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*Models of Jewish Identity
in Romanian Culture:
The Case of Isac Ludo*

Summary

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Summary

The purpose of my thesis is to analyze the way in which Jewishness is illustrated in the life, literary works and press pieces of Isac Ludo. Following the formation and assumption of a Jewish identity in the case of the director of the “Adam” magazine, I wished to illustrate the models of Jewish identity, of the constraints presented to Jews in Romania during the end of the 19th century, during the interwar era and in the Communist period, respectively. In this line of thinking, I attempted to identify the cadre within which Jewry has found itself during the aforementioned historical periods and Isac Ludo’s place in the life of Jewish culture in Romania in relation to this. By “cadre”, I understand not only the feeling of community with the Jewish or Romanian literary world, but also the use of Romanian language to express oneself, along with a choice between one of the two cultures of reference or an attempt to find a “happy medium” between them.

The motive behind my research comes in the first place from the lack of a study dedicated to the personality or activities of Isac Ludo. This intellectual, known not only for his humorous writing but also for his satirical journalistic productions, had a cemented influence on the Jewish cultural environment in Bucharest during the interwar era. Remaining in literary history a minor writer, Isac Ludo demonstrated his importance only within the context of the Jewish-Romanian cultural dynamic from the first half of the 20th century. In the second place, the course of Isac Ludo’s life is exemplary of the mobility of the cultural life of Jews during this era, making a study that includes aspects of his Jewish identity significantly reflect the possibilities of the assumption of Jewishness in a wider cadre within the cultural environment of Romania from different eras in which he has lived.

This thesis is composed of five chapters, each one reflecting a particular aspect of the issue addressed. The introduction renders the motivation, objectives, methodology and structure of the thesis. The first chapter, titled *Identity – conceptual boundaries*, circumscribes the concept of identity from a theoretical point of view as it is understood in social psychology and related social and human sciences. The first part studies theoretical aspects of the notion of identity, from the definition and classification to the sketching of the way in which it forms and evolves, enumerating the principal paradigmatic approaches and its semantism. As a concept composed of both sameness and distinctions, identity reunites individual (subjective) and social (objective)

components, piecing together a set of roles assumed by the individual in relation to oneself and others. The individual identity is equivalent with one's personality while the social component must be understood in the context of the multiplicity of its manifestations. That being said, the concept of identity does nothing but create a system out of the ensemble of its aspects which diachronically superimpose themselves while manifesting simultaneously.

Continuing on the subject of identity, I have also discussed the aspects of its formation, underlining the importance of adolescence in modeling it. Understanding the concept of identity as a process, the chapter also analyzes the notion of identification. I have also described the criteria of identity and classifications that come from this, beginning from the functional distinction between individual and social identity, both being characterized on the basis of material, historical, psychosocial and psychocultural factors. I then selected the items that help circumscribe Jewishness from these categorical elements, discussing ethnic and national, religious, cultural and linguistic aspects of the identity. Additionally, I followed the dynamic between the individual and collective identities, which happens to derive from the particularities of their criteria.

Another part of the first chapter explores the diverse aspects of Jewish identity. As far as self-identification as a Jew is concerned – a concept from which this research is derived – it must be stated that the noun *Jew* does not succeed to stand alone as a definition of all the aspects of Jewishness. Rather, saying that “a certain trait is *Jewish*” is more appropriate. As a result, the Jewish identity ceases to be seen as indivisible, and instead is reconsidered as individuals evolve. The criteria for this are religion, culture, tradition, direct or indirect experiences of anti-Semitism and xenophobia, one's relationship with Israel, relationships with non-Jews and experiences in the individual's life. Along the line of the definition of the Jewish identity strictly from a religious point of view, I have illustrated the tight association between the context and body of what was understood throughout various epochs as a Jewish identity, depending on space and ideology. Beyond identification – taken either as individuality or the feeling of belonging to a group – the Jewish identity also more concretely illustrates the external aspect of identification, the Jewishness being influenced by the reception it had been given in diverse time periods and spaces, as well as the consequences of these perceptions.

The second chapter, *The historical and socio-cultural context of Romanian Jewry from the end of the 19th century up until the beginning of the Communist period*, examines the

conjunctures in which the author of the novel *Mesia poate să aștepte* has lived. The first part chronologically follows the cultural and historical evolution of the time periods during which Ludo has lived. The second part presents some of the models of the Jewish cultural identity in Romania. In this manner, I have followed the presentation of the main points of reference in the history of the Jews within the Romanian space before the First World War, during the interwar period and the first years of the Communist regime in relation to their implications for the cultural environment. I was also interested in the aspects of anti-Semitism in each of these epochs. The motivation behind this is that the Jewish identity, in all its manifestations, is directly tied not only to its transformations within the community, but also – and most importantly – to the transformations imposed by the greater society, the latter of which has provoked Jewish thought leaders to react by modifying or reaffirming an individual or collective Jewish identity.

The second part of this chapter unites four models of Jewishness in the previously outlined context. Thusly, I have considered that the defining factors for the evolution of the Jewish-Romanian culture were the political options, Zionism, the tendency to assimilate and the question of cultural integration. Each one of these reflects the possible cadres within which people of Jewish culture could fit, which Ludo in his own right has assumed in one way or another throughout his life and work. The first factor refers to the identification with a leftist ideology, although the chosen example is not that of the socialists that have left the community and denied their Jewishness, but that of those who have sought through ideology a solution to the “Jewish question”. On the other hand, and despite his activities in socialist gazettes, Steuerman-Rodion, referred to himself as a Jewish-Romanian writer whom the greater society has rejected. He is, for this reason, the first of an extensive series of Jewish writers who have not found their place in the greater culture. The Zionist factor is much more related to one’s affiliation with the community, though being a Zionist in interwar Romania did not necessarily result in the rejection of Romanian culture. The two examples that correspond to this model are A. L. Zissu and Theodor Loewenstein; the first was a leader through the example he offered, while Loewenstein was a theoretician and pedagogist of the Zionist Movement. Active in the Jewish cultural press, both have identified as Jews through the activism they held for the recovery of the Jewish identity. The third factor is precisely that which the two mentioned above have countered: assimilation. Although the concept falls into a wide variety of degrees concerning the resignation of Jewishness, we can understand through “assimilation” the distancing of oneself from Jewish

tradition, implying a propensity for Romanian culture in its stead. The last of the four factors I have selected was that of cultural integration, which can be observed through the multitude of Jewish intellectuals who wished to participate in the cultural life of Romania, even understanding Jewish culture as a component of the Romanian one.

The third chapter, *The begetting of Isac Ludo: The Iași period (1894-1919)*, follows his genealogy, formative years at school, debut and journalistic activity from that period. The first part of the chapter sketches the effervescence of the Jewish cultural environment from late-19th-century Iași into the next century, an environment in which Isac Ludo has developed and which has permanently marked him as a Jew and as a journalist.

In the second part of this chapter, I then followed the familial context in which young Ludo has grown, from details concerning the family with which he was born up until his motivation to drop out of school after only three years in the gymnasium. I was also interested in the course of Ludo's school years, reflected as much in his school records as it was in his own memoirs. Refusing a religiously Jewish education, his school years took place in two state educational institutions: "Trei Ierarhi" (primary school) and "Alexandru cel Bun" (gymnasium). His grades did not necessarily reflect an appetite for formal education, but nonetheless Samuel Șaraga's library provided him with an affinity for Romanian literature. One of the episodes that had an influence in the evolution of the future journalist was his clash with his high school principal, whom he accused of being biased, eventually resulting in him repeating school years.

I then followed the context in which Ludo approached Romanian literature, forming his preference for symbolism. His debut takes place in an environment that emulates the Jewish cultural group "Licht", in a modernist Romanian-language publication edited by Alfred Hefter called "Versuri și proză". Together with a group of young Jews: Geri Spina, Eugen Relgis and Kiva Ornstein, Isac Ludo took the initiative to found a magazine of Romanian literature titled "Absolutio", named after the poem by Tudor Arghezi.

This first publication conceived and led by Ludo was defining for his evolution in the entire "Iași" period, and the analysis made in this chapter over the thematic body of this magazine follows precisely the transformations that have configured his identity. Conceived as an expression of modernist Romanian literature, the magazine of the young Jews from Iași had lost, after its first year, its purely-literary profile, transforming into a publication interested in current events from a political perspective. Even more, "the Jewish question" and its

implications were discussed at large in articles published during its second year, transforming a cultural publication into one of a political nature. In tandem with the transformation of “Absolutio”, Ludo himself was also changing, tempering his enthusiasm for literary problems and assuming the position that the situation of the Jews of Romania was a more stringent subject. In this chapter, we also discuss Ludo’s writings during this period, especially from the point of view of the stylistic and thematic constants that already come to fruition during this early production.

The next chapter, *The prolific years – aspects of Isac Ludo’s creation during the interwar period*, concentrates on his activities during the mentioned interval. The first part describes Ludo’s contributions from two central Jewish publications, “Mântuirea” and “Știri din lumea evreiască”, followed by an analysis of the “Adam” magazine to which Ludo’s name became definitively attached. The importance of this publication for Jewish culture is indisputable. Not only are important names from Romanian Jewry revealed in the majority of Isac Ludo’s gazette, but its theme and the debates reflect the Jewish culture during the interwar era with minutiae. While attentively following the current problems of Romanian Jewry and remaining conscious of the need of the existence of a stage with which to express them, Ludo had decided to become himself a defender of Jewish interests. This identity he assumed has to be seen moreso in its cultural aspect, considering that he did not accept to make from “Adam” a political magazine.

The chapter also takes a look not only at the other publications in which Ludo signed – “Puntea de fildeș”, “Copilul evreu”, “Palestina ilustrată”, etc. – but also at his pamphlet writings. On one hand, I discussed the principal literary works published by Ludo during this interval, the most memorable being *Mesia poate să aștepte* and *Hodge-Podge*. These volumes described the Jewish environment and have a strong literary value. Another aspect of Isac Ludo’s activity during the interwar period is represented in the series of polemic writings published in “Adam” (later on as stand-alone brochures) in which he closely follows European and Romanian politics concerning Jews, condemning the rise of National Socialism and anti-Semitism in general.

The fifth chapter, titled *The years of repudiation: Isac Ludo’s activity in the period of 1944-1973*, has a look at Isac Ludo’s activity after the war and analyzes the factors that influenced his transformation during those years – from the assumption of his then-pseudonym as his legal name up until winning the State Award for his novel *Domnul general guvernează* and from the accusation of assisting Israeli spies up until the isolation he suffered from the

Jewish and Communist environments. The second part of this chapter follows his publicist activities in the first years after the end of the war, cemented in the founding of the “Răspântia” magazine, in which he discussed current problems of a Jewish nature while benefitting from the support of his older collaborators.

I then followed with an examination of writings during this period that could still be considered favorable to Jewry, identifying themes that could still be discussed during the years of the installation of the Communist regime. Ludo’s writings took another direction through pamphlets and brochures with an anti-Israeli character published under the direction of the Jewish Democratic Committee, in which I analyzed commonplaces of anti-Zionist discourse. Within this chapter, I have continued gathering Ludo’s other writings in service of the regime – which do not touch Jewish problems – such as the series of novels called *Paravanul de aur* that have given him a reputation in the Communist period.

In addition to this, I have illustrated Ludo’s translating activities, underlining his systematic translation work from Sholem Aleichem, the atmospheric details and style of which he understood fully. Within this chapter, I have also included an aspect of Isac Ludo’s posterity, tied not only to the reception his works have had, but also to the significance they have been given. As such, I have related aspects referring to the “literary process” that he underwent posthumously in Israel, reviving within the discussion the question of whether the ideological factor in his later years could diminish the significance of his previous work and activity. The conclusion closes my analysis over the ways in which Ludo has expressed Jewish identity, making a point of its importance and elements of originality as well as a direction for future research.

Keywords: Isac Ludo, identity, Zionism, Jewishness, Romanian literature, Jewish literature.