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Ghettos, *Shtetls* and Projective Spaces. Diasporic Discourses in Jewish-Romanian Interwar Literature

Abstract: The aim of this paper is to investigate the interconnections between diasporic discourse, spatiality, and Jewish literature within an analysis of a certain movement from Interwar Jewish-Romanian literature, the so-called *literature of the ghetto*, represented by authors such as I. Peltz, Ury Benador and Ion Călugăru. Depicting the lives of Romanian Jews in *shtetls* or marginal neighbourhoods, this literary discourse features a close relationship between spatiality and identity at its core. Alongside the space of the ghetto, multiple topoi (such as America, Palestine, or Russia) appear in these writings. I call these *projective spaces* as they are included in the novels through the longing of the narrators, for which different political affinities play a key role, or by means of fragmented stories that, often altered, echo through the ghettos.
Keywords: Jewish Literature; Interwar Romania; Ghetto; *Shtetl*; Spatiality.

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Jewish Literature & Jewish Diaspora

Bearing the traces of its tumultuous historical development, the term "Jewish literature" is closely linked and even defined by the concept of diaspora that marked Jewish written culture since the Talmudic period. The Jewish Diaspora can be considered the prototype of the diaspora or, as William Safran calls it, a "paradigmatic diaspora," pointing out that "[t]he Jews are the oldest diaspora; they lacked a 'homeland' for two millennia but thought about it constantly and the idea of a return to it."[1] Safran further argues that "*the Diaspora* had a very specific meaning: the exile of the Jews from their historic homeland and their dispersion throughout many lands, signifying as well the oppression and moral degradation implied by that dispersion."[2]

Focusing on the terms in themselves, one could go as far as to say that Jews became Jews through exile and diasporic existence since the first biblical mention of the term *yehudim* (Jews יְהוּדִים) as opposed to *ivriim* (Hebrews עִבְרִים) appears in the Book of Esther as to describe Mordecai. It was thus in exile that Judahites

became known as Jews. A direct equivalent in biblical Hebrew for the word diaspora doesn't exist, but it can be associated with the concept of *galut* (תוּלָג), meaning exile. The Modern Hebrew word for diaspora is *tefutza* (הָצוּפְת), which would translate to "dispersion" or "scattering." Regarding both terms, a strong negative connotation can be observed, and I will come back to this aspect later. For now, I will concentrate on the strong connection between spatiality and Jewishness, identifiable in the main literary movement present in Jewish-Romanian literature from the Interwar period.

The Literature of the Ghetto: Neighbourhoods, Slums, and *Shtetls*

Two main artistic orientations can be considered central when relating to the literature written by Jewish authors in this specific timeframe: the literary avant-garde of the so-called "first wave" and the autobiographical novel. Even if a certain spatial longing, sometimes even explicitly oriented towards Canaan, appears in the poems of Jewish-Romanian writers such as Tristan Tzara, Benjamin Fondane, or Ilarie Voronca, for the purposes of the present investigation, I found the autobiographical approach to be more suitable. This is especially true when considering the spatial dimension since, as Marc Brosseau states, "autobiographies are not only a form in which to 'write life'... but also to write oneself in place, or place oneself in writing."[3] The Jewish-Romanian literary critic Ovid S. Crohmălniceanu proposed and consecrated, during the '60s, a term (*the kaleidoscope of the mediums*) to identify a thematic direction in the novels published in the Interwar period. To Crohmălniceanu, this thematic program of the novelist implied the depicting marginal mediums of the society and had two interconnected poles, which he coins using the formulas *the literature of the slums (literatura mahalalei)* and *the literature of the ghetto (literatura ghetoului)*[4]. In the past decades, multiple studies[5] have been dedicated to this direction of the Interwar Romanian literature under the generic term of *literature of the slums*, but one of the components initially identified by Crohmălinceanu seems to have been forgotten, i.e., *the literature of the ghetto*.

Even though multiple similarities exist between the *literature of the slum* and *the literature of the ghetto,* it is important to note that the differences between the two cannot be reduced to simple nuances, identity, or ethnic aspects. The ghetto contains in itself the mark of a double marginalization, a double exile closely tied to the existence of the Jewish diaspora and the discourse it produced. In this sense, it could be said that *the literature of the ghetto* (and any movement within Jewish writing, for that matter) takes the form of diasporic literature, and the ways in which authors perceive the Jewish culture and the Judaic tradition will subsequently influence how their writings are articulated.

Furthermore, the very term "literature of the ghetto" raises a series of problems, generalizations, and limitations while remaining relevant for how Jewish writers use and reinvest them semantically. Crohmălniceanu uses the term ghetto broadly to describe novels in which the action takes place in Jewish communities, be they shtetls or marginal Jewish neighbourhoods. As opposed to ghetto, shtetl denotes a space and a culture strictly specific to Ashkenazi Jews. Derived from Yiddish,

the term shtetl[6] denotes a semi-rural, relatively closed space inhabited predominantly by Jews. Similar in their structure to boroughs, having as their primary activity the exchange of goods, shtetls played an essential role in preserving Jewish culture and the traditions of Judaism in the Eastern European space.

Due to this aspect, a certain idealized or mythical imagery of the shtetl can be found in European culture. Firstly shaped by Yiddish literature, its translations, and its diffusion in world literature, the idealized image of the shtetl still persists and can be found even in pop culture. Probably the most representative cultural produce for this imagery is Norman Jewisons's 1971 musical *Fiddler on the Roof*, based on Sholem Aleichem's character Tevye the milkman. Saul Noam Zaritt argues that *distance* can be regarded as the fundamental principle enacting the myth of the shtetl, as the core symbol of Est-European Jewishness:

> According to the mythos, the shtetl is a hermetically sealed Jewish space ensconced in its unchanging "traditions" and entirely removed from the larger world. That the nineteenth-century market town was actually embedded in the volatile and crumbling feudal economies of empire, was ethnically and religiously diverse with growing class divisions, was the site of complex linguistic interchange, and was being rapidly exposed to all the ideological and technological trappings of modernity—much of this is glossed over in repeated depictions of the shtetl as the seemingly eternal homeland of Ashkenazi Jewry.[7]

This perception of the Jewish space was generated, as Zaritt points out, since the idealized image makes possible the representation of the shtetl as distinct and distant from the modern world. Therefore, disregarding the cultural confluence characteristic of the space, the modern world and the marginal space can be perceived as distinct structures of identity, legitimizing each other. Novels such as those of Ion Călugăru have the means to represent the cultural tensions specific to shtetls. Still, it could be argued that, by simply labelling them as literature of the ghetto, this important component of the writing may be disregarded.

The difference between ghettos (as an official and legislated space of segregation) and Jewish neighbourhoods (as a result, but also the internalization, of socio-political and economic processes) can be considered similar to the distinction between ghettos and shtetls. Yet, it brings up even more subtle nuances, which could serve as the premises for a stand-alone study. Nonetheless, for the purposes of this current paper, I am more interested in a certain political dimension of the ghetto related to how the term is used by Jewish writers. The supplementary political dimension of the term stands behind the reasoning for which, despite its lack of accuracy, I will continue to use the notion of *literature of the ghetto*.

Between Referentiality and the Inner Ghetto

Born approximately in the last decade of the 19th century, the authors usually associated with the *literature of the ghetto* are the most representative Jewish-Romanian writers, as most of them received a religious education and grew up in more

traditional communities, speaking Yiddish. All these aspects are transparent in their otherwise modernist approach to the novel. Even if those authors like to experiment with the novel or make use of an objective narrative perspective, different aspects relating to their intimate life, personal experiences of discrimination and antisemitism, and subtilities of Jewish culture or customs are vastly present in their books. While other authors, such as the better-known Mihail Sebastian, also approached Jewish themes in their works, novelists such as Ury Benador, I Peltz, Ion Călugăru, and Isac Ludo differ in the way that a special relation between Jewish identity, political identity, and the construction of the actualized topoi, can be found in the case of the latter.

The title I. Peltz chose for his novel, *Văcărești Road*, can be regarded as a polemic gesture toward the title of Cezar Petrescu's novel *Victory Road*, which was well-received in the Romanian literary press after its release in 1929. In an interview taken by Camil Baltazar in 1933, I. Peltz partially confirms the polemic intention of the title, not in a direct relationship with Cezar Petrescu's novel, but between the two cultural spaces, the centre and the Jewish periphery from Bucharest:

> Văcărești Road is a neighbourhood like any other, susceptible to joke and irony. Victory Road is perfectly known by Văcărești Road; Văcărești Road, on the contrary, is ignored by Victory Road, and not only by it: by the entire world. […] My novel has a subject, but also a meaning: it shows all the faces of the neighbourhood, namely of the ghetto. And it shows them without passion, without hatred: it shows them as they are[8].

Thus, from Peltz's perspective, Văcărești Road becomes a universal space representing the marginality intrinsically represented by the concept of the ghetto. As he further states in the same interview:

> I am familiar with the Romanian slum because I lived in it. But I have the conviction that, Văcărești neighborhood deserves priority in terms of its charm, picturesque and originality. The Văcărești neighborhood is an entire universe. It is thus easy to understand how it came up to me and how I wrote this book, which does not only belong to the Jewish slum, but to the life from here, from the ghetto[9].

The same intention towards universality can be identified in the case of Ury Benador, the title he chose for his novel (*Ghetto 20th Century*) being, of course, already representative. Furthermore, in Benador's perspective, the ghetto is no longer strictly determined by spatial coordinates. It is rather an internal reality, a mark of diasporic existence. Also, in an interview following his novel's release, Benador confesses the following:

> I consider the ghetto not so much a spatial reality as a spiritual one. The characters from Ghetto XX Century, whether they are socialists like Leon Marguiles or Yiddishists like Mordhe Mundir or nationalist Jews like Dr. Strassburger, they are all traversed by a imponderable Jewish specificity - the ghetto from which they cannot escape

and which is shared by the Jews from everywhere[10].

Even more so, this perception of the ghetto is theorized, in the case of Benador also within the novel through the following statement of his alter-ego protagonist Baruch Landau: "And after all the ghetto is not a spatial, historical and decorative reality, but a spiritual one, which we all Jews carry in our intimate structure."[11] Relating the interview to the protagonist's words, it becomes clear that the trauma implied by the inner ghetto is doubled by a positive function, that of suspending (without disregarding) the ideological tensions from within the Jewish community. The inner ghetto thus becomes, for Benador, a form of resistance. In this sense, I believe that the initial terminological doubts can be as well suspended by the immediate political dimension of the term, which appears to be essential for the ways in which the writers relate to the referential space and their writing at the same time.

Another aspect that should be taken into account while analysing Jewish-Romanian literature, and especially the ghetto literature, is represented by the specificity of the referential spaces, the ways in which the Jewish settlements in different provinces and areas of Romania are constituted, organized, and subjected to changes. Investigating Jewish communities in Central and Eastern Europe, Ezra Mendelsohn writes on the diversity of communities in interwar Romania, considering there could be at least five specific varieties[12].

Referring to his writing, Camelia Crăciun outlines a series of typologies of Jewish spaces in Romania, considering as a criterion the way they relate to the Eastern European context. According to the author, the Jewish community from Wallachia can be compared with the Western type of Jewish community through its high

Fig. 1. The specificity of Jewish communities in the Romanian cultural space

urbanization, concentration in the capital Bucharest, and the high degree of acculturation to the Romanian language and culture. The Jewry from historical Transylvania and Banat is also of Western type, but of Hungarian and German acculturation. The community in Moldavia and the one in northern Transylvania are more of an eastern, Galician type, organized semi-rural settlements (*shtetls*), Yiddish-speaking, influenced by Hasidic culture, more proletarian, and much larger than the western type communities. The communities from Bessarabia and Bucovina are organized similarly, apart from the Germanized elite from Chernivtsi[13] (hometown of Paul Celan).

After the First World War and the Great Union of 1918, these communities would become part of the same national state. With the 1923 emancipation, most Jewish writers would relocate to the capital city, Bucharest. In the 1930s, the moment of the appearance of a literature that monographs Jewish themes, the influences of different areas will make their presence felt. In this sense, we must consider that the origin of a writer can influence the way they map the ghetto and, generally speaking, the relation between the fictional and the referential spaces.

Considering the importance of spatiality in the present analysis, a certain geocritical perspective cannot be omitted due to its relevance in literary studies. Nonetheless, the methodology towards which I lean does not claim itself from Westphal's take on geocriticism, but rather from spatiality studies in a broader way and from *literary cartography* in the way in which it has be theorized by Robert T. Tally Jr., as an essential function of the literary project. Bertrand Westphal pleads for implementing a *geocentric* perspective in literary studies that should dethrone the traditional *egocentric* one[14]. A geocritical analysis should thus take as its starting point a referential space, not a subjective construction, such as the representation of a space in literature or other arts. In this sense, a geocritical perspective implies a "*multifocalization* of views on a given referential space"[15]. Due to the small corpus of novels, but mostly because they all depict different referential spaces, an analysis of this type would not be possible.

In Tally's vision "writing itself is a form of spatialization that depends upon the reader's acceptance of numerous conventions"[16]. According to the American author, the writer is at the same time a "mapmaker," and the narrative "operates as a form of mapping," not according to the rules and principles of geography, but rather according to a specific manner in which the literary text produces space. In this sense, I will try to investigate the ways in which the space of the ghetto is generated by writing, its relationship with the referential space, as well as the place in which the ghetto inscribes itself in the symbolic network of topoi, actualized by the novel's text.

The main novels, usually considered representative of the literature of the ghetto, Isac Peltz's *Văcărești Road* (1933), Ury Benador's *Ghetto 20th Century* (1934) and Ion Călugăru's *The Childhood of a Ne'er-do-well* (1936) depict three different cities from two of the above-mentioned regions: Wallachia in the case of Peltz (Bucharest), Benador (Brăila) and Moldavia in the case of Călugăru (Dorohoi, clearly identifiable, but not actually mentioned in the novel). Not only do the three places depicted differ from one author to another, but the manner

they relate to the referential space, their Jewish identity, and the autobiographic nature of the text also vastly vary.

Probably under the influence of the Romanian critic E. Lovinescu, and his literary circle *Sburătorul*, which the three authors attended, they opt for a third-person omniscient narrative perspective. However, the atmosphere of the novels is rather subjective, especially in the cases of Călugăru and Benador, where the protagonist is clearly an alter-ego, as opposed to Peltz, who also includes an alter-ego (Ficu, the youngest son of the family), but as a silent witness, thus keeping an omniscient nuance in its point of view. Certainly, those nuances in the narrative perspective directly influence the construction of identity, but they also affect the way in which the ghetto is mapped in the novels.

In *Văcărești Road*, the descriptions of the space are predominant, with clear references to various places from the Jewish neighbourhood and its surroundings. The novel allows the creation of a map, which largely overlaps with the referential one. In *Ghetto 20th Century,* the representation of space is rather chaotic, built around how the protagonist moves deliriously through the city, prioritizing his points of interest: the Temple, the port, the socialist circle, his friend's houses, etc. In *The Childhood of a Ne'er-do-well,* the narrator also attributes the point of view to the protagonist, more precisely, the temporal gaps in the otherwise meticulously chronologically organized chapters. In this sense, the space of the shtetl is also depicted through the subjective lens of Buiumaș, the protagonist. Therefore, in addition to the family home and the synagogue, commonplaces in all the novels, Călugăru's narrative makes room for other spaces important to its protagonist, such as the school and an abandoned factory, which becomes the perfect playground for the protagonist and his friends. It is in this manner that Ion Călugăru manages to capture a series of important aspects for the history of the Moldavian Jewish community, such as the disappearance of the *heders*[17], a tragedy strongly felt by Buiumaș.

Thus, the degree of self-referentiality and the identity assumption deeply influence the relations between literary texts and the referential space. If in *Văcărești Road* we are faced with a naturalist depiction of the eponymous neighborhood, in *Ghetto 20th Century* and in *The Childhood of a Ne'er-do-well,* spatiality is generated by different coordinates. In his *Unconventional Dictionary of Jewish Romanian Writers*, Al. Mirodan states that Benador did not become known in the Romanian literary life for his psychological novels or for his writings about Beethoven, as he would have also wished, but simply for "his pedestrian walks on the mundane ground, with his eyes open and his notebook in hand."[18] Mirodan also refers to *Ghetto 20th Century* as a "general picture of Jewish life in Romania,"[19] imagining that Benador had a symbolic map of the Jewish world, which he kept near his writing desk and constantly checked if he had included every aspect of the ghetto.

This remained for a long time the manner in which Benador's book was perceived. Nonetheless, it is important to note that his detailed representation of Jewish customs was not merely a mimetic act but rather a programmatic choice of the writer. As Camelia Crăciun points out, analyzing the specificity of different Jewish communities, Brăila was right after the capital city

of Bucharest, the city which contained the biggest Jewish community. The degree of acculturation was similar to that of Bucharest and Brăila was also a "cosmopolitan, middle-size city, in which diverse communities concurred in different socio-economic fields."[20] Hence, Camelia Crăciun further argues that the identitary aspect was just a possible model among others, thus explaining Sebastian's detached perspective on Jewish traditions, Brăila also being his hometown. We can further mention that Brăila, in the ethnic specificity of Benador's description, has more in common with a shtetl like the one depicted by Ion Călugăru, than it has with the actual referential space or with the short episode form *For Two Thousand Years* where Sebastian's narrator goes back to his family in Brăila.

Temporally, the events depicted in *Ghetto 20th Century* mainly occur from 1900 (when the Landau family moves from Dorohoi to Brăila) to 1916. Thus, symbolically, Benador's autobiographical project begins precisely with the departure from Dorohoi. However, the Hasidic atmosphere that forms the Yiddish-speaking Moldavian shtetl will be projected upon the Wallachian space of Brăila. Far from being an error in the depiction, this aspect can be considered one of the novel's thesis.

Possibly conceived as a response to prior published Jewish-themed novels, *Ghetto 20th Century* depicts the Jewish community from Brăila in an antiassimilationist manner, outbidding Jewish traditions, Yiddish culture, and Judaism. If in *Văcărești Road,* the inn and the teahouse are the most frequented spaces, in *Ghetto 20th Century*, the synagogue takes their place. Likewise, the entire chronotope in Benador's novel is ethnicized. Undeniably, all the novels contain references to the Jewish calendar, but in the case of Benador, every temporal allusion is doubled or replaced by a religious reference such as: "Shortly after the Purim of 1900"[21] or "Only close to Hanukah a letter arrived."[22] Pompiliu Constantinescu pointed out in 1934, while reviewing *Ghetto 20th Century*, that it was only when reading Benador's book that he understood "the arguments that traditionalist Jews brought up against the way in which [I. Peltz] presented the Bucharest ghetto. The Brăila ghetto [described by Benador], as well as the short incursions in the Moldavian one, are more authentic, more specifically ethnic and spiritual for the traditionalist of Judaism"[23].

A Symbolic Network of Projective Spaces

Alongside the space of the ghetto, multiple topoi, such as America, Palestine, or Russia, appear in the three novels. I call these *projective spaces* as they are included in the novels through the longing of the narrators, for which different political affinities play a key role or through fragmented stories that, often altered, echo through the ghetto. The projective spaces could be considered a specific mark of the Jewish diasporic discourse as they are always inscribed in a symbolic network of spaces, characterized by the comparison with the Jewish-Romanian periphery. Out of all the actualized topoi in the novels, America seems to be by far the most often invoked one, as the possibility of getting out of the ghetto. In a certain sense, America becomes part of the ghetto. I. Peltz describes his characters as "detached from a sixth geographical continent, so many friends of mine each

carrying an inner America that we roamed until exhaustion."[24] The most representative piece in this sense is Chapter VI from I. Peltz's *Văcărești Road*, which depicts the departure of Uncle Moriț together with his wife and kids to San Francisco. They are accompanied to the train station by the entire family in a festive custom. Conscious of the way in which America appears in the imagery of the ghetto, the narrator uses this episode as a pretext to reiterate a couple of emigration stories that travelled through the ghetto.

Those stories produce euphoria in the ghetto, even though they are never completely credited, they have a comedic effect for the reader, but they also produce laughter in the ghetto, while remaining a hidden promise: "- America! sigh the Neighborhood! America! The Jews were daydreaming."[25] Thus, the idealization of America appears in the form of a recurring narrative, a mythology that actually describes how the peripheral space of the ghetto relates to what appears to be the ultimate centre. The American dream thus becomes a trademark of the Jewish slum:

> America has been a mirage to their entire family for years. And not just for their family: in every moldy workshop somebody tried the dream; In every poor bed in the neighborhood the Jew slept with the image of the fabulous land in which he would become rich and live humanly. The whole Văcăreşti road, the whole Dudeşti road, Traian and Raion streets, Bradului and Cîmpoduci streets, Olteni and Mircea Vodcă – the neighborhood from one end to the other grew in the longing of the all-saving America[26].

The contrast between the reality of emigration and the imaginary space of America constitutes the negative dimension of the projective space, hence the critical or ironic tone of the narrators. At the same time, a strong feeling of displacement is associated with emigrating to the "promised land," since getting out of the ghetto requires, in this imagery, a multiplication of the exile. Being already a diasporic position, that of a Jew in Romania must be renounced and replaced by another, that of a Jewish-Romanian in America.

There is also a sense of duty that male characters usually associate with the departure to America, which often implies the separation from the family. Such is the case of Șaia, the brother-in-law of the protagonist from Ion Călugăru's novel. At a family dinner, he reveals his plan of leaving for America in a few days, as it was nothing, by showing the boat ticket he already bought. The reactions he receives from the family are divided, and the scene is closed by the ironic voice of the narrator, who, even more subtly than in the case of Peltz's novel, unravels the multiple ways in which America is perceived by the Jewish community: "The family saddened but rejoiced at the same time. But they were mainly saddened, as they had been drinking wine and it was not a joy to see Şaia leaving for America, the country where there is plenty for everyone…"[27]

With the same dose of subtle cynicism, the possibility of emigration to America is presented in Ury Benador's novel. One day, the protagonist, Baruch Landau, and his brother, Leon Landau, skip school. They wander on the streets of Brăila, and while they stop to contemplate the "wide Danube," Leon reveals to his brother a

hypothetical plan of traveling to America by hiding on a boat that is heading to Rotterdam, hopefully repeating the process and eventually arriving at the destination. Shortly after, Leon disappears, and a couple of months later, around Hanukah, the family receives the following letter:

> My dears,
> I'm fine and healthy and I wish the same for you too. Know that nothing bad happened to me and I'm leaving with another ship. Don't look for me. I might come home to see you, but that will only be when I will have become a millionaire and all the boys will die of envy. Then, I will also buy a nice shop for dad on the Main Street and new clothes for all of you.
> Your child,
> Leon Landau[28]

Leon's enthusiasm is contrasted here with the cynical mode in which the letter is inserted into the novel, marking the complete disappearance of the character. At the same time, it could be pointed out here that, by means of Leon's letter, the American dream is doubled by a certain relation between the spaces of his hometown. The symbolic spatial relationship between Brăila and America directly corresponds with that between the Jewish neighbourhood and the Main Street.

Alongside the occurrence of America, in Ury Benador's novel, *Ghetto 20th Century*, the projective spaces multiply, entering a complex symbolic network based on the internal conflict of the author's Alter-ego, which acts as a narrative mechanism. The first page of the novel offers a glimpse of this tension. Apart from its prologue, the book is organized chronologically following the development of Baruch Landau from the young age of 5 in 1900, when his family moves from a village near Dorohoi to Brăila up until the start of WWI, specifically Romania's involvement in the war in 1916. Reaching maturity, Baruch is tormented by the fact that he feels forced to choose between his political identity and his Jewish one, or, between his two political interests: Zionism, socialism or anarchism (as the engagement for the two political movements often intertwines).

This constant theme intensifies near the end of the book, where the war is perceived as a distant event, while the character is still conflicted by his ambivalent political affinities, the writing becoming more and more fragmentary: "Suddenly, it was as if a disc kept spinning in Baruch's mind […] The war far away, socialists, Zionist, manuscripts, Mira… Mira… manuscripts… The disc stopped spinning, or it spins so fast that everything mixed and there is nothing left? Nothing. Nothing. Just him, Baruch, lonely, small and abandoned."[29] The internal conflict will not be resolved, and this appears clear when rereading the book`s prologue. During the first couple of pages, the novel departs from the otherwise chronological narrative, depicting two moments from Baruch's future in 1925 and 1930. In the first one, he appears to be in a similar state as the one from the end of the novel, in 1916.

In 1930, he is presented as a wealthy businessman, a financer of a publishing house, who has gone missing. His "mysterious disappearance" is announced by a newspaper article, inserted into the novel using a textual artifice. In the fictional article, the editorial board speculates as to

where he could have departed, advancing two possible places: "An escape to Soviet Russia is suspected, which, judging by certain affinities, would even be understandable" and "We also record the rumor of a departure for Palestine. Which would be the beginning of the long-awaited journey to the first Canaan."[30]

The two places represent Baruch's conflicting political engagements, and the uncertainty further reflects his internal conflict. The two interests, conflictual in themselves and sometimes even paradoxical for the protagonist's identity, are frequently represented in the course of the novel, as is the case of the prologue, by projective spaces. Thus, Russia, Tiraspol, Krakow, and Botoșani are spaces associated with anarchist or socialist ideals closely tied to Yiddish culture. Undoubtedly, Palestine is the sacred land associated with Judaism, but, at the same time, it also stands for the concrete political goals of Zionism. This aspect is precisely what contravenes Baruch's political views but also the way the character perceives space and historical temporality.

For Baruch, the sacred land remains a spiritual symbolic space, not the concrete one "Jewish nationalists," as he calls them, always bring up. In their study *Revolutionary Yiddishland: A History of Jewish Radicalism*, conceived as a book of interviews, Alain Brossat and Sylvie Klingberg use the formula "a diaspora culture that rejects Israelocentrism"[31] while referring to the specific ways in which leftist Ashkenazi Jews reject Zionism. However, in the case of Baruch, this rejection is still not enough to silence the conflict. It must be noted that the same distancing from spatiality also occurs in *Ghetto 20th Century* in the case of the topoi associated with revolutionary ideals.

Arriving in Botoșani, Baruch does not find what he sought and imagined, people who "stay up talking until dawn, like in Russian novels and sing revolutionary songs in Yiddish," but only a "bookseller with two boys who live a reality copied from who knows what books." At that moment, the protagonist realizes that he "believed in the mirage of a Jewish atmosphere."[32] In a similar scene, Baruch learns that his friend, "comrade Zalman Schachter," will speak on Radio Tiraspol "[t]o the Jewish Proletariat of Romania (in Yiddish)." Comparing himself to Zalman, Baruch is ashamed and hides the magazine but finally consoles himself:

> Zalman speaks on the radio and he is drowning in provincial stillness. But after all, is radio Tiraspol such a big deal? Here, he always lectures at the B`nei Brith lodge. A play of his was performed by amateurs at the Communal Theatre. His essays and literary chronicles always appear in local newspapers. Seen from here, from afar, with the mystery lent to it by the closed border and the "red danger", Tiraspol acquires a meaning that it lacks in reality. Brăila… Seen over time, can mean what Bonn, Bregen and Warsaw mean through Beethoven, Ibsen and Peretz.[33]

A certain awareness of the subjective perception of can be found here. However, it is closely followed by a fetishization of the peripheral condition through cultural references, by linking composers and writers with spaces that gained symbolic capital through the association. Baruch is anguished because he conceives that he cannot attain literary success while living in his hometown, Brăila, but, at the same time, he is scared of leaving for Bucharest and ultimately does not want to.

In the prospective prologue, we thus encounter a more mature Baruch that came up with a coping mechanism by relating to famous figures who were recognized internationally while also being known as inhabitants of peripheral spaces. Therefore, the projective spaces play an essential role in identity construction, even when their symbolic value is recognized and exposed by the narrators' voices. These spaces always remain projective. They are symbolic precisely because they are viewed as hypothetical. America, Russia, or Palestine are not concrete spaces for the ghetto but are rather marks of its double diasporic discourse.

Galuth & Geulah

It should be noted that apart from being a nationalist movement, Zionism also embedded several key components of Jewish thought. Thus, it should not come as a surprise that leftist Jewish intellectuals either embraced Zionism or departed from it with great difficulty. As William Safran puts it, the Jews are the "paradigmatic diaspora" since, for two millennia, they lacked a "homeland" and thought of returning to a space, which was "at first an eschatological conception and much later a concrete one that remained part of their collective consciousness" (37).

Benador's character seems deeply influenced by this idea, and it can be considered representative of a complex profile similar to that of the Jewish intellectual from Central Europe, analyzed by Michael Löwy in his study *Redemption and Utopia: Jewish Libertarian Thought in Central Europe, A Study in Elective Affinity*. As the subtitle announces, Michael Löwy proposes a study in elective affinities, a term originally used in the thirteenth century by Albertus Magnus, popularized by Goethe's novel and then adapted by Max Weber in sociology. According to Löwy, elective affinity represents:

> a very special kind of dialectical relationship that develops between two social or cultural configurations, one that cannot be reduced to direct causality or to 'influences' in the traditional sense. Starting from a certain structural analogy, the relationship consists of a convergence, a mutual attraction, an active confluence, a combination that can go as far as a fusion.[34]

The two cultural configurations analyzed by the author are Judaism, especially Jewish Messianism, and libertarian utopian thinking (understood as a radical political vision influenced by romantic thinking and political ideologies such as anarchism, socialism, or communism).

Amongst the Jewish thinkers analyzed by Löwy, Walter Benjamin is the one in whose case the elective affinity between the two currents of thought reached the point of an authentic fusion. This becomes significant due to the fact that here the conjecture also implies "a new way of perceiving historical temporality."[35] In the case of Benador's protagonist, the two currents of thought still appear incongruent, hence the internal conflict. Baruch Landau is in search of a radical event that would change the course of history, imagining a future in which there will no longer be a "Jewish problem" and humanity would be transformed as a whole.

This messianic attitude, probably originating from his religious and Hasidic upbringing, brings him to Zionism. He is

not fulfilled with the political movement finding it restraining in the ideals concerning only the Jewish people. Even more so, he perceives Zionism as an attack on Yiddish culture, with which he feels a strong connection. It is precisely in this sense that the character comes into contact with socialism and anarchism, considering them proponents of utopias that transcend the limitations of the Jewish People but accomplish the same result as Zionism. In this manner, his messianism links with the radical socialist or anarchist utopias. He still suffers as he cannot dissociate Zionism from messianism and neither Jewishness from socialism nor anarchism.

The way in which he imagines utopia and a radical new future that will solve the problems of the Jewish people and those of humanity as a whole is characterized by the elective affinity between the two currents of thought, which unfortunately puts him in an unconfutable position, being criticized from both sides. This generates doubt in Benador's character, determining him to find other solutions. At certain points, he finds refuge in literature or spirituality, as it can be observed from this fragment "[a]fter all we do not need emancipation, because we are freer than our masters. Let's close ourselves again in the ghetto, *in a spiritual ghetto.*"[36] This statement only grants him further ridicule, leaving him isolated, conflicted, and confused.

Unfortunately, we can say that somehow Benador's reception follows that of his character. The messianic element of his writing was noticed from the very beginning, but it was associated only with Zionism when the novel was first published and even later, after his death. In his 1934 review of *Ghetto 20th Century*, the Interwar literary critic Pompiliu Constantinescu mentions a certain "messianic atmosphere" as the key element in the construction of the novel, but he immediately associates it with "a Zionist creed." The messianic aspect is considered by the critic "a problematic closed almost exclusively within the limits of Jewishness." Therefore, he deliberately departs from the subject in his review, which he considers to be interested only in the "artistic plane."[37] In a 1983 interview for the *Unconventional Dictionary of Jewish Romanian Writers*, Shaul Carmel states regarding his relationship with the writer: "It's hard for me. I only believed Benador a single time. When he was a Zionist". Responding to the same questions, S. Galeriu has a more nuanced take, stating that Benador was a "more complex character than it seems" and "with all his oscillations" a "good Jew."[38]

The fact that Benador's complex ideological profile is partially misunderstood in various circles and timeframes (as is the case of its alter-ego, Baruch Landau) should not come as a surprise. At first glance, Jewish messianism and utopian thinking may seem contradictory, as Löwy emphasizes: "especially since the cultural ethno-centrism of the Jewish religion was poles apart from the militant universalism of revolutionary utopias."[39] The contradiction seems to appear between the facts that messianism belongs to a transcendental and religious tradition while utopian thinking is rather associated with the atheistic tradition of materialism and Marxism. However, Löwy demonstrates, following Gershom Scholem, that this alleged contradiction revolves around a confusion between Christianity and Judaism since "for Jewish (as opposed to Christian) messianism, redemption is an event which necessarily takes place on the historical stage."[40]

In addition, the affinities between the two paradigms can be identified as core structures. In the author's terms, certain structural similarities can be identified, taking into consideration the fact that Jewish messianism incorporates two tendencies: restitutive and utopian. The restitutive aspect consists of "the re-establishment of a past ideal state, a lost Golden Age, a shattered Edenic harmony," while the utopian aspect is represented by the aspiration towards "a radically new future, to a state of things that has never existed before."[41] It is at this point that utopian thinking meets messianism through a specific temporality intrinsic to both and related to the Jewish diaspora in a brother way.

In rabbinic literature, the term *galuth* (תוּלָג), meaning exile, with a strong negative connotation, as previously mentioned, is often described in close relation to *geulah* (לואג), meaning redemption. As Jacob Gordin states:

> The *galuth* (Diaspora, exile) makes sense only in relation to the movement of return, freedom, the *geulah* (redemption). The three terms: *galuth*, *eretz* (land), *geulah*, are closely related. The Jewish people will have to live in this world on one foot, and outside this world on the other. […] Life in *galuth* is life on the altar of sacrifice. To take pleasure in suffering is morbid; but if we do not lose sight of the fact that the term galuth is *geulah*, we take on *galuth* with joy (joy not from *galuth* itself, but from *geulah*).[42]

It could be said that what Zionism does in its quest of ending *galuth* is to rejoin *geulah* with *eretz*. Thus, the idea of returning from the diaspora to a homeland becomes a concrete political goal rather than an eschatological conception of temporality and spatiality.

The rejection of Israelocentrism present in the case of Benador's character leaves him incapable of fully adhering to the Zionist creed. Doubting Zionism, he feels disenchanted with Judaism and messianism, which he perceives as mostly incompatible with anarcho-socialist or communist ideals. The internal conflict of Baruch Landau, generated by an initial[43] lack of fusion between Jewish messianism and radical utopia, is therefore significant for the ways in which spatiality, both referential and projective, is constructed in *Ghetto 20th Century*, being also a clear mark of the Jewish diasporic discourse. Similar elements can also be found in the writings of I. Peltz, Ion Călugăru, I. Ludo, or Emil Dorian, the only difference being that in Benador's novel, the different ideological affinities are concentrated in the consciousness of a singular character, and thus more visible.

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Notes

1. William Safran, "The Jewish Diaspora in a Comparative and Theoretical Perspective", in *Israel Studies*, Vol. 10, No.1, *Israel and the Diaspora: New Perspectives*, Indiana University Press, 2005, p. 37.
2. *Ibidem.* p. 38.
3. Marc Brosseau, "In, Of, Whit, Out and Through, New perspectives in literary geography", in Robert T. Tally (editor) *The Routledge Handbook of Literature and Space*, London & New York, Routledge, 2017, p. 119.
4. Ov. S. Crohmălniceanu, *Literatura română între cele două războaie mondiale,* vol. I, București, Minerva, 1972, p. 344.
5. See for exemple Georgiana Sârbu, *Istoriile periferiei. Mahalaua în romanul românesc de la G.M. Zamfirescu la Radu Aldulescu*, Cartea Românească, București, 2009; Adrian Majuru, *Bucureștii mahalalelor sau periferia ca mod de existență*, Compania, București, 2003.
6. Samuel Kassow, *Shtetl*, in *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, 18 October 2010, accessed 30 August 2023, URL: https://yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Shtetl.
7. Saul Noam Zaritt, *Jewish American Writing and World Literature: Maybe to Millions, Maybe to Nobody*, Oxford University Press, 2020, p. 36.
8. Aurel Sasu, Mariana Vartic, *Romanul românesc în interviuri*, vol. II, part. II, București, Editura Minerva, 1985, p. 712 [My translation for this and all other Romanian sources].
9. *Ibidem,* p. 710-711.
10. *Ibidem,* p. 332.
11. Ury Benador, *Ghetto veac XX*, București, Alcalay & Co, 1934, p.105.
12. Ezra Mendelsohn, *Romania,* în *The Jews of Eastern Central Europe between the World Wars*, Bloomingron, Indiana University Press, 1983, p. 171-213.
13. Camelia Crăciun, *Scriitori evrei de limbă română: de la rebeli marginali la critici canonici*, Iași, Editura Universității Alexandru Ioan Cuza, 2019, p. 67-69.

14. Bertrand Westphal, *Real and Fictional Spaces*, translated by Robert T. Tally Jr., New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, p. 111-119.
15. *Ibidem*, p. 114.
16. Robert T. Tally Jr., *Spatiality*, New York, Routledge, 2013, p. 7.
17. A Jewish educational institution, organized within the synagogue, where the rabbis are teachers who instruct the students. The word *heder* can be freely translated from Hebrew as "room", the name of the institution being thus representative for the fact that institution was organized by the rabbi in a specially provided room in the synagogue or in its related buildings.
18. Al. Mirodan, *Dicționarul neconvențional al scriitorilor evrei de limbă română*, Tel Aviv, Minim (1986), p. 144.
19. *Idem.*
20. Camelia Crăciun, *op. cit.*, p. 69.
21. Ury Benador, *op. cit.,* p. 29.
22. *Ibidem*, p. 62.
23. Pompiliu Constantinescu, „Ghetto veac XX", in *Vremea* no. 148, (1930), 4, qtd. from *Scrieri*, vol. I, București Editura Minerva, 1967, p. 203.
24. Aurel Sasu, Maria Vartic, *op. cit.,* p. 708.
25. I. Peltz, *Calea Văcărești*, București, Cultura Națională, 1933, p. 166.
26. *Ibidem*, p. 148.
27. Ion Călugăru, *Copilăria unui netrebnic*, București, Hasefer, 1996, p. 108.
28. Ury Benador, *op. cit.,* p. 62.
29. *Ibidem*, p. 284.
30. *Ibidem*, p. 6.
31. Alain Brossat, Sylvie Klingberg, *Revolutionary Yiddishland. A History of Jewish radicalism*, translated by David Fernbach, London & New York, Verso, 2017, p. 67.
32. Ury Benador, *Op. cit.*, p. 130-131.
33. *Ibidem*.
34. Michael Löwy, *Redemption and Utopia. Jewish Libertarian and Utopia Jewish Libertarian Thought in Central Europe*, translated by Hope Heaney, London & New York, Verso, 2017, p. 6.
35. *Ibidem*, p. 95.
36. Ury Benador, *op. cit.*, p. 181.
37. Pompiliu Constantinescu, *op. cit.*, p 203.
38. Al. Mirodan, *op. cit.*, p. 147.
39. Michael Löwy, *op. cit.*, p. 14.
40. *Ibidem.*, p. 17.
41. *Ibidem*, p. 16.
42. Jacob Gordin, "The Galuth", in *Modern French Jewish Thought*, edited by Sarah Hammerschlag, Waltham, Massachusetts, Brandeis University Press, 2018, p. 110.
43. It should be noted that *Ghetto 20th Century* remained an unfinished project. Announced initially as a trilogy and later as a tetralogy, only the first volume was published at full length during Benador's life. The manuscripts for the upcoming volumes weren't found after the author's death, family members confessing that, according to their knowledge, Benador destroyed them. However, short excerpts from the following volumes were published by Benador in literary magazines and in the 1947 post-face to the 3rd edition of the first volume. Judging by these scraps of text, it seems clear that in its full length, the stories form *Ghetto 20th Century* would have ended with the resolution of the ideological conflict. While valuable and often missed, I will not analyse these texts in the current research, due to the fact that they mainly refer to a certain philosophy of history, being more concerned by temporality rather than spatiality, which I consider central for the concept of the Jewish diaspora.