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*PhD THESIS*

**Image of the Jews from Maramureș in the Collective  
Memory**

**-Summary-**

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**II. Key words:** Jews, image, collective memory colectivă, community, Judaism, inter-war period, communism, interethnic relations, private life, matrimonial strategies, Holocaust, Zionism, Maramureş.

### III. Abstract

The research of oral history based on interviews with Romanians, Jews, Hungarians, Ukrainians, witnesses and active participants of the inter-ethnic relations from the present Maramureş county has brought to light extremely interesting details, some of them novel, concerning the mentality of different social groups (differentiated according to their origin - rural or urban, the level of education, social, religious and political influences), as well as the evolution in time of this mentality, referring to Jews, a group that used to be numerous, with special characteristics, which marked the life of the population in the localities in which they lived. Both the image of the Jews from Maramureş and the details of their daily life, their relations with the Gentiles, beginning with the school years, as friends, neighbours or business partners stood out from the life stories told by 71 people.

*Chapter 1* was dedicated to the **Object of research and methodology**, taking into consideration the fact that Oral History represents a relatively new branch of History, although the role of the witnesses who participated in the recent history has become more and more prominent, and the development of technology makes it possible to record and preserve these testimonies, by audio and video recordings, that can be consulted and used whenever necessary, in spite of the fact that meanwhile the witnesses have passed away. Major events from history, that cannot be proved with documents (which are the only credible ones accepted by the positivist historians), sometimes find their exclusive sources in the participants' confessions. I considered it necessary to explain the terms from the title of the thesis, with their hidden or scientific implications (*Jews, oral history, image in the collective memory and the present Maramureş county*), as well as to carry out a survey about the notions connected with historic imagology and imaginary (*symbol, image, imagine about oneself – self-images, the other's image, stereotypes, myth*), from which the whole approach starts and in which testimonies are decomposed and explained.

*Chapter 2* is a review of the **Evolution of the Jewish presence in Maramureş**, with a short history from the first proofs from ancient times connected with the merchants that accompanied the Roman troops in Dacia, continuing with the successive waves of migrations of the Jews, brought about by the political measures of the great neighbouring powers or the attraction for some zones with commercial and farming potential and a favorable legislation which led to choosing Maramureş as a terminus point for the Jewish refugees. It was imperative to carry out an analysis of the Jewish community from a sociologic point of view,

taking into consideration the distinctive characteristics of this social group - relatively closed – and the evolution in time of its religious, identity and organizational characteristics. The number of the Jews who lived in towns and in the countryside, as it results from the censuses carried out before the World Wars and inter war was compared with the witnesses' estimates, who, without giving clear numbers or percentages, offer, by suggestive descriptions, an eloquent image about the members of the Jewish community living next to them. At the end of the chapter, based on the testimonies and on the scientific papers from the inter war period (geography, history, sociology and folklore) we have tried to render the moments when the **Jews settled** in the localities from Maramureş.

Since one of the essential characteristics of the Jewish communities was the institutional organization, whose foundations were laid from the very moment when a group settled in a locality, we considered that it was necessary to describe these **institutions** in **Chapter 3**. Helped by the bibliography and of the Gentiles' and Jews' memories, we have carried out descriptions of the *Rabbi institution, Synagogue, Ritual Bath, Ritual Butchery, Educational institutions (Heder, Yeshiva), Judgement, Institution for mutual help* and of the problems related to the funeral and graveyard, *Hevra Kadisha*, or of *Gamila Theset*, related to the problem of living generally. Although situated in a relatively expanded territory, of the present day county of Maramureş, the organization of the community was mainly related to the number of the members existing in each community, to their interest to involve themselves as well as the financial capacity or their willingness to involve themselves in creating institutions, which used to follow the same rules, the result of the contributions in time of the wise Rabbis. An institution could be rich or poor, in the countryside or in a big city, it was made up of the same precepts, and due to the contacts with other communities the leaders of these communities could correct their infringements and they would even manage to distinguish themselves at international level if they proved to have outstanding qualities, although there were clans of some powerful families which would impose and maintain their influence over a locality or even a zone, for a long time (for example, the Teitelbaum family).

Although it seems to be an unimportant topic, nowadays, when the genetic and physical characteristics have leveled in time, due to mixed marriages, and compliance with the fashion trends represents a general rule applied by the Jews who have remained in Maramureş, one of the most visible characteristics of the Jews in the inter war period was represented by **their appearance**, studied in **Chapter 4**. In the three sub-chapters we have analysed the physical features of the Jews, with a short introduction in the studies of the

Jewish researcher Joseph Jacobs (1854-1916) carried out in order to demonstrate “the purity of the Jews’ race”, which concluded that the observations and the measurements carried out on the group analysed, show that the appearance of a young Jew from London, at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is very close to that of Samuel and of young David, as they are represented on the Assirian basso-relief dated back in 701 B.C. Unlike this, fewer details appeared in the interviews about these genetic features, being mentioned especially some exceptions (extremely beautiful girls or russet people), emphasizing on the lack of the natural tan – a sign of health and hardworking in the countryside. Much more consistent are the descriptions of the specific Jewish clothes, both for men and for women, dealt with in the second sub-chapter. Another sub-chapter, not intended initially, was introduced subsequently, when in the interviews carried out in the rural zones mentions were made about the Jews’ “specific smell”, a stereotype also existing in the Romanian culture and analysed by Andrei Oișteanu<sup>1</sup>.

**Chapter 5 – Daily life** of the Jews from Maramureș was necessary in order to understand the behaviour inside the community and outside the community, with the inherent delimitations between the **poor Jews and the rich Jews**, with a short introduction in the **family life** and the specificity **of the Jewish homes** built according to the needs of their inhabitants. **The spare time** and the stricter religious limitations specific to Judaism, having as background the social transformation from the inter-war period, together with the evolutions of technology have been described in a different sub-chapter. The mother tongue of the Jews from Maramureș represent another problem, specific to this frontier zone, which has had several dominations along the time, and the Jews, owing to their occupations and their uncertain situations, have been compelled to adapt permanently, ending up with the situations that in a single family, each generation spoke a different language: “in many Jewish families from Transylvania the grandparents speak German, the parents speak Hungarian and the children speak Romanian.”<sup>2</sup>

The specific of a Jewish family is completed by **nourishment**, an extremely important element imposed by religious restrictions but which also represented a sign of the etnical identity, treated in **Chapter 6**. After a brief presentation of the Kashrut Laws, which are even more important because they are included in the Holy Book, the Bible, we have considered that it would be interesting to present the conclusions of some more recent

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<sup>1</sup> Andrei Oișteanu, *Imaginea evreilor în cultura română*, București, Editura Humanitas, 2001

<sup>2</sup> R.K. Dare se seamă (recenzie) asupra vol. Schuster, Hans, *Die Judenfrage in Rumänien*, Leipzig, Meiner Verlag, 1939, în *Anuarul Institutului de Istorie Națională*, nr. VIII, 1939-1942, Sibiu, Tipografia “Cartea Românească din Cluj”, 1942, p. 428, accesat pe [www.dacoromanica.ro](http://www.dacoromanica.ro)

studies, based on comparative linguistics and archaeology which try to explain the reason why such strict rules were introduced in nourishment, as well as the motivations offered by the Jewish interviewees. Then we researched, from the Jews' memories and the Gentiles' observations, the application of these **rules in the kitchen**, with examples of the daily **Jewish dishes** or on the occasion of some feasts. We have also described **infringements of the Laws of Kashrut**, which have become from exception in the inter war period – a general rule today.

Having an essentially different religion, with feasts and traditions that did not resemble the Gentiles', we have described and commented the Jews' manifestations on the occasion of these feasts (*Shabat, Yom Kippur, Pesah, Purim, Sucot, Rosh Hashana, Hanuka, Simhat Tora*) as well as the important events from the life of the individual (*baptism, Bar mitzvah, Wedding, Funeral*), both from the point of view of the Jews who lived once in the large communities before the Holocaust, and of the observing Gentiles. In the sub-chapter **Major events of life** we have compared and contrasted the Jewish and Gentile beliefs and rituals as well as the different ways of perceiving them from the Gentiles' point of view. Sometimes the discretion of these manifestations have turned into stereotypes (the dead buried standing, wrapped linen) or traditions strictly respected in the old times, which have disappeared and which are unknown even to some of the younger Jews (the women were supposed to have their hair cut after the wedding).

Since the Jews' life was an uninterrupted line of relations with the Gentiles, an analysis of the **inter-ethnic relations** is necessary, examining both the iconic influences from the wooden churches from Maramureş and those from the zone of the political aspect and of the intellectuals in the inter war period between, which became dramatically exacerbated around the Holocaust. We have described the different models of living together from the localities with Jewish population, from *Shabesgoyim* (aid given on Saturday), *relations between the Gentile children and the Jewish children at school* or in the spare time, *the relations between the Jewish women and the Gentile women*, the outbursts of *antisemitism*, which occurred especially at the *Gentiles' Easter* and *the Jews' attitude towards the Christian faith* are the sub-chapters in which we have analysed the information from the interviews with the Jews and the Gentiles and in which one can find a diversity of opinions, depending on the individual experiences, the zone from which they come, on the opening and understanding of each of the interviewees.

One of the defining characteristics of the Jews from Maramureş was the diversity of their **occupations**, who, besides the specific trades, of merchants and sales and service

intermediaries, as well as those of craftsmen, doctors, lawyers, proved to be willing to work in agriculture or even as miners. The paper analyses this predisposition for such trades that had been forbidden to them in some zones or some moments from history (they could not buy plots of land nor had they access in the mining localities), but which could be carried out in Maramureş, it also being the reason why the Jews settled in the zone. Criticized by the Gentiles, the way in which the properties had been acquired, is one of the most debated topic in time, which arouses interest even nowadays.

Other ethnical communities present in Maramureş, like the Ukrainean or the Hungarian ones, have had the tendency to avoid the mixed mariages, but within the Jewish community there was an absolute interdiction to mix their blood with other nations, imposed in the **Deuteronomy 7:1-4. Chapter 10** is dedicated to the **Matrimonial strategies** from the Jewish communities, before and after the deportation. In the period between the wars the members of the Jewish communities that did not respect this commandment were considered dead for their community and for their families, who would really go into mourning, like for a deceased person. From these reasons, there had been very few infringements, until the deportation. Although there had been some romances, the young Jews themselves involved were aware of the consequences and did not dare to cause their families such grief, giving up in time and marrying, in most cases, partners chosen by the family and the community, or even by a person specialized in such unions, called *shadchan* (match maker). It is even said that a marriage in the Jewish community was rather connected to business than to love. The Holocaust meant a turning point for the Jewish communities from Maramureş in this respect as well. The reduced number of young people who came back, the shaken belief in God and the more and more obvious tendencies to conclude eterogenous marriages in the communist period, also taking into consideration the fact that in most cases, the marriage was concluded only at the registrar's office, have been the reasons why most of the Jewish families still living in Maramureş are mixed or their descendants have entered such marriages. .

Since the Jewish woman is discussed especially as being a “forbidden fruit”, an exotic presence among the non-virtuous women, we have considered it necessary to unveil in **Chapter 11 The woman's condition in Judaism**, helped by the testimonies and the genre studies, the traject of the **evolution in age of the Jewish women**, as well as the illustration of some faces of **Jewish housewives, mothers**, with the good sides and the bad sides, as they had been perceived by the Jews and by the Gentiles; the antinomy **virtuous woman/nonvirtuous woman**; but also a comparative analysis of these women's life and that

of **Mary, the prototype of the Jewish woman**, about whom some Gentiles forget that She had been raised and had, in Her turn, educated Jesus by respecting the precepts of Judaism.

An unpredicted subject, but which imposed itself after the discussions with the interviewees, led to the birth of a separate chapter, **Chapter 12. Magic practices** in which we have considered it necessary to illustrate a short history of the accusations against the Jews, starting with the Middle Ages, about the bloody rituals, as well as explaining the existence and the transmission of such beliefs up to the present, especially in the countryside. We have included here references to the iconocidic sequences, which the Jews were supposed to perform in the Synagogue, that of the “Jew that brings the rain” or the misfortunes happening to the Gentiles who destroyed the Jewish cemeteries or the synagogues.

In **chapter 13 Zionism** we have tried to seize the intensity and the mechanisms of a massive movement preparing the emigration of the Jews in the Promised Land, *Alyah*, being predicted in the 613 commandments. Regarded at the beginning with disbelief by the religious leaders from Maramureș, the sionism being considered “dangerous and destructive for our religion”<sup>3</sup> as it results from the official statement drawn up after the sinodal meeting of the chief Rabbis from Dej, in 1920, an idea taken over from the Jewish communities that used to throw eggs in the sionist “profets”, the idea is reconsidered in the big towns, like Sighet and Baia Mare where it becomes widespread. Although the participation to the sionist associations rather represented a socializing activity, especially among the youngsters, who would take part both to discussions and to actual courses for housekeeping and farming, in order to be prepared for life in Palestina, the proportion of the emigrants was quite reduced, as compared to the number of the participants. But most of them probably considered *Alyah* a remote event and preferred to prepare intensively for it and remained in the country until it was too late for them to follow their dream.

Despite the fact that we did not intend to study the Holocaust, the precursory moments have been included in **Chapter 14, “Holocaust epoch”**<sup>4</sup>. We consider that this epoch begins from the first moments when the Jews enter under the empire of fear (insinuated gradually: unease, tension, anxiety, panic, hysteria, terror), which determine and accompany all this period. Although anti-semitic manifestations existed before as well, most of the witnesses consider the **year 1940** and the annexation of the Northern part of Transylvania to Hungary as being the moment that determined the worsening of the inter-ethnic relations in Maramureș. Short time afterwards, **community service** was introduced, the

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<sup>3</sup> Ioan J. Popescu, *O istorie a evreilor din Sighet*, Sighetul Marmăției, Editura Echim, 2009, p. 90

<sup>4</sup> Titlu preluat de la Ladislau Gyemant, în vol. *Evreii din Transilvania*

first form of slow and tormenting extermination of the Jews able to work, and then, **the deportation itself** was to empty the Jews from the villages from Maramureş. We have analysed “the reasons” of the deportation remained in the memory of those who had witnessed those events – from punishment for deicide, and envy for intelligence proved in business, to the simple fact of being escape goats, and sacrificed by Hitler. We have reviewed **the presentments, the information** that the deported persons had, as well as their feelings, the images that those who lived such events - as participants or observers - remained in their minds, cases in which, helped by Gentiles, **the Jews eluded deportation**, being hided, by baptism or marriage, but also the extreme attitudes of the neighbours, of the acquaintances among the Gentiles, fiind ascunşi, prin botezuri sau căsătorii, dar și extremele manifestărilor vecinilor, cunoscuților creștini, **between help and plunder**. We have resumed the description from the moment when the “luckiest” and most resistant deported persons came back home. We have intentionally omitted the interval between the getting on the carriages for cattle that had as destination the concentration and extermination camps, because this short period at historical level, but extremely intense is another topic for the research of oral history.

We have perceived the Holocaust as a black hole, the astronomic object that appears after the explosion of a big star, at the end of its life, because the Holocaust meant the moment of collapse for some communities that had found their place, with their good and bad parts, among an heterogeneous population, especially in the border zone of Maramureş. Although there had been survivors, being marked physically and mentally, they could resume their life from the moment when they left with remarkable efforts, but never was it the same as before the deportation.

The way they were welcomed by the Gentiles, their reintegration in the localities from which they had missed several years, and the interpretations of the Gentiles and of the Jews themselves about what had happened in the concentration camps (*Where was God? The survivors' "guilt"*) as well as *punishing the guilty ones* – effectively or by curses – represent some subpoints of this vast subchapter in which we tried to clarify some psychological mechanisms that have also led to the outlining of the image of the Jews in the collective memory.

The final chapter is dedicated to the research of the way in which the **Jews from Maramureş lived in the period after the Holocaust**, until the moment when the interviews were carried out. *The communist period* began under the sign of a general enthusiasm of the Jews who, after a very long time, found themselves equal with the other people living in the

same community, and are even perceived by some historians and by the masses as the main promoters of the communist ideology in Romania. The mass emigration continued, supported by the Romanian state which, as Radu Ioanid<sup>5</sup> demonstrated, received an amount of money for each Jew (between \$4,000 and \$6,000). We have tried to find out from the interviewed Jews the reasons why they remained in Romania and, respectively, for those who emigrated, the reasons for their departure. Together with two of the Jews who managed to immigrate to Israel in 1979 and, respectively in 1980, we tried to give, in parallel, the description of the procedures that preceded the departure, the escape from the communist space in which life had become more and more difficult. Without knowing each other, the two returned Jews, one in Sighet and the other one in Baia Mare, are placed face-to-face, by means of the tapescript of their confessions, have a dialogue, bring different information and complete the picture of an epoch and of some procedures about which many of their fellow countrymen had no idea. The Jews who remained in the country, from several reasons explained shortly, experienced the same difficulties as the Gentiles, sometimes facing discrimination (there was a percentage of 5% of Jews who could obtain a PhD in an academic centre like Iași), but generally they built a sound career and were respected by the team in which they worked. The inter-ethnic relations are more relaxed, the Jews from some zones even take part to the Gentiles celebrations, they go caroling and help one another against the communist oppression. *The religious life of the Jews* being restricted, like any other religious manifestation in communism, it had become more and more difficult for the Jews to respect the commandments, to go to the synagogue and to carry out the obligations imperiously demanded by the Law: the boys' circumcision or the marriages within the community. The most serious proofs of the existence of some Jewish communities in the localities from Maramureș, the Jewish buildings (among which were also the specific houses and the synagogues) with all their religious and architectural importance will be systematically taken out of use and, as much as possible, destroyed.

**The revolution from 1989** brings a new breeze of hope for the better for the Jews who had already decided to leave and even makes the one who had already left to consider coming back. For the Jews who had remained in Romania, **democracy** meant the resuming of the anti-semitic cavils, and for the Jews who had left, the possibility to come back to the

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<sup>5</sup> Radu Ioanid, *Răscumpararea evreilor*, Iași, Polirom, 2005

native country, places of the memory, for the first time described by Pierre Nora, the result of a triple semantic immersion: material, symbolic and functional.<sup>6</sup>

In the final conclusions we pointed out that the image of the Jew from Maramureș in the collective mentality is not unique or homogenous, not even at the level of a person. The Gentiles from the villages from the Historic Maramureș have preserved the mentality from the inter war period almost unchanged, which has become a general opinion, also shared by the intellectuals (in their scientific papers), who considered the Jews from Maramureș as speculators who used to take advantage of the backwardness, illiteracy and the poverty of the Gentile peasants. The Gentiles in towns and from the south of the county nostalgically remember the moments when they lived together in the native places. One can say that it is a multi-sided image, with unexpected tones: there are Gentiles who admire the Jews and evoke their positive features, and there are Jews who admit their drawbacks.

Unfortunately, the present generations can still hear stories about how the inter-war period looked like only from older grandparents, and soon they will survive only in recordings. Like ancient civilizations that disappeared, they will be rediscovered only with great effort, so that this research of oral history, as well as the interviews on which it is based will be sources of information, and reviewing and studying it, as well as the attempt of analyzing the details of private and religious life, the relations between the Jews and the Gentiles as well as the traces, both tangible, material, about their existence in Maramureș and their image printed in memory will have their contribution to the Great History.

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<sup>6</sup> Doru Radosav, *De la locurile memoriei la memoria locului*, în *AIO*, XI, Presa Universitară Clujeană, Cluj Napoca, 2011, p. 7