

Being a Jewish Writer under the Romanian Fascist Regime: The Case of Mihail Sebastian

PAULA DANIELA GANGA

Center for Eurasian, Russian, and East European Studies; Georgetown University

The rise of fascism in the late 1930s and 1940s in Romania had wide-ranging effects on the country's Jewish minority. Among the affected categories, artists and writers had a special place as the presentation of their work was either restricted to solely within the Jewish community or altogether forbidden. The case of the most representative Romanian Jewish writer of the time, Mihail Sebastian, and the way the anti-Semitic legislation in Romania in the 1940s affected his work, is analyzed in the following article. Against the background of the evolution of the legal status of Jews in Romania from the 1930s until the end of World War II, Mihail Sebastian's biography will serve as an example of the odyssey Romanian artists and writers of Jewish descent went through as their work became unacceptable to the fascist authorities. This article will mainly explore the situation of the Jewish artist in German-occupied Bucharest in 1944 by focusing on the process of writing and staging Sebastian's most popular play, *Steaua fără Nume* (The Star without a Name).

INTRODUCTION

'In such times I become a dramatist'¹ was Mihail Sebastian's reaction, preserved in his journal, to the success of fascist groups in Romanian politics and the adoption of harsh anti-Jewish laws. In Romania in the late 1930s and 1940s, the arts became subsumed to the promotion of ideological propaganda whilst it was almost entirely forbidden for Jewish artists to practice their professions. The case of the most representative Jewish writer of the time and the way anti-Semitic legislation in Romania in the 1940s affected his work will be explored in the following article.

Throughout the 1930s Mihail Sebastian had become one of the most important journalists in Romania, writing on culture, politics and the arts. He was also an artist himself, having written several novels, one of which – the novel *De Două Mii de Ani...* (For Two Thousand Years...) – became at the time of its publication in 1934 the most controversial work of the decade as it engaged with the discrimination suffered by Jews in Romania.

This article will first set the background for Sebastian's experience during the war by briefly discussing the legal status of Jews in Romania as it evolved through the 1930s to the end of World War II. There will be a particular emphasis on the situation of Jewish-Romanian artists, as well as an analysis of Mihail Sebastian's biography, his involvement in Romanian cultural life in the interwar period, his collaboration with his mentor Nae Ionescu and the Criterion Association, as well as the scandal

¹ Mihail Sebastian, *Journal 1935-1944*, trans. by Patrick Camiller (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2000), p. 145.

surrounding the novel *De Două Mii de Ani...*. The second part of this article will explore further the situation of the Jewish artist in German-occupied Bucharest in 1944 by focusing on the process of writing and staging of Sebastian's most popular play, *Steaua fără Nume* (The Star without a Name) during World War II.

Mihail Sebastian has been a controversial figure in Romanian culture both under socialism and after 1989, suffering from a 'deep process of mystification'.² Readily adopted by the Communist regime as an example of a writer suffering discrimination under the Fascist dictatorship, Sebastian's biography and work were distorted by Communist propaganda to fit into the required ideological canons. Work that could not fulfil this purpose, such as Sebastian's articles from the 1930s or the novel *De Două Mii de Ani...*, was simply never reprinted. After the collapse of the Ceausescu regime, when Sebastian's journal was finally published more than fifty years after being written, his work was again 'highjacked from the artistic to the political vendetta'.³ As the journal traces the author's life, career, and artistic work from 1935 to 1944, it also captures transformations in Romanian social and cultural life, as well as the conversion to fascism of many of his closest friends, some of whom later became world-renowned, as was the case of the religious historian Mircea Eliade and the nihilist philosopher E. M. Cioran.

The controversial place Sebastian occupies in Romanian culture, prompted by factors such as his biography, his friends, and his publications, only reinforces the need to assess his work in the context of such factors. An end to the mystification of Sebastian's work requires an analysis of the role each of these factors played in the creative process. The case of the play *Steaua fără Nume* is an opportunity to explore how Sebastian's Jewish identity played a direct role in the staging of his most popular play during World War II in German-occupied Bucharest.

FASCIST ROMANIA AND THE JEWS

Present in the Romanian principalities for centuries, the Jewish community did not have recognized legal status; they were accepted but not considered equal to the Romanian population.⁴ As the modern state of Romania emerged, the question of the status of the Jewish community became more pressing. Yet, as historian Andrei Oisteanu argues, 'Romanian politicians preferred to talk about tolerance rather than practice it'.⁵ It was after World War I, during the peace conference at St. Germain en Laye, that the freedom of religion and the civic and political emancipation of all Romanian Jews were finally included in an official binding document. The Treaty of 1919 stipulated in Articles 1, 7, and 8 the freedoms that Jewish and other minorities were to enjoy in Romania; these provisions would be included in the 1923 Romanian

² Marta Petreu, *Diavolul si ucenicul sau: Nae Ionescu – Mihail Sebastian* (Iasi: Polirom, 2009), p. 249.

³ Dan C. Mihăilescu, 'Plecând de la Sebastian,' *Idei în dialog*, 10 (2007): 7.

⁴ Leon Volovici, *Nationalist Ideology and anti-Semitism: The Case of Romanian Intellectuals in the 1930s*, (Oxford, UK: Pergamon Press, 1991), p. 197.

⁵ Andrei Oisteanu, *Imaginea evreului în cultura română*, (Bucuresti: Humanitas, 2001), p. 17.

constitution.⁶ Although the new constitution improved the situation of Romanian Jews, it also led to an increase in popularity of right-wing movements that called for a return to a “purer” national Romanian state.⁷ As early as 1934 an increasingly intensive campaign of Romanianization (Romanizare) led to discriminatory laws. The 1934 *Law on Using Romanian Personnel in Enterprises* required that Romanian citizens should hold at least eighty per cent of all positions in a company. This law was targeted especially towards oil refineries where the boards of directors were mostly composed of foreign citizens. Additionally, the president of a company could only be a Romanian citizen belonging to the Orthodox Church.⁸

The first truly anti-Jewish law was the Decree-Law no. 169/21 January 1938 of the Goga-Cuza government on the revision of citizenship. Though it did not name the Jewish community directly, it was applied exclusively to it. This law required that all who had obtained their Romanian citizenship through the Nationality Registry or a judicial procedure must show papers proving their right to be a Romanian citizen. Of the almost 800,000 Romanian Jews, only 391,191 remained citizens.⁹

The 8 August 1940 decree by the Ion Gigurtu cabinet went further in generalizing the denial of civil and political rights to the Jewish population. Jews were divided into three categories: the first included Jews who had settled in Romania after 30 December 1918; the second those who had naturalized before 30 December 1918 and those who had fought in the Romanian army, including their children; the third constituted the remainder of the population.¹⁰ Under this legislation all Jews were barred from being career officers in the army, and only Jews in the second category could serve as ordinary soldiers. The other two categories had greater restrictions imposed on them as they could no longer be lawyers, notaries, or public servants, and could not sell alcohol or conduct business in rural areas.¹¹ They were also banned from running or letting cinemas; editing books, Romanian newspapers and journals; and participating in or being members of national sporting associations. Instead of military service, the Jews in these categories were required to pay a special tax or perform community labour (*muncă de interes obștesc*).¹² Additionally, on 9 September 1940, another decree eliminated the Judaic faith from the list of

⁶ Carol Iancu, *Evreii din România (1866-1919) De la excludere la emancipare*, (Bucuresti: Hasefer, 2006), p. 90.

⁷ Irina Livezeanu, *Cultural politics in Greater Romania: Regionalism, Nation Building and Ethnic Struggle, 1918-1930*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), pp. 289-290.

⁸ Alexandru Florian, *Cum a fost posibil? Evreii din România în perioada Holocaustului* (Bucuresti: Editura Institutului National pentru Studierea Holocaustului din România “Elie Wiesel”, 2007), p. 50.

⁹ Marcu Rozen, *Holocaust sub guvernarea Antonescu* (Bucuresti: Asociatia Evreilor din România Victime ale Holocaustului, 2004), p. 19.

¹⁰ Dennis Deletant, *Hitler's Forgotten Ally. Ion Antonescu and His Regime, Romania 1940-44* (London: Palgrave, 2006), p. 103.

¹¹ The right of Jews to plead at the bar was limited by law to representation of their co-religionists as private persons (17 October 1940), while Jewish doctors were allowed to treat Jewish only patients (15 November 1940). According to data held by the Federation of the Union of Jewish Communities, 1577 doctors out of a total of 1877 were victims of this measure (Deletant 2006: 105).

¹² Tesu Solomovici, *Istoria Holocaustului din România* (Bucuresti: Editura Tesu, 2004) p. 117.

historically protected and authorized religions.¹³ Furthermore, the Decree-Law no. 2651/8 August 1940 prohibited marriages between Romanians and Jews.¹⁴

As the National Legionary State was imposed¹⁵ (14 September 1940 – 27 January 1941) and the 1938 Constitution was suspended, more draconian measures were taken against the Jewish population. On 4 October 1940, a decree passed all Jewish properties in rural areas to state control while Jewish urban properties were nationalized in March 1941.¹⁶

The alliance between the Legionnaires and Antonescu did not last long. However, even after the elimination of the Iron Guard from government, attitudes towards the Jewish community did not significantly change, with anti-Semitic measures continuing to be passed. A more controversial aspect was the requirement for members of the Jewish community to wear the Star of David.

According to Dennis Deletant, there is some confusion about Ion Antonescu's instructions regarding the compulsory wearing of the Star of David. It was Mihai Antonescu who gave the order in 8 August 1941 that all Jews in Romania “wear a distinctive sign”, but its introduction was postponed. This however did not stop some local prefects from enforcing the measure on their own initiative. Their move prompted the Ministry of Internal Affairs to telegraph all prefects on 31 July 1941 a request that they ensure that no Jew ‘wear a distinct sign that he is Jewish, because such distinguishing signs can lead to undesired reactions’.¹⁷

This order however was overturned by Marshal Antonescu on 3 September 1941 when he requested that all Jews wear the Star of David. This decision was also overturned due to a memorandum from the leader of the Jewish community, Wilhelm Filderman, in which he complained that the order for Jews to wear the star ‘marked a return to the Middle Ages’.¹⁸ In the end, the decision was not applied throughout the country. Jews in Bessarabia, Bukovina, and Transnistria were forced by local decrees issued under Antonescu's authority by the governors and prefects to wear the star.¹⁹ In Bucharest, Sebastian records in his journal on 9 September 1941:

¹³ Only the repeated requests of Wilhelm Filderman, the president of the Federation of the Union of Jewish Communities made Antonescu suspend the application of this decree. A similar change in policy occurred in theatre when the Ministry of Cults and Arts rescinded on 26 September 1940 its original decision of 12 September to ban Jews from performing on the stage, although it qualified this by allowing them to appear only in Jewish theatres and stipulating that their plays should be advertised as ‘Jewish theatre’ (Deletant 2006: 105).

¹⁴ Florian, *Cum a fost posibil?*, p. 58.

¹⁵ The Legion of the Archangel Michael (*Legiunea Arhanghelului Mihail*) was the main political vehicle of the Romanian far right since its creation in 1927. A paramilitary branch of this movement - the Iron Guard (*Garda de fier*), was added in March 1930. In 1935 the Legion changed its name to “Everything for the Fatherland” (*Totul pentru Tară*) and ran in the 1937 parliamentary elections when it came in third. After the abdication of King Carol II on 6 September 1940, this organization joined forces with Marshall Ion Antonescu creating a military dictatorship that was also the first Romanian government overtly allied with Nazi Germany (Nagy-Talavera 2001, Iordachi 2010: 316-357).

¹⁶ Florian, *Cum a fost posibil?*, p. 58.

¹⁷ Deletant, *Hitler's Forgotten Ally*, p. 113.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 114.

¹⁹ Oisteanu, *Imagina evreului în cultura română*, p. 108.

We were supposed to start wearing the “six-cornered star” tomorrow morning. The order was given to the Community and passed on to police stations. But there was a change of mind following an audience [...]. The change of mind does not give me any pleasure. I had grown used to the idea that I would be wearing a yellow patch with a Star of David. I imagined all the unpleasantness, all the risks and dangers, but after a moment's alarm I not only resigned myself but began to see in that sign a kind of token of identity. Even more, I saw it as a kind of medal, an insignia certifying my lack of sympathy for the vile deeds around us, my lack of responsibility for them, my innocence.²⁰

As Romania entered the war and a larger workforce was needed, the section of the Jewish population excluded from joining the armed forces was required to participate in compulsory labour. A decree of 14 July 1941 stipulated that Jewish males aged between eighteen and fifty could be used only by army general staff individually or in groups for community labour designated by the army or other state institutions. The maximum period of labour ranged, according to the age of the person drafted, from sixty to one hundred and eighty days a year, but in a period of prolonged mobilization or war it could be unlimited. Those summoned for work on certain projects in groups were to be formed into labour battalions (*detasamente de lucru*) under army command. Doctors, pharmacists, veterinary surgeons, engineers, architects, and active or retired officers were exempt from manual labour, but could be drafted to perform their professions if required.²¹

There was considerable confusion over the implementation of the compulsory labour provisions owing to the numerous and sometimes conflicting orders issued by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the army, the latter being responsible for the compulsory labour “recruitment” centres. After the decision was taken to enlist Jews into compulsory labour on the railways, all prefects were ordered by the Ministry of Internal Affairs on 1 August 1941 to request lists of these Jews from the recruitment centres set up by the army for this purpose. For their labour, the Jews were to be paid 90 lei a day, the railway board being responsible for their food and shelter. On 2 August 1941, the Interior Ministry informed prefects by telegram that Jews engaged in compulsory labour were to be paid 25 lei a day plus 10 lei for their upkeep.²²

MIHAIL SEBASTIAN'S BIOGRAPHY

Born Josef Hechter on 18 October 1907 in the city of Braila on the Danube River, from early childhood Sebastian felt strongly integrated into the Romanian population as both his parents ‘spoke only Romanian and raised us Romanian’.²³ He studied law until 1929 and after graduation he pursued a doctorate in law in Paris. In 1932, upon his return to Romania, he became actively involved in the activities of the famed

²⁰ Sebastian, *Journal*, p. 408.

²¹ Deletant, *Hitler's Forgotten Ally*, p. 108.

²² Deletant, *Hitler's Forgotten Ally*, p. 110.

²³ As quoted in Sebastian, *Journal*, p. XXVIII.

Bucharest Criterion Association. This collaboration with the young intellectuals of Romania had already begun in August 1927 when he started to write in the pages of the newspaper *Cuvântul* (The Word). Run by Nae Ionescu, this newspaper was the main mode of expression of the “Young Generation” – or “Generation 1927” as was dubbed by its leader Mircea Eliade – organized around Eliade, Petru Comarnescu, Constantin Noica, and others who would become extremely influential in the intellectual exchange of ideas that fomented in the Romanian society at the beginning of the 1930s.

The defining moment in Mihail Sebastian's career was the publication, in June 1934, of the novel *De două mii de ani...* (For Two Thousand Years...) in which his Jewish roots are explored for the first time. The novel was the story of a Romanian Jewish man struggling with his identity in 1920s Romania. Written in the form of a pseudo-diary, the novel traced the identity crisis of the protagonist, a young Jewish intellectual in Romania during a period when the country itself was undergoing a crisis of modernity.²⁴ Some of Sebastian's own childhood experiences of being a social outcast due to his Jewish heritage as well as the open discrimination practiced in Romanian universities in his student years were narrated in this controversial book.²⁵ The semi-autobiographical character of the novel was further reinforced by the fact that many of its characters could be identified among Sebastian's friends and acquaintances: the captivating professor Ghița Blidaru was actually his own mentor Nae Ionescu, the nihilist Parlea was the philosopher E.M. Cioran, the “Europeanist” architect Vieru could be recognized as the Romanian novelist Camil Petrescu, and the Marxist S.T. Haim could be identified with his friend and ardent Soviet sympathizer Belu Zilber.²⁶

Although anti-Semitism was a constant in Romanian social life for decades, it only broke out violently in late 1920s when Sebastian was a student, to later disappear from the limelight, allowing Sebastian to become an integral part of the young intellectual elite in spite of his heritage.²⁷ For Volovici,

Sebastian was exclusively a product of Romanian and European culture, loosely connected to the Jewish tradition, which he did not reject outright but which he viewed as belonging only to the

²⁴ Norman Manea, 'The Incompatibilities', *The New Republic*, (20 April 1998), pp. 32-37.

²⁵ According to Mircea Vulcanescu, 'Sebastian's novel is the confession of an assimilated Jew, of a man who did not start to feel Jewish until the others refused to acknowledge his belonging to the Romanian community to which he thought he belonged' (as quoted in Sebastian, *Journal*, p. XLIV).

²⁶ Manea, 'The Incompatibilities', p. 33.

²⁷ In spite of this short-lived acceptance, Sebastian found that his Jewishness often brought him criticism and attacks from the growing right-wing sympathizers. At one Criterion event, on 23 October 1932, where he was scheduled to present on Charlie Chaplin's theatrical technique, after a shout from the auditorium – a Jew speaking about another Jew! – he ripped the prepared lecture and decided to talk 'as a Jew about the Jew, Charlie Chaplin' and the way the solitude of his heroes reflected the solitude of the ghettos. See: Cristina Bejan, *The Criterion Association. Friendship, Culture and Fascism in Interwar Bucharest* (Oxford: DPhil Dissertation Oxford University (unpublished), 2010), p. 120. See also: Trandafir, Constantin, *Mihail Sebastian. Între viață și ficțiune* (București: Libra, 2007), p. 36.

past—a past that he regarded alternately with irony and nostalgic condescension.²⁸

Yet Sebastian's belonging to the Romanian community was denied by his own mentor. Nae Ionescu's foreword for the book viciously attacked the writer and his Jewish heritage, refusing to acknowledge the individual's merits due to the guilt of his community. Ionescu was the intellectual authority around which the Criterion Association was formed. They were almost all his students at the University of Bucharest and his collaborators at his newspaper *Cuvântul*. He also introduced them to the philosophy of experienta (the German Lebensphilosophie), which influenced the writing of all the Criterionists from their fiction to their journals.²⁹

Sebastian owed his literary career to Ionescu who hired him at *Cuvântul* and gave him an opportunity to make use of his talent. The gratitude Sebastian felt towards his teacher remained almost unwavering throughout his life in spite of the fact that it was Ionescu's involvement with the extreme right in Romania that converted most of the other Criterionists into supporters of the Iron Guard. Even as Ionescu wrote a destructive preface to Sebastian's *De două mii de ani...*, the pupil allowed his teacher's voice to be heard by publishing the original preface.

In those pages, Ionescu dismissed almost entirely the book itself focusing on nothing but the Jewish identity of the main character; he dismissed the drama of the unaccepted Jewish Romanian, focusing on the Jewish guilt of not having accepted Christ as the Messiah. The persecutions suffered by the Jews were simply the consequence of the tradition they themselves created:

Judah suffers. Why? Because Judah lives in the midst of peoples who cannot but be hostile to him even if they wish not to be; [...] Judah suffers because he gave birth to Christ, because he saw and did not believe. This would not have been too serious a matter. But others believed; we did. Judah suffers—because he is Judah.³⁰

The final blow Ionescu directed against his pupil emerged in the conclusion of the preface where he addressed Sebastian directly—yet not by his chosen pen name but by his Jewish one:

You are sick, Iosef Hechter. You are substantially sick because you have to suffer; and because your suffering is bottled up. Everybody is suffering, Iosef Hechter. We Christians also are suffering. But we have a way out, because we can save ourselves. [...] I cannot do anything for you. Because I know: the Messiah will not come. The Messiah has come, Iosef Hechter, and you did not recognize him.³¹

His argument that Orthodox and Jewish values are irreconcilable led to only one

²⁸ Leon Volovici, 'Mihail Sebastian. A Jewish Writer and his (Antisemitic) Master,' *Insiders and Outsiders. Dilemmas of East European Jewry*, ed. By Richard Cohen, Jonathan Frankel and Stefani Hoffman, (Oxford: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2010), pp. 58-69.

²⁹ Bejan, *The Criterion Association*.

³⁰ As quoted in Mihail Sebastian, *Jurnal II. Jurnal Indirect. 1926-1945*, Texte culese din mass-media vremii si cuvânt înainte de Tesu Solomovici, (Bucuresti: Editura Tesu, 2006), p. 22.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

solution: the end of the Jewish-Christian conflict through the disappearance of its cause, the Jews. In Norman Manea's opinion, this preface offered the Iron Guard the definition of Romanian identity: 'we are Orthodox Christian because we are Romanian, and we are Romanian because we are Orthodox'.³² In this equation, the Jewish Sebastian—and as a matter of fact any other non-Orthodox minority—had no claim to Romanian-ness.

This preface, as well as the topic of the novel, produced a society-wide response. Sebastian was attacked by fascists and communists, Christians and Jews, liberals and extremists. To them all, as well as to his mentor, Sebastian would later reply in his essay *Cum am devenit huligan* (How I Became a Hooligan). Though saddened by Ionescu's extremist conversion, in 1935, Sebastian was still an optimist. He felt that anti-Semitism was still 'on the periphery of Jewish suffering'.³³

The scandal that emerged after the publication of the book prevented Sebastian from continuing his thriving journalistic activity and ended his collaboration with *Cuvântul*. More than losing his job, Marta Petreu argued that Sebastian's entire life and personality were profoundly marked by the scandal of his novel. Her research on Sebastian's journalistic writing before 1934 revealed the portrait of a young man sure of himself and the protection of his renowned mentor, writing for one of the main newspapers of the country where his criticism of the old Romanian elite sometimes bordered impertinence. Yet after the scandal, the loss of his mentor and the steady legionary conversion of his closest friends, he became a changed man.³⁴

After the publication of *Cum am devenit huligan*, he continued to write novels and plays while also contributing to many Romanian newspapers. In July 1936, he became editor at the *Revista Fundatiilor Regale* (Magazine of the Royal Foundations) but even here his Jewish heritage sparked controversy from the right who believed that an important Romanian institution, in charge of protecting the 'holiest of Romanian essence,' could not be under the care of a Jew.³⁵

In 1940, he published *Accidental* (The Accident), which would also be the last book to be published in his lifetime. As the anti-Jewish legislation was adopted, his work was severely affected. Not only was he no longer able to be a lawyer, but he was also prevented from being a journalist and publishing books and was forced to participate in community labour. While he never owned property that could be nationalized he was forced to move from his rented apartment in the centre of Bucharest to live with his family.³⁶ Additionally, on 7 September 1940, he was fired from his job at the *Revista Fundatiilor Regale* for being Jewish, ending his public writing activity for the duration of the war. The note summarily dismissing Sebastian from his position read: '*Avem onoarea a vă încunostiinta că în baza Decretului Lege din 9 August 1940, sunteti licentiat din serviciu pe ziua de 7 septembrie a.c. fiind evreu*' (We

³² Manea, 'The Incompatibilities', p. 34.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Marta Petreu, *Diavolul si ucenicul său: Nae Ionescu – Mihail Sebastian* (Iasi: Polirom, 2009).

³⁵ As quoted in Dorin Grăsoiu, *Mihail Sebastian sau ironia unui destin* (București: Minerva, 1986), p. 74.

³⁶ As quoted in Mihail Sebastian, *Antologie*, prefață, tabel cronologic si bibliografie de Anatol Ghermanschi (Bucuresti: Eminescu, 1981).

have the honour of announcing that on the basis of the Decree-law of 9 August 1940 you are fired from your work starting with 7 September current year for being a Jew').³⁷ From 1940 and for the entire duration of the war, Sebastian would live through a period of many limitations, both financial and social.

STEAUA FĂRĂ NUME (THE STAR WITHOUT A NAME)

In a letter to his friend Camil Petrescu, Sebastian confessed how he first came up with the idea behind what would later become the play *Steaua fără nume*:

It is hard to say what the starting point of a play or a novel was. The first thought, first pretext, first suggestion that gets you started, many times they get lost on the way. Once your future play gets its main lines, once you are capable of putting on paper the lines in your future work, in that moment you have probably forgotten the thought or the event that started the process. I believe however I can say for certain where I got to first think of what one day would become *Steaua fără nume*.³⁸

PROCESS OF WRITING THE PLAY

Throughout the war Sebastian was forbidden to publish and consequently most of his writing was focused on his journal, translations and several plays. But this did not come easy. He wrote to his friend Camil Petrescu: 'to tell you the truth I can't write anything. I have tried to resign myself, to get used to the idea. But it's terribly hard.'³⁹ Though he had managed to get the position of teacher at a Jewish high school he felt unhappy and compared his existence to that of a prisoner.⁴⁰

The story of how the play was written reflects the ups and downs of life under fascism with hopes and disillusiones challenging the writing process at every step. Initially thought of in January 1943, the play would only be finished in early 1944 when it would be performed under a pseudonym. In January 1943, Sebastian's journal mentions the first moments of excitement over a new play, named in the early stages *Ursa Major*:

The night of Thursday to Friday was the kind of feverish night that usually follows my first vision of a book or play. I tossed and turned almost until morning, besieged by ideas, solutions, questions – and it seemed that I was finding an answer to everything, with magical ease. The play grew, filled out, became urgent, and demanded to be written at once. The next day, Friday, was equally agitated. First I rang Nicusor, to tell him without delay of my proposal. The plan was simple: to make the scenario tend toward farce; to eliminate elements of poetry, delicacy, subtlety, etc.; to draw everything in a burlesque direction. The man's role would suit Beligan, and I would write the woman's with Nora Piacentini in mind. [...] I felt with irritation that it really is necessary to do things quickly and energetically, while there is still time (if there is still time).⁴¹

³⁷ Grăsoiu, *Mihail Sebastian*, p. 78.

³⁸ Sebastian, *Journal*, p. 633.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 633.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 628.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 536.

The first moments of excitement over a new project would soon be replaced by exterior constraints such as time to rehearse, space, and actors for the production, the possibility of the play being significantly altered by people involved in the staging process. The journal entry of 14 January notes a dramatic drop in enthusiasm in the process. Material gain seemed to be the only thing left to motivate Sebastian into writing the play:

Both Piacentini and Septilici thought my scenario "fantastic" when I read it to them last night. Both see it being a great success. Both prefer the farce option (they even want music, if that's what there has to be). What will remain of my play? Nothing. But at least if I can write it quickly, and have it put on quickly, and score a great success that brings in a lot of money fast, I won't feel too bad about it. I am so cornered by poverty that I'll write anything for the theatre if it makes some money. But I won't even have that compensation. They are off until the 15 February, so we can begin writing only when they return. This means that the play could not be performed earlier than June or July, perhaps even next autumn. I am losing interest in the whole thing. I consider the scenario lost and have put it into a drawer along with so many other useless papers.⁴²

Only a providential vacation manages to change the fate Sebastian had in store for the play. His only exit from the drudgery of daily life came in 1943 when his friend Prince Antoine Bibescu invited Sebastian to his country estate at Corcova. In Bibescu's recollections of the events, Sebastian's reaction to the invitation was to ask whether he could stay there for a month. The invitation was providential as Sebastian wrote the first two acts of the play there in the summer of 1943.⁴³

In his journal Sebastian noted: 'Antoine forced me to talk about one of my scenarios, and so I gave him a brief outline of *Ursa Major*. I grew excited as I talked, and again it seemed to me that the scenario offered good chances of success'.⁴⁴ The process of writing continued back in Bucharest: 'Returned from Corcova. [...] I did write the first two acts of *Ursa Major*—Act One quite easily, Act Two with much greater difficulty, as I kept stopping and fell prey to doubts'.⁴⁵

However, it was Sebastian's experience in the labour battalions that brought to the play its true essence. While initially conceived as a farce or a light comedy, after the winter of 1943 the story received a much sadder, more poetic dimension. In an article for the newspaper *Cortina* (The Curtain), Sebastian traced the story of how the opening scene and the premise of the play were inspired by the winter days he spent clearing snow as a member of a labour battalion to which he had been assigned due to his Jewish identity:

At the beginning of the play, in the first Act, as the curtain rises you can hear a few words—the first words of the play—that preserve that memory. The stage is empty and from somewhere outside, backstage, you can hear a sleepy voice warning the audience: *Fereste linia!* (Beware of the tracks!) I had worked in the winter of 1943 in a snow clearing labour battalion on a train track not far from the Grivita train station. From six in the morning to six in the afternoon, with shovels and

⁴² Ibid., p. 537.

⁴³ Grăsoiu, *Mihail Sebastian*, p. 81.

⁴⁴ Sebastian, *Journal*, p. 554.

⁴⁵ Sebastian, *Journal*, p. 567.

picks, we cleared the snow and the ice. Sometimes you could hear the whistle of a freight train and the yell of the train worker who was waving a light signal in the distance: *Fereste linia!* The cry was repeated like an echo from one work team to the next: *Fereste linia!* We would move away, look with a certain amount of bewilderment at the train cars and then take our shovels and continue working. Morning and evening a passenger train would pass close by and we could see the lights of the compartments and sometimes even the heads of the travellers. We would look at them with something similar to a child's curiosity. I hadn't seen a train since the beginning of the war. But there was no time for dreams, memories or even opposition to this situation. We would hear "*Fereste linia!*" and we would step aside and clear the track.

One morning we were taken to the Grivita train stop to sweep the station. In a way I was happy. For the first time in almost three years I was in a train station: the noise of the trains, the steam of the engine, the clatter of the travellers. It smelled of departure. I believe right there, in that labour battalion, among other, darker thoughts, I had the first image of the simple provincial train station where my mysterious heroine would arrive at the beginning of the play. I do not know whether any of my former colleagues on the snow detachment ever saw the play, but if they did, then perhaps they would recognize the days in the winter of 1943.⁴⁶

The play that Sebastian originally only intended to finish in order to supplement his earnings suddenly changed in his heart. He confesses in a letter to Camil Petrescu that an accident occurred, he 'started to like it':

I had left the script in a drawer, among many other papers, but as time passed by, the comedy I had started to sketch turned into something else. Things were not only getting clearer, but the entire meaning of the play was taking a different road. My hero was becoming an astronomer and he was hiding a secret: an unknown star somewhere above Ursa Major.⁴⁷

PLOT OF THE PLAY

The play is set in a small town in Romania, so small that the trains linking the capital to the mountain resort of Sinaia never stop there. In this setting, Marin Miroiu, the mathematics teacher at the local girls' high school, waits impatiently for an important package, a book so valuable that the entire community is scandalized at hearing the price. Oblivious to their interest and disapproval, Miroiu starts reading the book and is captivated until late in the evening. He is still in the station when the Sinaia train stops in the town to hand over to the authorities a passenger without a ticket. Thus enters into the life of the small community a strange young woman of breathtaking beauty and elegance. Refusing to give her name or call any friends, the young woman accepts Miroiu's offer to host her at his house for the night while he stays at a friend's house.

The stranger's initial dislike of the town, of Miroiu, and of his modest house, changes as she realizes that the young man is much more than a simple country mathematics teacher. The professor is also passionate about astronomy and had just confirmed in the book he ordered that he had discovered a star that was previously unknown. Entranced by the story of the star that nobody had ever seen before, the young woman falls in love with Miroiu and offers her own name for the unbaptized

⁴⁶ Sebastian, *Journal*, p. 634.

⁴⁷ Sebastian, *Journal*, p. 635.

star: Mona. The next day Mona and Miroiu make plans to spend the rest of their lives together, but the woman's lover comes from Sinaia to take her back. In the harsh light of day, Mona sees the confining surroundings of the small town and realizes that she could not live there even if she had Miroiu's love and the dream of unknown stars. In the end, Mona decides to return to the world to which she belongs.

PERFORMING THE PLAY UNDER THE FASCIST REGIME AND DURING THE WAR

It was this version of the play that Sebastian presented to his first real audience, the actors Nina Piacentini and Mircea Septilici. The new plot was significantly different from its Corcova version and the final act was still to be written, but the actors' reactions were so positive that Sebastian wrote in his journal that evening:

Yesterday evening I unexpectedly found myself reading *Ursa Major* for Nora Piacentini and Septilici. They were immediately very enthusiastic about it and decided to put it on straight away, even though they had already started rehearsals of Michel Duran's *Barbara*. Today things happened with a speed that has swept away all my doubts and hesitations. From eleven this morning until four this afternoon, Mircea and I dictated simultaneously to three typists. At half past four the manuscript was delivered to the theatre. A quarter of an hour later, Soare⁴⁸ (already introduced to the plot) presented the play on behalf of a teacher who wants to remain anonymous—and signed Victor Mincu. The title: *Steaua fără nume*. (Personally I regret the loss of *Ursa Major*—but in their vision it sounded too literary.)

That's all and fine, but Act Three hasn't been written. When will I do it? It is urgent—but I don't have an hour to spare between school and college. Nevertheless I must try at all cost to finish it off, working day and night.⁴⁹

The challenge of writing the final act was dealt with a week later when a journal entry noted the completion of the writing process, though Sebastian mentioned his dissatisfaction with the quality due to the rush in which he had to finish the script:

Today I finished Act Three of *Ursa Major*. I wrote it quickly from Friday night until today, hurriedly, a little mechanically, almost without pausing to read back over it. [...] I need more freedom to move, more time for reflection. I think there are some excellent things in the act, but I know that I haven't given my all. Maybe I'll come back to it later. The ending does not satisfy me.⁵⁰

Though the play's writing was finished, the greatest troubles came from staging *Steaua fără Nume*. As Sebastian was Jewish, the play could not be performed under his name; instead the fictitious Victor Mincu was created. However, the fact that the author never attended any of the rehearsals soon raised suspicions. No matter how modest Victor Mincu was, the public and the theatre authorities had heard of the staging of a new play of great potential, and curiosity about its author naturally arose. The theatre newspaper *Cortina* started speculating as to the true identity of Mincu and the name of Romanian author Mihail Sadoveanu was put forward. The

⁴⁸ Soare Z. Soare would be the first director staging the play.

⁴⁹ Sebastian, *Journal*, p. 583.

⁵⁰ Sebastian, *Journal*, p. 583.

wave of speculations required the author to present himself to the public — the Direction of the Theatres made this an official request. The Alhambra theatre, where the play was staged, received an official letter requiring Victor Mincu to present evidence of writing the play as well as his papers attesting his ethnic background; otherwise the play would be cancelled.⁵¹

This official activity was undoubtedly prompted by suspicions that the author was Jewish. Sebastian's name had not been mentioned publicly, so a Romanian author needed to be found in order to impersonate Victor Mincu. In the end a former schoolmate of Sebastian's, the lawyer Stefan Enescu, an author himself, accepted the risk of claiming the play as his creation.⁵²

On 4 March 1944, the first staging of *Steaua fără Nume* at the Alhambra theatre under the name Victor Mincu became the theatrical event of the year. The cast was made up of promising young actors who also brought quality to a script that the Romanian audience instantly fell in love with.⁵³ For the actor Radu Beligan, who played Marin Miroiu and was a close friend of Sebastian's, this part opened the doors for more dramatic roles to an actor already known and appreciated for his comedic performances. In Beligan's words, '*Steaua fără Nume* opened my own way towards the stars', toward a rich and long career in dramatic roles.⁵⁴

The success of the play only increased the public's interest in its author. The night of the premiere, the theatre critic N. Carandino recognized the style but said nothing in his review, keeping the secret even though after the performance he was heard to remark that 'only Sebastian could write such a play'.⁵⁵ Eventually Enescu was forced to write a letter to the Romanian newspapers claiming once more the paternity of the play and asking for a stop to the rumours surrounding *Steaua fără Nume*.

As the war unravelled and news from France announced the Allies' advances, *Steaua fără Nume* was performed with a new cast in 1944. Even though Sebastian's journal has no entries on the premiere of the play, the performances of that summer were mentioned several times. On 17 August 1944, Sebastian wrote 'I didn't go nor do I feel at all curious about it,' but two days later he changed his mind and attended a performance. His journal entry that day captures both the excitement of the play and the daily presence of the war:

I am writing these lines during a morning alert. From the street you could see swarms of aircrafts passing in the distance with their metallic glitter in the bright sun. I saw *Steaua fără Nume* yesterday evening. What a splendid auditorium the Comoedia has! At the Alhambra everything

⁵¹ Grăsoiu, *Mihail Sebastian*, pp. 82-83.

⁵² Tatiana Visescu, *Potret imperfect* (Pitești: Electus, 2001) p. 90.

⁵³ The original cast of the play comprised: Maria Mohor (Mona), Radu Beligan (Marin Miroiu), Nora Piacentini (Domnisoara Cucu), Marcel Anghelescu (Ispas, train station chief), V. Brezeanu (Udrea), Mircea Septilici (Grig), N. Tomazoglu (Pascu), C. Iordănescu (Ichim), I. Serbănescu (a peasant), Ninetta Gusti (a student), G. Basmagian (the conductor). Sets: Mircea Septilici, Director: Soare Z. Soare. See: Grăsoiu, *Mihail Sebastian*, p. 187, p. 466.

⁵⁴ Beligan Radu, *Confesiuni despre Artă și Viată* (public lecture at Mihai Eminescu Theater in Chisinau, 30 May 2011).

⁵⁵ Grăsoiu, *Mihail Sebastian*, p. 85.

gets lost, as in a huge barn. But here the whole hall is like a wonderful sound box. A surprise: Tantzi Cocea. She has quite a few false touches, but also a mixture of frivolity and emotion which is quite similar to my Mona's.⁵⁶

Ten days later Bucharest was freed by the Russians. Sebastian's 22 August journal entry read: 'How shall I begin? Where shall I begin? The Russians are in Bucharest. Paris is free. I am tired as a dog. It is my lot not to be able to fully rejoice at the overwhelming events.'⁵⁷

Even as Romania experienced the first bursts of freedom the situation was still desperate for Sebastian. In the last German raid on Bucharest his parents' house was destroyed in the bombings. Forced to live with friends and constantly on the move, his play was the only source of light as well as the thought that the war was ending. Yet, even with a liberated Romania the risk of divulging the truth about *Steaua fără Nume* was present. In his journal a conversation with his friend Stefan Enescu is revealing of the fear people in Romania still felt while the Germans had not been completely defeated:

I was surprised today by Enescu telling me that our only risk, if we divulge the secret of the play, is execution upon an eventual return of the Germans.

Do you think that to be possible? I asked laughing.

I don't. But many people talk about a new German offensive from Timisoara.⁵⁸

After the extreme poverty endured during the war, the liberation seemed to bring a brighter future for Sebastian. He received offers to write for all the publications which began to appear in Bucharest: *România Liberă* (Free Romania), *Revista Fundatiilor Regale* (the Magazine of the Royal Foundations) and the publications of N. Carandino and Zaharia Stancu. He was even invited as a contributor by the Romanian radio. He refused all of these requests.⁵⁹

Above all, Sebastian wanted to avoid political involvement and simply focus on his writing. In the initial period of enthusiasm after the liberation he agreed to contribute to the communist newspaper *România Liberă*,⁶⁰ yet he soon left, explaining in his journal:

I am happy that my experience at *România Liberă* ended quickly, before I signed up for anything. I'd have found it impossible to work in that regime of secret committees. Indoctrinated stupidity is harder to take than the ordinary kind. Patrascanu attracted me for his human side. When we reached agreement about the paper four weeks ago, at Ulea's farm, I can't say I didn't feel some regret that I would be returning to journalism. But I welcomed it insofar as it gave me an immediate way of saying aloud all the things I had kept silent about, grinding my teeth for five long years. In three days, [...] I realized that I would be joining an editorial committee terrorized

⁵⁶ Sebastian, *Journal*, p. 606.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 610.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 616.

⁵⁹ Marta Petreu, *Diavolul si ucenicul său: Nae Ionescu – Mihail Sebastian* (Iasi: Polirom, 2009), p. 245.

⁶⁰ Liviu Rotman, *Evreii din România în perioada comunistă 1944-1965* (Iasi: Polirom, 2004), p. 148.

by conformism. No, no, it's better for me to write plays.⁶¹

Resolving to avoid the political domain, Sebastian focused on his plays, beginning several new projects. He was also hired as a press adviser by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs with the intention of being sent to London. His plays were being staged in Bucharest and abroad and he was about to start teaching at the newly opened Democratic University when he died suddenly after being hit by a truck while on his way to his first lecture.⁶²

The sudden death of Mihail Sebastian created the premise for the decades-long mystification Petreu argues has been created around this author's work and biography. As Sebastian died before he had the opportunity to express more public dissent towards the new regime or leave the country as he had planned, the Romanian communist regime was later able to use Sebastian's image to its advantage.⁶³

CONCLUSIONS

The circumstances in which Sebastian's *Steaua fără Nume* was written and performed — in war-time Bucharest while the author was prohibited from writing by anti-Semitic laws — have been explored both in the context of Sebastian's biography as well as in the larger background of the fascist dictatorship of early 1940s Romania. The sections in this article dedicated to Sebastian's biography and to the anti-Jewish legislation delineated the extent to which Sebastian's Jewish identity shaped both his interaction with his closest group of friends and with the Romanian authorities.

Sebastian's struggle as a Jewish writer in an anti-Semitic Romania has been extensively explored through his novel *De Două Mii de Ani...* as well as his journal. However, *Steaua fără Nume*, despite being Sebastian's most popular play, has escaped a similar attention. This article has analyzed the play as another such instance where the author's Jewish identity determined every aspect of the play, from the original idea emerging while Sebastian was forced to perform involuntary labour for the state, to the dramatic circumstances of its staging during the war.

The plight of Sebastian's war years have become present in the public's eye due to the publication of his journal which offered a new insight into the life of Romanian Jews under the fascist dictatorship. Yet further research would be welcomed on other instances of Jewish writers illegally continuing their activity during the war. From his highly controversial position in Romanian cultural life, Sebastian has opened the road in this respect, shedding light not only on Jewish writers in Romania, but on Romanian writers of Jewish heritage who had to deal with the imposition of an

⁶¹ Sebastian, *Journal*, p. 610.

⁶² Camil Petrescu, 'Steaua fără nume și fără noroc', *Revista Fundațiilor Regale*, 12, (1945) in Mihail Sebastian, *Antologie*, prefată, tabel cronologic și bibliografie de Anatol Ghermanschi (București: Eminescu, 1981), p. 42.

⁶³ Petreu, *Diavolul și ucenicul său*.

exterior identity over their Romanian one.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR

Paula Ganga is a graduate student in Russian and East European Studies at the School of Foreign Service, Georgetown University, Washington D.C., where she is conducting research on the Russian peacekeeping operation in Transnistria and the peace process after the 1992 conflict in Moldova. Please send correspondence to: pdg23@georgetown.edu.

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