commemoration. The two locations employ separate forms of memory and imagination for a Romanian-focused audience. Nevertheless, further explorations of the psychological impact of the Holocaust on survivors and on the second generation (and most recently, the third or even fourth generations) were absent from the Romanian context even if the need for these research and discussion themes could be followed when the Holocaust topic was addressed.

Following the liberation of Romania in August 1944, the Yiddish theatre emerged as the first platform in the country to confront the atrocities of the Holocaust. Drawing on a rich theatrical tradition, these productions continued a legacy of performance even under the harshest conditions — from cultural resistance at the Barasheum Theatre under the Antonescu regime to plays staged in Transnistrian camps, such as *Day and Night* by Ansky or *The Liberation of Moses* at the Vapniarka camp. This artistic response to the horrors endured by the Jews received support from the newly established post-fascist state. Even orphaned

survivors of Transnistrian camps found expression through theatre. On March 6th, 1945, the Barasheum Hall hosted a *Yiddish Language Arts Festival* performed by these children based on their camp experiences. The large audience witnessed an emotional display of sketches based on their harrowing life stories: *The Fire* and *Transnistria* brought tears to the audience's eyes. These raw portrayals depicted the horrors they witnessed in ghettos and during forced marches. But the performances weren't solely about the dark recent past. *The Yeshiva and the Cheder* offered a glimpse of pre-war Jewish life, a bittersweet blend of sadness and humour while the second half of the show looked towards the future. Another short performance calling for the realisation of a Jewish homeland, Eretz Israel, was presented as a beacon of hope. Additionally, joyful music and dance expressed gratitude to their liberators, the Red Army, and the United Nations. ("Festivalul orfanilor din Transnistria", 1945; Lukács, 2019).

In June 1945, just months after the war's end, the newly formed IKUF (Yidisher Kultur Farband / Jewish Culture Association) started its activities. They organised a Yiddish poetry festival at the Barasheum Theatre, with Iacob Mansdorf, a former actor of the well-known Yiddish Vilna Theatre Company, who performed in Romania in the 1930s, among the participants. Building on this momentum, IKUF publicly announced the establishment of their Yiddish theatre that same month. The IKUF Theatre would have a distinct artistic direction, and was described as "a progressive folk and art theatre." (Lax, 1945).

A meeting held by IKUF on June 12th attracted numerous representatives from various Jewish communities in Romania. The goal was to establish the new IKUF theatre. Dr. Eng. Lascăr Goldenberg presided, and prominent figures like Barbu Lăzăreanu, M. Lax, Lascăr Șaraga, and Mauriciu Marcu participated. M. Lax even read a letter of support from Chief Rabbi Dr. Al. Șafran. The renowned actor Iacob Mansdorf played a key role in these efforts. He explained the theatre's vision and even presented scenes from the play *Ih Leb (I Live)* by Soviet playwright M. Pincevsky. Enthusiasm was high, with attendees immediately launching subscriptions to support the theatre. By mid-October 1945, the establishment of the IKUF Theater under Mansdorf's artistic direction was solidified and the focus was building on the legacy of the Vilna Troupe.

On October 19, 1945, the IKUF Yiddish Art Theater inaugurated its activities at the Barasheum Theater Hall with the premiere of *I Live*, a drama centered on resistance within a Ukrainian extermination camp in Transnistria. This event, officially endorsed by Romanian authorities,

marked a significant moment in the postwar reconfiguration of Jewish-Romanian cultural relations. A preview performance for officials and members of the press, attended by the Minister of Arts Mihail Ralea and the General Director of Theatres N.D. Cocea, underscored the state's declared commitment to supporting Jewish artistic expression. Figures such as Niky Atanasiu (President of the Artists' Union), Iacob Groper (President of the Yiddish Writers' Association), and Ury Benador (Romanian-Jewish Writers' Association) also signaled their endorsement through their presence ("Deschiderea Teatrului Evreiesc de Artă IKUF", 1945).

*I Live* maintained the performative conventions of Jewish theatre while confronting the unprecedented historical rupture of the Holocaust. Pincevsky's script articulated a straightforward yet deep conflict: the persistence of human dignity, sacrifice, and hope in the face of unimaginable horror. The production was received with intense emotional resonance by its first audiences. In particular, Iacob Mansdorf's portrayal of Rabbi Shafir — embodying the figure of a wise and steadfast communal leader — was widely praised for its restraint and emotional power. Critical accounts emphasized that his performance succeeded in mediating the play's underlying tension between human nobility and moral collapse. The scenographic designs by Jules Perahim further enhanced the aesthetic and emotional impact of the performance.

The founding of the IKUF Theater must be situated within the broader context of postwar cultural renewal. It represented an effort to reestablish Yiddish theatrical production in Romania on a foundation of artistic seriousness and ideological engagement. Under the leadership of Iacob Mansdorf — a figure with considerable experience in the Vilna Troupe and other European Yiddish companies — the theatre explicitly distanced itself from the prewar dominance of "Schund" theatre, which had often been associated with commercialized, lowbrow entertainment. In line with emerging currents of socialist realism, the IKUF Theater pursued an artistic program that combined memorialization with social pedagogy.

The selection of *I Live* as the inaugural production was a deliberate act of cultural and political significance. It simultaneously functioned as an act of communal mourning and a reaffirmation of Jewish resilience, aligning the theatre's aesthetic project with broader postwar narratives of survival, resistance, and reconstruction. Mansdorf sought to cultivate a new generation of actors, less entangled in the factionalism of the prewar Yiddish stage, aiming to build a coherent and ideologically committed ensemble.

Nonetheless, the IKUF Theater's early trajectory was not without difficulties. Persistent financial constraints, tensions between veteran performers and new recruits, and criticisms of Mansdorf's leadership surfaced rapidly. Some contemporary commentators argued that, despite its ambitions, the theatre lacked a genuinely prophetic articulation of Holocaust trauma (Lukács, 2022). Others pointed to the unevenness of the ensemble as a limiting factor in achieving the theater's artistic goals.

Despite these challenges, the IKUF Theater occupies a crucial position in the history of Romanian Yiddish culture. By foregrounding Holocaust memory from the survivors' perspective and rejecting commodified forms of entertainment, it forged a bridge between the shattered cultural landscape of the prewar period and the aspirations of a new, postwar Jewish artistic consciousness.

The IKUF Theater embarked on a national tour in over 25 cities in April-March 1946. While their Bucharest production *I Live* enjoyed great success for various Jewish communities of Holocaust survivors, the tour itself became a different kind of journey ("Turneul IKUF în Moldova", 1946). Iacob Mansdorf wrote a passionate letter to colleagues back in the capital. He described the tour not as a financial triumph, but as a "moral success" of profound connection with surviving Jewish communities. Mansdorf encountered devastation. In Cluj, he learned that only 1,500 Jews remained out of a pre-war population of 20,000. Educational institutions were gone, and the cultural life he cherished was shattered. He lamented the disconnect between Bucharest-based artists and these struggling communities. He urged colleagues to visit, share their artistic heritage, and offer solace to those "sick and soul-destroyed" by the horrors they endured. The tour was also a pilgrimage for Mansdorf. He visited the grave of Jehudith Lares, a pioneer of the famed Vilna Troupe, in Arad. Her broken tombstone stood as a stark reminder of a vibrant artistic tradition nearly erased (Kawa, 1946; Lukács, 2023). The performances brought joy and a sense of connection to those who desperately needed it.

The IKUF Theatre's *I Live* resonated deeply with audiences all over the country, formed mainly by devastated Jewish communities, trying to adapt to the new post-war conditions. In Brașov, for example, the show, performed for the local Jewish community still grappling with the wounds of war, offered a sense of comfort. The powerful response was evident when the curtain rose, when the audience erupted, demonstrating the play's significance for their process of dealing with the recent traumatic events: "Over the still unhealed wounds of the Jewish population of

Transylvania that suffered so much, the performances of the IKUF Theatre spread a soothing balm and constituted an incentive in the recovery work that this much-tried population is putting forth. The audience's reaction to the curtain raising of the show 'Ich Leb!' on which is printed the slogan 'Am Israel hai!' was tremendous." ("Turneul Teatrului IKUF", 1946).

Another representation of *I Live* in Oradea, part of the same tour, is described by B. Raluca in a review that captures the emotional intensity of the performance that depicted the horrors of the camps in Transnistria. Scenes of cruelty unfolded at the beginning of the performance, with a camp guard whipping innocent people and shouting commands. The audience reacted immediately with a mixture of breathless silence and clenched fists, expressing their hatred for the brutality they witnessed on stage. The women clung to the men beside them, and a single word filled with condemnation – "The beast!" – was shouted. After the short description of the first scenes and the initial shock, the audience connected to the revolt scenes and identified with the liberated prisoners: "And the scenes keep becoming more horrific and yet as real as the others. The play is a historical document of the contribution of the much-tried Jewish people to the fight against evil and darkness, to the fight for the emancipation of mankind." (Raluca, 1946).

The commitment to Holocaust themes continued after the nationalisation of the Barasheum Theatre in 1948, which led to the creation of the State Jewish Theatre in Bucharest. With the addition of the State Jewish Theater in Iasi (which operated between 1949 and 1963), Romania had two dedicated Jewish theatres. Mansdorf's efforts paved the way for the establishment of the State Jewish Theatre, marking a new era for Yiddish theatre under the socialist regime. While Mansdorf's tenure at the IKUF Theatre was brief (only two years), his legacy lies in his attempt to create a high-calibre, politically engaged Yiddish theatre that reflected the changing times.

Following the establishment of the communist regime in Romania, the two Jewish state-run theatres adopted a new approach heavily influenced by the IKUF Theatre's model. This shift, starting in 1948, emphasised "art" over entertainment, with a focus on cultural and educational themes. Productions followed the principles of socialist realism, taking inspiration from the Stanislavsky system of acting. These theatres featured a mix of experienced and young actors and actively toured the country with new technical and stage methods. The Bucharest State Jewish Theatre premiered *Night Shift* in October 1949 and marked a significant moment. Written

by Ludovic Bruckstein, a survivor of Auschwitz, it was the first locally written Yiddish drama about Jewish life under the new communist regime. The play centered on two Auschwitz survivors, Lana and Mira, awaiting their husbands' return from a factory night shift. The narrative interweaves memories of the concentration camp's brutality with the hope for a better future. Bruckstein drew inspiration from the 1944 Sonderkommando revolt at Auschwitz, a story he encountered during his imprisonment. Also, Bruckstein's experience attending IKUF Theatre performances in 1946 directly influenced *The Night Shift*. He was particularly impressed by Iacob Mansdorf's directing style and realistic acting. Bruckstein viewed the IKUF Theatre as a positive step towards a high-quality Jewish theatre and felt the existing Yiddish theatre scene lacked focus and substance. *The Night Shift* reflects the ideological framework of the time. The play emphasises class struggle rather than ethnicity, blaming the "barbaric bourgeoisie" for the Holocaust. This shift is evident in characters like Sacher, the Jewish collaborator, and Heinrich, the "good" German. The play portrays work as a symbol of liberation and integration for Jewish survivors, contrasting it with the forced labour of the camps. This perspective drew criticism from the writer and theatre critic Valentin Silvestru, who argued the play toned down the ongoing social struggles faced by Romania's Jewish population (Lukács, 2019). Despite these criticisms, *The Night Shift* became a model for socialist theatre, aligning with the regime's critique of the old order. While the play addressed the Holocaust within an international context, it did not spark a broader public debate in Romania due to persistent anti-Semitism, the government's efforts to deflect blame, and the Communist Party's increasingly dominant anti-Zionist stance, which soon became official state policy. Unlike in Western Europe, where public memory largely remained silent at that historical moment by focusing on postwar reconstruction, Romania publicly condemned the Antonescu regime and its alliance with Nazi Germany, using this as part of a broader political realignment under the new Communist power. However, the focus was on Nazi culpability, downplaying Romanian involvement in the Holocaust. Plays like *The Night Shift* could exist because they placed the blame on an external entity, Nazi Germany, rather than acknowledging Romania's role in the genocide. The State Jewish Theatre, influenced by the IKUF Theatre's model, proposed a new approach to Yiddish theatre under communist Romania. *The Night Shift* served as a groundbreaking Holocaust drama, albeit tinged by the limitations due to the political climate. While the play sparked dialogue within Jewish communities, the

broader Romanian public remained largely disengaged due to the state's efforts to control the narrative surrounding the Holocaust.

If thousands of performances about the Holocaust have been staged around the world since 1945, all these works functioned as a means for communities, artists, and audiences to make sense of the legacy of the Holocaust, as Erika Hughes (2024) observes. Not following a singular style or storytelling mechanism, "this incredibly diverse canon of plays, musicals, documentary and archival adaptations, applied theatre, pageants, ceremonies, and concerts reflects manifold ideas of what the Holocaust was, whom it affected, how it should be remembered, and why it should serve as a warning for the future." (Hughes, 2024, p. 1). This history of representation was extended to other art forms. Following this pattern, we already have an extended archive of representations of the Holocaust that were constructed in particular historical contexts and various forms of addressing a traumatic event that changed European communities in dramatic ways. *The Diary of Anne Frank*, in its Broadway adaptation by Frances Goodrich and Albert Hackett, remains one of the most popular plays about the Holocaust. The figure of the most famous Holocaust victim established a specific popular approach that placed a young female protagonist at its center, offering an accessible identification model for young audiences in the context of Holocaust and anti-fascist education. In 2019, there were fifty-six current productions of the play in the original form and another fifty-five of Wendy Kesselman's revised version (Hughes, 2024, p. 8). Starting with 1955, the year of its Broadway premiere, *The Diary of Anne Frank* was seen in Romania as an international success in terms of Holocaust remembrance: "All over Germany, theatre lovers are talking about a theatrical event, meant to be seen as a stirring protest of people of good faith against the forces of darkness in our times, it is the German premiere of the staging of? 'The Diary of Anne Frank'" ("Jurnalul Annei Frank", 1955, p. 4). The same newspaper presented the German-language premiere as a monumental event that marked the post-war cultural life:

> The theatres of Aachen and Konstanz, of Düsseldorf, West Berlin and Hamburg, of Mainz, Karlsruhe, Munich, and Dresden, and even those of Vienna and Zürich have waived the right of the premiere, so long coveted for commercial reasons, by agreeing that the premiere of this play should take place on all stages on the same day and at the same hour. ("Jurnalul Annei Frank", 1955, p. 4).

The Bucharest State Jewish Theatre's 1957 production of *The Diary of Anne Frank*, directed by George Teodorescu, offered a new and distinct perspective on the Holocaust within the Romanian theatre scene. Unlike many productions of the era, which often emphasized socialist ideology, *The Diary* focused on the personal journey of a young girl grappling with confinement and fear — a narrative that resonated widely with audiences. The innovative use of intermissions featuring narrated excerpts from Anne's diary deepened the audience's immersion into her world.

Theatre critic Ecaterina Oproiu praised the play's raw honesty and the strategic avoidance of graphic depictions of concentration camps, emphasizing instead the psychological and emotional landscape of Anne's experience. Oproiu noted that seemingly mundane details — such as the fear of forgetting how to dance or the theft of a cookie — carried greater emotional weight than sensationalized portrayals of atrocity (Lukács, 2019).

Director George Teodorescu's careful staging, supported by outstanding performances from Lya Koenig and Ophelia Strahl, further contributed to the production's impact. In a theatre culture dominated by ideological narratives, *The Diary of Anne Frank* stood out for its focus on personal resilience and the innocent, unfiltered perspective of a young girl facing unimaginable adversity.

*The Diary of Anne Frank* left an indelible mark on Romanian theatre and its success transcended cultural and political boundaries. Staged in other Romanian cities such as Iași, the play continued to resonate with audiences for a long time, offering a different, more personal perspective on the Holocaust. These types of productions of the State Jewish Theatres dealt directly and indirectly (in performances based on classical plays, for example) with the Holocaust until the early 1960s, when such plays became increasingly rare. Until the mid-1980s, the Jewish State Theater's repertoire became tokenistic, with only one play staged annually.

Miriam Bercovici witnessed the first staging of *The Diary of Anne Frank* in Bucharest, and she remembered how the audience raised and applauded Ana Pauker for her presence, even if she was already forgotten by the Party. Miriam Bercovici survived the camps in Transnistria while many of her relatives lost their lives. I asked her in 2022 and 2023 in two personal interviews how the Holocaust was represented in theatre, film, and literature in Romania and her answer was surprising. Her main issue with Holocaust representation was the focus on Auschwitz as the centre of suffering while Transnistria was forgotten. In trying to understand

the political context of not discussing the Romanian Holocaust, her explanation was also connected to the main forms of representing the Holocaust: "It was all about Auschwitz, everything. Auschwitz was the pinnacle and that's why it happened. Transnistria was nothing but epidemic typhus, typhoid fever, and other diseases and people dying of hunger." The focus on Auschwitz provoked a strong and constant feeling of exclusion, of suffering that was not recognized, and negative feelings towards the stories told in the well-known set-up. As she explained in the interview, the untold stories are marked on the body and are persistent even 80 years after the events:

> I can say this much: in fact, I was jealous of those in Auschwitz because they are being talked about because those in Transnistria died piece by piece. Those from Auschwitz solved the problem. Those who were burned, and those who were directly taken to the furnaces were happy, they did not know that they were going to the furnace. You know they were told that the Zyklon gas was a disinfectant while we from Transnistria were dying bit by bit, sick, hungry, parasitic, frozen. I can't stand being cold. I have to... When I see a heater... And today the electric heater... I can't help but shower at least every two days because I've been so dirty. Do you understand? That's my feeling. And that's why I envied the people in Auschwitz, I was jealous of them when people talked about them.

Aurel Baranga, a former surrealist poet, and journalist, one of the most important socialist playwrights and a key figure in the cultural structure of socialist Romania, published in 1945 a series of reportages written in the form of short stories mainly with a first-person narrator, about the camps in Transnistria in the daily *România Liberă*, that were collected the same year in a volume titled *Snowing over Ukraine*. Presented as "powerful reportage", the stories are a play between imagination and memory, even if the marketing campaign of the book strictly emphasised the aspect of the book as a crucial document: "Mr Baranga's testimonies are a humane and realistic document of the horrors committed by the fascists." The value of the book was considered in 1945 based on precisely the play between reality and fantasy, or more specifically, a reality that was presented as a fantasy: "the fact that its substance is derived from reality, a grim, unrelenting reality that seems the figment of a sick fantasy, but which nevertheless existed" (Ulysse, 1945).

In 1976, when he knew that his death was close, Baranga left a literary will with only 6 volumes to be republished, the last one on the list being

*Snowing over Ukraine*, with the mention: "A book that I love because it was the world's first account of Nazi atrocities in extermination camps: 'SNOWING OVER UKRAINE'. In 1948, in 'Naṭiunea', G. Călinescu wrote a shocking review. I would like to publish it as a preface. And that's that." After this mention, on the last page of his diary, Baranga gave an explicit description of how he burned over 1000 pages from his last 30 years, many of them written with coded inserts he no longer had the code for, "too many smouldering griefs, too many buried despairs to be entrusted to a foreign eye" (Baranga, 1978, p. 188). He took the notebooks to the bathroom, threw them in the bathtub, poured a bottle of medical alcohol on top, and set them on fire. The process was identical to burning his written papers during the Antonescu regime out of fear of being discovered.

Another major figure in postwar Romanian cultural life, Zaharia Stancu — former director of the National Theatre in Bucharest and a complex literary rival to contemporaries like Aurel Baranga — published his final novel, *Șatra* (*The Gypsy Tribe*), in 1968. Inspired by the plight of Roma communities during the Second World War, the novel integrates elements of oral testimony and myth, opening with the disclaimer: "Alimut told me what happened, Kera insisted I write it down" (Stancu, 1986, p. 15). Although based on factual experiences and interviews with Roma survivors of the Transnistria camps, *Șatra* was often promoted as Stancu's only "pure fictional work" (Simion, 1978) and regarded as his literary testament.

Even though it was inspired by facts and documents regarding the Roma deportations to Transnistria and their explicit atrocities, the novel's narrative, as noted by Iorgulescu, "meets mythology, not history, by being projected on a screen of senses that go beyond the concrete data" (Iorgulescu, 1986, p. 5). *Șatra* was a success and remains the only work by Stancu that continues to be republished and widely read today (see Manolescu, 2008, pp. 948–950). The novel's engagement with the Holocaust through non-historical artistic approaches — even if this is more reflective of its reception and critical interpretation than of Stancu's original intent — raises important questions about the role of fiction in processes of remembrance, imagination, and cultural memory.

In 2018, I wrote and directed *Kali Tras / The Black Fear*, co-produced by the Jewish State Theatre, based on the only autobiographical novel by a Roma Holocaust survivor from Transnistria, Valerică Stănescu. The novel is titled "Death in My Eyes". I had the chance to work closely with Mr. Stănescu. Unfortunately, he died suddenly, a few months after he saw the premiere of the performance. His novel was heavily influenced by

Stancu's novel, as an inspiration to connect to his own nomad family's deportation to Transnistria. To imagine the tragic events of Stănescu's real story, the writing of Zaharia Stancu proved to be an essential resource.

Zaharia Stancu's portrayal of the Roma genocide in *Șatra* aligns stylistically with the work of Mateo Maximoff, considered the "first Roma novelist." After 1947, Maximoff was introduced to Romanian readers through translations from French journals and was often presented in the cultural press as a literary curiosity. His novels, addressing the historical trauma of the Roma — from slavery to the Holocaust — employed oral history, autobiographical elements, and fantasy. A 1947 article in *Opinia* featured a profile of Maximoff, focusing on his personal experience as a member of a traditional Kalderash Roma community of 142 people in Montreuil, a suburb of Paris. He was portrayed as the historian of this group, writing about internal conflicts, rigid gender roles, interactions with French authorities, and the dramatic postwar transformations the community endured. His narratives chronicled his arrest, survival, and the impact of the Porajmos (the Roma term for the Holocaust), including the systematic killings of Roma in extermination camps. The article also offered historical data and emphasized Maximoff's role in shedding light on a silenced history:

> Who could have imagined that a people with such strange traditions could live near Paris in these times? It is to Mateo Maximoff's credit that he knew how to put them on paper and thus make them known to the general reading public. ("Mateo Maximoff primul țigan romancier povestește aventurile unor triburi din Franța", 1947, p. 2).

The article also compared the French Roma community to the Roma population in Romania, noting that the latter faced significantly harsher living conditions and was met with widespread indifference from broader society.

Stancu's *Șatra* functions as an epic narrative about the disappearance of a small Roma community — a community crushed by a brutal state and, in the words of Iorgulescu, by "a History that is cruel and uncaring of the lives of the people" (1986, p. 5), or as another critic puts it, by "the monsters of War and brute Force" (Damian, 1970, p. 70). Iorgulescu observes that the novel, though realist and at times

heavily documentary, draws symbolic power from its grounding in authentic events and experiences during the Second World War — when "entire populations, considered to be of 'inferior race,' were condemned to extinction and subjected to a delirious program of mass slaughter by internment in industrial annihilation camps, and to mass deportations to remote barren wastelands where survival was virtually impossible. (Iorgulescu, 1986, p. 5).

*Șatra* is anchored in this traumatic memory, condemning the genocidal decisions of the Romanian state, rendered in the novel through absurd, dehumanizing laws blindly enforced by authorities. These regulations, often incomprehensible to the Roma characters, determine the community's tragic fate. Their impact is not limited to the protagonists: Romanian bystanders and officials, either as enforcers or passive observers, witness the deportation of the Roma as if they were "walking dead," bound for a place of no return. For Iorgulescu, the novel engages with the concept of absolute Evil — not as a force external to humanity, like natural disasters or pandemics, but as "the work of other people, who became mere instruments in the service of dark and summary ideologies, fanaticized, enslaved or frightened people to the point of being nothing more than docile executors of institutionalized death." (Iorgulescu, 1986, p. 5).

Nevertheless, *Șatra* does not function as an objective historical reenactment. Rather, it offers a reflective, poetic meditation on the erasure of an entire community — not merely the fate of isolated individuals.

Polish director Tadeusz Kantor's quintessential performance *The Dead Class* (1975) from Krakow focused precisely on a non-historic perspective on the forgotten past in life and art as a form of mass amnesia that functioned performatively as a stronger demand for the audience to put meaning where it was only suggested. As in the case of Stancu, this perspective is not necessarily a break with history, because as Noel Witts notices when discussing Kantor's performances, "it is impossible to understand any of his key performances without being aware of the historical events that shaped them" (Witts, 2010, p. 2). Viewers themselves restored the historical aspect of the Holocaust in various performances by releasing a personal wave of memories from personal experience, family stories, literature, or history lessons, that triggered metaphorical memory associations. The artistic process escapes the restrictions of the temporal boundaries of biography to move beyond simple texts anchored in specific locations and time frames, as in Kantor's case: "Any desire

to provide a historical and social map will immediately be ruptured by the thoughts, events, objects, and people who emerge, disappear, and re-emerge to present their conflicting claims, testimonies, and fragmented (his)stories" (Kobialka, 1993, p. xix). As Niziołek stated in his analysis of *The Dead Class* performance, "Kantor must have realised clearly that he could no longer count on the mechanism of oblivion" (Niziołek, 2014, p. 190). The presence of the director on stage during the performances, as a witness, can be compared to tragic characters such as Antigona, a criminal commander who orders destruction, or a mortician who is taking care of the killed victims, such as the actress who has fallen on the floor in his *Wielopole, Wielopole* (1980) performance, part of his Theatre of Death series.

In the Polish context, the combination of "dismantled symbolic means and extra-symbolic embodied tools and performative acts" (Sendyka, 2022, p. 523) was considered to be a form of non-memory that can still transmit an experience when that experience is difficult or impossible to be addressed within existing cognitive frameworks.

Concepts that frame artistic practice and production are essential for guiding trauma representation analysis toward the specific activities undertaken by artists. Contemporary scholar Lauren Fournier defines *autotheory* not merely as a creative act, but as a method and strategy employed by artists and writers. Focusing on performance, she argues that "performance foregrounds ideas of liveness and the artist's body, iterability and citation, the body in research and documentation" (Fournier, 2021, p. 29). Rather than centering the transcendental subject of aesthetic theory — and its dialectical function within or around the artwork — the notion of "auto" is reconfigured as a critical negation of the Cartesian "I." In Fournier's move away from the autonomous subject and toward poetic heteronomy, *autotheory* becomes a form of critique — and self-critique — that unfolds both within and beyond art.

As a method, autotheory resists traditional disciplinary boundaries. It merges autobiography, memoir, and critical theory to create a hybrid form of expression that challenges conventional literary and academic norms. Through the incorporation of diverse media — such as photography, music, and performance — into the writing process, autotheory expands the possibilities for both narrative and theoretical exploration. It offers a multidimensional and immersive experience that engages both the creator and the audience in rethinking the relationship between personal experience, theory, and artistic practice.

Reflecting on my personal trajectory as a theatre maker, my perspectives on how the Holocaust can be represented on stage have evolved over the years, influenced by new literature and emerging theoretical frameworks. *Mansdorf* — a performance based on the early years of IKUF, which I wrote and directed and which was co-produced by the Jewish State Theatre in 2023 — addresses the challenges and the urgent necessity for Yiddish theatre artists to confront the Holocaust immediately after 1945. The performance operates as a play of memory and imagination, shaped by the material conditions of its venue and ensemble.

Another recent project, *Acting Out* (2024), explores the fictionalized biography of choreographer Esther Magyar, who, in an interview, recounted that she could no longer dance on stage after surviving the Vapniarka camp in Transnistria.

To develop a conceptual orientation toward the difficulty of artistic representations of the Holocaust, it was necessary to construct a broader contextual framework addressing how issues of Holocaust representation have shifted in Romania both before 1989 and today. In comparison, examining similar time frames and theoretical debates in Poland has proven particularly productive, offering a richer understanding of how national contexts shape the evolution of Holocaust representation in performance.

The spark for the *Mansdorf* performance staged at the Jewish State Theatre in Bucharest ignited in an unexpected place: my research on Holocaust representations in Romanian theatre from 1944 to 1989. The prevailing narrative, which ignored Romanian state crimes in Transnistria and their role in the Holocaust, silenced survivors yearning to share their stories. This research, supported by the Elie Wiesel National Institute for the Study of the Holocaust in Romania, resulted in two articles published in *Holocaust. Studii și cercetări*. Studying the Jewish press (1944-1950), I encountered a vibrant spirit of reconstruction. Despite a clear awareness of the tragedy, there was a strong desire for a new beginning. Artists, writers, and theatremakers spearheaded this renewal. Among them stood out Isaiia Răcăciuni, one of the characters in the performance, whose writings balanced the past, present, and future. His background, connected to the pre-war literary scene and the influential revue theatre run by his brother Stroe, provided context. But the story went beyond local figures. New arrivals, both Romanians and European personalities, sought to restart their artistic careers in Romania. The war's final stages offered a haven, a place where Jewish artists and others could rebuild their lives, albeit with

challenges (Lukács, 2023). Iacob Mansdorf, the visionary actor-director, emerged as a prominent figure. His Bucharest theatre company left a lasting mark on how surviving Jewish artists could create Yiddish theatre after the Holocaust. The *Mansdorf* show, staged in the building where Barasheum Theatre functioned (Mansdorf's former workplace), attempts to tell this story.

By consciously working with sharp contradictions, I created *Acting Out*, a performance that interlaces the life of Esther Magyar-Gonda — the Jewish-Hungarian choreographer who survived the Transnistrian camps and later became a key figure in Romanian dance education during the 1950s — with the personal and artistic journey of actress Katia Pascariu, who portrays Magyar-Gonda on stage. In one review of the performance, Székely Örs (Bíró et al., 2024) raised the question of Holocaust memory and representation on stage by focusing on the gestural quotation in *Acting Out*: "What is the truth of the data-centered form of historical memory, and how does it compare to the imprint-like outlines of the body, passed on through gestures? According to Walter Benjamin, Brecht's epic theatre is a tradition that sets itself the task of making the actor's gestures quotable, and the quotation is a strategic operation of taking them out of context, through which generations past and present give each other an unmarked, secret meeting."

Georg Lukács, the Hungarian philosopher of Jewish origin, reflected deeply on how historical tragedy can be represented in art. Although he did not directly address the Shoah, his thought resonates with the conceptual challenges of representing the Holocaust. Lukács identified a central paradox in the artistic treatment of trauma: the tension between the internal necessity of tragic action and the external, often arbitrary and meaningless, constraints imposed by historical reality. For him, the greater the distance between these two forces, the deeper and more compelling the narrative becomes. Tragedy, in his view, arises from a "categorical opposition" between pure will and pure compulsion.

Artists engaged with traumatic histories frequently confront this tension, seeking within the historical event not just realism but what Lukács called the "ultimate symbol of human limitation" — the stubborn resistance of material reality to the creative or moral will. In writing about tragedy, Lukács describes this dynamic as the brutal severance of action from intention, where "the power of what merely is" ultimately overwhelms "what should be" (Foster, 2022; Wetters, 2023). In this framework, trauma becomes legible as tragedy: not simply a record of suffering, but a structure

of profound ethical and ontological rupture — where meaning and agency are undone by historical violence.

The unselective force of brute reality, in Lukácsian terms, annihilates any intention held by the protagonist — as exemplified in the case of Anne Frank, the paradigmatic figure of Holocaust representation. Her intentions, marked by a certain purity and original aim, are violently interrupted by the antagonist force of historical reality. For Georg Lukács, the historical loss of a meaningful "closed totality" in human life and culture — a loss replaced by the alienation and fragmentation of modernity — was a key reason behind the philosophical and aesthetic interest in traumatic narratives, particularly those emerging from the catastrophic ruptures of recent history (Foster, 2022; Wetters, 2023).

Holocaust representation thus reveals the gap between individual consciousness and the objectified structure of the world — a world in which individuals can no longer take for granted a coherent or totalizing meaning. In engaging with traumatic histories, artistic works seek to express a deeper understanding of the human condition: a condition in which the creative will confronts the immovable constraints of material reality, leading not to resolution, but to the destruction of intention and the exposure of a darker, more elusive dimension of human existence. This tragic dynamic echoes Lukács's broader philosophical concern with the dissolution of cultural and social totality in the modern era.

The trauma of the Holocaust proved a challenging subject for Romanian playwrights not only with regard to the issues of the right form and concept of representation of recent trauma, but also in terms of integrating their writing in the ever-changing political landscape. Plays dealing with sensitive topics often faced rejection by the Ministry of Arts censorship board. The archives hold scripts like the anonymous *Arrested Woman no. 976: A Play in Three Parts* (rejected in 1947) and *Raisko, the Model Camp: A Dramatic Report in Seven Pictures* by Isaiah Răcăciuni and Maria Davidescu (rejected in 1950).

*Raisko, the Model Camp*, written in 1945, is particularly intriguing. A handwritten note on the first page reveals co-author Maria Davidescu's deportation to Auschwitz. The play, set in 1944 in Auschwitz and its satellite camp Raisko, features a cast of deported women from various backgrounds. The opening scene, set in a "jail wagon," showcases the play's potential to challenge anti-Semitism. Sarah, a Jewish character, declares, "Do you know what it means to be a Jew... to live with the difficult heritage... because one could not choose his or her parents?" This

line, underlined by the censor, highlights the play's exploration of Jewish identity and suffering (Lukacs, 2019). However, the play's focus on Jewish persecution and inter-ethnic unity against fascism clashed with the political climate. Anti-Zionist campaigns were underway, and highlighting Jewish experiences or resistance proved problematic. Consequently, the play, along with others, was deemed unsuitable for performance, effectively silencing these important narratives. In the *Mansdorf* performance, we addressed this particular situation and its staging possibilities as an open question regarding the material limitations of representation.

Silence was a long-term method of not addressing the traumatic memory, as in the case of Miriam Bercovici, who in a personal interview from 2023 mentioned the long period of silence in the Transnistria camp of Djurin, that she compared to Auschwitz. Her traumatic memories as a teenager influenced her long-time silence for over 50 years: "It was not Auschwitz, there were no extermination camps, but you felt that you were dying little by little. I had a period, I didn't know it was called depression, but I had a period when I didn't speak in Transnistria, I simply didn't speak."

Representing the Holocaust works dialectically with the two distinct concepts that affect the way we perceive and interact with the Holocaust, memory and imagination. Memory, the symbolic process that can anchor us to the past, is not a perfect recording but a reconstruction of past experiences based primarily on language, social codes, or cultural norms. Memories are retrieved by composing narratives, fragments, and interpretations, influenced by current contexts and desires. On the other hand, imagination allows us to create new scenarios, desires, or images that are not limited by the symbolic order, moving beyond the limitations of memory. The possibilities of imagination go beyond past experiences. Nevertheless, memory and imagination can slip into one another (Popescu, 2015), while memory depends on imagination in the commitment to remember the past in constructing the present but infusing the social codes of responsibility in symbolic demands such as "never forgetting" or "never again" (Keightley & Pickering, 2012).

As Popescu and Schult (2015) argue in *Revisiting Holocaust Representation in the Post-Witness Era*, scholarly discourse in the late 1990s and early 2000s emphasized a sharp opposition between imagination and the history and memory of the Holocaust. Within this framework, imagination was often viewed as a distortion of the idealized construction of the past — as it was and ought to be remembered.

More recently, memory itself has been critically reassessed by scholars such as Dorota Sajewska, particularly in relation to its dominant paradigms. For example, in the context of Polish theatre, Sajewska contrasts two influential models: the Romantic paradigm focused on the peripheral status of Polish theatre, as proposed by Leszek Kolankiewicz, and the model advanced by Grzegorz Niziołek, which identifies a structural parallelism between modernity and the Holocaust (Sajewska, 2016). Both models remain rooted in the testimony paradigm.

To move beyond the limitations of memory shaped by grand narratives, Sajewska proposes a turn toward the performativity of archives, grounded not in testimony but in evidence — remains, traces, and vestiges. Concepts such as the body-archive and necro-performance further complicate the relationship between the artist or researcher and archival material. As in autotheoretical approaches, this shift signals the need for concrete, embodied strategies for engaging with cultural history, where research becomes inseparable from artistic and performative practice.

The difficulty of finding a language to transmit the trauma of the Holocaust marked the early artistic endeavours. One of the earliest responses to the Holocaust trauma was provided by poetry, which, unlike prose, goes directly for the affective density necessary to get the attention not only through constative or documentary purposes and "is necessarily oriented toward aesthetic expression; poetry is primarily concerned not with what to say but with how to say it. Poetry, moreover, displaces the usual boundaries that divide the metaphorical and figural from the literal. This blurring of lines between the imaginary and the real produces a lyrical and often-associative semantics or, alternatively, graphically stark realism that shocks the reader into accepting the truth of the incredibly surreal reality of the Holocaust" (Feldman & Sicher, 2024, p. 10). Poetry had the potential to offer an epiphany in addressing the dead relatives or the horrible conditions of the camps and could also affect the reader more powerfully than what Feldman and Sicher called "the false objectivity of prose or photographs", while it could also resist "the denial or burying of testimony". This contradiction between "objective" proof and a speculative and imagined or metaphorical poem was a theme of reflection on the memory of the Holocaust immediately after 1945, as in the case of Robert Antelme: "Poetry did not, surely, run so great a risk of creating that naked, 'objective' testimony, that kind of abstract accusation, that photograph that only frightens us without explicitly teaching anything. It could, on the contrary, risk fleeing the reality of the camps, letting that

reality be glimpsed only through a melodic counterpoint, through themes of nostalgia that surround but never penetrate this reality of fog and words" (Antelme, 2003, p. 33).

The fundamental tension between *phantasy* and the *reality principle* can, according to psychoanalytic theory, be mediated through art. For Sigmund Freud, phantasy refers to unconscious mental processes that fulfill frustrated wishes — both conscious and unconscious — in a realm separated from the constraints of reality testing. These wish-fulfilling imaginings serve as compensatory mechanisms when reality proves unbearable. Melanie Klein later expanded the concept, understanding phantasies as innate, structural elements of psychic life, deeply tied to early object relations and bodily experiences, which gradually evolve into symbolic forms (Spillius, 2001).

Freud contrasted phantasy with the reality principle, the ego's capacity to engage the external world rationally, to delay gratification, and to mediate between inner desire and social norms. As the ego develops from the infantile "pleasure-ego" to the mature "reality-ego," it increasingly represses or channels unconscious drives. Yet Freud also believed that art offers a bridge between these opposing realms. Artistic creation allows unconscious fantasies to be expressed, not as raw instinct, but as sublimated forms that are culturally sanctioned. Art thus becomes a space where internal psychic conflict — between desire and prohibition — can be worked through symbolically.

In the context of Holocaust representation, this psychoanalytic framework takes on urgent significance. The trauma of the Holocaust presents a historical reality so overwhelming that direct representation often fails. In such cases, the space of phantasy — when mediated through art — can offer an oblique but powerful mode of engagement. Rather than denying reality, artistic phantasy may enable access to dimensions of suffering, memory, and loss that remain unspeakable within strictly documentary or realist frameworks. Through sublimation, fantasy becomes not escapism, but a method of returning to historical trauma by way of imaginative transformation — a process through which unbearable realities may be symbolically encountered and partially integrated.

As the last witnesses disappear, the scholarly focus is currently shifting from the ethics and limits of representation to the relevance of imagination in representing the Holocaust, as a form of working against closure (Popescu & Schult, 2015). The current process of representing the Holocaust through post-witness memory relies heavily on imagination.

The local histories of representing the Holocaust, through an extraordinary effort and difficult remembrance, are unremembered in an unassimilated way, a process that goes beyond Freudian repression or the simple act of forgetting. Ulrich Baer was writing in *Spectral Evidence* about unmarked sites of post-violence and trauma as they were photographed: "Landscape photographs produce the mild shock of recovering what seems to be an unremembered —rather than a forgotten— experience" (Baer, 2005, p. 78).

Beyond stylistic and artistic debates, the most significant challenge for Yiddish theatre creators or writers grappling with the Holocaust was navigating a rapidly shifting political landscape after 1944. Jewish communities themselves were undergoing dramatic changes, creating a stark contrast to pre-war life. Some artists, like Iacob Mansdorf, left the devastated landscape. Others, like those involved with the IKUF Theatre or Aurel Baranga, sought solace in optimistic humanism, a political stance that offered a bridge between darkness and hope. Their productions offered a specific style for confronting these difficult realities on stage, shaping the local culture through the lens of the Holocaust. Despite being largely forgotten by the theatrical world or even erased from memory entirely, the process of representing the Holocaust through Romanian Yiddish theatre or popular literature remains vastly unknown. Local archives hold a wealth of documents waiting to be unearthed, offering a fragmented yet powerful glimpse into the immense struggles to tell this critical story in a new cultural context.

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