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**The Personal Diary as a Form of Testimony and Cultural Memory During
the Second World War**

Summary

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Keywords: autobiographical literature, crisis diary, Holocaust, antisemitism, Jewish identity, testimony, collective memory, cultural memory, postmemory, moral witness.

Summary:

This study is situated at the intersection of confessional literature, twentieth-century cultural history, memory studies, and research on testimonial discourse, examining the transformations undergone by the personal diary when confronted with the violence of history. At the core of the analysis are the diaries of Jewish authors from the Romanian context, written during the 1930s-1940s or in the immediate aftermath of the traumatic experiences they record. In this configuration, the diary no longer serves solely as a medium of introspection or self-examination; rather, it emerges as a form of testimony, an act of symbolic resistance, and a medium of cultural memory.

The historical ruptures of the twentieth century, generated by the rise of totalitarian and authoritarian regimes, led to a profound destabilization of the subject, with the Jewish community among the most vulnerable groups affected by this process. Within these ideological configurations, the Jew becomes the outsider – the excluded – subjected to policies of stigmatization and elimination, and exposed to arbitrariness, humiliation, persecution, deportation, and, in some cases, extermination. In this context, the diary becomes the space in which the fragility of identity, the pressure of history, and the effort to preserve the traces of a threatened existence take shape simultaneously.

The contemporary relevance of this topic also stems from the gradual disappearance of the last direct witnesses of the persecutions during the Second World War, which inevitably reduces the possibility of direct, unmediated testimony. In this situation, diaries written contemporaneously with the events acquire particular significance, as the time of testimony remains closely aligned with lived experience. Such texts preserve the tension, fear, lucidity, and, at times, confusion of subjects caught in unfolding events they cannot fully comprehend, yet feel compelled to record. In the absence of critical forms of reactivation – such as books, museums, testimonial objects, photographs, archives, and commemorative practices – the traumatic past risks not only fading but also being reshaped through ideological selection, competing public narratives, or collective forgetting.

This study proceeds from the premise that the personal diary written in contexts of historical crisis must be understood from a dual perspective: on the one hand, as a form of

self-referential literature, marked by fluid boundaries and inherent ambiguities; on the other, as a form of testimonial discourse and a medium of memory, capable of exceeding the strictly biographical sphere and contributing to the construction of collective and cultural memory. Accordingly, the thesis examines how diaries written by Jewish authors in Romania in the years preceding and during the Second World War function not merely as records of lived experience, but also as means of preserving a memory under threat.

Research Object, Aims, and Questions

The object of this research is the analysis of personal diaries written by Jewish authors from the Romanian context, with a focus on the transformation of the traditional roles of the intimate diary under the pressure of antisemitic persecution. The central aim is not merely to identify recurring diaristic themes, but to capture the ways in which a traditionally self-oriented and reflective practice is reconfigured into a form of testimony and a medium for the transmission of memory.

The study seeks to demonstrate how these writings move beyond their conventional status as private practices, becoming, within the context of authoritarian and totalitarian regimes, forms of self-preservation, symbolic resistance, means of recording lived experience, and embodiments of memory. At a secondary level, the thesis argues that the crisis diary, far from being a passive repository of recollection, actively shapes representations of the past and contributes to the construction of a cultural memory of persecution.

The research is guided by the following questions: How is the personal diary configured as a flexible discursive form, situated at the intersection of personal document, writing practice, and literary expression? In what ways does it transform, under totalitarian conditions, from a practice of self-knowledge into an instrument of self-preservation, resistance, and testimony? How does the status of the diaristic self change when it is compelled to move beyond the sphere of pure intimacy and assume the role of a witness to history and a moral witness? Through what mechanisms does individual experience acquire collective significance and become integrated into cultural memory? To what extent can the diaries under analysis function as testimonial objects, “figures of memory” or “sites of memory,” capable of mediating the experience of trauma across generations?

Methodology and Theoretical Framework

From a methodological perspective, this study advances a narrative-discursive analysis of the diaries included in the corpus, complemented by a theoretical examination of diary writing with particular attention to genre conventions and their historical transformations. The theoretical foundation of the research draws, first, on major contributions to autobiographical and diary studies – Philippe Lejeune, Georges Gusdorf, Maurice Chapelan, Michèle Leleu, Béatrice Didier, Alain Girard, Gustav René Hocke, Pierre Pachet, Françoise Simonet-Tenant, among others – alongside key works in Romanian literary criticism on diaries and confessional writing, represented by Eugen Simion, Silvian Iosifescu, Ioan Holban, Gheorghe Glodeanu, and Dan C. Mihăilescu.

This first layer is complemented by scholarship on diaries written in the context of war and the Holocaust, where the contributions of Hélène Camarade, Arvi Sepp, Rachel Feldhay Brenner, Alexandra Garbarini, Victoria Stewart, Alexandra Zapruder, David Baol, Amos Goldberg, David Patterson, and Eryk Tahvonen are particularly significant. In addition, reflections on terror and dehumanization articulated by Hannah Arendt, together with the interdisciplinary framework developed by Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub on testimony and trauma, provide essential tools for understanding the relationship between extreme experience and diaristic discourse.

A third theoretical pillar, central to this thesis, is provided by memory studies. The concept of collective memory, as formulated by Maurice Halbwachs, underscores the extent to which individual memory is shaped by the social frameworks of the group. The distinction between communicative and cultural memory, introduced by Jan Assmann and further developed by Aleida Assmann, makes it possible to account for the processes of selection, mediation, and institutionalization through which individual experiences are integrated into public memory, while also foregrounding their ethical dimension and the idea of a transgenerational contract of testimony. In the same vein, Marianne Hirsch explores the mechanisms of postmemory, while Astrid Erll conceptualizes literature as a privileged medium for the transmission of cultural memory.

Originality of the Research

The originality of this research unfolds across several levels. First, the thesis advances an integrative reading of Jewish diaries from the Romanian context, situated at the intersection of autobiographical literature, memory studies, and the cultural history of the

Holocaust. It adopts an approach that simultaneously considers the discursive form, the testimonial dimension, and the capacity of these texts to function as media of cultural memory. Second, the study brings into focus and places in dialogue a series of texts that have been insufficiently explored in Romanian scholarship. While the diaries of Mihail Sebastian or Maria Banuș have received relatively sustained critical attention, other writings – by Emil Dorian, B. Brănișteanu, Miriam Korber-Bercovici, Arnold Daghani, Éva Heyman, and Ana Novac – remain comparatively underexamined, despite the interest they have occasionally generated beyond the Romanian context. Within this framework, the crisis diary is approached as a distinct form, whose conventions – such as simultaneity, calendar-based structuring, spontaneity, and authenticity – are destabilized under the pressure of terror. This instability, however, does not diminish the value of these texts; on the contrary, it becomes a defining feature of their specificity. Finally, the thesis emphasizes the transformation of these diaries into forms of cultural memory which, through processes of preservation and circulation, can become “cultural texts” and “testimonial objects.” In doing so, they contribute to the recovery of a memory that remains both fragile and contested within the Romanian context.

Limitations of the Research

Any undertaking of this kind inevitably entails a number of limitations. First, the analysis is restricted to diaries published in book form and does not extend to archival materials that remain inaccessible or insufficiently edited. Second, the corpus consists of texts available in Romanian, including translations, which inevitably introduces a degree of mediation with respect to the original language. Furthermore, the selection has been guided by relevance to the research objectives rather than by any claim to exhaustiveness. Accordingly, the thesis does not attempt to catalogue the entirety of Jewish diaries written during the war period, but instead proposes a representative corpus that reflects the main forms of experience under examination: marginalization in the capital, ghettoization, deportation, forced labor camps, and Nazi concentration camp detention. Finally, the focus lies on the ways in which these texts function as testimony and as media of memory, rather than on providing a philological or genetic edition of the manuscripts.

Structure of the Thesis

The thesis is organized into three chapters, preceded by an *Argument* and followed by *Conclusions*.

The first chapter, **“The Personal Diary: Theoretical Preliminaries,”** delineates the diary within the broader field of confessional literature and examines its generic status, competing terminologies, as well as the international and Romanian history of diary writing, its critical reception, and the possibility of a poetics of the diary.

The second chapter, **“The Personal Diary During the Second World War: From Individual Testimony to Cultural Memory,”** analyzes the crisis diary, its specific roles, and the transition from individual memory to collective and cultural memory through processes of interpretation and public recognition.

The final chapter, **“Diary Writings by Jewish Authors in the 1930s-1940s,”** is devoted to the analysis of the corpus through a series of case studies, grouped according to the type of historical experience they reflect: persecution in the Old Kingdom, deportation and confinement in Bukovina, and the experiences of the ghetto and the camp in the case of diarists from Northern Transylvania.

Chapter I. The Personal Diary: Theoretical Preliminaries

The analysis of the theoretical framework highlights, first and foremost, the fluid nature of self-referential literature. Until the 1990s, most European studies tended to subsume such texts under the broader category of autobiographical writing; however, the rapid development of the field and the proliferation of confessional texts have led to the emergence of more encompassing conceptual frameworks. Alongside the “autobiographical genre,” terms such as *l’écriture de soi*, ego-documents, *Selbstzeugnisse* (“self-testimony”), and life writing have gained currency, reflecting an open and dynamic field shaped by overlaps and reconfigurations, in which confessional writing continuously negotiates its position between convention and deviation. One of the key premises of this study emerges from this observation: there is no such thing as a “pure” form of personal writing. Diaries, autobiographies, memoirs, essays, correspondence, and even fiction frequently intersect and coexist, in varying proportions, within the same texts. The elasticity of these boundaries not only complicates methodological classification but also accounts for their theoretical richness.

In the case of the diary, this instability becomes even more pronounced. The multiplicity of terms – daily notes, personal entries, chronicles, notebooks, journals, albums,

indirect novels, companion documents, or records of interiority – points to the wide range of roles and forms that diary writing can assume. This study adopts a distinction between the “intimate diary” and the “personal diary”: the former refers to texts published without the diarist’s consent, while the latter designates writings for which the prospect of publication, even if only implicit, is present. This distinction proves particularly relevant in the case of diaries written under the pressure of history, where confidentiality is often undermined by the anticipation of a future reader.

The history of the diary further confirms its dynamic status. Following a long period of gestation in the medieval era – dominated by forms such as logbooks, accounting records, and spiritual journals – the personal diary acquires a more distinct shape in modernity, alongside the emergence of individual subjectivity and the recognition of intimacy as a cultural value. In its early stages, diaries tend to be oriented toward external reality, focusing on the observed world; only toward the end of the eighteenth century do we see the more frequent emergence of entries exploring the depths of the self. The metaphor of the diary as a “barometer of the soul” aptly captures this dual orientation: while it records, with varying degrees of regularity, the inner fluctuations of the self, it continues to maintain a relation to the external world. In the twentieth century, against the backdrop of the crisis of the modern subject and the processes of identity fragmentation it entails, the diary gains renewed prominence. The notebook becomes a space in which the sense of identity is affirmed, questioned, or reconstructed. The modern individual – fractured, unstable, often estranged from the self – turns to diary writing as a means of giving form to inner discontinuities. In this sense, the diary emerges not only as a document, but also as a practice through which the subject attempts to reconstitute itself.

As for its critical reception, the diary has oscillated between discredit and legitimation. Often regarded as a “Cinderella of literature” – a marginal form, aesthetically unremarkable or merely utilitarian – it has gradually been reassessed, both in Western and Romanian contexts. Two major interpretive directions can be identified: the first separates the diary from literature in order to preserve its authenticity, while the second acknowledges its aesthetic value precisely through its proximity to fiction or through the quality of its writing. Beyond these positions, what becomes evident is the protean nature of the form. Based on its historically established conventions, the diary may be described through a flexible poetics, structured around authenticity, sincerity, spontaneity, simultaneity, confidentiality, calendar-based organization, and fragmentation. None of these features, however, is absolute.

Fragmentation may be the only relatively stable trait, while the others become increasingly unstable as the diary approaches the public sphere or is written under conditions of constraint. From a thematic perspective, one may distinguish between external, internal, and hybrid diaries; in terms of its roles, the diary may function as a site of literary experimentation, a practice of self-examination, a space of self-exile, a tool for self-refinement, a record of micro-histories, a medium for emotional release, and – under certain circumstances – a form of testimony preserving the traces of the self in its confrontation with history.

Chapter II. The Personal Diary During the Second World War: From Individual Testimony to Cultural Memory

The Second World War and the authoritarian regimes associated with it bring about a decisive transformation of diary writing. The widespread publication of diaries is interrupted, and the diary retreats into the private sphere, becoming clandestine, risky, and at times prohibited. In such a context, private writing acquires the significance of an act of resistance, which justifies defining the diary as a “literary genre of resistance” (Hélène Camarade). In this study, this form is conceptualized as the “crisis diary,” following Mihai Zamfir, as it is shaped by a disruptive external context capable of fragmenting identity and destabilizing the subject. In this configuration, the conventional features of diary writing are reconfigured: calendar-based structuring becomes more flexible, simultaneity and spontaneity are disrupted, and authenticity can no longer be understood as the faithful recording of events, but rather as the expression of an experience mediated by fear, trauma, and the limits of language. The stake of these writings lies not in the objective reproduction of events, but in the ways they are lived and articulated.

From Hannah Arendt’s perspective, diaries can be read as traces of a tension between totalitarian domination and the spontaneity of the subject, threatened by the erosion of legal, moral, and individual status. Complementing this view, the work of Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub highlights the therapeutic dimension of testimony, with the diary functioning as a space for reordering traumatic experience and as a form of inner resistance. At the same time, Eryk Tahvonen’s observation regarding the “crisis of imagination” points to the diarists’ difficulty in narrating “radical evil,” revealing a zone of hesitation between the imperative to bear witness and the reluctance to confront trauma directly.

Beyond its personal and reflective dimensions, the crisis diary acquires a distinct ethical role. The diarist becomes a “moral witness” (Avishai Margalit), and their testimony is

transformed into an appeal addressed to posterity. In Aleida Assmann's terms, such texts establish a transgenerational contract in which the reader assumes the role of a "secondary witness," responsible for carrying memory forward.

The transformation of individual testimony into collective memory and, subsequently, into cultural memory constitutes one of the central axes of this chapter. Drawing on Maurice Halbwachs's theory, individual memory is understood as dependent on the social frameworks of the group, a dynamic reflected in the recurrent use of the pronoun "we" in wartime diaries. Fragile and temporally limited, collective memory is taken up by the mechanisms of cultural memory, as conceptualized by Jan and Aleida Assmann, through which experiences are selected, mediated, and institutionalized. In the development of this perspective, Aleida Assmann's contributions are particularly significant. Memory is conceived as a cultural and ethical structure, stabilized through language, emotions, symbols, and trauma, with language occupying a privileged position. Writing thus becomes a means of preserving existence, while testimony assumes the force of an ethical obligation toward the past.

Different modes of engaging with memory – between remembrance and forgetting – as well as the notion of dialogic memory, highlight the difficulties involved in constructing a shared European memory of the Holocaust, especially in contexts marked by denial or competing memory narratives, such as the Romanian one. In this framework, literature functions as a privileged medium of cultural memory (Astrid Erll), while diaries may become forms of postmemory (Marianne Hirsch), circulating across generations through processes of preservation, editing, and canonization.

Chapter III. Diary Writings by Romanian Jewish in the 1930s-1940s

The diary of Mihail Sebastian, written over the course of a decade, moves beyond the register of personal confession to become a significant document of its time, spanning the Goga-Cuza regime, the reign of Carol II, and the Antonescu period. Structured as a multifunctional form – at once a personal, political, and reading diary, as well as a space of literary experimentation – it traces the gradual deterioration of the Jewish condition while articulating a lucid critique of collective indifference and a sustained reflection on responsibility.

In the case of Emil Dorian, diary writing, extending over approximately seven years, deliberately eschews literary ambition, grounding itself instead in an ethics of restrained reflection. His entries, organized around medical practice, intellectual activity, and political

observation, consistently record the experience of persecution and discrimination, filtered through a lucid and self-aware consciousness.

For Beno Brănișteanu, the diary almost entirely abandons interiority in favor of a perspective oriented toward major historical developments. Written over a relatively short period, the text takes the form of a late-life chronicle, in which international politics, press commentary, and recollections of the First World War converge into an interpretive record. The stance of the journalist prevails, and the identification of those deemed responsible is accompanied by an appeal for “moral purification.”

In a different register, Maria Banuș destabilizes diaristic conventions through a pronounced fictionalization of the text. The use of narrative masks, the theatricalization of discourse, and the subsequent selection of material give rise to a hybrid form in which fragmentation is attenuated and chronology becomes merely a structuring device. Thematically, the diary oscillates between erotic crisis, ideological commitment, and experiences of professional exclusion, articulating a tense and continuously reconfigured identity.

Faced with extreme experiences, the diary of the adolescent Miriam Korber-Bercovici traces the trajectory of deportation to Transnistria, culminating in the Djurin ghetto, where forced maturation unfolds under the pressure of extreme cold, hunger, and disease. In a world where death loses its exceptional status, survival depends on fragile practices—reading, work, dance, and rumor – which sustain the illusion of continuity.

In Arnold Daghani’s case, the experience of the forced labor camp at Mihailovka, beyond the Bug River, is expressed both through writing and through drawing and painting. A space of depersonalization and terror, the camp also becomes a site of resistance, where written and visual testimony reinforce one another.

The diary of Éva Heyman captures, from an adolescent perspective, the abrupt rupture between innocence and the violence of history. Initially conceived as an intimate confidant, the diary later becomes a means of coping with the reality of the Oradea ghetto, where the loss of home, the confiscation of property, and enforced isolation are experienced through a sensibility still shaped by childhood, unable to fully comprehend or articulate the traumatic reality.

Ana Novac offers an artistic reconfiguration of the experience of Nazi camps, her retrospective diary taking the form of a hybrid text. Within this space of radical terror and

dehumanization, irony, caricature, and the grotesque do not diminish the brutality of experience but instead make its representation possible.

Taken together, these diaries move beyond the status of mere records of private life, becoming media of memory in which traumatic experience is preserved, transmitted, and integrated into a broader cultural horizon. Writing thus emerges as a form of symbolic survival.

Conclusions

The analysis of both the theoretical framework and the corpus confirms the fluid nature of the diary while also allowing for the identification of a distinct form: the crisis diary, defined by the tension between private experience and the pressure of history. The integrated reading of the eight diaries makes it possible to propose a typology based on how Jewish authors relate to historical trauma: inward-oriented diaries, diaries centered on the direct experience of terror, and hybrid forms. This diversity does not fragment the genre; rather, it confirms its capacity for adaptation and reconfiguration within the disruptive context of the Second World War.

In this sense, the diaries under analysis do not merely record history; they reconfigure it from within lived experience. They function as forms of counter-narrative that reshape the relationship to “grand” history by shifting the focus from the chronology of events to the texture of experience. This transformation is achieved through several key mechanisms: fragmentation, which disrupts the narrative continuity of official history; a focus on microhistory and everyday life; the incorporation of affect and moral dilemmas; and the positioning of the subject as an involved witness rather than a detached observer. The diary thus does not compete with historical discourse, but rather complements and nuances it, offering a perspective that is difficult to recover through other types of sources.

In the Romanian context, where the public memory of the Holocaust remains in the process of negotiation, these diaries perform a crucial recuperative role. They counteract silence, minimization, and denial, providing not only factual information but also the human dimension of the tragedy. From this perspective, the thesis contributes to the reintegration of these testimonies into a still fragile and evolving discourse of memory.

Considered together, the eight diaries are not merely documents of life writing, but forms of archiving exceptional experiences, counter-narratives to official discourses, and media of cultural memory engaged in ongoing renegotiation. In these texts, writing functions

not only as a means of preservation, but also as a form of resistance; not only as an act of remembrance, but also as an act of accusation; not only as the result of trauma, but as an attempt to give it a meaning that can be transmitted further.

Ultimately, the crisis diary emerges as a space in which individual testimony acquires ethical significance and becomes integrated into cultural memory. Far from remaining a mere vehicle of recollection, it actively shapes the ways in which the past is understood, offering a subjective perspective that nuances and at times reorients dominant historical narratives. Writing thus becomes a guarantee of the transmission of memory beyond the limits of individual biography, toward a transgenerational horizon.

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